

Back in youth: social unbecoming in the study of West African masculinities

Bjarnesen, Jesper

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bjarnesen, J. (2023). Back in youth: social unbecoming in the study of West African masculinities. *Africa Spectrum*, 58(3), 247-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00020397231211615>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Back in Youth: Social Unbecoming in the Study of West African Masculinities

Africa Spectrum

2023, Vol. 58(3) 247–266

© The Author(s) 2023

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/00020397231211615

journals.sagepub.com/home/afr



Jesper Bjarnesen

Abstract

African youth became a central research theme in anthropology and related disciplines in the early 2000s, drawing renewed attention to the lives and aspirations of a segment of the continent's population that, since the independence era, has become increasingly demographically dominant but socially and politically marginalised. Reflecting on an extended case study of male ex-combatants in urban Burkina Faso, this paper offers a critical reading of the anthropological scholarship on African youth, emphasising, first, that much of this literature is most usefully read as studies of diverse (West) African masculinities and, second, that the literature has underplayed the extent to which achievements of social progression tend to be acutely reversible in contexts of precarity or radical social change, throwing the unfortunate, as it were, back in youth.

Manuscript received 16 November 2022; accepted 12 October 2023

Keywords

Burkina Faso, masculinities, youth, ex-combatants, vital conjunctures, social progression

The Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden

Corresponding Author:

Jesper Bjarnesen, The Nordic Africa Institute, P O Box 1703, SE-75147, Villavägen 6, 752 36, Uppsala, Sweden.

Email: jesper.bjarnesen@nai.uu.se



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access page (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Introduction

The early 2000s produced a considerable anthropological scholarship on young people in various African contexts, offering insights into the lives and aspirations of a segment of the continent's population that, since the independence era, has become increasingly demographically dominant but socially and politically marginalised. Based on an extended case study of male former Forces Nouvelles combatants in Burkina Faso, this paper offers a critical reading of the anthropological scholarship on African youth, emphasising, first, that much of this literature is most usefully read as studies of diverse (West) African masculinities and, second, that the literature has underplayed the extent to which achievements of social progression tend to be acutely reversible in contexts of precarity or radical social change. The main purpose of the paper is thus to reframe and revitalise the literature on male youth in various African contexts with a particular emphasis on a more nuanced analysis of social (un)becoming.

In the literature under consideration in this article, studies with an empirical focus on young male combatants or ex-fighters in the armed conflicts affecting the West African subregion during this era played a prominent role. While these experiences remain an important research matter in their own right, it is less straightforward to appreciate why such studies became so influential in orienting the study of African youth. This question will be addressed further below, but since the present article emulates these earlier works in choosing an empirical focus on the experiences of former combatants, it is worth noting that while these experiences are by no means representative of the majority of young African men, the extreme risks, losses, and gains of militarised livelihoods throw some central issues pertaining to gendered social becoming into relief.

Most centrally for the purpose of this text, a combatant career unsettles the idea that social becoming is achieved through a gradual and unidirectional accumulation of different forms of capital or achievement. The sudden and excessive access to not only money but also the power and status of wielding a weapon and being enrolled in a military network enabled young men to leapfrog their peers by providing quick access to money and esteem. But the rapid demise of the rebel movements or other armed actors to which young men were recruited also caused equally dramatic social, psychological, and/or financial trauma that pulled the rug out from under these temporary achievements, throwing the unfortunate, as it were, back in youth. This article offers a conceptual reading of these turbulent combatant experiences as examples of social unbecoming, which may inform studies of African masculinities beyond the empirical specificities of these cases. The article further explores the socio-cultural underpinnings of the gendered aspirations that motivated combatant enrolment, arguing that localised idioms of social becoming must be contextualised in relation to globalised and gendered ideas of success, youth, and adulthood.

The paper is based on interviews and participant observation involving twelve former combatants, recruited in the town of Bobo-Dioulasso in southwestern Burkina Faso in the early 2000s when they were all in their early twenties. Initial in-depth interviews with eight informants were conducted in 2010 over the course of an eleven-month fieldwork as part of a broader study on regional labour mobilities in the region (see Bjamesen,

2013), with follow-up conversations and observations conducted intermittently during shorter fieldwork stays over the past twelve years. Four of the former combatants were interviewed for the first time in 2016. Interviews were generally conducted in French, which was a second or third language for both the informant and the ethnographer.¹ Much of the material referenced here is based on retrospective accounts of their years spent in the ranks of the Forces Nouvelles rebel movement, and their initial demobilisation and return to Burkina Faso.²

In the next section, I provide a brief and partial review of the anthropological literature on African youth, with particular attention to the often implicit emphasis on young men in particular. The section positions this scholarship in a longer history of the study of inter-generational relations in Africanist research. The following section then outlines the case study of male ex-combatants in southern Burkina Faso, illustrating the whirlwind experiences that I argue can be understood as processes of social becoming and unbecoming. Before the conclusion, a final analytical section highlights the connection between earlier studies of African youth and the emerging scholarship on African masculinities, with a focus on the notion of gender performativity and the influence of gendered ideals and aspirations in shaping the practices of young men.

Youth and Social Becoming in West African Ethnography

In early Euro-American anthropological studies of African societies, the structural-functional emphasis on general, often idealised, models of how societies worked inspired attention to the rituals and socio-cultural institutions that ensured transition from one life stage to another (e.g. Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Fortes, 1959, 1969a, 1969b; Goody, 1971 [1958], 1989). Here, the transition from childhood to adulthood in particular received attention, with Van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) influential work on transitional rituals as a key reference. This early scholarship often portrayed adolescence as a socially ambiguous position; a liminal phase in need of ritual and societal guidance and control. In the 1960s and 1970s, a less sociological and more ethnographic interest in young people emerged, for example, through the Birmingham School's view of youth culture as resistance (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). These approaches inspired later works on youth culture outside the Euro-American sphere as a vibrant form of self-expression and liberation from societal norms (Amit-Talai and Wulff, 1995; Maira and Soep, 2004).

Karl Mannheim's influential thesis on "The Problem of Generations" (1952 [1928]) continues to inform much of the more recent thinking on the idea of generational transfer and progression, which suggests that at a societal level, and in a sociological sense, social progression is inevitable with the maturation of a new generation and the fading of an old. It is within this structural cycle that Mannheim located the possibility of a young generation to come into "fresh contact" with society's fundamental values and principles, allowing for social change to take place through the ascension of the younger generation into (social) adulthood (see also Cole, 2004).

