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# Escape to victory: Development, youth entrepreneurship and the migration of Ghanaian footballers



James Esson\*

Department of Geography, University College London, 26 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AP, UK

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## ABSTRACT

This article contributes to contemporary debates over the resourcefulness and entrepreneurialism of young people in the Global South by exploring the relationship between development and the migration of male youth within the football industry. Drawing on fieldwork in Accra, the paper reveals how young Ghanaians attempt to enact development as freedom through spatial mobility. Significantly, this is coupled with an awareness that their desired spatial mobility is difficult to attain, thereby inducing a sense of involuntary immobility. For some male youth, the solution to this predicament is to invest in their sporting bodily capital and become Foucauldian 'entrepreneurs of self' in the form of a professional footballer. Meanwhile for others, the solution to prevailing economic pressures is to embrace financial risk by becoming entrepreneurs in the form of football club owners, and attempting to profit from the movement of players. The interests of these two sets of entrepreneurs coalesce around the fact that the mobility of footballers is crucial to generating a return on their respective investments. It is argued that the construction of young Ghanaians as responsible for their future life chances, and the growing dissonance between aspirations and the ability to migrate, is a key reason why youth are trying to migrate through football. Problematically, this can foster conditions favourable for irregular migration.

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## 1. Introduction

In August 2011, The Daily Guide Accra newspaper reported that 70 Ghanaian youths had been tricked into thinking they had trials for football clubs in Mauritius (Coe and Wiser, 2011). The Ghanaian Football Association (GFA) and Mauritian Football Association (MFA) both confirmed the story. Individuals claiming to be football agents approached the players after watching them play in Ghana, and pledged to secure trials for the players at Mauritian football clubs in exchange for several thousand Ghanaian Cedis.<sup>1</sup> This money was requested to cover the player's travel costs and the agent's commission. The agents also promised the players 'they could use Mauritius as a hub to transit to Europe' (Coe and Wiser, 2011). Unfortunately when the players arrived in Mauritius they realised they had been duped and there were no trials. Some of the players were subsequently imprisoned for remaining in the country illegally.

\* Address: Department of Geography, Loughborough University, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK.

E-mail addresses: [james.esson.09@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:james.esson.09@ucl.ac.uk), [j.esson@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:j.esson@lboro.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> Ghana's currency is the Cedi. In 2011 when I conducted my fieldwork USD1 = 1.30 GHC.

The thought of young Ghanaians stranded in Mauritius probably does not conjure the type of imagery usually associated with African football migrants. This is possibly because the incident depicted above constitutes an irregular form of migration, in that 'it includes people who enter a country without the proper authority; people who remain in a country in contravention of their authority; people moved by migrant smugglers or human trafficking' (Koser, 2010, p. 183). Academic studies have addressed the issue of irregular football migration, particularly the plight of young West African footballers who find themselves stranded in European countries (see Donnelly and Petherick, 2004; Esson, 2015; Poli, 2010b), however the majority of scholarly literature has focused on the regular migration of African footballers to Europe. By regular football migration, I mean movement that complies with regulations outlined by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA). This type of migration is directly linked to recruitment between two clubs registered with their national associations, involves a certified agent or lawyer, and players enter a destination country legally (Esson, 2015).

Research on regular football migration has recently undergone a noticeable transformation. Initially, the migration of African footballers was mainly conceptualised in terms of neo-colonial relations and Marxist inspired structural historical theories such as Dependency and World Systems (see Bale, 2004). It was argued

that the movement of African footballers to Europe was symptomatic of relations between countries within the core (Europe) and periphery (Africa), and indicative of the multifaceted domination of the former over the latter (Darby, 2011). Structural historical theories were and still are somewhat appealing because they can illustrate a basic picture of the global professional football industry, and the migratory patterns of African football players (to Europe). However, these approaches yield top-heavy determinist accounts that are inattentive to the agency of African actors, particularly the players themselves. Furthermore, these approaches often focus on professional clubs and do not consider smaller amateur teams that are strongly associated with irregular football migration (Darby et al., 2007).

A flurry of research has emerged to rectify the limitations in structural historical accounts of football migration. Carter (2013) and Darby (2013) have sought to theorise the migration of African football players using actor network theory and global value chains respectively, while Poli (2010a) has discussed the growing presence of African players in less prestigious but potentially lucrative leagues in the Middle East and Asia. Moreover, scholars have attempted to recognise the importance of broader macro-structural constraints in influencing football related migration while simultaneously foregrounding human agency. For example, van der Meij and Darby (2014) highlight how Ghanaian families play an influential role in preliminary decisions around the internal migration strategies of football-playing family members.

This article extends research on the migration of young African footballers by trying to understand the social conditions and processes that lead to regular and irregular football migration. Through doing so, I demonstrate why the desire to migrate through football has to be understood as an outcome of the way conditions within the football industry interact with those beyond it. I pay particular attention to how this interaction is interpreted by Ghanaian youth and then incorporated into endeavours to facilitate development through the deployment of individual autonomy. The overarching argument is that the construction of young Ghanaians as responsible for their future life chances and, the growing dissonance between aspiration and the ability to migrate, is a key reason why youth are trying to migrate through football. Problematically, this can foster conditions favourable for irregular migration.

