Imagination and Connectedness:

Consumption of Global Forms in a Malian Village

Introduction

This paper aims to interpret the way global forms and consumables are appropriated locally in a Malian village. The paper is based on research in a village in the Senegal River Valley, from where a large part of the male population has migrated to France, sustaining rural households with various forms of remittances. Meanwhile, with the increasing barriers to social and geographic mobility of the populations in the global South and particularly, increasing restrictions on immigration into Europe, many of the young men living in the village find themselves involuntarily immobile, as they are unable to migrate to their desired destinations. This paper argues that consumption can be seen as an attempt by these youngsters to participate in an imagined world from which they are largely disconnected. The paper will present various examples of this phenomenon, including the display and consumption of brands, food and modern technology which represent a connectedness to the privileged world of global flows. To the villagers, these were signs of connections that transcended the rural context, representing access to resources and possibilities that were not available in the limited local setting.

Connectedness in a globalised world – flows and barriers

This paper draws on five months fieldwork in a Soninke village, Kounda, in the Senegal River Valley in Mali (see Jónsson 2007). On the one hand the village of Kounda was characterised by a longstanding tradition of migration and what has been termed a "culture of migration", whereby international migration, to France in particular, was construed as the expected and desired trajectory for a young man on his path to independence and adulthood. On the other hand, however, this ideal mainly reflected a reality that was possible in the 1960s and 1970s during the guest worker era in Europe - a reality which has steadily transformed along with migration policies in Europe, which are currently intended to keep these migrants out. Hence, Soninke migration has largely transformed from a viable livelihood strategy to a clandestine business, which many aspiring migrants cannot afford to participate in. This has resulted in a paradox, where many young men in the village of Kounda were expected and wanting to

migrate, but were unable to do so – a condition that Carling has termed 'involuntary immobility' (Carling 2002). This paper considers these young men's consumption preferences and practices as attempts to connect with the imagined world they are unable to enter as non-migrants.

Consumption has classically been studied in relation to social distinction. Researchers like Veblen (1899) and Bourdieu (1984) have shown how social class is reproduced through patterns of consumption. Yet, in the context of the Malian village, the concept of class makes little sense because of the limited significance of economically reproductive activities. Those who were lucky enough to earn an income through a salaried job or business were the exception. Household income in the village was derived from two main sources: seasonal subsistence farming and remittances from abroad. Hence, when the entire economy relies on external benefits, and local reproduction is not even sufficient to cover annual subsistence needs, the notion of class as definitive of the social structure seems rather irrelevant. The data collected in Kounda focused mainly on involuntarily immobile young men; however, examples concerning women will also be highlighted in the analysis below. The shared characteristics between these two groups were their status as non-migrants and their lacking possibilities of attaining financial independence; and, perhaps consequently, an obsession with money and goods. Therefore, rather than analysing consumption in relation to class, it might be more fruitful to view consumption in this context in relation to the need and search for existential security, as represented by the imagined world society.

With contemporary globalisation, borders have become more porous in the sense that goods, images, and ideas flow across the globe with relative ease and swiftness (Inda and Rosaldo 2002). But globalisation also entails a hardening of borders between the global South and the global North, particularly in terms of accessing labour markets and engaging in international migration (Bauman 1998; Carling 2002; Ferguson 2002; Ferguson 2006). While connectedness for many people in the global South is imaginary and ephemeral, the global North is permanently connected or 'plugged in' to the global economy and moreover, its population can physically live their global connectedness as their bodies can travel and migrate to almost any place in the world. In Kounda village, young men could access modern goods and indulge in urban forms of consumerism; but their geographic and social mobility was largely blocked. It is this tension

between access and barriers, aspirations and abilities, connectedness and disconnectedness in a transnational Malian village that this paper will analyse.