The generational context, it follows, is central to understanding the positionality of male youth. As early as the 1930s, the studies of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute

documented radical changes in the employment opportunities in the Copperbelt region of present-day Zambia, turning generational structures upside-down as fathers became dependent on the wages their sons were earning in the copper mines (Alber et al., 2008; see also Berry, 1985). These insights highlighted the "... 'intergenerational contract', that is, the implicit expectation that parents will care for their children until they can care for themselves, and that children will support their parents when they can no longer support themselves" (Reynolds Whyte et al., 2008: 7). When changing labour conditions offered young people the possibility of becoming financially independent from their seniors at a relatively early age, the criteria for achieving seniority, or social adulthood, were tested.

This transformation of the labour market challenged the first premise of the generational contract: that parents should care for their children – not because children were better able to care for themselves but because it rendered fathers dependent on their sons, thereby placing them in the socially inferior position traditionally taken by their children. At the same time, as Claudia Roth has argued in her study of intergenerational relations in Bobo-Dioulasso, the inability of young adult children to provide for their ageing parents in the context of economic decline and receding employment opportunities posed a challenge to the second premise of the generational contract: that adult children should care for their ageing parents (Roth, 2008: 52). This inversion of the generational contract specified what is often alluded to as the blocked social mobility of African youth: the inability of young men to achieve independence from their parents and establish their own network of dependants. Hence, generational competition is not merely over power or privileges but more fundamentally about how society ought to be structured. When structural conditions make it difficult to live up to the moral obligations of the intergenerational contract, or when specific actors challenge the structure by refusing to abide by its rules, the vision of what these rules ought to be is challenged. To some extent, then, the crisis of African masculinities so often evoked in studies of African youth opens the door for radical rethinking of established norms and gender roles. But are young men generally striving towards new social orders?

In a study of Burkinabe labour migration in the early 1970s, the typical migrant – statistically speaking – was argued to be a young, unmarried man. These young men were motivated to initiate a migrant career primarily by their dependence on their seniors with regards to the payment of bride wealth (Boutillier et al., 1985: 245). While the choice to migrate tended to be met with disapproval in the 1950s and 1960s (see also Fiéloux, 1980), migration was seen as a legitimate livelihood strategy by two-thirds of the population in the 1970s (Boutillier et al., 1985: 245). As labour migration became an accepted livelihood option for young people, well-established social hierarchies were challenged by the new possibilities for accumulating wealth (Berry, 1985: 9). In this way, the enrichment of unmarried young men posed a threat to the gerontocratic social order by providing young men with new possibilities not only for accumulating wealth but to bypass their elders by achieving the status symbols associated with social adulthood, such as the capital to marry, settle, and invest in land or other viable livelihoods at home (Skinner, 1965: 73). Yet this transformative potential of the introduction of labour migration does not imply that such hierarchies would necessarily be

overturned by the material enrichment of young men (Meillassoux, 1960: 51–52). More often than not, the introduction of wage labour only served to change the *currency* available to young men in negotiating with their elders, not the structural terms of being obliged to engage in that negotiation in the first place (see also Cordell et al., 1996: 48).

In the early 2000s, a series of anthropological studies emerged, reemphasising that the position of youth should be understood as an actively constructed, and negotiable, social position rather than a fixed age or generational grouping (e.g. Bucholtz, 2002; Christiansen et al., 2006; Cole, 2004; Cole and Durham 2007; Durham, 2000, 2004; Honwana and De Boeck, 2005; Vigh, 2006). Youth, in this view, implies a hierarchical and socially vulnerable position characterised by a lack of influence and independence. In these works, young Africans are actively trying to escape this position by searching for employment opportunities, connections to influential and powerful patrons, or by achieving different socially recognised roles (see also Phillips, 2014) in a process often described as “social becoming” (cf. Christiansen et al., 2006). In this sense, the anthropological literature on African youth emphasised individual social action; the efforts young people make to fit in or get ahead, thereby combining the earlier scholarship on generational replacement with more ethnographically oriented traditions of studying specific youth cultures.

One of the enduring contributions of the anthropological scholarship on African youth is, firstly, that the position of youth is understood as an actively constructed, and negotiable, social position rather than a fixed age or generational grouping. Youth implies a hierarchical position as junior in relation to someone senior, a socially vulnerable position characterised by the lack of influence and independence, which weighs on young men and women in specifically gendered ways (see Argenti, 2002, 2006; Bayart, 1993; Durham, 2000, 2004; Mbembe, 1985). Secondly, youth is seen as an ambiguous position in many African societies, in terms of the social norms, political structures, and economic possibilities relating to those thus defined (see also Mbembe, 1985; Rashid, 2020). Thirdly, in addition to the attention to young people’s experiences in particular social contexts, the literature has also emphasised the processual dimension of studying (African) youth; both in the sense that young people are actively working to affect change to their own circumstances, and in the Mannheimian sense that these practices and aspirations contribute to social change at the societal level.

What the anthropological literature on African youth left less explicitly explored boils down to how the empirical case selection tended to prioritise male, urban, disenfranchised young people, and leave the conceptual implications of those biases implicit or unaddressed (cf. Durham 2008). The following subsection elaborates on this critique by suggesting a conceptual reengagement with the anthropological literature on African youth, reframing its contribution as primarily concerned with *African masculinities*.

Youth and Gender Performativities in the Study of African Masculinities

As already implied, the main aim of this article is to argue that the recent anthropological scholarship on African youth is a rich source of knowledge relevant to the study of

African masculinities. The leap, as the reader may agree, is not monumental. As Ammann and Staudacher (2021: 762) summarise, “[m]uch research on men and masculinities in Africa has focused on youth.” I would phrase the same observation in the reverse: much research on youth in Africa has focused on men and masculinities, although rarely stating this delimitation explicitly. For example, in Henrik Vigh’s rich and influential analysis of “the generational position of youth” in Guinea Bissau in *Navigating Terrains of War* (2006), the empirical delimitation towards young men did not explicitly carry over into a conceptual delimitation towards masculinities. In a passage of the book summarising how youth is experienced in Guinea Bissau, the focus on urban and male experiences is stated but used as an illustration of a more generalised idea of “the generational position of youth,” rather than a specifically male and urban predicament:

The relationship between the generational position of youth, social mobility, and access to resources has [...] entered into a vicious circle in Bissau. Persistent decline in resources has entailed a retrenchment within family, socio-political networks and state, resulting in diminishing access to resources and life chances among *young, urban men*, making it impossible for the majority of them to support a family, marry and thereby become *a man of respect, an adult*. The consequence is [...] a situation of generational anomie in which it is currently unachievable for youth to attain the role and position, which is socially prescribed and expected of them [...]. The current position of youth thus sets the frame for a wide range of inter-generational conflicts and tension, as the decline of the Guinean economy has made it difficult to gain access to the resources needed to become a “*complete man*,” with marriage being the primary, but unattainable, ritual that heralds the move into the status that being a provider provides. (Vigh, 2006: 99–100, emphasis added)

Although not stated as such, Vigh’s analysis, I would argue, offers important insights into the “norms and expectations related to what men say and do to be men” (Ammann and Staudacher, 2021: 760) that lie at the heart of the study of masculinities. Chronic underdevelopment as described in the quote clearly must have affected young women’s lives as much as it did young men but Vigh’s implicit equation of adulthood with manhood – which was a general trend in much of this literature – left these gendered dimensions largely unexplored. To be more specific, by treating issues pertaining to masculinity as representative of the experience of youth, such approaches omitted both the experiences of young women and the more explicitly gendered implications for young men. It is in this sense that I argue that the anthropological literature on African youth, of which Vigh’s work is an excellent example, provides a rich ethnographic resource for the study of African masculinities.

In the spirit of this special issue, I would further frame this contribution in terms of what Judith Butler has called “gender performativity,” which she argues “... does not necessarily presuppose an always acting subject or an incessantly repeating body” but rather “a process of repetition that is structured by a complicated interplay of obligation and desire, and a desire that is and is not one’s own” (Butler, 2009: xi). Butler’s work, I would argue, posits the negotiation of viable gender identities within the realm of the

“performance of self in everyday life,” which Ernest Goffman (1959) argued was a deeply relational social practice at the heart of the reproduction of collective identity. Goffman also emphasised that while performativity may have a ring of insincerity to it, the performative dimension of these practices does not evoke a masking that conceals the (authentic) self from view (see also Bjarnesen, 2014; Newell, 2012), but rather the enactment of a symbolically and morally loaded collective social category, which in turn reflects back on broader “struggles for being” (cf. Ratele, 2021: 772; see also Van Wollputte, 2020: 69). The profoundly social and relational dimension of masculinities in this sense may be particularly useful when studying these gendered identities across various African contexts. According to Mfecane, while most established theorisations of masculinities rely (implicitly or explicitly) on epistemologies and experiences specific to the global North, it may be understood as a key element of African masculinities to be “accomplished in social practice, specifically in front of other men” (2018: 300).

The relational aspect of gender performativity thus implied, I would add, may be explored in ethnographically sensitive ways across empirical and socio-cultural contexts. Such explorations may offer a way past the overly general notion of a “crisis of masculinity” per se to more nuanced understandings of how masculinities are articulated, reproduced, and challenged (cf. Baral, 2021; Boulton, 2023). In the West African ethnographies of African youth already evoked above, finally, a central pillar of such explorations involves reflections on how male disempowerment intersects with broader patterns of socio-economic precarity. These common experiences of marginalisation cannot be reduced to gendered crises of manhood or womanhood, but neither can their gendered effects and expectations be forgotten, which brings us back to Butler’s notion of gender performativity. The quest for recognition through viable (public) performances of gender identity, she insists, is at once a source of and an effect of precarity: “Precarious life characterizes such lives who do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable” (Butler, 2009: xii–xiii).

Vigh’s work illustrates the struggles of young Bissauan men to live up to the expectations of being “a complete man”; a role understood to rely on the access to enough resources to marry and maintain a certain degree of financial independence from one’s social seniors. In many contexts in West Africa and beyond, that expectation is placed on the groom and his family to a larger extent than the bride. Similarly, while norms obviously vary across different contexts, the notion of being “a man of respect” generally carries connotations oriented towards the public sphere and the role as a provider to a larger extent than it does for women. These gendered expectations obviously do not imply that all men aspire towards public recognition, or that all women orient their sense of achievement towards the private sphere; but it does imply that such standardised expectations weigh on both men and women, and require concerted efforts to challenge or circumvent.

With this slight conceptual reframing granted, what may the scholarship on African youth offer an analysis of masculinities in urban Burkina Faso? The following section outlines a brief case study on male ex-combatants drawn from my ongoing research in Bobo-Dioulasso to illustrate how the anthropological literature on African youth can

be engaged to reflect on issues relating to masculinities and their public performances in everyday life.³

Cross-Border Recruitment in the Ivorian Civil War

In the early 2000s, Côte d'Ivoire entered a nine-year civil war in which mobility was a key site of contention. The country had emerged from the independence era as a regional migration hub due to its considerable plantation economy and permissive immigration policies, and also due to the attraction of the regional metropole of Abidjan on the coast. Labour migrants from Burkina Faso continue to constitute the largest diasporic presence in Côte d'Ivoire, with more than two million Burkinabe nationals residing in the country.

The armed conflict in Côte d'Ivoire revolved around a political rhetoric of reified autochthony propagated by the regime in which immigrants and their offspring, under the rubric of the so-called "strangers," were targeted as scapegoats for the country's growing economic hardships (Dembélé, 2002). This persecution affected Burkinabe labour migrants significantly, and more than one million fled to Burkina Faso during the most intense 2002–2005 period of conflict (see Bjarnesen, 2013). Despite the state-sanctioned violence, however, mobilities continued to flow in both directions between the two countries. Not only did labour migrants continue to leave for Côte d'Ivoire to tend to their assets such as farmland or urban housing but a new generation of migrants ventured the journey despite the considerable risks to their lives. These cross-border mobilities not only continued to target the southern plantation sector and the urban informal economy in Abidjan but they also included a smaller share of migrants taking an entirely new trajectory. Before the coordinated attacks by northern rebel groups on 19 September 2002 that marked the beginning of the civil war, these groups had been recruiting civilians on both sides of the border to build the capacity they needed to challenge the Ivorian army. Young Burkinabe men⁴ were approached by rebel recruiters and offered lump sums of 100–500,000 fCFA (approximately €150–760), which was more than most people made in a year, to commit to an initial "mission" in Côte d'Ivoire, with the possibility of extending their stay, and their earnings later on.

