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Master's Thesis
The Social Making of Futures:
Planning for Uncertainties

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Figure 1: Job advertisement on the streetside in Yaoundé; August 2018. © Dana Harms

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I Introduction

"Methodologically speaking, we can retrieve the future by articulating it with social action in the present. Individuals tame the future in the present by investing their energy into enabling action – or, in the words of Pelican and Heiss (2014), by »making the future« (Engeler and Steuer 2017: 14)

The future is the result of our actions of today. Theoretically, that makes it somewhat predictable at first glance. But one must soon admit that this predictability has its limitations because too many contingencies and interdependent factors are at work and can change the expected trajectory tremendously. Therefore, uncertainty is part of everyone's life. However, uncertainty varies in scale and intensity and therefore does not affect everyone equally.

Life in urban Cameroon is shaped by an uncertainty that permeates all aspects of social life and moulds the thinking as much as the doing in a particular way. The overall goal for most young educated[1] Cameroonians, as noted by a key informant, is "to have a place in society". But what does it mean to have a place in society and how does one get to have one in the first place? How do young educated people make a future for themselves and for their families in urban Cameroon? This thesis is dedicated to finding answers to these questions. As the introductory quote suggests, it is key to focus on social action in the present to understand how the future is being tackled and approached. This thesis seeks to call attention to the future enabling strategies of young, aspiring Cameroonians in an uncertain environment and explores how social relations[2] and their contingent dynamics impact them.

Uncertainty is still a relatively small research branch in Anthropology since anthropologists mostly focused on repetitive events and regularities instead of the unforeseen and disruptions of the social order (Dein 2016: 1). While people are used to living in conditions of uncertainties in the Global South, life in the Global North is characterized by a relatively high degree of stability. However, times of crisis and uncertainty are increasingly present in the Global North.[3]

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[1] I understand the term "educated" in this thesis in an academic and institutional and hence formal context. Certainly, knowledge, and thus education, can also be produced outside of universities and schools. Informal knowledge, for instance traditional knowledge, is seldom a subject in such institutions.

[2] I use the term "social relations" as an umbrella term which focuses mainly on kinship, private networks and to a certain extent on professional networks. However, the main focus lies on informal social relations, such as kin and friendship, which become an important source for social security once public institutions fail to provide it (Benda-Beckmann 2007: 8).

[3] Jean and John Comaroff challenge notions of "developed" and "underdeveloped" nations in their book: "Theory from the South. Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa" (2012) and argue that nation-states in the Northern Hemisphere converge more into imaginaries of societies associated with the Global South by experiences of economic crisis, racial tension, ecological catastrophes and the like.

Recent global events, such as the Covid 19 Pandemic, have created a degree of uncertainty in the Global North that is new for most people.[4] On that account it is essential and indeed helpful to take a look at how young people make a living and create a future for themselves in conditions where uncertainty has already become the norm.

In the late 1960's, holding a university degree in Cameroon used to be almost like a guarantee for a more or less well-paid job in the formal sector (Ngwana 2003: 6). Consequently, the number of university students has increased significantly. In the 1980's and 1990's the economic situation changed radically, resulting in the state no longer being the main employer due to International Monetary Fund's imposed structural adjustment programmes which failed to stimulate the private sector (Frei 2012: 45; Jua 2003: 14). Thence, there was a lack of job opportunities, and many highly skilled young people with academic degrees found themselves unemployed. In the early 1990s, an endemic economic crisis became a steady condition and a reality for most people in Cameroon, and many African countries.

Therefore, a routinized state of uncertainty[5] has emerged which reveals an imperturbably assertiveness of young people to *make a future,*[6] despite all odds. Different kind of strategies have been developed which have proven to be useful. Some of these strategies will be expounded in this thesis. The notion of certificates and education as a guarantee for a job remains popular until today (Macamo 2017: 186-187). Subsequently, education and certificates are seen as one of the most popular ways to make a future and become a respected member in society (see Figure 1). Stanley[7], one of my key informants, told me that certificates and titles are crucial in Cameroon: "People will treat you differently with a PhD, they will respect you more" (Fieldnotes 11.03.2019). Most young educated Cameroonians I met during my research in 2018 and 2019 confirmed that - no matter what they had already achieved, a PhD was something that almost everyone was aspiring to realize one day. I was told: "In Cameroon it depends on the certificates, not on the skills. And [on] questions like: 'Which person has sent you? Who is your godfather?'" But it is not only cultural and symbolic capital that can provide access to job opportunities, and more generally

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[4] Johnson Hanks (2016) argues that for some class of people there is a global convergence of modes of action taking place. But unlike often assumed, it is not Africans who become "westernized" in their doing, but "the rich North taking on life ways and modes of action that have long characterized life in Africa." (Ibid: 9).

[5] A crisis is being referred to as an event or a period with a beginning and an end. It thus describes a temporality (Roitman 2016: 30). Therefore, it makes more sense to speak of uncertainty as a general term to describe the ongoing volatility and social and economic insecurity that people suffer from in their daily lives in urban Cameroon. An end of this condition is not in sight.

[6] See page 12 for further reading on the concept of "making a future" (Pelican and Heiss 2014)

[7] All names of informants are anonymized for confidentiality.

speaking, to power. Social capital plays a tremendous role, and is the key for getting access into the labour market or positions of power, as the above quote suggests.

An individual is always embedded in its network of social relations and acts upon it. In an African context, social relations hold a key role in decision making processes. They are vital for future-making and even more so in times of need. They can provide some basic social security. However, at the same time, they pose a breeding ground for conflict because they involve expectations, obligations and responsibilities (Tiemoko 2004; Fleischer 2007: 417). In other words, "every contract or negotiation constitutes in itself a vast field of ambiguity, which as such leaves enormous potential for dispute, argument and discord" (Mbembe and Roitmen 1995: 342). Hence, there is always some degree of unpredictability and vulnerability within social relations which can create new uncertainties (Bledsoe 2002). In times of scarcity and uncertainty, one can witness both; solidarity and support on the one hand and distrust and disputes on the other. I would like to break the dichotomy of one-sided perspectives on social relations, either focusing on the positive or negative aspects.[8] Social relations in Africa are messy, ambiguous and ever changing. They bear room for both, support and conflict, even simultaneously. In order to understand the future-making of an individual profoundly, it is essential to take the network of social relations into account. I would like to shed light on the influence of social relations on future-making strategies of an individual, namely the specific challenges and advantages that derive from them.

Furthermore, I would like to deconstruct notions of passiveness which are frequently attributed to young Africans who often find themselves in a state of prolonged youth. That is not the case, as Steuer and Engeler (2017) have argued: While waiting for the desired opportunity to make their future(s) they are already "doing adulthood" (ibid: 16) in various spheres of their lives, and constantly create and reshape their present. The three ethnographic case studies presented in this thesis depict the stories of individuals confronted with major challenges in their lives due to uncertainty and scarcity and/or conflicted relationships. Despite the odds, they remained active, empowered themselves and found new contexts of action to keep working successfully towards a better future for themselves and their families.

For many years migration has been considered as the most promising way of making a future in Cameroon, especially in the Anglophone region, which is marked by marginalization, economic struggles and an intensive conflict that has turned into an uncontrollable civil war. Whoever had the opportunity would travel abroad. Studying abroad

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[8] I will discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter 1.3 (p. 15-16)

was the path to success for those who were given the opportunity.[9] There has been extensive research on the topic of migration in Africa, but less specifically on future-making, which has become a new popular focus in anthropology recently. Nowadays, there is a larger body of literature on future-making and modes of action in Africa, but the focus lies often either on young graduates who are still at the beginning of their career (see Steuer and Engeler 2017; Pelican & Heiss 2014; Johnson Hanks 2002, 2005). I would like to draw attention to those who have already taken concrete steps towards imagined futures and can look back on a set of experiences which they can draw from in their decision-making. The thesis focuses more on the process itself than on the outcome (Macamo 2017: 186). Against this backdrop I pose the following research question: *How do social relations shape future-making strategies of young educated Cameroonians in a context of uncertainty?*

I argue that in times of uncertainty, young educated Cameroonians make use of a diverse set of strategies to make a future, addressing both, short- and long-term objectives. Whether the focus lies on the short- or long-term objectives is mostly dependent on the economic circumstances an individual finds him or herself in (Bourdieu 2000a [1977]). *Social investments* pose a strategy I have identified as promising because they can pay off anytime in the future and are not necessarily dedicated to a specific point in time or objective. Young people invest into relationships with potent people, they invest into education, professional skills, or into their own appearance to manifest the version that they would like to become in the future, if possible, everything at the same time. It is a strategy that holds a maximum of flexibility – a necessity in an environment shaped by uncertainty. I would like to emphasise the *social* dimension of these investments; all investments have a social component, either directly (e.g., through investing into children's future or into the social network, see Chapter Three) or more indirectly (e.g., investing into one's social appearance or education, see Chapter Four and Five). These investments ultimately have a social dimension because they aim to make a future not just for oneself, but also for the individual's social environment. Furthermore, if those investments are not made *for* the social network (e.g., children and family), then they are often established *through* them (*ergo* through connections to people of power and hence social capital). Therefore, future-making in Cameroon is always social. The community plays a key role in the positioning of an individual in society.

