

# ‘We are passing our leisure time’: moving on from education in eastern Uganda

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## Introduction

In eastern Uganda, there is a generation of young men, typically between the ages of eighteen and thirty, who are educated and who also farm. On most afternoons a number of these young men can be found playing ludo (see [Figure 1](#)). The game is a relatively recent addition to the area, and older men played *omweso*, a mathematical game for two players. Salaried jobs are few and far between. Instead, the more usual forms of work for young men are as motorcycle taxi-men, as petty traders and day labourers, and also as farmers, growing cassava, groundnuts, maize and other foodstuffs. When I talked to young men in the trading centre of Atine Atirir, farming was not something they always liked to discuss, although it was part of their lives (cf. [Sumberg \*et al.\* 2012](#); [Mwaura 2017a](#); [2017b](#)).<sup>1</sup> They preferred to talk about their time at school, future business plans or the prospects of their favourite football team in the English Premier League. One young man spoke of wanting to do a degree in mass communication and journalism, a legacy of a project that the *Guardian* newspaper had been running in the area; another talked about farming ‘in the meantime’. These were often part of a discussion of ‘leisure time’, which meant passing time in the company of other, mostly educated, young men. Young men described themselves as ‘without jobs’, in the sense that they did not have salaried employment. Some affected the urban ‘style’ of hip-hop stars and footballers; others dressed like would-be office workers; others again dressed more in the style of their parents; some came in their work overalls. They went to burials, sometimes attended church and most had young families. Neither of the town nor entirely of the village, they were educated but did not belong to the salaried economy.

This account relates to and complicates a growing literature on youth in Africa and elsewhere ([Mains 2007](#); [Cole and Durham 2007](#); [Honwana and De Boeck 2005](#); [Abbinck and van Kessel 2005](#); [Jeffrey 2010a](#); [2010b](#)). Studies of this type look at what it means when young men are unable ‘to experience progress and take on the normative responsibilities of adults’ ([Mains 2007](#): 659; see also [Honwana 2014](#); [Langevang 2008](#)). Such men might remain, in a social and

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<sup>1</sup>[Mwaura \(2017a\)](#) finds a more extreme situation in rural Kenya. There, the phrase ‘I am just farming’ is a common response among rural youth and is ‘often uttered with a hopeless intonation’. This despairing position is then replaced by the exclamation ‘I am farming!’, which is spoken ‘with boldness, pride and self-approval’. In line with recent scholarship on youth subjectivities in Africa, [Mwaura](#) frames her discussion around ‘neoliberal subjectivities’ (cf. [Mains 2007](#); [Esson 2013](#)).



FIGURE 1 Young men around a ludo board in Atine Atirir, July 2015. The four coloured quadrants are visible. The man on the far right raises his hand ready to launch the die onto the board, with its raised sides.

cultural sense, ‘youth forever’, with adulthood remaining ‘elusive’ – a situation that mixes frustration and disappointment (Hansen 2005: 5; Dungey and Meinert 2017). And ‘various authors have shown how young people, especially young men, throughout sub-Saharan Africa and beyond, are facing *more* complex and contested transitions to adulthood, and ... a *widening* gap between the expected ideals of adulthood and actual practice’ (Dawson 2014, emphasis added). In these sorts of account there is a ‘rift between the expected and the possible’ and a contradiction between the ‘expansive potential’ of being young and educated and ‘declining opportunities in the formal sector’ (Archambault 2013: 89). Things are frustrating and they are getting worse.

These ‘more complex transitions’ to adulthood are often accompanied by claims of a growing gap between old and young, parents and children, with differences between generations becoming ‘the dominant line of cleavage’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 284). Henrik Vigh’s work in Guinea-Bissau finds younger men cast off by their elders: left as ‘social navigators’ trying to build a life in a place that is not ‘stable ground’, but rather a moving and fluctuating socio-political environment where patrons are few and far between (2006; 2010). Their ‘inability to ensure a future for themselves’ leads to criticism of ‘the greed of their elders’ (Vigh 2006: 36; 2010). A recent study of land disputes from northern Uganda points to the way in which the young complain about the ‘older generation’s secretiveness concerning land matters, their selfishness and corruption’

(Whyte and Acio 2017: 23). Other accounts point to the way in which educated youths live with the frustration of being both unemployed and dependent: graduates in Niger, for example, seeking support from ageing parents and ‘disapproving elders’ (Masquelier 2013: 479). Time is something to be waited out, or ‘killed’, and young men are found describing themselves as ‘incapable of doing anything’, ‘stuck in the compound’, or living a life ‘without sauce’ (Ralph 2008: 22; Hansen 2005; Vigh 2009: 94). They are both judged by, and judging of, an older generation.

This was not quite how things were in Atine Atirir, and the rest of the article seeks to explore a context where waiting was not the defining experience of younger people.<sup>2</sup> One-time students farmed, felt they had got something out of going to school, had families, and enjoyed reasonable relations with older generations. Their experiences were a mixture, with some doing better than others, but among the group around the ludo board ‘leisure time’ offered a space to pass time and relax, in between other things. There was less frustration with the fact that schooling had not led to salaried employment: some planned a return to education if funds allowed; family life provided the focus for many. Education, which has long been a feature, albeit a highly rationed one, of the landscape of rural Uganda, was regarded with a pragmatic sense of what was probable. As Finnström observes in work among war-affected youth in northern Uganda, young men in such settings are far from being ‘unrealistic about the future’, aware that education, although ‘something important’, does not necessarily ‘deliver anything concrete’ (2006: 204). Earlier generations had also had their successes and failures with education, and salaried jobs had never really been a good bet (cf. Whyte and Acio 2017: 31–2).

