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Beyond Limbo: Understanding Waithood and Youth Transition in Africa

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Abstract:

This paper explores the period of 'waithood' in young Africans in light of the socioeconomic difficulties and neoliberal policies. Despite prevailing stereotypes depicting this phase as idleness and despair, the study reveals that many young Africans are actively engaging in strategies such as 'straining', 'hustling', and establishing *fadas* to navigate their circumstances. Drawing on case studies and examples across Sub-Saharan Africa, this study emphasizes the varied ways in which young people have responded to the socioeconomic crisis, highlighting their inventiveness, fortitude, and agency in redefining their social roles. Providing examples from the *Y'en a Marre!* movement, the case of one self-employed young man in Sierra Lone, and the establishment of *fadas*, the author discusses how young Africans engage in socialization and self-affirmation while coping with their status.

Keywords: Waithood; Africa; Youth; Un(der)employment.

1. Introduction

In neoliberal Africa, rapid modernization movements have resulted in young adults frequently migrating to metropolitan areas in search of work or education. Simultaneously, the socioeconomic control from external agencies, as incorporated in the development strategy in Africa since the 1980s, has diminished the capacity of African governments to manage their own economies [1]. As a result, a great majority of African adolescents today struggle with inadequate education and a shortage of employment. This status quo leads to young Africans experiencing the stage of what Honwana conceptualizes as 'waithood'. By 2019, Africa has been found to be the world's youngest continent, with about 60 percent of the population being under 25 years old [2].

The term 'waithood' was first introduced by Dhillon and Singerman in 2007 and further modified and expanded by Honwana in 2013 [3]. Waithood refers to a prolonged transformation from childhood to adulthood. Due to harsh economic conditions and a spike in population, young Africans suffer from unemployment and are thereby unable to get married and independently support a family even though they have biologically reached the age of adulthood. Under such circumstances, young African adults often continue to seek shelter in their parents' homes, delaying their integration into society.

However, highly generalized presumptions and stereotypes have misguided the debate on African youth transitions, giving overly negative connotation toward the future of young Africans in many ways: by criminalizing un(der)employment, which is considered to be directly linked to social unrest [4], and by portraying it as a state of idleness, indifference, and hopelessness [5]. This paper responds to the gloomy attitude associated with the waithood of Africans and demonstrates that despite the depressing reality of the labor market and rising price levels, young Africans actively seek solutions by employing strategies such as 'straining' [6], 'hustling' [7], and 'migrate' into their strategy to evolve through waithood.

2. Examining Waithood

Contemporary literature regarding waithood refers to it as a situation of involuntary waiting to become a full adult [8]. It is seen as an adaptive stage in which young people, although biologically mature, are unable to perform individually as adults in society. The threshold to adulthood lies in the traditional qualities of an adult, which could entail completing postsecondary education, obtaining a solid career, getting married, and being able to support a family [9]. Young adults in waithood thus undergo multiple searches to confront the stalled adulthood: they search for high-level education that could guarantee instant employment; they search for solid careers that could boost their wages and career outlook; and they search for loyal companions who would fight alongside them and create happiness. These searches are interconnected, and failure in one area could undermine the search of all others, prolonging the waiting process and making it more demanding. Un-

fortunately, the period of waithood transition can vary from a month to several years, during the course of which young people often shelter with their parents or friends.

Largely due to socioeconomic predicaments (i.e. urban discontent and futile governance) within a nation, the waithood period has resulted in young people being 'idle' or 'stuck' [10]. As a nation that has adopted neoliberal reform since the 1980s, the (Sub-Saharan) African government has been accepting help from the global north and thus declaring its dependency on international agencies such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), and numerous Western nations [11]. Today, this dependency, and more specifically the failure of neoliberal political reforms [12, 13] has resulted in young Africans' adulthood being gradually inaccessible.

Additionally, the government in sub-Saharan regions is not creating opportunities for youth to ameliorate the status quo. Young people who view education as a means of achieving upward mobility, however, are the government's most vocal opponents; they are "victimized" by policies that limit the accessibility of the public sector [14]. Even so, the existing educational sectors have been letting down scholars by the ever-decreasing employment rate for graduates. Africans attended colleges believing that they would be guaranteed a better job position, but as they were still struggling for a diploma, their former peers who had not enrolled in further education were already earning a living as farmers and cleaners. Those who attended college in particular were far from satisfactory. On the one hand, they feel unworthy to keep pursuing agronomics so instead the majority of freshmen students enrolled in public service majors; On the other hand, they were well aware of the fact that the chances of getting an occupation are slim unless they have 'special connections'.

