

Chapter 4

## JUST SITTING

### The Spectre of Bare Immobility



In addition to farming and *hustling*, the typical day of a young man involves much, or even mainly, sitting around with friends. In cities as well as in villages, a ubiquitous element of the landscape is the sight of small groups of young men perched on chairs, benches or platforms at the road sides and street corners. Sitting together is part and parcel of everyday male sociality, but youths also sit around because they have no job or are waiting for an opportunity to start a business or leave the country. For young men who remain in Sabi during the dry season, sitting stretches out from morning to night, to be interrupted only by prayers, meals and occasional tasks at home. From a leisurely activity, therefore, sitting alone or with friends becomes a cumbersome experience. As one greets young men in a gathering and routinely asks them what they are up to (*xa do manni wa me yi?*), a common reply is ‘we are just/only sitting’ (*o wa taaxunu tan*), usually followed by other remarks such as: we are up to *hari baane* (nothing at all) or *ma koriye* (only poverty).

Sitting around in broad daylight jars with the ideal of the dynamic, hard-working man. Young men who farm in Sabi or *hustle* in Serekunda might fail to amass money and to progress substantially in life, but they do at least try and perform activities deemed to be valuable. They hone and unleash their embodied capacity for work and endurance, which is inherently linked to maintaining their body-self in a state of motion. By contrast, ‘just sitting’ is associated, for a young man, with passivity and growing anxieties about his reputation as a *hustler* and more generally

as a worthy man. It is a bodily metaphor for the inability to move either physically by emigrating, financially by working or socially by purposefully 'sitting' in Sabi. However, 'just sitting' is not solely a signifier of geo-social immobility; since young men internalize a capacity for *hustling*, 'just sitting' indexes specific ways of somatically attending to this impasse (Csordas 1993). The stilled body is a mode of embodied consciousness in which geographical, social and corporeal movement (or lack thereof) coalesce.

In this chapter I attempt to gain insights into experiences of mobility and staying behind by analysing the cultural kinaesthesia of 'just sitting', the perceptions of bodily postures and the cultural sensibilities conveyed through them (Geurts 2002: 74). I will describe the ways in which young men experience their motionless bodies as a form of entrapment, and then show how bodily inertia becomes filled with imaginary movement, not in the sense of purely mental images of mobility, but of embodied thoughts of international travel that crowd young men's heads. While projecting their dynamic selves into the future and elsewhere helps young men to envision a way out of their impasse, thoughts of mobility often become a haunting presence and ultimately exacerbate their sense of entrapment. In the second part of the chapter, I will show that youths may thus resort to temporal strategies to deal with their spatial problems; namely, reconfiguring their sitting and waiting as a moral-religious struggle against despair.

Of all the experiences of 'sitting' described in this ethnography, 'just sitting' is certainly the most abject one. It is a form of 'sitting' where no value accrues to the 'sitter'. It is an incumbent spectre of social death hovering over young men's lives and the prospect of emplacement in Sabi. Rather than in the absence of mobility per se, however, the problematic nature of 'just sitting' lies in the fact that stillness is not attached to any value and purpose. To distinguish it from other modalities of immobility, I thus describe it as 'bare immobility', a mode of 'sitting' stripped of its qualities and reduced to mere inertia. This term gestures towards Agamben's (1995) notion of 'bare life', a borderline form of existence produced by, and inherent in, the legal and political structures of state sovereignty. Bare life is the condition of a person completely subordinate to sovereign power and who does not receive any counterpart of rights for it. In using this terminology, I do not mean to suggest that 'just sitting' can be read as a form of bare life, for young men are not *sensu stricto* totally subject to sovereign power;<sup>1</sup> rather, I wish to hint at the processes of denudation of qualified subjectivity resulting from the biopolitical, economic *and* societal regimes of (im)mobilization described in the previous chapters. Broadly speaking, while young men are still being

valued against ideals of productive and mobile masculinity, legal barriers to mobility and neoliberal regimes of the economy exclude them from circuits of gainful employment at home as well as abroad. It is the hiatus between the potential and the actual condition, between possibility and opportunity, that wears down 'sitting' and reduces it to 'just sitting'. Utter bareness is an exceptional circumstance; it is nevertheless a modality of 'sitting' that many young men experience in varying degrees of intensity and frequency during their stay in Sabi and in the Gambia, a spectre that informs the imagination of other, more worthy immobilities.

### Ghetto Youth: (Em)placing Male Sociability

In the Gambia, sitting – the act of being seated – is a central aspect of social life. Known as *bantaba* in the Mandinka language and *kora* in Soninke, seating platforms dot the urban landscape of the entire region, providing male elders with a place to chat and a forum for debating current events. Though less visible in the public space, male youths have their own gathering places at the *koranlenme*, the minor *kora*, also known as *ghetto* in youth slang. In general, a *ghetto* consists of no more than ten to fifteen young men sitting on benches and chairs placed under a tree, at the gate of a house, or on the veranda of a friend's shop, or more frequently in the boys' quarters of family compounds. In coastal cities, gathering places are often called *vous* (from the French *rendez-vous*), and they are tied to the history of neighbourhood associations in Banjul, where some *vous* used to be well-known as political circles (Hughes and Perfect 2006: 201). In Sabi, while youths meet at seating platforms to discuss current affairs, the *ghetto* is mainly a place to relax in and ease the pressure of everyday problems. Over a glass of *ataya* (green tea), young men exchange news, listen to music, play games and cards, and often share their frustrations about money, their angst about the future and their concerns about strained household relationships (see Janson 2013: 117–19).