Some young men might emphasize an interest in holding onto an educated identity, while others were more fully farmers. In contrast to other accounts, marriage was not particularly deferred or delayed, and many of the young men who played ludo also had wives and children (cf. Honwana 2014). What was missing was a strong narrative of failed social adulthood and waiting. Time was passed, rather than killed, and ludo was played. We can therefore think of the ludo board as a site through which prevailing notions of what it meant to relax were being adjusted and reworked to reflect experiences of education and schooling, as well as wider changes in the economy. Young men dressed in different styles, could sit alongside schoolteachers who joined them during a break, or could absent themselves if there was something else to do. In this way, playing ludo could be thought of as a free and meaningful activity in and of itself – ludo played by *homo ludens*, so to speak (Huizinga 1955 [1938]) – and the game commanded the concentration of those around. I had expected the ludo board to be a place of gossip and discussion, but instead found that my prompts and questions provoked considerable irritation if a game was being played, and I was often advised to go and sit further away.

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<sup>2</sup>A similar situation is found in Whyte and Acio’s study of rural youth in northern Uganda. The authors focus on land disputes, and show that, for young men in particular, any waiting had a very practical dimension, in that it was waiting for conditions to come right so that they could get better access to and control over land (2017: 28).

The wider landscape also bled into life around the ludo board, and so, rather than imagining the ludo board as somehow standing for 'play' in opposition to a more 'serious' world beyond, the space around the board was deeply social (Huizinga 1955 [1938]; see also Gombrich 1973: 136). When leaving, the board players went to the next activity – farming, barbering, watching a football match, going back to work – and ludo took up only part of the day. As soon as someone stood away from playing or approached the board mid-game, they broke the rhythm of the game. These moments offered a chance for casual conversation, or for moving to another part of the trading centre to talk to a neighbour or relative.<sup>3</sup>

'Leisure time', it should be said, was the particular property of young men. Young women did not have a space equivalent to the ludo board, and the relationship between notions of time and work were deeply gendered (cf. Karp 1978: 54–5). It would be astonishing if a young woman were to pick up the dice and play a game. Instead, most young women, whether more or less educated, came to the trading centre with a sense of purpose: to do business, to go to church, to buy medicine. In this there would seem to be little change since the late 1970s, when Ivan Karp was able to write of women 'becoming involved in a whole set of domestic duties' during the time of the day when men played (*ibid.*: 169). This sense that women should spend time purposefully was near universal and seemed to be reinforced, rather than reformed, by the experience of schooling. While educated young men could pass time in or outside school playing a game of ludo or watching a football match, young women who had gone to school were expected to busy themselves in the world of church, business or domestic work. Concerns over female respectability and sexuality were never far away. Phrases painted on school walls advised that 'early sex is bad work', and classroom posters showed 'girls affected by distractors'. There were also stories in church about wayward 'girls', articulating widely shared apprehensions over the bodies and morals of young women.

The closest women came to having leisure time was joining activities that might involve some sort of rest. A church group or the meetings of a village savings association also offered the chance to lie down and sleep. One group of Anglican women 'prayer warriors' I spent time with practised a mixture of singing, listening and dozing during a five- to six-hour service. Women would come with their mats and might get a few hours' rest during a healing ceremony. There was also the possibility of 'visiting', which typically meant going to see one's natal kin. And while parents might expect a helping hand from their daughters, their demands were less than those coming from husbands or in-laws.

In the remaining part of the article, three related points are made. First, 'leisure time' produced something of the particular sociality young men experienced at school. This helped them feel that they were educated and offered a place to relax. Those around the ludo board associated 'leisure time' with the lives of those who were more educated, urban and 'developed'. (NGO workers and other members of Uganda's salaried class were felt to have their 'leisure time' in the towns.) Second, life around the ludo board was part of a rural economy

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<sup>3</sup>It is also worth stating that the ludo board was not really the sort of 'oppositional site' defined by a sense of being on the margins found in other accounts (Weiss 2002: 102).

where young men engaged in farming and family obligations. These men were a step down from the urban, college-educated individuals who have helped shape our understanding of youth in Africa and elsewhere (Masquelier 2013; Jeffrey 2010a; 2010b). This did not always mean their lives were easy, but it did produce a matter-of-factness about the nature of things and a capacity to see 'leisure time' as a space for relaxing, rather than waiting. Third, there was sympathy on the part of older people towards the lack of salaried employment for this 'educated' generation. People knew that work was rare and that it had always been, and that schooling had always been a realistic investment.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to accounts that emphasize generation as a line of cleavage, older villagers understood and, to some extent, shared in the predicament facing younger people. In summary, each of these points helps us understand the broader contribution of the article, which is to challenge some of the prevailing narratives around youth in Africa and elsewhere, and to show how playing ludo helped young men pass time and make sense of their lives as both educated and rural.

This article comes out of long-term fieldwork in the Teso region (cf. Jones 2005; 2007; 2009; 2013). My first visit to the area was in 2001, and since then I have spent more than three years living and working in the region, most recently over six months from October 2018 to March 2019. The puzzle that sits at the heart of the article – education without jobs – relates to something I saw when I first arrived in the region: the rolling out of universal primary education. The massive expansion of the primary school-age population in the late 1990s and early 2000s has had a knock-on effect on secondary school and college-level enrolments. I have seen friends invest in education and have found myself involved in the struggle to pay school fees. I have also observed an economy where jobs are few and far between, available only to those with connections or able to pay a bribe. For this particular article, I draw on observational and interview data conducted among younger men and women in Katine sub-county, which I first visited in 2010. I have returned to the sub-county for short visits in 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2017.<sup>5</sup>

To put faces to my observations, I start with a description of two young men around the ludo board. They were at slightly different points in their lives, and their different stories, along with those of other young men, are picked up later in the article to show the variations and slippages that occur over time.

