



**UiT** The Arctic University of Norway

*Faculty of Humanities, Social Science and Education*

# ***Nous sommes ensemble.***

Uncertain contingencies and hope in urban Ngaoundéré

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*Master thesis in Visual Anthropology - Spring Semester 2020*



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Uncertain contingencies and hope in urban Ngaoundéré

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## Abstract

Uncertainty is becoming a fundamental new conceptual tool for anthropologists in order to understand the complex ways in which the vulnerable people living at the margins of African fast-growing cities create meaning out of a routinized sense of crisis. Many studies (Cooper & Pratten 2015; Whyte 2009; McGovern 2012; Waage 2015; 2018; etc.) have highlighted the importance of hope and social contingency in navigating through one person's unresponsive environment; and patron-client relations have been recognised everywhere in Africa and the Global South as common relational strategies to cope. Though, to make the concept useful at an epistemological level it needs a variety of situated and thick descriptions.

In Ngaoundéré, a city of northern Cameroon, everyone is connected to others in a network of solidarity and mutual recognition, and patrons are fundamental figures to disempowered individuals. During my fieldwork of 3 months, I have investigated over this issue: in which ways do individual experiences of uncertainty determine the practice of building up patron-client relations? Following the life story of the immigrant Jean Louis, his Cameroonian patron *Dji Dji* and the foreigner who went to learn from them, myself, I argue that doing fieldwork and building our representations with a critical and reflexive approach can also be a way to understand the experiences of our subjects, by entering at the same time productive and reciprocal collaborations.

**Key words:** anthropology; visual anthropology; ethnographic film; Africa; fast-growing cities; urban poor; uncertainty; coping with uncertainty; suffering; patron-client; hope; social contingency; trust; place-in-the-world; reflexivity; reciprocity; applied anthropology; Cameroon; Ngaoundere; Adamawa; migration; Central African immigrants

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## I. Introduction

As I set my foot in Ngaoundéré, it was my first time ever staying in Sub-Saharan Africa. As I was proposed the possibility for conducting the fieldwork project there for my Master degree in Tromsø, I applied immediately: it was a great opportunity for learning the ‘craft’ of being a visual ethnographer out of Europe; and if it wasn’t for the grant I wouldn’t have had the means to go. I was certainly fascinated by the exotic beauty of a cultural context so different from my own; but I was especially fond of studying those problem that I felt as increasingly urgent because resonating with my own identity: what does it mean to be a migrant, in the contemporary global world? What strategies are partaken to find a *position* in the world, one which is defined as ‘good’ according to personal and social expectations? I also lived far from my homeland, trying to make a life across borders; and one day, I hoped to find the work that I felt to ‘deserve’, thanks to my education as a visual and social anthropologist.

Anyway, my desires and needs were clearly really different from the ones of African young men and women who were displaced by their land because of insecurity, violence or climate crisis; but also from those ones who migrated in Ngaoundéré simply to find a better status. There was a gap between me as a European and them as Africans, not simply of cultural background, but more depending on our social condition, categories of the global world and power.

I was well aware about the dangers of doing fieldwork and producing representations of people living in vulnerable contexts of the Global South, and already concerned that my perspective as a European could reproduce ethnocentric biases and power structures between me and the collaborators to my project. I wanted to address these problems with a reflexive narrative that aimed to break with exoticising representational practices. Anyway, the theoretical interest of my research was focused on the experiences of uncertainty and the practices of patronage within the informal economy, that is the strategy of establishing relations of exchange with wealthier individuals. In Ngaoundéré, the extent of the phenomenon is difficult to grasp because it seems to permeate the society at any level. In general, every person I met seemed connected to others in a web in a web of *grands et petits*, creating a network of solidarity and mutual recognition.

Before leaving, I saw the patron-client system, as posing a problem of agency and empowerment. How far do these relations give a substantial aid in coping with the uncertainty of their everyday life? What is the power of an individual who is highly dependent on the agency of more capable others? But I was also curious to see what kind of positive outcomes these relations could bring, and I thought that it was urgent to understand what consequences this encounter, shaped by hope and social expectations, have on the social advancement of the urban poor.

The aim of this research project is to give a contribute answering a theoretical issue:  
*in which ways do individual experiences of uncertainty determine the practice of building up patron-client relations?*

To answer this question, in the field I have started to look at the particular and inter-personal level: the life story of Jean Louis, a young man from the Central African Republic; who was related in such an exchange with a wealthy man of his neighbourhood. Anyway, my *presence* and identity have soon become a catalyst of the phenomenon I wanted to understand; and when I tried to negotiate a reciprocal exchange with my main informant, he started to see me as a patron myself, because of my commitment to a larger degree of collaboration.

My positioning process gave me a strategical point of view to give a subjective and situated description of uncertainty and how it is managed with the support of a patron. At the same, it has emphasised how much our exchange was depending over larger global categories; and how large the divide between my main informant and myself, as a European and an anthropologist.

The resulting master thesis and film<sup>2</sup> have tried to produce a complex representation of my informants' experience, while at the same time giving a reflexive and critical account of the ethnographic encounter.

## II. The Context of the Research

Ngaoundéré, '*le carrefour*': from slaves to asylum seekers

Ngaoundéré is a city situated in northern Cameroon, on the plateau which forms the state of Adamaoua. The city is called by the inhabitants *le carrefour*, 'the cross-road', because it's a hub for

transports<sup>3</sup> and it lies in a peculiar position both geographically and culturally. Between the savannah and the tropical rainforest, Adamaoua connects the northern region to the western and southern states of Cameroon, moreover it borders with Nigeria, Chad and the Central African Republic (here as ‘the CAR’).

Today, like in the past, Ngaoundéré is ethnically configured and organised (Burnham 1996). At the start of the XIX century, the *Fulani* cattle herders, followed by *Hausa* merchants and *Kanuri* scholars, migrated from Nigeria bringing Islam, a sultanate (the ‘*lamidat*’) and slavery in the region (Burnham 1996:16-17); which was previously inhabited by *Mbum* and *Dii* farmers. The centralized power of the new state used the discourse of the jihad to justify slave raiding and the subordination of non-Muslim populations in the neighbouring regions (Holtedahl 2010). Fulani cultural consensus was based on a hierarchical system defined on ethnicity, religion and gender; and on clear-cut social positions revolving around a variety of local norms for public behaviour, called *pulaaku*. Muslim groups were cattle owners and characterized as ‘free men’, *dimo*, contraposed to ‘the slaves’ *maccudo*: herders, cultivators and servants, seen as non-believers, dirty and rude (Waage 2015). During the colonial times, both German and French left much of the formal power to the local authorities and tolerated slavery and slave raiding (Bogen Sinderud 2008). Anyway, in those years “the social boundary demarcating the *Fulbe* ethnic category progressively shifted from exclusionary to assimilative” (Burnham 1996:49): people who converted to Islam, included the liberated slaves, gradually acquired the *Fulbe* ethnic status.

The privileged position of the Muslim population was undermined in post-colonial times: the abolition of slavery and the institution of a Western formal education system gave to the former subjects access to the bureaucratic positions of the secular state, from which the Muslim élite was largely excluded (Waage 2006:5; Waage 2015:115).

In the meanwhile, a constant flow of immigrants, with a variety of ethnic, religious and national backgrounds, made the city grow at a dramatic pace: from 55.000 inhabitants in 1950 to 600.000 in 1998 (Waage 2015:113).

The economic crisis in the mid-1990s, caused also by sanctions from the World Bank, had provoked large social change. Everyone faced a new condition of uncertainty and vulnerability; leading men, and increasingly women, of the Muslim élite to do jobs previously perceived as shameful for their ethnic status (ibid.:115). For the youths in general, the impossibility to reach the status of adulthood, as defined by their ethnical belonging, has merged with a social landscape of

“frenetic individualism” (2006:7). The new generations are not able to attain their goals simply by re-enacting the repertoires of roles of their parents and grandparents: they have to be open to any possibility if they want to find a position in this society, and negotiate the access into different and unknown social fields (Waage 2018).

In the last decades, new global humanitarian crises have also brought asylum seekers coming from the the Central African Republic and from the region of the Extreme North; furthermore, Ngaoundéré is an attractive destination for work and make business to the nationals of the neighbouring countries, like Chad, Nigeria and Gabon.

The condition of the most vulnerable of these new migrants has some similarities with the condition of slaves in the past: they are usually Christian, they still perform those tasks that other groups would consider ‘shameful’; some of them follow the same routes of the slave raiders of the past (especially in the case of the Gbaya and Mbum people from CAR), and they are still taken under the influence and ‘protection’ of powerful and usually Muslim individuals. Anyway, this time it’s them seeking out for such a bound.

For the majority, the informal sector is the main, if not the only, arena where the means to sustain a livelihood can be found; and, as we will see in the next chapters, patrons are important figures to promote local entrepreneurship. Anyway, a variety of relational strategies is needed to navigate through this uncertain context, and the family network acts as the most important safeguard and source of connections. People who don’t have such ties are the most fragile.

Many work sectors depend on the seasonal cycle. Similarly to the past, the routes of circular migration bring the cultivators to work in the bush during the rainy season, when the economy is stagnating in town; conversely, during the dry season the work condition is better and the city attracts seasonal workers and migrants. But the majority of individuals and families who stay in town have to find alternative activities and coping strategies to pass through the long rainy season. The activity in which basically every family is involved, is commerce: an activity which is dominated by Muslims in the region (Burnham 1996). Reselling basic food commodities in front of one’s home is a very common source of income for the households in Ngaoundéré. The merchandise is exposed upon desks called *tables*; that are usually administrated by the women of the house and presided often by the children. Normally it cannot provide much more than pocket money, but if one is able to expand the business, the activity could grant a decent revenue and stabilize itself into a boutique, a corner shop.



## The neighbourhood of Seka Mbara

Seka Mbara, is a recently founded neighbourhood at the southern hilly edge of the city, stretching along the course of a water stream, and a parallel dirt road, between the hills. *Le cartier*, as the inhabitants simply put it, is inhabited for the most part by Central Africans. Catholic and Lutheran Christians are the majority, and the Fulani urban élite is relatively less influential than in other neighbourhoods. Most of the families living here are poor or have very limited economic means, but they sustain themselves either by growing crops in the close-by bush; by selling services to the wealthy inhabitants of the nearby *le Plateau*; doing commerce at the market place of *Bourkina*, or just in front of the yard of home with a *table*.

The social status of a family can be seen in the landscape: the big households of the wealthiest families, like *Dji Dji*'s, are along the main dirt road, built with cement bricks and enclosed by walls. The other inhabitants live in mudbricks houses; standing either along the part of the dirt road towards the bush, or along the paths stretching perpendicularly, either uphill or downhill towards the stream. The house rented by Jean Louis and his family stood the stream, right at the bottom. Almost all the patches of land of the valley was covered with households recently completed, building sites, and a few tiny crop fields which were becoming larger only towards the bush. New works to build a new cemented road started in July, whose aim is to connect the neighbouring districts of Seka Mbara, Gambara and Bourkina, to the farmlands in the bush behind the hills. My informant Jean Louis gave his own contribute to the process of fast urbanization of the new neighbourhood: most of the households along the dirt path where Jean lived had asked for his services as bricklayer; and he joined the works for reinforcement and expansion of the dirt road. He liked to talk about the future of the neighbourhood: in ten years, the city would have pushed his border across the hills and expanded towards the bush. Great opportunities could have opened for who was 'resourceful' enough to invest in that land, Jean liked to imagine.

## Characters and arenas

### **Jean Louis**

The main character of my story is a 26 years-old man who comes from a village near Paoua, on the western side of the CAR. Jean grew up in a family of Lutheran Cristian belief; and attended a

couple of years of formal education. Tragically, his entire family was killed in 2002, at the rise of the violence which would have brought to the civil war two years later, and only Jean and his sister were spared. The siblings were separated though, and Jean was immediately brought to Ngaoundéré from an uncle, where he began to manage on his own, working in the building sector. Jean became an experienced and respected bricklayer; he made up a family with a girl from his village and moved in Seka Mbara six years before. Even if he had hardly attended primary school, he spoke Fulani well, a quite good French and Sango, his national language; apart from his mother tongue Kaba. Jean had worked in various other jobs, like as street photographer and employee in a bakery, and he had the creative attitude of an entrepreneur. Anyway, when I met him during the rainy season, he could only find on-call day jobs, which would hardly suffice for the food expenses of the family.

The livelihood of my main informant stretched within a limited number of places and arenas. Jean's life was quite confined into determined social environments, which seldom trespassed the borders of the neighbourhood. This depended also by the cost of moving to the centre or to the other neighbourhoods, the price of a *moto* ride<sup>2</sup>, the cheapest means of transportation, costed 250<sup>3</sup> CFA<sup>4</sup>, about double than a ride inside town. Even if moving across neighbourhoods was necessary for work, most of the jobs available during my stay were paid so little that about one third of the pay was wasted in commuting.

