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Mutual dependency: Young male migrants from the Central African Republic in Urban Cameroon

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Abstract. Rural Central and Western Africa is losing its population to cities (Adepoju, 2005). The young men described in this article have left poor economic conditions in the Central African Republic for a better life in Cameroon. They are mostly orphans who left their homes before the age of 15 and, through various paths, found their way to Tongo, a Muslim neighbourhood in the centre of the fast-growing city Ngaoundéré in northern Cameroon.

All those 'who come' rely on whatever opportunities they can carve out in the relation between themselves as individuals and the host community. Available work is mostly within petty-service which was the work for slaves in the 19th and most of the 20th century.

Drawing on ethnographic material gathered over a period of ten years, this article asks: What strategies are used by the young men coming to urban Ngaoundéré to gain access to work and to survive? In this specific setting, the quality of the relation between the young men who have come and the Muslim women is of special concern. Accepting slave like working conditions, following certain rules of respectability and a reciprocal logic, with the work providers; some migrants find their surviving strategies. Not accepting or not being able to negotiate such work conditions is work access denied, witch is extremely dramatic for young men with out any social network in the city. The article merges approaches from visual anthropology and 'the ethnography of the particular' (Abu-Lughod, 1991), and aims at making a fresh contribution to the study of migration and youths in urban Africa.

[Central Africa, urbanisation, migration, youth, slavery, informal economy, visual anthropology]

Introduction

Immigrants coming to Cameroon

Matieu previously lived with his grandparents in a small village north of Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR). There, the family had regular contact with a trader from Cameroon who promised Matieu schooling if he were to come with him to Cameroon; thus, Matieu was permitted to leave. This is how he came from CAR to Tongo – a Muslim neighbourhood in Ngaoundéré – in the mid-1990s.

Koko made the journey to Tongo from his village in CAR with his friends Mathoum and Saxon. Koko and Mathoum had both lost their parents.¹ All three say that they were unhappy with the way in which they were treated in their homes, and that this was the reason why they fled. Doing small work on their way, they spent two rainy seasons in the border town Maiganga, cultivating for a Fulani family and working as shoe shiners, before moving on to Ngaoundéré.

Elie and Abel previously lived in a small village in CAR, where they heard rumours about the wealth and prosperity in Cameroon by young adults who had spent some years there. One day, Elie and Abel decided to follow in the footsteps of their elder village mates. They did not have anything to do in the village and no one cared about what they did. Without telling their superiors, they picked up some clothes and two chickens, and left.

Vincent grew up in a village on the Cameroonian side of the border, a five hours' drive from Ngaoundéré. His brother worked with water transport in Ngaoundéré for many years. When Vincent was old enough, he went to town and took over his brother's position.

These are some of the stories that the children and youth who come to Tongo tell about why they have left their villages. Some have made the journey as planned by their family, some have been given away, but most have fled from poverty, without their parent's consent.

MÈRE, a local NGO working to improve conditions for children on the streets, confirms that the stories of Matieu, Koko and Elie are common among youth who come to Ngaoundéré. Their dreams are within a neo-liberal narrative of progress (Fergusson, 2006). They also share the flight from poverty, failing harvests, drought, or slave-like work conditions in diamond or gold mines (Adepoju, 2005). Increasingly, they also flee from conflicts and war-like situations.²

The current migration in Cameroon is mostly internal, from the countryside to the cities (Mberu and Pongou, 2012); however, an increasing number of immigrants are arriving from other countries in West and Central Africa (Adama, 2014). In migration studies, Cameroon has often been seen as a country of departure (Pelican, Tatah and Ndjio, 2008) for international migration. Little is known about migration into Cameroon. A number of publications have dealt with the migration motives and strategies of Cameroonian youth in the country's south. Studies in the country's north have shown that migrants tend to Islamise after coming to the cities. This is due to Mus-

¹ 370,000 of the Central African Republic's population (approximately five million) are orphans (according to SOS Children's Villages <http://www.soschildrensvillages.ca/central-african-republic> (05. 04. 2015)).

² The UHCR reported a flow of more than 190,000 CAR refugees to Cameroon in 2014, due to armed conflict in the country. Most of these refugees are living in refugee camps at the border, but many have tried to find a way to live in Ngaoundéré.

lims' domination of trade in the region (Burnham, 1996). There are studies in West Africa on youths who have migrated within family networks (Thoresen, 2013).

The protagonists in this article are all of Gbaya ethnicity. The Gbaya were traditionally agriculturalists and hunters, and they are one of the larger ethnic groups in CAR, divided by the border with Cameroon (see Burnham, 1980).

These young men try to situate themselves in their new setting in a way that would enable them to maximise their opportunities and they create these new opportunities through individual choices. The article wants to show how different their individual careers might be, despite of the fact that the protagonists come from similar backgrounds and meet similar opportunities.