In Sabi, *ghettos* usually gather men belonging to the same age group, though other criteria and shared interests often override age differences. Meeting points are often identified with a charismatic youth or the person at whose house or shop they are located. The 'host' usually buys sugar and tea to make *ataya*, the basic ingredients for creating a conversation and making it 'sweet', as young men say.<sup>2</sup> Regular attendants contribute with money or by bringing tea, cigarettes, sweets, batteries for the cassette player and other commodities which they share as an act of male bonding. This micro-political economy of sociality creates other forms of mutual aid and social networking among peers (Nyanzi 2011: 208). When

a young man is broke, he will turn to some of his close mates and explain his situation to them. He may plead for a handout, or he may be able to borrow a bicycle, to use a friend's phone to make an urgent call, and so on. The shopkeeper entertaining a *ghetto* on the veranda of the shop may count on these young men for small errands or to supervise the shop in his absence. In return, at the shop they may find small opportunities for business deals. At the very least, in the *ghetto* a man will be able to share his frustrations and drink some *ataya* that he could not otherwise afford.

Although they are deeply localized and intimate, *ghettos* are places of 'global' imagination and laboratories of transnational youth cultures. Youths in their teens and early twenties often select exotic names for their *ghetto* from a pool of possible migrant destinations as well as from American hip hop, reggae and European football; among others: Atlanta, Los Angeles, Hannover Boys, Barcelona Team (Figure 4.1).<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the imaginary of international migration follows a logic of cultural extraversion whereby foreign products and images are used to express and shape local meanings (Fouquet 2008). Rather than just reflecting local–global connections, these names reveal ways in which youths inhabit the wider world and participate in it through imagination. Weiss (2004b) has argued that imagination (he uses the term 'fantasy') is not the sole result of flows of images and consumer goods in the age of globalization; it is an integral aspect of social life that enables people to



Figure 4.1 Hannover ('Anoba') Boys, 2008

represent and experience social reality. The urban Tanzanian male youths in Weiss's study use images and icons from rural society as well as from American rap. In particular, Tanzanian youths refer to the toughness embodied by American gangsta rappers singing about *ghettos*, as a way of imagining, and hence inhabiting, everyday hardship in the streets of Arusha. In a remarkably similar fashion, some Sabi youths told me that the very word *ghetto* comes from American rap or closely related genres of Jamaican reggae (cf. also Jaffe 2012). As a young man explained: 'life in the [American] ghetto is not easy, just like here'. The evocative imagery of *ghetto* youth is sometimes reflected in the names of gatherings too. For instance, one group of Sabi teenagers named their *ghetto* Mafia Boys, a term they had learned at school, in order to represent themselves as a tough and thuggish gang, and possibly to 'grappl[e] with their inability to inhabit normative masculinities' (Masquelier 2013: 478).

Stylized thuggishness does not really translate into deviant behaviours. Although there have been occasional violent clashes between *ghettos* of boys in Sabi, confrontation usually takes place on different grounds. A *ghetto* acquires notoriety by sponsoring DJ party nights on the outskirts of the village, which are attended by hundreds of boys displaying their hip hop gear, swaggering around and trying to impress the girls; here *ghetto* groups and groups of friends 'hire' the dance floor for a song or two and dance together.<sup>4</sup> From their mid twenties, young men do not usually participate in such parties, nor do they bother to give fancy names to their meeting places. Imagination is nevertheless important for them, as I will explain shortly.

Starting from the early 2000s, the Jammeh regime contributed to demonizing youth gatherings. *Ghettos* have become a major target of Jammeh's attack on youth as being lazy and bewitched by the European dream. In cities and rural areas, youths often complain about the government's crackdown on youth gatherings with the excuse of fighting against drug trafficking. In villages like Numuyell, where paramilitaries have a base, youths and villagers have long complained about the paras' frequent night incursions into *ghettos*, with young men being intimidated and even dragged away and beaten up. In 2011, a man was reported to have been beaten to death by the paras, triggering an upheaval in the village which led to the closing down of the paramilitaries' station. In villages like Sabi, the atmosphere has been more relaxed and relations with the nearby border police have been cordial. Nevertheless, during my visit in late 2012, the government was carrying out Operation Bulldozer, a police operation with highly moralistic overtones waged against criminals and foreign infiltrators that in fact tightened control on Gambians. Even relatively remote and dormant villages in the Upper River had become

targeted by night patrols and intelligence operations, with male youths and gatherings once again bearing the brunt of repression. In Sabi, there was a perceptible sense that some *ghettos* had retreated into more private spaces such as the interiors of family compounds, and that sometimes these groups had become smaller and less visible.

