

### 3 *Ça va aller*

#### The Role of Hope in Burkinabe University Graduates' Navigation towards the Future

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#### **INTRODUCTION: BEING A YOUNG GRADUATE IN BURKINA FASO**

Malik is a young Burkinabe who graduated from the University of Ouagadougou in 2012. He holds a diploma in economics, yet he is still looking for employment. When I first met him in 2013 he was 33 years of age; this makes him the oldest graduate in my research sample of thirty freshly-graduated diploma-holders. He lives in a small compound in a neighbourhood called »Zone 1«, which is characterised by a high number of students attracted by modest houses with low rents close to their university, where he shares his cramped two-room apartment with two of his cousins who recently also started to study at the university. Like him, they are »Diaspo«, that is, their families migrated from Burkina Faso to Ivory Coast in search of work opportunities. For Malik being »Diaspo« means that the network of relatives who support him financially at irregular intervals is distant and not easy to access. The living room of his apartment is crammed with chairs along the walls, and there is little space for the television set and a table cluttered with exercise books and papers. Most of these are workbooks for the annual *concours*, which is a recruitment test for the civil service. Malik bases all of his hope on the slim chance of being amongst the small number of applicants recruited each year. He is aware that time is not on his side because the maximum age for participation is 37. Therefore, he invests all affordable means in training-books and preparation classes. When I met him in 2014 and 2015 he had not yet found a job. In 2016 he wrote to me explaining that he

would prepare for the recruitment test in 2017 – still convinced that finally he would be lucky enough to be on the winning side. Despite numerous setbacks Malik holds on to his optimism, and whenever I met him he was always in good humour and confident about the future. Yet, he also spoke of sleepless nights full of fears about what the next day would bring. His thoughts circle around the fact that he is still dependent on his parents and brothers – and on the crop yield of their cocoa fields in Ivory Coast – in order to make a living, despite having spent so much time and money on his university studies. Malik meets his graduated peers nearly every day in the shade of the trees on the university campus to discuss exercise after exercise from the workbooks for the *concours*, hoping to increase his chances by training from early morning until late afternoon. Indeed, hope is an important topic not only in Malik's narrations and actions. In this chapter I ask what hope means for him and the other graduates to whom I have spoken in their orientation towards the future. In order to do this I draw upon participant observation and consecutive interviews with thirty young graduates, all of which were conducted between 2013 and 2015 in Ouagadougou and Bobo.

After they complete their studies, graduates are confronted with demands for financial support by their families as well as social pressure to get married and start their own family. However, instead of being able to follow what they had imagined to be a straightforward trajectory (employment followed by marriage and then children), they are forced to deal with detours and delays; instead of proceeding as they had imagined when they were still students, they approach their goals in ways which often seem to be indirect. Amongst my informants there is the notion that the future has to be accessed through certain entry points, which are imagined as gateways. Interviewees reflected on the future in a way that suggests that they imagine there to be a cleavage between the present and the future which prevents individuals from realising their plans either quickly or straightforwardly. In the following I elaborate upon how this cleavage is manifested. I will show how young Burkinabe graduates implement the idea of accessing the future by imagining their trajectories as a kinetic process, which gains dynamism through their active hope and thereby serves to create accessible gateways. These dynamics are also influenced by the obstacles they encounter when they try to implement their plans. The point of departure for this chapter is the observation that the majority of my informants present themselves as

»not yet having arrived« in the place they want to be in order to be satisfied with their situation. I will use the concept of »social navigation« to trace the (narratively reflected) motion of graduates towards their future goals. Vigh (2009: 419) introduces this concept in order to facilitate a better understanding of practices in contexts of insecurity and uncertainty, in other words, of motion in a fluctuating framework. The concept is open for discontinuities in individual action, which is especially relevant in the case of Burkinabe graduates in regard to the adaption and transformation of their goals. Although they approach these goals in ways that they often perceive as being indirect, they thereby transform their environment into a terrain in which they are able to manoeuvre in order to attain them (Jackson 1998). In this way they navigate their social present while trying to influence their individual and collective futures by outlining ways that lead to their goals. This reveals that they are far from being trapped, despite the fact that direct routes towards their goals are often blocked. In order to carve out the conditions of their capacities to navigate, I will analyse how young graduates discursively reflect on their current situation and present activities, and the way in which they locate their pathways into the future.

