‘We align and rhythm the toubabs’: The Strategies of Beach Hustlers

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From October to May, when the summer rains along the West African coast take a hiatus, evening temperatures are cool and pleasant. A walk along the coast of the Gambia offers a picturesque view of the beautiful tropical sunset over the Atlantic Ocean. This is the period that many Gambians wait for in anticipation. It is the time when tourists visit the country, bringing with them the wealth of the West. It is called the “season”.¹

Abstract

This study investigates the economic strategies that young Gambian’s employ to achieve their aspirations of fulfilling socio-cultural obligations. In particular, the study explores the economic activities of young Gambians who engage in diverse informal economic activities in the fringes of the Gambia’s tourism sector to provide for themselves and their families. Known as beach hustlers, they consist of small entrepreneurs, principally peddlers, vendors and others who provide informal services with the aim of making a livelihood directly from tourists. Whilst existing research tends to mostly focus on the activities of beach hustlers who engage in transactional sexual activities with tourists as a means of earning a living or getting an opportunity to travel,

¹ This is not only used by Gambians to refer to the period between October and May when tourists visit, but also to describe a financial period.
this study focuses on the strategies of those who resort to alternative economic strategies.

Drawing on data collected from multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2014 in Kololi, the country’s main tourism hotspot on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean, the study uses the cases of two ‘beach hustlers’ to shed light on hustling strategies of young Gambians. The study discusses how ‘beach hustlers’ take advantage of the Gambia’s booming tourism industry by engaging in diverse informal economic activities. This study shows that majority of young Gambians who find it increasingly difficult to migrate to the West pursue local livelihoods to fulfil their aspirations of social and economic advancement. The study further shows that the strategies young Gambians employ are influenced by the structural constraints and opportunities that appear in specific space–time conditions. By doing so, this study contributes to the literature on the economic strategies that young urban youths employ to achieve their aspirations.

**Introduction**

The Gambia is experiencing a boom in its tourism industry with an exponential increase in the amount of Western tourists that visit the country each year. Cheap chartered flights and pleasant tropical weather compounded by the growth of terrorism activities in countries such as Tanzania, Kenya and Egypt have made the country an ideal destination for tourists wishing to enjoy some sunshine in the winter. This has created both formal and informal employment opportunities for a group of the country’s youth, known as beach hustlers. Most of the studies on beach hustlers (Cabezas, 2004; Venables, 2009; Meiu, 2009; De Francisco, 2004; Nyanzi, Rosenberg-Jallow, Bah & Nyanzi, 2005; Ebron, 2002 and Wagner & Yamba, 1986) focus on the activities and economic strategies of beach hustlers who engage in transactional sexual activities with tourists as a means of earning a living or getting an opportunity to travel. Hence the emergence of a growing body of anthropological work on sex tourism with focus on the
Caribbean in the 1970s, and West and East Africa in the 1980s (see Bindell, 2013; Cabezas, 2004; Venables, 2009; Meiu, 2009; Nyanzi et al., 2005).

This study shifts away from scholarship that focus on the tourism sex trade. Instead it focuses on the strategies of those beach hustlers who engage in diverse economic activities. These include, Fruit sellers, Juice pressers, Tour guides, Fishermen, Horse riders amongst others. Finding themselves in a state of ‘involuntary immobility’, an aspiration to migrate but the inability to do so (Carling, 2002), they take advantage of the opportunities provided by the tourism sector to generate the income they need to fulfil their aspirations of social and economic advancement. This study explores the strategies they employ through interactions with *toubabs* (white westerners) to generate the income they need to provide for their livelihood. The term aspirations as used here refers to hustlers’ wishes and goals of fulfilling family and societal expectations and attaining upward social mobility, whereas strategies are the activities and practices they employ in their interactions with *toubabs* to realise their aspirations.

This chapter will start by describing the physical and social setting of the environment within which beach hustlers operate. Following this, the study will illustrate that by adopting a particular appearance and lifestyle, beach hustlers construct an image of themselves that is advantageous for their work. The study further explains the various tricks and strategies that beach hustlers employ to make money from tourists.

**Research Methodology**

The accounts and stories of the hustlers in this ethnography culminated from eight months of fieldwork in the Gambia. The fieldwork was carried out in two phases between 2013
and 2014. The first phase was carried out from September to December 2013. This was followed by a second phase from March 2014 to July 2014. My encounters with beach hustlers mostly took place in Kololi, the Gambia’s tourism industry’s largest and most populated beach section. Considered the hotspot of Gambian tourism, it boasts many hotels and restaurants.

To understand the hustling strategies of Gambian beach hustlers, I followed the lives of prominent beach hustlers. I conducted 43 interviews including life history interviews with 4 beach hustlers. Although the hustlers I interviewed cover a broad spectrum of informal service providers from juice sellers to bird watchers, excluded from this sample were those hustlers whose main preoccupation is to sell sex to female tourists for material and financial gain. Their stories have been reported elsewhere (see for example Nyanzi et al, 2005; Brown, 1992; Wagner & Yamba, 1986).