### **Jean Louis's house**

The place that I frequented the most during fieldwork; especially during rainy days when Jean couldn't work. The house was a two-rooms apartment that the family was renting, with an open yard and a separated shed for the kitchen and fireplace. It was clearly **Ornela** domain, Jean Louis' wife, apart from the living room, where the guests were welcomed and where we held interviews and talks only rarely interrupted by her. Ornela came from the same village of Jean, 6 years beforehand, with the purpose of getting married with him: she had lost the family too, and it was Jean's sister who arranged everything. Like others in the neighbourhood, the couple run a small *table*, which was administrated by Ornela and often attended by the older daughter. The kids, **Dieu Merci**, the boy **Dieu Donné**, and **Flora**, - who at the time were respectively five, three and almost one year old - used to stay with the mother most of the time, but sometimes also Jean would bring the two older ones with him, if he worked close-by.

### **Jean's piece of land**

The land was bought from Jean two years before our meeting, with the purpose of building a new household for himself and the family; and I have also spent much of my time here. This place was Jean's own domain, and I have never seen Ornela, nor the kids, in there. In fact, it was a place to socialize with other men, perhaps where they could drink together single portions of whisky away from their wives and families; and where they can show solidarity by helping Jean in building a new household. For the work of digging the foundations, Jean was often helped, in turn, by his usual work mates: **Vanie**, **Madjide** or **Barnabé**. These are all Central Africans coming from the same village, related to him by family ties and work collaboration.

### **Dji Dji**

A Mbum and Muslim man in his late 30s, who moved five years before to Seka Mbara. His family came from the close-by village of Nghanha and resided in Bourkina, just one kilometres away. He is a sergeant of the Cameroonian army, but he also used to work as a surveillance guard: having two salaries made him the wealthiest person of the neighbourhood.

**Dji Dji's household** was uphill, at 200 meters distance from Jean's. The main house had a large living room to receive the guests in front of a big television. Outside the living room there was a little veranda, where Dji Dji's wife and sister used to sit doing different kinds of work, cutting vegetables and greeting the neighbours passing by. His yard, enclosed by an uncompleted wall of cement bricks, is one of the largest in the neighbourhood: it has a well, a little vegetable garden to grow few crops, other two buildings (another house and a tool shed), and a place for a *table* administrated by some neighbours.

A secondary social arena that I visited often was the **household of Jean's uncle** and his family, where I have met his wife (Jean's *petite soeur*), Adele and other nieces. This lied right next to Jean Louis' piece of land, and he would find shelter under their roof whenever the monsoon started too early in the afternoon.

I have also spent some time in the yards of two neighbours where Jean had to conduct day-jobs; and a few times later on I have followed him in his expeditions in town.

An important arena for Jean and the rest of the Central Africans of Seka was the Lutheran church in the close-by Bourkina. Anyway, I have never accessed it, because Jean seemed worried about showing off myself and the camera in front of the large community.

### **Ascanio**

I am the ethnographer, author of this this thesis and, as we will see, an actor within the events described in the analysis. My identity became an important element in the development of the exchange with Jean on which this research is based; then a few words on me are worth to mention. I was 27 years old and I lived in Tromsø at that time, but I grew up in a lower middle-class family, in the countryside of northern Italy. In 2014 I moved away to study anthropology and work in Copenhagen, and three years later I moved to Tromsø to focus my studies on visual anthropology. In Ngaoundéré, I was welcomed into the household of a kind Fulani family who lived in Troua Mala, in the middle of town. I slept in a small room with private toilet, next to that dizzy flow of noise, music, smells and life that is the living room of any African family. My home was a 15-20 minutes *moto* ride away from Seka Mbara; but I preferred like this: I didn't want to sleep in the neighbourhood not to create problems to Jean or to raise too much the attention over the camera borrowed by the university. 'Linguistically, I was still in the process of learning French, and I obviously didn't know the *lingua franca* of Ngaoundéré, the Fulfuldé. My family in Troua Mala, then, proved to be a fundamental reference point for me, to get through the 'cultural shock' but also the local discourses, and to make sense of my research.

## III. Theoretical Framework

### Uncertainty as a resource and practices of coping

In the last decades, 'uncertainty' has increasingly been used as a crucial conceptual tool adopted by social scientists to describe living conditions and social action in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>1</sup>. Uncertainty is reported as "a dominant trope [...] in the subjective experience of life in contemporary African societies" (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 1). With a critical perspective on globalization and migration studies, Vigh (2008), has argued that a routinized sense of *crisis* and forced liminality, one which doesn't seem to find a solution, is the very context of the everyday experience of his marginalised

informers in Bissau, and in general of the “structurally violated, socially marginalised and poor” (ibid.:5) of the contemporary world. Cooper and Pratten (2015), go further, taking the concept to describe Africa’s complexity: this as “a structure of feeling - the lived experience of a pervasive sense of vulnerability, anxiety, hope, and possibility mediated through the material assemblages that underpin, saturate, and sustain everyday life” (ibid.:1).

Uncertainty has also a positive framework: it is a social resource, relational and temporal, in the sense that it can be used “to negotiate insecurity, conduct and create relationships (ibid.), and act as a source for imagining the future with the hopes and fears this entails”. On one side, it is product of social contingencies, entwined within social relations that can create more uncertainty or alleviate it. On the other, uncertainty is not an external condition to endure, but a matter of action. ‘Coping with’, or ‘managing’, uncertainty is an action in the “subjunctive mood” (Wagner-Pacifici in ibid.:3), which attends for goals of an indefinite future instead of the immediate ones of the present; in a hoping, doubting and testing disposition.

In this sense uncertainty is actively sought and fuelled by the people living in such precarious conditions, and navigated through hope. Since the future is not predictable and fundamental life goals are difficult to be reached, they’d rather believe that things could advance if one is able to seize the opportunity when it comes - and God/luck/fate allows it -; which for them is always a better option than being ‘hopeless’. Hope and uncertainty, then, are driving factor of social action in this context, where people are constantly searching for a better life, “*la richesse*”<sup>1</sup>, or to make their social condition gradually better.

Anyway, this research isn’t an individualistic one: it is instead governed by trust. Like for Central African water carriers in the city (Waage 2018:8), sharing opportunities within the informal economy of Seka Mbara is a means to establish meaningful and mutual relations, which are needed to cope with the everyday uncertainty of their lives. In a context with such a limited amount of economic means, the quality of relations and the recognition of one’s reliability is often the main asset to play in this arena. But mutual dependency was also, in turn, a source of new uncertainty given by the social contingency; moreover it left little space for individual agency

In my fieldwork, I have approached critically this gatekeeping concept in order to give a situated account of this mode of experience, at a ground level. There is, I believe, a necessity to inform the conceptual tool with several local and emic discourses before to make it operative. One

epistemological issue is that uncertainty is very broad and not clearly defined in a global perspective: how far it is valid in other contexts of the Global South and the Global North? Or the opposite: isn't it a just a particular expression of a social and subjective condition which is universal? The concept can also be confused with many semantically affiliated terms, like 'crisis', 'unpredictability', 'insecurity', 'vulnerability', 'suffering'; which emphasize other elements or, like the last two, can express a sense of passivity.

For this reason, I am going to deal with the concept in a narrower sense: in the sense of the relationship between the 'unpredictability' of everyday life (both its unpredictable and 'quite predictable' elements) and 'hope', so as the distance between one's social position or "place-in-the-world" (Ferguson 2006), and the stakes one aims to attain. A gap which is a structuring force, experienced as a continuous search for the means to one's subsistence along a path full of perils, obstacles and setbacks; and eventually a resource, not only an obstacle.

#### Trust relations and informal livelihoods: patron-client relations

In Ngaoundéré, as in many other African cities, the main context where the people seek ways, and try out their strategies to manage uncertainty, is in the social arenas of the 'informal economy'; 'patron-client relations' are a mode of inter-subjective relation within this pragmatic system. Studies of globalization, urbanization and development has recently recognized the role of informal economies in maintaining complex social systems (such as the fast-growing cities or the transnational social fields) and providing forms of livelihoods to disempowered people. Eriksen (2016), talking about the contemporary cities, affirms that the extreme complexity, or 'superdiversity', of these systems makes them less flexible and so more vulnerable. Instead, the informal sectors of economy, which are necessarily present whenever there are formal ones, increase the flexibility of the system and provide the citizens of the Global South with forms of "globalization from below" (ibid.).

Ferguson points out that the "place-in-the-world" (2006) of Africa within the global categorical system left most of the people in the continent excluded, or at least marginalized, by the 'flows' of 'global integration'. In this sense, informal economies could be seen as a pragmatic attempt to obtain the goods, services and "membership" (ibid.) of a global society from which those individuals are disconnected, with all the constraints, uncertainty and expectations that such a project would entail.

Anyway, the kind of ‘capital’ produced in an informal business responds to a peculiar way of giving a moral value to money: this is essentially seen as a medium of “caring and sharing within the extended family” (Singh 2017:113). Works and services are embedded in a reciprocal logic which is far more determining than rational (and de-moralized) discourses about personal economic interest. This means that social relations, based on respectability and trust, are very often the only asset one has to navigate within his/her own social fields. This situation creates a condition of social contingency: it is not possible for those individuals to advance socially, to find a predictable position or a relative independence, without developing, and depending, on social bounds.

Since the 90s there has been a growing interdisciplinary interest for those contingent practices that have been approached in terms of ‘sponsorship’, or ‘patron-client relations’ (Roniger 2001). Even if it’s not a peculiarity of the African continent, this modality of social relations has been conceptualized by Western studies in Africa as a system of intersubjective, albeit asymmetric, exchange - of services within the informal sector, material and symbolical resources - based on respectability and mutual trust. It has been recognized as a crucial element in the power structures of these societies, a mechanism of social control at any level, from the national politics to the pragmatics of everyday life (Menzel 2017).

Patron-client relations can also be considered a practice for managing the uncertainty of everyday life. In the context of Ngaoundéré, as we will see, having a patron could provide disempowered individuals with the means to cope with both predictable and unpredictable elements of uncertainty. Having long-lasting, moral and symbolical ties with a more powerful, resourceful and knowledgeable person, is normally considered a better option than trying to advance socially as an individual, in a context where often other forms of protection and insurance are not at people’s reach. Waage, made an attempt of collaboration with some Central African water carriers in this city, who used to rent daily their handcart, from local patron ladies. He makes an account (2018: 10-12) of his project of establishing a self-sufficient ‘saving club’, that was supposed to help the members to buy their own handcart. The project failed, it was because of the fear that losing the rent from the ladies meant also losing a strategic relation and a position within their social milieu.

Anyway, in the field ‘client’ and ‘patron’ were not always such clear-cut roles, and neither much like a source of meaning and identity. As we will see, the roles were situationally assumed, where a person could be ‘client’, or *petit*, in a social arena and ‘patron’, or *grand*, in the following one; an ideal rather a norm. When disempowered individuals called someone their *patron* or referred to someone as their *frère*, they were making a claim more than referring to a factual and well-established bound. The practice of establishing patron-client relations is embedded into social expectations and it fosters hope for a social advancement. Hope is for them a resource of its own for evaluating the present and the self according to one’s own expectations, and for engendering actual projects aiming to gain a better life situation.

Anyway, navigating one’s social fields through hope can also involve tension between a ‘patron’ and a ‘client’ who are putting forth such claims of reciprocity and mutual dependency. In the field, the expectations implied in such roles were often not agreed upon; they could bring power struggles over the definition of the respective rights and duties, and so over the access to resources, which can either alleviate or worsen the condition of uncertainty. As we will see, sometimes the sense of empowerment given by finding a relationship which is considered as meaningful was more an imaginary advancement than an actual one

## IV. Methodological Approach

### Data-gathering methods: participant observation and participatory film-making

In quality of a student in visual anthropology I set out for fieldwork with the idea of having the camera, with an observational/participatory film style, as my main data-gathering device. This research practice has been developed during the 70s, and it recalls the ethnographic method of participant-observation (Henley 2004); it argues that visual tools would allow, through the attentive observation of small-scale social events and interaction, the access to a different kind of knowledge “by acquaintance”, as defined by Bertrand Russell. Opposed to the “knowledge by description”, which is produced through writing, this is characterized as proceeding by emotions and thoughts; concerning the “direct awareness of the sense-data, memory, introspection [...] and, more problematically, self” (MacDougall 98:77-78). It’s the domain of experience and of the particular,



so it doesn't survive to its translation in symbolical terms, and it is relational and performative, a kind of meaning that resides in the immediacy of the action (Jackson in *ibid.*: 79).