The thesis is structured in three main parts; the initial part (Chapter One and Two) is concerned with the theoretical framework this research is based on as well as the applied

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[9] In Germany for instance, from 2000 until 2010 most migrants from Central Africa came from Cameroon (Koschollek and Santos·Hövener 2012: 2)

methodology. The theoretical foundation, as well as the analytical discussion, focuses on two pillars; firstly, the cognitive dimension on future-making in uncertainty, which is greatly inspired and based on the work of Pelican and Heiss (2014), Johnson Hanks (2002, 2005) and Steuer and Engeler (2017) and highlights the agency of an individual in a context of volatility. Secondly, the social dimension of future-making is concerned with the social strategies, contingencies and challenges an individual is confronted with while making a future. This section is mostly based on Mboti's (2015) critique on the concept of *Ubuntu* and Roth's (2012) analytical take on the role of social recognition and social capital in future-making. Chapter Two offer's insights into methodological approaches, the context of the research, the research objectives as well as some personal reflections.

The second part is the heart of this thesis and entails the research findings. The life-stories of three young university educated individuals are presented, each portraying challenges and nuances which are unique to themselves but at the same time shared by countless other young people facing similar issues. Each case study is followed by an analytical discussion which is closely oriented towards the presented ethnographic material.

The third section presents a final analytical discussion which connects the individual research findings with the presented theory and builds final deductions about how young educated Cameroonians make their future(s) and how their social environment shapes this process. It will end with an outlook on the current situation of the three key informants featured in this thesis and some thoughts on further potential research on filling more gaps in the academic landscapes of knowledge on future-making in uncertainty and the role of social relations in Africa and the rest of the world.

Figure 1: University graduate celebrating her
Bachelor's degree. December 2018, © Fri Hilda)

1. Theoretical Framework: Making a Future in Yaoundé, Cameroon

In this chapter, I am going to introduce the theoretical foundation that this research is based on. I adapted an enabling and agency-based theory which takes the engagement of young educated Cameroonians with their future(s) as a focal point. It highlights a productive and empowered way of dealing with particular challenges posed through economic hardship on a structural level and the complex interplay between an individual and its social relations on a micro level. The adapted theory spans three realms which I am going to connect in my analysis. In the first section, "Cognitive and Social Dimensions of Future-Making", I aim to shed light on the general process of future-making in Africa and its various dimensions as it has been theorized by Pelican and Heiss (2014). The second section, "Acting Under Uncertain Terms", points to an unwavering agency of youth in uncertain conditions being understood through the enabling theory of social action by Steuer and Engeler (2017) and Johnson-Hank's much discussed and cited theory of "judicious opportunism" (2005). Finally, the third section will link the future-oriented agency of young people in uncertainty with one specific and vital component that influences their capacity to act tremendously: social relations. In "The Economy of Social Relations" I will elaborate on the contingent and ambivalent aspects

of social relations in relation to future-making with regard to Mboti's (2015) critique to the discourse on the moral concept of *Ubuntu* and Roth's (2012) discussion of social (and economic) capital as a necessary condition to act and keep acting.

1.1 Cognitive and Social Dimensions of Future-Making

When is the future? And who can afford to aspire one?

<center>***</center>

On one of my last evenings in Cameroon in June 2019, I was having a farewell dinner and a few drinks with some friends, including Steven, who was not only a friend but also a key informant. Over the course of the evening, the informal conversation took an interesting turn. Steven and his friend Barrister Claude, a young lawyer who recently started his own family, were discussing the future and their responsibility towards the community. Steven told us laughing that his nine-year-old daughter Hope always says: "You always talk about the future. But when is that future finally coming?" Steven then told her that one does not exactly know when the future will be. "It can be tomorrow, it can be next year; but it will come!" he said (Fieldnotes 21.06.2019).

<center>***</center>

In Cameroon, the future is perceived as something very subjective and intangible, hard to grasp or to define. Technically, it is a temporal description, but when people talk about the future, they refer less to a specific time frame and more to certain dreams and objectives that are still to be achieved – some of them reasonable and realistic, others just far away dreams and ambitions that might never become true. The "when" is most often not part of the discussion because it is the least determinable factor. The future is a vague horizon, an undefined point in time that can be in a few days, weeks, up until many years to come. The overarching uncertainty makes calculations and precise timing concerning the future impossible. One can only hope.

Before introducing the conceptual framework that my analysis is based on, I would like to draw attention to Appadurai's (2004) argument concerning an unequal distributed capacity to aspire and connect it to my research in Cameroon.[10] Drawing from research in the

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[10] Before one acts with a prior intention (Searle 1983: 84) one has an aspiration, therefore it is helpful to take a brief look at the capacity to aspire itself in order to understand the context which we are dealing with and what this capacity requires to come into existence.

slums of India, Appadurai argues that the capacity to aspire is distributed unequally in the world. Those who are better off have more opportunities to experience the link between aspirations and outcomes and thus have more room to explore alternative futures, both theoretically and practically. They navigate their social spaces by evaluating certain steps and actions in relation to the possibility of successful outcomes. Appadurai therefore coins this capacity as a navigational capacity. Due to material and monetary means, this exploration can be experienced more frequently which strengthens the capacity to aspire. This does not mean, according to Appadurai, that the poor have no wishes and future-visions, but due to a lack of immediate opportunities to experience and link them to direct future-outcomes, they have a less developed capacity to aspire. Their horizon of possible futures and thus aspirations is limited.

The question that rises is can this argument be applied in the context of young educated Cameroonians? Where do we need to draw the line between the poor and the more affluent? Appadurai's reference point is the poor living in the slums in India. But in the context of my research, this argument needs further clarification. Some young educated Cameroonians, who may or may not have a job in the informal or private sector and would thus be considered as poor from a Global North perspective, cannot be compared and put on the same level with the poor, living in slums in India. Nor do they fit into the category of those who are better off due to sufficient material and monetary means which would possibly enable them to follow one certain pathway that most likely leads to the desired outcome in the future. The life of the majority of people in urban Cameroon, those interviewed for this study, is determined by uncertainty and a shortage of monetary means as well as a lack of promising opportunities. They are in a grey zone; they constantly crave for a better future and use the social and economic capital they have at hand carefully to make ends meet in a context of scarcity. They aspire to have a life that provides them with stability and a certain degree of prestige and thus navigate carefully through life by making use of various tactics to fulfil their aspirations. So, we must ask: what does it take, beside material and monetary means, to develop the capacity to aspire?

Cognitive processes of future-making and the social dimensions of acting as part of a community

In the last ten years, youth, and more recently, university graduates in Africa became a new popular focus in Anthropology and African Studies (Christiansen et al. 2015; Fokwang 2006, 2008; Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2006; Steuer and Engeler 2017).

In this thesis, I would like to shift the research focus from young graduates, who have just received their degree and might not yet have taken any concrete step in a certain direction in order to pursue their careers, and instead follow up on these graduates a few years later to see how they fared after they had entered the labour-market. It enables me to reflect on possible failed attempts at founding a family or finding a job directly after graduating. I adopted the expression *making a future* which was coined by Pelican and Heiss (2014). It emphasizes that the future is not just an abstract concept and an ideal in one's imagination, but it is "confronted and constructed through action, in a back-and forth process between actors and their environment." (Pelican and Heiss 2014: 7). Such future-making activities can be diverse and contain several steps and determents which factor into this process, depending on the individual environment, society, culture, and historical moment. The contributions of the volume "Making a Future in Contemporary Africa" (2014) demonstrate that future-making in Africa is tremendously shaped by a high degree of uncertainty and a volatile environment that does not allow precise assumptions and planning for the future. Pelican and Heiss provide a useful analytical grid to research future-making activities of young Cameroonians. They defined general categories to comprehend practices of future making, which served partly as an analytical framework for my research; the identified categories are social and environmental conditions, economic and social capital, cultural means of confronting risk, cognitive processes and the social dimensions of acting as part of a community (Pelican and Heiss 2014: 11-12). During my research, I engaged deeper with two of the named categories; in order to understand the coping mechanisms of young educated Cameroonians, I focused on the *cognitive aspects* of making a future. That is how they plan and tackle an uncertain future, which temporal dimension they focus on in doing so, and how they deal with new and unexpected challenges that present itself along the way.

The second category I tackled is the *social dimension of acting as part of a community*. I aimed to understand the role of social responsibilities and mutual dependencies in future-making and to which extent it is shaped and reshaped by social networks and kinship. It became evident that social relations cannot just be seen as a fruitful resource that becomes all the more essential when the state fails to provide for its citizen. Social relations also bear room for conflict and dispute, manifested for example through high expectations or dominant restrictions from relatives (ibid.: 16-17). I would like to highlight the ambivalent aspect of the role of social relations in future-making for young educated Cameroonians and hence follow up on the call for more in-depth research on the many nuances and types of future making in Africa and the factors that underlie them.