Ngaoundéré

Ngaoundéré is situated in northern Cameroon, on the Adamoua Plateau, where the savannah meets the forest and Christianity meets Islam. As late as the 1950s, the Sultan was continuing to send soldiers to capture slaves from surrounding villages. Today, large numbers of young people come to the city from the same areas that were raided by the Sultan's soldiers only two generations ago. The first Gbaya to come to Ngaoundéré came as slaves. Today, young Gbayas (and youth from many other ethnic groups and nationalities) are coming by their own free will to search for a better life, often taking the former slave's work. Ngaoundéré is one of the fast-growing cities in Africa south of the Sahara; it has grown from 55,000 (in 1950) (Froelich 1954:25) to 600,000 people in fewer than 50 years (Akam, 2014:278).³ People with different cultural, religious and national identities come to Ngaoundéré in a constant flow. The immigrant's presence in this already pressured space has a significant effect on both themselves and their new physical, social, economic and political environment (Hammar 2014:7). The authorities in Ngaoundéré are concerned about the massive immigration. The Sultan, the police and politicians have taken various initiatives to house all those who have come. Fear for security, health, housing and pressure on the social system are frequently discussed. Migrants are talked about in general terms as the reason for increased criminality in the region.

Due to economic hardship and sanctions from the World Bank, the Cameroonian state started to tax water in the mid-1990s; following this, many households could no longer afford to have running water. Since then, public water taps in cities have become an open resource for income, attracting immigrants from all over Central Africa. Migrants seem to flock to the open opportunities that water gives them. One person sells water at each water post.⁴ In principle, anyone can come to these water posts and

³ From 1987 to 1998, the population grew from 457,000 to 600,000.

⁴ The person who pays the public tax for this specific water post employs the water seller.

offer their services. The many water posts in Ngaoundéré have boys of varied ethnic and religious identities; mainly, they come from the poor neighbouring countries (Niger, Chad and CAR) and the Far North Region in Cameroon. Some stay for some weeks, some for the dry season (when work is 'plentiful') and others for years.

Slavery and economic crisis

To understand the careers of Koko, Elie, Matieu and the others, we must review some aspects of Ngaoundéré and Cameroon's recent history.

Ngaoundéré became the capital of the Adamoua region of Cameroon during the Fulani-organised jihad at the turn of the 19th century. Shehu Usumanu bi Fodiye, a famous Fulani leader in Yola (present-day Nigeria), requested the Fulani, who were settled north of Ngaoundéré, to participate in jihad (holy war). Within a few decades, Ngaoundéré was turned into one of the most important Fulani centres in northern Cameroon (Burnham 1996:18).⁵

Before they started the jihad, the Fulanis were cattle herders who moved their herds on the savannah seasonally. They had relatively little knowledge about Islam (Mohamoudou, 1981). Hausa traders and Kanuri Muslim scholars followed the Fulani. Within a few decades, they managed to build a town with a developed tax and military system. The wealth and power of Ngaoundéré was largely built through the practice of slavery. Driven by the notion of a holy war, the Fulani sought to convert people through raids. In reality, the raids were carried out to capture slaves (Roitman, 2004; Schilder, 1993). Slaves did most of the manual and domestic work for the Fulani, and surrounding Ngaoundéré were several slave villages that cultivated for the Muslim populations. In 1950, there were 55,000 inhabitants in Ngaoundéré, of which 22,000 were Fulani/Muslim and 33,000 were slaves, vassals and servants (Froelich, 1954:25).

Ver Eecke (1989) traces two important characteristics of the Islamisation of the Fulani: first, the legitimisation of the seclusion and domination of women; second, the adaptability to Islam of the ideals of respectability in traditional Fulani culture. The term *pulaaku*, which refers to notions of respect and honour in human conduct, is key to understanding Fulani society (Riesman 1977:116–141; Mahmoudou, 2000). The *pulaaku* concept comprises a variety of norms for public behaviour. If a person's public actions violate these norms, he or she will feel ashamed (*semteende*). Shameful behaviour is sanctioned.

During the 1800s, a hierarchical system with clearly defined social positions and notions of personhood was established in Ngaoundéré. The basic division was between

⁵ As I write this article, Boko Haram is attacking northern Cameroon. Boko Haram is using the 1804 jihad in their rhetoric, claiming that their intention is a caliphate through which they will re-install the pre-colonial order and economical prosperity.

slaves (*maccudo*) and free men (*dimo*). The latter, who were held as pure and virtuous, proud and independent, were married (to secluded women), kept herds of cattle and were intellectuals versed in the Koran and disposed to teach in Koranic schools, from which some were elected to be members of the Sultan's court. In this category fell the Fulani, Kanuri and (to some degree) Hausa people – those with *pulaaku*. Slaves served as guards, herders, cultivators and household servants, being Mbom (from Ngaoundéré), Pere (from the southwest towards Nigeria), Dii (from north of Ngaoundéré), Gbaya (from the east towards CAR) and others from the Adamaoua Plateau and nearby areas. The slaves were considered non-believers, as well as dirty, rude and unworthy of personhood, due to their shameful behaviour.

Today, most families with compounds in Tongo are of Fulani/Kanuri origin, and have lived here for generations. They belong to the urban elite. Many of them have an economic adaptation based on a combination of trade and cattle; in addition, some are Muslim scholars. After independence, the Sultan lost his economic and military power to the new state. Public taxes were introduced and slavery was forbidden. Gradually, the Muslim populations lost their privileged positions. The once large cattle herds diminished, as their owners had to pay taxes and salaries for the work that slaves had previously done. Furthermore, formal education with a 'Western' curriculum was introduced as the basis for recruiting people to formal positions in the state.⁶ Over a period of a few years, the Muslim population lost much of its dominant economic and political position. The state economy went into crisis in the mid-1990s, wherein the CFA⁷ was devaluated 50 per cent and salaries diminished, due to IMF requisitions (Aerts et al., 2000). In Tongo, the economic crisis led Fulani men to do work that had formerly been perceived as impossible for Fulanis to do: working as butchers, drivers and so forth. Some women even started to work outside the household. Locally, it is widely said that the crises violated the norms of *pulaaku*.