Although ideological motivations to defend the plight of their compatriots in Côte d'Ivoire was part of the equation, young recruits primarily thought of rebel enrolment as a livelihood option; an involvement with violence as a mode of production (Hoffman, 2011: 6), in a context of enduring unemployment (see also Hagberg and Ouattara, 2010: 111). From the viewpoint of Burkinabe public debates, as well as the opinions and attitudes of their neighbours, Burkinabe combatants lacked moral justification and were widely condemned as greedy and unruly thugs.⁵ The combatants themselves would only half-heartedly evoke any ideological or moral justification for their enrolment, apart from the lack of other options in Burkina Faso.

Once in Côte d'Ivoire, new recruits would train for one or several months in rebel camps in the major urban centres of the northern half of the country, and mainly in Ferkéssédougou and Korhogo in the north, and Bouaké in the centre of the country. In

the camps, Burkinabe recruits would often find each other and form their own groups of friendships, across the military units to which they were assigned. Rebel recruiters used urban centres as what Hoffman (2007) has called “the city as barracks”: as recruitment hubs where young men congregated on the lookout for employment opportunities. Urban centres were also central to the rebel infrastructure in Côte d’Ivoire, where they served as the nodes of troop training and placement throughout the rebel-occupied zone. For Burkinabe combatants, these infrastructures were the basis of the friendships and mutual dependencies that developed along with lines of shared Burkinabe origins.⁶

Combatant Careers as Social Becoming

Speaking to Burkinabe combatants in 2010, at which point most of them had demobilised definitively, I was struck by the extent to which the notion of military recruitment as an alternative migratory trajectory shaped their narratives, despite the trials they had lived through during their years in Côte d’Ivoire. Looking back, as I will elaborate on in the following section, they assessed their experiences as labour migrants and in almost all cases, the end result was not overwhelming. But there was also more to the story. These narratives of circular labour mobility under extraordinary circumstances may, in part, be understood as a particular “politics of storytelling” (cf. Jackson, 2002), emphasising the aspects of their experiences that were socially and morally viable back home in Burkina Faso. As part of their gendered performativity of a viable self, it is not surprising, in this sense, that former combatants would emphasise their choices and experiences in familiar tropes, in a context where circular labour mobility to Côte d’Ivoire had been an aspiration for several generations of young Burkinabe men (and, increasingly over the past two decades, women).

As I came to know my interlocutors better over time, their narratives about their enrolment and participation in armed combat also dwelled on the sense of achievement and camaraderie they had felt in the early days of the conflict, and to a lesser extent on the horrors they had seen – and inflicted – along with the way. To the combatants themselves, then, their participation in armed conflict was remembered as both traumatically violent and as achievements of a job well done, so to speak, illustrating how moral and social viability was negotiated in relation to different discourses around male accomplishment.

As other studies of wartime mobilisation have shown (e.g. Hoffman, 2011, Honwana, 2005, 2006, Richards, 1996, Utas, 2003, Vigh, 2006), joining the rebel movement and becoming a soldier was experienced by these young Burkinabe men as an empowering adventure that changed their outlook on life as well as their opportunities for enrichment (see also Förster, 2010: 712–13; Fofana, 2008). Much as the combatants had foreseen, their enrolment initially presented a potential way out of the social moratorium of youth which, Henrik Vigh argues, characterises the social position of (male) youth in a context where persistent economic decline and “generationally asymmetric control over access to resources ... greatly reduce [young people’s] space of possibilities” (Vigh, 2006: 96).

In this way, military recruitment presented at once a rupture with societal norms, in the sense of being a self-fulfilling search for adventure and an engagement in immoral activities, and a continuation of the mobility practices of earlier generations of young men, in the sense of a labour migration trajectory intended to provide an income in the context of overwhelming youth unemployment. This understanding resonates with the anthropological literature on African youth, which – through contrastive titles such as *Makers and Breakers* (Honwana and De Boeck, 2005) and *Vanguard or Vandals* (Abbink and van Kessel 2005) captured this ambivalence inherent in the social position of (male) youth (see also Phillips, 2014). In the following section, I elaborate on how this initial promise of social becoming faded as the armed conflict deescalated and the Burkinabe recruits found their newfound fortunes to be more fleeting than they had hoped.

Combatant Returns as Social Unbecoming

While young Burkinabe men initially experienced their recruitment into the Forces Nouvelles rebel movement as an adventurous and socially meaningful journey that might lead them towards social adulthood, most combatants saw the end of their combatant careers as a reversal of these early promises. Many found themselves as destitute as they had been before the war, but now facing the moral judgements of their families and home communities in Burkina Faso. In this way, the fates of ex-combatants often seem as epitomising cases of young men stuck in a position of youth, unable to attain social adulthood because of their inability to achieve (relative) financial independence from their seniors and invest in socio-cultural markers of adulthood such as marriage, a house, and relatively secure sources of income. As Mats Utas has phrased it in relation to post-war Liberia, “for a large proportion of Liberian ex-combatants re-marginalisation, not reintegration, remains the only reality” (2005: 151).

Bouba, a quiet but eloquent man with visible scars on his face and arms, was recruited in 2001 at the age of 19. He spent six years as a Forces Nouvelles fighter in Côte d’Ivoire and experienced the rise and fall of the rebel movement, as he went from enjoying the steady flow of money, alcohol, and luxury goods in the early days of the rebellion to harassing travellers in a roadblock between to smaller towns in the middle of the rebel-held territory. His sense of re-marginalisation upon his return to Bobo-Dioulasso was related to his reception in the neighbourhood as well as the broken promises of his recruiters, who had told him that his services in Côte d’Ivoire would be rewarded with a post in the Burkinabe army. He told me that it was not only the Burkinabe authorities who were now hostile towards the former combatants, who were feared to have been turned into violent vigilantes and thereby a threat to their home communities. Back in his parents’ house in Bobo-Dioulasso, he had noticed his neighbours’ hostility as well. People blamed the rebels for the war in Côte d’Ivoire, he said, and most of all for the suffering and impoverishment it had caused on this side of the border. Things in Burkina Faso were much worse than before the war, he admitted.