In addition, I also carried out observations in four key settings to study the activities of beach hustlers. These included along the beaches, where juice pressers, fruit sellers, fishermen and horse riders operate; the ‘strip’ in Kololi and its restaurants where local tour guides operate; and the taxi stands and the shelters where bird watchers congregate. Observation was used in these settings to obtain insight into the daily activities of beach hustlers in terms of how they make contacts and interacted with the toubabs, how they make money from them and how they interacted among themselves. Whether hanging out with taxi drivers in their taxi stands, drinking attaya (Chinese green tea) with bird watchers, taking a break from the sun under the big baobab tress with horse riders, following the trails of local tour guides, or as a guest at a restaurant, my primary role as observer-participant
transformed the dynamics of the events I observed into an activity.

Context and Setting

The Republic of the Gambia is situated along the banks of the River Gambia in the West African Sahel zone. Nestled inside Senegal like a “hotdog in a roll” (Sallah, 1990), the Gambia is Africa’s smallest country. With a land area that spans only 4,361 square miles (11,295 sq. km), the country represents the classic case of a micro state. The country’s current population is estimated at 1.9 million (GBOS, 2014), a six fold increase since independence in 1965, when the population was just over 300,000 (Rice, 1968). According to the most recent demographic report, more than half (about 63.55%) of the country’s population are young people, below 25 years of age. In terms of gender distribution, the female population is marginally greater, representing 50.53% of the total population (GBOS, 2014).

The Gambia is divided into seven administrative regions: Banjul City Council, Kanifing Municipal Council, West Coast Region, North Bank Region, Lower River Region, Central River Region and Upper River Region. Banjul is the official capital of the Gambia as well as the administrative centre of the country and the seat of the government. Other towns of significance are the bustling town of Serekunda, which has the country’s largest market and the serene coastal town of Bakau, famous for its many tourist attraction sites. The peri urban town of Brikama is the Gambia’s largest town and is located in the Kombo Central District. It is the regional capital of the West Coast Region and it is the most populated Local Government Area in the country, with an estimated population of 700,000 people (GBOS, 2014). Located inland, in the South Bank, the main urban settlement is about 35km
southwest of the capital Banjul. The town is a popular tourist destination owing to its status as the home of the biggest craft market in the country.

The Gambia is renowned as an attractive tourist destination due to its fine beaches and pleasant temperatures. The country has a hot sub-tropical climate and experiences a humid rainy season from June to November and a cooler and more pleasant dry season from November to May (average temperatures range from 23 degrees Celsius in the winter to 42 degrees in the summer). The first tourists arrived in the Gambia in the 1930s by steam cruiser.

Findings

*Beach Hustlers, Chanters and Bumsters.*

Beach hustlers in the Gambia are both male and female. Usually between the ages of 18 and 40 from low socio-economic backgrounds, the majority of them are not educated beyond secondary level and have few qualifications or skills that can get them formal jobs. Engaging in the informal sector is their only means of earning a living. These observations are consistent with the demographic profiles of beach hustlers in Kenya, Zanzibar and Senegal (see Eid Bergan, 2011; De Fransisco, 2004 and Venables, 2009).

Generally, beach hustlers in the Gambia are referred to as *bumsters* by the wider society. The term is, however, contentious and considered derogatory. The Government of the Gambia describes them as ‘aimless youths who loiter around *toubabs* hassling and hustling them for money and other material benefits’ (Gambia Information Site). The introduction of sex tourism in the Gambia saw the term being used narrowly to refer to young males who sell sexual services to *toubabs*. For instance, Ebron (2002) describes *bumsters* as young Gambian men who seek out romantic affairs with Northern
European female tourists who could potentially help them to travel abroad. A broader definition that encompasses the complex activities of *bumsters* and which fits into the category of beach hustlers whose accounts are narrated in this study is provided by Nyanzi et al (2005). They describe *bumsters* as:

> Young men involved in diverse activities that include the process of misrepresentation of facts, usually a concoction of plight stories and ineffective struggles to meet the needs of large extended families, which are convincingly fed to sympathetic wealthy-looking foreigners with the motive of moving them to pity and compassion (Nyanzi et al., 2005:561).

Existing anthropological definitions of *bumsters*, like the ones provided above tend to be androcentric, discounting the activities of females who engage in similar activities. Nonetheless, the majority of beach hustlers I encountered in the Gambia avoid using the *bumster* label self-referentially when talking to *toubabs* or other outsiders and can feel offended when referred to as *bumsters* by those outside their professional circles. Instead, they refer to themselves as local tour guides, informal service providers or petty traders. For instance, Andy, one of my principal interlocutors told me that “I am not proud to call myself a *bumster* but a local tour guide who shows Gambia to tourists”. Similar observations were recorded among the *papasi* in Zanzibar (DeFrancisco, 2004) and the *coteman* in Southern Senegal (Venables, 2009).