The article draws on data collected in Accra during seven months of fieldwork in 2011 in the form of multi-sited ethnography at three amateur neighbourhood football clubs with youth academies (under 12, 14 and 17), referred to here as Austin Texans FC, Barracks FC and Future Icons FC.<sup>2</sup> All three clubs had over 100 registered players across their senior teams and academy. I attended 116 training sessions across the three clubs as well as home and away matches. Alongside participant observation, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with senior team players, coaches and club owners. In addition to the data collected at the clubs, I also spent time and conducted 10 expert interviews at two Premier League football clubs, the Ghanaian Football Association Regional office in Accra (GFA), the Ghana League Cubs Association (GHALCA), the Professional Footballers Association of Ghana (PFAG) and the Right to Dream Football Academy.

### 1.1. Development, youth entrepreneurship and football migration

The first half of the article engages with work reflecting on how the dominant narrow view of development as measurable via

economic indicators fails to consider subjective understandings of development (de Haas and Rodríguez, 2010; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999), and neglects that human mobility is an integral aspect of human development for both intrinsic and instrumental reasons (Bakewell, 2008). I examine how young Ghanaians are responding to being constructed as responsible for their future life chances by attempting to enact development as freedom through spatial mobility. However, a discrepancy between their desire to be spatially mobile and the ability to do so results in a scenario akin to what Carling (2002) has conceptualised as 'involuntary immobility'. This notion of 'involuntary immobility' is used throughout the paper to understand how and why players attempt to be mobile, and to think through how irregular migration, such as the case involving Ghanaian players stranded in Mauritius, can happen.

I bring these insights from the Ghanaian context into conversation with research highlighting how movement is often seen as emblematic of social status, and spatial mobility is often linked to aspirations to attain social mobility (Boyden and Howard, 2013; Gough, 2008; Nyamnjoh, 2013; Porter et al., 2010; Salazar, 2011). This resonates with work on young people in sub-Saharan Africa highlighting the prevalence of what Kalir (2005) has termed a 'migratory disposition' (see Langevang, 2008a; Jua, 2003). A disposition tied to a perception that improving their life chances while residing in the continent is doubtful, and a sense that this situation is unlikely to change significantly in an anticipated future (Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012; Jónsson, 2008; Simone, 2005).

Studies have also found that mobility, and in some cases irregular migration, plays a prominent role in the lives of young people residing in parts of Asia and Latin America respectively (Boyden, 2013; Huijsmans, 2014; Punch, 2015). Bylander (2014) has recently explored how a paucity of local opportunities for social mobility, alongside notions of hegemonic masculinity, has resulted in young Cambodian men feeling pressured to migrate in order to better their life chances. Conversely, youth who opt to remain sedentary encounter negative social judgments and have to find ways to make their relative immobility productive, or at least appear to be so. Meanwhile in Peru, Crivello (2011) has shown how young people and their parents associate migration with the process of 'becoming somebody in life', and with achieving educational aspirations.

The significance of this literature on youthful mobilities in the Global South to this paper on African football migration is the formers commitment to understanding where desires to be mobile, or not as the case may be, come from. In other words, there is an explicit mindfulness that mobility and migration 'is much more than mere movement between places; it is embedded in deeply engrained but dynamic processes of cultural meaning making' (Salazar, 2010, p. 2). This understanding is typically lacking in top down accounts of African football migration that fails to try and understand the local sending context.

The second half of the article explores how the Ghanaian football industry and entrepreneurial practices have come together and formed a vehicle capable of potentially overcoming involuntary immobility. As noted by Jeffrey (2010a,b), a growing body of research has highlighted how global economic change associated with the rise of neoliberal governance has undermined young people's efforts to attain social goods associated with adulthood (see also Honwana and Boeck, 2005). Faced with the double-edged sword of socio-economic insecurity and the restructuring of labour markets, the resourcefulness of young people does not simply reside in their ability to endure hardship. It is also evident in the spatially and temporally specific ways in which they engage with challenging economic conditions and assume responsibility for social reproduction (Berckmoes and White, 2014; Huijsmans,

<sup>2</sup> The names of clubs, owners and players are pseudonyms. All other names are genuine unless stated otherwise.

2014; Punch, 2015). Langevang et al. (2012) and Jeffrey and Dyson (2013) highlight how one of the strategies employed by young people in the Global South to combat difficult economic circumstances is to become an entrepreneur, i.e. a ‘person who sets up a business or businesses, taking on financial risks in the hope of profit’ (Oxford English Dictionary cited in Jeffrey and Dyson (2013, p. 1)).

I use insights from aspirant footballers and other youth involved in the Ghanaian football industry to engage with these debates, and respond to calls for social scientists to shed light on the ways in which young people become entrepreneurs (see Chigunta et al., 2005; Gough et al., 2013). I do so by drawing on the idea that young Ghanaians seek to become Foucauldian ‘entrepreneurs of self’ by investing in their human capital by becoming a professional footballer (Esson, 2013). In contrast to unskilled individuals who remain at the mercy of others, those with sufficient human capital are argued to be able to take control of their own productivity and income generation (Becker, 1993). Foucault (2008) highlighted that if income in the form of wages is a return on human capital investment, which consists of the physical and psychological attributes that enable a person to earn an income, then human capital becomes both that which makes a future income possible through a wage, and inseparable from the person who possesses it.