Despite these and other changes related to the general modernisation of the state, the system of social stratification introduced through the holy war still holds a strong position in Ngaoundéré. As we will see below, the seclusion of women and the differences between free/slave and clean/dirty introduced two centuries ago are fundamental to understanding the integration of young migrants into petty-service work.

Studying social processes through an ethnography of the particular

An inspiring ethnographic classic from the nearby region of Sahel is *Baba of Karo* (Smith, 1954), which describes Muslim Hausa male-orientated society in northern Ni-

⁶ The Muslim communities in northern Cameroon have been reluctant towards Western education and families in this region have, for a long time, refused to send their children to schools (Waage, 2006).

⁷ CFA = Central African Franc.

geria from a woman's point of view. Having been divorced several times, Baba has lived in several provinces. Smith narrates Baba's life history and the stories of other women who have been close to her throughout her life. Through vivid descriptions of joy and happiness, sadness, longing and reaction to authority, we engage in the narrative, understanding when and why Baba feels confident, embarrassed, proud and so on. We learn about Hausa domestic life, farming, mobility and slavery, as well as the Hausa institutions of friendship, adoption, polygamy and kinship. Baba is presented as a complex person with a rich repertoire of skills and qualities, developed through a long life living in different households throughout northern Nigeria.

Making anthropological films and carrying out work on migrants in West and Central Africa, I have been deeply inspired by Jean Rouch's work. Rouch made several actor-centred films on migration. The most fascinating is *Jaguar* (1967), a road movie that portrays three young men as they travel from Niger to Accra. Rouch and the protagonists have an ongoing discussion about what should be filmed on their travel. The aspirations, pleasures, fears and frustrations of the film's three characters are expressed directly through the way in which they handle a series of filmed situations, giving authentic and appealing voice to the younger generation searching for excitement, success, and meaning in their lives. When watching the film, most audiences would agree with Henley (72:2009) that *Jaguar* 'provokes a reaction of delight'.

We could say that the film gives an eloquent insight into the way in which these three men cope with dislocation and social change in West Africa. However, as MacDougall notes (2006): 'In *Jaguar*, Rouch is as much concerned with the mental world of his subjects as with their participation in the objective processes of urbanization and labour migration. For Rouch, anthropology was as much about culture as an interior state as it was about the world of social institutions.'

The great achievement of anthropological works such as *Jaguar* and *Baba of Karo* is their success in representing their subjects not as stereotypic exotic curiosities, but as human beings with attitudes, personalities and characters. We learn their individual dreams and their phantasies, their longings and how they meet various challenges and difficulties. We learn how different three migrants to Accra might be. Smith and Rouch both, in their manner, emphasise an anthropology wherein we learn through the response of individuals to various challenges and situations, either as told to the ethnographer or through situations provoked by or shared with the filming ethnographer. They underline the importance of 'temperament, interests, moods and the experience of solitude' which 'all belonged to the individual' (cf. Nadel: Introduction). Furthermore, Abu-Lughod (1991) follows the tradition of Smith and Rouch, introducing the concept 'ethnographies of the particular' as an attempt to break with generalising research practises by utilising the empirical strength of research through 'writing against culture. By focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships, Abu-Lughod argues, we change and subvert the problematic connotations of culture, such as homogeneity, coherence and timelessness. These are research strategies that all are similar to what Piette (introduction) calls 'phenomenography'.

What I find striking in the growing literature on migration is that the immigrants are seldom named. They are rarely presented as persons inhabiting a social landscape, and are more frequently presented through the social categories of poor, women, men, religious, and so forth (Adepoju, 2005; Mberu and Pongu, 2012).

Photographs and video footage/film hold a unique position in representations of individuals in the concrete and the particular (Waage, 2013). Putting weight on the particular is a strategy for developing awareness of the gap between our general knowledge about urbanisation and migration on the one hand, and our knowledge of its constituent individuals on the other hand. Through my significant experience of carrying out fieldwork with film, I have come to realise the enormous importance of grasping situated expressions of temperament, interests and modes such as shame, embarrassment, dignity and so forth in understanding how the individual *Mairuuwas* negotiate meaning and gain access to work.

The elders in Tongo summarise the huge change after the economic crisis as a '*chacun pour soi* attitude'⁸, for the reason that: '*Il n'y a pas de confiance*'⁹ anymore. Creative and flexible fending strategies have been developed. Everyone connected to the informal economy will say '*Je me débrouille*' (Waage, 2006), and this can be summarised as individuals' coping strategies. Withehead, working on West African household economy, argues similarly that individual decisions are informed by the responsibilities associated with their social positions, and are made with a view to past favours and hopes for future opportunities (Whitehead, 1994:49).

Trefon, doing research on displaced urban poor in Kinshasa, has, in the same vein, observed that: 'the collective values and practices characteristic of rural life in Congo have given way to the demands and contradiction of a marked economy in which the individual is central. Individual attitudes and behaviours have evolved due to the degree of experienced crisis and specifically the difficulties in finding cash-earning employment' (2004:488).

Following these ideas, I will argue that grasping the way in which individuals cope in certain situations is key to understanding both migrants' coping strategies and the vast variation of the migrant experience. Those who have come and the persons they interact with have different ethnic, national and religious identities, as well as different ages and opportunities. Those who have come can be understood to be preparing themselves for whatever tasks they are offered. This potentiality is performed in everyday activities and is what makes their future manifest.

