

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Downward social mobility among young Ghanaian digital entrepreneurs: navigating family expectations and digital start-up dreams

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Abstract

Since the 2000s, digital entrepreneurship has been framed by policymakers, NGOs and international corporations as a solution to Africa's high youth unemployment. In this article, I explore how the promise of serial digital entrepreneurship – the idea that repeated business failure will eventually result in a profitable digital start-up – lured young adult Akan digital entrepreneurs into downwardly mobile trajectories. Building on the recent anthropology of (de-)kinning, I show that young adult Akan were given and/or negotiated a window of opportunity during which their families allowed them to invest most of their resources in establishing their own middle-class career and marriage. As families tried to close this window out of concern for the young adults' ability to achieve a middle-class lifestyle and redistribute opportunities to siblings, serial entrepreneurship could encourage entrepreneurs to distance themselves from their kin in their continued unprofitable pursuit of digital start-up success. When these young adults finally wanted to quit entrepreneurship, they could find themselves far removed from obligations of care and opportunity from kin and the waged job market, trapped in the precarious pursuit of digital start-up 'dreams'. This article contributes to debates on the African middle classes by conceptualizing downward social mobility in Ghana as the de-kinning that occurs when family members fail to reach mutual understandings about how to pursue middle-class aspirations.

Résumé

Depuis les années 2000, l'entrepreneuriat du numérique est présenté par les décideurs politiques, les ONG et les entreprises internationales comme une solution au chômage élevé des jeunes en Afrique. Dans cet article, l'auteur explore comment la promesse de l'entrepreneuriat du numérique en série, à savoir l'idée que des échecs commerciaux répétés débouchent à terme sur une start-up numérique lucrative, a incité les jeunes entrepreneurs numériques akans à prendre des trajectoires de mobilité descendante. En s'appuyant sur l'anthropologie récente de la (dé-)parenté, il montre que les jeunes adultes akans se sont vu offrir et/ou ont négocié une fenêtre d'opportunité durant laquelle leurs familles leur ont permis d'investir la majeure partie de leurs ressources dans l'établissement de leur propre

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carrière et mariage dans la classe moyenne. Alors que les familles cherchaient à fermer cette fenêtre, soucieuses de la capacité des jeunes adultes à accéder à un style de vie de classe moyenne et à redistribuer les opportunités à leurs frères et sœurs, l'entrepreneuriat en série pouvait encourager les entrepreneurs à se distancer de leurs proches dans leur quête infructueuse de réussite dans le numérique. Lorsque ces jeunes adultes souhaitaient finalement quitter l'entrepreneuriat, ils pouvaient se retrouver loin des obligations de soins et des opportunités offertes par leurs proches et le marché du travail salarié, piégés dans la poursuite précaire de « rêves » de start-up numérique. Cet article contribue aux débats sur les classes moyennes africaines en conceptualisant la mobilité sociale descendante au Ghana comme la déparenté qui survient lorsque les membres d'une famille ne parviennent pas à s'entendre sur la manière de poursuivre des aspirations de classe moyenne.

Resumo

Desde a década de 2000, o empreendedorismo digital tem sido enquadrado por decisores políticos, ONG e empresas internacionais como uma solução para o elevado desemprego juvenil em África. Neste artigo, exploro a forma como a promessa de empreendedorismo digital em série – a ideia de que o fracasso repetido de um negócio acabará por resultar numa start-up digital lucrativa – atraiu jovens adultos empreendedores digitais Akan para trajetórias de mobilidade descendente. Baseando-me na recente antropologia do (des)parentesco, mostro que foi dada e/ou negociada aos jovens adultos Akan uma janela de oportunidade durante a qual as suas famílias lhes permitiram investir a maior parte dos seus recursos no estabelecimento da sua própria carreira de classe média e no casamento. Quando as famílias tentam fechar esta janela, preocupadas com a capacidade destes jovens adultos alcançarem um estilo de vida de classe média e redistribuírem as oportunidades pelos irmãos, o empreendedorismo em série pode encorajar os empreendedores a afastarem-se dos seus familiares na busca contínua e não lucrativa do sucesso de uma empresa digital em fase de arranque. Quando estes jovens adultos querem finalmente abandonar o empreendedorismo, podem ver-se afastados das obrigações de cuidados e oportunidades dos seus familiares e do mercado de trabalho assalariado, presos na busca precária de 'sonhos' de criação de empresas digitais. Este artigo contribui para debates sobre as classes médias africanas ao concretizar a mobilidade social descendente no Gana como a desvinculação que ocorre quando os membros da família não conseguem chegar a um entendimento mútuo sobre a forma de concretizar as aspirações da classe média.

Introduction

A few months into my fieldwork in Accra in 2014, I found Kwabena Osei, one of the young adult digital entrepreneurs participating in my study, in a very distressed state. When I inquired about the source of his stress, Osei explained that he was on his way to a board meeting with the early-stage venture capital investor¹ in his digital start-up to discuss the details of shutting down the company. For three years, he and his team had tried everything they could, from programming into the late hours to promoting their start-up as the newest African success story in national and transnational media outlets and at tech events. Yet, they had not managed to build a

¹ Venture capital investment is a form of private equity financing provided to early-stage start-ups that are considered to have high growth potential or have demonstrated high growth.

profitable business and eventually had run out of funding. He mentioned that the decision to shut down the start-up not only meant that he could not meet the expectations of his investor for start-up growth, but that he had been unable to return his family's investment in him. He told me:

[It] puts me in a very difficult position. My parents have cast me out of the family, they don't talk to me any more. I am the oldest child, the family put money aside so I could be the first to go to university. They expected that I would get a well-paying job and return their investment and fund the secondary and university education of my siblings. I have not been able to do that. The past three years I and my team worked hard on the start-up.