Connectedness as used in this paper indicates a form of membership, if not belonging, to a world that transcends the local context. Transnationalism between villagers and migrants is a form of connectedness, to a known community in a known location. But the connectedness treated in this paper is more abstract and denotes membership in a world defined by progress, welfare and prosperity, providing financial/social/physical security. This is what Ferguson terms 'the new world society' defined by "modernity as a social status implying certain institutional and economic conditions of life" (Ferguson 2002: 560). Transnationalism and regional travel to urban areas in particular allowed the villagers in Kounda to connect to this imagined world, mainly through consumption of different forms. But it is one thing to have a momentary feeling of transcending the precarious circumstances of local existence through consumption; a completely different thing is actually being existentially secure - the sense of not having to worry about essential things like money, work, and health. Connectedness can therefore be ephemeral or permanent, and it can be imaginary or tangible. Connectedness in the village of Kounda was usually short-lived and never permanent. Permanent connectedness - that is, belonging to the imagined world - required migration; if the young men stayed at home, they believed they would never succeed. While the global elite in the wealthy North is connected to the world *at home*, progress and possibility only exists *elsewhere* for the Malian villagers.

Migration and Participation in Global Flows

Young men in the village of Kounda were not living in an isolated rural setting, but were directly connected to the world at large through economic, cultural and informational flows that constituted the transnational social field linking migrants to Kounda. Transnationalism hence connected villagers to the world of global flows where capital, people, goods, and communication move freely across international borders (Inda and Rosaldo 2002). This sense of connectedness and belonging to a social field that extended far beyond the confines of the rural setting reinforced migration aspirations of young men who desperately wanted to become active participants in the world of global flows. The following analysis seeks to show why villagers were not contended with a local subsistence life limited to the rural setting and what role

migration and transnationalism played in creating and sustaining desires to participate in the world of global flows.

To the villagers in Kounda, economic conditions were considered place-bound (cf. Carling 2002). The distinction between 'foreign' and 'familiar' was not only reflected in the local conception of people[1] (i.e. strangers vs. locals) but also of places: The local and familiar was characterised by gift giving, while the foreign was defined by money-making – money was made abroad, and spent at home. This reasoning is partly due to the association of money with payment, which does not harmonise with the ideology of generalised reciprocity in Kounda. But it is not only its symbolic value that makes money foreign to the village. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Soninke men have mainly looked for profit, especially in the form of cash, *outside* of their traditional homeland. With the continuous decline of the local economy, Kounda has become increasingly dependent on this external generation of money. At the same time as migration to France gained pace, the impact of migrants' earnings made Kounda increasingly dependent on a monetary economy. Kane & Lericollais (1975) note that in 1975, the bride price in the Kayes region equalled the value of two months of work of a migrant in France and that this was affordable to him, but not to a non-migrant peasant (ibid:185). Today, the expenses of a wedding in Kounda often amount to about 1 mio. CFA while in comparison, a wedding in Mali's southern region of Sikasso (where people rarely migrate to France or other Western destinations) costs about 200,000 CFA[2]. In this sense, migration to France has become self-perpetuating, since villagers' expected living standards can only be sustained by migrant wages.

Carling (2002) has pointed out that the way people think about places is central to their migration aspirations. In Kounda, the young men in particular conceived of their village as a stagnant place

[1]I am here referring to a chapter of my Master's thesis that deals with the relations between local villagers and "strangers" in the village. See chapter 5 in Jónsson, G. (2007). The Mirage of Migration. Migration Aspirations and Immobility in a Malian Soninke Village. Institute for Anthropology. Copenhagen, Denmark, University of Copenhagen. **cand.scient.anth.**

[2]My household head who was in the rare position of earning cash and having a stable monthly income received about 40,000CFA a month administering the communal water supply in the village. Even with this salary, and not taking into account everyday and occasional expenses and investments, it would take years for a young man to afford a wedding, if he were to finance it purely with a locally generated income.

of non-productivity – like a Westerner might consider a holiday resort or a retirement village. One villager explicitly stated that, "We are here to consume". What was considered meaningful productivity was relegated to foreign places. Many Soninke villagers considered subsistence farming a demeaning form of livelihood. I once asked a young girl, who had come from another village to join our household so that she could attend the local school, what her father did for a living. "Nothing", she replied, "– he farms". This tendency to devalue and neglect local subsistence farming is, perhaps unwittingly, supported by migrants, who prefer to send money to pay for the wages of seasonal migrant labourers cultivating their fields, rather than paying for improvements of the agricultural equipment (cf. Kane and Lericollais 1975: 186).