None of the former rebels I met had been able to accumulate anything but a few memorabilia, such as military boots or photos of themselves in uniform, sporting AK47s or

other weapons. Materially, they were no better off than before their recruitment. As Till Förster argues in relation to former rebels in Korhogo, “[t]he ordinary rebel soldier did not really profit from the rebellion. Salaries were ridiculously low and there were not even adequate supplies of food ... Those who profited most in the military were the leaders” (Förster, 2010: 13). Idrissa was the only one who had managed to invest some of his earnings in a house in an informal settlement, but even he felt that the war had left him worse off than he was before. He was recruited alongside Bouba at the age of 20 in 2001 and fought alongside him before the conflict deescalated in the second half of 2005 into a situation where the Forces Nouvelles controlled the northern half of Côte d’Ivoire, but made no further advancements towards the government-controlled south. As payments to the fighters eventually dried out, Idrissa deserted and returned to Burkina Faso in late 2007. While he was away, his girlfriend Amie had left him and taken their two children with her to her family’s village, taking the prospects of marriage and a more respectable social standing along with her. Although short-lived, Idrissa’s combatant career had initially set him on the path to achieving key social status markers such as marriage and relative economic autonomy, only to thrust him back into a life as a single man, looking for financial support among his more fortunate peers and social seniors. The following section draws some conceptual lessons from this brief case study to inform the study of African masculinities.

Masculinities and Men’s Aspirations in the Face of Social Unbecoming

The story of marginalised and disenfranchised young men in different African contexts has been told many times before, with a considerable scholarship on the postwar fates of former fighters. These analytical narratives have established the category of youth as a socially, rather than biologically defined marker; emphasising the relationship of youths, social juniors, or social cadets to their social seniors. What has also been established conceptually is how these predicaments reflect gerontocratic political orders. Mamadou Diouf has described this structural disenfranchisement as a political shift in many postcolonial states:

Not only are young people losing the prestigious status that nationalism gave them in its ascending phase, but they no longer represent the national priority ... The reclassification of young people is manifested in institutionalised hostility towards them. This takes increasingly violent forms which, combined with disdain and indifference on the part of the elites, render their present difficult and their future unpredictable. (Diouf, 2003: 4–5)

The anthropological literature on youth has also brought out how young people enact their own agency despite these difficult circumstances; to “navigate” their marginalisation and find a way to strive towards social becoming (see e.g. Christiansen et al., 2006; Utas, 2003; Vigh 2006). But I would argue that despite the nuanced deconstructions of biologically deterministic understanding of social progression, the analytical expectation

that these young people, and predominantly young men, are on a linear path towards adulthood remains implicit.⁷

Despite the ethnographically informed analyses of social becoming, then, I would contend that the anthropology of African youth has tended to rely on a *sociological* reading of generational transfer, in which the experiences of individual young people (and, again, predominantly young men) are inscribed into broader societal structures with a certain sense of inevitability. An individual youth may experience stuntedness and marginalisation, it would seem, but society rolls on towards generational renewal and the social becoming of a new generation. This underlying expectation of a linear progression towards social adulthood also seems to be implicit in the more recent writing on the notion of “waithood,” which Alcinda Honwana characterises as “a prolonged adolescence or an involuntary delay in reaching adulthood, in which young people are unable to find employment, get married, and establish their own families” (2012: 4). Although the approach offers an avenue for a powerful critique of the structural disenfranchisement experienced across many African societies, the notion of a prolonged developmental stage or a delay does seem to imply a unidirectional progressive trajectory from youth to adulthood – a one-way street, however, extended the “waiting period” between these two phases may be (see also Jeffrey, 2010).

Contrary to such expectations of a linear path from youth to adulthood, Burkinabe recruits into the Ivorian rebel movements experienced a reversed journey of social *unbecoming* upon their returns to Burkina Faso. Idrissa returned to find that his girlfriend had moved back to her parents during his absence in Côte d’Ivoire, leaving him once more to live as a single man in the house they had once shared. His reputation as an ex-combatant had spread quickly and he experienced an unfamiliar sense of exclusion in the neighbourhood he had lived in for eight years before his recruitment. This experience of social unbecoming rendered his gender performativity socially and morally unviable, and his former social networks virtually obsolete, forcing him to search for new connections and possibilities in other parts of the city. Although the beginning of his career had seen an unprecedented flow of money and luxury items, Bouba had returned with nothing more than the clothes he wore and a few war mementos, leaving him worse off than when he started out. In this way, the return from combatant careers implied a social, moral, and economic regression for most, in many cases rendering these men single, socially isolated, and broke – in other words, a journey back into the social position of youth.

In her highly influential reflection on the anthropological analysis of life stages, Jennifer Johnson-Hanks emphasised that for her female interlocutors in southern Cameroon,

... liminal states between stable statuses are rare. Most vital events – such as marriage, motherhood, and migration – are instead negotiable and contested, fraught with uncertainty, innovation, and ambivalence. The “transition to adulthood” is not only “processual” ... but also nonsynchronous. (Johnson-Hanks, 2002: 865)

Johnson-Hanks' deconstruction of the classical notion of transitional rites, as pioneered by Arnold van Gennep and elaborated by Turner (1967, 1969), certainly brought important and needed nuance to the understanding of the dynamics of social progression. By introducing the idea of "vital conjunctures," Johnson-Hanks insisted that, rather than a predetermined trajectory from childhood to adulthood, social progression may be understood as the gradual accumulation of socially significant achievements such as having a child, getting married, establishing one's own household, or holding steady employment. Although the transitional rites studied by Van Gennep, Turner and a range of others in their wake may have framed social progression as a linear path through a landscape dotted with significant life cycle events, in other words, these "vital conjunctures" rarely line up neatly in the way socio-cultural ideals may suggest. For example, while many societies may still prescribe to the ideal that marriage should come before parenthood, that trajectory rarely happens in practice. While ideals may persist, couples and the people around them navigate such discrepancies between cultural models and social realities in a range of ways, which means that we may all be striving towards an idealised ordering of our social progression through life, while also making sense of the ways in which reality does not match up to the ideal.

To put this point in more theoretical terms, Johnson-Hanks' proposition of an analytical shift "from a model of events to a model of aspiration" (Johnson-Hanks, 2002: 878) offers a possibility for considering social mobility as a *non-linear teleology* – a movement towards a known end-point that does not follow a clear-cut cumulative or progressive trajectory. This shift, in turn, may enable a fresh look at two interrelated dimensions of social becoming that tend to be neglected in Africanist scholarship, and which the "vital conjunctures" approach does not address explicitly.