My camera practice during the filming sessions tried to approach this experiential dimension of the life of my main informant, searching for a close proximity with the small-scale social events of my informant's everyday life, and trying to preserve the integrity of his actions and speeches through long-takes and documenting processes of the activities; without imposing my own point of view over his.

At the same time, my actual practice in the field has relied extensively on writing-based techniques. In many occasions, especially during the early stages or delicate situations, I have preferred to rely on notes; even in the case of long talks. Generally, I have registered as more events and verbal expressions as possible; jotted down as field notes and gathered into a "field diary" which registered them together with the accounts of my own experience on the field.

Anyway, this descriptive commitment wasn't always possible and crushed with the everyday 'exigencies' of filmic practice. It created contrasts during the day, when I had to choose whether to take notes or to film, and during the evenings too, as the daily logging of the footage prevented me from compiling the meaningful accounts that I wanted to produce. Until I had to make a choice over the most important method to follow, and I opted for filming: I relied on taking notes mainly when filming wouldn't have been appropriate.

But the camera posed delicate problems. It had, as an object with an 'agency' in itself, a big role in influencing my position in the field, as the one of my informants. In the neighbourhood, people seemed to hold quite strong expectations, albeit not true, about me being a journalist or reporter working for television, and so a 'rich' or wealthy person; which in turn had consequences on Jean who, people believed, had to be given gifts by the 'white man'. This, for sure, gave to Jean some kind of symbolic power (especially, as we will see, within the social fields and relations connected to patronage) but it also made him more vulnerable to the expectations and envy of others. In all probability my video camera, together with my identity as 'white', awoke neighbours' attention to the point that the burglars broke into Jean's home.

It also implied that my filming practice had spatial and time limits. Jean was unwilling to be filmed in the streets of the neighbourhood, and I had to be careful to where and whom I was pointing the

camera to. Discourses about witchcraft regarding pictures were widespread, so Jean was scared that if a tragedy happened to someone I filmed, he could be deemed responsible for it.

Most of the interview material, including hours long takes, wasn't planned beforehand but recorded whenever an informal talk or spontaneous monologues of Jean Louis seemed to last for a while (and if the context was appropriate); dialogue that I was usually only orienting with a few questions in order to elaborate topics of interest. This approach developed in quite a peculiar way in relation to Jean's style of expression and my non-judgemental attitude; and our talks became soon for Jean a defined social moment and space where he could express himself in relative freedom, and reflect upon, many of his everyday problems, dreams and conflicts. The camera, which in the beginning could have prompted him to behave more self-consciously, seemed not to bother him after a while. He clearly liked having filmed talks with me once in a while. As we will see in the analysis, I believe the camera had contributed to create, on one side, a liminal arena where culturally creative configurations of the self could be approach like in a mirror; a platform where his voice and suffering could find a meaning by being delivered to a distant audience; but also, more problematically, an arena where to try out his strategies in order to get something out of me, the 'white' researcher with a camera.

### My position as method: A reflexive methodology

Even more than the filmic or written-based techniques I adopted, my *self* and identity - as they entered in a relationship of intersubjective exchange and trust with my main informant - have been the fundamental means to gather data and to give sense to it.

The decisions I took in the field, along the moral boundaries of social interaction of this context, have provoked determined situations in which the dynamics of social roles and expectations that I wanted to understand could easily be grasped. Those choices, which I describe in the analysis, on one side, were determined and almost imposed by the social categories where my own identity would fit (in quality of a European, 'white', young man with an expensive camera); on the other, they gave me a role, or better a *position*, within the relationships of my informants; and I could glimpse some of that uncertainty as "a structure of feeling" (Cooper and Pratten 2015), to which I reacted. When I was faced by the evidence of the stagnation of the livelihoods of my main informant Jean Louis, I committed to contribute to his attempts of social advancement, although

this choice imposed me the category of *patron*. I was subject then, through my role, of the same moral expectations that oriented my informants' relation of patronage. The main reason for my decision was to establish a symmetrical form of exchange within what I felt as our distant social conditions and agencies; and I hoped to build my research over these attempts of transactional exchange.

My data, then, is necessarily of a highly self-reflexive nature, entangled with the personal feelings and emotions involved in my process of becoming and making sense. But how such a reflexive kind of knowledge should be addressed methodologically and represented in the written ethnography and film?

Long after the pioneering works of Mauss and Hallowell around the '80s, there has been a renewed interest in 'self' and 'subjectivity', an issue that has been largely neglected by anthropologists. Morris (1994) argues that individual and the person, in social science, are conceptualized in three different, even if interrelated, ways: as a natural human being, so embodied, conscious, social, with language and moral agency; as a performative cultural category; and as an individual 'self', a universal category which is unique and specifically determined at the same time, a central topic for both psychology and philosophy.

Discussing the "intersubjective turn", Michael Jackson (Madden 2010) affirms that 'selves' are "mutually arising"; requiring acts of mutual recognition, even in the case of asymmetrical exchange, but also that the relation is never coherent and "steeped in paradox and ambiguity"<sup>1</sup>

Reflexivity has been the main conceptual tool to approach the issues of 'scientific' validity in ethnography (ibid.): if the subjectivity of the researcher is a component of the research process, we need to evaluate the influence of the first over the second.

In ethnographic films, reflexivity was developed by a generation of "participatory" film-makers inspired by Jean Rouch's catalytic camera (De Groof 2013:109-112), was aimed to include both the perspective of the actors and the ethnographer's self-critic on his own gaze into the same filmic representation.

Anyway, producing a filmic representation has political implications too. Critics have pointed out that transparency and verisimilitude can reveal the ethnographer's interaction with the subjects while still concealing the hierarchy built in it; and, in the worst case, it could confirm stereotypes and contribute to Western discourses of self-legitimation<sup>2</sup>. The most critical positions in this debate

would claim that the only future for anthropology is not found in reflexivity but in subjects' generated films<sup>3</sup>.

In my opinion, the way to avoid the ethical problems posed by reflexivity is not to be simply aware of our identity and biases when we build up our representations, but also to position ethically ourselves, our projects in order to avoid reinforcing power structures. This means to commit to take account, directly into our analysis, about how our identity and actions in the field have consequences over these people; and to take action in order to ease the tensions imposed by our presence. In the case of my fieldwork, my commitment to help my informant was an outcome of this ethical urgency; and my filmic practice didn't conceal this relationship, instead I tried to see the limits of my position as productive.

For this reason, my filmic and written representations are constructed over the descriptive chronological account of my positioning process within the field, on how my identity entered into the anthropological project of understanding the actors' point of view, in this case, the experiences of uncertainty and the practices, and pragmatics, of handling them through one's and moral expectations. The aim is to let emerge, into the same narration, the reflexive account of the events, the positioning of the two main characters (Jean and Dji Dji) in respect to me, and their own interpretations on their everyday experience.

But the filmic and written representations are always in danger of concealing power relations under the sense of transparency provoked by the reflexive narration.

I believe that we can maybe solve some of the issues if we recognize the crucial role of the viewer in giving a meaning to our filmic representation (MacDougall 1998:88); and that the commitment to produce complex representations, supported by the epistemological qualities of the camera, can help us to define the ethical agenda that we want to pursue in our written and audio-visual representations. Pictures from a person's life could provoke, in the viewer, a sense of empathy and connection with the experiences of the actors, which in turn can induce a questioning of one's own preconceptions and ethnocentrism. The aim is then, to create a platform of communication with the viewer and the reader by evoking the expectations and subtle experiences of uncertainty which are the object of the research.

In the written text, the meanings implied in the representation are more controllable, also in a productive way. Whether in terms of sensorial and inter-subjective depth the written description of the events could be seen as thinner, reflexivity can be pursued here more extensively and explicitly. The thesis, then, is the place where I can: account, in its entirety, the process in which both sides of the filmic encounter, mine and Jean's, positioned to each other; to give a thicker contextual characterization; while still building up a representation of my informants' lives.

Film can't account for all that process, and many important stages can be addressed in it only through explicit reflexive statements. It has, anyway, the capacity of giving dense and sensorial description which wouldn't be possible to approach with writings; a more experiential depth to the context.

In any case, a more experientially complex encounter can be provoked only by intending film and text as separated but dialoguing voices, which concur in constructing the same reflexive, and finally 'thick', representation.

## V. Analysis

### Part I. The ethnographer's self: Reflexivity as a method

#### Entering the field: first meeting and expectations

The meeting with *Dji Dji* happened by chance, but it felt like providence to me. I was scared for my fieldwork: one month had already passed, only two months were left, and I couldn't find any informants who would fit within my research interests. I wanted to find a young Central African man having a long-lasting relationship with a local household, but either the people who I contacted were unwilling to join a research project, or I wasn't convinced about our collaboration. I had previously work with Simon, a displaced Cameroonian from the far North who worked as service *boy* in a Muslim household in town. I wasn't convinced from the relationship with his matron though - since they had known each other for a short time –, and neither with myself: he was too self-conscious in my regards and I felt that I couldn't make a film on his story.

The day when I met *Dji Dji*, I had a meeting with another possible gatekeeper who didn't show up, so a friend and I had a walk around the hills that were neighbouring *Seka Mbara*, my future field. We encountered *Dji Dji* by chance: he was an acknowledge of my friend so he stopped us on the

road, saying hello and asking what he was doing with a *nasara*, a ‘white man’. As my friend explained, Dji Dji said that he welcomed a Central African *boy* into his family as his “*enfant*”; and he invited us. I had no idea what he actually meant, but it sounded an interesting relation. I was driven by necessity and time limits, but when I saw Jean a few days later and we talked at Dji Dji’s home, I realized that my hopes were fulfilled: I found a story, one that could be seen on a film. Jean Louis was shy and talkative at the same time, with a serious look and deep gaze; whenever he talked he seemed to have a lot to say. On that day, Jean Louis saw a young ‘white man’, a *nasara*, accompanied in the neighbourhood by my friend, who was an employee of the national broadcasting channel, asking about who he was and his past. I was probably introduced as a journalist by Dji Dji, and I had such an appearance, travelling around with a semi-professional video camera and always jotting down on a notebook. He was self-conscious in expressing himself, but also very proud. Jean probably wished to meet a *nasara*, as he met some generous ones in the past, and he probably thought that a collaboration with me represented a chance to establish a meaningful patronizing relation. Anyway, he needed to be a bit disoriented when he saw that I didn’t fit much into the stereotypes of the *white man*: I was young, growing long hair and beard; I travelled with the *moto taxi* instead than with a car and, even when I was invited to wear my sandals inside Dji Dji’s home, I refused.

I was happy about my first meeting with Jean Louis because I felt empathy with him: we had a similar temperament; he was about age and living through an uncertain condition, albeit the gap between our condition was wide and steep. I was a student facing the challenges of my first fieldwork, a European visiting Sub-Saharan Africa for the first time. Jean didn’t frequent school, he was an immigrant but also well trusted and quite integrated within and outside the community of Central Africans in Ngaoundéré. Our living conditions were very different, but this didn’t prevent that Jean and I could relate on a less professional and pragmatic level.

In the case of Dji Dji I didn’t feel the same empathic connection: he was a *patron*, an army officer and the richest man of the neighbourhood; he seemed to have a stability, domains and power that I couldn’t relate to as much. Dji Dji was also an easy-going and smiling person, he didn’t seem to expect much from me or to have peculiar interests over my presence; and neither he seemed interested to my project. He liked to talk with me about the times when he was in Europe travelling with the army, and about his impossible dream to move there. What he appeared to like the most

was to simply have a *nasara* at his home, who would watch television in his living room together with his family.

Very early during fieldwork it became obvious that the relationship between Jean and Dji Dji was problematic and difficult to visualize. Jean had resentment for Dji Dji; at that time, they were not connected by any active work project. Neither they would spend much time together: most encounters happened in Dji Dji's dark living room, for sharing a meal and have a little chat. Then, Dji Dji would lie down in his couch with an earphone on, scrolling on his phone until he would sleep; while Jean would stay there, on the opposite side of the room, watching television for another hour or two. The interest of Jean towards me, instead, became soon very obvious and easy to be recorded on video. From the start, while I was filming he spontaneously talked with me about his hopes, projects and challenges in order to advance in his life. Soon it became obvious that Jean had much more expectations over me as a possible patronizing figure than he had for Dji Dji. Or maybe the relation he could build with me, as we will see, left more space for hope.

I gradually decided to fully acknowledge the extent of my presence within the object of my research and the dynamics of that field; shifting the focus from the challenging relation between Jean and his patron, to the one that Jean hoped to establish with me, the new *nasara* in town.

I acknowledged to be an actor within the power dynamics of that vulnerable context, becoming a character in the story that I wanted to visually tell.

