

# BECOMING A SOMEBODY: MIGRATION, MONEY, AND SOCIAL LIFE IN SMALL TOWN SENEGAL

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My research explores the economic realities and social expectations that shape life in the rural towns of the Senegal River Valley today. A key feature of this region is its reliance on the remittances of transnational labor migrants to support and sustain family members who remain at home. This steady inflow of financial resources fuels the local economy. Money from migrants abroad drives the market for everything from fresh fish to contemporary clothing fashions in the rural towns of the Senegal River Valley. The myriad workshops and boutiques that populate these towns owe their continued existence to the remittance economy. Because of this, the migrant men who cycle back and forth between their rural hometowns and global destinations are celebrated as the heroes of the region. Financially successful migrants are respected for their wealth because it enables them to not only provide for their families but also to assist a wide circle of kin and kith.

However, this migratory phenomenon is also driving an increasing gap in wealth and opportunities within these rural towns. As traditional economic activities such as agriculture become more marginal and the circumstances surrounding transnational migration grow more perilous an increasing number of young men find themselves stuck at home without any open pathway to economic independence. Stuck in a junior status without the means to attain the mainstream markers of respectable male adulthood many young men work tirelessly in pursuit of an avenue to either migrate or start up some sort of business of their own so that they can advance their lives. In the end, they are all looking for a way to get married, start a family, and become fiscally and morally responsible members of their community.

Young migrants who succeed in making money abroad have little trouble attaining these status markers. Yet, for the men who stay home the pathway to full adulthood presents big challenges. Many are faced with a prolonged bachelorhood

due to their inability to match the financial success of their migrant peers. The indeterminacy of this situation brings some of these men to the point where they are willing to brave the peril and uncertainty of a risky clandestine effort at migration in the hope of returning with the skills, experiences, and above all the money to break out of junior status and be seen as successful men in their own right, as ‘somebodies.’

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