When I asked Osei what he planned to do in this situation, he mentioned that he considered continuing his entrepreneurial career abroad:

My family is ashamed of me, so I don't think there is a future for me here in Ghana any more. They probably won't support me through this, help me find a job. So, I have been considering moving abroad, do an acceleration² programme in Chile with a new start-up.

I was both surprised and deeply struck by Osei's description of the ultimately unprofitable investment of his time and resources into his start-up resulting in a deeply fractured relationship with his family. This situation formed a stark contrast to the promise of digital entrepreneurship that was articulated in public spaces in Accra's start-up industry at the time. Just a few days before I spoke to Osei, a typical performance of this narrative had been provided by his venture capital investor. During a speech at a tech event in Accra, he told the digital entrepreneurs in the audience:

We don't need a big success like Facebook, but a ten to twenty million dollar exit³ would be huge. You have the opportunity to create globally successful companies that create wealth and jobs locally in Africa.

This optimistic public narrative normalized failure as an inevitable part of digital entrepreneurs' journey – a part they should take pride in and embrace as it would provide them with valuable lessons. It encouraged serial entrepreneurship – the establishment of a new business after the old one fails – as a way to implement these lessons and work towards eventual start-up success, with little regard for the negative effects start-up failure could have on entrepreneurs and their families (Friederici *et al.* 2020: 24; Irani 2015; Weiss and Weber 2017: 369–71). In this article, I use biographical accounts of young Akan entrepreneurs (such as Osei) chasing digital start-up dreams, with the eventual result of being shut out of family networks of care and

² An acceleration programme is an advanced entrepreneurship training programme.

³ An exit is start-up owners' strategic plan to sell all or some of their shares in the company to investors or another company. If the business has been considered successful, start-up owners can make a substantial profit from selling their shares.

(re)distributing opportunities to achieve middle-class aspirations, as the empirical starting point to conceptualize de-kinning as part of downward social mobility in Ghana.

Experiences such as Osei's challenge popular ideas about the middle classes and digital entrepreneurship in Africa. In the early twenty-first century, the 'growing' African middle classes were marked as drivers of economic, social and political development by global media outlets, financial institutions and management and consultancy firms (Melber 2022; Mercer 2020; Scharrer *et al.* 2018). In a 2011 report, the African Development Bank used a daily per capita income expenditure of between US\$2 and US\$20 to catapult 31 per cent of Africans into the middle classes (Ncube *et al.* 2011). The international banking and business community interpreted these numbers as a sign of new market opportunities becoming available on the African continent (Darbon 2018: 46–7), which could be unlocked through digital technologies and digital entrepreneurship. Since the early 2000s, transnational businesses and governments have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in tech cities, tech hubs and incubators and tech events, celebrating start-ups as providing access to African consumers, solving local development challenges, and providing skilled jobs to unemployed youth in cities such as Accra (Friederici *et al.* 2020). In this economic and political setting, digital entrepreneurship emerged as a seemingly attractive new opportunity for young Ghanaians to remain or become part of the middle classes (Avle 2014; Pijnaker and Spronk 2017).

These economic and political circumstances gave rise to rich scholarly debates on the development of the middle classes (e.g. Coe and Pauli 2020; Daniel *et al.* 2023; Kroeker *et al.* 2018; Melber 2016; Mercer and Lemanski 2020) and the rise of digital entrepreneurship in Africa (Friederici *et al.* 2020; Ndemo and Weiss 2017). The debate on the African middle classes criticized income-based definitions of middle-class status as a way to recast both the marginalized poor and the rich into a class position positively linked to moderation, democracy and economic empowerment (Darbon 2018: 48; Melber 2022: 206–7; Mercer and Lemanski 2020: 431). To root the theoretical understanding of the middle classes in the lived experiences of Africans, it proposed to build on Weberian approaches to social inequality as produced through not necessarily overlapping economic positions, social status and political action (Gane 2005), and on Bourdieu-inspired approaches to class as produced through actors' lifestyles, consumption patterns and distinction from those 'above' and 'below' (Bourdieu 1984; De Coninck 2018; Lentz 2015; Mercer 2020; Spronk 2014). Scholars such as Lentz (2015; 2020), Spronk (2018; 2020), Mercer and Lemanski (2020) and Heiman *et al.* (2012) have added that the African middle classes should be considered as a classification-in-the-making and aspirational category: an insecure status that becomes desirable for people to strive towards in different ways, based on opportunities and constraints available in different periods and settings. Through this theoretical lens, scholarship has shown that since the late nineteenth century obtaining or maintaining middle-class status in Africa was made possible and constrained by changing educational, religious and professional opportunities, kinship relations, religious affiliation, gender, rural–urban relationships, ethnicity, transnational mobility and political action (Coe and Pauli 2020; Daniel *et al.* 2023; Kroeker *et al.* 2018; Southall 2017). Yet, relatively little attention has been paid to the unmaking of middle-class status or downwardly mobile trajectories (Coe and Pauli 2020: 11). While research has explored the role of governments, NGOs

and infrastructure in the emergence of digital start-up industries across Africa, it has only hinted at kinship as a factor in how Africans navigate digital start-up success and failure (Bramann 2017: 242, 252; Friederici *et al.* 2020: 167–8). Digital entrepreneurship scholars such as Weiss have called for research that investigates ‘what happens to entrepreneurs in Africa who fail’ (2017: 477).