#### A reflexive and situated account

I believe that taking the ethnographer's self as the point of departure of a reflexive analysis is a way to become aware of the constraints of our ethnographic research. The 'reflexive turn' in anthropology has criticized the ways how Western scholars have tended to represent Africa (Ferguson 2006), and it stressed the necessity to build representations that are able to grasp the experience of our subjects (De Groof 2013). Anyway, even if many of our analytical accounts are informed by these debate, they are not, in fact, very reflexive.

The authors writing in the volume of Cooper & Pratten (2015), for example, aim to "capture the lived experience of uncertainty in Africa" (ibid.:13), with a methodology drawing "heavily on narrative and the individual biography". Anyway, the articles aren't openly reflexive and give no clues about the ethnographer presence and role in the events; their arguments open inspiring new views on the contemporary social life in Africa, but the descriptions are thin.

Let's take Simon Turner's article on young Burundian refugees in Nairobi (2015). His argument on hope and the productive nature of uncertainty is very strong: he claims that the young men whom he interviewed preferred not to enter the UNHCR camps, because this institution wouldn't allow for alternatives, but only for a kind of hope which is concrete and goal-oriented. Instead, they would live and "passionately suffer" in the insecure context of the city, where they can wait for an indefinite success in the future and leave their hopes "open-ended". Turner's narration is not situated: the discourses of the characters are presented in almost an objective way; and his identity as ethnographer and person is carved out of the narrative. Moreover, from Turner's account we don't have any idea about how he is related to his interviewees, apart from the fact that they would fit to the category of people he was researching about. The neutral narrative of Turner doesn't necessarily imply that his fieldwork was conducted without a degree of self-critique; but the danger of hiding the ethnographer's self from the representations that we produce is to linger on the modernist notion that the researcher is separated from the object of his/her research; if not to reproduce the Western cultural appropriation of Africa as a "radical other" (Ferguson 2006).

Anyway, also reflexivity as a methodological tool can be criticised for similar reasons. Perhaps, the sense of transparency given by a highly reflexive account is still selective and it can hide the authority to represent which is still held by the ethnographer. In ethnographic films, a more discrete approach to build a reflexive narrative is proposed by MacDougall, with his methodological approach of "deep reflexivity". The film maker doesn't need to jump on the screen or to use a voiceover to make his presence obvious, since his presence can be grasped by the camera movements and the relationship we have with our informants is already visible in the way in which the actors approach the camera.

Still I believe that when the self of the ethnographer is recognised as an actor in the social field, also more explicit and catalytic forms of reflexivity can be a way to develop critical forms of knowledge.

Compared to Turner's fieldwork in Nairobi, my own in Ngaoundéré had a very small scale and number of participants; but it allowed for a very focused and situated perspective which I have maintained at the core of the written and filmic representations of my research.

On the field, my reflexive effort wasn't simply aimed to record my presence but to engage with the events, taking positioned choices and social actions. I didn't avoid the challenges given by my



identity, but I tried to take the limits given by my privileged position and place-in-the-world in a productive way. Assuming the role of *patron* offered me a very narrow point of view, giving me access only to Jean Louis' discourses and to observing the development of our relation; but it allowed for a closer focus. Furthermore, my actions and investments were framed within the same uncertainty. I had to make long reflections before every decision, but those situations of uncertainty have also given me an opportunity to look back at my reactions and to challenge my cultural biases on the research. While in Jean, it provoked the hopes and aspirations of social advancement that I wanted to understand. A standpoint where I could observe the relational strategies to manage uncertainty that he used to partake, what were his stakes and how did he situationally express particular moods and temperaments to reach them.

## Part II. '*La souffrance*': the everyday struggle in Seka Mbara

### Emic discourses of uncertainty

I have spent the first part of fieldwork having very informal interviews with Jean Louis, at his home or piece of land, that were intended to develop trust and to know better Jean and the context of his life. I had very loose control over the conversation: Jean talked about what he cared the most; I would just listen and make few questions to bring him back to the main topic. He had clear consciousness of the uneasiness of his condition, I didn't need to direct him often because, since the early interviews, he could eloquently express his points of views. In fact, Jean was constantly analysing the problems in his life and searching for pragmatic solutions to them. Our 'intimate' interviews became very soon a place where he could express his pain and give free vent to his thoughts and hopes.

The hope for advancement and his planning to get out of it were the major topics: Jean saw his life as a path towards a future of indefinite of plenty and justice; a progress which was influenced by the superior will of God and, especially, the positive and negative power of other individuals. He referred to the condition of uncertainty caused by the obstacles along his way as *la souffrance*, 'the suffering' or 'misery'.

At the base of Jean's comprehension of the pragmatic issues in his life, was the scarcity of resources in Ngaoundéré, or better the obstacles to access the means to one's subsistence.

The people employed with a contract outside the informal economy were a small minority in the city; there was a general lack of long-term jobs which allowed for a decent pay. The informal sector, spanning from agriculture and retail commerce to constructions, allowed most people to cope with everyday food expenses; not much more than that. All my informants reported that the wages in town had decreased in the last few years, same for the pay of the day jobs offered to bricklayers. Jean affirmed that previously his average pay for a full day job was around 5000 CFA, now between 3000-2000; but many jobs available would take only half a day, and be paid accordingly.

Furthermore, seasonal changes are a great challenge to the already fragile work conditions in the city. Business in the city lives a halt during the long rainy season; and informal work in constructions, a sector which is contributing to make the city grow from down-up, is particularly affected. Bricks are generally made from sand because most households can't afford the cement; but sand bricks cannot be dried up in the rainy season; and buildings have to be promptly raised with a roof, otherwise they could break from the heavy rains.

When I met him, Jean used to find only *petits travaux*<sup>1</sup>, the expression for 'day jobs': he would spend the day waiting to be contacted by a neighbour or an employer of a construction company, asking him to work on the following day. Jean didn't like to stay home, be passive and not even being able to give a proper welcome to the guests like me, offering tea, coffee and food. He was happy to spend time with his kids, but the household was also the place where his wife Ornela would "give him the list": remind him what was missing for the family economy. The family had to cope with many subsistence costs on a periodic basis: food, bills, rent, transports and school for the children. Even if these expenses were a daily certainty, whether and how they could provide for it depended if Jean would work and be paid on that day, two necessities that were both uncertain. The unpredictable work situation would heavily influence also the access to the most urgent resources; such as quantity and quality of the food consumed by the family and medical treatments.

Health problems were always a concern. Some were possible to be accounted for since they were endemic: seasonal sickness, like malaria, and chronic issues which haven't properly been treated, like dental problems, were a constant worry for Jean's family as everyone else. More sudden and serious diseases were also considered a frightful possibility.

Many other unpredictable events were taken into account as potential obstacles to his advancement. Jean was stressing the danger posed by other people: theft, fraud and other mischiefs were common occurrences in the neighbourhood. Together with many informants and friends I met during my stay, he was emphasizing the need to be wary of everyone because no one could be fully trusted, not even the closest friends and family kin.

The relation with the family members was always problematic in that context, and it could add on the vulnerability of the individual and of the nuclear family. On one side, Jean was glad to be visited by the family members of his two uncles, and he wanted to be recognized as “*a man*”, worthy and resourceful; but this would also bring up their expectations to obtain resources from him.

Also his close friends or *petits* could ask for support if they were in need, and they were also a category of relation for which some capital deserved to be invested. Sometimes, Jean would share day jobs with his fellows, even in cases when the task could be completed by one person.

A way to reduce the expectations of people was to use or invest all the money as soon as it was earned. In general, Jean stressed that to overcome all everyday obstacles he needed to make business in as many fields as possible, investing immediately all the earnings, and hoping that they will become beneficial credits in the future. Anyway, also investments are highly unpredictable in that context: sometimes, given the low education rates, they could fail because they aren't well planned or based on wrong presumptions; but very often the outcomes are simply not under the control of the individual.

The lack of means and the impossibility to save money, in face of so many dangers and obstacles, prompts many inhabitants of Ngaoundéré to search for creative solutions. In this context, uncertainty seems to encourage “an ethos of thick sociality” (Cooper & Pratten 2015:7): people navigate in their social context mainly through social relations and personal dependencies. When they are not protected by their social networks they are vulnerable; but relationships are also unpredictable and it's difficult to establish meaningful ones.

Their condition is also one of stagnation: in their situation, it's difficult advancing in life or rising enough capital to reach a well-off position and a recognised status. Even though many young African man and woman have well designed plans and good entrepreneurial skills, “*il n'y à pas le moyens*”<sup>2</sup>, so they have to rely over forms of solidarity. For them, the most feasible way to start any enterprise is to find sponsorship; so to search the means by asking someone else who does own it.

In other terms, everything is relational. Every problem caused by uncertainty, also when it is clearly out of individual agencies like diseases, could be explained in relational and moral terms: a consequence of the behaviour of others. Whyte and Siu note that Ugandan people under treatment for HIV felt life “as a series of steps facilitated or impeded by other people” (ibid:5). In Ngaoundéré, witchcraft was a commonly adopted discourse when logical explanations would miss. In general, Jean thought that his suffering was caused by “the malice of others”; anyway, this negative vision was also a reason to be hopeful. Suffering was just a disruption in the order of things maintained by God; it would increase his expectations to obtain a new success, because good deeds were always repaid and he was certain of behaving correctly. In his argument, then, he did have agency; his own actions did have a weight within this uncertain context. To be successful he just needed to behave morally, be trusted within meaningful relations, be knowledgeable in many activities and be attentive to new possibilities. Uncertainty was for Jean a matter of becoming, the important was what he did with it.

#### Managing uncertainty with a patron

The attempt to be successful in this context is expressed with the widely used expression “se débrouiller”; which in different francophone African countries refers to creative fending, winding out of a complicated situation, so to the individuals’ coping strategies (Waage 2006; 2015). In the discourses with Jean and others, the required qualities for having success were being attentive, actively waiting for possibilities to appear, and open to as many activities as possible.

For the new immigrants, establishing relationships of solidarity with equals was the first strategy for adapting to the life in the city: family, work and the neighbourhood were the main networks where to find a safeguard. In Ngaoundéré, everyone seems related to others in a web of *petits* and *grands* spanning across religious, ethnic and regional differences; but their inclusive discourses hide the fact that these relations can be very different in terms of power balance: from being familiar and egalitarian to very hierarchical, if not existing within the institutions of the formal economy.

Anyway, it’s the quality of the relationships which makes the advancement possible. Being tied to individuals with little means could drain energy away, as Jean lamented; while building ties with powerful locals was seen from Jean as the key to make his status better.

At the home of the wealthiest individuals of the community there used to be a number of men constantly visiting. He would normally call them his *pétits*, or *enfants* 3; while they would call him their *grand*; or *patron*. Jean Louis was such a person in relation to Dji Dji. They didn't use hierarchical terms between themselves and Dji Dji didn't like to be called *patron*; but their relationship was characterised by a specific deal of work services in exchange for favours. They met because of business: Dji Dji needed to refinish the buildings of his new household, and the previous workers run away after having been paid; Jean was a recommended bricklayer in the neighbourhood so he was employed. The "friendship", told Dji Dji, started after he recognised that the work Jean did was "well done". His compound was very large and with different buildings to be completed, so Jean was called for other projects inside Dji Dji's house and yard. The pay could be of a different order to money, such as food supplies and tools of different kinds; but generally, Jean expected to be paid with money for his services. The terms of the deal were always very open to negotiation, and the different power relations and expectations could also bring tension, as we will see. The immediate earning by a working collaboration was seen as only the first gain in a relation with a *patron*; Jean, in the role of 'client' of Dji Dji, was expecting and longing for more collaborations. But having a patron had various advantages for managing uncertainty in that context.

First of all, it was a safeguard towards the unpredictability of everyday life. A patron is a person to whom you can ask for economic support when the availability of day works is low and so it's not possible to pay bills, rent and especially medicines.

Secondly, a patron is a mediator, a "guide" to other fields of knowledge. Being normally a local, he can give access to other social networks and fields where resources can be obtained; especially when it comes to work and, as we are going to see, symbolic remedies against uncertainty.

These first two functions can be expected also from other individuals, such as *grands* with a more equal status; even if their help would probably be expected less incisive. But normally only patrons could be sponsors: they were able to grant, in some cases, the means to start a business activity.

How often they would it's difficult to say; according to Jean promoting others was a requisite to be a good patron. But for sure, patrons were clusters of hope in the dreams of social advancement of these young men.

The reason for this is that patrons have the capacity of responding to the most urgent necessities to advance from poverty of the vulnerable people. Daryl Collins, drawing examples from South

Africa, India, and Bangladesh, argues that the poor have three key needs when it comes to actively manage their small, uncertain and irregular flows of money. They need help: in managing their money on a day to day basis; to build savings over the long term; and to borrow for all uses (Singh 2017:109).

