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**Autor:** Birzle, Maike / Ludwig, Susann

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# CONSTRUCTING THE FUTURE

Hope and «la chance» amongst university graduates in Ouagadougou,  
Burkina Faso and Bamako, Mali

**Text:** Maike Birzle, Susann Ludwig

**Keywords:** *Uncertainty; Future; University graduates; Bamako; Ouagadougou*

## University graduates in times of uncertainty

The end of university studies always coincides with decisions and uncertainties about what is going to happen next. Having just experienced this ourselves, we had the chance to participate in the project «*Construire son Avenir* – self-concepts and life course construction among university graduates in Mali and Burkina Faso»<sup>1</sup> located at the Centre for African Studies in Basel. This project aims to describe the life world experiences of young university graduates who are affected by uncertainty, and to find out how individuals act in order to be able to act (Macamo 2008). Both anthropology PhD-projects described here are situated within this framework. Maike Birzle is following Burkinabé graduates and their notion of hope, while Susann Ludwig immersed herself in the Malian context and traces «*la chance*» amongst young academics. The objective of both studies is to contribute to the broader field of risk and uncertainty studies as well as to research in social sciences on time, future and life-courses.

With our own worries, anticipations, plans, hopes and wishes connected to that new period of life still on our minds, we went for a first phase of field research in the summer 2013 and experienced the harsh realities newly-graduated Burkinabé and Malians face when planning their future. As the labor mar-

ket situation is quite grim, it is difficult for them to orient themselves towards their future in the sense of making plans and realizing them. Since the structural adjustment programs that were implemented during the 1980s, Burkina Faso and Mali have experienced a sudden socio-economic change. Employment in the public sector is no longer automatically guaranteed to academics; their opportunities have been severely reduced as a result of the reforms, which strictly cut recruitment and froze wages (Calvès et al. 2004). As a consequence of the deteriorating situation of young graduates in Burkina Faso and Mali, the former image of academics as the society's educational elite has turned into today's image of university graduates as potential troublemakers and future unemployed masses. Moreover, the conditions of university studies in general have worsened since scholarships and student residences are rare and the quality of teaching is declining while the number of students is constantly increasing. In 2008/09, there were 41 000 university students enrolled at the University of Ouagadougou and 70 000 at the Universities of Bamako (Kobiané et al. 2010; Universités de Bamako 2014). Each year, about 10 000 students graduate – all of them expect to find well-paid jobs and consider university diplomas as multipliers of opportunities in the job market. Reality looks different, though: the public sectors are saturated and both countries' economies are predominantly based on agriculture. Thus, the unemployment rate among young university graduates in Burkina Faso and in Mali reaches about seventy

<sup>1</sup> For further information: <https://zasb.unibas.ch/de/forschung/research-projects/construire-son-avenir-selbstverstaendnis-und-laufbahnpraktiken-von-jungdiplomierten-in-burkina-faso-und-mali/>

percent (APEJ 2011). This implies that most young academics encounter difficulties finding a job that corresponds to their qualification or entering the labor market in general, and this often leads to challenges in planning the future.

The preliminary results presented in this article are based on a total of seven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Ouagadougou (Maike Birzle) as well as in Bamako (Susann Ludwig). During the first phase in the summer of 2013, thirty biographical interviews with twenty male and ten female former university students from different areas of study were conducted. All of them graduated between 2010 and 2013. They were selected in accordance with the overall distribution of students at the various faculties of the Universities of Ouagadougou and Bamako. In 2014, contacts with informants were resumed and intensified, which allowed us to interview them once again on the basis of the first interviews. The data from those interviews are substantiated by expert interviews and participant observation including everyday conversations. Our research will be completed with another five months of fieldwork, including follow up interviews in 2015. This longitudinal study allows us to accompany young academics for a period of three years after their graduation. It enables us to understand the social context of our informants, to follow their present actions, trace their pathways into the future and, thereby, to understand how they work on the construction of their futures.