1.2 Acting under Uncertain Terms

Uncertainty and Insecurity are notions
that link the present with the past and the future.
(Benda-Beckann 2000: 7)

The uncertainty of the everyday

Life is colored by a number of small determinants which can have a big impact on the near as well as the distant future. In Cameroon it is almost impossible to know with certainty which step leads to the fulfilment of some short- or long-term objectives. Anything can happen anytime, be it the sudden death of a relative or the call of a friend who tells you about a well-paid and promising job that is waiting just around the corner. This uncertainty permeates the day-to-day life and influences the way people act and plan. During the rainy season, for instance, it is common to frequently get stuck somewhere in town due to sudden and heavy rain, and when this happens appointments just have to wait. The unpredictable traffic in town has a similar effect. Apart from these rather trivial difficulties due to the infrastructure and the weather, this unpredictability is omnipresent at both, the individual and the structural level; be it the admission for a visa to travel out, to get into a specific bachelor or master's programme, the passing of a *concours[11]*, finding a good job or a suitable wife or husband. Whether one gets lucky by succeeding seems to be a matter of arbitrariness and luck
– *la chance[12]*. As a result, planning becomes difficult in circumstances of volatility and unpredictability. But does it become impossible or redundant? Or is it simply a different kind of planning and going about the future as opposed to straight forward planning? I argue that in conditions of uncertainty, young people still make plans and approach the future in a foresightful way, just not as appointed as may be the case in relatively stable environments. What this means will be elaborated in the following sections.

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[11] Competitive entrance examination in the Francophone educational system.

[12] Ludwig (2017) conducted research in Mali on the diverse future-making activities in Bamako and presents *La Chance,* an emic concept which fuses opportunity with destiny and can offer a new and unexpected future-pathway. It presents a horizon of hope which can turn the wheel around and lead to a new and bright future (ibid. 2017: 19). *La chance* reflects the lack of control to be successful in an uncertain environment, but at the same time it stresses the ability to create opportunities and take action, regardless of the prospect in sight.

The contingency of social action and social relations

The contingency of social action, when approaching potential future horizons[13] in Africa, has been illustrated in the volume "Elusive Futures" edited by Engeler and Steuer (2017): "Social action in the present amounts to the construction of the future, but this future is one that does not necessarily respond to one's plans." (ibid.: 21). The emphasis on the contingent aspect of social action that is directed to the future reveals the elusiveness of the latter; one can never know with certainty which action leads to which outcome. Their contribution portrays different future-creating activities of young graduate students in Africa and reveals their dreams, hopes and imaginaries about the future. Engeler and Steuer argue that graduates, who were mostly perceived as a "waithood generation" (Honwana 2012), are actually "[…] already doing adulthood in different spheres of social life […]" (2017: 21). Acting in the present enables further action in the future, thus the present always bears a promise of the future (Macamo 2017: 4). Engeler and Steuer's contribution sheds light on different dimensions of future-making in various regional contexts of Africa, such as Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali and Tanzania. Hope, for example, constitutes a major internal driving force that makes young people "keep going" despite the odds, always on the lookout for the future that they have been waiting for (Birzle 2017). This optimistic and anticipative attitude informs the social action, which for instance becomes very feasible in religious contexts: praying to God constitutes a powerful mechanism which is manifested through hope and the strong belief that things will get better eventually.[14] The social dimension of future-making gains special attention in Ammanns (2017) paper in which she depicts the interwoven layers and nuances of young graduates' agency and how it is informed by their social environment. The bridging element of the quoted papers is the agency of young graduates. It becomes evident that acting in the present in different spheres of social life which are not obviously and directly devoted to the future still can be seen as a way to approach the future. These future-oriented activities are termed as a "social becoming" (Engeler and Steuer 2017: 22).

An anticipative and preparing way of engaging with the future, which I term as social investments, turned out to be a substantial tactic to cope with uncertainty. Young people engage in different forms of social investments and find out later which investment pays off and which does not. Engeler and Steuer's understanding of young educated individuals as

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[13] Refers to the various possible futures that are imagined and desired. This term is inspired by Johnson Hanks: „Horizons are specific to a time: what looks like a hopeful prospect now may be closed down without warning tomorrow, and another potential future may open up." (2005: 872)

[14] This optimistic attitude attributed to religion was omnipresent in my research, but cannot be a main focus in this thesis.

active agents of their own destiny serve as a great inspiration during this research. They contribute to the body of literature on future-making by young educated Africans by shedding light on the intrinsic features of social action and everyday experiences in uncertain environments. Their insights on the enabling agency of youths are rather opposed to Honwana's perspective on youths, described as passive, stuck in the present, and rather shying away from an uncertain future that they can no longer trust (ibid.: 3). She describes the phenomenon of *waithood* as prolonged time between childhood and adulthood in which youth undergo momentous challenges due to global socioeconomic and political crisis (Ntarangwi 2012). Yet, Honwana describes the responses of the youths to their seemingly hopeless situation as creative and solution-oriented. On the one hand, she focuses in her analysis on the strategies youths undertake in order to escape the waithood they find themselves trapped in and on the other hand she highlights the inequalities youths are confronted with due to a global neoliberal agenda. Her research is helpful to understand the situatedness of African youth in local and global dynamics and their struggle for autonomy. However, this thesis focuses solely on the micro level of future-making - that is the kind of strategies young people use to make a future and which role the direct social environment plays into it.

In line with Engeler and Steuer's argument, which focuses on a future-orientated agency, Cooper and Pratten (2016) go even a step further and describe uncertainty as a fruitful social resource and an engine for productivity and agency. It is used to negotiate insecurity and existing social relations, create new relationships and open up opportunities. They conclude that uncertainty is a product of social contingencies. They draw on Bledsoe's (2002) notion of the term contingency, which equally provides a fertile ground for this thesis; on the one hand, it implies uncertainty, risk and randomness, but on the other, it opens room for agency and the creation of new social ties. Such contingency permeates all aspects of life (2002: 25). Hence, the future is a contingent outcome of social action in the present. Cooper and Pratten describe uncertainty not as an autonomous external condition that is always coming from "outside": Uncertainty is produced and reproduced in the public sector as well as the private sector, as well as within the macro and the micro level. Social relations, for instance, are highly contingent and unpredictable: "In some situations social relations create uncertainty, while at other times social relations alleviate uncertainty and often the equilibrium is held in suspense." (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 2). Thus, the contingent aspect of uncertainty is both a powerful resource and an unavoidable burden. My aim is to investigate the contingency of social relations and uncertainty, how these two notions are intertwined and

interdependent and inform the everyday life of young people in Cameroon whilst making a future.

Dealing with uncertainty: wealth in prospects

My research is largely based on and inspired by Johnson-Hank's theory of judicious opportunism (2005). Having researched on how young Beti women in south-west Cameroon approach marriage and reproduction, she argues that social action and decision-making processes are informed by the current environment: under conditions of uncertainty and the absence of institutional social security, young people do not develop calculative and well-organized long-term planning strategies to relate to the future. Instead, they seize opportunities as they emerge:

> "Under extreme uncertainty, when all the rules are changing, what works is not the best strategy but the most flexible one − the one that takes every present in the subjective, that keeps every alternative open as long as possible, and that permits the actor to act rapidly and flexibly to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise." (2005: 377).

Instead of following up, invest and rely only on one career path it seems more reasonable to always have a backup plan at hand, in case the current trajectory suddenly becomes a dead end. Therefore, it is necessary to be constantly alert and flexible for other promising opportunities. The sad reality, that dreams often continue to be dreams, has informed the way people reason and act. The future remains a mystery. Therefore, one must anticipate that the social action of today might have a different outcome tomorrow. Hence, the safest strategy is to seize opportunities as they come and to remain attentive and flexible towards the environment one is surrounded with. Stanley, a father in his early thirties, described this phenomenon and its institutional background precisely:

> "So, the unemployment is really driving the youth in Cameroon crazy. They often don't end [up] with the passion which they followed earlier; they can just end up doing anything. So, you can train as an anthropologist and you want to become a researcher and you end up working in the bank. Whatever comes along. Cameroon becomes a society where just the least opportunity you have, you will grab it. Not that you must think you build a career. I don't think it works here, it doesn't." (Stanley, 18.06.2019)

I aim to take Johnson-Hanks's theory of judicious opportunism a step further and add the dimension of social relations, as many scholars have suggested in response to her theory (see Alber 2016; Notermans 2005; Pelican and Heiss 2014). Individuals, who act in the present to enable various future horizons, and thus act intentionally, are always embedded into a social

network that they depend on: "The future, even when it concerns the individual, always has a social dimension: it depends on others." (Augé 2014: 2). Social relations can constitute support and stability on the one hand, but they can also create new uncertainties and obstacles on the other hand (Cooper and Pratten 2016: 2). In this thesis, I will look deeper into how social relations impact the way people relate to the future.