The holder of appropriate human capital is therefore not only able to acquire a wage, but becomes ‘an entrepreneur of self, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 226). Additionally, Foucault (2008) noted that an individual’s mobility, i.e. their ability to move around and migrate, could be considered a key element in the fostering of human capital. This is because although mobility may entail costs, these costs are incurred as investment choices with the intention of improving one’s position, be that materially, socially or both. As an analytical device, it brings to light how in a neoliberal environment, the success of individual biographical projects are dependent on the ability to identify and then maximise opportunities capable of improving one’s life chances (see also Kelly, 2006). Additionally, while emerging from a discussion of mobility for instrumental reasons, the incorporation of an understanding of mobility as a key component of human capital resonates with a framing of mobility as constituting an integral aspect of human development for intrinsic and instrumental reasons mentioned above.

For the purposes of this article, I use the ‘entrepreneur of self’ concept to think through the interplay between structure and agency in relation to the life choices of aspirant Ghanaian footballers. But the concept also offers scope for understanding better the conduct of youth in other parts of the world facing similar socio-economic conditions. The ideas underpinning Foucault’s concept of the ‘entrepreneur of self’ speaks to insights from scholars highlighting how young people in the Global South grappling with the effects of neoliberalism, and concerns that formal education is incapable of facilitating an acceptable future, are adopting a variety of innovative strategies to improve their life prospects (Langevang et al., 2012; Jeffrey, 2011). Moreover, the concept connects to a related strand of research on how mobility is often a central component of these strategies to better one’s life (see Crivello, 2011; Huijsmans, 2014; Langevang and Gough, 2009; Punch, 2015).

Lastly, influenced by Jeffrey and Dyson’s (2013) observation that research in the social sciences on entrepreneurship has focused on business elites, I explore how young unemployed Ghanaian males are becoming owners of football clubs and involving themselves in entrepreneurial practices often associated with financial elites, i.e. that involve ‘considerations of risk and profit and entail long-term planning’ (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2013: 1). I tie the two halves of the article together by depicting how football migration emerges from the converging and competing interests of different

actors striving to overcome socioeconomic uncertainty within the football industry, and contemporary Ghana more broadly.

## 2. One minute visas: development through spatial mobility

A notable topic of discussion that surfaced during conversations with participants was how life in Accra compared to life ‘outside’, i.e. beyond the African continent. As the owner of Future Icons FC explained, ‘in Ghana unlike let’s say Europe, you don’t have many options or support when you are out of work, and some of the boys you see here are struggling to even get one good meal a day’. In Ghana, the diffusion of responsibility through a shifting of guidance and care of the self from the state to wider society allocates the task of development upon individuals, households, and informal networks. Other researchers have touched upon this topic. Particularly how economic reforms implemented by African countries following the adoption of neoliberal modes of governance have encouraged associations, NGO’s and other intermediaries to assist and undertake what could be considered as the state’s duties (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000; Mohan, 2008).

Young people at the three clubs frequently commented on the difficulties of finding ways to survive in challenging economic circumstances, and it became increasingly apparent that this construction of individual subjects as responsible for future life chances created a sense of a less than certain future. Langevang (2008a) articulated this sense of individuation amongst Ghanaian youth when she drew attention to the popular notion of ‘managing’. In Accra, when young people say they are managing, they are simultaneously articulating and affirming their ‘relentless determination to negotiate conditions of turbulence and to introduce order and predictability into their lives’ (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004 cited in Langevang (2008a, p. 2045)). During a discussion with under-17 players at Future Icons FC regarding the obstacles impeding one’s life chances, Kweku – a tall uncompromising defender with a penchant for punctuality who quit school at the age of 14 to pursue a career in football – affirmed that you have to search for solutions and not remain passive to the uncertainty of your situation. Interestingly, although this discussion took place independently of my conversation with the club owner, both participants drew attention to the immediacy of the precarity facing youth at the club through reference to a daily need, namely food.

When we say we are managing we are talking about finding answers to life here in Ghana and the poverty. But it is not easy for somebody to give you the answer because they too are looking and also thinking about their next meal.

This quote from Kweku resonates with Jeffrey’s (2010a,b) call for a more sensitive approach to the study of youth, culture and neoliberal transformation. For example, while some male youth in Uttar Pradesh conceptualise time as something that needs to be ‘passed or killed’ (Jeffrey, 2010a,b), Kweku articulated how for some male youth in Accra, temporal anxiety associated with prevailing socioeconomic conditions resulted in time becoming something that must be contorted and harnessed to productive ends. Although difficult, you must look for answers, particularly as Ghanaian men are expected and under pressure to make their own way financially (Adinkrah, 2010), they must find their own solutions to economic difficulties. Doing so is considered a mark of respectable adulthood, personal strength and masculinity (see also Langevang, 2008b; Ungruhe, 2010). So how does one decide where to look and which path to follow in order to survive and manage in the midst of this uncertainty?

In contrast to the male Cambodian youth in Bylander’s (2014) study, who pushed back against social pressure to migrate, the correlation between migration and a sense of personal progress

figured strongly when the players I encountered discussed their plans for the future. Importantly, this was not just in relation to their football prospects, but rather their life prospects more broadly. Some claimed they would like to remain in Accra but at present saw no discernible reason for doing so, while others suggested they were keen to leave Ghana and return to help their family once they had 'made it'. Nevertheless, the consensus was that their future would be brighter 'outside'. Other scholars have also noted this conflation of spatial mobility with social mobility amongst young Ghanaians (Coe, 2012; Langevang and Gough, 2009; Langevang, 2008a; Ungruhe, 2010). Addae, the owner of the Austin Texans FC, expressed this point when describing how even poorly skilled migrants are believed to be capable of earning eye popping salaries abroad.