Attempts by the government, in 2003, to regulate the activities of Gambian beach hustlers further problematized the *bumster* label. Beach hustlers were encouraged to register their informal economic activities with the Gambia Tourism Board (GTB) so they can become recognised economic operators and service providers within the tourism industry. Those who registered were issued with GTB cards to enable them move freely within the industry. This subsequently categorised beach
hustlers into two main groups; registered and unregistered beach hustlers as not all beach hustlers were willing to register with the GTB. The beach hustlers that registered with the GTB argued that they no longer deserve the *bumster* label as they are legitimate economic operators within the industry. Although they admit that they sometimes use their legitimate status to ‘bums’, in a ‘civilised way’.

Registered beach hustlers who engage in this form of ‘civilised bumsing’ call themselves ‘chanters’. Buju, a key respondent, told me: “*bumsters* have a bad reputation, so we call ourselves chanters. We have a job here but we chant. A chanter is someone who has something to do in the industry but has the chance to bums”. The unregistered beach hustlers I spoke to did not share Buju’s view. They consider anybody operating within the industry and making a living from tourists as a *bumster*. Andy, who did not register his local tour guide business, told me: “Everybody in the industry is a *bumster*, including the minister”, referring to the tourism minister. It should be noted that the registered-unregistered beach hustler dichotomy is not rigid as some beach hustlers’ circumstances change from the former to the latter.

“Fridays at the Airport and Sundays at the Beach”: Knowing the Schedule

Beach hustlers operate in multiple locations. Some are static while others are mobile. Registered beach hustlers are mostly static as their cards only allow them to operate in specific locations. Un-registered beach hustlers wait for tourists along the beach, but they also hang around at the airport, outside hotel entrances and supermarkets and street corners where tourists are most likely to frequent. Hotels do not allow beach hustlers within their premises.
Popular bars and restaurants along the Kololi main road and beach bars along the coast also attract un-registered beach hustlers. During the tourist season, some beach hustlers offer to work without a salary in bars or restaurants just to get access to *toubabs*. Andy, one of my principal respondents who I will introduce in more detail later, told me that he offers to work for free at his friend’s bar just to get access to *toubabs*:

I help a friend who owns a bar called Tiger Tiger in Kololi. I help him arrange tables and chairs during the season when it’s busy. This gives me access to *toubabs*. When the tourists arrive, I offer them drinks. If they are first timers, I start the conversation by asking about their flight and ask them their lovely names. I then introduce myself and ask where they come from. I sit and chat with them and we get to know each other. I normally conduct business with first timers as they are more eager to visit markets, animals and schools.

Several aspects of this quote illustrate that beach hustlers like Andy do make some strategic decisions. Firstly, they volunteer to work for free with the expectation that this will provide opportunities for them to access *toubabs*. Secondly, the status of a tourist as a ‘first-timer’ (first visit in the country) or a ‘repeater’ (a multiple visitor) is essential information for beach hustlers. It provides an indication of the extent to which the tourist is aware of social norms and prices for goods and services in the Gambia. Less informed tourists are mostly targeted as it is easier to make money from them. This is not only because they are more open to accept offers, but also because they can be easily exploited. Hotels and tour operators advise tourists to avoid divulging this information to locals, particularly beach hustlers.

In addition to occupying spaces that tourists frequent, beach hustlers also acquaint themselves with their movements. This particularly applies to un-registered beach hustlers who
must tout for potential clients. Whereas registered beach hustlers normally meet clients at their place of work, i.e. kiosks, stalls, craft markets and taxi stands, the unregistered ones have to follow the itineraries of the *toubabs*. Andy, for example, has a schedule that is adapted to the tourists’ itinerary:

Fridays I go to the airport because lots of tourists come on Fridays. Although I am not expecting anybody, I still go there with nothing and sometimes come back with something. When I get access to them at the airport I can make money by getting some change from them or by helping them to change their currency. The plane arrives around midday, so at 2pm I go down to the beach, say hello to people, and try to chat to them, asking them where they come from…. I try to convince them, propose my work to them. Saturday and Sunday are spent on the beach as most will want to relax. Mondays are visiting hours before noon but most will come early to go to the beach. Normally they come back after four to swim. I know their visiting places and I go and wait for them there. I know this because I observe their movements.