In this article, I contribute to answering this question by exploring downward social mobility through the lens of kinship. Young Ghanaian digital entrepreneurs like Osei could usually negotiate or were given what I call a window of opportunity by their family: a period in which they could invest most of their resources into establishing a professional career and family (spouse and children), and there was little expectation for them to provide opportunities to achieve middle-class status to their siblings. When entrepreneurs did not manage to seize this opportunity to establish themselves through digital entrepreneurship as kin closed this window, some entrepreneurs held on to the promise of eventual start-up success. It was then that a lack of accumulation and redistribution of resources could result in entrepreneurs becoming distanced from their families, while middle-class marriage with age mates became out of reach. I argue that in those instances of being shut out of collective efforts to achieve or maintain middle-class lifestyles through obligation and care, downward mobility occurred in the form of de-kinning (Abram and Lien 2023).

To further understand these processes, I discuss the biographical accounts of four unmarried Ghanaian digital entrepreneurs in their twenties and thirties belonging to the Akan⁴ ethno-linguistic group. These entrepreneurs were part of a longitudinal ethnographic study researching how forty Ghanaian digital entrepreneurs’ and ten tech hub and incubator managers’ enactment of their aspirations resulted in a decline, maintenance or improvement of their socio-economic status. In 2014–15, I engaged in participant observation of the entrepreneurs’ everyday lives and conducted semi-structured interviews, in which I assessed the entrepreneurs’ past achievements, family background and current aspirations. In 2018–19, they were asked to reflect on the aspirations they voiced in 2014–15 and on any developments during the 2014–18 period. In these instances, entrepreneurs rarely recounted their experiences in terms of ‘becoming middle class’; instead, they spoke of the pressures from parents and siblings to acquire more economic resources and status for future generations of the family than past generations had enjoyed, and of the economic expectations of potential marriage partners. In this article, I consider digital entrepreneurs as those who work on their own digital start-ups: young businesses that aim to deliver digital products or services such as websites and mobile applications. Within this broad category, all entrepreneurs featured in this article attempted to build platforms: businesses that aim to generate value by providing (digital) infrastructure that reshapes and facilitates interactions between two or more different user groups, ideally in a disciplined, closed-loop system (Woodcock and Graham 2020; Srnicek 2016). All entrepreneurs in this article had family members who financially supported their tertiary education and they had all received post-tertiary training and resources from tech hubs and incubators. Due to the sensitivity of start-up failure and the semi-public and recognizable figures these entrepreneurs had become when their once promising start-ups were celebrated in the media and at tech

⁴ The Akan are the largest ethno-linguistic group in Ghana.

events, all entrepreneurs have been anonymized. I have used pseudonyms. Also, personal details, such as age, (former) profession and family composition, as well as business details, such as the exact nature or sector of the start-ups, have been omitted or slightly altered when not directly relevant to the analysis.

Conceptualizing the role of kin and aspiration in downward social mobility

In the debate on the African middle classes, only a few studies on downward social mobility exist. Some have explored how the middle classes collectively became downwardly mobile in certain historical periods (Budniok and Noll 2018; Sarre 2018; Southall 2020). Others have investigated how Africans tried to avoid or limit downward social mobility, for instance by creating physical distance from those they considered less respectable (Bolt 2010) or by strategically investing in insurance, loans and/or relationships with rural kin (Kroeker 2018; 2020). Studies that explore the relationship between the loss or absence of redistributable income, kinship expectations and individual aspirations have mainly been conducted in the global North and Asia (Yang 2017).

In her research, Newman (1999) took the sudden loss of redistributable income (in the form of job losses among American men and divorce for American women) as the starting point for downwardly mobile journeys. She analysed that similar experiences of a loss of income could result in a broad variety of negative effects on kinship relationships, as individuals had to navigate different sets of professional and gendered expectations about social mobility held by their family and friends. Newman added that the ways in which individuals navigated these socio-economic challenges were influenced by how they positioned themselves in relation to the class trajectories of their parents and the class aspirations they had for their children.

More recent scholarship on the USA has moved away from considering the sudden loss of income as the start of downwardly mobile journeys towards a focus on the role of aspirations in gradual decline. Streib (2020) found that, among the American upper middle-class children who participated in the National Study of Youth and Religion, holding onto aspirations that celebrated lower levels of monetary resources and status than their parents into adulthood formed an important factor in them slowly declining in socio-economic status. Berlant (2011) has shown that what she coined cruel optimism could play a role in Americans' gradual downward journey. She argued that some ideas about the good life could be so appealing that, even though they were not realistically achievable for individuals within a certain socio-economic setting, they cruelly prevented them from course correcting and pursuing paths that were more likely to let them flourish. When these ideas were passed on from parents to children, they could motivate gradual decline across several generations of the same family. What these three studies on the USA have in common is that they predominantly focused on the (failed) production of the 'nuclear family'. This imaginary about family life does not capture the lived experience of the role of kin in class making in African settings (Coe 2013; Kroeker 2018; Lentz 2015: 3).

To further conceptualize the role of family in downward social mobility in Africa, I turn to two developments in the anthropology of kinship. In the mid-twentieth century, Africanist anthropologists predominantly engaged in the ahistorical study of the rules of lineage systems (descent) and marriage (alliance) (Evans-Pritchard 1940; 1951),

considering them the central organizing features of African societies. In the past decades, the anthropology of kinship has moved away from this focus on rules to analysing the processes and practices of (un)making kinship in everyday life (Carsten 2004; Franklin and McKinnon 2001). Howell (2006) developed kinning as an analytical term to conceptualize the process of making persons into kin through activities such as working towards a shared future for the family or redistributing and transferring material and economic goods from one person or group to another. Recently, Abram and Lien (2023) have drawn attention to how kinning, as a process that is always selective and involves negotiation between ideals, norms and pragmatics, also carries within it the potential for de-kinning and un-kinning. De-kinning conceptualizes the process of failed (re)appropriation and disruption of kinship relationships, which occurs when kinship expectations are not met to such a degree that people feel resentment towards their kin because they are not getting what they feel they are owed, or because people actively refuse to meet those expectations. This process is negotiated, needs the parties involved to have somewhat shared ideas about what constitutes kinship relationships, and results in relationships that are at the same time held together and apart. The opposite of kinning is not de-kinning but un-kinning: the indifference that comes with not recognizing kin relationships as relevant at all.