### Hope as a method of orienting towards the future<sup>2</sup>

The informants in Burkina Faso are used to permanently having to cope with uncertainty regarding their present and future. This does not, however, coincide with a state of resignation or pessimism, as an amelioration of their situation might always be possible. When analyzing the way individuals locate and orient themselves in a social field in constant motion, the concept of social navigation has proven to be a helpful tool for understanding the way they are influenced by and adapt to their constantly changing environment when working on their trajectories. Social navigation thus is tied to time as well as to motion through social present and social imaginaries:

*As we seek to move within a turbulent and unstable socio-political environment we are at the same time being moved by currents, shifts and tides, requiring that we constantly have to attune our action and trajectory to the movement of the environ-*

*ment we move through. [...] Social navigation in this perspective is the tactical movement of agents within a moving element. It is motion within motion.* (Vigh 2007: 14)

Given the uncertain situation many young academics face, the concept allows a better understanding of their trajectories. However, orientation is a prerequisite for navigation and thus this study is interested in how Burkinabé graduates orient towards their future in times of uncertainty. To figure out the trajectories of graduates in Burkina Faso it is not only important to acquire data about their dreams, wishes, plans and anticipations, but also about the ways they try to realize them. The Burkinabé informants imagine a chronological order of events after gaining the diploma: stable and well-paid employment, marriage, and the creation of a family; or, regarding their actual situation, experiencing a (hopefully) limited phase of unemployment, as Salif<sup>3</sup>, a 24 year old geologist, who stayed unemployed for about one year after his studies and is now contentedly working for a mining company, explained during the first research phase.

*If you don't happen to be very fortunate it is impossible to avoid the experience of unemployment. As all good citizens we tell ourselves that one day it will just be fine. So, presently, I'm not doing anything and I think this is somehow normal, because this is a transitory phase of my life, and as I am optimistic I tell myself that one day it will be fine.* (Salif, 24, graduated in geology in 2013)

Having finished their studies, graduates find themselves confronted with the demands for financial support from their families and the social pressure to get married and create their own family. As many graduates manage their lives by pursuing unstable jobs or unpaid internships, they experience their everyday activities as a struggle whereby they are «running from left to right» to find something to do. Job offers for graduates are very rare, as employers expect a couple of years' worth of experience in their field, and the greatest number of available jobs is distributed through connections. For many there is no other possibility than to compete with thousands of others for a small range of jobs in the public sector. The omnipresent uncertainty about one's future brings along a discourse of hopefulness, a very common phrase is «*j'ai l'espoir que ça va aller*» («*I have hope that it will work out*»). It appears that young people in Burkina Faso have the impression that the future can rarely be anticipated and tamed by pursuing plans. This is mostly due to the fact that success or career opportunities are not straightforwardly linked to performance. Whenever they are referring to this lack of control, hope becomes an issue. Hope is directed towards the space beyond

<sup>2</sup> This section is based on fieldwork and data analysis by Maike Birzle.

<sup>3</sup> All names in this article have been changed.

the individual horizon which cannot be anticipated yet, which cannot be made palpable from where we stand. So the individual horizon can be seen as a line that separates individuals temporally and spatially from the unknown terrains which only exist in our imaginations; the more uncertainty we face in our present life world, the closer this line is located to our status quo (Vigh 2008: 16). Making plans for actual steps towards the distant future often seems a vain pursuit for the Burkinabé informants. Due to financial uncertainty, plans are mostly restricted to the nearer future – visiting English classes, obtaining a driver's license or finding a side job. The interesting aspect of the hope university graduates speak about and act upon is that it is a particular form of hope: aimed hope, which has an act-and-object structure, it is a kind of doing, a kind of act, and sometimes also a kind of attitude (Godfrey 1987: 14). In this sense an individual is acting because he or she hopes that a change of the situation for the better is thereby being induced. In the case of the Burkinabé informants hope is mobilized<sup>4</sup>, it influences their actions, thus it can be interpreted. Jean-Pierre, a sociologist, who aspires to work for a NGO or a consultancy and is currently earning his living by doing sporadic errands for a befriended consultant, explains that he is still hoping that his plans will work out.