Andy is of course not the only beach hustler who makes an effort to inhabit spaces where he can easily gain access to tourists. Several other beach hustlers I have spoken to have their own ways of making sure they get access to spaces where tourists would normally converge. Although none of these follow a strict schedule as Andy does, the loose pattern they follow is mostly guided by factors such as instinct, acquaintance, previous experience and the time of the season.
From Palma Junction to the Beach

Beach hustlers also extend their activities to the Tourism Development Area (TDA). The TDA is geographically concentrated along a 10 km strip on the Atlantic Coast, encompassing an area that is 800 metres from the coastline. The hub for these activities is Palma Junction. Connecting Kololi village to the shore of the Atlantic Ocean is a short road from the popular Bertil Harding highway leading to the beach. At the top of this junction (called Palma Junction) is the Palma Rima Hotel. The street connecting Palma Junction to the beach is known as ‘the strip’. It consists of a military check point at the very top, a few bars and restaurants and a taxi stand where tourist taxi drivers wait for customers. At least five hotels are located along ‘the strip’. The military check point controls the movement of people entering and exiting the beach. The security officers ask locals to prove that they work in the industry by showing their ID cards. Beach hustlers without a valid pass find it difficult to evade the security check point.

The tourist taxi drivers have their stand in the middle of the road, opposite a famous restaurant called Bukarabu. Owned by an English woman, Bukarabu is popular for serving British food and is frequently visited by British tourists. Bukarabu is the first restaurant on that street which makes it a strategic location for the taxi stand. The tourist taxis are regulated by the GTB and normally charge fixed prices calculated by distance and the prices are displayed on boards placed near the stands. With many bars and restaurants, hotels and the famous Bukarabu, Palma Junction is a hotspot for tourists looking for a taxi to get into town. The taxi stand itself consists of a makeshift roof made out of palm trees and anchored by four bits of wood, a wooden bench and some
loose bricks where taxi drivers sit to wait for customers. Their taxis parked across the road, they patiently sit and wait for customers while brewing *attaya*. The tourist taxi drivers are different from the normal taxis or the so called ‘yellow taxis’. They are only allowed to operate within the TDA. They can be distinguished from ordinary taxis through their colour, which is all green with a white diamond sign on the sides and bonnet as well as their unique tourist number on the sides, whilst ordinary taxis are yellow with green stripes.

Due to the nature of their work, tourist taxi drivers are always involved in bitter competition for customers with the ‘yellow taxi’ drivers and other beach hustlers, such as bird watchers and craft sellers. For instance, professional bird watchers do not have their own cars, and so they rely on tourist taxi drivers to take customers on trips. However, feuds over payment occur during these transactions as the taxi driver would assume that the bird watcher is offering less than what the tourist is willing to pay. On the other hand, the bird watcher would not allow the taxi driver to directly negotiate with the tourist as they have a habit of charging the tourists exorbitant prices thereby discouraging them. In this situation the bird watcher risks losing the customer unless he has a second option. In most cases, this option entails the bird watcher walking with the tourist up to the main road to get one of the yellow taxis, which are comparatively cheaper. This decision by the bird watcher does not go down well with the tourist taxi driver.

Conversely, the craft sellers in Kololi and Senegambia also complain that the tourist taxi drivers undermine their business by taking customers who want to buy crafts all the way to Brikama or Banjul when they are just around the corner. The drivers justify this by saying that they earn more money if they take tourists to places like Brikama, which are further away,
rather than the nearer Senegambia craft market. Stanley Man told me that taxi drivers do this to secure their own interests as they want to earn more money.

Heading southwards, away from the taxi stands, one enters the beach area where tourists can have a swim, relax and enjoy the sunshine. The beach in the Palma section of the tourism industry is lined with about three beach bars. Solomon Fish Bar is the one that attracts the most tourists. It is a round house, situated at the northern end of the Kololi beach with coconut trees planted outside in a semicircle. At Solomon’s, guests are seated inside the bar or outside in its well ventilated seating area right on the beach. Close to the beach bars are stalls built by the Gambia Tourism Board (GTB) where fruit sellers sell their fruit.

To ‘Align’ and to ‘Rhythm’: The Hustling Strategies of Beach Hustlers

To ‘align’ and ‘rhythm’ the toubab are key strategies in a beach hustler’s efforts to make money from tourists. To ‘align’ means to understand the toubab’s culture and to speak their language. To ‘rhythm’ means to bring the toubab into the world of hustlers and make them understand their life situations. For Andy, it is first important to establish some form of relationship with toubabs before offering them services. Aware that they are normally suspicious of strangers, Andy claimed that he would first clear the air of mistrust through banal communication. Some modicum of patience is needed to successfully ‘align’ the toubab. Hence, patience is a key skill in beach hustling. As Andy told me, “working as a tour guide, you have to have patience and be nice to even the toubabs who are not nice to you. They might come to be your friend tomorrow”.

‘We align and rhythm the toubabs’…
‘I am learning Polish’: Learning the *Toubabs*’ Language

One of the ways hustlers ‘align’ the *toubabs* is having the ability to communicate with them in their own language. As such, the majority of the beach hustlers I have met are multilingual, speaking several European languages including German, Swedish and Norwegian that they have learnt through their long interactions with *toubabs*. This helps them to easily communicate with non-English speaking tourists and also to initiate relationships.