Aside from state repression, youth gatherings are certainly subjected to the public gaze of the villagers too. People are very attentive to movements through town and inquire about householders who have gone to visit friends and families, even for a brief time. Sometimes strong inferences are made from these observations (some people view this as a confirmation that villagers are fond of gossiping and backbiting). Being seen sitting in *ghettos* is automatically perceived as a sign of being associated with the usual attendants of the *ghetto* or with the activities taking place there. Although young men are tacitly expected to have sexual experiences before marriage, premarital sex is forbidden and parents especially fear their daughters being enticed into boys' *ghettos* where they might lose their virginity. Another compromising activity associated with some *ghettos* is marijuana (*kali*), a drug that is relatively cheap and widely consumed in the Gambia by young people as much as by those in their thirties and forties. Needless to say, elders and many other people view the use of cannabis as a clear sign of laziness and moral depravation (see also Nyanzi 2011: 207).

In her study of a Malian Soninke village, Gunvor Jónsson (2007: 70ff) has argued that the *grins* – the Malian equivalent of the *ghetto* – represent a form of adaptation to involuntary immobility. Unable to inhabit migrants' hegemonic masculinity, and stigmatized as lazy people and even deviants, disenfranchised youth take refuge in *grins* – which she defines as 'spaces of freedom' – that lie beyond the elders' gaze and provide them with modes of agency and presence. In an illuminating article on the *fada* – a male-based congregation in Niger similar to the *ghetto* – Adeline Masquelier (2013) draws similar conclusions. Nigerien elders find the *fada* futile and self-indulgent; unemployed young men are no less troubled by idleness, but by making tea and spending time together they also fight against boredom and seek to regain a direction in their lives. In the Gambia, *ghettos* are equally ambiguous phenomena, an ambiguity aptly captured by the trope of the American or Caribbean ghetto. On the one hand, Gambian *ghettos* provide a refuge from societal pressures where young men create intimacy and, at least the younger ones, alternative codes of respectability. Sitting in *ghettos* is in this sense a mode of emplacement, producing a social space (Lefebvre 1991), exchanges, affects and contacts vital to men's everyday survival and self-esteem. On the other, the price for this freedom is often more stigmatization

and enclosure; what makes life hard in a Sabi youth *ghetto* is clearly not solely the rural suffering (*tanpiye*) youths face in their daily life, but the load of pressure and gossip weighing on them. Prior to exploring ways in which young men seek to rethink the temporal and spatial terms of their ghettoized lives in Sabi, closer attention to this process of devaluation or questioning of the socially productive act of sitting is, in my view, required.

### Stilled Bodies and Burdened Heads

Notwithstanding external pressures and controls, the sense of oppression associated with sitting in *ghettos* originates primarily from within the *ghetto*, or to be more precise, from within the *ghetto* men themselves. As places of leisure and rest, *ghettos* should be ideally an after-work activity; but as leisure prevails in the absence of work, it fades dangerously into idleness precisely at a time when youths remind themselves that '*taaxe nta di*', there is no (time for) sitting. Remarking on the body at rest is thus an implicit commentary on virtue and vice, more than a response to accusations of laziness coming from the outside. By 'just sitting', youths sense in a bodily way their inability to live up to the ideals and dispositions which they themselves have internalized through the agrarian ethos of work and vigour.

Inactivity generates sentiments of discomfort and distress. According to these young men, the signs of prolonged sitting may become visible in the body itself, particularly in aspects related to bodily strength (*senbe*), such as loss of weight and muscular tone. It is not uncommon for young men to use bodily metaphors to draw contrasts between their current situation of inactivity and a period in the past in which they were *hustling* and making money. For instance, Sigu – a man in his mid thirties at the time of my fieldwork – was once trading commodities between Serekunda and Sabi. Back then, he used to earn a good amount of money, which he eagerly shared with his family and friends. His life was hectic, as he used to travel long hours on bad roads, but he could afford good food, such as meat, which Gambians associate with energy and strength. 'My body was *dinka* [big, plump] and *melexe* [shiny, toned]', said Sigu, as he narrated his story to me. Then, business became slack, and eventually he had to abandon it. Ever since then, he has done some street peddling and worked in Serekunda during the dry season, but has never managed to make much money. He mostly stays in Sabi, and once the agricultural season is over, he flits from *ghetto* to *ghetto* to drink *ataya* and entertain friends with his news and jokes. Sigu has remained a jovial person and apparently enjoys

spending time at the *ghettos*, but he also complains he has lost weight (*kuma*) and become restless because his situation causes him too much anxiety: ‘Sometimes I lie in bed until 2 or 3 A.M. without sleeping: thinking and thinking’.