Firstly, by making the non-synchronous nature of social progression more explicit, we find that gendered social adulthood may not be as clear-cut a status either, or to put it differently, that people's aspirations may hinge on ideals or unrealistic expectations that only partially capture their own lived realities, as already suggested above. In addition to the existential strain of such unattainable aspirations, these unrealistic expectations have political implications. As Ghassan Hage has noted, the sense that we can all exceed expectations and progress in life beyond the class position of our parents, and sometimes even our peers, is instilled in us by the late capitalist idea that social mobility is mainly a question of individual abilities and perseverance, which leaves us chasing unrealistic aspirations rather than addressing their underlying structural injustices (Hage, 2003: 13–14).

There is, in other words, a governing or disciplining effect inherent in unattainable aspirations for the future. For my interlocutors in Bobo-Dioulasso, their experiences of temporary upwards social mobility as combatants and of re-marginalisation at home could have positioned them to critique and challenge the unrealistic expectations inherent in traditional gender roles. Instead, standardised ideas about middle-class masculinity still informed their aspirations, and left many in frustrated apathy, in the face of their deep sense of social abjection (cf. Ferguson, 1999: 236). In a similar light, I would argue that the "social moratorium of masculinity," as faced by many ex-combatants in

Burkina Faso at the end of the Ivorian armed conflict, did not result in radical revisionings of what societal norms and gender roles ought to be, but rather in a practical engagement with alternatives and compromises in everyday life. In that sense, the social unbecoming of male ex-combatants pointed towards a different kind of aspiration; the sense that the standardised expectations of being “a complete man” may never have been attainable in this context; the sense that many young men (and women) were orienting their aspirations towards a set of vital conjunctures well beyond their reach.

Secondly, Johnson-Hanks’ theory of vital conjunctures reconfigures the role of ethnography in the study of social progression, since it emphasises the specific “conjunctures” that people aspire towards in a given socio-cultural context. In contrast to the assumption of a shared idea of social adulthood, this conceptual fragmentation allows us to deploy ethnography more consequentially to explore the goals and achievements that people perceive as “vital.” And we may deploy this analytical strategy with a more acute awareness of the gendered, classed, and racialised specificities of such aspirations. Perhaps tellingly, Johnson-Hanks’ argument drew primarily on ethnography of women’s experiences, based on long-term ethnographic research on young, educated Beti women in southern Cameroon. This empirical focus departed in several ways from the bulk of the scholarship on African youth that followed: most significantly in its explicit focus on young women, and furthermore in its attention to the reflections and aspirations of a relatively privileged segment of the population, in terms of class, educational, and socio-cultural status. These empirical contrasts, however, were rarely noted in other works on African youth, and Johnson-Hanks – writing in the early days of the ensuing boom in scholarship on the theme – did not address these contrasts explicitly in her work. But in reengaging with the scholarship on African youth, we may carry with us this attention to the gendered specificities of particular “vital conjunctures,” and the related questions of classed and ethnic or racialised positioning.

Conclusion

What this critical reading of the literature on African youth suggests, I believe, is that the well-established idea of a “crisis of youth” (Cruise O’Brien, 1996), and a generation stuck in waithood (cf. Honawana, 2012), is more usefully understood as contextually specific crises of masculinities. This slight rephrasing carries conceptual implications, for example on how to understand the aspirations of young men (and women) in more explicit relation to established societal norms and gender roles. Furthermore, this reframing may enable a rethinking of the role of temporality in the analysis of (African) youth. Even under the most disenfranchising circumstances, the social position of youth has a due date. What may linger indefinitely, however, are the unstable and reversible aspirations towards becoming “a complete man.” By re-gendering the anthropology of African youth, then, we may reengage that scholarship towards two important ends. Firstly, to reconnect African contexts to a wider world, in which masculinity is contextually defined and aspirations towards manhood may be comparable and relatable above and beyond their socio-cultural specificities. Secondly, a re-gendering of the anthropological scholarship on African youth may also

provide a different conceptual space for analysing African femininities in a more consequential dialogue with a literature that has tended to downplay its male bias.

To end, although this paper presents the case of male Burkinabe ex-combatants as a brief illustration, the conceptual issues raised – and the empirical experiences of re-marginalisation and abjection on which they build – are not exclusive to former combatants. Many Burkinabe men experience numerous shifts in fortune, as investments in land, property, or business either flourish or falter, with life-changing consequences. The re-gendering of the scholarship on African youth should be relevant for research on the dynamics of social (un)becoming in a broader range of empirical cases. In a similar vein, the conceptual shift from youth to masculinities may also open up analytical space for comparative reflections beyond African contexts (see e.g. Cole and Durham, 2007), and engage more consequentially with questions of global inequality and the effects of neoliberal capitalism on the standardisation (and restriction) of aspirations for upward social mobility.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful for the financial support by the Swedish Research Council through grant 2018-04602 and for institutional and collegial support within the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI). Anna Baral provided invaluable insights and support in reviewing the literature and challenging the initial framings of my argument. The author is also grateful to the anonymous reviewers and the Africa Spectrum editorial team for helping me articulate and refine my contribution with such diligence and patience. Finally, the author wish to thank Bruce Whitehouse for his inclusive and insightful leadership throughout the collaboration that led to this special issue, and to the other participants in the 2021 ASA panel, “African Masculinities in the Modern World,” convened by Bruce Whitehouse.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Vetenskapsrådet, (grant number 2018-04602).

Notes

1. I got to know the former combatants as residents in the informal settlement I was researching, and I spent 3–5 months getting to know my main interlocutors before conducting any structured interviews. In addition to ensuring their anonymity, I did my utmost not to refer to information from one interlocutor in conversations with another, and to engage in follow-up conversations in the weeks after an interview. Since interviews were conducted in a secluded and familiar atmosphere, several years after demobilisation, I am convinced that they did not provoke any strong

reactions on the part of the former combatants, who generally seemed to appreciate the opportunity to share their stories with an outsider withholding moral judgement.