Indeed, studies have found that beach hustlers in other contexts also speak several European languages (Venables, 2009; Pruitt & LaFont, 1995; Davidson & Taylor, 2005). Although beach hustlers in the Gambia speak English, which is the official language, their command of the English language in both accent and grammar does not match their limited schooling. David, a beach hustler, who speaks almost perfect English despite the few years he spent at school told me this when I complimented his language skills:

> As a beach hustler, you have to be able to talk and speak good English so *toubabs* can understand you. You need to be flexible, smiley and happy. I have met Polish tourists. Some don’t speak English but I can speak a few words and I am learning their language. So my language skills are developing.

According to David, the ability to communicate with *toubabs* in their language has two advantages. Firstly, it is a means of impressing upon them the fact that they care enough to try to learn their language. Secondly this engenders familiarity which in turn breeds satisfaction as well as understanding and friendliness. Besides, what this quote seems to suggest is that interacting with tourists using their language both constructs and maintains a relationship based on cultural understanding. As it turns out, David is not the only hustler
learning Polish to be able to communicate with Polish tourists who have started visiting the Gambia in large numbers. Other hustlers I have met in Kololi, with Polish dictionaries in their possession, told me that they are learning Polish to ease their communication with tourists from Poland.

In addition to speaking the language of the tourists, beach hustlers also endeavour to imitate their accent. David, for example, has the ability to speak English with a Cockney accent which he acquired through years of interactions with tourists from London. Other beach hustlers who knew that I spoke Swedish would insist on speaking the language with me. I would sometimes be left impressed by their mastery of the language and their accent, which is locally acquired. I would suggest that the ability to speak the language of the toumbab with a mimicked accent is an important strategy for getting their attention and to earn their respect, as David aptly put it:

We like to imitate toumbab. So we talk like them. We have to align or rhythm them. So we take their accent. Aligning them is part of the strategy to get the toumbab. This means understanding their culture and talking their language.

David and other beach hustlers told me that to ‘align’ or ‘rhythm’ toumbab not only means imitating their culture and lifestyle but also adopting their world view. Bringing themselves to the level of the toumbab by demonstrating to them that they speak their language and understand their culture is a strategy that beach hustlers use to initiate relationships with them.

‘Call me Stanley Man’: The Elegance of European Names

An interesting aspect of beach hustlers’ strategies is the adoption and use of nicknames. This is a part of beach hustlers’ strategies to ‘align’ the toumbab. A great majority of
hustlers have nicknames that they use regularly in the industry to present themselves to tourists. Most of these are Western names and are acquired after they have started hustling. Both Weiss (2004) and Giddens (1994) attribute the use of Western names by local populations to the impact of cultural globalisation which represents the formation of complex social ties between the global and the local, dubbed the “glocal”. Beach hustlers never use their local or traditional names to present themselves to *toubabs*. David explained to me the significance of adopting and using Western names:

We have to have European names in the industry. It’s easy for the tourist to understand. It’s also fashionable. The *toubabs* know these are not our names so they ask what our real names are and this leads to conversations.

Unlike game hustling (Polsky, 1969), where nicknames are adopted for the purpose of disguising identity, beach hustlers’ motives for adopting nicknames is a hustling strategy in itself. It is therefore a common practice among juice pressers and horse riders to also give their kiosks or stalls and horses Western names. Some name their kiosks after a generous *toubab* who sponsored them to start their business. Some use their own names or the names of their *toubab* girlfriends. “ML Juice Bar” is named after the proprietor himself, whose name is Momodou Lamin. “New Vision 2014”, “VIP Five Star Juice Bar” and “Sulay and Linda’s Juice bar”, which is named after the owner Sulay and his girlfriend Linda, are some other examples.

Also, “Queenie”, “Charlotte” and “Diana” are the names of some horses I have encountered being offered for hire around Kololi and Senegambia. Beach hustlers consider the use of Western names as a lure to start conversations with *toubabs* who are curious to learn about the stories behind the
names. The use of Western names by beach hustlers reflects a general pattern I observed across Gambian society. Local football teams adopt the names of popular European football teams like “Real Madrid” or “Manchester United”. Likewise, football players also adopt the names of famous European stars like Messi or Ronaldo. These names will be printed on the back of their jerseys. Some are stuck with these names long after they retire from football. Saikou, for example, was one of my former classmates in primary school and a very good footballer. He adopted the name of a former Italian footballer Del Piero. Though he has long retired from playing football, we still call him Del.