Anthropologists of kinship have also moved away from a focus on parenthood and marriage towards considering siblingship as equally important (Thelen *et al.* 2013: 2; Abram and Lien 2023: 5). Thelen *et al.* (2013) have argued that sibling relationships should be considered as being both similar or equal (e.g. shared biological parents) and different, because differences in aspects such as age, birth order, health, gender and personality matter in the relationships siblings develop with each other and with their other kin, and in the expectations they need to navigate. Thelen *et al.* conceptualize sibling relationships as constantly (re-)made throughout people's life courses through shared parentage, shared experience and/or shared exchange and care. Common descent or growing up together does not mean that siblings will develop similar relationships with their parents or with each other. For instance, sisters might be assigned different roles to those of brothers; elder or wealthier siblings might be expected to provide more support to younger or poorer siblings. Some siblings might receive more investment from kin than other siblings, for instance in terms of investment in their education, and they might secure work and marriage partners of different socio-economic status, resulting in class differences among siblings. These differences among siblings can enable them to develop bonds of support and care for one another, especially in adult life, but can also lead to envy, rivalry and resentment about unmet expectations of reciprocity for the investment provided, as well as 'losing' one's sibling (de-kinning).

Just like Newman (1999), I consider the inability of young Ghanaians to accumulate and redistribute resources and how they relate to the class trajectories of their kin as important aspects of downward social mobility. However, unlike American men and women in the 1980s, Ghanaian digital entrepreneurs did not experience a sudden loss of income. Building on Streib (2020) and Berlant (2011), I consider their inability to meet expectations to accumulate and redistribute resources as a slow decline, which entrepreneurs were not incentivized to course correct as long as they kept believing in the eventual success of serial entrepreneurship. I conceptualize Ghanaian entrepreneurs' slow decline as (eventually) being experienced through processes

of de-kinning; that is, kin distancing themselves from entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs distancing themselves from kin to cope with the inability of the entrepreneur to meet family expectations to collectively work towards achieving middle-class aspirations. How and when this de-kinning was experienced were not the same for each entrepreneur; their experience depended on birth order, gender, and how the entrepreneur perceived the opportunities to become or remain middle-class that their family members had already pursued and to which they aspired. Building on Thelen *et al.* (2013), I argue that analysing sibling (descent) and marriage (alliance) relationships equally is important in order to capture the lived experience of digital entrepreneurs with downward social mobility. In their daily lives, entrepreneurs faced a double burden of kinship expectations: they had to cope with the stress of simultaneously not meeting expectations from siblings and from (potential) marriage partners, as having obligations to both was part of becoming an Akan adult. In the following section, I discuss how Akan families' shifting opportunities to enter the middle classes in modern Ghana incentivized young Akan adults to consider digital (serial) entrepreneurship as a new and attractive way to achieve middle-class status.

Changing opportunities to become middle class

Spronk (2020) has shown that in Ghana's modern history three conditions of possibility were key to the pursuit of middle-class status: access to education, social networks and financial resources. To understand the eventual appeal of digital entrepreneurship, I add to this list 'access to new technologies'. What these conditions meant in everyday life changed with historical developments in Ghana. Due to colonization, members of ethno-linguistic groups who had predominantly resided in southern parts of Ghana, such as the Akan, typically got access to these possibilities much sooner than people in the north (Behrends and Lentz 2012; Lentz and Noll 2021).

During the interwar years, the British Colonial Office expanded primary and secondary education in mainly the southern parts of the Gold Coast, allowing for a small middle class of educated Gold Coast inhabitants to emerge; these held lower- to middle-level professional roles such as clerks, teachers or evangelists (Budniok and Noll 2018: 115; Gocking 1994). After World War Two, the Colonial Office, and from 1957 President Nkrumah's administration ruling over independent Ghana, further expanded primary, secondary and tertiary education. Nkrumah's administration invested in teacher training colleges to 'Africanize' the civil service (Ahlman 2017; Nugent 1995; Whitehead 2005). Due to these developments, many more people had the opportunity to join the middle classes in roles such as civil servants. From the interwar period to Ghana's independence, the middle classes bought the newest technologies from Europe and the USA to mark their status, such as radiograms, gramophones and typewriters (Budniok and Noll 2018: 119–20; Kilson 1958: 376).

From the late 1960s to the 1980s, Ghanaians' ability to remain or become members of the middle classes was affected by severe national economic and political crises. Due to extreme inflation, real income from wages rapidly shrank and many had to supplement their wages with small-scale farming and/or informal entrepreneurial activities. The middle classes and elites collectively became downwardly mobile (Budniok and Noll 2018: 123–5; Nugent 1995). In the late 1970s, public sentiment grew suspicious of all forms of accumulation and displays of status, such as the use of the

newest technologies, believing that some Ghanaians used their preferential access to imported goods to make massive profits at the expense of hungry compatriots. When Jerry Rawlings seized power through a coup in 1979, his armed forces assaulted and murdered alleged profiteers (Clark 1994: 372; Nugent 2019: 454–61). Elite professional and business families, many of them Akan, feared for their safety and went into exile (Lentz and Noll 2021: 462). In 1983, Ghana's crisis had become so deep that Rawlings agreed to implement structural adjustment programmes in exchange for debt relief. Most Ghanaians were negatively affected by these plans and kept struggling to survive throughout the 1980s (Gary 1996).

