

## 4 ›Opening up La Chance‹

(Un)certainity among University Graduates  
in Bamako, Mali

---

*Susann Ludwig*

### INTRODUCTION

With a public university campus, four state-run Institutes of Higher Education and numerous private universities, Bamako is clearly Mali's centre of higher education. In 2010, about 70,000 students were enrolled at the University of Bamako; every year, more than 10,000 graduate. They grew up in the belief that studying is a privilege, and they were promised that education would guarantee employment and, therefore, a livelihood. Until the 1980s university degrees secured access to public-sector employment; thus, their parents' generation experienced the fulfilment of that promise. But Mali's public sector has been saturated for years and the country's economy is still predominantly based on agriculture. In other words, today's reality is dramatically different for graduates. Although less than two per cent of the Malian population hold a university degree, graduates still constitute the country's educational elite and, yet, it is this group that is most affected by unemployment. They are losing the advantage of their privilege. Not only have the future benefits of higher education been lost, but also the quality of higher education itself is in doubt.

Today more than 70 per cent of young academics in Mali are searching for employment (APEJ 2011). They encounter severe difficulties in finding a job that corresponds to their qualifications, and it is a challenge for them to enter the labour market at all. Secure employment ensures secure futures, people say. Since there is no secure employment in the present, the present is uncertain and, therefore, so is the future. University graduates

find themselves in situations characterised by uncertainty, which affects not only how they imagine and plan their futures but also their actions in the present.

In response to that, I argue, Malian graduates ›open up *la chance*‹. *La chance* separates the present from the future since it enables a different present – something that has been imagined as the future in the past. University graduates in Mali create *la chance* (opportunities); they take *la chance* (chances), but they also happen to have *la chance* (serendipity) or simply get *la chance* (good fortune). »God provides *la chance*, but you're able to open up *la chance* on your own, too,« an informant explained. *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.

This is a similar response to what Johnson-Hanks (2005: 363) has conceptualised as ›judicious opportunism‹, meaning that »the actor seizes promising chances.« Johnson-Hanks conducted ethnographic research among young educated Beti women in Cameroon, who shared their ideas on marriage and reproduction with her. By connecting these ideas with a theoretical analysis of intentional action, she claims that Beti women are aware of the uncertainty of the future. In response they do not pursue fixed plans but instead adapt to opportunities as they appear. Her main argument elaborates on the relationship between intention, action and outcome in contexts characterised by uncertainty. She concludes that ›judicious opportunism‹ is the most flexible and, hence, the best strategy within that framework (ibid.: 377). As much as I agree with her argument, her paper does not sufficiently deal with questions such as what it is that people actually do or, more specifically, how they create certainty through present-day action that is geared towards the future. I will engage with these questions by introducing the process of ›opening up *la chance*‹, which is about ›seizing opportunities‹ or identifying *la chance*, but also about preparing and transforming it.

This contribution focuses on narratives of individual and common experiences with *la chance* – a phenomenon perceived as the key to enabling futures; it does not focus on individual biographies and futures. In order to systematise and ultimately capture the abstract and complex phenomenon of *la chance*, I outline a typology of *la chance*. Based on the application of ethnomethodology's Membership Categorization Analysis to narrative interviews, I present three types of *la chance*: prerequisites, sprouts and outcomes. These are connected to each other through actions

taken by individual during the process of ›opening up *la chance*‹ (*ouvrir la chance*). This process again consists of three essential parts: looking for *la chance* (preparation), finding *la chance* (identification), and working with *la chance* (transformation).

Furthermore, this paper demonstrates that *la chance* enables specific futures. *La chance* is exclusive; it suddenly appears and needs to be identified by a prepared individual. It is ultimately argued that the process of ›opening up *la chance*‹ is a way of dealing with uncertainty in the present and, consequently, a way to access the future.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a total of nine months of fieldwork between 2013 and 2015 in Bamako, Mali, which I conducted in the context of my PhD studies. Three samples of narrative interviews were conducted with thirty young academics (ten female, twenty male). The longitudinal character of the study should enable us to understand not only the informants' social context but also how university graduates construct their futures in the present. No one has privileged access to the future; and the future is uncertain. However, there are ways of accessing the future with reference to present social practices. The idea of ›opening up *la chance*‹ points to such practices.

In order to approach the notion of *la chance* in the interviews, I looked at the various contexts in which informants talked about it. The term is mentioned in three different contexts: first, in fixed expressions such as *bonne chance* or *tenter la chance*. The second centres on the description of what *la chance* is, either the abstract *avoir l'opportunité de faire qc* or the concrete *travailler dans les ONGs* or *faire un stage*. *La chance* generally is ›to do something‹, whether it is professional (to create, manage, realise) or non-professional (to live, love, play), but it is also ›to have‹ (a diploma, an opportunity, employment) or ›to be something‹ (chosen, lucky, accepted). The third context in which *la chance* is mentioned problematises how it can be accessed, which is either in an active manner, as in *se battre* (to fight), *prendre ta vie en main* (to take control of one's destiny) or passively, as in *Dieu donne la chance* (God gives *la chance*).