University studies in Burkina Faso are seen as gate-openers to a better life by all of my informants. Most of them stated this fact as their personal motivation to study at university, and the conviction that university diplomas greatly facilitate entry into the Burkinabe job market is fundamental. They believe that holding a diploma leads to a greater number of entry points becoming available, that the salary will be higher and that more interesting posts will be available. The higher the diploma, the higher the salary, is a commonly held notion amongst my informants. Besides this factor, several mentioned that their initial motivation to study at university was to become able to support their parents financially, which is an aspect of the motivation for finding well-paid employment. Other aspects mentioned were the wish for a better understanding of things, for personal success and for the possibility to contribute to the country's development. It becomes clear that finding a job is a basic ambition when informants explain that they had been participating in the annual competition for posts in the civil service ever since they obtained their *baccalaureat* (high school diploma) but, because they had not yet succeeded, they were continuing their studies at university in order to find a job later on. About two-thirds of my sample had tried this strategy, but none of them became employed and left their studies. A graduate

of economics explained that he dreamt of working for an international bank, but when he started university studies he also had in mind that after two years of studies he could, as he said, at least work as a teacher in the civil service. He nevertheless continued until he obtained his diploma. The *baccalaureat* alone is not enough to find employment in Burkina Faso today, my informants agree. Several graduates whom I interviewed explained that their motivation was also influenced by their parents, who had urged them to go to university. The motivation factors often intersect, as in the case of Cynthia:

MB: What made you start studying at university?

Cynthia: (laughing) I always told myself that it has to be interesting to have a diploma and knowledge in order to be primed to work in international enterprises; that is the reason why I wanted to study at university. And my parents also urged me and told me not to stop at only the high school diploma, because high-school diplomas are nothing anymore. (Cynthia, 28, accountant; Interview July 2013, my translation.)

When asked about their current situation about a year after their graduation, nearly all informants replied that they were still looking for employment. Exceptions were two young women who studied medicine, one of whom had entered the civil service and worked at a public hospital, and the other who is now a doctor at a private clinic. Unemployment in the case of university graduates in Burkina Faso does not equate to inactivity in terms of generating income but, instead, is used to explain that they have not yet found a job that is commensurable to their university diploma.

## **ÇA VA ALLER: NARRATIONS AND MANIFESTATIONS OF UNPREDICTABILITY**

When faced with unpredictability that includes the delayed entry into the job market, the ever-present phrase to be encountered is *»ça va aller«* (it will work out alright), which is always intertwined with the notion that higher education must eventually and inevitably lead to benefits. *»Ça va aller«* is like a chorus and is voiced in nearly every interview when the speaker refers to the future and its unpredictability. Retelling this phrase seems like a narrative obligation, for example when a young graduate says:

»like every good citizen I tell myself *ça va aller*.« (Yacouba, 28, graduate of geology; Interview March 2014, my translation.) Yet, the interviews also make clear that there is more to this phrase than its talismanic invocation suggests. Analysing the passages where »*ça va aller*« is expressed, several patterns of usage emerge. The principal function of the phrase is narrative and practical in that it enables the speaker to shift from a negative point in the narration to a more positive projection upon which they can then further elaborate. This appears in two senses. First, this relates to a condition that is seen as normal or favourable, for example when saying that the political system is unfavourable while hoping that it will change or be ameliorated; or for example when one anticipates that having two children in the future would be a good condition. There is always a dynamic aspect to the phrase, thereby implying a comparative characteristic:

I appreciate my current situation compared to the one before, because it brings along autonomy and now I hope that it will work out much better in the future [*maintenant j'espère que ça va aller beaucoup mieux dans l'avenir*]. (Sandrine, 29, graduate in law studies; Interview February 2014, my translation.)