Financial remittances sent by migrants have contributed to changing local economically reproductive practices and perceptions of the rural economy. The introduction of grinding machines, water taps, motorcycles, donkey carts and mobile phones into Kounda has lowered the time and burden of activities like farming, transport and food processing. New technologies do not appear to have heightened local productivity but rather, to have given villagers more leisure time, which, particularly in the case of young men, is often spent on socialising and consumption[3]. This dependence upon a monetary economy coupled with the decline and devaluation of local productivity sparked the migration aspirations of young men in Kounda.

In Kounda, the unpredictable local climate and the difficulties of subsistence farming appear as very concrete "push factors" of migration. But even if conditions were more favourable, many of the young Soninke men did not want to be subsistence farmers. They wanted to earn money, preferably as traders (*commerçants*). But the money made from local business or trade would be

[3]In an analysis of the impact of remittances upon recipients in Africa, Thygesen & Hansen question the general assumption that, if migrant remittances do not go directly into productive investments, then they do not encourage economic growth (Thygesen, T. R. and P. Hansen (2007). Remitter – Finansiering af Udvikling i Afrika? DIIS Working Paper Copenhagen, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). Increased consumption is to a great extend the focus of development efforts, and the authors therefore argue that it seems paradoxical to question the development perspective in remittance generated consumption (ibid:15). However, a study in the Kayes region shows that remittances do not improve local agricultural performance but rather, make recipients less productive (Azam, J.-P. and F. Gubert (2002). Those in Kayes. The impact of remittances on their recipients in Africa, DIAL (Développement et Insertion Internationale)..

generated slowly and in small amounts, requiring too much patience and modesty. This did not appeal to the young men, as reflected in this conversation with twenty-six year old Oussy:

> "You need a sum of money to start up anything. Otherwise you will just make little sums every day, and you will eat[4] it all in a day or two. You will live from *couscous*, three times a day. If you want to eat meat and rice, if you want to construct a nice house like the one behind us, you have to go abroad and look for money". "But why not eat *couscous*?" I (interviewer) insist, "why do you have to eat rice?" He looks at me, incomprehensibly: "But who wants to eat *couscous* three times a day?!"

The *couscous* that Oussy talks about is a traditional dish made from locally grown millet, which is dried and ground into a fine powder that is steamed, producing a sand-like texture with a bland flavour. Usually, it is eaten with a very liquid peanut sauce or a thick green sauce made from herbs. According to elderly informants, millet *couscous* has been the stable diet in the Soninke homeland for centuries. Pollet & Winter (1971: 146) wrote that in the 1960s, millet was the most prestigious commodity in the region. But today, this staple has largely been replaced by rice, which is imported from Asia[5]. Rice is considered more tasty and prestigious by most young men, who sometimes refuse to eat the traditional millet-based dishes. Such urban consumption preferences are stimulated by migration, as villagers become aware of and accustomed to new food habits that are associated with foreign environments (cf. Polak 2007).

Immobility and Consumption

While the previous section analysed how migration is seen to enable villagers to participate in global flows, the following section will analyse the current context of involuntary immobility, showing some of the strategies young men apply to create meaning and construct their identities as they are unable to pursue their desired migration trajectories. The analysis focuses mainly on

[4]The local expression for spending money quickly or carelessly was to "eat" the money.
[5]The Malian-produced rice, which is of superior quality, is too expensive for the majority of local consumers and is mainly exported. See Dioné, J. (2000 [1989]). Food Security Policy Reform in Mali and the Sahel. Democracy and Development in Mali. R. J. Bingen, D. Robinson and J. M. Staatz. USA, Michigan State University Press**:** 119-143.