For this article, I have selected extracts from interviews of the third sample, which was generated in 2015. These extracts focus on *la chance*

– an emic concept that turned out to be crucial already in earlier stages of my research. I asked questions like: What is *la chance*? What does *la chance* mean to you? Could you identify moments in your life in which you encountered *la chance*? Following this, I conducted analytical free-writing on these interview passages, describing what these extracts' themes, which helped me to gain a better understanding of what university graduates mean when they refer to *la chance*.

In order to describe the phenomenon of *la chance*, I took up *An Invitation to Ethnomethodology* (Francis and Hester 2004) and conducted Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA), which »is concerned with the organization of common-sense knowledge in terms of the categories members employ in accomplishing their activities in and through talk« (ibid.: 21).

MCA is about the identification of membership categorisation devices, which are a collection of membership categories and their rules of application. Here is a popular example (Stokoe 2012: 281): »The baby cries. The mother picks it up.« The ›baby‹ and the ›mother‹ are so-called categories. Now, there are rules of application such as category-bound activities, which refer to activities connected with a category, for example, ›crying‹ as a category-bound activity of the ›baby‹ or ›picking up‹ for the ›mother‹. In other words, category-bound activities give information about what it is that a certain category (›baby‹, ›mother‹) does. Another rule of application that is pertinent to this case is that of category-tied predicates, which refer to characteristics connected with a category, for example, ›demanding‹ as a category-tied predicate of the ›baby‹, or ›caring‹ for the ›mother‹ (see also Francis and Hester 2004; Silverman 1998; Stokoe 2012; Ten Have 2004).

To return to the example of »the baby cried; the mother picked it up.« There is nothing strange about this phrase. Vice versa, this would seem irritating: »The mother cried; the baby picked it up.« When it comes to the phenomenon of *la chance*, however, both stories are accurate: »*La chance* cried. The graduate picked it up.« (In other words, *la chance* appeared and the graduate took it.) And vice versa: »The graduate cried. *La chance* picked her/him up.« (The graduate was searching and *la chance* appeared.)

However, the relation between *la chance* and graduate presents itself as ambiguous. ›La chance‹ and ›graduate‹ constitute a pair. But it is not a unique pair: ›la chance‹ is not constituted by ›graduate‹, and ›graduate‹ does not constitute ›la chance‹. *La chance* exists without the graduate,

and the graduate still exists without *la chance*. However, the relationship between the two is crucial because ›la chance‹ defines ›graduate‹, and ›graduate‹ identifies ›la chance‹. This article focuses on that relationship since it demonstrates how graduates experience *la chance* and what it is that they do with *la chance*.

MCA was a useful tool for me to disentangle the ambiguous nature of *la chance* by, first, itemising informants' common-sense meanings of *la chance* and second, systematising different types of *la chance*. Rather than members' descriptions of persons (e.g. ›baby‹, ›mother‹), I was interested in their descriptions of a phenomenon – specifically, university graduates' descriptions of *la chance*. Therefore, I considered what university graduates referred to as *la chance* as a collective category for MCA. This was followed by analysing *la chance* as a category in terms of category-bound activities and category-tied predicates of *la chance*. I discovered that the emic term ›la chance‹ is a category which consists of several types I will refer to below as ›prerequisites‹, ›sprouts‹ and ›outcomes‹. These three types of *la chance* are interconnected through practices of ›opening up *la chance*‹ (›looking for *la chance*‹, ›finding *la chance*‹, ›working with *la chance*‹). The ultimate result of this analysis is a typology of *la chance*, which I now proceed to introduce in the following section. This will permit a more systematic understanding of what *la chance* is for university graduates in Bamako, what it does to them, as well as how they ›open up *la chance*‹.

## EXPLORING LA CHANCE

The university graduates I met in Bamako are working on the realisation of their futures – some of them have already achieved their goals, and some have not (yet). If it is personal effort which they all invest, what is it that, from their perspective, makes the difference? *La chance* makes a difference. It is distinctive, and it distinguishes. *La chance* is considered to determine the future outcome of graduates' present actions. Everyone is looking for *la chance*, yet it is not there for everyone. For university graduates the notion of *la chance* is a way of answering the puzzling question of why some people make it whereas some do not.

Malian graduates reflected on *la chance* either retrospectively or with reference to the future, but it is in the present that they work on increasing their exposure to it. As long as things stay the same, the future has not

yet arrived. In other words, *la chance* with a future perspective is a well-defined moment: it is the point in time when their efforts are rewarded.