Finally, having a patron could give a help to be recognised as worthy and resourceful by others of their community: it can increase one's symbolic capital and influence within the networks of other social fields. The client becomes a mediator himself since he can find, for example, more lucrative work deals, and he is more likely to be a *grand* to more *petits*; with whom he will share the job and so he will be better protected in the future. But even if more connections mean more protection, the influence has a cost to be maintained in terms of expectations to be fulfilled. Expectations in the neighbourhood can rise to the point that a person can become vulnerable to the envy of others.

In the first part of the analysis, we have explored the emic understanding of uncertainty; and I have argued that uncertainty is managed through strategies which make people contingent. The quality of relation that they can obtain is fundamental for social advancement, and patrons were seen as allowing for a steadier progress. But is that really so?

In the next paragraphs, I will draw from my experiences in the field to give situated accounts of processes in the field in which the way uncertainty is managed through patron-client relations can be grasped better and discussed further. We'll see that establishing a relation with a patron is a complicated matter when the expectations of many people are involved; high hopes and power dynamics can create tension, and stagnation is hard to overcome.

### Part III. *Nous sommes ensemble*: situated accounts from the field

#### Becoming a patron. Positioning choices between ethics and global categories

Already from the day I started filming, I had to take a crucial decision regarding my position in the field and, in general, for my research. I filmed Jean Louis doing a *petit travail*: plastering a ruined mud bricks façade at a neighbour's household. There was a lot of attention over me, especially from children, and I felt a bit irritated. Afterwards, we went home and had a chat with the camera turned off; and Barnabé, a Central African of the neighbourhood with whom Jean worked often together, came down with us. Compared to him, Barnabé took more confidence with me; asking who I was and what I was doing. We discussed over the issues for the bricklayers and for the "people without

means”; about the difficulty to get through the rainy season. I felt compassion, but I only tried to explain better what anthropology is and I argued for the importance of knowing social reality at the level of how it is lived and experienced by people in order to affect it positively. Barnabé asked me then, really seriously: “so, what could be done for us?”, next to Jean’s attentive gaze. I wanted to reply, but I couldn’t find any concrete way to answer their question; I just felt like the anecdote of Sol Worth working with Navajo herders, who was asked whether making film made any good to the sheep<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, this issue had taken me personally. I replied that also many young people from my country, struggled a lot to find a job and to start a life; that many, like me, have to migrate in other countries too. Barnabé replied disappointed: “Really? Is it the same down there!?”. In my mind I admitted the difference between our life conditions, our uncertainty couldn’t be equated; I felt that taking pictures of his life within such a fragile context was intrusive and uneven. I wanted to do something to compensate for this gap of power between us; to build my filmic project on the basis of a reciprocal exchange. I silently took the decision to take action, to give something of mine.

After having slept over it, I made a proposal to Jean on the following day: I would give him financial aid for the business activity that he considered most urgent. I thought that I could be helpful if I gave him some money to invest for trade, for example. I asked him what his most urgent priority was. “*La maison*” he said; building his own house, he bought some land two years before. I expressed my doubts about this choice: my budget couldn’t cover all of the expenses so it was probably going to become a dead-end road. He was convinced, so I agreed with this project; but only after stressing the fact that I was making a sacrifice which I couldn’t do twice. I also tried to make clear that I was only a student without a job, and so incapable of being a *patron* to him. A few days later he elaborated further about his priorities. Two things were required to have in Ngaoundéré; he said: “*la maison propre*”, the house of property, and “*mon argent*”, in the sense of the means needed to work and to make your own wealth. Having the means to run a lucrative business or activity are needed to advance, but owning a house was the priority to Jean, because it would allow for fewer everyday expenses and as safeguard to his property. He gave me an example: without a rent to pay he would rather buy bags of rice and corn flour, which are cheaper than retailed portions; and a secure home would allow to “guard” them. The key was to have a wall around the household and especially a solid door, to protect well the family and their properties.

My doubts about the house, anyway, were very founded; since my budget was really low: about 50000 CFA, a bag of cement. Could I actually be helpful? Jean had no doubts, the sum was enough to start the works for his new house. After our negotiation, he brought me to his piece of land. Interestingly, Jean seemed already much more at ease in front of the camera. He explained me his plans of digging the foundations and raising a dam to prevent the land erosion by the side of the stream. For talking about the stages of the work, he always started with the conditional clause *si je trouve les moyens*, “if I can find the means”.

When I came home I didn't feel so much at ease with the situation. I didn't like to find myself in the position of acting as a *patron* only because my identity as a ‘white man’ would give me a privileged position. I also felt somehow disappointed by this pragmatic necessity of being related; what I defined in my field diary as the “inexorable functionality of human relations”.

My initial rejection to become a patron was fostered by my theoretical and methodological doubts; but it was driven by personal motives. It wasn't a position where I would feel comfortable: I had never been powerful and influential, and the patron was a position that my political convictions would reject for being exploitative; especially in that vulnerable context.

I saw myself as an anthropologist in the first place; my aim was to investigate how they experienced their world, not how I could positively affect their reality. I was critical against the authoritative role of the ethnographer on the field.

Money is always a problematic resource in the relationship with our informants. Paying money or other goods in exchange for information or interview sessions has the danger of making the ethnographic relation to become a form of economic transaction. Even when there are good intentions, it's difficult to predict how the individuals of a disempowered community would benefit by money donations. Especially in my context: Ngaoundéré is a place where relations are more effective than money. My biggest worry about promoting Jean was the effect that such a help would have in the community.

I accepted to base our exchange on money when I have understood that it was another way to understand how people create relations in that context. As Singh argues, money, is one of the most important means of communication: in the Global South it's a medium of relationships, care and sharing with the extended family; as much as it can be of coercion and control (2017:113).

Moreover, I was there as a student doing my first fieldwork, and I wanted to be recognised as such at my home university as well as from the collaborators to my project in the field. After two months



of field research I was undoubtedly seen as a scholar by my informants. Jean and Simon, my previous informant, were more certain than I was about the fact that I would have finished my master course and be back to work as a PhD. But in any case, I was seen as a *nasara* first; a *white man*.

'*Nasara*' was the fulfuldé term used in the area for white/western person. It probably comes from the Arabic '*naṣārā*'s which is the Qur'anic term for 'Christians'. Furthermore, it seems connected to the root of the verb '*naṣara*', which is 'helping someone, or making someone victorious, against someone else': the derived terms carry the meaning of aiding/sustaining, victory and baptism. But it's particularly interesting that my Fulani informants were convinced that '*nasara*' meant 'literate'. Two elements are important here. On one side, in the region of Adamawa, the first schools were brought from the conquerors: the Qur'anic schools from the pastoral Fulbe and other Muslim groups, and western education systems by the European colonizers; and these institutions are still coexisting now. On the other, the symbolic meaning of 'white' skin has a broader sense in Northern Cameroon: it defines Europeans as well as Asians, Americans, Arabians and North Africans (so not necessarily Christian or Western). It can also indicate those Sub-Saharan Africans who had a brighter shade of skin, and the Fulani élite was renowned and proud for having the brightest one.

During fieldwork I was hosted by a Fulani family. I was living in the middle of the old city; in a Fulani neighbourhood not far from the *le lamidat*, the palace of the sultan and the *petit marché*, the biggest market in town. As I walked a few hundred meters from home, half of the people in the crowded street would stare at me with investigative eyes; children would euphorically run away, pointing at me while shouting: "nasara!"; and the youngest would make funny expressions of astonishment, if not of terror. Europeans are very few in the city, the majority works in religious missions, NGOs and at the hospital. For many inhabitants of the city, to see a *nasara* was a rare event: they normally stayed in segregated resorts; but, wherever they went, they were always very visible.

It was a category I would have gladly avoided to wear in the field, because it was clearly raising unrealistic hopes in the people that I met. The expectations about Europe as a land of plenty were difficult to break, but also to fulfil. Many asked for help to get the documents needed to migrate with me; I would have loved to share my privilege with them, but it was clearly out of my power. Also Jean, who knew well about the condition of uncertainty that I was facing also in Europe, was

sure that I would have been successful and reached the positions I wanted. Europe is the land of hope.

Jean seemed to equate *nasara* to patrons; the majority of *white people* he met were working into charity or they were employers of a business activity. As he had clear expectations about the behaviour of patrons, likewise for *nasara*. They were generous in giving and asking nothing in return, like God they were reliable and supportive; in other terms, the *nasara* have the ideal qualities of a patron. While “*nous, le noir*”, he continued, were greedy and not to be trusted, defined as the opposite. Jean thought that the relationship with a *nasara* normally involved gifts, and it seemed to be a belief for many others in town.

I understood the fact such discourses were also situational: he expressed a certain picture in order to influence more engagement on my side. Anyway, he was also making a good point. In Africa, Western people make their way either through money and donations; they have drivers for their movements, porters for their luggage, guides. The high expectations about the West were also a pragmatic realisation that *nasara* people could easily do what they couldn't. In that sense, I understood his requesting attitude as a matter of exchange: since I had plenty of resources compared to him, it felt right to share some of my wealth in order to ease the gap between us.

But what did they expect to get from maintaining such high expectations towards Westerners? I believe that their hopes are a way to make a claim of membership to the modern society. For Ferguson, modernity is not only a matter of past and present, but of up and down. African people desire the goods and means from Asia and the West, such as cars, smartphones and electronics, that would allow them to rise in the world in economic and political terms and so to improve one's place in the world (see Ferguson 2006:VI). Very often the topics of my conversations in town were about technology, the life and cultural icons of Europe and about their dreams of moving in the West; they probably saw me all the time as someone different, as a member of the global so. *White men*, then, were seen as members of the global society from which Africa was excluded. A *nasara* is seen as a mediator, a repertoire of knowledge of the global world who can make a bridge to access the goods and capitals of the interconnected global world. Jean stressed many times that if everyone would share his resources with the unluckier ones, the world would be a happy place.

I was a *nasara*, Jean was right. Regarding my theoretical doubts about the deal of the house, I concluded that, if the anthropological project is to produce knowledge together with people in a

reciprocal dialogue, then getting engaged and sharing experiences with them was also a way to learn. I decided to commit by taking responsibility of my debt, by promoting an activity of his that would make him advance a little; and to limit the focus of my research to the exchange between Jean and I, and the consequences that this deal would have had within that uncertain context. Assuming the role of the promoter, a function normally performed by patrons, meant that I would have been seen as such; a position which maintained north-south power dynamics and emphasised the gap between our social status. Anyway, the power dynamics between us wouldn't have dissolved if I refused to be characterized as such.

But there was a more serious doubt about my supporting aid that was raising an ethical problem. Why do we, educated Europeans, want to help them, the poor African? Is the desire legit or just another reproduction of post-colonial categories of thinking, where we have a privileged position for understanding, representing their world and for allowing their redemption?

I think that my attempt of support wasn't really an empowering strategy but rather a pragmatic exchange that would have allowed to me to show concretely that I was close to him and to his suffering; and a way to take responsibility of the consequences caused my actions. I was taught that fieldwork is a progressing dialogue based on reciprocal exchange. Doing anthropology has also an economic cost and, more importantly, a set of consequences triggered from our behaviours and our professional methods and agendas. How to pay back the debt we anthropologists have with the participants to our projects? It's a very important question to consider when doing fieldwork in an African context; but also very difficult to answer.

Throughout fieldwork my positioning process has changed and adapted, trying to give concrete answers to this need of finding a reciprocal exchange. My uncertain progress, in the end, was mirroring the perilous project of my informants: trying to compensate or cross the gap between cultural differences and uneven statuses in order to establishing meaningful relations.

The ampli was stolen: an everyday drama in the quartier

Jean bought the cement, and started the works for his home by digging the foundations. One week after our deal, he was digging under the strong midday sun at his piece of land, alone and with a dark face. The areal of the digging was already well defined. Jean counted me about what happened two days before, on the previous Sunday. While Jean was with the family at his maternal uncle's

funeral, the burglars broke into his home. Apparently, only the *ampli*, the ‘amplifiers’ of his DVD players were stolen; but for him it was extremely serious matter. It had to be a person “who knew him well”, he said; a person of the neighbourhood who stroke because he knew about the funeral and that a *nasara* visited his home; he assumed. People could have thought that I worked for television, so they expected that Jean could have received precious gifts from me. Dji Dji was angry for the fact, Jean told me; he affirmed that he would have helped Jean “to find the person” who stole the *ampli*. On Sundays, connecting the amplifier to the DVD player, he loved to play out loud disks of Central African music; and he loved especially to play the songs in his mother language, the Kaba. Jean was angry for his loss and he probably felt life in the neighbourhood less secure; but he tried to bring the issue back to his personal religious philosophy: The bad action of the thieves wasn’t a problem for him but for the person who committed the crime, because only righteousness was to be repaid by God; while misdeeds would turn back on the offenders. Anyway, the rationalisation over the misfortune wasn’t enough to ease his anxiety for action. Jean seemed to have a new priority: finding the amplifier or repaying it; in any case, searching for a solution to the disruption created by the loss.