'youth culture' and on young men's engagement with urban and Western cultural styles and consumerism.

Youth culture in Kounda

During the heyday of migration to France, 'male youth' did not exist in the village, partly because most of those who could be considered young had left on *aventure*. But today, male youth is present in Kounda, constituting what Dorothea Schulz (2002) aptly refers to as a "generation-in-waiting". Schulz uses this term to refer to urban Malian youth, observing that, "they wait not only for achieving a status of adulthood, but for parental support and for the state's creation of the very conditions that would enable them to become full grown members of the social and political community" (ibid:806). In Kounda, male youth are also in a waiting position – some literally waiting to obtain the visa to go abroad but also, awaiting the passage to adulthood that was traditionally secured by migration. As these young men sit and "wait", they socialise in groups that resemble traditional age sets.

In Kounda, institutionalised age sets for adolescents (*īre*) have existed since pre-colonial times. These age sets have always had their own separate quarters apart from their families, where the members would sleep. In the 1960s, Pollet & Winter (1971: 263) observed that, although the *īre* still existed, villagers did not consider their public function significant. One of the main purposes of the *īre*, which is still relevant, was that the groups could be mobilised by the village chief for communal purposes (e.g. to dig a well, construct buildings or roads, or put out fires). The *īre*, at least since the 1960s, has become mainly a form of socialising, characterised by egalitarian relations and mutual help and solidarity of the members. Pollet & Winter (ibid:261-265) write that the *īre* would form when boys were nine to ten years, as they settled with their friends into their own, separate chambers. Members spanned all social classes; age and sex[6] were the only criteria for joining. The group nourished a team spirit and on significant occasions and ceremonies a man would always be surrounded by his group. Members confided each other their secrets and remained loyal to each other throughout life.

[6] Girls also used to have their own groups with their own separate quarters in the village, where they would sit together and spin cotton. This tradition has dispersed, possibly since cotton is no longer grown in the Kayes region.

The increasing migration to France since the 1960s probably reduced the significance of the *īre*: Members were separated by large geographical distances for very long periods of time, and means of communication and transport were lacking. Middle-aged men in Kounda said that generally, most traditions practiced by the youth stopped in the mid-1970s. This was partly due to the great drought of 1969-1974, they explained, because many traditions that defined the youth were connected with food items: Stealing and preparing food and using animal hides for musical instruments had been some of the privileges of the village youth[7].

However, in 1989, Kounda witnessed a revival of the traditional age set and 'youth culture' with the introduction of "Mickey Black Paul". This was a group founded by young villagers, who had spent time in urban milieus and who were inspired by the kind of male socialising known today all over Mali as the *grin* (cf. Schulz 2002). The *grin* refers to a group of male friends, who meet regularly to socialise, often in a particular location, where they drink tea, listen to music, play cards, or discuss. The *grin* appears to be mainly an urban phenomenon and normally members of urban *grin*s, who might be adult males with families of their own, do not share living space. However, since the *grin* in Kounda is in many ways a re-invention of the *īre*, the *grins* in the village also resided in separate, shared rooms. Meanwhile, the current emphasis on leisure and consumption distinguishes the *grin* from the *īre*, and while the members of the *īre* appeared to only have used their rooms to sleep in, young men in Kounda today often spend the entire day with their *grin*.

In the *grins*, young men practiced their own version of 'youth culture' and this set them apart from the surrounding local community. The *grins* would often listen to hip hop and reggae music and the walls of their sleeping chambers were plastered with posters of Afro-American music and film stars. Some of the young men had nick-names that they had taken from famous rap stars, such as '2Pac', 'Snoop Dogg' or 'Puff Daddy', and at parties they often performed with innovative dance moves or self-composed rap music. I attended some of these parties, where we

[7]For example, girls could sneak into peoples' houses and milk their goats, and boys were allowed to steal chickens, maize and sugarcanes which they shared with their friends when they where partying or socialising.

would sit on benches and chairs in a big circle, watching people, who took turns dancing energetically in the centre to loud drums that were played by two or three hired musicians. At a certain moment, the rhythm of the drums would change to a particular slow beat. At the first party I attended, this prompted my companion to ask if I knew how to "dance rap". When this "rap music" started to play, the young men got up from the benches where they had been sitting watching young women do the traditional twirls and steps. Wearing big baggy jeans and very long shirts, heavy boots, bandanas and caps, the young men showed off their moves that they had either practiced with their friends in the village, or learnt in the city.