There are three different types of *la chance*: prerequisites, sprouts and outcomes. These types are connected through the practice of ›opening up *la chance*‹, which itself consists of three practices: ›looking for *la chance*‹, ›finding *la chance*‹ and ›working with *la chance*‹. One type of *la chance* might add up to, or turn into, another type through practices of ›opening up *la chance*‹. It can be understood as akin to a chain, which has a beginning but no definite end. The following part of my contribution gives a detailed account of this typology of *la chance*. I begin by introducing prerequisites as the preconditions of the process of ›opening up *la chance*‹, which will then be discussed in the subsequent section.

### **Prerequisites: Possession**

In order to discover what *la chance* is, I coded the interview extracts in terms of category-tied predicates (which are included in footnotes here). This allowed me to identify three different types of *la chance*. The first type is what I call ›prerequisites‹. These prerequisites constitute the context into which individuals are born and socialised (e.g. family, environment, education). They are often referred to as *ma chance* (my chance) – *la chance* in possession. Prerequisites are *la chance* that has not been opened up by an individual but, instead, has been open to the individual from the very beginning. Most graduates considered these to be privileges. Prerequisites constitute a starting point that appears to be distributed randomly – a distinguishing factor that also enables further *la chance*.

University graduates do not consider this type of *la chance* as their personal achievement; rather, they are already equipped with it. In most cases, prerequisites are attributed to an external force such as God or coincidence. The following example demonstrates a clear distinction between the two: God is religion, but coincidence is something different. However, both provide *la chance*.

SL: Do you think that God made us meet in the first place?

A: Ah, no. That was a coincidence. You know, if we talk about God here, it is all about religion. But this is really a coincidence. So, the fact that we were almost neighbours. It's a coincidence that we met. [...] Human beings are shaped by their environment. So, I'd say that it is the environment. There are areas in Bamako

where you'd never meet a white person. And yeah, that was ma chance. (Interview 2015 with Siaka, 29, English graduate; my translation.)<sup>1</sup>

Siaka, my field assistant, described the fact that we met as *la chance* because it later led to employment for him. He argues for the importance of context when it comes to *la chance*. Living in the same area and getting to know each other are coincidences. He did not do anything to bring it about, and he was not living there in order to look for *la chance*. But living in the right area makes it more likely to find *la chance* even if one is not looking for it. For him, the area he lives in is a prerequisite. This is *la chance* in the sense that it preconditioned us meeting each other. In other words, coincidence is *la chance*.

*La chance* as a prerequisite is an individual's foundation for looking for further *la chance*, in a similar way as a gardener inspects the soil where she has planted seeds. Prerequisites define the starting point in the process of ›opening up *la chance*‹. Graduates are aware of the privilege of their education:

Going to school as a kid was ma chance to me. There are a lot of girls and also boys that do not have this la chance and they are on the streets today. [...] It's because their parents did not have the means to send them to school. [...] I'd say school is la chance for me: being literate, being intellectual. That is la chance. Not everyone is an intellectual, because not everyone had la chance to go to school. (Interview 2015 with Rokiatou, 32, sociology graduate; my translation.)<sup>2</sup>

There are many children who do not go to school, either because their parents' financial situation precluded it or because they had other plans for their children. In other words, being born into a family with both the attitude towards and the financial means for their children's studies is *la chance*, and so is education itself. Graduating from university, ›being an intellectual‹ is *la chance*. One of the reasons for this lies in the fact that only few individuals graduate; they are an exception and constitute the educated elite. For Simone *la chance* is something that made her exceptional as well:

---

1 | Code: la\_chance\category-tied\_predicate\environment\prerequisite.

2 | Code: la\_chance\category-tied\_predicate\means\prerequisite.

I've had *la chance* to travel. No one in my family had *la chance* to travel abroad before. I did my university degree [Master's] abroad. I thank God for that. I also never thought of integrating professionally as quickly as I did. That was *la chance*. [...] I also had *la chance* to have wonderful parents. I grew up in a family with different religious beliefs in harmony. I have a lot of *la chance*. [...] I have *la chance* to be healthy. (Interview 2015 with Simone, 24, law-school graduate; my translation.)<sup>3</sup>

Simone was the first person in her family to travel and study abroad – that is *la chance*. She is grateful for that opportunity, which has made her biography unique amongst her relatives as well as in comparison to the rest of Malian society. Ultimately, this puts her in a privileged position on the labour market when looking for *la chance*. Simone lists numerous examples of what *la chance* is to her: her opportunities, her job, her family and her health. There are a wide range of things she is thankful for, and she recognises them as privileges that were preconditioned by her birth or by an outside force. For Simone, *la chance* is her family; for Oumar, it is friendship:

O: I've always met amazing people throughout my life. I consider that to be *la chance*. But it wasn't me who provoked it. [...]

SL: So, receiving your job is not?