In the following pages, I will portray some of the young men who have come to Tongo and taken up work as *Mairuuwas*. The material was gathered through my many visits to Ngaoundéré as a part of an on going university collaboration, as well as several periods of fieldwork between 1998 and 2013. Based on film work and analysis of

⁸ French for 'each for themselves'.

⁹ French for 'you can't trust people'.

filmed situations (filmed over a period of five months in 2009 and 2013), which I carried out while making and editing the film *Les Mairuwas: The Masters of Water* (Waage, 2015), I will, in the following text, describe aspects of the lives and everyday situations of Matieu, Elie and Koko, all working as *Mairuwas* and performing the same repertoire of activities, but with different careers. I will underline how emotions, as expressed through temper, embarrassment, frustration and obedience, are of special importance to understanding access to work and integration in this economic field of petty-services.

La Fontaine

From sunrise to sunset, there is vibrant activity at the water post at the entrance of the Tongo neighbourhood in the centre of Ngaoundéré. Many boys and young men gather to meet friends, eat, listen to news, relax and wait for work. Up to 20 persons and 10 handcarts with eight 30-litre water cans can be seen lined up at the sidewalk. Most of the males at the water post are waiting for someone to buy water. They are *Mairuwas* – water transporters – who take the water to the different compounds in the area. Others are waiting for some of the *Mairuwas* to let them take over their work when they are tired, or just waiting for whatever work might pop up, depending on the season and availability. In principle, anyone can work here, but to rent a handcart and gain permission to go into compounds, a person needs a certain level of acquaintance with the people in the neighbourhood (handcart owners are afraid that an unknown *Mairuwa* might destroy or steal their cart). Depending on the *Mairuwas'* acquaintances in the neighbourhood, other kinds of petty-services might open up, such as opportunities to transport furniture and other luggage, make bricks for construction, run errands, dig new toilet pits and so on. The water post, or *La Fontaine*, as they call it, is a key social arena for these migrants to gain work.

Elie is the first to arrive at the water post in the morning. He brings with him two handcarts that he rents on a daily basis from Miriam, a woman he lived with during his first five years in Tongo. Saxon arrives second. He has just woken up from the doorstep of a tailor's workshop, where he works as a night guard. He asks if he can have Elie's first job, as he needs money for breakfast. Mathoum has also come. He looks horrible. We haven't seen him for some days. A few days ago he got paid for a job he had done, digging a new toilet in a compound. Since then, he has been drinking heavily. Matieu is also there. He often sits close to the *Katika*, who sells the water that will be transported, as Matieu controls who serves the next client. He shouts '*Mai shai!*'¹⁰ at a boy passing with a bucket and a kettle. Matieu wants his morning meal, some tea and a few doughnuts. I recognise the young doughnut seller. He can't be more than 11 years old. He came to Ngaoundéré a week ago.

¹⁰ 'Tea vendor' in Hausa.

Elie and Matieu are called '*Grand*' by the others. Together with Samuel, a former *Mairuuwa* who has been able to marry and get a job in the formal economy, they have discussed what they can do with this young doughnut seller. All of them agree that he is not ready for the city, but they do not feel it is worth trying to send him home, as he will simply refuse. And who should eventually pay for the travel?

Koko does not have his own handcart. He has been working with Mathoum's handcart, as Mathoum has been away. Koko does not know anyone willing to rent him a handcart, and he cannot afford the daily rent.¹¹

These young men are at *La Fontaine* constantly, hoping for a job. That is hard work.

Matieu – *le Grand*

Matieu came to Tongo from CAR in the early 1990s at the age of 10. He never went to school (though this had been promised to him by the trader who brought him here), but instead was set to work guarding the trader's house. Jamice, an unmarried Fulani neighbour, observed this shy boy being left alone while the trader was travelling. Like many Fulani in this region, Jamice grew up with *les Centrafricaines*¹² carrying out domestic work in his father's house. Jamice took over responsibility for Matieu, giving him a room and arranging for him to wash clothes for people in the neighbourhood. For several years, Matieu did domestic work for Jamice and other residents in Tongo. When the government began to tax water, Jamice opened a public water tap in the quarter and Matieu started to sell and transport water to compounds that could not afford running water. Now that Matieu has been in the neighbourhood for many years, Muslim residents call him a *fil du quartier*¹³. When he had issues with the commune, his weekly tax and, subsequently, the police, the *Jaouro*¹⁴ took the initiative to get Matieu a Cameroonian identity card. When Jamice suddenly died, Matieu had both a network and a job.

Matieu's relation to the residents can be observed both audibly and visually on a daily basis at the water tap. If someone shouts 'Matieu!', Matieu will jump on his feet and run towards the direction of the shout. If a resident approaches the water tap asking for Matieu, Matieu will react immediately and approach the person with a bowed head and lowered eyes, answering '*Oui miseu*'¹⁵.

¹¹ Daily rent is 400 CFA (0.75 EUR).

¹² French slang for 'people from the Central African Republic'.

¹³ French for 'son of the quarter'.

¹⁴ Fulani for 'chief of the neighbourhood'. The *Jaouro* is a member of the Sultan's court.

¹⁵ French for 'yes master'.