Like Sigu, young men tend to associate ‘just sitting’ with a burdensome proliferation of thoughts (*simmaye*) in their heads. An expression in Soninke clearly shows the linkage between bodily stance and cognitive activity: ‘*n do hanmi wa taaxunu*’, literally meaning ‘my concern and I are sitting [together]’, or ‘I’m sitting on my concerns’. Usually glossed as ‘concern’ or ‘preoccupation’ (Girier 1996: 279), *hanmi* refers to a mode of focusing the mind (*fakle*), and as we saw in previous chapters, it is used to describe men’s determination and ambition to look for money. Since money is needed everywhere and yet is never enough, the *hanmi* to acquire money easily fades into the nagging concern about being unable to find cash, as a proper man should do: ‘you keep on thinking [*simmene*] about money, how your wife can eat, how your children can eat, [how they] can have clothes and other things. You keep on thinking’ (Mohamed, 27). As thinking haunts the young men, it may generate a sense of oppression, of being weighed down by a head full of thoughts. The term *likke* (burden) is used to describe this state of the mind and gives us an indication that thoughts are not perceived as a disembodied mental activity, but as ways of experiencing the embodied mind.<sup>5</sup> This mental encumbrance leads to becoming ‘confused’ (*jaxasi*), which in turn leads to a loss of *hanmi*, the focus and determination that is so vital in order to continue *hustling* for the very money young men worry so much about.

This situation is again comparable with Brad Weiss’s findings about Tanzanian youth describing everyday encounters with economic hardship and shame as a *stream* of thoughts flooding their minds and experienced as pain and even as something akin to spirit possession (Weiss 2005). Although I have never heard Gambian young men speaking of haunting thoughts as spirit possession, concern and confusion can cause somatic distress, as Sigu indicates.<sup>6</sup> In certain cases, young men resort to herbalist or medical remedies, including cannabis, to relieve the burden weighing down their heads.

## The Nerves Syndrome

Given its special relationship with money, international travel is unsurprisingly one of the most recurrent haunting thoughts associated with ‘just sitting’. Gambian youths often refer to the lure of emigration as the



*nerves syndrome* or simply ‘being nerves’, a persistent craving for travel, especially to *Babylon*, the West, that lingers within them. The use of the word syndrome must not deceive us into thinking that this is a disease in the biomedical sense of the term; rather, syndrome here conjures up the idea of a contagious fever for travel that has affected Gambian youth for at least twenty to thirty years. Although only a few works have tried to explain the phenomenon, an article by Mamadou L. Jallow (2006), a Gambian independent political commentator living in the United States, is an exception. In his article, Jallow provides an anecdotal etymology of the word nerves:

In the summer of 1984, a group of Gambians on [a] short holiday from Oslo, Norway came with a swagger and attitude that forever changed my generation ... Legend has it that in the summer of 1984, a youth in Banjul was so taken by these *semesters* in their fancy clothes, expensive cars, gold chains, the money and the life style [that he] remarked that the overwhelming feeling he experience[d] [got] his NERVES up [sic]. Hence the origin of [the] word *nerves*. The word eventually evolved into the embodiment of the longing to travel, to explore, to hustle, to study abroad, to go beyond the Gambian shores, to try new opportunities and above all to return home and make a difference to yourself, your family, friends and your community.<sup>7</sup> (Jallow 2006)

Rather than in the historical accuracy of Jallow’s account, I am interested in the cultural reference points he uses. The ‘embodiment of the longing to travel’, to explore, make and bring back money is readily recognizable even to the previous generations of Soninke and Gambian migrants. This was one of the driving forces of the diamond rush in 1950s, and is one that has continued, albeit in different directions, to polarize the geography of the quest for money among the following generations of Soninke men. Tellingly, Soninke speakers translate *nerves* as *hanmi*, the concern, ambition and determination of mind and body to perform a purposeful task, most notably *hustling* (the word *curasi* – from the French *courage* – is often used as a substitute for *hanmi*). This is consonant with the image of ‘getting one’s nerve up’ used by Jallow. Also featuring in Jallow’s story are the migrants who, through displays of success, lure those who have stayed behind into travel. Although Soninke young men are often critical of *semesters* and their excesses, they readily admit that houses, pilgrimages and other achievements of respected *hustlers* give them *hanmi* to get up and try to emulate them. In other words, the *nerves syndrome* can be seen as a variant of the discourse on *hustling* that emphasizes proactive attitudes as a precondition to socioeconomic success, and that exclusively attaches them to international travel.