O: No, no. [...] It's because of Adama that I got that job today. So, *la chance* that I have is to have Adama as a friend. At university, it was the same. He often paid for my transport to school because I couldn't afford it. [...] It is *la chance* that I met him and the reason why I am where I am today. (Interview 2015 with Oumar, 27, economics graduate; my translation.)<sup>4</sup>

For Oumar *la chance* is primarily his friendship with Adama. He emphasises that he did not provoke that. It has never been his intention to make friends in order to benefit from them in any financial or professional sense. Oumar has not been calculative; he did not anticipate any advantages when he first met Adama. This is basically why he believes in *la chance* – *la chance* is something with which he was provided. Oumar attributes the fact that he was able to finish his studies and find employment to

---

**3** | Code: `la_chance\category-tied_predicate\privilege\prerequisite`.

**4** | Code: `la_chance\category-tied_predicate\friendship\prerequisite`.



his friend Adama, who has always been supportive of him. In this case, friendship is the prerequisite for access to a job and money.

To sum up, environment, family and friends, and related opportunities are *la chance* in the sense of prerequisites. They compose an individual's point of departure for the process of ›opening up *la chance*‹, which I will now discuss.

### ›Opening up *la chance*‹

›Opening up *la chance*‹ (*ouvrir la chance*) is a process of action that is directed towards the future. This process consists of three connected practices: ›looking for *la chance*‹ (*chercher la chance*) or preparation, ›finding *la chance*‹ (*trouver la chance*) or identification, and ›working with *la chance*‹ (*bénéficier de la chance*) or transformation. To look for *la chance* means to prepare in order to be able to create or identify *la chance* when it appears and, then, to transform *la chance* into a state of possession. With the help of interview extracts I coded as graduates' category-bound activities in relation to *la chance*, the following section highlights how university graduates talk about their engagement in these practices in the process of ›opening up *la chance*‹.

#### Looking for *la chance*: Preparation

University graduates do not simply receive *la chance*, but they are ›looking for‹ or provoking *la chance* as a means of preparing for its appearance. They are preparing not because *la chance* is guaranteed to emerge like a sprout from the soil, but because graduates are convinced that they will eventually find it. However, *la chance* is not only about getting or finding it but also about preparing for it, as the next interview excerpt demonstrates:

La chance exists, but in my life there is not a lot of it. We say that if you look for la chance, you'll find la chance. But if you don't look for it, you cannot speak of la chance. (Interview 2015 with Siaka, 29, English graduate; my translation.)<sup>5</sup>

Siaka distinguishes between *la chance* in general and in his life. He has not experienced much *la chance*; yet, he is convinced of its existence. He knows that it is only by looking for *la chance* that one will find it. It is

---

5 | Code: la\_chance\category-bound\_activity\opening\_up\looking\_for.

the practice of ›looking for‹ that defines *la chance*. To put it differently, *la chance* is the result of practices of ›looking for‹. It is only *la chance* if it has been looked for in the first place. Things that simply happen are therefore not *la chance*. In other words, there is a difference between ›looking for‹ and ›finding‹ *la chance*. It does exist, but only those who look for it will be able to find it.

Let's take soccer as an example: if you want to have *la chance* to score, you need to know how to play first. So, it is in this sense that you can provoke *la chance*. In real life, you need *la chance* to have a good job and for that you first need a good diploma . [...] So, in this sense you can provoke *la chance*, but *la chance* could also show up just like that. For example, when I met Adama. (Interview 2015 with Oumar, 27, economics graduate; my translation.)<sup>6</sup>

Oumar provides soccer as an example: scoring is *la chance*, and if you want to score you must know how to play the game. Conversely, if you are not fit and are neither able to dribble the ball nor understand the game, then you cannot score. Figuratively speaking, there are skills required in order to open up *la chance*; and these skills are informed by preparation and practice. »In real life, *la chance* is to have a job,« Oumar says. If you want *la chance* of being employed, you have to be qualified and well-educated. Again, there is no guarantee that there will be *la chance* – neither in soccer nor in real life. However, mastering the game of soccer or holding a university degree renders individuals capable of provoking *la chance* and, therefore, makes them more likely to receive *la chance*. To provoke *la chance* is to look for *la chance* in the sense that individuals provide themselves with the set of skills necessary for them to be able to identify *la chance* when it appears.

But there is also another *la chance*, one which appears »just like that«. Oumar connects this type of *la chance* with his friendship to Adama. To him, friendship is *la chance*. He did not provoke it – it simply ›is‹. There is no rule for meeting great people. »We met just like that and we became friends just like that.« Friendship, it seems, cannot be provoked, but only fostered. Oumar appreciates their friendship for everything that it is. His employment opportunity was unexpected, and it is true that while it

---

6 | Code: la\_chance\category-bound\_activity\opening\_up\preparation\looking\_for.

originated in that friendship, it did not grow out of that friendship. Oumar did not establish his relationship with Adama with the intention of finding employment. Nevertheless, Oumar found *la chance* without having genuinely looked for it. The intention to provoke *la chance* is beyond the scope of intention in friendships. When it shows up through friendship, it comes as a surprise and it is experienced as having ›just happened‹.