Because Matieu has been going in and out of compounds for many years, people know him and trust him. When people from the host community talk about those at *La Fontaine*, they often say ‘*chez les Matieu*’¹⁶. People know that if they call him, he will come and the work will be done appropriately. They don’t trust the newcomers until Matieu approves of them.

Matieu equally responds to complaints about *Mairuuwas* from the residents. Being the point of queries is Matieu’s most important resource – an outcome of having been around for a long time and the respect he has continually shown to his clients.

Having spent more than 20 years in Ngaoundéré, Matieu is now in charge of distributing work to those who are newer. He does not proceed with his own handcart any longer. The one he got from Jamice was sold when Matieu suffered a long-term illness and needed healthcare. Now, he gets a handcart from a nearby lady who has six carts for rent; thus, Matieu pays rent every day.

Families that live near to the water post let their children be with *le grand Matieu* in public space, considering him a kind of babysitter. One day I filmed him as he waited for work with a 4- or 5-year-old child on his lap who repeatedly asked: ‘So you’re only a *Mairuuwa*, Matieu?’ Eventually, two other Fulani kids came along, both of them laughing, and the first one stated: ‘Matieu is only a *Mairuuwa*.’ Matieu’s face showed embarrassment and shame, as this had been said in front of me and the other *Mairuuwas*.

Over the past few years, Matieu has tried to change his work by delivering locally produced furniture and other goods instead of water. Furniture production is a blossoming business for carpenters with a workshop in the neighbourhood. Transporting new sofas to homes and bringing old sofas to be cleaned has become Matieu’s domain. It is also a concrete strategy to differentiate himself from the younger *Mairuuwas* in an attempt to create a new income. As furniture production is not continuous work but one that peaks at the Ramadan celebration (when most marriages are concluded), Matieu depends on income from water transportation.

Several of Matieu’s attempts to marry have failed. Jamice found him a fiancée, but he was unable to get hold of the requested bride price before she lost patience and married someone else. Samuel, his married friend – also a Gbaya who grew up in a Fulani family – also found him a fiancée through his wife’s family network. Matieu was again unable to pay the agreed bride price and consequently left Samuel in a difficult situation, as the girl had been promised to someone who couldn’t pay for her.

Matieu is father to a child that he has never met. The child’s mother – also of CAR origin – came to Ngaoundéré with her parents. Her parents were unable to make a living, so they returned to CAR, leaving their daughter with a distant uncle. Not being content at the uncle’s house, the young woman agreed to move in with Matieu without any bride price. When she became pregnant, she followed tradition for women in the

¹⁶ French for ‘Matieu’s people or gang’.

Sahel giving birth to their first baby: she returned to her parents' home to give birth. Matieu paid for her travel. Rumour says that her parents were unhappy with the little equipment and clothes Matieu sent with their daughter. This is why she has not returned.

If the topic of women is on the agenda at *La Fontaine*, Matieu's colleagues only laugh about his many failed attempts. There are no more woman stories. Having known him for many years, Matieu has changed: he behaves frustrated and ashamed; he does not joke anymore. It appears that no possibilities for upward mobility are available. As long as he is able to pay his daily rent for a handcart, he will defend his position as *le Grand* among *les Mairuuwas*.

Elie – from *Domestique* to *Mairuuwa*

Working on the film project at this specific street corner, Elie stood out as a character. He was difficult to film because he was always busy. While others had problems getting work, he would often have his hands full. He had many fixed customers.

Elie had come to Ngaoundéré as a young child with his friend Abel. They were both orphans. After leaving their village, they travelled towards Cameroon. Elie recalls that their young age made the travel easy: they got a free ride on the bus and were ignored at the border, so they simply passed through; they easily got something to eat when they offered to chop wood or do dishes.

In Ngaoundéré, Elie didn't know anyone, but he continued to offer his services. Speaking Fulfulde, he got to know a Muslim lady Miriam, who adopted him. Elie grew up in Miriam's household with her husband, co-wife and children. The extended household included several of Miriam's husband's sibling's families. On a daily basis, Elie did the dishes, washed clothes, cut wood and sometimes sold foodstuff that Miriam had made. In return, he received a place to stay, food and clothes, and sometimes money. When he grew older, he started to transport water using one of Miriam's handcarts, in addition to his regular housework.

When Elie was about 17, he desired a place to stay by himself. Miriam helped him find a room in the neighbourhood and negotiated the price with the landlord. Elie now rents one of Miriam's two handcarts on a daily basis. In addition, he is in charge of the other handcart, which he hires to other *Mairuuwas*. When we¹⁷ first tried to film Elie picking up the handcarts at Miriam's house in the morning, I was some minutes late. He had already left to pick them up – he was never late to an appointment with her.

¹⁷ The film fieldwork was conducted in collaboration with Amadou Adamou, a former student in visual anthropology at UiT (where I teach), who is originally from Ngaoundéré.

When Miriam's husband died, Elie was marked by sorrow. During the mourning sermon, Elie was at Miriam's side as part of the extended family. After her husband's death, Miriam was in a difficult situation: in her 40s, she was responsible for six young children. She needed more and stable income, so she started to make doughnuts and tea, which she wanted to sell on the streets. Elie was the one who recruited, and controlled, the tea-seller for her. This young boy had recently arrived from CAR. He was then called '*petit Elie*', living with his '*grand Elie*'.