I couldn’t ascertain the actual help that he received from his patron. Dji Dji later said that his main support was to make a complaint to the police station; but he acknowledged to have contacted a *médecin traditionnel*, a Fulani medicine man from his home village, and to have negotiated the offer to make a magical remedy, a ‘*remède*’, to find the culprit. Jean never mentioned the complaint; and told me, a few days later, that the price for the *remède* was higher, but he couldn’t pay more than half: 5000 CFA.

Until that point, Jean was very elusive in talking about Dji Dji and in defining their relation. He talked a lot about *les patrons*, but he never explicitly said that Dji Dji was such a person to him. But almost three weeks after the burglary, he broke his silence by doing something unusual. He was digging alone again, by the stream at his home; and I was documenting his activity. After a while he stopped, looked at me and, taking me by surprise, started to talk: “there is a problem with Dji Dji”. Jean approaching the camera with a new confidence, expressed with open heart how he felt about Dji Dji’s way to handle the issue of the stolen *ampli*. The *remède* wasn’t working and he was convinced that the fault fell on Dji Dji; he could have pretended to arrange a remedy in order to steal 5000 CFA to Jean. Maybe the witchcraft wasn’t working because Jean paid only half price of the service, and this would also create resentment. For Jean there wasn’t any doubt, it was Dji Dji’s

responsibility to pay the remaining 5000 CFA and make sure that the remedy would be effective. Furthermore, he was convinced that the witchcraft from his homeland was stronger and it would have been more efficient; he also knew the right man in the bush. But he didn't want to use that strategy, because in that case the thief of the *ampli*, would have died with all of his family; and killing isn't legit for Christians.

But for Jean the problem didn't concern only the *remède*; because the story of the *ampli* was also connected to a previous shortcoming of Dji Dji, which was still creating tension between the two. The *ampli* was owned by Dji Dji in the past, but he decided to upgrade to a bigger sound system. At that time, Jean was building the wall of cement bricks enclosing the yard of Dji Dji's household. When the supply of cement was over, also the building project was suspended; and the *ampli* was the payment for that service. Now it was stolen, and the wall was still uncompleted. Dji Dji had even some cement but he preferred to give it to another *petit*.

In other words, regardless of the uncertain context Dji Dji had the responsibility and he owned all the tools to find a solution to the disruption represented by the burglary. He could find either a magical solution - he would have found it back if he had negotiated better with the *médecin* - or a practical one: he could pay now in cash for Jean's previous service of building the wall; or he could give him work for finishing the wall, or he could simply pay for a new *ampli*. But Dji Dji was unwilling to help; so to Jean he was culpable as much as the culprits.

Jean's words were very harsh, but also showing that he had high expectations upon Dji Dji's behaviour. With me instead, he never expressed the desire explicitly; but a few days later, after two beers at the bar during a rainy day, he made a bold request. Our conversation fell again on the lost *ampli*; and Jean said that I should have bought a new *ampli* for him before my departure. I said that I had no more money to give, and he replied very serious: "Well, it's not my problem. You can find the money". I reacted to the pressure by closing down, simply replying that I couldn't, that I wasn't his patron and I couldn't give him money for everything. Jean reassumed the usual posture of respectful silence. He never asked again.

To me, it was difficult to understand why was the *ampli* so important to him. For sure, it had a relevant price, 46000 CFA; which meant that if some misfortune happened, it could have been sold or given as a pledge. But it wasn't a means to work or sustain the family, and I didn't consider it a priority.

I understood that the *ampli* had a symbolical meaning for Jean: it was a tool for expressing his cultural identity in the public sphere – listening to his music out loud - and to show his status. Probably, owning an *ampli* was already a sign of wealth, since it was also a resource belonging to the global world. More importantly, for Jean it was a symbol of the fact that he had already advanced in his life against much difficulties and uncertainty. I understood it but I saw it as a paradox: was the symbol of coping more important than actual coping?

In any case, the *ampli* psychologically symbolised also the tension with Dji Dji. Unless his patron would have magically found back the amplifier, or bought some cement to make Jean work again, it meant that Dji Dji couldn't be trusted.

Finally, it showed that I was deluding as a patron. I hadn't accepted to assume such a category yet, making the terms of exchange more complicated. For Jean, similarly to Dji Dji, I wasn't taking action to ease the new vulnerability of his condition.

This little conflict between us gave me also chance to make self-criticism. Again, it was a matter of sharing and commitment: I could find money if I would have limited my monthly budget or if I would have asked to my parents. Furthermore, this showed me that I had a qualitative and moral scale through which I assessed Jean's activities: only some had to be prioritised and promoted, such as work, building his house and getting food supplies. Both Jean and I, then, were giving moral assessments about how the other should have behaved; but our argument showed also that our expectations were going towards different directions.

Becoming a photographer: an attempt of collaboration

Jean's request at the bar over the *ampli* was particularly surprising to me because it was bolder than usual and he was expecting quite a big sum; anyway, he was asking quite often for smaller amounts of money, regardless of my constant reminding that I wasn't his patron. I gave money to buy painkillers to heal his toothache and a new shovel, because I felt guilty to film him while he was suffering. When he wouldn't work for long, I would hand him 2000 CFA for the food costs. But when he was telling me his business plans, he tried to convince me often to buy him a bike or a car, bags of food supplies to do the commerce, or a camera to work as street photographer.

All these donations were asked in a very indirect way: in Ngaoundéré, it was common to ask by only expressing the need instead of making a direct question. The long accounts of misfortunes of

Jean and many others in town were undoubtedly used in a situational way, in order to provoke a merciful action from the listener.

It was a different story when Jean was surrounded by his *petits* or family kin. Twice, I clearly saw Jean to abandon his usual shyness towards me and claim something that I would owe him. Once it was with the *ampli* at the bar; because his 'best' *petit* Vanie was sitting at the table with us.

The other time we were waiting for a break in the rain at home of Jean's uncle. Jean already asked different times to have a new mobile phone; and I had previously bought a small one for 10000 CFA, so I had two phones. On those days Jean used his wife's mobile, because his had broken; and I was having problems contacting him. With a loud voice, Jean asked me in front of different family members to exchange his almost unusable phone with my new mobile. I didn't like his directness; but I also recognised that having a phone was a really important tool in his livelihood, and to our collaboration; thus I accepted.

Every time Jean asked me for something, I had to decide whether to give or to avoid, but I was doing it according to what I believed as necessary and useful. It was a spontaneous choice which rested over the assumption of a scale of values, through which I assessed Jean's plans and commitments. I also had my own personal stakes, limits and pride: I didn't want to be taken advantage of. After our argument, I acknowledged that I had my own expectations and that these were having an influence over my exchange with Jean and, in general, over his life. For Jean, I was part of that arena where symbolic resources are sought in order to cope against the uncertainty of everyday life. Our friendship and research collaboration was a bit struggling to establish itself; but Jean's high expectations on me were also showing the opposite: despite our differences of views and cultural backgrounds, he could negotiate with me and trusted me as a partner in exchange. When he asked me about the *ampli*, he wasn't only searching for a solution to his uncertainty, but also testing my own limits and checking towards which aims my stakes were oriented. After my refusal, he saw that the *ampli* wasn't a priority for me, so he resigned about considering me responsible for it. At the same time, I felt that our relation had to be confirmed by a major commitment on my side.

Few days later, we wanted to have a walk on the hills over the neighbourhood in order to take some panoramic shots; and Jean told me to meet at Dji Dji's place. This one wasn't home, and we were welcomed by his wife and served some food. Jean was very serious on that day, he stopped there to

have a meal because he hadn't worked lately and he had an empty belly. On that day I brought my photographic camera with me. We ate in the living room without talking much; then Jean grabbed my camera, he started to take pictures of *Dji Dji's* daughters posing under the veranda, and his face lightened up. I already noticed that he liked my camera, he used to carefully hold it in his hands, while telling me that he had already worked as photographer in the past, as long as the camera broke.

Upon the hill I took some beautiful shots; then Jean, who was also taking photos of the nature and, with my surprise, of me shooting pictures, started to talk and we had a crucial interview about stagnation. He made one of his gentle requests: holding and shaking my camera, he told me about possibilities of owning such a tool, *if he had it* he could make good money by selling pictures to the people in the neighbourhood, especially at the Sunday mass. He knew the job, he said. Most people in town used to fill up albums of photographic portraits to save the memories of events and people. The printed picture clearly had important symbolic values for them; and they hang, on the wall of their living room, large prints of the best portraits of themselves, of the family members and the deceased ones. It wasn't common to own visual devices of good quality for personal use; then, the profession of the photographer had an important mediating role for obtaining those portraits. No one else was doing the job near, then the neighbourhood and the surrounding areas could have been a good area for business.

As usual, I had my doubts; but this time it was attachment to the object: I didn't want to give the camera away. I didn't own any other visual tool, since my video camera was also borrowed. Even if it was an old and elementary model, it allowed me to start learning photography. I wanted to make a life out of filming, so I saw it as a first temporary step in my learning process; until I could afford a video camera.

While recording, I proposed to borrow him the camera until I stayed in town. Anyway, if I gave him the camera then took it back, he answered, it wouldn't have helped but rather damaged him. Jean would have been seen as unreliable and not worthy enough to be a *man*; people would have called him "a liar".

Still, I was sceptical about the actual utility of such a tool for him; so I concluded that he would just borrow it for the moment.

Few days later, on a Monday, he came for a visit at my apartment in town, after having done some shopping at the *petite marché*. He was in town to develop the pictures he took on the day before, at



the parish for the Sunday mass, and in the neighbourhood. He happily showed me: they were beautiful. With the money that he raised he bought two plastic bags of carrots and sweet potatoes. Very excitedly he explained me the business: a photo costed 400 CFA; 200 was paid as an advance by the customers, and that amount was used to print the photos at the *laboratoire*, the photo lab in town. When the pictures were delivered and accepted by the customer, Jean received the rest. The gain was 200 per picture then; but he had to cope also with the cost of the taxi ride to town, 200-250 CFA.

It didn't sound an ideal job; and the stew of carrots and sweet potatoes, he had told me, was the meal for when "*il n'y a pas le moyens*". Still it was better than nothing.

I decided, then, to give him my camera for real. It was a heart-breaking choice for me; but I knew that the camera would have assumed a much greater value by giving it to Jean. I knew that the gift would have confirmed my role as his patron; since then I accepted the evidence and started to recognise myself as such.

On the following days, Jean seemed much more confident and friendly in my regard; moreover, he didn't make as many requests as before. He wasn't so anxious as before when the terms of our relation weren't as much defined. In my research, I started to observe how his new activity was developing and the changes it would have produced; from the point of view of his promoter, I would look how his expectations and hopes were coping with the difficulties of this process.

Anyway, the enthusiasm about this last project, for both Jean and I, changed soon to a more realistic outlook. Already a few days later, as I followed him at the photo lab in town, the first drawbacks about the jobs started to be evident. He would always print photos within one or two days, in order to be considered as trustful by his customers. The cost for the transports was too high in respect to the gain; he could only afford one trip, then he had to walk back home for 5 km, in order to save a little.

Moreover, the work was totally depending on trust. The reliability of the photographer was everything, as Jean emphasized from the beginning. Customers had to pay an advance beforehand, so they needed to trust that the photographer would be back; and they needed to trust that he could take a picture deserving to be paid for. But the photographer too needed to trust the customer for the complementary reason: he can only hope that the customer will show up again; accept the photo and spread good rumours over his skill and reliability.

On that day he explained me the latest issue with Dji Dji: he asked for two pictures for free. In face of the difficulties about the job and the additional costs, the request was making Jean upset. He struggled for coping with daily expenses; and Dji Dji, instead of making his life easier, was adding complications, costs (the 400 CFA of the print) and he wasn't recognising his professionalism. In any case, "there is nothing to do", he concluded very sadly, he had to give the pictures to Dji Dji for free.

About a week later, the situation with the job didn't seem to get better. At that point, he made the trip to town every time he had an arrangement for 3 or 4 photos; because he needed pocket money. The rainy season affected, in general, the availability of work in the city and so of possible clients; as a consequence also the celebrations were postponed, which are the best context to earn well. Furthermore, Jean was angry with Dji Dji again: he joked with Ornela, when Jean was away, that the *nasara* granted for his husband. Jean was already set as a photographer, and didn't need his help anymore. Dji Dji's touchy joke made Jean outraged: the person who should make him advance was treating him as equal just for mocking; while the gap between their income was huge. "It's not fair" he concluded.