However, aside from setting the body-mind to a concrete quest for money abroad, the *nerves syndrome* is a way of coping with the present condition of sitting, pondering and despairing. It can be read as a form of ‘existential mobility’, whereby going somewhere becomes desirable when ‘people feel that they are existentially ... “stuck” on the “highway of life”’ (Hage 2005: 471). Young men know full well that many migrants sit jobless in, say, Europe, especially after the 2008 financial crisis; but many remain confident that moving out will give them at least a chance to move on in life. By placing travel at the centre of the imaginary of success in a context where opportunities to emigrate are actually few, the *nerves syndrome* also assumes an escapist function, an imaginary flight from misery and abjection. To leave is to leave behind the burden of concerns weighing one down and to escape from a place which offers no hopes for the future (cf. Vigh 2009b). The migratory elsewhere thus becomes a heterotopia, a space external to the self and yet inhabited (Foucault 1984), an imaginary screen on which to project an inverted reality (Capello 2008: 49, 84). Thinking of travel is a way of injecting movement into the inertia of the here-and-now in which sitting prevails, and projecting oneself into the dynamic there-and-then of travelling. As a young man (aged 30) told me once: ‘You see me [sitting] like this now. If I reach there, I will not sit! *La illaha!* I will wake up early in the morning and work till night!’ The *nerves syndrome* thus emerges from, and articulates, the cultural kinaesthesia of bare immobility, the bodily and mental shackles that trap young men. As such, it is a response to the structural violence (Farmer 2004) inflicted on young men by multiple forces, from the societal pressures to conform to normative models of male emancipation, to rural poverty and unemployment, to migration policies restricting free movement across borders.

Much as it constitutes an empowering concern, the longing for international migration can easily turn into pining. Since the lure of travel articulates and funnels discourses of the proactive self, it too may become a haunting presence in young men’s heads. One of the common tropes of representation of the *nerves syndrome* in the Gambia is, in fact, a youth ‘just sitting’ all day, continuously thinking about Europe or North America, and progressively alienating himself from the surrounding environment. Overtaken by the *nerves*, a young man may withdraw from his group of friends and spend time in isolation ‘sitting over his thoughts’. In Serekunda, I learnt that some youths feeling excessively *nerves* went as far as physically threatening their parents to find them a visa. Even when it does not reach this extreme, being *nerves* frequently has a boomerang effect: it leads to *jaxasiye* (confusion), the dissipation of the *hanmi* that anchored the mind to the goal of migration in the first place. In other

words, while it stems from, and gives respite to, the burden of thoughts and preoccupations distracting young men's heads, the haunting, unfulfilled aspiration of migration may add to their daily *tanpiye* or suffering.

Cindy Horst (2006) has described a similar phenomenon among Somali refugees in a Kenyan camp. Here, the term *buufis* 'indicates a longing or desire *blown* into someone's mind' (Horst 2006: 143, my emphasis). The unrealized desire for emigration to the West, as well as failed attempts at it, can increase the turbulence of the *buufis* to such a degree that it becomes a form of spirit possession and a cause of madness (Horst 2006: 146). Massimiliano Reggi (2011) has found *buufis* to be widespread in Somalia too; he has further shown that migration concerns are embedded in the highly volatile political, social and economic conditions that impinge on everyday life in Somalia and cause psychological distress. Together with the previously mentioned 'stream of thoughts' among disenfranchised Tanzanian youths (Weiss 2005), these cultural phenomenologies of embodied cognitive processes denote, in my view, the chasm existing between ideals of progress and the lack of available opportunities to realize them. In long-standing migratory contexts like the Gambia and Somalia, migration is both a source of malaise and a cure. On the one hand, migration is an entrenched livelihood strategy as well as a prospect for overcoming hardship and paving the way to a better future. On the other hand, as the challenges to becoming mobile remain daunting, the encumbrance of travel-related thoughts exacerbates the suffering and the sense of being trapped not only in a place but also in a bodily, existential condition of stasis.

### Waiting: The Stilled Time of Sitting

So far I have focused on the spatial dimensions of 'just sitting'. Time does, however, play a part in the experience of bare immobility, in more ways than one. In the first place, it is the prolonged nature of 'just sitting' that makes it such a wearing experience. In *ghettos*, young men accumulate an 'abundance of unstructured time' (Mains 2007). This problem is all the more poignant for those who stay in Sabi during the dry season. At this time, empty farms bake under the sun, work in family compounds is scarce and youths spend most of their days in the *ghettos* with their friends. Days become long and repetitive, with *ataya* sessions punctuating the passing of time in an almost cyclical manner (cf. Masquelier 2013: 486). The monotony of village life can thus slowly but inexorably lead to boredom, especially because young men are acutely aware of the promising and exciting perspectives elsewhere, to which they make constant reference

(cf. Schielke 2008: 258). Friends go to Serekunda, leaving behind fewer and fewer people as the season proceeds. Those who stay behind make plans to join them in Serekunda, with departures being imminent in words but in practice put off day after day for weeks or months, due to commitments keeping them at home and the inability to pay for the fare.<sup>8</sup>

The quality of time is a second element of ‘just sitting’. Time spent in *ghettos* is time spent sitting rather than *hustling*. A young man described the situation in this way:

I don't know what's wrong with me. When I sit like this, doing nothing, I feel like going to town [the village] ... When I go to see my friends [at the meeting point] it is a waste of time. I realize that. I go there and just talk: *yala, yala, yala* [blah, blah, blah]. When I leave, I realize it is useless, but when I am there, and even before going, my mind is not thinking the same way. (Musa, 32)

Musa's unfocused mind is clearly linked to ‘a waste of time’, a problem of which he is acutely aware.