Second – and far more frequently – the phrase is used as a metaphor. Like this it serves to bridge a rift which is formed by the unpredictability of future events. The phrase becomes a place-holder in interviews, and I will interpret its intended meaning by analyzing the respective sequences. When used as a metaphor it always refers to an event that serves as a catalyst in transforming the now-condition, which is unfavourable for several reasons, into a favourable afterward-condition. For example:

I'm trying to find something, and often, after I receive responses like in the job interview this morning, I tell myself that little-by-little it will pay off, and that is reassuring. I tell myself that one fine day *ça va aller* and I will find the ideal job. (Cynthia, 28, graduate in accountancy; Interview March 2014, my translation.)

This catalyst is a momentum of change which gets things going, and it has to be induced by a person's own efforts and desire to change the situation. Some informants, however, add that without good fortune the moment cannot take place. The bridge between the two states – and the conviction that it exists in the first place – seems to be important in

order to stay optimistic and continue to struggle. In my interviews, this bridge is in most cases based on hope. During the interviews I asked for an elaboration whenever my interviewee constructed their narration around *ça va aller*. This was the moment when people started to speak of hope and optimism. *Ça va aller* implies dissatisfaction with one's actual situation that stems from the notion that one is temporarily blocked from accessing the goals to which one aspires. The phrase aims at the trigger for when things start to go the way one wants them to go. A firm belief is articulated here that this moment of change is inevitable and not to be questioned; it is less clear, however, when this will become manifest. That notwithstanding, it is this moment upon which all hopes are pinned. One informant underlines that you have to know your position (whether along the intended trajectory or within the social environment) in order to change it – in other words, to start acting towards a moment of change. Therefore, according to informants, one has to be convinced that the moment of change which transforms the now-condition into the afterward-condition is possible. The fact that things will start changing is seen, on the one hand, as a direct consequence of one's efforts combined with good fortune and, on the other hand, as being subject to sudden changes. This is where unpredictability is manifested, and where several strategies have their starting point.

In longer conversations young graduates start sharing other facets of their specific situation, and their self-representation becomes more nuanced. My role during interviews was that of a listener who had never experienced the implications of uncertainty in Burkina Faso; for this reason informants gladly elaborated on what it meant to keep in mind that things would work out alright (*ça va aller*) when the present was structured by the fact that the moment of change was unpredictable. Doubts, complaints and disappointment can be voiced in this context.

My informants' discontent over their situation on the job market is linked to three main aspects: first, the negative conditions of university studies that lead to a diminishing quality in education and result in a lack of experience, which places graduates at a disadvantage in the application process. Many informants claim that they do not feel well-prepared to enter the job market because they lack experience in their fields as a result of the insufficient quality of their studies; this in turn entails not gaining access to jobs and, thus, to a respected status within society. Second, the distribution of jobs is not transparent and, according to my informants,

mostly directed by nepotism and patronage. This phenomenon is labelled as »*bras longs*« (long arms). It can be seen as part of what Hyden (1983: 8) describes as the economy of affection: »a network of support, communication and interaction among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affiliations, for example, religion.« My informants claim that the distribution of jobs and internships through *bras longs* leads to a deterioration in the importance of university diplomas for accessing employment. It propels discontent among those graduates who have to struggle with »short arms« due to the fact that they do not come from wealthy, influential families and do not have access to a network during their studies. Third, the government is often criticised for failing to create institutions that support young graduates in becoming independent. My informants express the wish for more funding to start their own businesses, and they criticise that the government's fund for implementing young entrepreneurs' projects is biased and insufficient: »our applications [for funds] will stay on their desks and they will die on their desks.« (Salif, graduate of economics, 30; Interview August 2013; my translation). Those who applied for government funding claim that success is unlikely without an insider at the ministry who can support the application. Others add that even if a project were to be funded, the grant would not suffice to set up a business.