### **'Leisure time': two young men playing ludo**

I first met David Emaru and Robert Eonyu in the trading centre of Atine Atirir in 2010. At the time, David and Robert were ludo players, and I met them on a weekday morning when many others were busy in the gardens (I visited the area during the growing season). They were with a group of friends and were

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<sup>4</sup>This is a situation that is relatively common in sub-Saharan Africa, but not part of the story in case studies of mining communities or plantation agriculture (for example Ferguson's (1999) discussion of expectations of full employment in the Zambian Copperbelt).

<sup>5</sup>Simon Eebu, a local motorbike taxi-man (*boda boda*), farmer and lockup owner, helped with the introductions and sat with me during these conversations.

sitting in front of one of the verandas that flanked the main road. This was a grass-thatched shade in front of a small shop. A reasonable crowd had gathered, and by the time I arrived there were twelve men either watching or playing the game. At first I was surprised by the openness of the space in which ludo was played (sometimes the police would make the effort to move these groups along). The game was often played for small sums of money, and was always played by younger men. Older men tended to play the traditional game *omweso*, while both younger and older men played cards.<sup>6</sup> (Ludo was seen as a bit more respectable than card playing, as it was associated with young men who did not drink alcohol.)

The trading centre itself lies parallel to the newly constructed road between Soroti and Lira.<sup>7</sup> There is an old red-soil *murrum* road that used to be the main thoroughfare, and between these old and new roads are a small number of 'hotels': mud-walled, thatched structures where a plate of posho (maize porridge) and beans can be bought for 1,000 shillings (US\$0.27), or posho and beef stew for 2,000 shillings (US\$0.54). The main part of the trading centre lies either side of the old road and is made up of about twenty 'lockups' (single-storey structures that can be locked from the front). In front of the shops runs a continuous veranda, and in front of the veranda a number of more temporary structures. At the far end a group of women gather in the late morning and early afternoon selling a few foodstuffs: aubergines, tomatoes, avocados, onions and also small dried fish known as *omena* or 'million fish'. This is not a major trading place, and the pace of things is noticeably unhurried when compared with the former regional capital of Soroti, about twelve miles down the road.

The ludo board – the usual board that I remembered from childhood – was reinforced by a high-sided wooden frame. This allowed for the fairly violent throws of the dice, which ricocheted around. The game is played with more style, wit and performance than might be expected. Different players have a certain way with the dice, and the game commands a degree of attention, not only from the players, but also from the audience. The board is divided into four quadrants – red, blue, green, yellow. Each quarter is named after a Premier League football team – Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester United, Liverpool, in that order, with Arsenal the most popular (Vokes 2010: 10). At the beginning of the game, each player is given four tokens, which are placed on four separate circles in his quadrant. With each roll of the dice the player races his tokens clockwise around the board along a path of squares that are not part of any player's home column. The winner is the one who gets his pieces around the board fastest. As he goes around, others can stop him in his tracks by landing on the same square as one of his pieces, sending that piece back to the start – meaning that there is a back and forth, and an element of combat and strategizing. Ludo, though played for relaxation, was competitive; considerable delight could be had in returning your opponent back to his starting quadrant.

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<sup>6</sup>Among the 'southern Iteso' of Kenya, *omweso* is known as *elee*; in other parts of Uganda the 'o' is dropped and it is known as *mwesio*. Karp writes of it as 'a competitive game of lightning calculation in which stones or seeds are moved around in holes on a board. There are many variations and a complicated set of rules' (1978: 169).

<sup>7</sup>Starting in 2007, the road was upgraded with financing from the World Bank. As with many other large construction projects in Uganda, the contract was awarded to the China Roads and Bridge Corporation.

There was a semi-hierarchy to those who got to play, with ‘bigger’ men – those who were married, older or doing better in life – more likely to get a game. Those who could claim to be more pressed for time (schoolteachers on a break, or those with some sort of business to do in the trading centre) would try to get in before others. That said, what was striking was that this was not a particularly hard and fast rule, and people who could claim to be more important would often sit back, wait their turn, or decide to move on. This relates to what historians have termed the acephalous or ‘chiefless’ inheritance of people living in the Teso region, resulting in a similar respect for others, albeit tempered by attributes such as marital status, level of education or age (cf. Vincent 1968; 1982; Lawrance 1957; Henriques 2002). Ivan Karp, writing of the game *elee* (a variant of *omweso*) in the late 1970s, for example, noted something similar where ‘the atmosphere’ of game playing is always one of ‘informality, equality and cheerfulness’ (1978: 55). If there is a particular quality to social relations among men, it is the tendency to socialize with men of a similar age, and the ludo board was almost entirely surrounded by men in their twenties and early thirties, and it was unremarkable to find a former pupil playing with their schoolteacher or a businessman losing out to a farm labourer.

At the time of our first conversation, Robert was still at home with his parents. He was not married and told me that before marriage he wanted to find a proper job, by which he meant salaried employment. He was helping his parents on the farm, and said that he was also trying to get a sponsor for further studies (he saw me as a potential patron). Robert turned up in his farming overalls. He had left Katine Secondary School after completing his A levels a few years earlier. When asked about what he wanted to study, he told me ‘mass communication and journalism’. This seemed to relate to the after-effects of a well-publicized development project that had been running in the area. The NGO had received funding from the *Guardian* newspaper and had set up a ‘community resource centre’ where people could go to use the internet to find friends and, hopefully, a sponsor for future studies. One of his Facebook friends lived in Canada, and when asked about what he discussed with his Canadian friend, he said, ‘We exchange views on life here, and life there.’ Robert said that he could spend about six hours a week online, although he worried about finding another way of getting access once the NGO stopped its work. When I suggested that he might end up as a farmer, he said that this would be ‘wasting his education’. The money used to play ludo was mostly from day labouring, or ‘borrowed’ from his parents. Spending time in the trading centre – among educated young men – around the ludo board was also the closest thing he had to the experience of being back at school.