2. The perspectives are necessarily partial, not only because a relatively small number of informants were identified but also because of their temporal distance to the events and experiences in question. I have done my best to probe and cross-reference the chronology of the events that my interlocutors described, and to acknowledge that the narrations should be understood from the point of view of their memories and life circumstances during the time of our conversations.
3. While not my main field of research, the material on former combatants in Bobo-Dioulasso has been analysed from a different but complementary perspective in a previous publication (Bjarnesen, 2018).
4. Although female combatants took part in armed conflicts in the subregion (see e.g. Coulter et al., 2008), I heard of no such recruitments into the Forces Nouvelles. This does not mean that women were not involved in the rebel movements but simply that their roles and experiences lie beyond the scope and purpose of this text.
5. See Abdullah (1998) for an analysis of similar brandings of armed fighters in Sierra Leone and Mariam Bjarnesen's recent (2020) analysis of the gendered experiences of male ex-combatants in post-conflict Liberia.
6. Whereas migrant associations in Burkina Faso would usually take the form of hometown associations, social bonds among Burkinabe recruits in Côte d'Ivoire were founded on national belonging, which is somewhat ironic considering that the xenophobic rhetoric framed all immigrants, and certainly all Burkinabe, uniformly as "Mossi"; an umbrella term referencing the ethno-linguistic group in central Burkina Faso that historically dominated the transnational labour mobility between the two countries.
7. This phrasing is a reference to the conceptualisation of social progression as a "path towards adulthood," meticulously and eloquently articulated by Barrett (2004).

References

- Abbink J and van Kessel I (eds) (2005) *Vanguard or Vandals. Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa*. Leiden: Brill.
- Abdullah I (1998) Bush path to destruction: the origin and character of the revolutionary united Front/Sierra Leone. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 36(2): 203–235.
- Alber E, van der Geest S and Reynolds Whyte S (eds) (2008) *Generations in Africa. Connections and Conflicts*. Berlin: Lit Verlag.
- Amit-Talai V and Wulff H (1995) *Youth Cultures. A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Ammann C and Staudacher S (2021) Masculinities in Africa beyond crisis: complexity, fluidity, and intersectionality. *Gender, Place and Culture* 28(6): 759–768.
- Argenti N (2002) Youth in Africa: a Major resource for change. In: de Waal A and Argenti N (eds) *Young Africa. Realising the Rights of Children and Youth*. Trenton NJ and Asmara: Africa World Press, pp. 123–153.
- Argenti N (2006) Remembering the future: slavery, youth and masking in the Cameroon Grassfields. *Social Anthropology* 14(1): 49–69.
- Baral A (2021) "Thanks to Corona virus": trajectories of masculinities during the Ugandan lockdown. *Norma: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 16(3): 174–189.

- Barrett M (2004) Paths to Adulthood. Freedom, Belonging and Temporalities in Mbunda Biographies from Western Zambia. PhD Thesis, Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University, Uppsala.
- Bayart J-F (1993) *The State in Africa. The Politics of the Belly*. London: Longman.
- Berry SS (1985) *Fathers Work for their Sons. Accumulation, Mobility, and Class Formation in an Extended Yorùbá Community*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Bjarnesen J (2013) *Diaspora at Home? Wartime Mobilities in the Burkina Faso-Côte d'Ivoire Transnational Space*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- Bjarnesen J (2014) Social branding in urban Burkina Faso. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 23: 331–343.
- Bjarnesen J (2018) Cross-Border perpetrator recruitment in the ivorian civil war: the motivations and experiences of young burkinabe men in the forces nouvelles rebel movement. In: Buckley-Zistel S and Williams T (eds) *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence*. London: Routledge, pp. 169–186.
- Bjarnesen M (2020) *Repurposed Rebels. Postwar Rebel Networks in Liberia*. Athens, GA: Georgia University Press.
- Boulton J (2023) Beyond toxic masculinity: reading and writing men in post-Apartheid Namibia. *Africa Spectrum* 58(3): 227–246.
- Boutillier J-L, Quesnel A and Vaugelade J (1985) La migration de la jeunesse du Burkina. *Cahiers Orstom XXI*: 243–249.
- Bucholtz M (2002) Youth and cultural practice. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 525–552.
- Butler J (2009) Performativity, precarity and sexual politics. *Revista de Antropologia Iberoamericana* 4(3): i–xiii.
- Christiansen C, Utas M and Vigh HE (eds) (2006) *Navigating Youth-Generating Adulthood. Social Becoming in an African Context*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.
- Cole J (2004) Fresh contact in Tamatave, Madagascar: sex, money, and intergenerational transformation. *American Ethnologist* 31: 573–588.
- Cole J and Durham D (eds) (2007) *Generations and Globalization. Youth, Age, and Family in the New World Economy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Cordell DD, Gregory JW and Piché V (1996) *Hoe and Wage. A Social History of a Circular Migration System in West Africa*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Coulter C, Persson M and Utas M (2008) Female Fighters in West African Wars: Conflict and its Consequences. In: *Policy Dialogue*. Vol. 3. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.
- Cruise O'Brien DB (1996) A lost generation? Youth identity and state decay in West Africa. In: Werbner R and Ranger T (eds) *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*. London, NJ: Zed Books, pp. 55–74.
- Dembélé O (2002) La construction économique et politique de la catégorie “étranger” en Côte d'Ivoire. In: Le Pape M and Vidal C (eds) *Côte d'Ivoire. L'année Terrible 1999-2000*. Paris: Karthala, pp. 123–171.
- Diouf M (2003) Engaging postcolonial cultures: African youth and public space. *African Studies Review* 46(2): 1–12.
- Durham D (2000) Youth and the social imagination in Africa: introduction to parts 1 and 2. *Anthropological Quarterly* 73(3): 113–120.
- Durham D (2004) Disappearing youth: youth as social shifter in Botswana. *American Ethnologist* 31(4): 589–605.