Most of the university graduates in Burkina Faso to whom I have spoken are convinced that the annual recruitment test for the civil service (the *concours*) is the most likely way for them to enter the job market. Only one of the thirty individuals in my research sample never took part in it, and this was because he refused to work for the Burkinabe state. All others compete with tens of thousands of other candidates for a meagre number of jobs. The recruitment tests usually take place in August, and they consist of multiple-choice tests that require general knowledge and logical reasoning; they are completely detached from job-relevant expert knowledge. Preparation classes for the test have become a lucrative business, and workbooks with multiple-choice tests sell well at vending tables. Rumour has it that magical intervention also helps; preparation for the test is a booming business for various types of actors. When the list of offered jobs is released it is spread around within a couple of hours. Deciding in which recruitment tests to participate demands strategy, as some of them are scheduled at the same time. Moreover, there are registration fees to be paid, which restricts most of the participants to a

limited selection. Once the tests open for registration, the queues in front of the enrolment sites (for example, the national stadium) spill into the streets. Certain recruitment tests are more popular than others because they promise lucrative posts. Those who are selected are usually announced officially in November. The transition government under Michel Kafando, who succeeded former president Blaise Compaoré following his forced resignation, disrupted this routine in 2015, when they annulled certain results due to fraud – thus confirming suspicions that success in the competition is often linked to cash payments and helpful relationships. Nevertheless, many graduates are convinced that this competition is their only true chance to enter the job market (see Mazzocchetti 2009: 148) and that they hence cannot make use of helpful relations:

Tché! These competitions are difficult! A long time before I finished university I started to participate: last year, the year before that. Well, it is not easy to gain anything there, as the number of vacancies is limited. And there is no inherent logic in the multiple-choice tests, so you need to be lucky. Anyway, we hope to get admitted to the civil service, but it is possible to fail at the competition for two, three, four years after graduation. There are many graduates who tried for four or five years without success. So they don't have a job and they try again each year, but once you are 37 years old you cannot take part in the competition anymore. So you need to succeed by all means before you are 37; if you don't know anybody who can help you to find employment it will be very difficult. (Ada, 29, graduate of law studies; Interview March 2014; my translation.)

My informants make much of the fact that the number of competitors increases each year because past years' failures join the masses of new aspirants. The recruitment tests are a central aspect in many interviews when my informants speak about how they plan their future. Indeed, the tests are seen as the only accessible entry point for popular white-collar jobs. Nevertheless, posts do exist that are rather less attractive, such as those for primary-school teachers in remote areas. These are numerous, but for my informants they are not commensurate with their diploma because the wages are low and the work conditions mostly unfavourable. Only two individuals in my sample decided to take this opportunity, yet both of them see their present teaching activities as temporary in nature. Malik, who participates each year, for example is trying his luck in the recruitment test for the customs service and the ENAREF, like many



others from my sample. The likelihood of obtaining a post is fair because the number of participants is greatest there. There are also recruitment tests that are labelled as ›professional‹, which means they do indeed target a specific group, for example the recruitment test for magistrates. Two of my informants who studied computer sciences gained a post in the civil service by participating in a professional recruitment test. All of the law graduates in my sample are taking part in the recruitment test for magistrates, but none of them have been successful yet. Many of those who participate in the tests each year hope that, once they are recruited, they will be able to afford another diploma at university, and some are convinced that they would then start their own business. Most of them are still anticipating the next recruitment test and continue to hope for future success whilst in the meantime sending out applications whenever possible and doing menial jobs or internships. It is precisely in these types of activities that they keep up their hope, as they are convinced that they are just temporal in nature and represent a stepping-stone towards entry into what they see as the ›real‹ job market – be it in the private sector or public administration.

## **OUTMANOEUVRING UNPREDICTABILITY: RECLAIMING THE TERRAIN BY MAKING HOPE WORK**

The way young graduates locate themselves in time as well as in their societal environment is linked to their imagination of a dynamic trajectory, as discussed above in the context of my informants' narrations. In order to show the implications of these dynamics, I will make use of the concept of ›social navigation‹ and the role of hope therein. Vigh (2009: 419) defines social navigation as a concept that is »used when referring to how people act in difficult or uncertain circumstances and in describing how they disentangle themselves from confining structures, plot their escape and move towards better positions.« There is an inherent temporality to the concept of social navigation, because it is constantly adjusted to the present trajectories as well as to the way in which goals are approached. It thus combines present environments and future imaginaries (Vigh 2009: 425) while focusing on the trajectories of individuals. Young graduates also navigate their way through the present by focusing on the objectives they want to reach in the near and far future. I argue that by analysing the