Giving the camera to Jean and assuming the role of *patron*, as I said, seemed to have a positive effect over our relationship, and also Jean appeared more confident. In the beginning, Jean was very positive about the business, because he saw that he could earn enough money for the daily food expenses. We both believed the camera as a means capable to provide at least a fundamental safeguard from the everyday uncertainty. Afterwards, the work and the earnings decreased as much that they could hardly provide for the expenses of the job. He had a more realistic outlook over his new profession, and I noticed that in the last days Jean talked about his work as photographer only when I asked.

Probably the opinion of the important actors of his life played a part in breaking his big hopes. Ornela, his wife, didn't think that the camera was opening any new perspective in their life; she seemed more interested about the possibility to take photos of the kids and the family. She believed instead that they could have secured an economic basis by increasing retailed commerce. Interestingly, Dji Dji had a similar opinion: taking some pictures wasn't a job, he said in a later interview; commerce was the best way to advance from stagnation. Dji Dji had plans for Jean's

advancement, he said: when he would have found the resources, he wanted to promote him and give him the space between the yard and the street; where Jean could have opened a *boutique*.

My gift seemed to have a bigger influence over Jean's relation with Dji Dji. This one didn't like the camera; and he had scolded Jean for pressing me too much with requests after knowing about the gift. The mean comment said to Ornela as a joke, that Jean didn't need his help anymore, sounded like a threat; but it also reflected the fact that Dji Dji felt threatened by my gift and presence, and by the fact that Jean acted like he was less dependent on him. The camera acted as an alternative to Dji Dji's vision over Jean's advancement. Jean wasn't visiting often anymore, and he behaved without his usual reverence. While Dji Dji wouldn't show up to my calls, for two weeks, before we could organise a filmed interview. In general, Jean Louis seemed more confident with both his patrons: he felt empowered. Then, what kind of change did my promoting gift provoke in Jean's life?

During the last days of fieldwork, it was obvious that I did provoke a shift in Jean's attitude, he almost behaved like having finally grasped the means that he needed to start his way outside of stagnation. Anyway, this feeling of empowerment wasn't proven by actual economic revenues, nor important actors in his life, such as Dji Dji, his wife and neither I, would agree. I believe that the camera raised his hopes and allowed him to be *actively waiting* during periods of stagnation; thus the tool had potentiality for managing uncertainty.

At the same time the camera was a symbol of success, but referred to the relationship he established with me as a *nasara*. He was able to enter a meaningful relation with a patron from Europe, and to obtain a valuable tool that could bring him back on track. The real success, anyway, was showing of being a resourceful mediator; a *grand*. In that sense, the camera was a visible sign of his successful mediation; and the referents were his network of *petits*, of family members and the people of the neighbourhood. Maybe it was only an imaginary advancement; but it probably increased his symbolic capital in other meaningful relations.

And more than that, he needed some recognition of this kind in front of others. Generally very high expectations were falling on Jean because of my presence. As we have seen, Jean's requests over me became bolder when we were surrounded by others: both in the case of my small phone and in the one of the *ampli* at the bar. The eyes of the neighbourhood were on him. "Now, everyone knows

that Jean *is together with a white*” Dji Dji told me with a smile on the last day of fieldwork; when we finally had our long-awaited interview.

Dji Dji knew the reality about us, that the aid I had given wasn't substantial for Jean's advancement, nonetheless he preferred to take the point of view of others, who believed that Jean was *set*, because “he has *found* a white man who, maybe, can promote him”. Probably, even the burglars at Jean's home had believed that he reached such a status already.

I believe that the strong expectations that Jean and I had, and which we were experiencing upon us, were determined by the inequality of the global system. The obstacles to the global flow influenced a dualistic thinking in Africa, where a world of ‘plenty’ and solidarity is separated and opposed to a present reality governed by uncertainty and suffering. The meaningful objects from the globalised world are believed as reconnecting with the flow of resources; and so are people. Maybe the category of *nasara* is needed also to maintain this cultural discourse; as well as the hope for *miracles*. Then, when Jean was asking and obtaining, he wasn't only showing to be an efficient mediator, but also reinforcing the common idea that the *nasara* do have access to unlimited resources and the hope that they would share their benefit with whom is ‘resourceful’ enough to seize the opportunity.

Avec le temps... peut être ! Goodbye pictures and landscapes of hope

During the last days, Jean Louis cared for making arrangements with me about the future. One day at the river, he asked what we were going to do with the uncompleted works of the house: he still needed to buy some wood, the metal sheets for the roof, and a “solid” door, he emphasised. I agreed that, since I committed to it, I would have helped him with the remaining materials; but only when “I would have found the means”. We arranged that I would have sent him money as soon as I found a job; but I didn't know when it would have happened. “Don't worry, God is going to help you with it”, he concluded. Maintaining a contact as direct as possible, and possibly having a good smartphone, was considered by Jean as fundamental. If I sent him money from Europe, I should never send to an intermediary.

I didn't know whether I would have come back to Cameroon and when; I saw many obstacles in the near future; but as I explained to Jean, he was simply sure that I would have obtained everything

because I was a good man; that I'd have been back soon as researcher. On that day, the new household will be completed and I will come to stay, together with them, in "our home".

Two days before leaving, Dji Dji called Jean in the evening. He wanted to build a wall inside his yard, in order to make a separate space for his home building; and he hired Jean on the following morning to fabricate bricks with the cement. For me it was also the last occasion to have an interview with Dji Dji.

I showed up before the meeting to film Jean making bricks. Jean was helped by a new face, a Muslim Cameroonian man who was working knowledgeably and even faster. Jean didn't know him well either, but behaved very friendly; and later I discovered that he was the owner of the mould for the cement to make bricks. The interview went pretty smooth; even he had, not surprisingly, a defensive attitude towards me and the camera.

Surprisingly, Dji Dji's discourses reflected the very high hopes and expectations that Jean nourished for him. He claimed that his house was also the home of Jean and his family, that he was there for them in case of necessity. He had the desire to promote him and, like me, a defined scale of values through which he made up priorities to Jean's advancement.

Dji Dji emphasised that he was helping Jean as a "friend" and equal; he wouldn't help him to be recognised as a *patron*; anyway, he undoubtedly behaved as such. His power would rather appear in his way of making promises, in his commitments of solidarity than in his appearance. He told me, for example, that he wanted to open a foster home for children; he was just waiting for the funds. His joking attitude, instead was situational to his position as *patron*: it worked as a strategy to affirm his power by raising the hopes of his *petits*; while at the same time avoiding commitments or their high expectations.

But strangely, Dji Dji was also confirming the hopes that the neighbourhood seemed to have about me: that I would help Jean "to advance". "But how?"; I asked: "I am only a student, I cannot do miracles for him".

"*On ne sait pas*"<sup>6</sup>, he replied. My power was a matter of the potentiality in the future; not of the actual help that I could give in the present. "For us it's not about today; it's all about tomorrow". He was saying it right. For Jean, the most important thing was to remain well in contact and hope for the best. If the bond was maintained, there was a possibility that the relationship would have

become fruitful at some point in the future; but they had to make their plans as if the potential was a certainty; “*avec les temps...peut être!*” 7.

A good example of this future oriented attitude was given me after the interview; when Jean and the Cameroonian man were paid for the day work. More bricks were needed but the cement was over, and the wall still to be built. Jean received the total pay: 5000 CFA; which had to be shared. Jean Louis handed the entire sum to the other man; who gently refused. After a little bargain of courtesies, the man accepted the sum, but he handed over a one-thousand note to Jean. These two men didn't share any bounds, Jean couldn't even remember his name since “all Muslims”, Jean said, “have similar names”. But the man owned the mould to fabricate bricks; so, getting acquainted with him was also a way to borrow the mould in the future.

The important thing to get from that relationship, then, wasn't the immediate gain but the future potential; the same for us. Likewise, apart from the house, Jean Louis didn't advance many requests before I would leave Cameroon. For him, it was enough to hope that I would come back one day and open a photographic laboratory with him.

The most fundamental to get, for Jean, wasn't the utility of what I gave but the quality of the relationship. The rest is unknown, but they can just hope that one day their investments will flourish in an unexpectedly positive way.

There was a French expression commonly used in Ngaoundéré which pointed at this future oriented attitude in building relations: ‘*Nous sommes ensemble*’, literally ‘we are together’. The expression ‘être ensemble’ 8 would normally point to an intimate relation of friendship, it recalls the domain of the family. So it can significate a mutual exchange between actual friends. But in Ngaoundéré, ‘being together’ would also refer to a meaningful relationship of exchange within the context of the informal economy, usually between a *patron* and his *petit*.

I heard the expression “*nous sommes ensemble*” quite often when I was walking through town; but it had a different and more generic sense. It wasn't used so much to show proximity to a close friend; but rather to someone just met. I believe that it was an *aspirational* expression: it was a way to show good will towards someone whom they were not familiar with; but also whom they would have liked to get closer with<sup>9</sup>. Something similar is showed by Loma speakers of south-eastern Guinea (McGovern 2012), who had historically used idioms of kinship and relations of avunculate to incorporate both powerless refugees and powerful conquerors. These idioms of kinship are

invoked ‘aspirationally’ by people who are not related, by the weak as by the powerful; providing the user with “a ‘toolkit’ developed over many centuries of recurrent insecurity and unpredictability caused by slave-raiding warfare, colonial military conquest, and the recent regional wars, for managing and negotiating such uncertainty, forced movement, and dispossession.” (ibid.:735)

Here, investing resources into relationships, with equals as well as patrons, is the main insurance towards an unpredictable future. But human relations are never stable; and within this context they depend on trust. The capital previously invested to get closer to a patron, then, can become a “debt” when the exchange doesn’t seem to bring anywhere; for example when I said that I would help him to advance, still our attempts of collaborations were failing. Furthermore, when the pact of trust is already broken, the ‘debt’ becomes a ‘mischief’; like when Jean felt that Dji Dji stole his money for the *rémede* to find back the *ampli*, only because nothing was happening.

When trust is lost, also hope is; and with it also more individualistic calculations can enter a relationship.

Regarding the job at Dji Dji’s, Jean gave away his gain to the colleague also because he hoped to work on the following day, digging the foundations for the wall; but he wasn’t very certain since Dji Dji hadn’t specify the pay. Jean couldn’t call anyone for being helped: he would have been seen as unreliable by his *petits*; and in any case Jean wanted to agree on the price before the service.

Very often, in patron-client relations the pay for the service was left into a grey area where a mutual benefit could be negotiated between the two actors. Not even entering the negotiation, as Jean intended to do by refusing the job, was a demonstration of independence and a challenge to Dji Dji’s status as *patron*.

On the next day, Jean didn’t show up at Dji Dji’s call to work. He preferred to spend some time with me instead; since I left Ngaoundéré on that evening. I was very surprised, because it looked like the final rupture point with Dji Dji. But why then? What was the difference between Dji Dji and I, as *patrons*? I believe that it had to do with trust and hope. Refusing to work without clear terms was seen then as an uncertainty to be avoided; while in other cases the same unpredictable outcomes of a service given for free can be sought, because of the potentials they could reveal. In a relationship based on uncertainty, what makes the hope possible is trust. The terms of our relationship were never totally clear; but hope was indeed possible, because Jean came to recognise my commitment and started to trust me. Moreover, as a *nasara*, I had a bigger potential for hope,

because I belonged to a ‘land of plenty’. Hope could be left more open ended, not aiming to concrete aims but to an indefinite good fortune. But what really made our exchange to be perceived as reciprocal, and gave a more concrete basis to his hopes, was trust: the one we struggled hard to obtain through constant dialogue and negotiation.

On that last day I went visiting Jean and his family, only to say hello and to take a picture together: he told me many times that he wanted a to take a photo of “the family with you” before I would leave, “*pour garder à la maison*”, ‘to have/guard in home’. Like this, he said, I would have always stayed *together with* them. Portraits had clearly important symbolic values for them, and I also cared for making a ‘goodbye picture’. When Jean said that the object was ‘the family with you’, I didn’t know exactly what he meant; but I assumed he referred to a portrait of “the family”, so Jean, Ornela, their kids and I.

Instead, Vanie and Madjide arrived soon after me; Jean directed us all together in front of his camera, and shot. In the end, he was literally taking a picture of me with the family, he didn’t come in the picture at all, at least until I called him to come into the frame, just to have a memory for myself. In his picture, he didn’t need to be inside the frame, because he felt to be already in: the camera was belonging to him, the photographer and the *grand*; the one representing his core network of trusted ones, and not the one represented.

After our little photographic session, I said goodbye to Jean’s family; and Jean took the *moto* taxi to town with me; in order to develop right away the photos that he had taken with his camera.