‘We have to dress poor”: Dress and Appearance as a Hustling Strategy

Using language and Western aliases to ‘align’ the toumbabs, beach hustlers also use dress and appearance to ‘rhythm’ them. As such, beach hustlers in the Gambia are easily recognisable through their outfits and general appearance. However, varying styles of appearance are adopted. Whilst registered beach hustlers dress neatly and casual as required by the GTB, the usual attire for un-registered beach hustlers is dirty ragged jeans or baggy trousers and T-shirts. What Andy describes as his uniform, for example consists of a red string vest and baggy shorts with nyambalastic. David disclosed to me that beach hustlers choose to dress this way because “the toumbabs like to help the ragamuffins” and not neat guys. So hustlers have problems with trying to be neat.

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2 Plastic sandals are commonly worn by Gambian youths. They are not very comfortable but are popular during the rainy season.

3 Term used to refer to someone who is a roughneck or a streetwise tough guy according to the Jamaican patois dictionary. However, the term is used to describe rough and unkempt guys with no fixed abode.
The use of dress and body image to give an impression of their socio-economic conditions is the subject of anthropological research (Hendrickson, 1996; Newell, 2005; Venables, 2009). Unregistered beach hustlers in the Gambia portray an image of destitution through the way they dress to evoke sympathy from tourists. Sympathetic tourists sometimes offer gifts of clothing and other materials to these beach hustlers. Registered beach hustlers who must follow a certain dress code as prescribed by GTB do not benefit from these gifts, as Stanley Man, a registered beach hustler, complained:

We who dress neatly we don’t benefit from the generosity of tourists. They don’t give us left over clothes. They give them to those who dress really poor. They say we don’t need them. That’s why some hustlers dress poorly.

Having access to *toubabs* through language, western nicknames and appearance, beach hustlers resort to a variety of other strategies to make money from them. In what will follow, I use the life histories and accounts of two popular and successful beach hustlers, Andy and Buju, to show how beach hustlers make money by exploiting the tourists’ lack of familiarity with the local setting and mores and by cultivating a relationship with them. Using Andy’s case, I describe how unregistered beach hustlers use their work as local tour guides to make money from *toubabs*. I use Buju’s case to highlight the ways hustlers play on the sympathy of *toubabs* by exaggerating their poor living conditions to get assistance.

**Andy the Local Tour Guide: ‘Showing them the real Gambia’**

Andy is one of the most popular beach hustlers around Kololi. Born and bred in Brikama, he is 32 years old and has been a beach hustler for nearly ten years. Andy was introduced to
beach hustling by friends who had already established themselves in the tourism industry. Introducing himself as a local tour guide, he told me that his job has not only helped him provide his family with the financial support they need, but also provided him with the capital he used to invest in his businesses.

I am a local tour guide and my job includes taking a walk around the area to meet and talk to toubabs. I meet European people and introduce myself. I also introduce what I do for a living. I offer the toubabs cheap services because the hotels and tour operators charge them expensive rates per hour. But we the locals, if we get half the price of those companies, it is good for us. Because we can look after ourselves from that money and help our families (sic).

I first met Andy in October 2013 through David, who is a close friend of his. We normally met at Palma Junction in the afternoons when he was free or at his house in Kololi in the evenings. Andy’s success at Kololi and in Brikama overshadows his humble background and poor education. Having completed six years of primary education in 1995, he dropped out of school in grade 6 because his father, a night watchman, could no longer afford to pay his fees. In 1996, he went into petty commerce going round to households renting and selling Nollywood movies. His brother who owned a cola nut shop helped him with his start-up capital of 5000 dalasis. He used this money to buy Nollywood movies from some Nigerian businessmen in Serekunda market. Gradually, Andy expanded his business by opening a small stall along the Brikama highway, renting and selling Nollywood movies. A

4 These are Nigerian movies which have a huge audience, particularly among females in the Gambia.
fire disaster in 2003 saw him lose all his investments. This coincided with the beginning of the 2003 tourist season and one of his friends encouraged him to join him on the beach to hustle.

In the beginning Andy commuted by *gele gele* (Commercial Mini Bus) from Brikama to Kololi on a daily basis to hustle. It was only when he started making enough money after his debut season that he rented an apartment in Kololi where he still lives. The apartment is a modest two bedroom flat situated in a compound with four similar apartments purposely built for renting. Because he knows the owner, he gets a discount and only pays 6000 dalasis (around £90) a month, which is low rent compared to similar apartments in the same area.

Andy’s ability to charm and convince *toubabs* to hire his services is the source of all kinds of rumours and gossip among beach hustlers in Kololi. Some of his friends believe that he has a good *morro* (Mandinka for marabout) in Brikama who he consults for this purpose. The fact that Andy is a native of Brikama, a town considered the home of good marabouts, fuels these rumours. When I asked Andy if this was true, he just laughed, but neither accepted nor denied the claims. He told me that his work as a DVD sales man helped him master the art of seduction which is a requisite skill that beach hustlers must possess to succeed. To succeed in beach hustling, Andy told me that one must possess a certain and rare combination of charm, acumen and flexibility:

We need special skills in this job. You have to know how to approach toubabs. You have to be a good listener because if you don’t listen you don’t understand and know. You have to be able to talk and speak good English so toubabs can understand you. You need to be flexible, smiley and happy to charm the toubabs.