When ending my five months of film fieldwork among the *Mairuuwas*, I tried to initiate a saving club through which I would help them economically.¹⁸ The idea was to provide each member with a handcart. Having their own handcart would give them independence and a stable economic situation, as they would no longer need to pay daily rent. We had several meetings in which we discussed details such as: Who would be a member in the saving club? What would be a realistic amount for each member to put aside daily? 100 CFA? 200 CFA¹⁹? After some reflection, Elie came out against the whole idea. He raised questions about solidarity within the group. Was it realistic to believe that those who got the first handcart would continue to pay to the saving club? Wouldn't they just take the money and disappear? Equally important, what would happen to *les Mairuuwas* if they all had personal handcarts? Elie expressed his fear of the reactions of the residents of Tongo. What would be their reaction when the ladies in the neighbourhood lost their daily income from renting out handcarts? Having his own handcart, he was afraid of losing the protection and care he received from Miriam. Additionally, being independent from Miriam, he feared sorcery.

Matieu, on his part, wanted his own handcart, because he often quarrelled with the handcart's owner about rent and responsibility for the old cart's many reparations. He did not see the problem with a lack of protection, as he felt that the general population supported him.

Abel expressed a desire to invest in becoming more independent. He had chosen another strategy. After being in a Fulani household as a child, he had started to do different work – at times as a plumber, at times as a furniture maker and at times pushing water, depending on the market. Unlike Elie, Abel and Matieu were not connected to one woman – or one household – as a basis for their activity profile.

When I finally came to the conclusion that my only option would be to give Elie (and the others) a sum of money and for each to decide what to do with it, Elie used it to make his room more attractive for his girlfriend, a Gbaya girl whom Miriam had found for him.

¹⁸ The idea was that for each 1,000 CFA they saved I would add 1,000 CFA.

¹⁹ 655 CFA= 1 EUR

Koko – struggles to evolve

Koko had been sleeping at the bus station and walking the streets of Ngaoundéré for about a week, hungry and tired, when he passed Tongo and heard those working there speaking a Gbaya dialect from CAR, just like his own. At *La Fontaine*, he was given food and, eventually, some work.

When I first met him, Koko had been in Ngaoundéré for three years. He appeared as a lively, inspired youth, wanting to do much. After he came he befriended Vincent, a Gbaya already installed as a *Mairuuwa*. Vincent had taken over his older brother's work relation in Ngaoundéré, as his brother had returned to his village.²⁰

Vincent rents a handcart on daily basis, and Koko is allowed to work with Vincent's handcart when Vincent is tired. Allowing newcomers to work with the handcart of one of the 'elders' is a common *Mairuuwa* recruitment technique. Koko wants to gain permanent access to a good handcart he can rent on daily basis, as this will enable him to work longer days and earn better money²¹. When discussing the saving club, he is eager about the project but does not think it is realistic to save 10 cents per day.

Due to his work as a night watchman – a job he shares with Saxon – Koko sleeps on the doorstep of a tailor's workshop. He is relaxed about not having his own place, as he is not used to paying for housing and water. His few belongings are stored at Vincent's place.

When the morning rush is over at the water post (the customers have their water and other work tasks have been distributed), there is not much to do other than rest. This morning, Koko is there with some younger boys. Saxon is among them. The boys share a cigarette while observing street life. As they sit there, Koko complains that he is missing one of his jerry cans. He has borrowed the handcart that he has rented to several others over the past days, and one of his eight jerry cans has disappeared.

Suddenly, someone calls him. It is the Nigerian *Mairuuwa*, who has news about the lost jerry can. Koko vanishes into one of the narrow alleys opposite the water post and enters the home of the Chadian man, Mustafa. Mustafa is a drug seller (locally called *pharmacie ambulante*²²). It turns out that Mustafa has Koko's missing jerry can, but he

²⁰ Vincent's father was born to a slave in a household in Tongo. As a free man, he moved to his family's home area (near the border with CAR, on the Cameroonian side). When his oldest son wanted to earn some money, his former patron in Ngaoundéré accepted him as a domestic servant, so he carried out domestic work and used the handcart to earn money.

²¹ If newcomers get to hire a handcart it is usually an old and tired one that needs regular repair. One common conflict between owner and renter relates to who pays for reparations. The better the reputation of a *Mairuuwa*, the better the handcart he can access.

²² *Pharmacie ambulante* (French) are men who walk the city carrying a big colourful carton on their heads, selling medicaments: Nigerian made copies of Western medicine. Many also sell drugs.

insists that he has kept it as a deposit for some drugs (Tramol²³) he gave to the person selling water. Koko asks Mustafa to show him who gave him his jerry can. Koko is angry. Several times a Muslim youth tries to calm him down, but Koko ignores him. Koko and Mustafa return to the water post. Mustafa says sarcastically: 'You are as upset as if we are discussing a car.' Finally it appears that it was Saxon, Koko's friend, who gave Koko's jerry can to Mustafa.

Koko turns his head away. He confesses that he feels ashamed that he blamed the wrong person. He is embarrassed in front of Omarou, a Fulani who was present during the quarrel and whose grandmother owns the handcart Koko wants to rent. He is embarrassed in relation to the blamed, and he is embarrassed over how he performed in front of the camera.

Koko lost some of his reputation as he lost his temper. This had consequences: he was not given the handcart he had wanted to rent.

When Koko finally, some months later, gets a room together with Saxon and Matoum, his life changes. He is so proud. Moving indoors opens up some interesting possibilities.