*Hope is a capacity somebody can have. It is our capacity to sit down and say tomorrow will still be better. This is hope for us, the capacity to say «if everything works, it will be fine». The capacity of saying «I won't stop trying; I will go on until the end».* (Jean-Pierre, 30, graduated in sociology in 2014)

Aimed hope implies that the hoping person is doing something to realize that hope. It is closely linked to action and thus can be seen as a method of working towards one's future. As the imaginative engagement of the future is a crucial component of the orientation of individuals, this subproject will continue looking for manifestations of their projections in their present actions by focusing on their notion of hope as well as on the way hope influences their navigation towards their objectives.

### Opening up «la chance»<sup>5</sup>

The interviews with the Malian informants have shown that their images of the future are predominantly positive and frequently linked to the idea of security. Despite their heterogeneous backgrounds and different characters, and despite their various areas of study and specific aims for the future, they all

dream of «becoming someone». They want to become someone respected by their families and society, someone «independent» and «able to provide», either by founding their own company or getting the job they always wanted. Clearly, having secure employment is basic in order to fulfill the vision they have for their future, because a job means money; it means independence and the ability to marry and establish a family. Most Malian graduates consider secure employment to be preconditioned by «la chance» – something they can actually open up.

Madou is 25. He studied physics, because his aim was to become a researcher. After finishing his studies successfully in 2010, he applied for a PhD-scholarship in Germany and got accepted. But due to the 2012 military coup in Mali, it became impossible for him to leave the country. As he was forced to redesign his plans, his uncle then introduced him to a telecommunication company, where he has been working ever since. Today, his studies in marketing at a private university are financed by the company and he counts on becoming the head of the department soon. He works more than sixty hours a week on a limited contract. He shares his salary with his mother and saves some of it for his marriage, which has been postponed several times due to the shortage of money. He still aspires to become a researcher one day – with constant effort and the help of God.

*In Mali, nothing is easy. You really have to fight for what you want. You just can't simply fold your arms. Thank God, I've had la chance amongst a lot of people to do what I want to do... but not until the end. I can't complain. I've always had la chance to do what I wanted to. I'd say that I'm still young, I'm only 25 years old. So, I'm much younger than a lot of people here in Mali. They are 30 years old already and they still live at home, unemployed. Me, I've had la chance to continue my studies and work. So, my dreams? Ahhh, I'm going to realize them, for sure.* (Madou, 25, graduated in physics in 2010)

Madou has a clear image of his future and he is working hard towards it. Nevertheless, he cannot be sure that his contract will be extended every three months and supporting his family prevents him from achieving the financial cushion needed for the creation of his own family. Madou is aware of his uncertain future, but he does not seem to perceive this as overwhelming.

Young academics are not paralyzed, but they evaluate the options they have and actively create opportunities for themselves. In so doing university graduates construct their own

<sup>4</sup> Following Crapanzano (2003), who differentiates between hope which is mobilized and thus becomes energized and close to desire, and hope which is not mobilized and thereby resists interpretation.

<sup>5</sup> This section is based on fieldwork and data analysis by Susann Ludwig.

certainties and, thereby, make their environment manageable. The three main identified domains of such construction are: education, networks and religion.

Madou's example shows that studying does not end with graduation, but is an ongoing practice, that is believed to create opportunities and secure future jobs. Their first studies were often chosen on the basis of their dreamed-of profession. Secondary studies, predominantly at private universities, are chosen according to an analysis of the labor market or with the perspective of getting a better position at the company they are currently working for. In other words, the first diploma creates confidence; the second one secures employment.

«You have to have contacts», people emphasize all over Bamako. Madou would maybe still be unemployed, if not for his uncle. Thanks to their families some graduates are well-connected already; others work on establishing their own personal network. Networks mean support, but also access to information, money, employment and opportunities in general. But networks come along with duties and can thereby decelerate individuals on their path.

Most of the Malian informants are Muslims. To them, a lot of things happen in accordance or with the help of God, who knows and shapes the future. If something has worked out fine – *Dieu merci (thank God)*; and if something does not work out – *l'homme propose; Dieu dispose (man proposes, God disposes)*. This might sound fatalist, but it is not understood that way by Malian graduates. It does not state human's inability to decide or to achieve something on his or her own; it rather expresses the conviction that God only helps those who articulate their goals for the future in the course of their present efforts.