Furthermore, Johnson-Hanks (2002) discusses how the western concept of life-stages is not linear and one-dimensional as mostly argued and presented by western scholars. Rather, it is fluid and flexible and does not subscribe to a particular order in which one stage is closed after the other. After overcoming a certain life-stage, one can still go back to the former stage. For instance, the event of a young single woman who still goes to university falling pregnant can pose a vital conjuncture. It is a moment in time which constitutes a "nexus of potential futures" (Ibid: 871) and a zone of possibilities. She could decide to go back to her own family and leave the child to a relative so that she can continue her education, or she could join the family of her husband and dismiss her education to stay with her child. But in the latter scenario, she could eventually resume her studies and come back to be a student and therefore switch back and forth between being a student, a mother to her daughter, maybe a daughter to her mother and then a student again. A vital conjuncture constitutes one moment in life which composes different potential future-scenarios and openings and hence a lot of contingencies. It is a determining moment in which everything is at stake and a certain direction can lead to a completely new trajectory. But what happens if this vital conjuncture dilates in time and a step into one direction or another is never being made? Johnson-Hanks states: "When conjunctures dilate in time, the state of exception becomes normal, producing a potentially different modality of action. This modality can be described as waiting in a state of suspended action, of interstitial pause, of persistent temporariness." (2016: 9). Whether this still constitutes a vital conjuncture is questionable, as Johnson Hanks notes. Against this backdrop I would like to investigate what happens to those who are constantly in a state of anticipation, some sort of grey zone, which they actively try to shape and reshape with rather subtle modes of social action which shall enable them to keep acting in the future in order to escape the continually vital conjuncture, or in other words, to escape the situation of precarity and transform into a state of full capacity to act.

1.3 The Economy of Social Relations

"Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" - Persons depend on persons to be persons
(Nguni Bantu proverb)

Social relations in general, and family relations in particular, have an explicitly strong role in the life of an individual in the African context[15]. Shutte reflects on the extended family in Africa as "probably the most common, and also the most fundamental, expression of the African idea of community" (2001: 29). It is being described as a special solidarity, with which family members stick together and support each other socially and economically (Mbah 2014). This communal spirit is most often depicted as something very positive and very African. Yet, the dominant discourse on social relations in Africa is polarizing: it is either depicted as a continent of low social trust (see Burbridge 2019; Johnson and Mislin 2011: 873–874) or of a place of a real communal spirit and mutual support, as the philosophical concept of *Ubuntu*, among many other similar local concepts, suggests (Tosam: unpublished manuscript). The later seemingly favours Africans: historically, Africans have been denigrated as unintelligent, lazy, violent and without any moral (Taylor, et al. 2019). Through the community-based support to one another they were for once seen as ethical and moral beings (Mboti 2015: 139). The philosophical and moral principial of *Ubuntu*, a social code of conduct from the *Nguni Bantu* in South Africa, which defines the individual through the community and emphasises the community over the individual (Rampke 2016: 27) reached worldwide publicity in the 1970's with a quest for decolonialization and became best known as a guiding concept of the 'African Renaissance' by post-colonial and post-apartheid leaders in South Africa (Bolden 2014). Central to the concept of *Ubuntu* is, beside notions such as unity, oneness and solidarity (Ramoses 1999, see in Mawere 2014a: 83), the reciprocal character of the gift: "At the beginning of one's life one is only potentially a person. One's life, if all goes well, is a continual becoming more of a person through one's interaction with others. Personhood comes as a gift from other persons." (Shutte, 2001: 12). Hence, the sense of a person is shaped through relationships with others and therefore cannot be detached from its social context. Relationships are supposed to maintain a certain balance and justice within society. The philosophy of *Ubuntu* is reflected in many other local concepts spread across the continent, such as the Kom *Wul,* the Nso' *Wir,* the Yoruba *Ènìyàn., the* Luo *Juok,* or the Akan *Onipa,* (Tosam: unpublished manuscript).

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[15] Family relations are vital in many other parts of the world. It shall be stressed, that this is not just an African phenomenon, but a global one.

They are all notions of personhood characterized by an intrinsic motivation to share, cooperate and contribute to the greater good of the community. *Ubuntu* is often equalized with the saying: "I am because we are". This stands in contrast to Rene Descartes famous saying "I think, therefore I am". The opposing discourses standing behind these sayings are clear: African philosophy is based on interdependence and communitarianism (Bolden 2014; Shutte: 2001, Praeg: 2008 and Ramose: 1999). It is portrayed as highly relational and stands in contrast to the celebrated European individualism and freedom of choice. Mboti (2015) argues that this harmoniously painted notion of *Ubuntu* is too simplistic to rightfully portray African realities: social relations are much messier then depicted from the Western point of view and contain both, harmony and discord:

> "The normative "greatest harmony" account attempts to elevate harmony to a moral duty that Africans must simply uphold. That is, harmony is constituted as some form of categorical imperative. But is disharmony really that inconceivable? Is goodwill really neutral? There is, for me, a clear difficulty in elevating of harmony to a moral duty that Africans must simply uphold. […] In truth, Africans are not restricted – and need not be restricted – to any one moral code. Rather, it seems that we are always already a multi-ethnic people, involved in complex multi-ethnic interactions with others dependent on context." (Mboti 2015: 131-132).

Conflict and cooperation are not mutually exclusive and can exist simultaneously. Furthermore, Mboti states that interdependence does indeed exist, but it is a voluntary one.

The ambiguousness of social relationships will pose a central part in my case studies. Mboti's critique to the dominant discourse of *Ubuntu* helps us to comprehend and situate the contingency of social relations in relation to future-making in urban Cameroon. As we shall see, social relationships can be cooperative and supportive, but they can also be a burden and bear the potential for conflict. The Cameroonian Anthropologist Nyamnjoh (2015) has pointed it out: Africans and their agency is everything but static or tied to just one attribution – be it positive or negative. They are border-crossing shape-shifters, flexible and ever transforming. The complexity and fluidity of African endogenous universes are narrated in popular writings and novels, such as Amos Tutuola's, Palm-Wine Drinkard (Tutuola, 1952), as Nyamnjoh suggests (ibid.: 4). The Protagonist of the novel is travelling through different realities, constantly transforming and shape-shifting. Sometimes he appears weak and sometimes overall mighty and powerful. The characters he meets along his journey are at times very helpful and giving and in other times they are capricious and deceiving. Rather than taking Eurocentric notions of African realities as a starting point, I want to embark from an emic perspective on social relations in Africa, which takes their complexity and diversity

into account. Mboti's straight forward argument for a more nuanced and complex view on the concept of *Ubuntu* – and thus social relations in an African context – breaks the dichotomies between positive and negative attributions of social relations and will help to understand the role social relations, such as family members or friends, play in future-making for young aspiring Cameroonians. From there, I would like to take a closer look at the mutual interplay between an individual and her/his social relations in regard to their decision-making and agency and bring in the ethnographic study of Roth (2012), in which she analyses the role of social and symbolic capital (based on Bourdieu's theory of capital) and the agency of young educated Burkinabé who strive for a better future.

Before moving on, I would like to draw attention to another related concept that circles around social relations and sociality: *Conviviality* is a concept that is used to describe modes of living together with differences.[16] It has gained popularity in the Social Sciences over recent years and can be translated best with the German term *Geselligkeit*, although, there is no current consensus on its meaning. The concept is mostly used to analyze everyday interactions and rather focuses on differences than communalities. For this thesis it does not pose a suitable concept for my analysis because I am less interested in the (daily) interactions and thus the sociability between individuals as such, but would like to analyze and understand the influence of social relations on an individual and its modes of action. Furthermore, the concept is mostly used in diverse urban contexts where people of different ethnic backgrounds live together. I rather focus on the social action of individuals and their intimate or professional relations which are not characterized by diversity. Nevertheless, the concept is worth mentioning because it helps us to comprehend individuals in their interrelatedness and interdependency at the root of human existence (Norwicka and Vertovec 2014: 342).

The role of social capital and social recognition in making a future

According to Roth (2012), young Burkinabé are able to develop a new context of action in an environment of precarity if two components are given: a minimum of economic capital and social capital, ergo social relations. It enables young people to reinterpret their situation and to take another turn in their trajectory. A minimum of economic capital is necessary in order to

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[16] To construe it with the words of Tilmann Heil: The concept "[…] describes aspects of the everyday life in neighborhoods where local residents engage in practices and discourses of living together, engaging with, confronting and embracing differences" (Heil 2015: 319). Nyamnjoh (2015) describes *conviviality* as a currency for Frontier Africans. He invites us to celebrate incompleteness and question popular ideas on what constitutes reality: „Conviviality encourages us to reach out, encounter and explore ways of enhancing or complementing ourselves with the added possibilities of potency brought our way by the incompleteness of others." (ibid. 2015: 10) He makes a strong case for a future of convivial scholarship and knowledge production.

achieve other forms of capital, especially social capital, and vice versa. Roth's argumentation is mostly based on Bourdieu's ethnographic research on the Algerian society of the 1960's and the impact of a steady income on planning for the future (Bourdieu 2000a [1977]). He stated that a discrepancy between the means that are available and the visions made for the future emerges because the present seems to be too difficult to overcome: those who are overwhelmed by the present loose reference to the future and aim for something that seems too unrealistic to achieve (ibid.: 87-90). This suggests a certain passiveness when scarcity and uncertainty are dominating life. However, Roth's ethnographic fieldwork in Burkina Faso showed a different result and is in line with Engeler and Steuer's theory of social action: even in circumstances of precarity, it is possible to create new contexts of action and reinterpret the present. Roth indeed suggests a more empowering and action-based theory on the relation between poverty and future-orientated action than Bourdieu did. Essential for the ability to act and keep acting are social relations, which can provide vital support in times of need.