dynamics of their present navigation it is possible to retrieve the future through research. In order for graduates to neither lose their orientation (despite sometimes being forced to stray from a straight trajectory) nor to lose their motivation, they make use of hope as a strategy. Interviews quickly showed that hope is a central factor in young graduates' lifeworlds and deeply influences the way in which they navigate towards their objectives. Hope becomes vital especially in regard to the recruitment test, which is the most frequent strategy applied in searching for jobs. There is usually a one-year hiatus between two tests, and it is essential for graduates to sustain the conviction that they will be recruited in the following test. The dynamic aspect of young graduates' life-courses seems to gain its kinetic input less from the passage of time than from an emotional orientation that is best coined as ›hope‹. The emic definition of hope shows that graduates define it as a sort of motor that inspires their acting in the interest of the future. This kinetic aspect becomes apparent when graduates use phrases in their narratives such as »not yet arrived« to describe the fact that they have not yet attained their desired status, or in notions such as »being blocked« when speaking of obstacles that can often lead them to change their routes towards the future:

Sometimes you have the impression that everything is closed. All the doors are closed and no door can be opened. So you are stuck in the middle, surrounded by doors which are closed. Even if you knock at those doors, they are not going to open. [...] That gives you the impression that you are not moving. We [the young graduates] are not moving. It is said that if you do not move, you are going backwards. If you do not advance and you are stuck like that, you know that you are going backwards and time is leaving you behind. (Pascal, 30, graduate of sociology; Interview February 2014, my translation.)

The notion of individuals moving – or navigating – through time towards their objectives becomes evident in Pascal's narrations, and so does the idea of being stuck while time passes. It is seen as a person's own responsibility to disentangle themselves from this unfavourable state so as to be able to continue navigating and acting towards their goals. This is where hope becomes important and is expressed in the interviews I have conducted. Early interviews were full of references to hope; therefore, in consecutive interviews I inquired into the emic meaning of hope. It quickly became clear that young graduates actively work with their hopes in order

to unblock the future to which they aspire. They create hopeful moments in the sense of practices that nurture their hope and enable them to hold onto it by creating the possibility for change. Hope propels the actions and informs the imaginaries of these young graduates and is deeply entangled with practices that can thus be seen as an important component in the framing concept of social navigation. This is borne out by other research that inquires into the link between hope and agency. Bjarnesen's (2009: 121) ethnographic work on young Ivorian migrants considers the concept of hope to be more suitable for capturing the uncertainty that characterises anticipations than the notions of aspirations and agency, »which tend to emphasize the capacity of the individual to steer a course through life; to envision a future and act in order to make it happen. As such, an attention to hope might better combine the active aspirations and practices of the hoper with the social forces that are seen to influence the possible or past outcomes of specific hopes.« Turner (2015: 180) describes how hope informs the way in which young Burundian refugees in Nairobi »navigate in the present in order to increase [their] odds for a better future«, as well as inspiring action that aims to change the future. In his profound ethnography on young, unemployed men in Ethiopia, Mains (2012) inquires into their struggle to attain their hopes for the future whilst constantly threatened by the lack of opportunities that youths in Ethiopia face. Sliwinski (2012) analyses hope as a category that is relevant to agency when she discusses how hope and value are combined in the post-disaster humanitarian context of El Salvador; similar to the case in Burkina Faso, here hope is defined as a »modality of doing« when future-oriented practices are grounded in hope. Giraud (2007) highlights the way in which hope influences practices by operationalising it as a category for analysing actions. Like this he shows that hope can serve as a motor for actions as well as being mobilised by action; hence, it is characterised by its dynamic aspect. Hope in Burkinabe graduates displays the same attributes, as I will now show by drawing on data from my field research. I argue that hope and agency are intertwined in the case of Burkinabe graduates because they clearly inform each other – and especially because graduates see themselves as capable of actively working towards a better future. Hope sets them in motion and makes them follow their routes, in the sense of stimulus as well as navigation instrument. During interviews and conversations it became clear that hope is not linked to »waithood« (Honwana 2012) in a deterministic sense but instead to individual action.