Rokiatou, in contrast, describes how she seeks *la chance* by creating and using professional networks based on an anticipated outcome. She builds relationships with people working in her field or who are themselves well-connected. »If someone working for an interesting company lived next-door, I would surely get in touch with that person: present myself, my qualifications and my professional goals,« she explained. In case that person knew of a job offer, he or she would then think of Rokiatou. »You have to be courageous and keep on looking and maybe *la chance* will nurture you one day,« she says, recognising that there is no guarantee that *la chance* would appear. Consequently, efforts made in looking for *la chance* are more like promising ventures than secure investments.

Madou looked for *la chance*, too – in multiple directions. His dream was to become a researcher. »The company I'm working for? I did not choose it,« he says. He always admired those people in their fancy cars and clothes, but he never intended to work for them. »Never,« he emphasises. Madou acquired his diploma in 2010 but was unable to find a job quickly. His mother suggested that he should talk to his uncle, who held a high position at a telecommunications company.

For a whole year [...] I passed by my uncle's house to ask about an internship. ›Could you get me an internship?‹ He'd say: ›Yeah, come back here tomorrow,‹ and I came back the next day. I did that for a whole year. So I became discouraged. My mother always told me: ›Go there again.‹ [...] And one day, he talked to my boss: ›We need to take that kid as an intern. He is really starting to bother me.‹ He said: ›Okay. Let's take him as a commercial agent.‹ (Interview 2015 with Madou, 27, physics graduate; my translation.)<sup>7</sup>

His persistent efforts were not directed towards his initial professional destination but to an alternative, similarly difficult goal. Although he did

---

7 | Code: la\_chance\category-bound\_activity\opening\_up\persistence\looking\_for.

not envision a future as a commercial agent, he did perceive his uncle as a possible gate-opener to employment in general. Madou considers this first internship at a telecommunication company as *la chance*. He recognises his own persistence and says, at the same time, that he had no influence on the matter since it was his uncle who had to ask and his boss who decided.

Again, *la chance* is the result of a combination of prerequisites and practices of looking for *la chance*. These practices are characterised by anticipation and commitment; their core lies in preparation. Graduates prepare in order to make sure they are able to find *la chance* when it appears. The appearance of *la chance* and its identification by graduates is an interplay that will now be presented.

### **A sprout appears: Identifying *la chance***

This part of my contribution introduces what I have coded as the category-bound activity of ›finding *la chance*‹ and the category-tied predicate of ›sprout‹. This second type of *la chance*, which I call a ›sprout‹ in the sense of a sprouting plant, and the practice of ›opening up *la chance*‹ are closely connected. The sprouting of *la chance* is the key here: provided that this sprout appears and is identified as such by an individual, the future will work out well.

Some informants referred to the following type of *la chance* as ›a sprout‹ that suddenly appears. I like this metaphor because it conveys the sense that ›opening up *la chance*‹ is like the planting of seeds: university graduates are the ones who plant, but the seeds themselves need to grow as well. When a sprout appears, it does not show up in a flash and a bang. It is small and fragile and can therefore easily be overlooked by people who previously did not sow any seeds. But those who do see a sprout must still take good care for it to flourish. University graduates refer to it in real life as an opportunity or coincidence. This sprout itself cannot be created by individuals, however. Its actual emergence is beyond an individual's influence, but an individual is required for it to be recognised. To put this differently, a sprout of *la chance* needs to be identified by an individual who is prepared. Siaka knows what he wants and executes his decisions accordingly:

Yeah, I've always said that I had *la chance* with my friends, because I chose them. [...] *La chance* originates in the person itself; you have to choose what you want.

But I think it's difficult to choose because choices fall as they will like that. And you have to know what you want. This is how you'll find *la chance*. (Interview 2015 with Siaka, 29, English graduate; my translation.)<sup>8</sup>

He emphasises that *la chance* is a product of human reasoning and, therefore, of human action. Decisions, if they are directed towards a fixed goal, will lead to *la chance*. Siaka is focused and able to prioritise different options and identify *la chance*. Simone argues along the same lines:

I tell myself I already have some [professional] experience and I know that I can get there. If you know what you want and you are willing to work hard for it, God will help you to get there for sure. God is going to provide me with *la chance* to succeed, because I know what I want and I'll work hard for that. So, the two complement each other. (Interview 2015 with Simone, 24, law-school graduate; my translation.)<sup>9</sup>

For her *la chance* is the result of both goal-oriented hard work and God's blessing. Simone already knows her way and it is this knowledge that enables her to identify God's provision of *la chance*. Knowing what you want is presented here as the key criterion to *la chance* in the sense of an initial sprout. Such sprouts create differences; they privilege some people while leaving others with what is considered to be normality:

There were a lot of other interns, more than twenty, but we were the only ones who were allowed to produce our own reports. That was *la chance*. [...] The others were also upright and hard-working. I don't know, but I believe it's like an impulse for something to flourish. *La chance* is a sprout. It's true that we've contributed to it, but it was also *la chance* itself. (Interview 2015 with Simone, 24, law-school graduate; my translation.)<sup>10</sup>

There were many interns, but only Simone and her friend worked on their own reports. *La chance* distinguishes. It is because an identified norm exists that *la chance* is recognised. *La chance* exists in relation to the norm; it is exceptional. Simone explains that she does not differ from others

---

**8** | Code: `la_chance\category-bound_activity\opening_up\decision\finding`.

**9** | Code: `la_chance\category-bound_activity\opening_up\conviction\finding`.

**10** | Code: `la_chance\category-tied_predicate\impulse\sprout`.

who work as interns, but it was she and her friend who received *la chance*; it was she who became the exception. From this perspective, people are not perceived to be different, but it is *la chance* that creates difference. *La chance* in this sense is like a sprout that enables something new, or as Simone formulates: »*La chance* is like an impulse for something to flourish.« For Simone it is *la chance* that made her become the exception. Siaka, in contrast, argues for his own capacities that qualified him for *la chance*:

La chance is also within human beings. What I'm saying is that humans come with all their capacities to the game of *la chance*. When I saw you, I came closer, I talked to you; but how many people have seen you, too, and simply passed on by? I talked to you, we got to know each other and as soon as you had something... BAM! You gave me the opportunity. You think you would have given me the job if I hadn't talked to you in the first place? It's like that. (Interview 2015 with Siaka, 29, English graduate; my translation.)<sup>11</sup>

Siaka easily interacts and connects with people. He initiated a conversation with me whereas many others living in our neighbourhood did not. If he had not approached me, this job opportunity might not have shown up. It was his qualification in combination with his behaviour that distinguished him from others and, »BAM«, there was *la chance*, there was the sprout he was looking for:

You needed someone to transcribe those interviews. That was *la chance* for me. You knew me already. That was an advantage. You did not know anyone else for that; and then, simple as that, you took me. (Interview 2015 with Siaka, 29, English graduate; my translation.)<sup>12</sup>

My need to find someone to help with interview transcriptions appeared as Siaka's *la chance*, he says. It is pertinent to note that he depicts this sprout as *la chance* to him, whereas it was »simple as that« to me. Even though he acknowledges that I was looking for someone to assist me, he does not speculate that knowing him might have been *la chance* to me, too. Obviously, *la chance* is a matter of perspective. Siaka's conception of

---

**11** | Code: `la_chance\category-tied_predicate\opportunity\sprout`.

**12** | Code: `la_chance\category-tied_predicate\job\sprout`.

the appearance of *la chance* is similar to that of Simone. She goes one step farther when she explicitly focuses on its source:

La chance maybe is to achieve something that you never thought you could achieve. Yeah, that's la chance. You want something, but you're aware that you'll never get it if you don't have la chance. But there is God, who provides you with just some little thing, but this gets things moving so that you'll get it. That's la chance. (Interview 2015 with Simone, 24, law-school graduate; my translation.)<sup>13</sup>

*La chance* is referred to as being beyond what seems to be possible and, simultaneously, as »just some little thing«. It is personal effort plus God rewarding you with *la chance* that finally enables you to move forward.

Once *la chance* has been identified individuals need to ›work with *la chance*‹, which is still part of the process of ›opening up *la chance*‹. ›Working with *la chance*‹ is characterised by practices of transformation, as I shall now explore.

### **Working with *la chance*: Transformation**

To begin, it is important to note that working with *la chance* differs significantly from looking for *la chance*. ›Looking for‹ refers to practices that are not directed towards a specific goal but rather an idea (for example, employment). Practices of ›looking for‹ *la chance* result in finding *la chance*. ›Working with‹, on the other hand, is directed towards a specific, anticipated outcome that has been inspired by the sprout of *la chance*. The product of working with *la chance* is the very possession of *la chance*.

In my daily life, well, I'm at work and I work correctly. It's in this sense that I'm provoking ma chance right now. You know, one day when they do their evaluation, they'll say: ›this guy is working well, we should put him in another position‹. So, it is in this sense that I'm provoking ma chance. (Interview 2015 with Oumar, 27, economics graduate; my translation.)<sup>14</sup>

He refers to his job, which he does diligently because he anticipates company evaluations. He mentions nothing concrete but he anticipates

---

**13** | Code: la\_chance\category-tied\_predicate\achievement\sprout.

**14** | Code: la\_chance\category-bound\_activity\opening\_up\anticipation\working\_with.

other potential positions for him within the company. He is working correctly and thereby provokes *la chance* to be considered for another job. He is preparing. He cannot think of any other action that provokes *la chance*. According to him, *la chance* is something he can provoke by preparing for an anticipated outcome.