Connecting to an imagined world

This emerging local youth culture might be considered as an attempt to consolidate youth as an inter-generational position in the village. But on the other hand, it could also be viewed as an imaginary substitute for migration. From this perspective, the young men's involvement with Afro-American popular culture reflected their aspiration for community in an imagined world (cf. Appadurai 1996; Frederiksen 2002). As immobile villagers, they were cut off from active participation in the global community that they aspired to and their experience of globalisation was largely confined to a local appropriation of urban and Western forms and practices (cf. Ferguson 2006).

The young men in Kounda shared a sense of restlessness and said they wanted to make "fast" money and "big" money. Gessouma was a twenty-six year old who only knew the first half of the alphabet and who had already passed the age when a young man should leave the village and start making a living. Once, as we sat talking in his *grin*, I told him that starting a career and saving up money takes time. Gessouma got up restlessly, shook his body and looked at me saying, in Soninke: "I don't have a calm spirit! I think too much of money. Of BIG money". Gessouma and I later became good friends and one late evening, coming back from a trip to Bamako, I gave him a cap that I had bought for him in the city. Gessouma was delighted to receive the gift; yet he and his friends immediately pulled out a torch to check the label inside the cap, to see what brand it was (but there was not any, it was just bought from a street vendor). A local salary could hardly meet the consumerist desires of these young men.

The young men often spoke passionately about the meals and products available in neighbouring countries and they loved to learn about the exotic types of food you could get in Europe. Their taste for imported, fast-food type products (not to mention cigarettes) was evident in the heaps of inorganic waste that filled the streets of Kounda. Young men, who went for brief periods to Kayes or Bamako, would usually bring back certain food products that were not available locally. After their relatives had gone to bed, they would arrange late night meals with their closest friends. I was sometimes invited to such meals. The food could be a big bowl of salad made with fresh vegetables; spaghetti mixed with a can of sardines; minced meat and fried bananas; or boiled potatoes and yams with bread. I was also frequently pulled aside after dinner by one of the young men, who would have reserved some *couscous* from the meal and then mixed it with fresh milk – a tasty alternative to the regular peanut sauce.

Partaking in these meals was a very intimate experience and I had a sense that we were indulging in something forbidden – in a way, neglecting the hard work that the women of our household had put into preparing the standard meals, and denying them a part of our luxury. As we withdrew from the family meal, we also withdrew from the local community norm, where household members would produce and eat food together. But I must admit that the late night meal was a welcome luxury. There was hardly any variation in the kind of food that the women prepared three times a day for the forty-two members of our household, but as a guest, I politely ate whatever was on the menu. The young men were in a similar situation; they preferred to take charge of their own circumstances, but were forced to accept the conditions of living in their parents' household. But over the late night meal, we momentarily neglected our dependency upon the family's economy, and transcended the conditions of local subsistence life. The meals recalled the familiar way I used to eat back in Copenhagen and I felt more at home. Meanwhile, to the young men, who had purchased, prepared and consumed the food by and for themselves, the situation probably reminded them of being abroad.

Through consumption, young involuntarily immobile men in Kounda transcended their sense of dependency upon their kin and the local subsistence economy. But these were still the structures that supported the young men. Therefore, when young men withdrew from the exchange relations practiced between local villagers, their surrounding community experienced their

behaviour as negative reciprocity, since the young men retired to consume without contributing and sometimes also stole from other villagers. Hence, senior generations and visiting migrants, who were economically in charge of the local households, expressed contempt of the *grins*, and considered them spaces of delinquency and laziness.