Benda-Beckmann (2007) bring the term "social security" into the discussion: "Social security is the totality of institutions which aim to provide social security in respect to specific needs and distresses (contingencies)." (ibid.: 12). As they have argued, social security includes more than what the state regulates and provides. Benda-Beckmann plead for a more diverse understanding of social security; one that includes the different layers of social organization and takes its interrelation into account. Social relations play a tremendous role in the process of restoring social security. They may at times create new uncertainties, but they will always be the most important source of social support: "Though people may be poor, and social relations which in the past may have provided more social security have weakened, these relationships remain the main vehicle through which people in need and distress at least receive some help." (ibd.: 9).

In order to receive this support, it is important to equally invest into social relations and maintain the reciprocal balance of giving and receiving. Furthermore, it is essential to maintain an image of success and thus social recognition. The social recognition, and thus symbolic capital, can be achieved through education or other social titles and positions[17] as well as material goods (such as cloth) that suggest wealth. The social appearance of an individual needs to be maintained despite all odds in order to be recognized as someone who can take care of herself/himself and is not a burden to others (Roth 2012: 5-6). But what happens, however, if this appearance of social recognition and success can no longer be

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[17] For example, the position of an *elder* in church. This is a highly respected position within the presbyterian community which comes with certain duties and responsibilities, such as serving the pastor. It is not synonymous to the verb *elderly*.

preserved and starts to fade away and reveals the true current condition of despair? What if the fragile balance of reciprocity cannot be maintained? What if one is never able to give back what one has received? According to Roth this leads to a social retreat (ibid.: 9). Individuals try to avoid those social contacts where social or material expectations are coming from in order to maintain a certain status and to not disappoint or be exposed to shame and humiliation from others. My research confirms this to a certain extent (see Stacey's life-trajectory), but it also indicates that there is always the hope to eventually be able to pay back or to become successful. Hence, one is constantly in the position of anticipating the future because the future shall be better than the present.

Status and social recognition in urban Cameroon are highly contextual and depend on the setting. Nevertheless, it has a moral dimension: there is a constant negotiation between giving and receiving, which makes it ambivalent and transient (Frei 2012: 45). Social affiliation, on the other hand, is the outcome of social interaction and represents categories of social relations which are negotiated between actors (Neckel 2003: 161). Social recognition is therefore bound to social affiliation within a certain group. The kind of position and ergo status one has in a group seems to be of great importance, especially for men, as the case study of Steven will demonstrate. Social recognition can allow a certain degree of social security in an uncertain setting because it suggests a bigger (and potentially more powerful and wealthy) circle of social relations. However, the social security that is not provided by the state will always bear a contingent aspect because it can vanish as soon as one component (e.g., economic flow) of the carefully composed status within the network of social relations falls apart and reveals the all-embracing uncertainty. In this thesis, I am going to elaborate on the pitfalls of success and social relations; Steven's life story exemplifies the social pressure and expectations from family and friends that his success and high social standing are coming along with.

2. Methodology and Research Design

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand"
William Blake, Fragments from "Auguries of Innocence" 1863

This thesis is based on a collaborative research and teaching programme of the University of Cologne and the Universities of Yaoundé 1, Dschang and Bamenda. It took place from the 30.7 -7.9.2018 in Yaoundé. The theme of the research project was: "Urban youths' perspectives on making a future in Cameroon and/or abroad". It aimed to find out how young,

educated Cameroonians are going about making a successful future for themselves and their communities and what obstacles they encounter in doing so. After six weeks in the field, I returned to the theory, reflected on my raw data in a back-and-forth process and started coding the material. In order to get a deeper understanding on the matter and after having started to elaborate a more focused research design, I returned to Cameroon five months later to dive into the field for another four months. In this chapter, I will introduce my sample, the research design and its development, present my research objectives, elaborate on the used methods and finally reflect on my experiences in the field.

2.1 Doing Fieldwork in Yaoundé: Sample and Research Design

For the duration of the research programme in 2018, we worked in research tandems; six German students worked with six Cameroonians students on related research projects. I worked with Nzouenkeu Yaanou Guylaine Clode from the University of Bamenda and we conducted most of the interviews together during the project (see Figure 2). While she focused on sexual harassment and sexuality in making a future in Cameroon, my research topic was still rather broad and unspecific. I was investigating three main questions: what influences the decision-making process of young educated Cameroonians concerning their future-making? What obstacles do they encounter? And, how do they tackle and overcome them? These open questions allowed me to first of all get an understanding of the general situation of young people in urban Cameroon, their perspectives concerning their future and what challenges they face. This first research period posed the breeding ground from which my specific research interest developed.

After six weeks in the field, I returned to Germany to continue my studies. I used this change of setting to distance myself somewhat from my research and later reflect upon the notes and interviews that I had taken so far, as suggested by many scholars (Breidenstein et al. 2013: 109). As I started analyzing and coding my research material, I identified general themes to focus on. Since I researched during the first research period on what influences decision- making processes of young educated Cameroonians, I realized that social relations were vital in the future-making of my informants and posed a double-edged strategy: young people depended on them, profited and suffered from them, sometimes all at the same time.

During my second field research in Cameroon, I examined the ambiguous role of social relations with respect to future-generating activities. My second stay lasted from early March until late June 2019 and was embedded in an internship I completed at a local

grassroots organization in Yaoundé. Beside the general interest in the work of a local grassroots NGO, I also wished to be more engaged in the community and hence establish a more reciprocal relationship between myself and my informants. The couple running the NGO, Audrey and Steven, not only offered me some interesting insights into their work and lives, but also became friends of mine. They became the key informants in my research, especially Steven. Therefore, I was very happy that I could also be of use to them with my work in the NGO (see Figure 3).

My sample constitutes 33 young Cameroonians, both male and female, who participated in qualitative interviews and/or focus group interviews. Thereof are 20 female and 13 males. Female informants being the majority happened as a coincidence, but I also had the impression that I, as a female researcher, was able to have deeper conversations built on trust with female informants than with male informants, especially after several conversations and interviews and hence the establishment of a relationship. The age of my informants ranged from 22 until 36 years. Most of them can still be considered as "youth", a flexible concept, or in other words, a social category (Christiansen et al.: 2006) that is negotiated and established through the socioeconomic environment.[18]

My sample reflects a certain diversity in sex, age, social and economic background, and current personal situation and life trajectory. I have chosen the presented case studies not only because they are rich in data, but also because they all show certain communalities while they differ at the same time and reveal individual issues. Furthermore, every individual case "is constituted within a social reality, and can reveal something about the relationship between the individual and the general. […] Thus, each individual case can tell us something about the general." (Rosenthal 2018: 65).

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[18] According to Christiansen, Utas and Vigh (2006), „Youth" is a highly dynamic and contested category. Youths are considered as individuals which are both, „social *being* and social *becoming"*(Ibid.: 11). The movement from childhood to adulthood is not just a transition from one state into another, it is also a struggle for power, authority and social recognition in which one is constantly positioned, but according to the authors also tries to position oneself and generate contexts of action (Ibid.)

Figure 2: Cameroonian and German researchers waiting for informants to conduct a Focus Group Discussion in the Ministry of external relations. August 2018. © Winnifred.

Figure 3: Working together in the Office of the NGO from Steven and Audrey. April 2019. © Victor Abai.

2.2 Research Objectives

My research project brings two themes in dialogue with each other regarding the impact on future-making in urban Cameroon: uncertainty and social relations. Both are major factors contributing to the decision-making process for an individual living in urban Cameroon. By linking those topics within the context of future-making, I aim to get a deeper understanding on why and how young people act, prioritize and plan for their future. Generally speaking, in Cameroon, uncertainty affects everyone because it is rooted in structural failures related to the economy and governance. Networks of social relations, on the other hand, are highly individual and therefore create partly opposing life-stories and contexts.

Concerning the cognitive aspects of future-making, that is how an individual decides to act and why, I wish to build on Johnson Hanks theory of judicious opportunism (2005). I aim to take her theory a step further by adding a social dimension to it and to apply the theory on a different time in the life of an individual, as elaborated already. As we shall see, judicious opportunism still remains an important strategy after having already invested and started certain careers and future horizons, but circumstances demand more tactics, most often.

The general discourses on social relations in Africa are polarizing and do not leave much room for nuances and variations. Either the focus lies on negative aspects, such as low social trust (Burbidge 2019) and nepotism, or on an overall harmonic notion of social relations in Africa, informed for example by local concepts such as *Ubuntu*. Certainly, those discourses cannot be dismissed entirely. My aim is to portray a more a nuanced, shaded representation of social relations in Africa by depicting both, the collaboration and solidarity and the challenges and conflicts that accompany networks of social relations.

Furthermore, I would like to portray a more empowered picture of young people in Cameroon and how they go about making a future. Instead of just passively waiting for things to get better or change, they are actors of their own destiny by breaking out of dependent and toxic relationships (Stacey), trying out new ways when one trajectory becomes a dead end (Steven), investing into job opportunities (Christina), reasoning well and envisioning a bright future for themselves and their children.