- Durham D (2008) Apathy and agency: the romance of agency and youth in Botswana. In: Durham D and Cole J (eds) *Figuring the Future. Globalization and the Temporalities of Children and Youth*. Santa Fe: SAR Press, pp. 151–178.
- Evans-Pritchard EE (1940) *The Nuer. A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*. London: Clarendon.
- Ferguson J (1999) *Expectations of Modernity. Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Fiéloux M (1980) *Les Sentiers de la nuit. Les migrations rurales Lobi de la Haute-Volta vers la Côte-d'Ivoire*. Paris: ORSTOM.
- Fofana M (2008) Les déterminants de l'enrôlement des jeunes combattants de la rébellion du Nord de la Côte d'Ivoire. *CRISE Working Paper*. Oxford: Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity.
- Förster T (2010) Maintenant, on sait qui est qui. Political re-configuration of an African society after conflict. *Development and Change* 41(4): 699–722.
- Fortes M (1959) *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion*. Cambridge, MA/New York: Cambridge University Press/Octagon Books.
- Fortes M (1969a) *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi. Being the First Part of an Analysis of the Social Structure of a Trans-Volta tribe*. Oosterhout/London: Anthropological Publications/Oxford University Press.
- Fortes M (1969b) *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi. The Second Part of an Analysis of the Social Structure of a Trans-Volta Tribe*. Oosterhout/London: Anthropological Publications/Oxford University Press.
- Goffman E (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books.
- Good J (1989) Futures of the family in rural Africa. *Population and Development Review* 15: 119–144.
- Goody J (ed.) (1971 [1958]) *The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hagberg S and Ouattara S (2010) Vigilantes in war. Boundary crossing of hunters in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. In: Grätz T and Kirsch TG (eds) *Violent Demeanors: Vigilantism, State, and Struggles for Encompassment in Africa*. Oxford: James Currey, pp. 98–117.
- Hage G (2003) *Against Paranoid Nationalism. Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*. Annandale, NSW and London: Pluto Press and Merlin.
- Hall S and Jefferson T (1976) *Resistance through Rituals. Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London: Hutchinson.
- Hoffman D (2007) The city as barracks: Freetown, Monrovia, and the organization of violence in postcolonial African cities. *Cultural Anthropology* 22(3): 400–428.
- Hoffman D (2011) Violence, just in time: war and work in contemporary West Africa. *Cultural Anthropology* 26(1): 34–57.
- Honwana A (2005) Innocent and guilty: child-soldiers as interstitial and tactical agents. In: Honwana A and De Boeck F (eds) *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. Oxford: James Currey, pp. 31–52.
- Honwana A (2006) *Child Soldiers in Africa*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Honwana A (2012) *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa*. Boulder and London: Kumarian Press.
- Honwana A and De Boeck F (eds) (2005) *Makers and Breakers. Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. Oxford: James Curry.

- Jackson M (2002) *The Politics of Storytelling. Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Jeffrey C (2010) *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Johnson-Hanks J (2002) On the limits of life stages in ethnography: toward a theory of vital conjunctures. *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 865–880.
- Maira S and Soep E (eds) (2004) *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Mannheim K (1952 [1923]) The Problem of Generations. In: *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 276–320.
- Mbembe A (1985) *Les jeunes et l'ordre politique en Afrique Noire*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Meillassoux C (1960) Essai d'interprétation du phénomène économique dans les sociétés traditionnelles d'auto-subsistance. *Cahiers D'études Africaines* 1: 38–67.
- Mfecane S (2018) Towards Africa-centred theories of masculinity. *Social Dynamics* 44(2): 291–305.
- Newell S (2012) *The Modernity Bluff. Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Côte d'Ivoire*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Phillips J (2014) Dealing with diversity. African youth research and the potential of comparative approaches. *Journal of Youth Studies* 17(10): 1362–1377.
- Rashid I (2020) Introduction: African youth and globalisation. *Africa Development XLV*(3): 1–5.
- Ratele K (2021) An invitation to decoloniality in the work on (African) men and masculinities. *Gender, Place and Culture* 28(6): 769–785.
- Reynolds Whyte S, Alber E and Van der Geest S (2008) Generational connections and conflicts in Africa: an Introduction. In: Alber E, van der Geest S and Reynolds Whyte S (eds) *Generations in Africa. Connections and Conflict*. Münster: Lit Verlag, pp. 1–23.
- Richards P (1996) *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth, and Resources in Sierra Leone*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Roth C (2008) Shameful! The inverted intergenerational contract in Bobo- Dioulasso, Burkina Faso. In: Alber E, van der Geest S and Reynolds Whyte S (eds) *Generations in Africa. Connections and Conflicts*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, pp. 47–69.
- Skinner EP (1965) Labour migration among the Mossi of the Upper Volta. In: Kuper H (ed) *Urbanization and Migration in West Africa*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 60–84.
- Turner V (1967) *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Nbembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NJ: Cornell University Press.
- Turner V (1969) *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*. Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction.
- Utas M (2003) Sweet Battlefields. Youth and the Liberian Civil War. Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University, Uppsala.
- Utas M (2005) Building a future? The reintegration and remarginalisation of youth in Liberia. In: Richards P (ed) *No Peace No War. An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, pp. 137–154.
- Van Gennep A (1960 [1909]) *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Van Wollputte S (2020) Masking the dividual: an exploration. In: Greub T (ed) *Revisionen des Porträts: Jenseits von Mimesis und Repräsentation*. Paderborn: Brill, Wilhelm Fink, pp. 55–72.
- Vigh HE (2006) *Navigating Terrains of War. Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Author biography

Jesper Bjarnesen is associate professor in Cultural Anthropology and Senior researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute. His main fields of interest are African migration, mobility and displacement, urban informal settlements, intergenerational relationships, and public protests and electoral violence. His main empirical focus is on Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. He is the co-founder of the AMMODI network and the co-editor of *Violence in African Elections* (2018), *Invisibility in African Displacements* (2020), and *Worlds Apart. Perspectives on Africa-EU Migration* (2022).

Rückkehr in die Jugend: Gesellschaftliches Ungenügen im Studium westafrikanischer Maskulinitäten

Zusammenfassung

Die afrikanische Jugend wurde in den frühen 2000er Jahren zu einem zentralen Forschungsthema in der Anthropologie und verwandten Disziplinen und lenkte die Aufmerksamkeit erneut auf das Leben und die Bestrebungen eines Teils der Bevölkerung des Kontinents, der seit der Zeit der Unabhängigkeit demografisch immer dominanter, aber sozial und politisch marginalisiert wurde. Ausgehend von einer ausführlichen Fallstudie über männliche Ex-Kombattanten im städtischen Burkina Faso bietet dieser Beitrag eine kritische Lektüre der anthropologischen Forschung über die afrikanische Jugend. Dabei wird erstens hervorgehoben, dass ein Großteil dieser Literatur am sinnvollsten als Studien über verschiedene (west-)afrikanische Männlichkeiten zu lesen ist, und zweitens, dass die Literatur das Ausmaß unterschätzt hat, in dem Errungenschaften des sozialen Aufstiegs in Kontexten der Prekarität oder des radikalen sozialen Wandels akut umkehrbar sind, wodurch die Betroffenen gewissermaßen in die Jugend zurückgeworfen werden.

Schlagwörter

Burkina Faso, Männlichkeiten, Jugend, Ex-Kombattanten, Lebenszusammenhänge, soziale Entwicklung