University graduates met in Bamako are working on the realization of their futures – some of them achieved their goals already, some of them not, or not yet. So, if personal effort is what they all invest, what is it then, to them, that makes the difference? Seven months of fieldwork in Bamako with more than sixty interviews have shown that «*la chance*»<sup>6</sup> is a distinguishing feature for the future outcome of graduates' present actions. The challenge of this research consists in identifying present choices and practices geared towards the future and the extent to which the latter can be influenced by the former. The problem, thereby, is that neither me as a researcher, nor my informants have any privileged access to the future. The idea of «opening up *la chance*», however, points to crucial ways of accessing the future with reference to present social practices.

The French word «*la chance*» has different meanings and connotations such as luck, opportunity, possibility and chance as well as serendipity, fate or destiny. In Bambara, the most widely spoken local language, it is common to use «*chanci*», a derivation from «*la chance*». However, the Bambara word «*kunnandi*», for example, which literally means «a person with a good head», is used to express the idea of «a person that has *la chance*».

University graduates in Mali create «*la chance*» (opportunities); they take «*la chance*» (chances), but they also simply have «*la chance*» (luck) or happen to find «*la chance*» (serendipity). «*La chance*» is ambiguous: it can be accessed and influenced by individual action, but it is also believed to be God's will, which cannot be enforced. Nevertheless, graduates do not use that as an excuse, but rather as an urge to continue with their work. «*God provides la chance, but you are able to open up la chance on your own, too!*» an informant explained. It is by working on education, networks, but also on practicing their religion, that university graduates in Mali open up «*la chance*» and, therewith, prepare for their vision of the future in the present. Malian graduates reflected on «*la chance*» retrospectively or with reference to the future, but it is in the present that they work on increasing their exposure to it. «*La chance*» with a future perspective is a well-defined moment, when their «construction work» finally prospers, a moment of reward.

University graduates know how their future is supposed to look like and what they want to become. They also know which steps they need to take in order to achieve their goals. The only uncertainty they face is *when* their future vision will become reality. These points in time, when future suddenly materializes, are defined by «*la chance*». It is this horizon of the future in the present of my informants and their conviction to be able to influence it significantly, which this subproject will be seeking to uncover during the next period of fieldwork.

## Conclusion

The situation of young graduates in Burkina Faso and Mali is quite similar. Even though most of them have a hard time acquiring secure employment, they present themselves as neither desperate nor incapable of action. University graduates are preparing the basis for their future to flourish. This process is what both research projects aim to capture. The analytical examination of both the notion of hope and the phenomenon of «*la chance*» allows inquiring into the ways they deal with uncertainty concerning their trajectories and therefore provides a

<sup>6</sup> I decided to work with the French term «*la chance*» as it is done by my informants.

way to operationalize the concept of the future in the empirical research in general. The study on Burkina Faso focuses on how university graduates continue to nurture hope when imagining the future. The study on Mali demonstrates how university

graduates try to open up «*la chance*» in the present as a preparation for their imagined futures. Facing the future in general means facing uncertainty, but as we intend to show in our work, there are ways to attain the future through present practices.

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## AUTHORS

**Maïke Birzle** is a PhD student and research assistant at the Center for African Studies, University of Basel. She studied Applied African Studies (B.A) at the Universität Bayreuth and Social Anthropology (M.A.) at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. Before she started working on Burkina Faso she did extensive fieldwork on youth in The Gambia, as her master thesis focused on agency and social navigation of rural Gambian male youth.

[maïke.birzle@unibas.ch](mailto:maïke.birzle@unibas.ch)

**Susann Ludwig** is a PhD-student and research assistant at the Centre for African Studies in Basel. She studied Social Anthropology (M.A.) at the Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg. Her MA-thesis focused on the connection between neoliberal policy and work among academic youth in Bamako, Mali, and drew attention the phenomenon of *débrouillage* as a smart and creative entrepreneurial strategy deployed by urban academic youth.

[susann.ludwig@unibas.ch](mailto:susann.ludwig@unibas.ch)

Centre for African Studies Basel  
Office 204  
Petersgraben 11  
4051 Basel, Switzerland