The 1990s was a period of democratization and further economic liberalization in Ghana. Diaspora Africans were encouraged by the Ghanaian government to 'come home and invest' (Schramm 2009: 9). In 1995, Ghana obtained internet connectivity. These developments encouraged some of the formerly exiled Akan elites to return to the country. The return of this group was important for the development of the Ghanaian digital start-up industry, as they established some of the first digital enterprises in the country and private tertiary education institutions focused on digital and entrepreneurial skills. In the late 2000s, these developments merged with the interests of the international business and development community in Africa, as they came to perceive the continent as a 'new frontier' of middle-class consumerism and digital expansion (Avle 2014; Zachary 2004). The first tech hubs and incubators were established in Accra by American, European and Ghanaian businesspeople, supported by foreign development institutions and/or corporations. Reflecting the shift from a focus on the poor to the middle classes in development policies (Melber 2022: 205; Southall 2017: 212), tech hubs and incubators selected only Ghanaian⁵ university graduates for their programmes. They offered them access to education and resources that appealed to older middle-class sensibilities: American and European-style training, the newest technologies, access to transnational social networks, usually in the form of glamorous tech events and/or media attention, and financial resources, usually in the form of early-stage investment.

Two of the downwardly mobile digital entrepreneurs discussed in this article came from Akan families who had seized changing opportunities to become part of the upper middle classes in the early twentieth century. Francesca Frimpong, in her late twenties when I met her in 2014, had parents who for most of their lives had worked as a senior civil servant and an engineer for an international corporation. Yawu Prempeh, in his early thirties when I met him in 2014, had a father who was a university professor and a mother who was a secondary school teacher. In the late colonial and early independence period, the grandparents of these digital entrepreneurs had been teachers, pastors or senior civil servants. Frimpong and Prempeh mentioned that their eldest male siblings had achieved what they described as 'more than middle-class status' in professions such as doctor or lawyer and that all of their siblings had obtained university education and had pursued professional careers in Ghana's civil service or private sector. Both of their parents had at some point combined wage labour with forms of entrepreneurship. Prempeh mentioned that his parents had resorted to small-scale farming in the 1970s and 1980s, while Frimpong's parents had started farming and real-estate businesses as they entered their fifties.

⁵ In later years, this was expanded to other African nationalities.

The two other digital entrepreneurs discussed in this article, Kwabena Osei and Joe Koranteng, were the oldest sons of Akan parents who had pursued lower middle-class aspirations. When I met them in 2014, Osei was in his late twenties and Koranteng in his mid-twenties. Both had a parent who had had some secondary education and/or teacher training and had held a job as a lower civil servant and/or teacher for at least part of their life. Both also had one or more parents who attempted to achieve upward social mobility as traders. Hart (1973: 64–9) has shown that, during Ghana's period of high inflation, trading could earn uneducated people or those who had received limited formal education a more substantial living than wage labour. While wage labourers' salaries did not keep up with inflation, traders could offset inflation by adjusting the prices of traded goods. Although trading did not come with the status of education or a professional role, it did provide the financial resources to set parents and their children up for upward social mobility. The parents of entrepreneurs such as Osei and Koranteng envisioned that their children could maintain or improve their socio-economic position for themselves and their family if they were provided with the opportunity to obtain the middle-class education, prestige and social capital they could not access themselves. Both Osei and Koranteng belonged to the first generation to receive support from their families to acquire a university degree.

Young Akan with parents who had strived to maintain upper middle-class lifestyles explained that their decision to pursue digital entrepreneurship was partially motivated by their assessment of their parents' civil service careers. Prempeh said: 'It took my parents thirty years to buy a house and car for their pension, after having worked for the government their whole lives. I felt this career path was not worth it.' What also influenced their decision was that, during the period of structural adjustment, African governments came to be associated with 'corruption' and a lack of 'good governance', dampening the enthusiasm of Ghanaian youth for government jobs (Pierre 2020). Entrepreneurs with parents who had entered the lower middle classes often recalled their parents' positive experiences with trading as a reason to pursue digital entrepreneurship. Additionally, the experience of young Ghanaians in the 2000s and 2010s, unlike in the previous era, was that tertiary education no longer provided a ticket into the middle classes. In this period, the number of professional roles in Ghana did not grow as rapidly as the number of students enrolling in university education, leading to a large number of graduates competing for a few professional roles (Spronk 2020: 475). In this context, the post-university education and resources tech hubs and incubators offered became an attractive way for young educated Ghanaians to distinguish themselves from other graduates, acquire a source of income for themselves (and others), and increase their chances of creating a middle-class lifestyle.