2.3 Research Methods: Qualitative Interviews and Participant Observation

During both of my stays, the most important research method I used was conducting qualitative interviews. Nevertheless, there was a methodological difference of conducting research during my first and second stay in the field. My first research period in Yaoundé lasted six weeks and can be denoted as focused ethnography (Knoblauch 2005) or, as Sarah Pink described it, "intense routes to knowing" (2001). During that time, I was conducting various interviews almost on a daily basis which allowed me to immerse myself into the field and the new social realties very quickly. It was easy to find voluntary interlocuters. I used the social network of my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Pelican, who connected me to some young educated Cameroonians. Through the snow-ball system I was able to reach out and establish more contacts. Furthermore, I was getting in touch with people in the day-to-day life. For example, I met Stacey, one of my key informants during a church mass of a Pentecostal church.

Most interviews were accompanied by my Cameroonian co-researcher. The fact, that we were two researchers interviewing one person and thus researchers being the majority, is unusual and could have had an impact on the interviews as it could have been intimidating for some interviewees. Additionally, the interlocutors may have been reluctant to share more sensitive or confidential information with us. The most exploited research method used during my first stay was qualitative semi-structured interviews. My research partner and I had developed the interview guideline beforehand together in an intense workshop that prepared us for the fieldwork. Since we had a related but yet different focus in our research, we developed a question guide that would entail questions that were relevant for both of us, but we also included parts with questions only important to our individual research topics. Furthermore, we made use of free listening and used index cards to give informants the opportunity to prioritize short- and long-term objectives (see figure four and five). For doing so, we asked the interviewee to first of all freely write their objectives for the future on the index cards and to prioritize them in a second step. This method was only used three times, but it gave us good insights into the prioritisation of their short- and long-term goals. In total, we conducted 24 semi-structured and unstructured interviews, including three group-interviews and several follow-up interviews with 27 informants. We spoke to 15 female and 12 male informants. I already did some preliminary analysis of my data in the field and after returning to Germany, I pursued a more intense process of analytical work.

The second stay in the field was of a different nature: I was in the field for four months and the research was embedded in an internship at a local grassroots NGO in Yaoundé. The work there allowed me to make more use of participant observation and immerse myself into the field. This was only conditionally possible during my first stay because of temporal constraints and the nature of the project. During my second stay, I experienced the day-to-day life in the office with my co-workers and was frequently invited to social events, such as the admission of Audrey's mother into a woman's group of the Church and the admission of Steven's friend and former colleague into the lawyer profession (See Figure 6). I was able to make friends and learn about the day-to-day struggles, about what matters to them, as well as learn more about the personal life-trajectories of my informants through casual conversations and narrations. Beside interviews and participant observation, I wrote field notes, mostly of a descriptive nature, sometimes analytical. The coding started in the field with a systematic reading of research material (jottings, field notes, interviews) in which I transferred the data from the "world of the field" to the "world of scientific discourses" (Breidenstein et al. 2013).

It was a fruitful back and forth process between literature research, evaluation of research material and conducting new interviews.

During my second stay, I hardly used any interview guideline and rather made use of biographical narrations. My interlocutors knew more or less what the topic of my research was about and what I was interested in. On that basis, they started telling me about their life-trajectory. Their school years served as a starting point because that is when the first more serious future aspirations started to grow. Being more in the background as a researcher, it was the interlocutor who decided what to talk about and how much. My questions rather deepened the conversation and encouraged to talk more about certain experiences then others and maintained the focus. The biographical interviews allowed me to get an idea on the life-trajectory as such, but also showed me how my interlocutors see their actions of the past today by describing them to me in a certain way and hence judging them. In Rosenthals (2018) words: "Biographical narrations tell us about the present of the narrator, as well as about their past and their future expectations." (Ibd.:162). To understand why an individual acts the way it does in a certain moment in time, it is vital to know the temporal interrelatedness of events and to understand them in their social context.
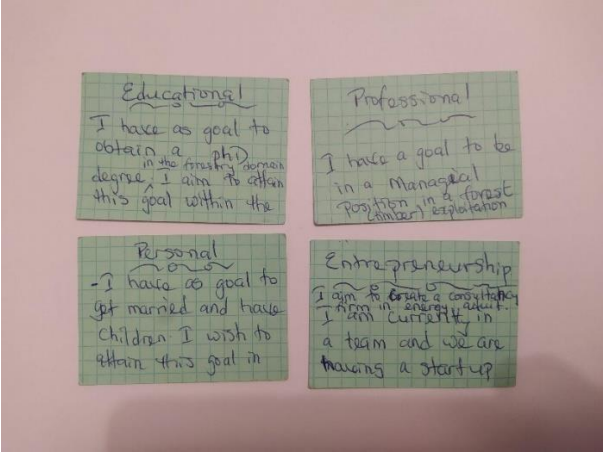

Figure 4: Index cards with long- and short-term objectives categorized by the informant; August 2018. © Dana Harms
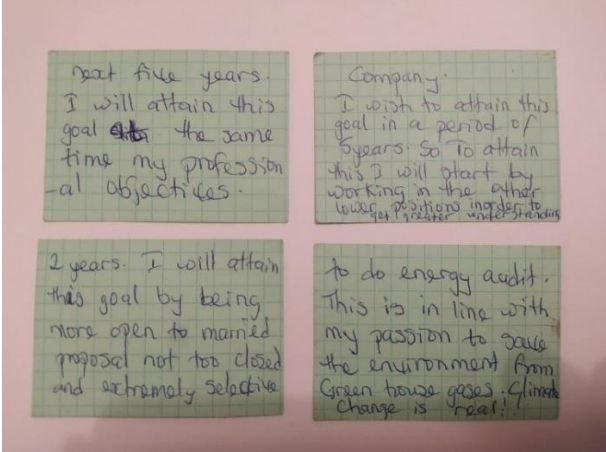

Figure 5: Backside of the index cards, explaining future goals and the temporal timeframe when they should be achieved; August 2018. © Dana Harms

Figure 6: The admission of Steven's friend and former colleague into the lawyer profession;
Mai 2019. © Dana Harms

2.4 Personal Reflections

Before presenting my research material, I would like to reflect on my research and my position in the field. Coming from a privileged European country, it was widely assumed that I was wealthy and in a certain way powerful because I come from the "land of opportunities" – *white men kontri* (Nyamnjoh 2002). For example, one day I met a young man called Francis on a bus journey, who was a medical anthropologist that was just about to finish his PhD. After a brief first acquaintance he instantly gave me his CV, hoping that I could connect him to some "powerful" people.

As portrayed in Nyamnjoh and Page's article on representations on Whiteness by Blacks (2002), my Whiteness was omnipresent and I was constantly reminded of it. Hence, blending in into the field was not an option. I was seen as "a wallet on legs or a ticket to the good life" (Ibid. 2002: 612), which then again made it easy for me to find informants who were willing to meet me for an interview. Listening to the difficulties my closer informants encountered in daily life due to economic challenges was difficult at times. Knowing that the precious time and information they entrusted me with would help me to pursue an academic career in a country where one has far better chances to make a good living with most jobs, evoked the urge in me to establish some reciprocity in any way possible and give back, by showing appreciation for the private information they shared with me. Nevertheless, I had to be careful not to establish a relationship based on hierarchies through gift or money giving and thus strengthen a dynamic, I was actually trying to dismantle.

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Furthermore, the topic of my research, social relations, invades the private realm, which seemed problematic at times. I noticed that it was sometimes difficult for some informants to talk freely about their relationships with friends and family members. This "closedness" revealed the mistrust that was spread amongst friendships and casual relationships. I was told several times by informants that they did not have many friends because they could either not trust them or they were too much of a burden. There was one interview which I had to stop after 15 minutes because my interlocutor did not want the interview to discuss her private life too deeply, as it seemed: Gabriella, a highly educated single mother, clearly did not feel comfortable with my questions. She told me that she did not want to speak about the relationship she has with her family or friends. I accepted politely and we changed the topic. Since I could not ask her about the role her social relations play(ed) in her life, the interview finished not long after and I switched off the recording device. We continued to talk freely and after a while she started talking about the very topics that I was interested in, for example about her troubled relationship with friends and the way her father invested into her academic career and expected her to become a professor. It seemed like all of a sudden Gabriella had decided to trust me and shared information with me that she refused to share earlier. She even allowed me to use the recording device again and record our conversation. Methodological difficulties as such - when an interlocutor refuses to talk about certain topics - are very telling. I found the interview to be highly interesting and even more so when the barrier suddenly vanished and gave room to a more interesting and deep conversation which reflected Gabriella's reluctance to share personal information with me initially.