We all know of illiterates that have gone outside and made money and come back and we see them and what they have been able to do here in Ghana. So now some players even tell me that 'even if I get a one-minute visa I will be happy'.

The above-mentioned belief that life elsewhere is better than here is partially attributable to the import of various media, commodities and ideologies from around the world, which is considered to be taking place at an unprecedented rate in Ghana (Langevang, 2008a). This provides young people residing in the capital with a greater awareness of lifestyles and consumer culture beyond the country's borders. Moreover, as alluded to by Addae, return migrants often drive expensive cars, own desirable consumer goods, build large properties and engage in various forms of conspicuous consumption. These practices encourage the idea that migration is a way to obtain wealth and social mobility, and reinforce a conflation of certain countries and regions 'outside' the African continent with discourses of development and progress (see also Langevang and Gough, 2009). However, it is important to note that the young people at the clubs were keen to enact a very specific type of spatial change, namely migration to Europe and North America. This is significant because the majority of African migrants remain within the continent (Bakewell and de Haas, 2007). Moreover, scholars working on youthful mobilities in the Global South, particularly those highlighting the life strategies of rural youth, have drawn attention to how aspirations to undertake internal migration can figure strongly in plans for life making. This is particularly evident in instances where economic conditions are limiting young people's ability to earn a living via the agricultural activities that traditionally underpinned their rural communities (Crivello, 2011; Bezu and Holden, 2014; Peou and Zinn, 2015).

The recourse to a geographical imagination that frames Europe or North America as offering opportunities to enjoy the benefits of modernity that are unavailable at home is not unique to would-be Ghanaian footballers. Yet, participants at the club drew my attention to how this interplay between migration, social mobility and perceived disparities in development between countries and geographical regions informed their plans for life making. For many of the players the problem was not that Ghana is not developing. The problem was that Ghana is not developing at a pace in line with their aspirations. Meanwhile long term state led development strategies such as the Vision 2020 project are concerned with facilitating a future that enables Ghanaians to achieve a better quality of life in Ghana itself Ghana. This created a tension, because the primary concern of the players was not the fostering of social interdependency and the development of Ghana as a nation, but individual and familial strategies of survival that took them 'outside'. Godwin, a 17-year-old trainee at Barracks FC who dropped out of school at 15 and is now viewed as holding the solution to his family's financial woes in the tips of his toes, articulated this point as follows:

People stay here and still be in the same step and never progress, they don't move forward and it is a waste of time. You have to compare African life to other places, you have to go outside. Because you see the place some people think is hard will be the place you are going to be strong and able to survive and make it.

Godwin's quote highlights two important points that emerged during my discussions with young people at the clubs. Firstly, Ghana's recent macro-economic success, and its classification as a low middle-income country, are of little relevance to Godwin and his peers and do little to alleviate their desire to travel 'outside'. This is because the level of development relative to other places often determines a predisposition towards migration (de Haas, 2010, 2007). Secondly, the long term development of Ghana as a nation does not placate their more immediate socio-economic concerns. An outcome of this situation is a disdain for notions of temporal social development and inclination towards development through spatial mobility and establishing a new life 'outside'. This resonates with Ferguson's (2006) observation that people in parts of sub-Saharan Africa are increasingly inclined to instigate development through the deployment of individual autonomy, and also with the notion of development as freedom proposed by Sen (1999). This is where development is understood as a commitment to respecting people's power of self-definition and well being, as opposed to a fixation with macro-economic measures such as GDP (see also Nussbaum, 2011).

As noted by Bakewell (2008) and de Haas and Rodríguez (2010), human mobility is an integral aspect of human development when viewed from this perspective for both intrinsic and instrumental reasons. It is intrinsic because expanding the capability to be mobile enlarges the choices open to an individual and therefore their freedom. It is instrumental because movement can enable people to improve and make better use of their capabilities e.g. increased wages, better health care provision and education opportunities. The challenge facing Godwin and his peers is that while the recourse to migration as a strategy for improving ones circumstances and quality of life is not new, the feasibility of actually doing so is diminishing. The 'accelerated closure of the West' in the form of tightened immigration rules has fostered the perception amongst youth in Ghana and West Africa more generally, that it is almost impossible to acquire a visa to certain parts of the world using official channels (see also Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012; Jua, 2003; Nyamnjoh and Page, 2002).

Drawing on fieldwork in Cape Verde, Carling (2002) has conceptualised and termed this disjuncture between the aspiration and ability to migrate as 'involuntary immobility'. Thus, while spending hours browsing the web in SharpNet Internet Cafe allowed players at Barracks FC to momentarily feel part of a wider context 'characterized by ever-expanding connection and communication' (Ferguson, 2006, p. 192), they are simultaneously aware that although information may flow freely across fibre optic cables, immigration borders are not so porous. As the owner of the Austin Texans FC pointed out, the world of international migration has its own rules that are often hard to fathom and decipher.

These people in the embassy don't realize what you go through just to get documentation for an interview, but you go to an embassy to get a visa you have everything and just because you don't have travel experience they will tell you that you can't have a visa. How then can you get travel experience? You pay them \$200 for a visa and when they refuse you they don't even give you some of the money back. Why is this ok? That is why the moment some of these guys get the visa, even if it is for one week they will never come back. Like the guy I told you about

who ran away when we went to Denmark [to compete in a tournament].