Therefore it is described as a positive attitude to the future that requires specific types of maintenance, as Liliane formulates for us:

In my opinion, hope means thinking that everything is going to be fine, it means thinking that tomorrow I can have what I can't have today, why not? So this is what hope means for me. That I don't sit down, inevitably saying that I will never succeed. Instead, it means maintaining the idea that even if I don't succeed today, I can succeed tomorrow. [...] In my personal opinion, as I am religious and believe in God, I think that the basis for hope is the conviction that God will do something for me. Even if this is not now, in favourable times things will work better for me. So, first, there is the belief, and second there is the contribution of one's competence and talents. (Liliane, 28, graduate of law studies; Interview February 2014, my translation.)

She mentions two important foundations for hope: individual competence and talents on the one hand and, on the other hand, the belief in God. Other informants outline determination, courage and individual skills as further prerequisites for hope. But whereas those prerequisites themselves already demand a strong will and a positive attitude towards the future, one has to act upon hope in order to make it work:

Hope is the certainty of a better tomorrow, it is the conviction of a better tomorrow, and it is this certainty and conviction which allows you to act, because if you have no hope you are trapped in a maelstrom of despair where you don't act - and if you don't act, you don't evolve; and if you don't evolve, you are sad. But if you have hope, you struggle by telling yourself that the next days or months will be better than the present. So hope allows you to move from a situation ›x‹, which is not favourable, to a situation ›y‹ in the near-or-far future which is more favourable. (Elise, 29, medical doctor; Interview March 2014, my translation.)

Hope requires investment and allows people to act towards the future, as Elise stresses when she illustrates ›hope‹ as a facilitator for individuals to evolve and follow their ambitions. Another informant explains that hope enables desirable change to be realised: his dreams and the imagination of his satisfaction once he obtains his goals motivate him to augment his chances of making them into reality. Hopelessness is seen as defeat, and although some of my informants acknowledge that, from time to time, they lose hope because of the hardship they experience, they nevertheless insist that these are occasional periods – comparable to the doldrums at

sea, to stick with the metaphor of navigation – which they overcome with the help of their families and their belief in God. In fact, doubts, fears and hopelessness are expressed during many interviews, yet these are temporary in character. Augustin is illustrative of this:

Only those who do not have an objective lose their hope definitely, because when you have an objective, you struggle. You see what you have to do. So whenever there is the possibility to do something it will always help you for the future. (Augustin, 31, graduate of law studies; Interview May 2014, my translation.)

These kinds of narrations suggest a sense of acting and of individual responsibility for one's trajectory, and they are commonly heard during interviews on future perspectives. Ousmane, a graduate in economics, stresses that it is hope which allows him to project himself into the future, and therefore it is a way for him to enter the future in pursuit of his goals. Hope is seen as a resource for action and for navigating through terrain littered by contemporary obstacles; yet at the same time it requires investments in the sense of effort, as Madi explains:

I think that hope is hidden behind all of our present activities. We do not work in order to sit at home one day in the future. We study with the objective of acquiring something, and it is this ambition of acquiring something later on that is in our heads; and I call that hope. (Madi, 28, graduate of accountancy; Interview April 2014, my translation.)

Hope allows individuals to transform unfavourable situations into stepping-stones, or necessary detours, that lead to intended goals in the future. Pascal (a sociology graduate) answers the initial question of what he is presently doing with: »presently, I am not doing anything [...] but *ça va aller*.« Later on, however, he explains that he is spending most of the time in a consultation office, where he does different tasks without being properly paid – but he sees profit for his future in this activity, not only because he is gaining experience in social research but also because he can greatly expand his networks. Similarly, most of my informants do work, even if this is not in their field of study and in most cases is either not remunerated at all or only pays a miniscule wage. This applies, for example, to Cynthia, who studied accountancy and has worked as a promoter for a mayonnaise brand ever since her graduation three years

ago, but who nevertheless clings to her goal of creating a staffing firm one day. Or to Abdul, a graduate of psychology, who accepted a short-term contract as a philosophy teacher in a remote province, but who still maintains his ambition of working with an NGO where he could apply his training as a psychologist. Many graduates who are now in a job unrelated to their ambitions plan to invest their salary in additional diplomas, which are still seen as gate-openers on the job market. Some of my informants have already started further studies at private universities, and one of them continued on to a Master's programme at the public university of Ouagadougou. They call the motivation for these activities ›hope‹, and it is hope that allows them to transform what may have been regarded as failure (from the point of view of projecting the future during their studies) into the initial push in the direction of an intended trajectory.