By creating serious relationships, I mean: we are collaborating right now and I'm going to be serious about it, and I'm not going to lie to you, I'm going to be honest. If you find something that corresponds to my profile, you won't hesitate to contact me, right? And that's it. (Interview 2015 with Siaka, 29, English graduate; my translation.)<sup>15</sup>

How, then, does Siaka open up *la chance* on his own? He establishes professional relationships by being honest and dutiful. This is his means of establishing himself as a present collaborator and proving himself worthy for possible future collaboration. This is how he makes sure that I think of him in case an opportunity arises for him in the future. He would not only be serious within this relationship, but with everyone around him. You do not want anyone to think or suggest that you are not serious because this affects your opportunities. If I had heard from someone I trust that Siaka was not serious, I would not have employed him. Far more than merely a type of behaviour you need to apply in relationships that appear to be promising in regard to employment opportunities, being serious is a characteristic that is of greater general value because it works beyond established relationships in both positive and negative ways. As Simone once again reflects on her chance to become an intern at the national television network, she says:

La chance was that we studied hard, that we understood our lessons and were thirsty for knowledge. We were worried and we managed to get out and it's also because of us that this chance worked out. (Interview 2015 with Simone, 24, law-school graduate; my translation.)<sup>16</sup>

---

**15** | Code: la\_chance\category-bound\_activity\opening\_up\professionality\working\_with.

**16** | Code: la\_chance\category-bound\_activity\opening\_up\studying\working\_with.



I specifically ask her about the saying that I heard from a friend in Mali, which is about God providing *la chance* and man's ability to open it on his or her own as well. She says that it is true, since it is God who provides the opportunities. She was amongst the five best students in her class, and this assured her an internship at a television station. And, she continues, it was due to her studying well and staying on at the station as an unpaid intern that made *la chance* work. She speaks of *la chance* that »a pu fonctionner« – that worked out. Thus, *la chance* is not something that is supposed to work just like that but, instead, it is something people need to work with. *La chance* is presented as an opportunity that has been recognised and exploited as such by, in this case, Simone. Therefore, had she not worked with *la chance* or, to put it differently, not participated in the development of *la chance*, it would not have flourished. The final part of this contribution picks up this notion of flourishing *la chance* and presents the third, and last, type of *la chance*.

### Outcome: Possession

*La chance* transformed is called *sa chance* – her/his chance. As a possession, *la chance* is considered to be the outcome of a completed process of ›opening up *la chance*‹. This exact outcome will then turn into the first type of *la chance* as a requisite in the ongoing process of ›opening up *la chance*‹.

Siaka simply found a job, and he terms this happenstance ›la chance‹. This type of *la chance* is recognised not only by the graduate who finds it but also by the people around him:

We say that someone who's got la chance is someone who's got something. Do you understand what I want to say? If you get something, we say you have la chance. But if you don't have anything, no one is going to say that you have la chance. So, you've got to look for it. That's it. (Interview 2015 with Siaka, 29, English graduate; my translation.)<sup>17</sup>

›Not to have something‹ is not *la chance*. But if you have something, others will observe that. This type of *la chance* is about making *la chance* your own. Siaka said earlier: »You have to look for it and *la chance* will come.«

---

17 | Code: la\_chance\category-tied\_predicate\possession\outcome.

But *la chance* itself is nothing. »It's about possession, about what we have,« he adds. Hence, if you happen to have *la chance* without looking for it, you would still have to deal with it in order to make it work for you. Once the sprout is identified it flourishes in the process of working with *la chance* until the crop is ready to be harvested.

In summary, there are different states of *la chance*. Residence in a certain area can be *la chance*, but only for those who use it that way, for those who benefit from it. Many people live in the same area but not all of them are considered to have *la chance* – only some have it. *La chance* is not for everyone; rather, it is distinctive. It is recognised in retrospect once it is owned, if it has been grasped or transformed from sprout into possession, from *la chance* to ›sa chance‹ (›her or his chance‹). Others would only recognise *la chance* when it is in the state of possession.

## CONCLUSION

In this contribution I have introduced the process of ›opening up *la chance*‹ as a way in which Malian graduates manage uncertainty. My initial understanding of *la chance* as a single, ambiguous phenomenon shifted to distinguish between various forms of *la chance* that are distinct in terms of characteristics and practices. Ultimately, three types of *la chance* have been identified: prerequisites, sprouts and outcomes. They are interconnected through practices of ›opening up *la chance*‹ – a process that consists of ›looking for‹, ›finding‹ and ›working with‹ *la chance*. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the phenomenon of *la chance*, as experienced by university graduates, is a process that includes persistent preparation in addition to the identification of a precise moment in time – a sprout of *la chance* – that enables futures.