The apprehension linked to a curtailment of their mobility through an immigration system that is at best arbitrary, and at worst plutocratic, creates a sense of frustration, exclusion and despair amongst youth that further fetishises migration to, and reinforces the appeal of, Europe and North America. According to Mo, an under-17 player at Future Icons FC, 'when you reach [outside] I'm sure you will understand and see that the struggle was worth it. If going is difficult, it is because the rewards there are so great'. So how can a young Ghanaian male overcome the issue of involuntary immobility?

### 2.1. *Managing through football*

In a previous article, I showed how in a context where the cost of completing one's formal education is rising, and the financial rewards for doing so are deemed to be diminishing, some Ghanaian youth are not convinced that education will lead to acceptable employment opportunities (Esson, 2013). In the face of what were perceived as inadequate opportunities to improve their life chances, young people at the three football clubs explained how for them, the solution to this predicament was not to join the estimated 80% of the population working in the informal economy (Obeng-Odoom, 2013). Instead, they were embracing a career in football often at the expense of their schooling. While it is important to acknowledge the diversity of experiences and conditions occurring across the Global South, it is appropriate here to highlight that other studies have also documented the often-fragile relationship between education and opportunities to earn a decent living, for example in Cambodia (Bylander, 2014), the Gambia (Jones and Chant, 2009), Ghana (Langevang and Gough, 2012; Porter et al., 2011), India (Jeffrey, 2010b) and Bolivia (Punch, 2015).

Some readers will argue that the reason football is more attractive than other vocations has little to do with the Ghanaian education system's ability to provide a smooth transition to the labour market, and everything to do with the pursuit of fame and fortune. It is true that young Ghanaians are aware of the riches associated with professional football. Yet, to stop and declare that they only opt to become footballers in pursuit of stardom and wealth ignores how this decision is the product of a complex array of motivations within a specific context. For some male youth, turning to a career in football is based on their engagement with, and reinterpretation of, normative understandings of entrepreneurship and human capital circulating within society. In Ghana, formal education has long been promoted as one of, if not the, most appropriate form of human capital investment (Rolleston and Okech, 2008). Other scholars have also discussed the emphasis on education as a key form of human capital, and the reasons why young people may remain outside the schooling system irrespective of discourses promoting the benefits of a formal education (see Kabeer, 2000). However, while the male youth I met agreed that those with appropriate human capital are able to take control of their own productivity and wealth creation, they refused to be constrained by society's narrow interpretation of what constitutes appropriate human capital.

In a context where young people are constructed as being personally responsible for finding solutions to life's hardships, some male youth view the West African footballer who turns his sporting ability into productive human capital, and migrates to a well-paid European League where he will get a maximum return on his ability, as the embodiment of 'managing' (Esson, 2013). He is an 'entrepreneur of self'. Better still, in a society where monetary success is viewed as an inherently masculine trait, the trappings of

fortune and fame associated with professional football offer a route to a respectable manhood. But perhaps more importantly, unlike education, football is seen as a way to earn an income and invest in one's human capital by providing access to 'outside'. In the discussion that follows, I explore how mobility and opportunities to migrate are made possible via practices taking place in Ghanaian football.

### 3. **Chairman give me transport! Money and mobility in youth football**

The early 1990s were an era where the grand design for development was enacted through neoliberal structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and marketisation, and the Ghanaian Football Association (GFA) sought to do away with its amateur status and professionalise the football industry in line with prevailing commercial ideologies (Pannenberg, 2010). This approach succeeded in popularising the idea of football as a business, and professional Ghanaian football is now structured around a sponsored Premier League with the Division One League beneath it. There has also been a change in the demographic of club owners. Kurt Okraku, secretary of GHALCA explained how wealthy businessmen are now purchasing professional football clubs as investments and for the prestige.

If you look at our league table you will clearly see that this is the era of the Sugar Daddies. It is becoming very common in Ghana and they do it for the money and social recognition.

Scholars of African football have documented the increasing presence of 'Sugar Daddies' or 'Big Men' as they are also known, as part of the above-mentioned expansion of professionalism (Pannenberg, 2010). What is less well known is that like the Premier and First Division important changes are also taking place in amateur youth football or, as it is colloquially known in Ghana, 'Colts'.<sup>3</sup> A new regulated and national Colts league was launched in the summer of 2011. In March 2011 while registration was still taking place, the GFA regional office in Accra used their registration database to estimate that seven hundred clubs in twelve regional zones would take part. Two hundred and forty of these clubs were located in Accra spread over eleven districts, with the number of registered youth players estimated in the region of 25,000. Alongside these changes to the format and number of clubs in the Colts league, GFA Executive Evans Amenumey explained how there has also been a change in the demographic of club owners, characterised by the emergence of 'small boys'.

Before things were not at all like this thing. Now most of these the small boys who even organise this juvenile league are unemployed. Some push truck and some help building contractors to carry concrete just to pay referee fees and transport.

The term 'small boy' does not refer to physical stature, rather it is a phrase commonly used in Ghana to describe an individual's social status in relation to their age. In this case, it highlights how the majority of club owners in the Colts' leagues lack social markers associated with normative notions of manhood, such as home ownership, formal employment and financial independence.