Furthermore, a significant portion of juvenile labor cannot be simply classified into the 'employment–unemployment dichotomy', making it hard to measure the activeness and inactiveness of youth in dealing with the status quo. This is due to the fact that regular instances of informal underemployment in developing cities are often uncommon and difficult to evaluate. Additionally, these activities usually occur in temporary urban settings like street trade or transient kiosks. Young Africans usually end up working twenty-four-seven in low-paying, labor-intensive occupations or worse, unemployed. Many others are underemployed, taking several part-time jobs, and struggling to maintain their livelihoods.

3. Youth Empowerment

African youth used a variety of ways to cope with the existing crisis, both spontaneously and passively. However, the passive definition of waithood had a tiny impact, if not none, on suppressing young people's aspiration to escape the loop of waiting. Contrary to the notion that a majority of youth are merely waiting for circumstances to improve, many are actively engaging in changes that reshape their realities. They are harnessing their creativity, innovation, and resilience to challenge the status quo and carve out paths for themselves. For these young individuals, the concept of waithood is not synonymous with failure; rather, it represents a transformative lifestyle choice, in which they embrace uncertainty while pursuing opportunities for growth.

Nonetheless, there remains a segment of youth who find themselves caught in a cycle of waiting, yet they reconceptualize this experience as part of their journey. This perspective allows them to maintain a sense of hope and agency, viewing their situation not as a dead end but as a phase in a broader narrative of personal development. As they navigate this period, some youth adopt radical approaches, including advocating for social change, engaging in grassroots movements, or pursuing entrepreneurial ventures to address the challenges they face. Others take a more pragmatic route, participating in community projects, educational initiatives, or informal economies that enable them to contribute meaningfully to their surroundings while waiting for broader societal shifts. In this way, African youth display a remarkable diversity of responses to waithood, blending resilience and adaptability as they seek to redefine their present and future.

A starting form of dealing with waithood is by protesting. In 2011, an uprising of about three thousand Senegal youth against former president Wade occurred in a movement known as *Y'en a Marre!* (Enough is enough). By protesting, youth demolished the dictatorship of Wade in the presidential election and succeeded in preventing the ratification of constitutional modifications that would have favored former President Wade [15]. In the past decade, youth anger fueled uprisings, taking the streets of Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Ethiopia, Malawi, Angola, and many more as they continued to protest for tax cuts, bad governance, and unemployment. These youths attempt to change their current situation by eliminating policies.

"Here in Kenya, if you look at these protests, actually, they were led by educated people. But most of them [were] jobless," said Anthony Kamande, an inequality researcher at Oxfam [16]. Indeed, the underlying issue responsible for forming the waithood stage is that most youths are unemployed or currently underemployed, working with several 'pieces' of jobs and trying to make ends meet. This process of attempting to weave out livelihood despite their marginal position in society is referred to as straining by Finn and Oldfield. Straining encompasses the resourcefulness of a collection of work. It also highlights the challenging nature of these men's arduous work to sustain themselves and their families.

It is noteworthy that strategies of straining are often com-

bined with another concept referred to as improvising. Improvising integrates the ability to blend disparate technology in novel ways, make audacious choices promptly, and work independently to overcome challenges [17]. This concept emphasizes its innovativeness, as many Africans do not have an established job position and must often create their own jobs to make a living. For example, in Freetown, Sierra Lone, a 25-year-old man named Olucia gathers cans from the Kroo Bay slum and fills them with clean water before lining them up outside the ghetto's public restroom. He levies a small fee to those who use it for self-cleaning. Due to insufficient job opportunities, young but ambitious adults like Olucia strain every day to seek any possible opportunity to earn enough for their families. For Olucia, his tiny startup earns him 10,000 leones [USD 2.50] a week. "I cannot sit down and be a man." Olucia remarked, "I have to work hard and earn for my family". His decisions represent the daily lives of a great portion of young Africans, demonstrating a proactive approach to waithood under a seemingly hopeless situation. This signifies the trend that younger generations are not simply passive victims of their circumstances; instead, they are actively seeking to improve their environment through entrepreneurship and diligence.

Other African youths take more placid steps towards dealing with waithood. As they confront their abjection towards social becoming, they feel increasingly excluded from society and unrepresented in politics. The educated were particularly victimized by joblessness and their unessential role in society especially as their schooling prioritized them above their sisters and are now in a position no better than them. Additionally, the once condescending pride of those who are educated and the extent to which adult masculinity is defined in terms of economic independence much hinders their resilience and betterment in African societies. They expect a stable job 'behind the desk'. Instead of succumbing to what they call 'shit jobs' — low-paid, informal, and labor-intensive jobs — they remain to be unemployed. Young men globally sought refuge that provide consolation and unity against the outside world which they feel worn out. Therefore, *fadas* ('tea circle') were created.