David ran a barbering salon in the trading centre. He had a pair of electric clippers and worked out of a small grass-thatched shade, cutting hair for 500 shillings. On a good day David cut the hair of about twenty or so customers and made about 10,000 shillings (US\$2.74). His business was started with help from his uncle, also a barber, after David left school in ‘Senior Four’ (the last year of the lower part of secondary school).<sup>8</sup> David had also recently started playing cards, a slight slip in

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<sup>8</sup>The education system in Uganda consists of seven years of primary schooling followed by four years of secondary school (S1–S4 or ordinary level) and then S5–S6 (advanced level). There is an array of tertiary-level institutions, including universities, vocational schools and teacher-training

the eyes of some of his peers. David had a family he was supporting in the village. He was married with two children, although he had still to complete the payment of the bride price owed to his wife's family (a common situation in Uganda; see Muthegheki *et al.* 2012; Hague *et al.* 2011).<sup>9</sup> An only child, David farmed three plots of land (*amisirin*) next to his home. He told me he preferred his work in the trading centre as there were more opportunities there. David was also a member of a village savings and loan association, a form of savings group organized around a self-selected group of villagers and a product of NGO work in the area. Members received loans that were valued against the assets – typically livestock – they had. David wore a baseball cap and an Arsenal shirt.

In watching the ludo game play out, I was reminded that this has become a feature of life in trading centres across the region. It was a change from what I had observed during my first stay in the area in 2001. I was also struck by the way in which Robert and David had a relationship, in one way or another, both to education and to farming. Robert, younger and with slightly more years of schooling, helped his parents in the garden, while also hoping for further studies. David, older, with less formal education and with his commitments as a husband and father, saw farming as more of a fixed part of his future. Both puzzled over what to do. The possibility of Facebook friends, watching Arsenal play in one of the video halls, membership of a village savings and loans association and the hoped-for degree in 'mass communication' suggested signifiers of a different world. Their lives were also framed by the familiar experience of going to church, of attending burials, of digging.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. In the next section I offer a brief history of the Teso region as it relates to experiences of education, play and farming.<sup>10</sup> In particular, I reflect on the words and practices through which people made sense of time and leisure. After this I discuss the three observations concerning 'leisure time' outlined earlier. First, the way in which the space that developed around the ludo board continued the sociality of school and made possible a sense of passing time in the style of the salaried classes. Second, the ways in which this experience of 'leisure time' also existed alongside patterns of work – farming, petty trading and casual employment – that were typical for the area. Third, that despite the apparent 'idleness' of 'youths' in the area, older people were sympathetic to the situation younger men found themselves in. Each of these points complicates a literature on youth in Africa that has mostly focused on the different ways in which young men are 'stuck' or failing to move on to

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colleges. Students often have an episodic relationship to education, meaning that, in Teso, a typical S6 graduate can range anywhere from nineteen to twenty-six years of age.

<sup>9</sup>Bride price is meant to be paid prior to the marriage day itself, with the cattle inherited from the father, brothers or uncles. Since at least the time of the Teso Insurgency (1986–93), when people lost their stocks of cattle, the system has moved to one of part-payment (Jones 2009). Typically, the lineage group (*ateker*) now helps with the initial instalment, while the husband is left with responsibility for the balance. Many feel that the system of part-payment has resulted in more fragile marriages.

<sup>10</sup>The historiography of the Teso region is dominated by the work of Joan Vincent (1968; 1982). The first full survey of the region was conducted by the District Commissioner J. C. D. Lawrance (1957). More recent studies have focused on the violence of the Teso Insurgency and its aftermath (Zistel 2002; de Berry 2000; Henriques 2002), land conflicts (Kandel 2016) and religious change (Ravalde 2017).



'social adulthood', or somehow abandoned by an older generation that experienced life very differently.

### Schooling and play in eastern Uganda

The most obvious change in rural Uganda over the past twenty years has been the push for mass education (Meinert 2009; Cheney 2007).<sup>11</sup> In Katine sub-county, the number of primary schools has gone up from a handful in the 1990s to more than thirty by 2018. As well as primary schools, there are fee-paying secondary schools, both government and private. Parishes typically have their own government primary school, which may be a 'mango tree' school made up of temporary structures, or a more finished complex of school buildings and teachers' houses. There are also 'community schools' where there may be a few government-paid teachers alongside teachers whose salary is paid by the parents. In Katine sub-county, Katine Primary School and Katine Secondary School, both down the road from the trading centre, are examples of government schools (where the full roster of teachers is on the Ministry of Education payroll and where the buildings are the responsibility of the District Education Office in Soroti). The popular view is that government primary schools have suffered under this expansion; with classes of more than 100 a common feature of the first few years of schooling, many do not learn to read or write and drop out of school after a few years. For these reasons, David sends his children to a private primary school on the edge of the trading centre (the school fees were 200,000 shillings or US\$55 per term).

This expansion of primary education has had a knock-on effect on the numbers going to secondary school and for further studies.<sup>12</sup> It is possible to see a sort of 'diploma disease', with young men such as Robert responding to the puzzle of education and unemployment by seeking out more education (Dore 1976; Bourdieu 1984: 142–3). I was also told that 'you need someone in front to get a job', and that getting a government job also involved bribes and 'donations'. At the same time, education was not entirely new, and the longer history of schools in the area informed the way people regarded the current crop of 'educated' individuals. Villagers could point to older men who had 'got an education', who farmed but who had also drifted in and out of salaried employment, or who had remained 'in the village'. I was introduced to a man in his fifties with a university degree who did not do much, even in the way of farming, relying instead on his wife. He spent his afternoons sitting and drinking.

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<sup>11</sup>In documents such as Uganda's *Second National Development Plan* (Uganda 2015), education is presented as key to the economic transformation of the country. The relationship between education and development also runs through the work of the NGO sector in Uganda and is supported by the broader global discourse on 'Education for All' and the UN's Millennium Development Goals and more recent Sustainable Development Goals.