Koko rents the room from the same family that rents to Matoum, and he and Matoum rent a handcart for a while. Although the room is expensive, renting it confirms and strengthens his relation to the lady who owns the handcart and the room. Later, Koko acquires his own handcart but can share his cart with someone else, as he also has access to work that his landlord gives him.

Elder *Mairuuwas*, such as Matieu and Elie, actively support Koko (Mathoum and Saxon) having a room. They underline their personal security and stress that, by having a room, Koko, Matoum and Saxon cannot throw away money on beer and women.

But there is more to moving indoors. After some days in the room, I am invited over. The room has a big bed and is nicely decorated with posters of Barcelona Football club and President Obama. A smiling Koko wants to ask me something. Since he moved in, women have contacted him proposing their younger sisters as fiancées. Koko has a girlfriend, and he needs a new sheet for his bed! In the days that follow, he visits '*la grande sœur*'²⁴, who gives him a list of what is needed for a bride price: wrappers, shoes, suitcases, underwear, perfume and an exclusive room for the new couple.

When the rainy season comes, Koko's income sinks again, as people collect rainwater. Koko is not able to pay the bride price and is unable to have his own room. His dream of having his girlfriend move in with him gradually dissolves. Later, he is not sure if the young woman's growing stomach contains his baby or another's.

²³ It is said locally that Tramol pills are painkillers for horses. The effect of using this drug is relaxation, dizziness and drunkenness.

²⁴ His girlfriend's elder sister.

Two years later, both of Koko's roommates die. Saxon dies after extensive use of Tramol.²⁵ Matoum does not have money to go to the hospital when he is too weak to work, and his friends and colleagues are unable to gather enough money for his care. The money collected is only sufficient to send him back to his village in CAR, where he can rest and receive traditional medicine to recover.

Alone, Koko cannot pay for the room. As he has not paid the rent for several months, he has lost both his room and his access to the handcart. Vincent, who, in former times, allowed Koko to work with his handcart when he was tired, is now paired up with someone else. Koko has to sell most of his belongings: Matoum's bed, Saxon's stereo. Back on the street, he becomes a *débrouillard* again (Waage, 2006), fending for his life within the network accessible. People who meet him during this time speak about a frustrated and reluctant person.

One morning, he takes the handcart he rented for the day, sells it and disappears. The residents of the quarter scold Matieu, Elie and the other *Mairuuwas*, urging them to get it back. The residents believe it is their responsibility, since they gave Koko access to Tongo. Koko's theft not only destroys his own future in the quarter, but it is also a threat to the community of *Mairuuwas*. Koko flees Ngaoundéré, leaving no traces behind. His fellow *Mairuuwas* search his network and conclude that he has fled, starting anew somewhere.

Recent information says that he now works as a shoe shiner in a small town further south.

Summing up: Solidarity of despair

The Tongo neighbourhood, with its specific economic field of petty-services, is open to immigrants because the available work tasks here are shameful for Muslims and connected with the stigma of slavery for those who originate from families that have lived in Ngaoundéré for several generations.

Most of the *Mairuuwas* coming to Tongo arrive alone or with a friend. Many of them are orphans who have run away from home. All accessible work for this category of immigrants is in the form of petty-services that are connected to households and family networks in Tongo. The men who do this work spend much time waiting for it; they are active – agents in their own lives – carving out their own future through their behaviour and choices.

Sitting at the water post, they hope that someone who needs a service of any kind will come and pick them up for work. It is a liquid organisation (Bauman, 2000), wherein job activities are, to a large extent, unpredictable. Status becomes about poten-

²⁵ Politicians and newspapers in Cameroon express their concern about the rapid spread and increased use of this drug.

tiality – becoming someone, doing something. Gaining access to this something demands a certain position, depending on the way in which the individual relates to his various colleagues and the host community. Success in the system is about willingness to grasp an opportunity when it comes. Being present and having a respected position is a precondition for opportunities to arise.

Matieu holds a gatekeeper position at the water post, which he has obtained by being a serious worker since the economic enterprise started. Elie's position is similar. He is also well known with a good reputation. The difference between Matieu and Elie is that Elie has a reciprocal relationship to a specific person, whom he calls both 'Mother' and 'Patron'. Their mutual dependence is strong and useful for them both. Koko learns a lesson when he loses his jerry can. He learns that he cannot trust his childhood friend. The quarrel over a jerry can (and other quarrels) makes him lose his reputation and, eventually, his access to the handcart he wants to rent. (Both the way he behaved and what the behaviour signified weakened his reputation). Koko learns a second lesson by moving indoors. As a renter of a room, he presents himself as a reliable person with a confirmed dependency to a house owner. He obtains access to a handcart on daily basis, then to a fiancée. However, the economic harshness of the rainy season and the tragic death of his roommates change everything again.

The main difference between the *Mairuuwas* is the extent to which and the way in which they as individuals are linked to the people living in the neighbourhood. This has been exemplified in this article through illustrations of Matieu, Elie and Koko. Jamice trains Matieu and the *Jaouro* help him get an identity card; Elie has the support of Miriam; but Koko does not have any relationship to lean on when things are difficult.

I find it relevant to point to five kinds of *Mairuuwa* careers in this specific setting.

The first is a *Mairuuwa* who has stable access to a handcart and a number of fixed customers. This is a position that makes steady income possible. All such *Mairuuwa* start their career at a young age as a *Domestique*, or 'Boy', which implies living with a Fulani family as a servant. Through a reciprocal relation with their Muslim 'mother', they achieve stable income. However, this requires obedience, respectful behaviour and regular payment for renting a handcart. Both Elie and Matieu belong to this category.