A third temporal factor of ‘just sitting’, therefore, is that prolonged sitting instigates reflexivity on the passing of time. By spending time at meeting points, I learned how *ghetto* stories can be woven into biographies and narratives of travelling and staying behind. There is no man in his mid twenties or older who does not remember a close friend who used to visit his *ghetto* and then migrated abroad or moved to Serekunda. Friends leave, one by one, until too few people are left sitting in the *ghetto*; then it may break up, and those who stay behind are forced to join other gatherings and sometimes to spend time with younger men. Young men often use such stories of the waxing and waning of their congregations to remark on the lag in social time between *hustling* and sitting. Those who have travelled work, accumulate money and build mansions. Those who stay in Sabi, in contrast, place benches in the shade of those mansions being built, to brew *ataya* and thoughts of travel.

Finally, because of this contrast between actual expansion and potential compression of the timescale of social emancipation, young men live in a permanent state of urgency. They feel they have to catch up with their brothers and peers who have accelerated their progression to manhood by travelling abroad. The *nerves syndrome* captures this compelling need to become active and mobile, thereby negating the existential impasse which prevents young men from moving forward. Diluted in the unbound condition of ‘waithood’ (Honwana 2012), however, this need can erode confidence and determination (*hanmi*) from within the self, thus blurring the mind and numbing the body.

## The Virtue of Patience: Temporal Fixes to Spatial Problems

While the *ghetto* partly provides a space for alleviating young men's sedentary woes, and the prospect of travelling may hold out a promise of change, we have seen that these solutions may also become part of the problem. Young men thus seek other resources to make sense of their space-time suspension. How should one live in the present and avoid yielding to despair? If posed directly in these terms, a common response is: *munyuye* or *sabari* (from the Arabic *sabr*), patience. An important concept in Islamic theology, *sabari* is also referred to by lay Gambian Muslims in numerous other mundane conversations and is used in social and political negotiations (Davidheiser 2006: 843). *Ghetto* conversations are no exception. A number of popular mantras among young men emphatically capture their pleas to wait patiently for God's providence: no condition is permanent, God's time is the best (*Allah waxati sire ya ni*), better must come, in God we trust (*o na Allah raga*), and



Figure 4.2 Driving towards God's Time, Serekunda, 2008 (religious slogans are a common decoration on taxis and commercial vans, transportation being an important job market for young men *hustling* in the Gambia)

so on (Figure 4.2). In this final part of the chapter, I would therefore like to show that theological invocations are used in order to resist plunging into apathy, while simultaneously countering the sense of urgency provoked by being *nerves*. By inscribing their present condition in a cosmologically conceived future, young men envisage, to paraphrase Mains (2011: ch. 6), a temporal fix to a spatial problem. Although patience alone does not provide a solution to ‘just sitting’, nonetheless by motivating young men to bear with hardship and confusion it often helps them retain a still mind and a dynamic body in the pursuit of everyday subsistence.

Urgency and despair may entice young men into taking hazardous and religiously illicit actions. Elsewhere I have shown how expressions such as ‘God’s time is the best’ are mobilized to tame the appeal of hazardous ways of reaching Europe such as undocumented boat migration, or of making fast money illicitly such as by dealing drugs (Gaibazzi 2012a). As mentioned in the introduction to this book, the regional media captured the sense of despair of youths who pursue their European dream by gambling their lives on fishing boats sailing to the Canary Islands. This phenomenon was actually not numerically significant in the Gambia: it lasted only a few years and was not necessarily perceived in the same way by the young men as it was by the media. Nevertheless, it gave rise to enlightening debates in the *ghettos* and in households. Some young men saw embarking on a boat as a way to confront their destiny, in an attempt to fulfil their family duties: dying while *hustling* was not a sin but a dignified death. As a popular maxim in the Gambia recites: get rich or die trying. Others warned that the dangers of perishing at sea were too evident to be ignored. Youths who boarded the boats were at times accused of attempting suicide, an illicit act in Islam because it defies God’s power to give and take life. To recall the justness of God’s time – the moment in which God will provide for the individual or show him the right path – was thus tantamount to condemning haste and calling for forbearance.

Forbearance is a discourse of hope in an open-ended future. ‘You don’t know when your time will come’, the Sabinko often say, remarking that divine will and personal destiny are ultimately unknowable.<sup>9</sup> The future is always uncertain, and no present condition can wholly predict things to come. By the same token, the future will not necessarily be the repetition of the dull present. As an Islamic teacher phrased it: ‘This world is a temporary place and transit point. When we [are] in the next world, whatever situation you find yourself in, you will live in that situation forever. But as for here, no condition is permanent’ (S., 65). Since the future is full of possibilities, there is hope for a change of condition.