The staff of tech hubs and incubators introduced young Ghanaians to serial entrepreneurship: the idea that long periods of mistakes, tinkering alone, economic hardship and investing most of one's time, effort and resources in a start-up, or in a series of one start-up after another, would allow one to learn lessons that would eventually result in start-up success. Digital entrepreneurs were not encouraged to consider various forms of risk mitigation, such as changing to a different career after one or a number of start-up shutdowns. Among young digital entrepreneurs, serial entrepreneurship became an influential narrative, with the capacity to shape how they perceived the role of the individual, (waged) work, social status and resource

accumulation and redistribution in the production of middle-class status. For instance, in 2014, Frimpong mentioned that one reason she chose to pursue a career as a digital entrepreneur was because she believed: 'Even when I don't obtain success [with my start-up], I will have skills and experience ... I will not lose.' Serial entrepreneurship made her perceive the 'loss' that might come with start-up failure as a win in terms of valuable skills and experience. When I interviewed her again in 2018, Frimpong shared that she and her co-founders had decided to close down their start-up the year before, after not managing to secure more investment and failing to make a profit. She mentioned that, at the time, she felt immense pressure to remain a digital entrepreneur: 'Getting a stable job was considered giving up. It was looked down upon by many entrepreneurs.' In 2018, for Frimpong, serial entrepreneurship translated into pressure to start a new start-up. I interpret these reflections as indications that Ghanaian digital entrepreneurs participated in a collective effort to project an image of digital start-up careers as leading to profit and social status. Moving from entrepreneurship to pursuing older paths into the middle classes, such as waged labour, thus became not just a matter of individual choice; it also came with the pressure of breaking with a collective endeavour to establish a new kind of middle-class lifestyle. In the next section, I discuss how young entrepreneurs had to combine serial entrepreneurship aspirations with (not) meeting the expectations of Akan families in their quest to become middle class.

Window of opportunity

In their study of how the members of over 200 families in modern Ghana sought to improve or secure their class position, Lentz and Noll (2021; Noll 2016) have argued that, typically, Akan family members had two sets of obligations they needed to navigate. First, they had obligations of reproduction and reciprocity to the wider extended matrilineage (the *abusua*). They were expected to provide support in times of need and opportunities to kin to help them acquire middle-class lifestyles. In my study, Ghanaians thought of these obligations in terms of 'providing investment', for instance in the form of parents and uncles funding a child's education, and getting a 'return on investment', for instance in the form of an educated child using the salary from a professional role to help fund the education of their siblings and cousins. These obligations were not set in stone: they changed during a person's lifetime based on aspects such as age, gender, birth order, health, economic circumstances and historical developments. Akan family members were also expected to produce biological offspring, as this would help with the reproduction of the family support system. A childless individual would have to rely on other family members in old age or ill health. A lengthy bachelorhood or an inability to produce offspring could thus lead to tensions about unmet expectations about care between kin (Ampim *et al.* 2020; Adomako Ampofo *et al.* 2009; Miescher 2005). Second, in Akan families that had managed to secure middle-class status for several generations, typically young adults were expected to enter into a monogamous Christian marriage before having children (Lentz and Noll 2021: 467). This kind of marriage was introduced to the Gold Coast by missionaries through the 1884 Marriage Ordinance. Since then, it has been used by educated Ghanaians to mark middle-class to elite status (Miescher 2005; Oppong 1980;

Pauli 2018). All entrepreneurs discussed in this article had parents – and in the case of Prempeh and Frimpong also grandparents – who had had Christian marriages.

Members of Akan families seeking to obtain middle-class lifestyles could choose to limit the obligations to extended kin. For instance, Spronk (2020: 479) has described that some couples chose to ‘disappoint’ their relatives and prioritized investing their resources into education and opportunities that they imagined would help themselves and their children become members of the middle classes. Noll (2016) has added that some wealthier Akan family members drew boundaries around the support poorer extended kin could expect, in the form of formally established family associations. What I add to these already known strategies is that many young adult Akan were offered and/or negotiated what I call a window of opportunity, in which they contributed to the production of middle-class status for the family by investing most of their resources in themselves and establishing their own career and family (spouse and children). During this period, the family expected less redistribution from the young individual. Middle-class sensibilities about the value of pursuing one’s ambitions and finding a romantic partner motivated families to grant this window, or they were invoked by young adults when they tried to convince their kin to give them space. Granting a young individual this space to establish themselves could also be perceived by kin as being in their interest, as it was imagined it would eventually lead to access to new networks, income and care.

This window of opportunity meant that, in theory, young middle-class Akan had some time to experiment with the investment of most of their resources in themselves and their digital start-ups, encouraged by serial entrepreneurship, as a means to establish middle-class careers and families. Some entrepreneurs in my larger study indeed succeeded in this goal. Younger siblings or women tended to have access to relatively large windows of opportunity, as they faced less expectation to redistribute income than older or male siblings. Some Akan young adults did not have a window of opportunity at all, as some parents forbade their (usually eldest male) child from pursuing entrepreneurship or anything but the trajectory into the middle classes laid out for them (usually by becoming a teacher, doctor or lawyer). In other words, windows of opportunity depended on aspects such as the young adult’s gender, birth order, investment received and the family’s openness towards trying new paths into the middle classes. However, for all entrepreneurs this window of opportunity closed at some point. In the sections below, I analyse how digital entrepreneurs’ downward mobility manifested through the de-kinning that occurred when they continued the unsuccessful pursuit of serial entrepreneurship, as kin and (potential) spouses tried to close the window of opportunity out of concern for the individuals’ ability to establish a middle-class adult life.

Navigating sibling expectations

This article started with Osei, the first-born son to parents who expected him to ‘return the investment’ they had made into his tertiary education, in the form of financial contributions to his siblings’ education, immediately after his graduation. For him, the window of opportunity to invest his resources in himself and his start-up without failing to meet the expectations of his parents and siblings was small. Yet, according to Osei, in practice it was only after three years of digital entrepreneurship

that his family attached consequences to his lack of contribution to his siblings' education; they did this by excluding him from the family and their obligations to provide care and opportunity in times of hardship, such as a start-up shutdown. To cope with the lack of family support, Osei intended to create more spatial and moral distance from his kin, by pursuing the development of a new start-up abroad. To further conceptualize how entrepreneurs experienced de-kinning from siblings on their downwardly mobile journeys, I compare Osei's experience to Prempeh's.