The second category is the most successful one; that is, a *Mairuuwa* who has proceeded to a stable position in the formal economy and a married life. In my material, only one person, Samuel, manages to achieve this position. Living in a Muslim household from a young age, Samuel's career background is similar to that of Elie, but at some point he was able to increase his repertoire of job activities, which generated enough income for him to save money. Samuel worked as a street photographer, a porter at the state hospital and a night watch man. Women that are accessible (and perceived as 'interesting') for these men are all of Gbaya origin who have come with their families to Cameroon from CAR. Samuel, being married into a larger family, is not only dependent on his 'Fulani mother', but has other family-relations he can navigate within.

A third category consists of those who return to their villages of origin. These men go home to marry and to be with their families. I did not interview any of these, but in all cases those who stay behind in Tongo say that those who have left did not have the patience to earn enough money to marry in the city.

A fourth category belongs to the sad group of those who die. Many fall sick from tuberculosis, malaria, cholera and Aids. Over the last couple of years, drugs have started to take many lives. As many as a quarter of all the *Mairuuwas* I have known have died from various diseases.

Finally, the fifth category consists of those who fail to carve out a stable work relation in this informal economy. Among these are Koko. Koko is trying the best he can, struggling to get a stable position from which to manoeuvre. Many are those who, like Koko, come to the city with lots of energy and many dreams to fill. What Koko and Matoum and others who do not manage to get stable work relations have in common is that they come to Tongo in their late teens and are either not asked and/or refuse to be a 'Boy' in a Muslim household.

Comparing *Mairuuwas* I see that those experiencing conflicts and problems are those who like Koko (Vincent, Matoum and others) try to adapt to the economy outside a Muslim household. This finding is similar to that of Thoresen, who observes rural migrants' work within family networks in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. She observes that: 'Clashes are usually related to young migrants rejecting the idea of being dependent' (2013:214). Not being able to create relations of mutual dependency is the critical point for 'successful' adaption for immigrants both in Ouagadougou and in Ngaoundéré.

Observed from afar (the other side of the street or from a researcher's first glance) the *Mairuuwas* look similar. It takes a closer look at individual adaptations to prevent oneself from making generalisations which do not fit the subject-matter. Coming closer, with the intensity experienced in the field using a video camera (doing 'thick participation'), I have seen, as underlined in the introduction, that beyond role-performance, the actors' individuality is visible. Koko, Elie, Matieu and the others use more or less the same repertoire of roles but their careers are very different. The main difference between them is the way in which they as individuals engage in relations in Tongo. They differ when it comes to temper, mood, sense of humour and how they cope with quarrels etc.

It is this article's main finding that migrants' ability to succeed in Tongo depends on how they engage in relations with the host population. By approaching the individual, we have seen how those who are established as *Mairuuwas* are behaving according to local standards of behaviour when it comes to respectfulness, politeness etc. Being patient, always polite, ignoring humiliations is the explanation for Elie's relative success and Koko's failure.

There is a developed reciprocal logic or solidarity among the actors in the informal economy of Tongo that is similar to what Trefon, working among urban poor in Kinshasa, calls 'despair solidarity'. This is a solidarity 'where people help each other pri-

marily if they can expect something in return. Debt, whether it be in the form of a loan, a service rendered or a favour, is expected to be redeemed at some point' (Trefon, 2004).

We have seen here that solidarity that exists between the 'hosts' and individual *Mairuuwa*, and among the *Mairuuwas* themselves, differ. Elie's relation to Miriam is characterised by mutual dependency – they help each other out because they know that their loan or service will be returned. Matieu has a unique career in the quarter, as he has a large repertoire of persons he works with. When Koko loses his room, he starts to hang out at bars, sleep on the street and become dirty and rude without shame. In this form, he falls outside the dynamics wherein he can be trusted by fellow *Mairuuwas* and the Fulani host community. He does not get work offers and he represents a threat to the other *Mairuuwas*' reputation. From this point on, there is no place for him in this moral community. Unable to hold a position within this logic, he must move on. Those immigrants who are unable to become integrated in dynamics of mutual exchange are the most vulnerable.

Koko and many with him have been derailed from a narrative of progress (Ferguson 2006). They become frustrated, and some (like Koko) do 'stupid things'. When their struggles to emerge do not succeed, there is an obvious fear that a state of frustration and hopelessness will be installed. Durable poverty and crisis as a constant state of being has been widely discussed (Vigh 2008). Vigh points out that many crises are continuous. A relevant question is what does frustrations living in durable poverty without being able to develop relations where you can earn a living, lead to in long terms?

These men live in constant uncertainty. Constrained by desperate exchanges, they rely on whatever opportunities they can carve out in the informal economy. They must be constantly creative in social relations. They must not fall sick. They must behave according to local standards of respectfulness to gain relations to people who can offer them jobs. If they do not, they become vulnerable and might have to escape to somewhere else, or else die. Those who are forced to escape are the 'loose molecules' who migrate to cities south of the Sahara (Kaplan 1994) and desperately try to find ways to survive. A criminal career might offer them one possible solution.

Elie and Matieu have succeeded as *Mairuuwas*. They work in relations characterised by mutual dependency. And they remain slaves. Paradoxically, it seems that the rapid growth of migrants in Ngaundéré contributes to the reproduction and conservation of the traditional patron-client system, with segregated Muslim women depending on servants.

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