Living and working on one's faith, mostly by praying regularly, fasting and attending church or mosque services, represents an important investment in hope and is seen as working on one's good fortune. The belief in God's benevolence is connected to the actions that must be taken so as to prevent God from forgetting about a person's need for His help. It involves the notion that as long as a person tries by all means to improve his or her situation, God will intervene for an improvement. This approach also serves as an explanation for the successes of others. Counting on God is not a form of fatalism but of agency, because in order to retain faith in a better future a person needs to apply their talents and the belief in God's benevolence, which will become manifest through good fortune:

Hope is important but you have to associate it with fortune because the foundation of hope must be effort. I know that I will struggle, and so I have hope that I will be alright while struggling. It is possible that my efforts alone will not be enough; I also need to have good fortune. Hope and fortune have to happen together, and if you experience failure, it might be linked to a lack of good fortune. But if you do not struggle, you will not succeed. You can even be fortunate; but as long as you are not struggling, you will not gain anything. If I just sit here I might get lucky, but luck will not descend towards me and find me. But if I work towards it, it can facilitate opportunities for me. (Ahmed, 29, graduate of economics; Interview May 2014, my translation.)

The idea that God distributes good fortune is common amongst my informants and implies a kind of reciprocal agency. This connects to the

initial idea of university degrees as fundamental gate-openers to a better future. Once arriving at a point where a change for the better becomes possible, diplomas are imagined to be facilitators. Yet, to reach these points one must continue to head forwards despite the unpredictability that has to be managed; and hope is a fundamental element in this kind of acting towards the future in the case of the Burkinabe graduates. Hope as presented by my informants is central to the way in which they navigate towards their goals, because it allows them to act despite the unpredictability they presently face. Like this they become able to keep their objectives in sight, even if these are regularly transformed and adjusted over time. Because hope has to be maintained constantly, it is itself a type of strategy when working towards the future.

## CONCLUSION

Researching the future has to rely on inquiring into the present practices of individuals. The practices of Burkinabe graduates are deeply entangled with their aspired futures, and informants outline this connection when speaking about their present situation. Usually, the point of reference is the future, and they value their status in relation to what they hope their status to be in the future. Drawing on the insights from interviews and the everyday practices of young graduates, hope can be seen as facilitating agency in regard to accomplishing goals. When projecting their trajectories across the terrain (or contexts of action) contoured by their social situation, the narration recurs on the individual's trajectory, thereby connecting the discourse of hope with the notion of agency. Their practices reflect the fact that while they may be trapped in an unfavourable situation, they nevertheless have ideas on how to extricate themselves and advance in order to approach their goals. Hope allows graduates to anticipate and work towards a favourable future in which they will attain their goals, even if they could appear to be headed in the wrong direction in the present. Thus, Burkinabe graduates act towards a future that is far more than merely a vague notion of a better tomorrow for them. They are far from being fatalistic; they do drift in a terrain informed by uncertainty. On the contrary, their imagination allows them to focus on their ambitions at the same time as their practices, informed through hope, continue to take aim at them. They are navigators who constantly face challenges due to their uncertain situation, but who nevertheless are

convinced of being headed in the right direction, specifically the direction that allows them eventually to access their future goals. Yet in order to keep up this attitude, they must continue to act. In this they share common terrain, but their trajectories differ, even if they are often inspired by the promising strategies of others. This notwithstanding, their goals are almost equivalent and unchanging, even if in many cases the expected moment of arrival has had to be postponed. During the three-year period of my field research, some of my informants moved to other towns, some got married, others divorced, some had children, some started new jobs or lost old ones. Nevertheless, their aspirations stayed mostly the same. And often they transformed what had earlier been seen as a goal into a new stepping-stone once it had been reached.

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