As the youngest of eight siblings born to parents who had achieved upper middle-class lifestyles, Yawu Prempeh had been granted a longer timeframe to establish himself as a digital entrepreneur than Osei. When Prempeh and I spoke in 2014, he explained that in principle his siblings did not believe in entrepreneurship and succeeding after multiple failures as a new way to obtain middle-class status. Holding on to older ideas about upward social mobility, they were convinced that in Ghana there was only one chance, or one path into the middle classes, and this path included waged work:

None of my siblings supports my career [as a digital entrepreneur] . . . because they want me to do well. In Ghana, people think you only get one opportunity: you go to primary school, secondary school, university, do national service, . . . get a good job and you work your way up, buy a car, buy a house and then you marry. When you become an entrepreneur, your family can be worried that you throw that one chance away.

Yet, in practice, for the past five years Prempeh's siblings had supported his multiple digital start-ups through monetary contributions and housing. It was only just before Prempeh and I met in 2014 that they had staged what Prempeh called their first intervention. One day he had come home to find all his siblings waiting for him, intending to convince him to leave his entrepreneurial dreams behind and to start a corporate job in finance they could secure for him. I interpret this event as an attempt by Prempeh's siblings to care for him, by warning him to change course and offering him an opportunity they imagined would help him build a middle-class adult life and allow him to remain included in the collective project of their family to maintain middle-class lifestyles and a good reputation.

Prempeh shared that he declined his siblings' advice and support, as he believed that sometimes it just took entrepreneurs longer to succeed and that he would eventually build a successful start-up. He moved out of the family's home in Sekondi-Takoradi and to Accra, to work on the digital start-up of a friend, so he could use his wages instead of sibling support to provide for himself and develop a new start-up. While Prempeh and Osei had different windows of opportunity due to their birth order and class background, both had families who attempted to limit their digital entrepreneurship out of concern for their and their siblings' well-being, social mobility and social standing.

In 2015, Prempeh reflected on five years of sibling support as a 'disadvantage':

I struggled, but never really as much as people who try to build something up from the bottom. Because of this I could afford to not see mistakes for a long time and could postpone making choices and did not have to carry

consequences. Such a safety net can be a disadvantage when developing yourself and your business.

Framing privilege as disadvantage could easily be dismissed as naiveté or arrogance. However, I consider this reflection an indication of how notions about serial entrepreneurship can influence young adults' perspectives on the role of siblings in achieving middle-class aspirations. From the perspective that start-up failure was an entrepreneur's opportunity to learn lessons for eventual future start-up success, support from family could be perceived as a hindrance to learning these lessons. Notions about serial entrepreneurship thus initially tempted digital entrepreneurs such as Osei and Prempeh into considering steps in the de-kinning process, such as moving away from kin or refusing to heed warnings, as positive steps towards eventual success. The promise of serial entrepreneurship could thus make de-kinning an initially alluring part of gradual socio-economic decline.

When I spoke to Prempeh again in 2018, he shared that in his pursuit of serial entrepreneurship, over the past few years he had not dared to ask for his family's and friends' support, despite facing economic hardship:

Last year I had a really difficult time. I could not get consultancy work [short-term assignments] or any other source of income, so I had to touch my savings. Eventually, I struggled to get food. I felt I could not ask my friends or family for help any more. It was very difficult and lonely.

Prempeh added that he did not ask his friends and family for help because of two reasons. First, he felt that he had reached the limits of what he could ask for in terms of family investment without meeting the wishes of his siblings to change careers. Second, he perceived the lifestyles of his friends and family as much more established than his (with well-paying jobs or successful start-ups, cars, spouses, children and houses) and he believed that they would not be able to emotionally relate to his hardship. He shared that it was at this point that he experienced his inability to establish a profitable start-up as truly, deeply isolating. It was only then that he felt ready to accept that his serial entrepreneurship had not and would likely never set him up for start-up success, but would make it increasingly difficult for him to remain included in the lives of his family and friends. It was only then that he wanted to pursue a more conventional middle-class career.

However, he found out that this was difficult for him. He blamed his serial entrepreneurship:

When I applied for jobs like project manager, I felt recruiters did not understand what I had done or the progress in responsibilities I had had going from start-up to start-up. I feel that I can't get out of entrepreneurship.

Other male digital entrepreneurs in my study who became entrepreneurs as university graduates and spent more than three to five years in this career trajectory similarly struggled to leave the digital start-up industry. Osei's situation reminds us that, in these cases, family no longer being willing to help the serial entrepreneur find a job could also play a role. These situations illustrate that, for young Akan digital

entrepreneurs with (repeatedly) unprofitable start-ups, engaging in de-kinning could eventually exacerbate their downward mobility. The pursuit of serial entrepreneurship could not only disrupt an individual's ability to seize what Prempeh's siblings framed as the 'one opportunity' to join the middle classes through waged work, but also trap them in pursuing the allure and promise of start-up success, as kin were perceived as inaccessible or were unwilling to help them find a way out. In the next section, I examine how serial entrepreneurship affected young Akans' prospects in marriage.