Lastly, I would like to reflect on the research topic itself and its global dimension. As Johnson Hanks has highlighted in her paper "Vital Conjunctures revisited" (2016), strategies to make a future resulting from uncertainty, such as judicious opportunism, are not just a Cameroonian or African phenomenon. Judicious opportunism is a strategy that gains more popularity in the so-called Global North. As Johnson Hanks argues, "some aspects of youth in the United States are increasingly converging towards an African model, in which uncertainty is the norm and the cultivation of multiple options is the only viable strategy." (2016: 6). I can confirm this convergence myself: when talking to young people who completed their academic degree or were about to do so and were virtually trying to find stability within the labour market, I could relate to them on many levels. Even though I come from a country with a stable economy and better welfare system, I find myself in a strikingly similar situation as many of my informants. Being in my early thirties, I am a young mother who is about to complete her master's degree and am simultaneously trying to invest into different future

horizons because one cannot know which pathway will work out and which will not. Is Johnson Hanks right about how we are drifting more and more into an all-encompassing and preparing-for-all-eventualities kind of way to attend to the future? To answer in Johnsons Hanks words: "The future decides" (Ibid).

II Research findings: Navigating Towards a Bright but Uncertain Future

In this chapter I will present some of my research material, condensed in three case-studies. Each case study is followed by an analytical discussion, directly engaging with the presented case study. The first case study (Stacey) serves as a general introduction to the topic and illustrates a rather conflicted pathway of a young educated single mother in Yaoundé. The general difficulties and obstacles young people face in urban Cameroon become visible in her narrations. It depicts differently prioritized objectives and rather subtle tactics to target an uncertain future in a present that is dominated by precarity. The second case study (Christina) tells the story of a successful young single mother and contrasts the first case study, but at the same time shares commonalities. Unlike in Stacey's case, Christina's stable job allows her to target objectives in the distant future. At the same time, she is charged with a lot of responsibility and is still working towards a better future for herself. To reach her future visions, she seizes opportunities as they emerge and plans her next step carefully. Steven (Case Study 3) is in a similar position: being the ambitious person that he is, he has already achieved a lot and has a high social status. Yet, he is struggling with his wife to make a future for themselves and their children and to be in an economically stable position. His case study reveals insights into the double-edged reality that requires a careful bargaining of prioritisation and the need to always plan a step ahead and to be prepared for all eventualities in the way possible.[19]

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[19] Being a male in a highly patriarchal society, leaves Stanley in a different, more favourable position concerning job opportunities and many other things compared to Stacey and Christina. While successful men are highly respected, women are often confronted with doubt concerning their skills. According to my research, they are frequently suspected of having done "sexual favours" to men in high positions in exchange for a good grade/ job position and are seldom hired in leading positions. However, men face their own kind of challenges, which shall be highlighted in this chapter. The difficulties men encounter in their future making differ to the experiences of women, who are not expected to be breadwinners and/or the head of a family. Thus, despite the better access to the labour market, they are charged with a higher social pressure to be successful.

3. Making a Future in Yaoundé as an Educated Single Mother: Stacey

Stacey, an educated woman from the south west of the country, is a single mother in her early thirties, who is trying to make a future in Yaoundé without a stable job. This profile is extremely common in Cameroon nowadays. During both of my stays in Yaoundé, I met several educated single mothers, who told me stories which were strikingly similar to Stacey's. They are confronted with a double burden; while still forging the fulfilment of their own future horizons and aspirations, they have to take care of their children and make sure that they are equipped for an uncertain future in the best way possible and at the same time possibly take care of other family members who are dependent on them or have invested into their education.

I met Stacey in a Pentecostal church on the outskirts of Yaoundé during church service. With her cheerful spirit, she explained to me the procedure of the mass, who was who, and patiently answered all my questions. From that day on, we met several times, and she became one of my closest informants. In the beginning, she was somewhat reluctant to speak in detail about certain periods in her life. She mostly referred to God who was the reason for things to happen in a certain way and avoided straight forward answers. For example, it was God who decided that her parents got divorced when she was twelve years old. But God would reveal his plan regarding the future to her eventually, she was sure of that. This did not necessarily mean that she did not want to talk about certain topics. Referring to God, who is the one deciding about what happens in life and what not, also points to her feeling of arbitrariness and to a certain extent, a powerlessness to take influence.

Stacey is the oldest of five siblings. The divorce of her parents seemed to be an important turning-point in her life; being the oldest, it was on her to take care of her younger siblings while living with her father. She had to act responsibly from an early age on. Her parents saw potential in her and wanted her to achieve a good position in society. She was not able to meet up with those expectations and instead of studying medicine, as her parents had wished, she registered for environmental science, simply because this was what she got accepted for in the University of Buea. It was not her first choice, but since her father paid her school fees, it sounded more appealing than staying at home where she had little freedom. She was seventeen years, when she moved out of her father's house to study in Buea, a small town in south-west region of Cameroon. It was a difficult time for her, as she recounted. Sometimes she found herself without any money and couldn't ask her parents for help as they would shout at her and insult her. Instead of helping, they put more pressure on her, she explained to

me. She had to turn to friends. Within the first year, she was not very passionate about her studies and had rather poor or average results in class. After a couple of failed exams, she realized that she needed to stand up to the task in order to have a future. So, she started to look at her studies in a different way and realized that environmental science has many potential job-openings. The fact that she was not limited to only one job position but instead could go into many different directions motivated her. She saw all the potential doors that could open up. Her grades became better and she started to enjoy her studies. But after her first degree, life presented itself to her again with a surprising turn. She got pregnant. Her boyfriend, the father of her unborn daughter, made a living from some small business projects and could not contribute much economically. Despite the odds, she had high hopes to marry him, create her own family and finally have some stability. Yet he never proposed to her and was reluctant to meet her parents.

Three years later she decided to continue her education. She enrolled in a master's programme in Geology at the University of Yaoundé 1. She sees a good education as vital for her future-making: "No matter how much experience you have. If your degree ends, you might know a lot of things that even doctors know, but if the educational level you have is lower [than others], it will not be considered." (Stacey, 29.08.18). Her father paid for her school fees while her boyfriend took care of the rent. He was still not ready to show the kind of commitment she was looking for, such as marrying her or at least meeting her parents, much to the discontent of Stacey. She lived and studied in Yaoundé while he lived in Buea. He came and went how he pleased. While studying, Stacey had to work and take care of her child. She had to hustle and take whatever opportunities came up: "Most often I had to take work. Then when I had assignments, at night, after coming back from all those days of work, you have to do your assignment, you have to wash napkins…" (Stacey 26.04.19). There was no room for any kind of planning for the future. She had to focus on the present and see how to get by from day to day. Soon the relationship started to crumble; he was violent towards her and they fought a lot. One year later, she became pregnant again. Her parents were not happy about her second pregnancy:

> S: "And for me it was even better that I was far [away from my parents]. Because if I was near…
> Already, insults were hitting me when I was far. Then imagine what it would be like if I was near."
> D: "They were insulting you because of the pregnancy?"
> S: "Yes. Like, "how can you be so stupid?! I sent you to school, is this what you are supposed to do?"
> (Stacey, 26.04.19)

After giving birth to a second child, Stacey stayed with her aunt because she had nowhere else to go to. This caused her to drop out of university again. She felt stuck. Besides raising her children, she did not have any job or prospect in sight to elevate her and give her some perspective for the future. There was nothing she could do to move forward, to generate her own income. This situation posed a vital conjuncture (Johnson-Hanks 2002) for her; suddenly all her future(s) were at stake. She did no longer want to be with her boyfriend who never seemed to be ready for a commitment. However, breaking up would pose other challenges for her, as she would be all alone with her children and had no financial support from him anymore. She could not stay with her aunt for much longer either. Despite the hopeless outlook, she eventually decided to break up with her boyfriend for good. She had to do something else, try again. She decided to write a *concours* – the entrance exam into the public service in Cameroon, which would enable her to have a stable source of income[20]. However, she failed the exams. With some money she received from her father, she was able to start a new master's programme in environmental science in Yaoundé, after she had given up her master's in Geology. She could stay at a friend's family home. Disappointed by the father of her children and pressured by her parents, she had to find another source of strength to carry on, which was religion. The church community was a social network which gave her hope, social security and a new perspective. God would take care of her future if only she follows his guideline (See Figure 7 and Figure 8). The other support system, which she developed over the past ten years, was her private social network (e.g., friends and people she encounters in her day-to-day life). Having failed in getting employment in the public sector, she turned to the private sector. To get jobs in the private sector, it is useful to have a well-established network of social relations. Being well aware of this, Stacey, who was good at making new friends, began talking to people and thus expanded her own social network at every opportunity. It became an essential strategy for her future-making. This was apparent in most of the conversations we had: "I am that personality who keeps relationships and friendships due to beneficiaries in the future." (Stacey, 26.04.19). She has engaged in different projects and business-ideas with friends, even though the majority of those projects eventually led to a dead end. By helping friends and being offered help, by engaging with different kinds of people from diverse professions, she has the ability to increase her social capital and the possibility of new emerging future horizons. Not long after she broke up with her boyfriend, it

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[20] The majority of young Cameroonians dreams of working in the public sector due to the relatively good pay and – even more importantly – a stable and secure income. Unlike the private sector, social benefits and a permanent job position makes the public sector an attractive target for young people which promises social security and hence certainty.

seemed like her prayers were heard. She got into an internship at an international NGO, called "World Vegetable Centre". It was well paid and was the type of work she wanted to get involved with on a long-term basis. It even gave her the opportunity to travel to Tanzania, for training:

> "Things were fine. I had money to take care of myself, take care of my children. And my parents too were satisfied. They were like, "okay something good is coming out from your life". Because they [the organization] sponsored a training programme in Tanzania on qualitative research. So, we went. And I knew if I come back, my parents are also happy. You have pictures to show and you know that wow, there is something good coming out of your life. […] So, they were relieved." (Stacey, 26.04.19)

The internship ended after six months, and even though it was prolonged for another two months, it ultimately ended. She had to start looking for other job opportunities again and make ends meet with her "small small business"[21].