<sup>12</sup>A Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) report from 2017, based on 2014 census data, shows the primary school net enrolment rate (NER) at 85 per cent in the Teso region. The primary school NER is the percentage of the population aged six to twelve years that is enrolled in primary schools. The secondary school enrolment rate in the region was 50 per cent. See <<https://www.ubos.org/publications/statistical/21/>>, accessed 11 April 2019.

The semi-detached relationship between education and jobs in the Teso region has a long history, and Teso is different from many of the other sites in sub-Saharan Africa – mines, plantations, cities – that have offered some of the more eye-catching accounts of under-employment on the continent: sites where wages, salaries and labour migration are part of lived experience and expected futures (cf. Ferguson 1999; Bolt 2015). The incorporation of the Teso region into the colonial system in the first half of the twentieth century was as a small-holder agricultural economy in which households were expected to grow cotton for onward sale, and where much of the work of buying and selling was managed by Asian traders (Vincent 1968: 182–3; 1982: 154–6). The Iteso – the dominant society in the area – were pushed into this economy (Vincent 1982). Employment was limited to the few individuals who joined the higher levels of the local government system, the army or the police. The only other major organizational structures present in the region during the colonial period – the mission churches and the schools and hospitals they founded – were managed by Europeans until the mid-1970s (Ravalde 2017: 51). Positions occupied by Africans – lay reader, clerk, catechist – had few prospects and were unwaged, and those who held such positions were expected to continue their agricultural work.<sup>13</sup> Schooling during the colonial and early postcolonial period, I was told, was more about creating a class of ‘gentleman farmers’ who could serve in these part-time roles. The decline of cotton in the postcolonial period – due to the expulsion of Uganda’s Asian population in the early 1970s, along with declining global prices – only confirmed a pattern where schooling was combined with smallholder farming, cattle rearing and petty trading (Jones 2009).

Of more immediate interest for those turning up to play at the ludo board have been the new forms of consumption that have developed with the spread of mobile phones and satellite broadcasting. Long conversations about Arsenal’s prospects in the English Premier League, and the sense that farming might be ‘backward’, suggest a subtle shift in ‘the cultural knowledge and self-making of individuals’ in Atine Atirir (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 83). For many younger men, the English Premier League has moved the high spot of the week from Sunday to Saturday, while car batteries mean that video halls can screen films late into the night most nights of the week. Younger men watched Nollywood and Bollywood films, martial arts movies and porn films. On my most recent visit to the area, two one-arm-bandit machines had been installed by an Indian businessman who had travelled up from the district capital. These new ways of passing time, of which ludo was one, provided the context in which ‘educated’ young men were refashioning older notions of what it was to relax.

For those who went to secondary school, there was a sense of being educated that set them apart from those who ‘dropped out’. This was as much about the particular sociality of schooling as it was about the curriculum or the classroom learning that took place. Students would walk to and from school, in their

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<sup>13</sup>A good example of this mix of employment and agricultural work would be the Catechist Training Centre at Kidetok. This was a place where the Catholic Church offered courses to catechists from across the Teso region. The centre made a specific virtue of training catechists and their wives in agricultural production, on the understanding that they should not depend on the church to support them.

uniforms, and this opened up time for particular ways of socializing and hanging out. Many of the young men I spoke to also remembered with affection the moments of relaxed, mostly homosocial, ways of spending time with friends in the school grounds or during class. I was also told – with a degree of embarrassment – about the one-line ‘love letters’ that passed from boy to girl under the desk: ‘I will love you ’til Lake Victoria runs dry.’ There was a playfulness mixed in with what it was to get an education. As such, memories of school focused less on the sorts of frustrations that came from lack of salaried work in the present than on the experience of becoming a student, school as a place for socializing, or the sort of identity schooling gave.

‘Leisure time’ was also something read against older phrases and understandings. A particularly popular verb among young men was *aibwobwo*, which can best be translated as the sense of walking around without an obvious destination: a form of ambling that was nonetheless important as a way of relaxing and for opening up space to think. I was told that *aibwobwo* was also a space for reflection and for coming to terms with disappointments and frustrations. The practice of ambling along also relates to the experience of earlier generations when men would spend long days away with cattle. Another popular phrase was *auriak*, which refers to the way a man relaxes in the shade, but also the way in which cattle relax under a tree after grazing. The language of relaxation was deeply gendered (*aibwobwo* and *auriak* are phrases that men use about themselves). When I asked the wives of Robert and David what they did to ‘relax’, I was told that women ‘work and sleep’ and that ‘there was no time for relaxing’. Women were able to find their own ways of unwinding – sleeping during a church service, visiting a relative – but this missed out on the language of play.

### **‘We are passing our leisure time’**

For many of the young men around the ludo board, their education marked them out from earlier generations, having been the first in the family to go to school. Playing ludo, and the culture that developed around ‘leisure time’, produced something of the sociality they experienced at school. Spending time with men of a similar age and educational attainment helped continue this ‘educated’ experience, and, as already noted, a couple of those who turned up to play were themselves young schoolteachers from the nearby primary school. The ludo board and the trading centre opened a space where, in the absence of a ‘good job’, it was possible to escape momentarily from ‘the dust and soil of the village’ and be in a place that was reserved ‘for after school, in the afternoon’, a ‘place for relaxing with friends’.

When I asked Robert whether older people might pass judgement on them for the time spent around the ludo board, I was told: ‘Ludo? We just play for our leisure. Some old men might criticize us ... but they don’t know that we are passing our leisure time here.’

Robert was making the point that ‘leisure time’ was a space that educated younger men had made for themselves, a space that was for passing time, a

space that older men could not fully understand.<sup>14</sup> Those around the ludo board tended to be those with at least a secondary-school education, and a few of those who sat around the board affected a mixture of rural and urban idioms (they sometimes spoke English and were keen to tell me that they were not ‘full villagers’). Robert’s slightly oppositional response – ‘our leisure’, ‘they don’t know’ – also reflected how the ludo board could, for some, be a way of fashioning an identity as a would-be student, even while being busy with farming. (Robert hoped to return to his studies and was also aware that I might be a possible sponsor, and he showed me business cards of journalists and NGO workers who had passed through the area.)