During my time in Accra attending matches, and also while collecting data in the GFA regional office, I noticed that many of the owners I spoke to appeared to be in their twenties and thirties. Moreover, the owners and managers at Austin Texans FC, Barracks FC and Future Icons FC were also of a similar age. Although the owners of the three clubs did not push truck or work in construction, they did share traits typical of 'small boy' club

<sup>3</sup> Under 12, 14 and 17 – it is compulsory for clubs to have a team at all age levels.

owners. For example, Addae, a twenty-four year old university graduate and owner of Austin Texans FC (established in 2008), and Rama, a twenty two-year-old junior high school dropout and owner of Barracks FC (established in 2001), still lived at home with their parents. Addae was unable to secure formal employment after completing his degree but generated an income providing tuition to wealthy students at elite secondary schools, while Rama sold second-hand mobile phones. Meanwhile for Billa, a forty-year-old schoolteacher and owner of Future Icons FC (established in 2005), owning a Colts team began as a recreational activity but became a means to supplement his salary as a schoolteacher so he and his wife could move out of his parents' home.

Taking ownership of a football club carries significant administrative and financial obligations. In addition to official mandatory fees such as team registration (40 GHC per team), player registration (5 GHC per player) and referee fees (22 GHC per game), players are also known to ask for boots, training kits, water, winning bonuses and even money for school examinations. As the owner of Future Icons FC explains below, this can make for an uncomfortable life.

Let's say you have paid the officiating fees, you have paid the transport for the players to and from the venue and then your daily training allowances, which could be as much as ten cedis or fifty pesewas. But if as many as sixty players are training you can see how much it will cost you for a week, but maybe you don't earn all that in a month. So you are wondering how do we get the money to do it? Nobody can ask you that question and you can give them an answer, somebody will tell you that we have some magical wands.

So why put yourself through this hardship? There are undoubtedly those who own academies purely for the love of the game. Yet, for Addae, Billa and Rama like many of the young people now involved in Colts football, they go through these hardships because they see themselves as entrepreneurs, and their Colts team as their enterprise. For them, owning and running a Colts team is more than a recreational activity or hobby. It is a window of opportunity, a chance to be economically active and rip off the 'small boy' label invisibly inscribed on their forehead. They take financial risks and invest in Colts football in the hope of making a profit. Like the young Ghanaians who turn to their own bodies and become 'entrepreneurs of self' in the guise of a footballer in order to circumvent the challenges and constraints associated with life in neoliberal Accra, these owners seek to create a sense of economic security and improve their social standing through football.

This growing interest in Colts football and the clamor to own a team has arisen because despite the influx of financial investment following the encouragement of commercialism and diversified revenue streams, money circulates in Ghanaian football primarily through player transfers. Players are not only a human resource for their respective clubs, but also a source of capital attributed valuations according to their performances on the pitch. Importantly, players are aware that their performances and sporting ability have a commercial value, and this is one of the key reasons why they view football as a way to be self-reliant. For example, those in the U-14, U-17 and seniors teams sought payment for their 'labour', even while playing in the amateur leagues. Ben, a U-17 player at Austin Texans FC explained this point as follows:

BM – Under twelve when they finish they just change themselves and go but an under-seventeen asks where is my transport and winning bonus? You can't just play football for free, you do it to make money. Essien just checks his account and it is in.

INT – But Essien plays for Chelsea in the Premier League.

BM – There is no difference he is also playing just like me. Football is like a profession now so you take it serious and you sacrifice.

GFA executive Jordan Anagblah picked up on this point as follows: Even when you call a boy coming to play a youth game he is demanding money. Oh yes! Under seventeen after they close they will tell you 'Chairman give me transport'. You think they are coming from their home to play just because they love ball? Even an under-fourteen asks for money, under twelve are younger so is just for fun but the others no no...

Crucially, any financial value associated with a player only becomes real when they are transferred/sold from one club to another. GFA executive Evans Amenumey explained that this has resulted in player trading emerging as a potentially lucrative source of income for club owners in the Colts divisions.

It is from let's say from around 2003 that people are now involving themselves deep into this thing... People have seen Essien, Appiah, Muntari all of those people go through, so now they are more serious that at least let me get one person who one day when my prayers come I can get something.

Somewhat ironically, this situation is linked to international transfer regulations introduced by FIFA in 2001. These regulations sought to minimise the movement of minors within football by deterring clubs from signing players under the age of eighteen. One of the associated rulings stipulated that clubs involved in the training of players between the ages of twelve and twenty-three must receive financial compensation from the buying club (FIFA, 2008). This has financial ramifications, because if a highly talented player is transferred to a major professional club in one of Europe's top leagues, the compensation could potentially be worth hundreds of thousands of US dollars. These changes taking place in football at the global level are being interpreted and put to use in locally specific ways by young Ghanaians. In light of the 2001 FIFA regulations, the labour and investment spent on a youth player is now an objective quality of said player.

In keeping with conduct associated with a good entrepreneur (Chigunta et al., 2005), so-called small boys recognised this opportunity and embarked on a way to capitalise on it. Billa, Rama, Addae and the club owners I met at the GFA offices explained how this was possible. In order to play organised football in Ghana, a player has to have a registration card containing their biographical details and career history (even at Colts Level). The registration card can be used as proof that the player was trained at your club and you are therefore entitled to compensation. In this respect the registration card is like a financial bond, purchased with the hope of maturing as the player's career does, and mirrors other securitised products and contracts associated with a contract driven mode of present-day capitalist financial activity. GFA executive Jordan Anagblah explained how a notable outcome of this situation is that player transfers at Colts level are now more costly and frequent as club owners speculate over young playing talent.

JA – Now you see everybody starts asking 'Give me this before I do this'. They see football as business.

INT – So now you have to deal with more transfers?

JA – Oh yes! A Colts player (hmmm), if I recall the amount that somebody will sell a Colts player your mouth will open and you will marvel. At this level people will buy a player for 500 Ghana Cedis sometimes a 1000. Yes people buy for 500 new Ghana. That is for a Colts divisional player today.