Hope is not only about a better future or at least a different future. It is also a ‘temporal structure of the background attitude that allows one to keep going or persevere through one’s life’ (Zigon 2009: 258). Invocations of forbearance recast hardship and uncertainty as tests of endurance and reliance on God, two foundational principles in the Islamic religion.<sup>10</sup> This does not necessarily sanction a fatalistic attitude: Hamdy (2009) has noted, in relation to a different Muslim context, that even when accepting affliction, forbearance and reliance on God must be actively cultivated through work-on-the-self and prayer. While Muslim Gambians constantly refer to God’s will, responsibility for one’s own actions is deemed important, particularly for doing deeds that bring rewards (*baraji*) needed for the afterlife (see Fortier 2005: 200ff). From this perspective, being overwhelmed by thoughts and preoccupations may be even more dangerous for Gambian youths than non-migration itself. Overindulgence in the aspiration to travel may lead to a state of aloofness, deflecting attention from the here-and-now (Gaibazzi 2012a: 129). Frustration and impatience may drag young men into utter despair and hopelessness, leading them to embark on hazardous ventures such as boat migration, or to withdraw from social life, both of which are acts that taint the moral and religious standing of the person.

In addition to contrasting the perils of despair and self-annihilation, forbearance is closely associated with steadfastness in everyday working life. Waiting for ‘God’s time’ goes well with looking for money at home, and actually provides a theological basis for its undertaking. Invocations of patience are especially used in the context of everyday life to invite people ‘not to give up’ (*nan du do xoto*), to ‘keep trying’, to maintain enough *hanmi* to tackle everyday hardship and strive for subsistence. They are an encouragement to occupy the time of immobility if not productively then at least proactively, something which also enhances young men’s reputation in the eyes of potential supporters. Work and perseverance may not be immediately conducive to wealth, but they are viewed as ways of catalysing an opportunity. During a telephone conversation concerning the expression ‘God’s time’, Bakauru, a friend and a research assistant, pointed out that patience did not mean passivity: ‘I don’t believe you have to fold your hands and wait for God’s time: you have to “create time”. Of course, you have to accept whatever God designates for you, but you have to work towards it: that’s better than sitting under a mango tree all day drinking *ataya*’. In response to ‘just sitting’ all day under a mango tree, the stereotypical place for a *ghetto*, Bakauru invoked both submission to God and a proactive attitude to work as a way of pleasing God and creating an opportunity, or ‘time’.

## Piety as Acceptable Immobility?

The importance of religious imagination in creating a different temporality of immobility bears out the question of religiosity. Soninke youths have eagerly embraced strands of Islamic reformism, known locally as *Sunna*. Now, the invitation to trust in God and his plans are not confined to *Sunna* youths and people; as I have argued, they belong rather to common sense, which straddles different theological inclinations. Nevertheless, this discourse chimes well with the reformist call for direct reliance on God (Arabic: *tawakkul*) combined with empowerment through piety, including steadfastness. In the context of Islamic revivalism, piety is particularly interesting because it amounts to more than praying and displaying public signs of faith (cf. Soares 2004); it involves the daily cultivation of attitudes towards particular ethical principles (Mahmood 2005: 170–74; Hamdy 2009; Janson 2013). Since such a transformation pertains to all domains of the self, could piety itself be a solution to ‘just sitting’, a way of achieving and expressing respectable adulthood without prior accumulation of wealth?

In the Gambia, as in several other Muslim contexts in West Africa, youths see piety as a conduit to modernity and moral progress. In some cases, this is directly related to disenfranchisement and the delusion of unrealized migration plans. In her study of the Gambian branch of the Tablighi Jama’at missionary movement, Marloes Janson (2013) argues that militant reformism can be thought of as an urban youth culture characterized by patterns of sociality and specific understandings of the situation of young people in the Gambia. Some of the Tablighi activists frame the movement as a response to the malaise of the Gambian youth. As one of her informants remarks: ‘We don’t despair, since we know that Islam is the truth’ (Janson 2012). What is more, some of Janson’s (2012) informants clearly see the Tablighi way of Islam as a means of overcoming the disorientation and immoral temptations caused by the unfulfilled aspiration to travel to Europe. Stefania Pandolfo (2007) has found that in Morocco, religious movements and preachers address youth despair in similar terms. Some activists and at least one youth cited in Pandolfo’s (2007: 343ff) article envisage a struggle with the self (Arabic: *jihad an-nafs*) as an antidote to the feelings of emptiness and hopelessness that impel youths to embark on hazardous migration routes through the Strait of Gibraltar or even to commit suicide.

As we saw, Soninke young men view similar existential dilemmas through a religious lens. However, although religious discourse certainly offers moral support, the end result of religious invocations is not necessarily piety or religious activism. In Sabi, *Sunna* is not a movement or an



organization, and the differences between various currents of Islam are sometimes played down in favour of unity. Furthermore, neither age nor urban residence are strong determinants of *Sunna* adherence. Thanks to their studies in Islamic institutes, some learned young men have become respected teachers and preachers in Sabi. Yet they are a very small minority; however pious, the vast majority of youths do not choose a clerical career and thus face the problem of earning a living (Janson 2013: 124). Religious adherence may mitigate the *nerves syndrome* and despair, but it is not necessarily an alternative to the quest for money, including emigration abroad. As Musa (33), who considered himself a *sunnanke*, put it once: ‘You can sit all day in the mosque, but you still need to eat. You still have to look for your subsistence; even the Prophet said that’. Tellingly, even some graduates from Middle Eastern universities working as teachers in Serekunda confessed to me that they were considering travelling abroad because they were not satisfied with their salaries.