Operating on the margins of the industry and having to overcome their negative reputation, beach hustlers like Andy
have a difficult task of winning the confidence of potential customers who normally approach them with suspicion. I have on many occasions watched from a distance beach hustlers failing to persuade tourists to take them on as a guide. Andy explains their failure, blaming it on the approach of beach hustlers:

These guys don’t understand the toubabs. They just rush and speak to them and tell them let me take you here and there (sic). For me I rhythm them and bring them into my world. If you don’t rhythm them they cannot come with you because they come from another part of the world where they do not expect to meet somebody like you. So if you meet them you have to talk to them to give them confidence.

To convince the toubabs to buy their services, the more entrepreneurial beach hustlers like Andy and David carry books and albums that they use to publicise the kinds of services they offer. Andy showed me his album with pictures of local markets, the crocodile pool and other local sites. The albums also contain photos he took with previous clients during tours. The book has a handwritten map and a brief description of the places he proposes to take the toubabs. Handwritten testimonies and reviews were written at the back by previous clients. The pictures and testimonies serve as references to prove to future clients the quality of their services as they help to impress potential clients. They have to be likeable, but also show themselves to be professional as local tour guides. In short, beach hustlers like Andy are adept at making their services indispensable through the use of a myriad of skills, methods and artefacts.

Using these skills and artefacts, Andy and other beach hustlers entice new clients by telling them that they can show them the ‘authentic’ Gambia. They stress the uniqueness of their services despite taking tourists to the same places week in
week out. Once a tourist is interested, they are urged to pay the equivalent of either £5 or £10 as a deposit, to secure a half day or a full day trip. A normal full day trip includes visits to Serekunda market, the batik factory in Latrirkunda, the crocodile pool in Bakau, the monkey park\(^5\) in Senegambia, the Arch 22 in Banjul, Lamin lodge and then a boat trip along the river Gambia to watch mangroves. These trips allow beach hustlers the chance to spend valuable time with tourists who talk to them and tell them their problems. They provide the right opportunity for beach hustlers to make money from tourists.

‘We do not charge them for our services, yet nothing is Free’

Beach hustlers do not charge their clients for their services. Rather, they tell the tourists to give them whatever they have and that they are not doing it for money but to help make their stay memorable. As Andy explains:

> We normally do not charge fixed prices for our services. We instead tell tourists to give us anything. We make a lot of money this way as generous toubabs can give 3000 to 4000\(^6\) dalasi for a trip.

During these trips, hustlers make extra income by acting as interlocutors for their clients, bargaining and negotiating prices for them. For example, when tourists want to buy something from the shops or at the market, beach hustlers tell them to allow them to negotiate the price in the local language so they can get discounts. The beach hustler will then make a deal with

\(^5\) Also known as the Bijilo Forest Park which is located near the Senegambia Beach Hotel in Kololi. It is popular for sighting two out of three breeds of monkey in the Gambia. These are the green velvet monkey and the red colobus.

\(^6\) Around £60 to £70.
the seller and the tourist is charged at a higher price. The profit is then shared between the seller and the beach hustler. ‘I would then make sure that I either leave my hat or spectacles behind so I can go back to get it along with my share’, Andy told me. Similar strategies are used by beach boys in the Caribbean who make a financial profit from foreign women through their local networks by taking tourists for dinner at a friend’s restaurant where they are overcharged and the reward is split between the beach boy and the friend (Taylor, 2001).

‘Taking them to our homes’

Beach hustlers also use their work as local tour guides to offset the economic pressure of sending monthly allowances for the upkeep of their families. Most beach hustlers are the breadwinners of their families and they are expected to send monthly allowances to their families to buy provisions like rice and other food items, medicine and to pay for their children’s or siblings’ education. As such, as part of their guiding itinerary, beach hustlers suggest to tourists to visit the “locals” in towns to see how they live. Once the clients are willing, they will then be taken to their own family compounds. The tourists will be advised to buy gifts like rice, cooking oil and other foodstuffs to take with them as gifts according to the dictates of Gambian culture and tradition. David narrated to me how he became very popular in his neighbourhood when some of his *toubab* clients bought ten bags of rice for his home and his neighbours.

In spite of the fact that they are advised by tour operators and hotels to ‘be wary’ of interpersonal contact with local people, many tourists find visiting locals to be the ultimate authentic experience. This gives beach hustlers opportunities to extend the benefits of tourism to the wider community.
Andy told me that taking tourists to visit his family helps him to ease his own burden as a breadwinner:

Most of them when we take them to visit local people, especially our family, they buy them rice and onions and some other foodstuffs. This covers another place for me. Because then I don’t have to buy it. I don’t have a wife but I buy food for my mum and sisters and brothers.