INT – So how will he make the money back?

JA – (Laughter) well the one selling doesn't care he doesn't care. The one buying is hoping that tomorrow a bigger club will buy from you and that is the situation in Ghana today.

The players, and in some cases their parents, were not oblivious to the financial opportunities that local transfers could provide. There was an expectation even at the local amateur level that players should be rewarded when switching clubs. Moving clubs was seen as a way to generate a return on their labour and sporting prowess, and players would often seek out opportunities at clubs managed by a 'Sugar Daddy' or 'Big Man' who could further their career and migratory aspirations. Local transfers therefore become associated with progression and reward, as explained by Daniel, a senior team player and coach for Future Icons FC's under-17 team, and GFA executive Jordan Anagblah respectively.

D – Without a good manager who is a Big Man himself or knows some Big Men to make links for you and to support you then you cannot make it out of here [Ghana].

JA – You don't tell the player to go to speak to someone else, you don't need to force the player rather they will force you to transfer them. They [buying club] will entice them with money. Maybe they will say I will give the player 200 Ghana Cedis and then the chairmen or manager of the team 500 Ghana Cedis. . . Between their peers they [club owners in the Colts Leagues] are strong on collecting their money but when the big clubs come they will just give the player out because the players mother or father is giving pressure. So they will give the card before the money is paid.

As indicated in the quote above, a crucial outcome of this situation is conflicts between 'small boys' and 'Sugar Daddies', because 'Sugar Daddies' and owners of professional senior clubs attempt to poach promising youth talent from the Colts leagues. Thus, having made the effort to carve out their economic niche, club owners in the Colts League frequently find their business under threat. Billa the owner of Future Icons FC illustrated this point as follows:

You can imagine that the worst for us will be to toil and try to train these boys then as they get older people will come and poach them without paying money. Do you want to do that kind of job? Putting the team together and doing all these things, investing and the players you have trained people will take the good ones and the money.

#### 4. I'm a Ghanaian footballer get me out of here!

Through the empirical insights provided above, we begin to see how the movement of young players has become essential to the Ghanaian football industry. This movement is financially beneficial to a variety of actors including the players themselves, and to youth trying to make a living by owning a club and trading young footballers on the international transfer market. Football academies are therefore not only increasingly prevalent in Ghana, but in Accra at least, they are also progressively geared towards the grooming and export of young players to foreign clubs, especially those in wealthier European leagues. This is an important point, because as highlighted in the first half of the article, this is the same geographical region players are often desperate to migrate to but find their ability to enact spatial change constrained. For players, transfers take on the role of migratory channels offering opportunities for spatial mobility. Moreover, as indicated above by the Austin Texans FC player who absconded while in Denmark, competing in international tournaments also provide openings to obtain travel documents and bypass an arbitrary and

perplexingly bureaucratic immigration process. Thus, the structural logic of a football industry that promotes movement as a prerequisite to success is in sync with the migratory disposition of young Ghanaians.

Club owners and players explained that while mobility through football at the grass roots level can take place via interactions between locally based actors, an international transfer requires the intervention of someone with links 'outside'. Given that the primary objective for players and club owners was securing a transfer to a European football club, and the majority of certified football agents reside in Europe (see [Poli and Rossi, 2012](#)), encounters with those claiming to have connections to this particular geographical region took on added significance. Problematically, while players at established institutions like the Right to Dream Academy deal with professional clubs and registered agents in accordance with FIFA's transfer system, individuals at the three case study clubs encountered persons *claiming* to be talent scouts or certified agents with connections to foreign clubs. These intermediaries – who participants described as almost always being 'local' (black West African) but alleging to be based 'outside' in Europe, and invariably dressed in designer sunglasses, dress shirt and formal trousers – are linked to a version of trials known in full as a 'justify your inclusion' and in short as a 'justify'.

In Ghanaian football, a 'justify' is a term used to describe a trial where players compete for a place in a team, i.e. you are given an opportunity to justify your inclusion in the squad. These events can range from amateur Colts teams looking to rejuvenate their line up, all the way through to the Ghanaian national youth team where players from across the country take part in trials to secure a spot in the national side. A 'justify' is therefore not a problem in-of-itself. Rather staff at the GFA, PFAG and GHALCA; players, coaches and owners at the three clubs; and two executives at two Premier League clubs, explained that the issue is a contemporary twist on this form of trial. The intermediaries described above set up a 'justify' either in conjunction with a club or independently, based on the proviso that they can engineer a transfer for the best players to a foreign club in exchange for cash. At the time of my fieldwork, this sum was typically in the region of three to five thousand Ghanaian Cedis per player. The extent to which these controversial forms of a 'justify' are occurring is an area that needs further exploration.

Unfortunately, as indicated in the case of the young Ghanaians who had dreams of playing in Europe but instead found themselves stranded in Mauritius, some intermediaries are able to convince players to hand over large sums of money in the hopes of securing a transfer abroad. It is likely that scholars working with young people in Ghana and other West African contexts can envisage how this scenario could happen, as the situation described above contains traits that extend beyond Ghanaian football. Studies have drawn attention to how the above-mentioned 'closure of the West' in the form of stricter immigration policies has resulted in heightened demand for facilitators to assist prospective migrants traverse international borders ([Langevang, 2008a](#); [Nyamnjoh and Page, 2002](#); [Jua, 2003](#)). This is because mobility encompasses the production or reproduction of similarities and difference, as those moving or being moved tend to be positioned (hierarchically) in relation to those they encounter ([Nyamnjoh, 2013](#)).