The aspiration to consume above local means was expressed in many ways, including a conspicuous form of consumption, where the display of consumer objects was valued just as much as the actual consumption of these objects. For example, the fascination with labels was evident on the pieces of fabric that women used for covering entrances, windows and beds. Usually, women would crochet patterns on these cloths like the Nike "swush" symbol; Coca Cola cans; or the stock cubes used for cooking called '*cube Maggi*'. During festive occasions, when I took photos of villagers, they often found empty cans or bottles of soft drink and pretended to be drinking from them. Moreover, the display value of mobile phones seemed just as significant as their utility value. Even if a phone did not have batteries or credit to make a call, villagers would still wear it in a cord around the neck and flash it as often as possible. On one occasion, I was sitting with a group of young men next to our house in the village, when my mobile phone suddenly rang. This happened only rarely, so none of them knew that I in fact had a phone. My astounded friend next to me exclaimed: "Huh, you have a phone?! Here, if you have a phone, you must show it!"

The phenomenon of displaying and fantasising about objects rather than actually consuming them is a feature of the African 'imaginary of scarcity'. The historian Achille Mbembe characterises this imaginary as not simply an experience of economic deprivation but rather, "an economy of desired goods that are known, that may sometimes be seen, that one wants to enjoy but to which one will never have material access" (Mbembe 2002: 270-271). This imaginary, he argues, is one of the transformative forces in contemporary African practices of self-formation – albeit not a very constructive one:

> "Where shortage and scarcity prevail, the appropriation of desired goods may take place through pillage and violent seizure. If not, it can be realized only through shadow interventions in the phantasmatic realm […] Here the course of life is

> assimilated to a game of chance, a lottery, in which the existential temporal horizon is colonized by the immediate present and by prosaic short-term calculations" (ibid:271).

The sense of impatience and materialist desire observed by Mbembe was characteristic of the young men in Kounda. One middle-aged informant commented: "The guys here just want to make money fast; they have no patience". I overheard this man's friend give advice to a young man, Papa, who had grown up in Paris, but who had been sent to Kounda by his relatives after he had been imprisoned for stealing cars. The man recited a Soninke proverb to Papa: "If you jump to get something, you will fall and loose that thing" – implying that the things you have acquired without patience and hard work, you will lose quickly.

The spread of Western consumables to Africa and the way global forms are appropriated locally has often attracted the attention of anthropologists (Friedman 1990; Burke 1996; Lewinson 2000; Ferguson 2006; Dougnon 2007). These phenomena have generally been interpreted as either a sort of mimicry or, as is the more recent tendency, as signalling cultural authenticity and resistance to neo-colonialism and the hegemonic forces of globalisation, a "refashioning of the West" (Wilk 1990; Ferguson 2006). But as Ferguson points out (Ferguson 2006: 155-175), these analyses uphold a boundary between Africa and the West, either implying that Africans are creating poor, even embarrassing, copies of Western style; or that Africans do not want to be part of an imagined world community. In line with Ferguson's argument, it seems more justified to claim that the Soninke villagers' "longing for goods" in fact signals a longing for membership in an imagined global community. Surrounding themselves with brands and indulging in modern consumer goods – including the experience of eating spaghetti, of wearing nice new clothes, of showing off your mobile phone – might provide the immobile villagers with a sense of security and a feeling of transcending the precarious local environment and becoming part of the world of global flows.

