

A Lesson In Composure: Learning From Migrants In Times Of Covid-19

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The Covid-19 pandemic teaches a number of painful lessons. Many people, persistently deprived from access to adequate health care, housing, education or jobs, pay a devastating price for structural inequalities. For some, think of refugees on the road or holding out in camps, political measures such as lockdowns may even worsen their already critical conditions rather than help to confine the virus in their environments. Yet, for many others of us, particular inhabitants of yet less affected regions in Europe, the current pandemic is probably mainly the first experience of an overwhelming and immediate uncertainty. Exercising social distance, we also feel locked up by the crisis' unknown temporality and consequences on the horizon. How will we live? And when again? In almost no time uncertainty has become the dominant mode in our lives. It may have created niches of creativity and solidarity, yet, for many, stress and anxiety have become new and everyday companions. Uncertainty has become existential.



Our lack of knowledge towards the how-long and the how-bad is a disturbing experience. It is so, not only because the crisis is fatal and we worry about the people and the lives we love. It is so, because we have never really learnt to be uncertain. While we hang on every word of the various experts new knowledge fails to keep pace with uncertainty. Yet, who can teach us to cope with the crisis beyond (insecure) facts and daily changing scenarios? How can we get composed and confident?

Maybe migrants can provide a lesson. Since I can claim myself to be an anthropologist I have been fascinated by migrants from the Global South and their ways to embrace uncertainty as an existential condition of their lives. Without a doubt, and certainly in times of the current pandemic, many lives of people on the move are filled with

despair. Also, the living conditions and prospects of people I have worked with, be them male West African footballers or *kayayei*, young female load carriers from Northern Ghana in Accra, have been severely troubled by the recent crisis. However, while I worry about many of my research participants and their colleagues now, I know that they have developed practices that help them to cope with the social effects of the current situation. And today, finally, these may also be worth to consider for us the inexperienced.

Kayayei mostly move independently from their parents or other guardians to the city, some at the age of ten or eleven. In Accra, many stay and work together under precarious conditions in Agbogbloshie, a slum area known as one of the worst living environments in West Africa. Deprived from any sort of labor rights or familial care and exposed to health risks, violence and sexual harassments they make a living by carrying heavy loads for market sellers and customers. Some days, their daily incomes hardly provide for a proper meal and shower. However, *kayayei* give meaning to this misery by holding on to their aspiration to return home with a wealth of dowry items and become recognized adult women in their Muslim northern Ghanaian societies

(Ungruhe 2014). Yet, one may wonder, on what basis? As a composed and confident collective. *Kayayei* establish mutual and risk-decreasing support systems (e.g. informal rotating savings and credit associations) and exercise vigilance towards opportunities such as new income or housing possibilities for one's group that may provide for a better living in the here and now. It is this strong sense of togetherness that eases the known and unknown daily hardships and allows *kayayei* to believe in a future's promise.

Likewise, and despite the continuous setbacks caused by an inclement global football industry, West African footballers often invest everything they (and their families) have into getting abroad. An international football career shall provide for better lives and social recognition, e.g. by becoming providers for their families (Ungruhe and Esson 2017). Contrary to the mass-mediated image of football as a business of excessive wealth, my current research in South-East Asia shows how African football migration is mostly self-organized by players and a matter of connections to relevant people, luck, financial means and resilience. In light of often dubious middle men or clubs and associations that turn a blind eye towards their practices, many footballers are forced to adjust and reformulate plans, return home and try again (if possible) and discuss and justify failure and periods of waiting with involved family members. However, keeping the dream of professional football alive is not a naïve practice of a few talents. Rather, football has become a prominent means to meet social norms and become somebody in life among a whole generation of young West African men. Success stories may only be few. Yet, in the absence





of other opportunities (such as education) they have created a deeply grounded confidence in West African footballers and their bodily skills that allegedly predestine them to excel in football one day. Hereby, football migrants mutually reaffirm themselves of a better future and approach their persisting existential uncertainty by embodying and exercising hope as an everyday social negotiation among aspiring peers.

It was an eye-opening experience for me how *kayayei* and footballers alike make sense of a tough and often miserable here and now and generated hope towards a truly uncertain future. Being vigilant towards possible opportunities and constraints as inherent conditions of the present while being confident about what comes generated an atmosphere of collective composure: existential uncertainty was mastered by social hope (Hage 2003), a joined practice to overcome the critical state of the not-yet.

If we, the newbies to such crisis, learn from migrants such as *kayayei* and West African footballers to become vigilant towards opportunities and constraints while being confident to what the future holds we may learn to approach our existential uncertainty with composure. Developing lasting forms of local and global solidarity or seeking wider societal support for reformulations of the neoliberal world order while fighting against problematic long-term social and political effects of lockdowns or the crisis' fatal inequalities give meaning to an intangible here and now. Will this make us all one? Probably not. But it may generate a new kind of social hope that takes us through this crisis on more collective grounds than we could probably have anticipated, and, eventually, allows to imagine a slightly better world for after.



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#1: "Footballers Wanted" in Ashaiman, southern Ghana (March 10, 2010; photo by Christian Ungruhe)

#2: A goal on a dusty pitch in front of the Accra Sports Stadium (March 2, 2016; photo by Christian Ungruhe)

#3: A kayayoo carrying load in central Accra (October 10, 2008; photo by Christian Ungruhe)

#4: Collected dowry items of a former kayayoo in a village near Tamale, northern Ghana (April 3, 2020; photo by Christian Ungruhe)