Robert was a slightly awkward character; others were more comfortable with ludo as a way to mix their identities as ‘educated’ villagers with the realities of farming and family life. David, like many of his peers, was keen to impress on me that ludo-playing for him was a way of relaxing and of having a convivial time away from the troubles of family and work life. David made less of a fuss about his status as someone who had gone to school, and he elided his experiences of education with his roles as a barber and as a man with a home and a family. The ludo board was not, in practice, as restrictive a space as the would-be student Robert tried to claim. It was a bit of a mixture, with most of those playing educated men in their twenties or early thirties, but also with the odd ‘dropout’ or older man. Mostly, though, the board was notable for being a familiar and comfortable place for those who had experienced the sociality of secondary school or college.

‘Leisure time’ was also interesting for the way it formed part of a nexus with ideas of salaried work. Young men told me about NGO workers relaxing in bars in the district capital, and of the way in which the ‘working class’ of Kampala would meet to watch Premier League games in the best hotels. So ‘leisure time’ could also be thought of as a way of associating yourself with work, even if you did not have a job, and something that gave you the sense – however distant – of being like a salaried worker. This point would seem to take us back to Veblen’s observations concerning the ‘leisured class’ and his description of ‘conspicuous leisure’ as defined by its ‘exemption from useful employment’. Ludo players pointed to the way in which NGO workers and government officials drove around in Mitsubishi Pajeros, ‘not really doing anything’, and of the way they could be observed in social spaces – playing the ‘big man’ in church or at a burial, or hanging out in the hotels in the district capital – rather than working. Claiming some sort of connection to ‘leisure time’ was a reminder that relaxing was not only something that could be claimed by the elite; it was also available to those who did not have a salary but who saw themselves as educated and less obviously of the village than their parents.

If we return to Robert’s earlier comment about the way the games played around the ludo board were something that had been made ‘here’ for ‘our leisure’, there is also a story about the way in which ‘leisure time’ belonged to the trading centre. This differs from Ivan Karp’s description of games in the late 1970s, where players would keep an *omweso* board at home ‘so that potential

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<sup>14</sup>In this there is something of Mannheim’s point about the way in which each generation puzzles over, and makes something new out of, the cultural material around them, and the way each generation is conscious of this fact (1972 [1952]).

followers and friends can come and play' (Karp 1978: 55). For Karp, the game was not only a place to 'gossip, relax, and play' but also a place for developing an influential 'circle of friends' (he was struck by the fact that *omweso* was rarely played between close relatives). In Atine Atirir, game playing had shifted from the home to the trading centre and is less easily read as being about a would-be 'big man' cultivating potential allies by inviting them to his home to play. Instead, it was possible to see the trading centre as an emerging cultural site that helped educated young men carry over the particular experiences of socializing at school into their subsequent lives.

### **'We do our garden work and then we come to play'**

David sometimes came to the ludo board wearing muddy boots. His life, like those of his fellow players, continued to be lived in a way that bound him to farming. David continued to cultivate crops, and he and his wife used the three gardens inherited from his father. Farming of the sort David engaged in typically meant working a small amount of land with a focus on crops – groundnuts and sweet potatoes – that could be sold at market. Robert, the high-school student who hoped to do a degree in mass communication, also helped his parents in their gardens and had inherited some plots for himself. The schoolteachers who sometimes turned up to play also went back to the village to farm during the long holidays (and regretted the fact that, as teachers in a private school, they did not have houses or farmland provided for them by the school – part of the package for teachers in government schools). Although some of these men disdained the connection to farming, they were part of a generation that had to make education sit alongside the fact that rural forms of work continued to be a part of the way they made a living (cf. Mwaura 2017a).

Frustrations focused more on the fact that farming, in and of itself, was not able to provide a good living. Land in the Teso region is divided roughly equally among sons, meaning that there has been an accelerating process of land fragmentation in recent years and a consequent practice of internal migration. Young men who stay in the area have to pursue a number of things to get by.<sup>15</sup> Only the richest households in the area could pay labourers to work their land or had the resources to invest in experimenting in commercial farming. This meant that many of the young men around the ludo board not only farmed but also worked as day labourers (typically for between 5,000 and 8,000 shillings – US\$1.37–US\$2.20). Day labouring might mean digging a neighbour's fields or doing construction work. The most common forms of other work were making bricks for sale and gathering grass for thatching. A number of men had taken to selling roasted pork from sites dotted around the area, away from the trading centre.<sup>16</sup> David,

<sup>15</sup>As Mwaura (2017b) observes in her study of rural Kenya, farming is mixed in with other activities – day labouring, brick making, taking up committee work.

<sup>16</sup>Although there are few Muslim homes in the sub-county, they have a monopoly when it comes to butchering large livestock (cattle, goats and sheep). Pigs, which are haram, are only slaughtered away from trading centres and market places in the Teso region and elsewhere in Uganda.

who worked as a barber and as a motorbike taxi-man, was one of the better-off men in the area and looked busier, and he was able to elbow his way into a ludo game ahead of others.

In choosing the somewhat different cases of Robert and David, I suggest that there were different ways of approaching the issue of farming, marriage and joblessness in Atine Atirir. Robert, who seemed to be one of the younger men around the ludo board, claimed the status of a would-be student who was helping his parents in their gardens. When I first met him, he was also keen to be seen as an 'educated youth' in pursuit of further education, who was 'staying home' in the meantime. David, who was a few years older, married and had children, was further down the road to making a living and no longer felt such a connection to his time as a student. He did not see himself as 'jobless' (in the sense that he was hoping for future paid employment), nor was he someone who was on furlough before going back for further studies. Instead, he was a barber who had yet to pay off the rest of his bride price and who managed the land he and his wife farmed.