**Buju the Fisherman: ‘You are poor and I want to help you’**

Other beach hustlers play on the sympathy of the *toubabs* they sell their services to by exaggerating their poor living conditions to get assistance. This is achieved through both appearance and conversation. Nyanzi et al.’s (2005) definition of *bumsters* mentioned above aptly describes this strategy. The popular perception among Gambians that *toubabs* are wealthy and generous compels beach hustlers to portray themselves as destitute to evoke the sympathy of and assistance from tourists. These beach hustlers aggravate their deprived socio-economic situation to the *toubabs* by fabricating stories about their living conditions. They tell the *toubabs* that they are homeless youths struggling to survive. This is mostly done during conversations whilst taking the tourists around. This strategy has worked for many beach hustlers who secured help from *toubabs* to either start their own businesses or who send them monthly remittances.

Buju’s case is a good representation of the beach hustlers that resort to these strategies. Hailing from Basse\(^7\) in the upper river region of the Gambia, Buju comes from a poor farming family and so has never been to school. Instead he helped his

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\(^7\) A major town in rural Gambia.
dad on the farms. He is in his early 40s and has spent half of his life in the industry. Buju told me that the poor economic prospects of farming and the distress of seeing his parents live in absolute poor conditions compels him to take the journey into the urban areas to hustle. A tall guy with long dreadlocks and imposing looks, Buju is revered among other beach hustlers. He told me that they call him “Buju” because he is a fan of Buju Banton, the Jamaican reggae musician.

Buju started beach hustling as a local tour guide by taking clients on fishing trips on boats owned by others. After a while, he was employed by a company that offers game fishing\(^8\) trips to tourists. This company was owned by a British couple. Working for this company not only helped Buju to master the art of game fishing, but it also provided him with the opportunity to access tourists and to establish contacts and networks. Due to his likable character, Buju met a *toubab* couple who got him a boat to start his own business:

> The couple enjoy game fishing and they come every year. Whilst on our trips I will entertain them and be nice to them. I told them I was poor and do this to help my family. They feel (sic) me and said you are very poor and we want to help you. We have a boat in Holland that we only use in the summer. We don’t mind bringing the boat for you so that you can make a living, to look after yourself and your family. So they brought the boat. It has helped me look after myself and my family.

“To feel” as used in this context means “to understand”, “to like” or “to feel sorry for”. The help Buju got from the *toubabs* proved to be life changing. With his own boat, Buju started his own game fishing business in Kololoi and has employed six boys to work for him. He takes tourists on

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\(^8\) Game fishing or sport fishing is a form of recreational fishing where large fish renowned for their sporting qualities are targeted.
recreational fishing trips in the Atlantic. Buju and others like him who do this for a living are called “fishermen”. Although they mostly engage in game fishing, they do commercial fishing during the off peak season to survive. Showing me a photo album of their fishing trips and the fish they have captured with clients, Buju proudly described his work:

Tourists don’t know about artisanal local fishing and so they are interested if we introduce them to this. Some learn fishing from us.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have shown how tourism in the Gambia has created both formal and informal employment opportunities for many of the country’s youths. In particular, tourism has created opportunities of income generation for a group of young people who find themselves in a state of ‘involuntary immobility’. Known as beach hustlers, they engage in diverse informal economic activities on the fringes of the Gambia’s tourism sector to generate the income they need to fulfil their aspirations of social and economic advancement.

The study mainly focusses on the key strategies beach hustlers employ to strike up conversations with tourists, to gain their trust with the aim of getting access to them. In doing this, I show the significance of space and how beach hustlers manoeuvre to get access to these spaces. Although tourists mostly inhabit public spaces like the airport, the beach and restaurants, beach hustlers must negotiate access to these spaces by relying on networks or their social skills. For example, we have seen how beach hustlers establish relationships with restaurant owners to get access to tourists. By presenting ethnographic case studies of the hustling strategies of Andy and Buju, the study shows how beach
hustlers resort to diverse strategies, depending on their status, not only to gain access to *toubabs*, but also to financially benefit from their interactions with them. Using the case of Andy, the study shows how unregistered hustlers with restricted access to the TDA work as local tour guides. I show how they first navigate tourist spaces to get access to *toubabs*. I further show how, by interacting with *toubabs* through their work, local tour guides use various tricks to generate extra income from them. We have also seen how Buju portrayed an image of himself to his tourist clients to get the help he needed to start his own fishing company. I suggest that the use of language, Western names as nicknames and appearance constitutes part of the broader strategies that beach hustlers employ to ‘*align*’ and ‘*rhythm*’ so as to gain access to tourists with the aim of financially benefiting from them.

References