## VI. The editing and the film

When I entered the editing room; I had to make a major review of the knowledge I gathered on the field. My video material revealed his highly relational nature; and my initial idea, of making a story which would record experiences of uncertainty between patrons and clients, started to crumble. I didn’t have much on that, but I had much on myself: experiences of uncertainty which I shared with my informant through a reciprocal, but also privileged, relationship of collaboration. My audio-visual material was showing a lot on the micro-mechanisms of exchange within that system; and on the complex global and relational dynamics which the fieldwork process is made of. At one



point, I decided to move the accent from recording the experiences of the actors within the system to committing myself in a reflexive filmic narrative.

Becoming the main 'actor' in the film wasn't my choice at all in the beginning. I was aware of the possibility during the last weeks of fieldwork; but I still hoped to make a filmic life portrait of Jean Louis over the topic of how uncertainty is managed through patron-client relations. In the preliminary first edit of the film, my reflexive approach was only working as a contextual frame of the visual narrative.

The shift became clearly necessary after the first rough-cut screening of my Master film: the feedbacks highlighted what I was lacking in the visual material to make the story that I wanted to tell, first of all the absence of important actors such as the patron Dji Dji and the wife Ornela. Anyway, the comment of a visual anthropologist, who was also one of the only two persons from Africa in the room, was very influential in changing my perspective over the whole research. B. affirmed that my representation was stressing the miserable aspects of Jean's life and it was giving the impression that he was begging, just begging me all the time.

B.'s harsh comment shocked me, but also allowed me to face the nature of my material: everything that happened in front of the camera was influenced or depending by my presence. Not only because Jean refers to me all the time; but also in the sense that much of what he says is situationally performed in order to provoke more commitment on my side. More problematic than that, the critic showed that the politics of representation between the North and the South were a serious matter even when there's a real intention to escape the negative discourses over Africa (Ferguson 2006). My representation was still making the lives of my informants as an object of knowledge; but Jean's attempts of getting some gain out of our relation was also a way to show that he was a trustful and capable subject and actor of his life; even within an exchange where he had a subordinated position, with both Dji Dji and I, he was proud and he head dignity.

He deserved to be represented as such; but the visual material was too much our inequality of status. I decided then to take full responsibility of my presence within the narrative of the film, so I jumped into it: the main focus of the story became the progress of the relation between Jean and I. My narrative became reflexive in an explicit way, using a voiceover to introduce myself to the viewers and to share my own very partial and positioned perspective of the events described.

The film starts with an anticipation of the structural challenges which I entered in my attempt to establish a reciprocal exchange with the main character of my project. “You have a debt with me. You said you were going to help me”, he reminds me upon the hill. The tension created by the many obstacles on our way will be constant in the story, but the narrative gives also space to hope, small victories and dignity.

I hoped to build a catalytic narrative which aimed to engage the viewer by making an experientially complex portrait of a transcultural encounter where the viewer can visualise and challenge his own categories of knowledge. It wasn't so much the way Jean Louis approached spontaneously the camera as a creative space that had to engage the viewer, but rather how he interacted with me, actor and narrator. If the viewer had similar experiences he or she could empathise with my fragile position. The film was intended as a platform with the audience, a creative space where many Westerners, especially social scholars who entered these power dynamics in the field, can relate to, and so to problematize the ethical issues of how we build knowledge out of human relations.

When I have screened my film to the first large audience in Verdensteatstret, the oldest cinema of Tromsø, the reaction was interestingly what I intended to provoke: a rethinking about the way people saw the poor in the Global South; they related to similar experiences they had during their journeys; or they just felt uneasiness about seeing from “so close” the vulnerability of these people. In the end making the film, both the editing process and the reception of it, has been the most fundamental tool for me to make sense of the complexity of fieldwork experience.

## VII. Conclusion: Are we together? Uncertain contingencies

When I set forth to Ngaoundéré in order to learn about how uncertainty is coped through hope and patron-client relations, I discovered that my personal hopes and expectations about doing fieldwork were intertwining with the experiences of uncertainty, hopes and expectations of Jean Louis and the other actors of the social field. What I have discovered is that relationships of solidarity, such as patron-clients ones, are able to respond to some of the fundamental needs of the urban poor. A patron is a safeguard to cope with everyday unpredictability and expenses; a mediator to other fields

of knowledge; a sponsor to start an activity; and increases one's capital within his personal network. This kind of exchange is constructed with an *emphasis* on moral contingency; and it is defined through personal hope and the global categories that orient it and inform one person's identity and desires.

Even though I have spent long efforts to define a reciprocal collaboration within the limits of reflexive anthropology; global categorizations and social statuses have been more influential than academic roles in shaping my positioning process on the field. Being European gave me a particularly privileged social status in Africa, I had much more agency and mobility than he did. As we have seen, the *nasara* is characterised in the field as a special kind of *patron* who is particularly 'resourceful' of wealth and allowing for broader future possibilities. The unequal global categories - that in local discourses would divide between the 'good whites' and the 'mischievous blacks' - are actively maintained through social expectations by the people living at the margins: the belief in the supposed kindness of the *nasara* is an illusion that no one wants to break, because it allows for a fundamental resource in that context: hope.

As an asset, a hoping attitude is not simply giving a psychological aid and a creative drive to the individual who copes with suffering. It is also about power: raising people's hopes while not defining the terms of the exchange allows to increase the social capital and be more influential within one's social networks. As we have seen, Dji Dji confirmed Jean's expectations towards him albeit they were very high; showing also that, when the expectations of others towards one's capital have grown too much, previous commitments can be avoided or at least renegotiated. This is not always the case: Jean felt empowered within his network of *petits*; having power with such a fragile financial basis, anyway, made him also vulnerable.

Moreover, hope is an asset on which relationships can be built upon. As we have seen, Jean voluntarily renounced to share equally the pay with a co-worker, in exchange for the potential of establishing a reciprocal relationship with him, who owned the mould to make bricks, so a strategic tool for working more independently in the neighbourhood. Acting with a hoping attitude, then, is not simply aimed to fulfil the present needs of the individual, but instead to find new social connections with whom he could establish a reciprocal exchange.

Jean gave away what he had - his money, energy and time - to help others and cultivate relations. The return that he expected wasn't necessarily given directly by whom he helped; but also from the whole social milieu. Behaving as a trustful person meant that his actions were right and deserved to be repaid by God. "If everyone would give trust the others and share his resources without expecting anything in return", he said, "there wouldn't be suffering in here".

Acting reciprocally and navigating relations through hope, then, is a way to cope with uncertainty because it gives a sense of control and power over one's life. The exchange with me opened a broader landscape of potentialities: the immediate gain was modest, but the 'place-in-the-world' I belonged to nourished the hope for re-establish the order of things in his life disrupted by uncertainty. Moreover, my identity allowed him to make a claim of 'membership' to the global society.; because he would only join the relationship as an *equal*. Despite his discourses and informality, Dji Dji wasn't able to offer him a sense of reciprocity; and his 'place-in-the-world' gave to Jean much smaller room to future hopes. Eventually, their relation became 'hopeless'; while in our case Jean would find a "balance between being an actor and being acted upon" (Jackson 2005:181).

But so, have I actually 'helped' Jean to 'advance'? Was he *actually* empowered or did he just feel to be? Unfortunately, I had to leave just when I started to learn, and I cannot give an answer yet. My experience has been useful to observe and problematize the relationships we build on the field in order to find a position; but in order to say something about how such relationships actually develop, time and a long-term commitment are required.

But if I can draw a conclusion, is that the question about 'helping', Africa and the urban poor, could be wrongly posed. The point is not what *I* can do to make *their* life better. The very serious question that should be at the core of our methodologies is: how am I contributing in making this encounter reciprocal in their own terms?

I believe that anthropology, our fieldworks and representations, would greatly benefit in considering well these issues, both in an ethical and epistemological way.

## Notes

## Chapter I

1. Literally ‘the big ones’ and ‘the little ones’, referring to ‘old brothers’ and ‘little b.’; but it has the broader meaning of any familiar person outside of the family with a higher, social or cultural, status; and reverse. Accordingly, ‘grand/petit-frère’ refers to such a person who is more intimate, usually neighbours or inhabitants of the village where one has grown up
2. ‘*Nous sommes ensemble*. We are together’; 33 minutes; Norway, Cameroon.

## Chapter II

1. From Ngaoundéré there are state roads to reach Garoua and Maroua (the bigger cities of northern Cameroon); the western CAR and Chad; the southern capitals of Douala and Yaoundé. Moreover, the railway from the capital Yaoundé has Ngaoundéré as its northernmost destination, making it an important hub between the region of the Lake Chad and the Guinean coast
2. The moto-taxi, like in many other African cities, is the main means of transportations in the city: motorcycles are more affordable than motor vehicles and adapt better to the bumpy dirt roads of the city. Since the 80s, cheap motorcycles from China has changed the African urban landscape, and made the cities more dangerous because of the high occurrence of traffic accidents and harmful pollution. The establishment of the new profession and role of the moto taxi driver is discussed in: Waage, T. (2013) Globalization and the consolidation of ethnic categories. In : Créolité, creolisation: regards croisés. LCF: 230-233
3. Corresponding to about 0.38€. A ride costed 100-150 CFA inside town; from Seka Mbara to the city or to other neighbourhoods 200-250 CFA
4. The national currency is the ‘Central African CFA franc’, shortened in ‘CFA’ or ‘XAF’. It has a fixed exchange rate to Euro. 1 EUR = 655.957 CFA

## Chapter III

1. literally ‘wealth’ or ‘richness’

## Chapter IV

1. Michael Jackson individuates seven types of intersubjective ambiguity (summarized and quoted by Madden 2010). ‘Intersubjectivity’ is:
  - the site of constructive, deconstructive and reconstructive interaction – it moves continually between positive and negative poles’. Intersubjectivity is not a stable condition (because ‘selves’ are not stable);

- being is never limited to human being. Intersubjectivity includes persons, ancestors, spirits, collective representations and material things’;
  - ‘drawing on Hegel’s master/slave dialectic, no matter how great the social inequality self and other are beholden on each for mutual recognition’. It requires an act of (sometimes asymmetrical) recognition;
  - ‘while the elementary structure of intersubjectivity may be dyadic, it is usually mediated by something outside itself, e.g. a shared idea, a common goal’. It infers an object or external reference beyond the intersubjective;
  - ‘intersubjectivity is shaped by habitual taken-for-granted dispositions as much as it is shaped by conscious intentions and worldviews’. It is mediated by agency and habitus;
  - ‘intersubjectivity reflects the instability of human consciousness – oscillating from the retracted secure self, through fulfilment in being with another, to being overwhelmed by another’. It covers the spectrum from ‘buffered’ to ‘porous’ selves;
  - ‘drawing on Merleau-Ponty, there is the problem of knowledge – how can I speak of an “I” other than my own, how can empathy, transference, or analogy bridge the gap between me and you?’. It anxiously interrogates the knowledge gap between ‘I’ and ‘You’.
2. See the critics to the films of Jean Rouch made by African film-makers, especially the ones made by Ousmane Sembène and Mad Hondo (De Groof 2013: 116-119)
  3. Also the genre of ‘indigenous media’, anyway, posed fundamental problems to consider. One was that the former subjects’ gazes now could express non-ethnographic concerns, yet their films maintained an ethnographical relevance: the shift allowed for a repositioning of the film from a research tool to an ethnographic document (Loizos in De Groof 2013: 122). More severe problems have to do, from one side, with the economic dependence of these productions by financiers abroad; from the other, with the reception of the work: that an ‘other’-ness could be ascribed on the characters anyway by the viewer, and that the film would then reproduce the same mirroring effect of absorbing the other into a game of self-critique of participatory film-making. For Faye Ginsburg, the two film-makings have to be considered within the same analytical frame: indigenous films are part of the ethnographic film genre, even if the firsts are emancipated by the agenda of the seconds, simultaneously anthropologists need indigenous forms of representations for expanding their theory and challenge their own hegemonic forms.

## Chapter V

1. Literally 'little jobs'
2. It means 'there is no means'. The 'means' he refers to are the means of production, and all those tools or assets that would allow him to get access to resources and find a financially stable position in life
3. Literally 'children'
4. See *Through Navajo Eyes*, In: Ruby (2000), *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology*. University of Chicago Press: USA
5. Plural form of the singular *nāṣrānyat*; from 'al-nāṣirat', the city of Nazareth ( see Baldissera E. (2004). *Dizionario Italiano-Arabo Arabo-Italiano*. Zanichelli).
6. 'We don't know', here as 'knowing it is out of our capability'
7. Dji literally concluded the answer to my question by saying: 'with time...maybe [you will be able to help him in the future]'
8. Literally 'to be together'
9. Personal references from Mali have told me a curious fact about how the French expression is used and perceived in their country. 'We are together' would be used by a politician in search for political consensus; then the expression sounds so rhetoric that it is commonly considered hypocritical

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