Over the course of a few years, the stories of Robert and David moved forward in ways that complicated the picture. There was a popular and long-held notion among ludo players of the 'disturbed man' (*ituan yen irimi airim* – literally 'one who cannot settle down') to capture those who moved between village and town, or who failed to honour their obligations. In different ways, Robert and David moved in and out of this category. Robert, who had fashioned himself as a good student when I first met him in 2011, was, when I last met him, married with children and had developed a reputation as someone who was not particularly responsible. Robert had left the area for a while, claiming to go to town in search of work, and had left behind a daughter who was seriously ill. In his absence, the child was taken to a number of hospitals for treatment with financial help coming from his wife's brother. Robert's wife told me that he had become less and less useful around the home even before he moved away: 'I go to the garden when my husband is resting in bed ... my husband does not help me, it is my fellow women who come and help.' David was also seen as less and less settled. On my most recent stay in the area, I was told that David did not always stay with his wife and that he had started a second family in the trading centre.

### **'Younger people suffer from a lack of work'**

There is a general discourse in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa concerning idle 'youth' and the problems they pose to society. Press reports, television programmes and the speeches of politicians and church leaders all decry the moral character of Uganda's younger generation and link young men to problems of fraud, trickery and violence. This official discourse also finds expression in scholarly accounts of youth in Uganda and elsewhere (e.g. Namuggala 2016: 79). Frameworks that ask whether African youth are 'hooligans or heroes', 'heroes or villains', 'vanguard or vandals' or 'troublemakers or peacemakers' position youth in opposition to older generations and emphasize a mixture of potential and danger (cf. Resnick and Thurlow 2015). In an introduction to the subject, Deborah Durham writes of the ways in which youth in Africa may be 'saboteurs' of the prevailing order (2000). Whyte and Acio, while recognizing that many young men and women continue to farm in Uganda, also point to a general

discourse of rural youth unable ‘to face the garden’ and ‘too lazy to pursue agriculture’, and structure their analysis around conflicts and tensions between different generations (2017: 22).

What was striking in Atine Atirir was that the sorts of discourses that labelled young men as disruptive or problematic were less pronounced. Scratching beneath the surface of complaints between older and younger villagers, it was possible to find a degree of sympathy and understanding on the part of older people towards the situation of young men. They were not particularly viewed as a site of ‘twenty-first-century instability’, nor were they seen as needing particular disciplining or domination on the part of a more ‘responsible’ older generation (Argenti and Durham 2013: 396). Young men were instead seen as suffering under changes that were not really within their control and, in any case, their older counterparts were dealing with similar problems.

There are a number of reasons for the sort of sympathy that existed between the generations. The first, somewhat prosaic, reason was the fact that sitting and passing time was not the lone preserve of young men. Many others sat around the trading centre and waited out the day. A few metres away from the ludo board sat a number of older women selling aubergines and tomatoes. They came to the trading centre in the late morning, after they had done their garden work. Sales were rare and most of their day was spent sitting and waiting. Even the women and men running the various shops – mostly selling basic foodstuffs, stationery and mobile phone airtime – experienced business at a fairly slow pace, and hours might pass without a sale. Those who came to do a particular activity, such as buying cooking oil, collecting rent or taking a bicycle to be repaired, stopped and took their time. Schoolteachers from the nearby fee-paying secondary school came during their lunch hour and sometimes joined in a game of ludo or borrowed a slightly out-of-date copy of *The New Vision* or *The Monitor* to read.<sup>17</sup>

Older people were also aware of structural problems in the economy – smaller plots to farm, more people, fewer opportunities, indebted marriages. The situation of young men – particularly those just out of school – was more usually explained by the absence of work than by the failure of young men to find salaried employment. The lack of jobs was a situation that young men suffered under rather than one that they themselves were making, and, as we have seen, the link between education and employment had always been tenuous in the region. When I asked a local businessman about whether there was a problem with ‘idlers’, I was told:

Yes they [idlers] are there. But really there is a lack of jobs and these are men who cannot manage the life of a farmer. Even those without jobs go to the garden of others for day labouring.

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<sup>17</sup>Young men’s lives were also tied to the school day and to the agricultural seasons: I was told that ‘when the school is in session the trading centre is busier, but most of the time it is quiet’. The difference between the long dry season (December–February) and the growing season that followed was particularly stark. The dry season offered much more time for ‘hanging out’ in the trading centre (it was also a time when schools had their long holiday, meaning that it was also a time when youth in general were more available). As soon as the rains began, the number of young men who could be found in the trading centre in the morning was much reduced.

The businessman knew that it was difficult for young men with an education to get a job, and also that it was not easy to have a future that relied on farming.

Discussions around unemployment in Atine Atirir had a sociological rather than a pathological quality. Older men who had achieved success in farming or business told me that idleness came about mostly because people had gone for education and could not match their education with work. And while it was understood that many would have to find their way back to farming in the end, it was reasonable to expect that any shift would take time, and might involve a number of reversals. As such, the men playing ludo were not necessarily a general problem; rather, it was individuals such as Robert who took a wrong turn. The intimacy of village life meant that it was not so easy to stereotype younger men as uniformly idle; actions and behaviours varied between individuals and over time. The same young men who sat around the ludo board were also seen (or not seen) at burials, in the gardens or in church.