In essence, the *fada* is a socio-spatial masculine setting where young men acquire the socialization and self-affirmation they seek. Typically situated in public spaces such as open courtyards, parks, or community centers, *fadas* serve as informal gathering spaces where young men come together to engage in conversation, share experiences, and support one another in navigating the challenges of life. At *fadas*, idle young citizens, whose lives are dominated by unknowns, can free themselves from the constraints of their parents as well as traditional stereotypes and, in the words of one of them, "enjoy [their] youth while [they] can" [18].

At *fadas*, a pot of steaming tea must be placed in the middle. Contradictions to elders who see tea drinking as a frivolous pastime serving no purpose, members of *fadas* insist it is a fruitful way of spending time together and reflecting on their lives. Members of *fadas* believe that drinking tea is a productive method to spend time together and reflect on their lives, in contrast to the elders who view it as a meaningless pastime with little to no value. In addition to providing energy and combating frustration, it also supports the social structures that the un(der)employed rely on to uncover meaning in their lives. Utilizing tea as a key element to bring together young adults, the *fadas* expanded as members started to cultivate themselves, exchange socio-political viewpoints, and transform 'experience without qualities' into self-affirmation [19].

Importantly, *fada* members perceive waithood as a positive chance to prepare for adulthood. They condemn in their sermons the "worthless" members who "sit idly" while their parents work, implying that indolence is a type of self-indulgence that breeds disintegration and criminality. Such gatherings with members in the same situation diminished the passiveness and added exuberance in their future.

4. Structural Constraints to Progress

Innovative as it is how young adults improvise solutions to confront waithood, there are still multiple factors that cause it to be particularly distressing. HIV and AIDs, for one, are increasing the odds of the already unpredictable future. Today, there are about 24.2 million Africans living with HIV [20], while HIV drugs cost $75 a year [21], which is a relatively big expense for regular African families. Their suffrage from infectious diseases like HIV will lead to quarantine and thus detract them from their ability to engage in educational and employment opportunities, trapping them in a cycle of poverty and dependence that characterizes waithood. Moreover, the epidemic's broader implications extend their duty to caring for sick relatives. This added burden limits their time to pursue personal goals, further exacerbating feelings of hopelessness and waiting.

As for the country, waithood would cause significant brain drain as a majority of adults were un(der)employed, meaning that they were either jobless or were currently working in a career that does not make full use of their skills and abilities. Disappointed by the lack of government intervention and discouraged by their predicament, intellects are more inclined to seek better prospects elsewhere. In a recent study of over 4,500 African youth (18–24 years old), 52% of them said they would consider leaving their country in the coming years, with the main reasons being lack of education opportunities and financial difficulties [22]. This trend of intellects leaving the continent also impedes the growth of the region as a whole. The continent

of Africa is struggling to hold onto and utilize its intellectual capital for long-term growth, and the brain drain is making the divide between developed and developing nations even more pronounced.

5. Conclusion

This paper has aimed to investigate the multifaced impact of waithood on African youth and explore their proactive responses to the socio-economic problems it presents. In particular, the paper sought to uncover how young Africans navigate waithood and incorporate it into one stage in their lives. While waithood is often characterized by a sense of immobility and marginalization, this analysis reveals that young Africans are not powerless recipients of their environment. Rather, they demonstrate incredible resilience and ingenuity in managing their situations, seeking chances for development via learning, self-employment, and involvement in the community.

Both active approaches, such as self-employment, and moderate approaches, such as establishing *fadas*, prove effective in empowering youth to forge vital networks that can provide support, mentorship, and even political engagement. These connections rejuvenate young individuals and propel them to rethink their aspirations and pathways toward self-sufficiency. However, persistent structural limitations—like health issues, poor job opportunities, and government inadequacies—might prolong this transitional phase, creating a recurrent cycle of poverty and discontent that undermines potential and contributes to brain drain.

Ultimately, the findings of this paper suggest that, although waithood is fraught with challenges, it can also spur development, creativity, and social engagement. As young Africans continue to adapt to the challenges of this period, their stories emerge not only as narratives of struggle but also as powerful testimonials of their ability to flourish despite systemic constraints. In this way, waithood becomes a crucible from which a generation of determined and innovative leaders can emerge, ready to reshape their futures and the societies they inhabit.

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