The challenge for players and club owners therefore becomes one of distinguishing legitimate opportunities from fraudulent ones, and herein lies the gift and the curse of contemporary Ghanaian football. It is now geared towards encouraging encounters with those deemed capable of enacting spatial change and development through mobility, but the person regarded as being able to facilitate this change comes to the situation from a position of power. This is because youth craving spatial mobility view these intermediaries as the anvil to involuntary immobility's hammer.



Additionally, European football provides the best opportunity for these ‘entrepreneurs of self’ to secure a maximum return on their sporting ability. Meanwhile for ‘small boy’ club owners, these intermediaries could potentially help them cash in on their registration cards and make their investment in football worthwhile (before the player is poached by a Big Man or engineers a move to a different side).

The challenge for researchers including myself will be to further investigate how it is that in the context of African football migration one person is able to gain power over another, which as noted by Anderson (2007), is often key to understanding the mobilisation of potential irregular migrants. Doing so points us towards exploring an important point underpinning the thrust of this paper, namely, that in order to better understand how and why irregular football migration is occurring we need to look at how football interacts with broader social dynamics. When we do, we see that in the Ghanaian case, young males are not just trying to migrate through football because they are footballers. Rather a key reason they became footballers in the first place is because this occupation provides them with an acceptable form of entrepreneurial employment, and the financial logic of the football industry offers opportunities to be spatially mobile. This point is important when trying to understand how young Ghanaian footballers can end up stranded in Mauritius. Insincere intermediaries are making the most of this potent concoction of a football industry reliant on the movement of players, and a young population beleaguered by involuntary immobility.

## 5. Conclusions

This article demonstrated how ignoring the perceptions of young West African footballers, and viewing migration and mobility as being distinct from broader social relationships, hinders our understanding of African football migration and the agency of the young people involved in this migration process. By placing more interpretive weight on the rationales underpinning the decision to migrate through football, the article revealed how in Ghana, migration through football does not necessarily begin with the actions of duplicitous agents or with the demand for African talent amongst foreign clubs. In Accra, football migration often begins with a young Ghanaian male who has a body and a dream of attaining a respectable adulthood, which is the manifestation of a broader struggle for survival amid a sense of a less than certain future. It was argued that the construction of young Ghanaians as responsible for future life chances and the growing dissonance between aspiration and the ability to migrate lies at the heart of both regular and irregular football migration.

My analysis of how football migration emerges from the Ghanaian milieu provided rich empirical insights to further debates over the resourcefulness and entrepreneurialism of young people living in West Africa. I built on research with youth in the Global South to reveal how the young Ghanaians males I encountered in Accra have lost faith in temporal social development, and in its place now see development as freedom through spatial mobility, ideally to Europe. Problematically, this is coupled with a realisation that not everyone can make use of mobility’s benefits. This disjuncture between the players desires to migrate and ability to do so induces a sense of what Carling (2002) terms ‘involuntary immobility’. Young Ghanaians attempt to overcome involuntary immobility and enact development as freedom through spatial mobility by becoming Foucauldian ‘entrepreneurs of self’ in the form of a professional footballer, with the Ghanaian football industry viewed as a way to imbue their human capital with the much sought after element of mobility. But they are not alone in seeking to generate a livelihood from football. Other young unemployed

Ghanaian males are embracing financial risk and economic hardship by becoming entrepreneurs in the form of football club owners in the hope of making a profit by moving young players around.

The interests of these two sets of young entrepreneurs, namely aspirant football migrants and club owners, unite around the fact that spatial mobility is key to their plans. This is because despite offering up their bodies as collateral in compliance with the neoliberal order of the day, the resourcefulness and ingenuity of these young would-be professional footballers does not guarantee they will get an acceptable return on their investment. In order to do so, there is a perception that players must migrate to more financially lucrative non-African leagues, preferably in Europe. Meanwhile for club owners, the trading of players within Ghana provides a way to generate an income in the short term, but in the long term they use FIFA regulations to take a gamble that one of their academy prospects will eventually secure a lucrative transfer to Europe and make their investment in football worthwhile. Consequently, the structural logic of a football industry that promotes movement as a prerequisite to financial success merges with the migratory disposition of young Ghanaians, and it is in this context that exploitative and irregular migratory practices are able to occur.

It could be argued that the clamor to migrate through football, and any resultant cases of irregular football migration, are simply an outcome of the misappropriation of the entrepreneurial spirit and negative forms of agency it produces amongst young Ghanaians. Such a reading skillfully ignores an important point. This belief in football as a means to attain development as freedom through spatial mobility has coincided with an era in which the model for economic development is enacted through neoliberalism. The sense of individuation, competition and the treatment of the body as capital embodied in the ‘entrepreneur of self’, are all linked to the post SAP neoliberal ethos which constructs Ghanaians as primarily responsible for their own future life chances. By critically engaging with the demands neoliberal governance is placing on the shoulders of youth, and the nuanced ways in which understandings of what it means to be entrepreneurial emerge, this article highlighted the increasingly spatial nature of strategies to overcome the constraints on life ambitions facing young people in Ghana. The irony is that this loss of faith in interventionist development amongst Ghanaian youth perceptively corresponds with contemporary neoliberal governance, which is also no longer, if indeed it ever was, concerned with socioeconomic convergence through improved developmental strategies.

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