The aim of this paper has been to disentangle both the various layers and the ambiguity of *la chance*. By applying Membership Categorisation Analysis to sections of my data, I have been able to systematically distinguish between what *la chance* is (category-tied predicates) and which practices are connected with *la chance* (category-bound activities).

In parallel to ethnomethodology's popular example of the logical »the baby cried; the mother picked it up« (Francis and Hester 2004: 47), as opposed to the confusing »The mother cried; the baby picked her up«, the relationship between the graduate and *la chance* is revealed. There is

no inherent awkwardness here, which is one of the reasons why *la chance* appears to be ambiguous in the first place. To repeat, »the graduate cried; *la chance* picked her/him up.« (The graduate was preparing. *La chance* appeared.) And vice versa: »*La chance* cried; the graduate picked it up.« (*La chance* appeared. The graduate identified it.) This relationship demands attention in regard to both ends: the graduate demands attention from *la chance* as the graduate enforces it. *La chance* demands the graduate's attention as well, since it needs to be identified and transformed. All in all, Membership Categorisation Analysis has been instrumental in overcoming the first impression that *la chance* is ambiguous by disclosing the interplay between *la chance* and the graduate.

Now that the baby has been picked up, the question is: what happens next? What happens after the baby is picked up by the mother? How does the baby react? Maybe the baby stops crying, maybe the baby even starts to laugh or continues to cry. And what about the mother? Maybe she nurses the baby; maybe she lulls the baby to sleep or hands the baby over to her husband. The point is that the interaction does not end with the mother picking up the baby. Similarly, the process of ›opening up *la chance*‹ does not end with *la chance* being identified by the graduate: *la chance* is further transformed into the graduate's own requisite. And once *la chance* is owned, the graduate will look for further *la chance*.

›Opening up *la chance*‹ means ›seizing promising chances‹ (see Johnson-Hanks 2005), but it is also about identifying and creating ›promising chances‹. The process of ›opening up *la chance*‹ acknowledges university graduates' contribution to the appearance of such ›promising chances‹, which they (and I) call ›*la chance*‹. Whereas ›judicious opportunism‹ is about working with a sprout of *la chance* only, ›opening up *la chance*‹ begins earlier – with preparation, in particular by generating expertise and by planting seeds. To be prepared means to be attentive: no sprout will go unnoticed or, even worse, get crushed underfoot. It is the process of ›opening up *la chance*‹ that problematises how opportunities are evaluated and adapted to, but also how they are prepared for and created.

›Judicious opportunism‹ argues that »the actor seizes promising chances« (Johnson-Hanks 2005: 363). It is about evaluating and anticipating a ›chance‹ to be ›promising‹, and also about acting accordingly by ›seizing‹ such ›promising chances‹. ›Judicious opportunism‹ requires adaptation, flexibility and evaluation based on ›contingent, sudden, and surprising offers that life can make. On the basis of these offers, the

aspirations, once vague, will be concretized« (ibid.: 376). In other words, ›judicious opportunism‹ is about reacting in response to an opportunity once it appears (I regard this »offer« as a sprout of *la chance*). It is a strategy characterised by reaction, and it answers the question of how an individual responds to situations of uncertainty, even as it fails to fully recognise the ability of young graduates to create ›promising chances‹ on their own.

In conclusion, university graduates in Bamako create certainty as they open up *la chance*. It is their conviction that *la chance* exists, which is informed by their experiences, in combination with their practices of ›opening up *la chance*‹ (that is, looking for *la chance*, finding *la chance*, and working with *la chance*) that create certainty. University graduates know what they want their futures to look like and what they want to become in the future. Uncertainty about their future does not manifest itself in graduates' daily practices; rather, it circles around the question of when it is that these efforts will flourish. *La chance* delivers the answer because its appearance catalyses the future.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- APEJ (Agence pour la Promotion de l'Emploi des Jeunes). 2011. *Présentation de l'agence pour la promotion de l'emploi des jeunes*. Bamako: APEJ.
- Francis, David, Stephen Hester. 2004. *An Invitation to Ethnomethodology: Language, Society and Interaction*. London: Sage.
- Johnson-Hanks, Jennifer. 2005. »When the Future Decides: Uncertainty and Intentional Action in Contemporary Cameroon.« *Current Anthropology* 46(3): 363-385.
- Silverman, David. 1998. *Harvey Sacks: Social Science and Conversation Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stokoe, Elizabeth. 2012. »Moving Forward with Membership Categorization Analysis: Methods for Systematic Analysis.« *Discourse Studies* 14 (3): 277-303.
- Ten Have, Paul. 2004. *Understanding Qualitative Research and Ethnomethodology*. London: Sage.



© Fatoumata Traoré



© Zoumana Sidibé



© Oumou Traoré