To the villagers in Kounda, having connections that transcend the rural context was a form of power, because it entailed an access to resources and possibilities that were not available in the limited local setting. The mobile phone being the epitome of connectedness to the privileged

world of global flows, one can understand the young men's fascination with this item. The phone signals that the owner is connected to a social network beyond the local community. I came to consider the local meaning of 'connectedness' after a rather absurd experience in the field: During a one-and-a-half hours nerve wrecking ride on the back of a motorcycle across the sliding sand to one of Kounda's neighbouring villages, I had to sit and dodge the flapping cord of a headset that my driving companion, Demba, insisted on wearing, although he did not have a mobile phone to plug it into. The anthropologist Richard Wilk (1990) argues that the way we consume goods is a form of dialogue, but it differs from normal dialogue: "A dialogue is a difference of opinion communicated with a common code. The consumption of goods, in contrast, sends a message even when sender and receiver do not agree on what the message means" (Wilk 1990: 83). As I was sitting on the back of the motorbike, the flapping cord of the headset hitting me in the face appeared as a vivid and absurd illustration of Demba's "disconnectedness" – in both a concrete and symbolic sense. But to Demba himself, the headset was a decorative accessory, not just a dysfunctional tool. Demba was the only villager who owned a headset, and he had obtained it from a migrant, who shipped second hand goods from Washington to Kayes city, where Demba helped him sell the things. The headset gave him the air of an important businessman, and attested to his international contacts and his economic activities in the city. It was his claim to connectedness.

The villagers' conspicuous consumption and their preference for urban or Western style and technology can be analytically compared to Western 'political consumption' where Westerners self-consciously consume goods from the Third World[8] to signal sympathy and solidarity with the plight of globally marginalised people. When Kounda's young men are eating spaghetti or wearing clothes with Western labels they too are signalling a consciousness and solidarity with the outside world. Consumption was the young immobile men's way of exploring 'the world' and asserting global membership (cf. Ferguson 2006: 21-22).

This analysis prompts us to rethink the concept of 'political consumerism' beyond its current limited association with a Western form of leftist political correctness - to which the young

[8]Here, I am thinking of items like garments and home accessories from Africa, as well as 'fair trade' products, like Max Havelaar coffee.

Malian men certainly did not ascribe. What the young men seemed to communicate through their consumption preferences was that they welcomed capitalism and materialism and that they wanted to indulge in consumerism and afford to be irrational about how they spent their money, just like most other 'global consumers'. They certainly did not appear to object to the postulated "homogenising forces" of globalisation. These are indeed strong political statements, which are conveyed through consumption choices and preferences.

Political consumption in the West may be conceived as attempt at exerting a political and ethical influence on the global economy, for example by connecting marginalised economies to the privileges of the global market, which the Western consumers are already part of. Political consumption in Kounda, however, is an attempt on behalf of the consumers *themselves* to hook on to this global community; but they only succeed in so far as they become part of an imagined community of global consumers.

Hence, in response to the current conditions of globalisation, what we are witnessing amongst the non-migrants in Kounda is not so much the dialectics of flows and closure, as argued by Geschiere & Meyer (1998), where the homogenising tendencies of contemporary globalisation generate an emphasis on cultural difference and 'cultural closure'. The young men in Kounda are not responding to globalisation with reactionary or hostile attempts to preserve their "cultural authenticity". Rather, they embrace the global flows, but are faced with the paradox of co-existing barriers between the North and the South, which only allows them imaginary and ephemeral participation in the world. While contemporary globalisation at a glance seems to promise the possibility of free flows and equal inclusion of everyone, their membership is limited to a fragmented participation in modern consumerism.

Conclusion

This paper has shown why participating in a world of global flows is construed as important and meaningful to the villagers in Kounda. Migration and concomitant transnationalism has tied the village into a world of global flows, heightening young men's aspirations to consume, to make money, and to migrate abroad. Secondly, the paper has shown how villagers attempt to "hook on" to the world of global flows in a context of involuntary immobility, where young men are unable to migrate to their desired destinations. The argument has been that consuming modern

and urban goods and forms – including food, technology, clothing, music and dance - are prominent ways that young immobile men attempt to participate in the world of global flows. Young men's consumerist attitudes or, as Ferguson denotes it, their "longing for goods" has been interpreted as signalling a longing for membership in an imagined global community. By surrounding themselves with brands and indulging in modern consumer goods, villagers may feel more part of these global flows. However, for the involuntarily immobile young men, consumption did not replace their aspirations to migrate, nor did it compensate for their lacking opportunities to secure their own existence.

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