A final point. In studies of 'youth' in Africa and elsewhere, the desire has been to move away from an approach that sees younger men and women as appendages to an older generation. This type of work emerges out of a critical view of earlier accounts of youth on the continent, where young people were mostly 'cast in a supporting role' and 'rarely studied as the central point' (Durham 2000: 114). We see concepts such as 'youthscapes', 'youthmen' and the category of 'youth' itself producing a very different and distinct account of what it is to be younger rather than older, where youth becomes a self-evident category for social analysis (cf. Christiansen *et al.* 2006). As Whyte and Acio point out, 'youth in Africa have been the subject of intense study in recent years', and they go on to mention the different ways in which youths have been categorized – 'urban youth, militarized youth, unemployed youth, sexually active youth, culturally creative youth' – before adding their description of 'rural youth' (Whyte and Acio 2017: 18). And yet it is worth asking ourselves whether this push to make young people the 'central point' produces too much of an oppositional and difference-making view of the experiences of people of different ages. In Atine Atirir, I have found the word 'youth' much less helpful than the terms 'younger men' or 'younger people'. In the trading centre, part of the sympathy of older generations for younger men, for example, came from an understanding that things were different, but not that different.

## Conclusion

In Atine Atirir, young men mostly passed, rather than killed, time. Those who had been to school created a space of play around the ludo board, and the verandas of the trading centre afforded them a place to relax. Many had families; most farmed. In Atine Atirir, perhaps, there was less of an interest in drawing out the difference between youth and adulthood than in other settings, and these were not men who found themselves at risk of being 'youth forever'. Instead, they found themselves doing the sorts of work that were common to the area, while also reflecting on what it meant to have gone to school. In contrast to other accounts of youth in Africa, and elsewhere, the time that was passed was not best understood through a frustrated, suspended or deferred experience of 'waiting' (cf. Honwana 2014; Jeffrey 2010b). Instead, the ludo board offered a



place for play and relaxation where young men could elide the ‘educated’ identities they attached to their experience of schooling with rural lives.

Running through the above are the different ways in which sociality around the ludo board was informed by the wider landscape. Atine Atirir was a place where people knew that education was, and always had been, a somewhat problematic enterprise, connected more to the sorts of persons it made – chiefs, ‘big men’, community leaders, ‘gentleman farmers’ – than to salaries and jobs. There was less of a sense of frustration and feeling ‘stuck’ among both those with an education and those looking on. It also meant that there was a large degree of understanding concerning what it meant to be educated and to farm. While some young men disdained agriculture, they came to the ludo board with muddy boots, got married and turned up to funerals, and were not seen as particularly remarkable. The changes observed in Atine Atirir were less dramatic and understood in less oppositional ways than in other accounts of youth on the continent.

In this context, the value of ‘leisure time’ derived partly from the way it helped a group of young men feel able to continue the forms of sociality they developed at school. They were part of an emergent cultural formation, focused on the trading centre, of educated styles and semi-rural lives. The ‘leisure’ in ‘leisure time’ was important because it offered a break from farming or from doing some sort of casual work. The ludo board also offered a place to sit with other educated young men, away from home, echoing the sociality of school, while also allowing former students, such as Robert and David, to display more or less educated identities. It was an intimate world, one where older people sympathized with the younger generation, and where the lack of salaried work was nothing new. ‘Leisure time’ offered a space for relaxation and mixing rural lives with educated styles, and for fashioning newish ways of being social at a slight remove from the home or the village.

In listening to young men in Atine Atirir and observing how they relaxed around the ludo board, a story emerges where it is important to consider the ways in which people pass time in a relaxed way and seek out amusement, and where ‘culture arises in the form of play’ (Huizinga 1955 [1938]: 46). Young men continued to turn up to the trading centre with muddy boots, concentrating their attention on the game at hand, and, like older men, they found pleasure in making a place for themselves around an activity that had a good measure of ‘informality, equality and cheerfulness’ (Karp 1978: 55). This did not mean that life was always easy, but it did mean that it was difficult to see their condition as defined by waiting on the margins, or feeling at the edge of things.

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## Abstract

In the trading centre of Atine Atirir in eastern Uganda, young men gather to play ludo. They are educated but most do not have salaried employment. Many farm and do some form of casual labour. They talk about the importance of leisure and 'leisure time' and discuss the prospects of Arsenal in the English Premier League. In this article I explore the relationship between education, farming and 'leisure time' and look at the ways in which young men in particular make sense of lives that involve both schooling and farming. A number of scholars have focused on the tensions and frustrations of educated – typically urban – youth in Africa and elsewhere. They observe a growing distance between older and

younger people, and the ways young men define their situation as one of boredom, dissatisfaction and waiting. By contrast, I show the ways in which the ludo board helped younger men in a poorer, rural setting elide an interest in an 'educated style' with rural forms of work – farming, petty trading and casual employment – and how the space around the game was mostly a site of play and relaxation, a place for passing, rather than killing, time. There was also a large degree of sympathy between the generations.

### Résumé

Dans le centre de commerce d'Atine Atirir, dans l'Est de l'Ouganda, des jeunes hommes se rassemblent pour jouer au ludo. Ils sont éduqués, mais la plupart n'ont pas d'emploi salarié. Beaucoup sont fermiers et effectuent un travail occasionnel. Ils parlent de l'importance des loisirs et du « temps de loisirs », et discutent des chances d'Arsenal dans le championnat anglais. Dans cet article, l'auteur explore la relation entre éducation, agriculture et « temps de loisirs », et examine la manière dont les jeunes en particulier donnent du sens aux vies qui allient scolarité et agriculture. Certains chercheurs se sont intéressés aux tensions et aux frustrations des jeunes éduqués (généralement urbains) en Afrique et ailleurs. Ils observent une distance croissante entre les personnes âgées et les jeunes, et la manière dont les jeunes définissent leur situation en parlant d'ennui, d'insatisfaction et d'attente. L'article montre en revanche comment le tablier de ludo aidait des jeunes en milieu urbain à allier un intérêt pour un « style éduqué » à des formes de travail rurales (agriculture, petit commerce et travail occasionnel), et comment l'espace autour du jeu était principalement une aire de loisir et de détente, un lieu pour passer le temps, plutôt que pour le tuer. On y observait également une grande sympathie entre les générations.