Missed marriage opportunities

When Francesca Frimpong established her digital start-up in 2014, she had a head start. In the same year, she secured a first round of investment from a family friend. In 2015 she obtained a second round of US\$100,000 from an American early-stage investor. Despite these initial achievements, in 2017 she and her team decided to shut down the company, as they had been unable to secure further investment or make enough profit to build a self-sustaining business. When we reflected on this decision in 2018, Frimpong disclosed that the serial entrepreneurship notion she had held in 2014 – that in the event of start-up failure 'she would not lose' – had not fully held up. Since she had had a corporate career before she became a digital entrepreneur, Frimpong had not struggled to find a new corporate role after closing her start-up. However, in her early thirties, she had not yet managed to marry or become a mother. Only a few weeks before our conversation she had broken up with her digital entrepreneur boyfriend. That Frimpong had been dating a male digital entrepreneur was not unusual. Most female entrepreneurs in my larger study explained that the digital entrepreneur lifestyle of very long work hours promoted by serial entrepreneurship did not allow them to engage in home-making activities (such as cooking for a boyfriend) to the degree that they felt Ghanaian men typically expected (Ampim *et al.* 2020: 25). Therefore, female digital entrepreneurs considered their dating pool limited to fellow entrepreneurs or other men sympathetic to their career focus. Frimpong explained that she had broken off her relationship because her boyfriend had proved to be 'untrustworthy' in the path towards marriage: he had not been able to provide for her as well or as consistently as she expected in order to maintain an upper middle-class lifestyle. Frimpong added that she experienced her struggle to achieve an upper middle-class Christian marriage as a widening gap between herself and her siblings:

My older brothers have already married; my sibling just after me will likely be getting married soon. I am afraid of being skipped.

At the same time, male digital entrepreneurs with unprofitable start-ups in my study, such as Prempeh and Koranteng, reported that they struggled to date their age mates as they were 'too demanding': they perceived them as wanting to get married sooner than these entrepreneurs felt financially ready and as wanting them to provide more than they were able to offer. With these comments, male digital entrepreneurs referred to the Akan custom of the husband paying bride price to the bride's family and the practice of young men providing for their girlfriend by paying for her food

and other expenses, such as travel costs or haircare (Miescher 2005: 125). After the failure of their first start-ups, men like Prempeh and Koranteng opted to date middle-class women much younger than them, usually recent university graduates in their early twenties. They perceived these women as more compatible with them, as they did not want to get married yet, had lower expectations about what their boyfriends could or should provide, and were not concerned about their boyfriends' low or unstable income.

The perspectives of male and female entrepreneurs on marriage indicate that serial entrepreneurship could result in a limited capacity to marry an age mate with the desired class position. As female (serial) entrepreneurs did not adhere to home-making expectations, they believed that they were perceived as not suitable to make into kin through marriage by men with (upper) middle-class aspirations. They considered their options limited to unstable entrepreneurial men who did not meet their expectations of (upper) middle-class providers. At the same time, unsuccessful serial entrepreneur men perceived themselves as unable to attract age mates with middle-class aspirations who accepted their limited ability to provide. The blame ('untrustworthy', 'too demanding') digital entrepreneurs assigned to age mates with similar aspirations for the reproduction of middle-class lifestyles can be analysed as emotional distancing work from the other gender, which entrepreneurs engaged in to cope with their inability to meet the expectations for middle-class Akan marriage. Frimpong's concerns about 'falling behind her siblings' illustrate that entrepreneurs' distance from desirable marriage partners could ripple into worries about becoming (further) de-kinning, in the form of not being able to affirm the family's status through an (upper) middle-class wedding ceremony or by contributing to the collective production of care and middle-class opportunity through reproduction.

Reassessing the promise of digital start-ups in Africa

In this article, I have conceptualized downward social mobility in Ghana as the de-kinning processes that occur when family members fail to reach mutual understandings about how to collectively pursue middle-class status. Young Ghanaians who, inspired by serial entrepreneurship, in their first years after graduation from university opted to invest their resources in a start-up did not purposefully set themselves up for downwardly mobile trajectories. Rather, they imagined that this investment would eventually pay off in the form of (generating) income, profit and status that would allow them to establish a middle-class lifestyle. Young adults in Akan families were granted or could negotiate a window of opportunity, which they could use to focus on establishing their own careers and families. During this period, young adults could experiment with a start-up and were not expected to meet family obligations to 'return investment'. It was when families tried to close entrepreneurs' window of opportunity out of concern for their ability to create a middle-class lifestyle for themselves and/or their siblings through (repeated) start-up failure instead of waged work that downward mobility in the form of de-kinning could occur. As young digital entrepreneurs with unprofitable start-ups struggled to enter into middle-class marriages and/or meet obligations to kin, they distanced themselves or were distanced by kin from the collective family effort to provide care and opportunities to achieve middle-class aspirations.

I consider this article an invitation to conduct more research on middle-class unmaking in Africa and on the resources being invested into stimulating entrepreneurship on the continent, claiming that entrepreneurship will solve Africa's youth unemployment problem. Serial entrepreneurship's promise of eventual start-up success did not incentivize young adults to quit entrepreneurship and pursue older avenues into the middle classes, such as a salaried job. It gave them the intellectual tools to reframe no longer having support from kin as a hardship that would help them learn the lessons needed to eventually build a profitable start-up. When young adult Akan were finally ready to move from entrepreneurship into waged employment, they faced the pressure of fellow digital entrepreneurs looking down on this old path into the middle classes, as they engaged in collective efforts to project an image of digital start-up careers being a new way to establish a middle-class lifestyle. At the same time, entrepreneurs often felt they could no longer rely on friends or family to help them get a job, while they perceived recruiters as not understanding their start-up experience. In these cases, processes of de-kinning could exacerbate entrepreneurs' downward mobility, as such processes contributed to trapping them in the chase for a dream they realized was unlikely to be obtainable. Digital entrepreneurship then changed from a way to stave off downward mobility caused by inflation or a lack of jobs into something that trapped once well-off Ghanaians in positions they experienced as precarious, isolating and shameful. Their fate shows the need for further research on the inequalities and insecurities that the economic and political investment in 'development' through digital entrepreneurship in Africa produces.

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