Last but not least, piety is one of several ideal models of progress. Focusing on religiosity and activism conveys only a particular point of view, and sometimes fails to consider the plurality and ambivalence of non-militant Muslims’ understandings of religion as well (Schielke 2009: S37). Even though other cultural models may be competing with the *Sunna* and contradict religious precepts, most *sunnanko* I met in Sabi sit in *ghettos*, ponder over their situation and sometimes smoke marijuana to relieve their distraught heads.

\* \* \*

As a localized and dense activity of sociability, sitting is a crucial element of social life along the Gambia River. It creates a time and space for bonding and social exchange. For young men forced into prolonged inactivity, however, sitting loses its purpose and value and is reduced to ‘just sitting’. In this chapter, I analysed the cultural kinaesthesia of ‘just sitting’, in order to gain an insight into the burden of permanence. A burden, *likke*, is the word used by young men to describe their state of oppression and disorientation that risks sinking them into the abyss of bare immobility, whereas they are seeking to navigate towards an acceptable livelihood. ‘Just sitting’ is a mode of somatically attending (Csordas 1993) to this plunge. Ironically, while agrarian life aims to endow young men with a dynamic body and a focused mind, prolonged sitting, bereft of opportunities to generate social value, creates the opposite result: a stilled body and a blurred mind. As a borderline experience, ‘just sitting’ thus reveals a spectre of failure in the regeneration of rural permanence, looming large over the possibility of remaining in Sabi as farmers and villagers. It is in this sense that invoking a moral and religious horizon helps young men

to wait in an active and tactical way (Jeffrey 2010), and to keep bearing the burden of permanence with fortitude and forbearance. Implicit in this rekindling of hope is the message not simply that a better tomorrow will be one of hard work and good fortune but possibly that there are modes of being a responsible man at home that do not necessarily imply accumulating wealth abroad. Whereas undertaking a pious lifestyle might simply not be enough to manage the expectations of manhood, other life trajectories – as we shall see in the following two chapters – might offer some guidance for navigating towards a safer mooring.

## Notes

1. Through the notion of 'bare life', Agamben (1995) attempts to understand the nature of state sovereignty, which for him ultimately rests on the sovereign's right to impose exceptions to ordinary law. Agamben has employed this notion in the study of migration, notably of detention camps for irregular migrants, where people arrested while crossing borders or while living in the territory without documents are separated from the rest of society and subjected to exceptional measures. Young men like the Soninke do suffer from the legal ban imposed, for instance, on those seeking to enter the European Union; however, it is important to note they cannot be described as mere subjects of sovereign power, for these youths do not necessarily end up in such camps, nor do they in general totally subject themselves to such a power insofar as they stay home. Moreover, the forces that shape the experience of 'just sitting' are mediated by societal structures and norms not directly dependent on the chain of command of state sovereignty.
2. *Ataya* is part of hospitality. It is normally offered and prepared to honour guests from another village who are coming to visit a friend.
3. Some names are local instead (e.g. *xaxache*, the name of the tree under which is the meeting point). Interestingly, although religion is an important aspect of youth culture and imagination, references for *ghetto* names usually draw on other cultural repertoires.
4. Though less numerous, girls attend these parties; for young men, these are occasions to flirt and eventually seduce girls, who are otherwise confined to their compounds most of the day and night.
5. In speaking of bodies and minds, I am not implying any Cartesian dichotomy (Scheper Hughes and Lock 1987). For these young men, the head is certainly identified with thinking and intelligence/reasoning (*kilu*), although thoughts also originate in, or are linked with, the heart or liver (*butte*), the embodied centre of intentionality (*ɲanniye*) and moral judgement.
6. In particular, a healer I interviewed drew a distinction between a state of oppression self-induced by stress and a state of mental ill-being caused by sorcery. The first could be healed through remedies, whereas the second implied the need for divine intercession through a specialist.
7. Scandinavia is a destination for Gambian migrants, especially for Banjulians. This is probably due to tourism, as Scandinavian tourists were among the first tourists to

visit the Gambia. Linking up with foreign tourists on the beaches has become the way for a number of youths to earn a living as guides and to make friendships and romantic relationships which many hope will lead to a visa to Europe (Wagner and Yamba 1986; Ebron 2002: ch. 6).

8. Dalasi 200 (c. €5–6), in 2006–8.
9. Several divination techniques can be found in the Gambia. As a technique of anticipation, divination enables people to foretell the future. Nevertheless, all informants and diviners I have interviewed stressed that the knowledge acquired by divining is partial and often incorrect.
10. As many informants stressed, a situation of ‘good luck’ or material abundance is also a test for people: they should not sit back and stop worshipping God.