Today, Stacey lives together with her two daughters, who are still going to primary school, and her fourteen-year-old stepsister, who is helping her out at home. She is still looking for a stable job and a husband. They live in a good and sophisticated neighborhood of Yaoundé. Living in this particular neighborhood was a deliberate choice:

> "So, when I was looking for a house... It's not that my house is expensive, but I want an environment that made me not stay poor. […] It inspires me to work hard. And the image that my children see, it will help them to not see themselves low. Because I want to work on their image. Yes, my house is behind there… But when they leave, they see bigger houses." (Stacey, 26.04.19)

In order to get to Stacey's apartment, one has to walk a small pathway that runs behind houses and several compounds. The apartment itself is small and very plain. Walking everyday through this middle-class neighborhood where respected people such as high-level government officials live, shall give her children and herself an image of success – a success that is yet to come. For the same reason, she put her children into an expensive private school instead of a public school, so that they would be surrounded by other children from a wealthy background. To complete this image, Stacey always dresses in a very fancy way which gives her an aura of success and confidence. She told me that she did not have to buy those kinds of dresses as she mostly gets them from friends. She makes sure that her daughters know as little as possible about her economic struggles, which is not always easy to hide, especially on days when there is not even food in the house.

She is constantly trying to make ends meet by taking any promising job opportunity that she can. Whenever she sees a job opportunity that suits her expectations, which are

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[21] Local expression for informal business, such as selling food or fabrics on the street or on the market

mostly short-term contracts she encounters through her social network, she goes for it without hesitation. But those jobs are hard to find and most often, she ends up just doing her "small business", such as selling fabrics or baked cakes. The scarcity of job opportunities leaves her with few choices, but to recognize and seize opportunities as they come while praying and preparing for an unknown future for herself and her children.

Figure 7: A practical daily guideline and devotional booklet with prayers; September 2018. © Dana Harms
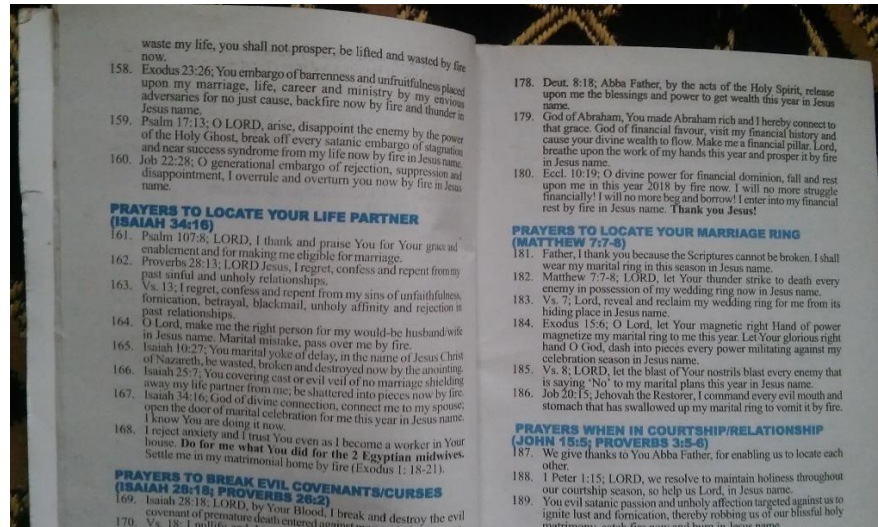
Figure 8: Prayers for various different occasions in life; September 2018. © Dana Harms

3.1 Reducing Uncertainty Through Future-orientated Investments

From dependence to interdependence

Stacey learned to be responsible for others from an early age on. It was later, when she also learned to be responsible for herself, for her own life and future. She was not able to fulfil her parent's expectations and become a medical doctor, so she went along with the opportunities that presented themselves to her, according to the theory of judicious opportunism. The disappointment of her parents to her bumpy and not straight forward path did not make it easier for her. Two unexpected pregnancies, an uncommitted boyfriend and a father who pressured her to be successful, made life more difficult as she depended on these people for support. She felt trapped and without any prospects for the future. Nothing was moving forward and there was no future horizon in sight. She found herself at a turning point in her life, in a vital conjecture, where she was stuck in the present and forced to take a decision that

would change her life either one way or the other. She decided against passiveness and became active again. She took her destiny into her own hands and worked towards a brighter future - for herself and her children:

> "After staying there, they were asking me "what do you want to do with your life?" Because it was not easy there also. […] You see yourself getting up in the morning, you don't have a programme of your own. Day in and day out… You are there with two children, you are not working. Who is sponsoring and all of that? So, I decided that I go back to school. It was better to leave and try something. Not just stay." (Stacey 26.04.19).

This was the moment when she could not take it anymore and decided instead of just passively reacting to what was happening to her, she would actively engage and start working towards a future she wanted to see and live. As a single mother, she needed a stable income in order to become more independent than ever. But things do not just happen or come along when she needed them to. And so, to her disappointment, she did not get into the professional training that would have given her the opportunity to earn a steady income in the public sector. Her father had to re-enter her life and support her financially so that she could start another master's programme in environmental science. It was the only opportunity to break out of her current state of hopelessness. She had to actively invest in her future and this did not seem to be possible without the assistance of her family.

Stacey was dependent on her father - and partly her boyfriend - for most of the time. Nowadays, she is independent of her parents, as she told me, and she is single. Expectations are still there nevertheless.

> "I know the expectations are there. But it cannot be that intense on my mother's side because she didn't really put in into my education. […] My dad has paid my school fees, taken care of my feeding, every other thing. So, on my mother's side, she has expectations, but it cannot really come out with so much authority. Unlike my dad, at some point he might call and say "what are you doing now?"" (Stacey, 27.04.19)

This quote illustrates that demands can only be made when (economic) support has been flowing. Being able to make demands due to earlier investments into the future of the offspring suggests to have power and to have a say in their decision-making. Whether this say is being accepted and the decision-making is being subordinated to their will cannot be taken for granted and can lead to conflict and dispute. Stacey is aware of her parent's expectations, but she has learned to live with them without being bothered by them too much. Stacey's parents might equally depend on Stacey's success in the future and therefore put pressure on her. It is taken for granted that they will profit from her success too.

With time, Stacey has learned how to navigate through life without being dependent on anyone (such as her father or her ex-boyfriend). Instead, she takes any small job opportunity to get along and at the same time she invests in her future by engaging in a diverse circle of social relations and surrounding herself and her children with an aura of success and wealth. This strategy mitigates dependence and to a certain extend it also reduces uncertainty in her life because she prepares and plans for all eventualities.

Stacey's short-term and long-term objectives

Concerning the future, Stacey differentiates between short-term and long-term objectives. Her short-term objectives are rather urgent and need to be realized as soon as possible. The long-term objectives are less pressing and can be realized in the distant future. In our first interview, she told me about the following three short term objectives which need to be realized simultaneously: the first objective she named was *a stable income,* which would guarantee her social security. She would be less dependent on her parents as well as other social relationships and have more personal freedom. It would enable her to take better care of her children (economically) and fulfil the expectations of her father by letting them partake in her new affluence and thus re-establishing the balance of reciprocity by finally giving back the support she once received from them. *To get married* is another important short-term objective for Stacey. Firstly, it would ensure some social and emotional security. Marriage would give her an assurance to a stable and serious relationship and therefore a lasting support from her spouse for herself and her daughters. Secondly, it would raise her symbolic capital and thus her social status. A married woman, especially one with children, has a higher social recognition than an unmarried one. She would be taken more serious by her parents and by society in general. Marriage is one of the determent factors in Cameroon which indicates that someone is an adult and not a youth anymore (Christiansen at al. 2006, Vigh 2006: 31-60). Stacey sees marriage as the only valid form of romantic engagement, which can be related to her past experiences. Therefore, she condemns any other kind of relationship and only gets into a serious relationship with someone if that person shows his dedication and willingness to commit: "If we are getting together, it's based on concrete decisions; we are getting together because it's for the future. And we need to plan for this, and there is marriage and things like that." (Stacey 26.04.2019). Stacey longs for certainty and that permeates all domains of her life. She has learned to take certain steps and avoid others in order to reduce new contingencies and potential uncertainties, such as a boyfriend who is not ready to commit.

Marriage as an objective is also part of the strict guidelines of the Bible that she follows. Religious guidelines to which she can simply act accordingly propose a stable component in her life, which is otherwise dominated by arbitrariness and volatility and therefore gives her a sense of social security (see Leutloff-Grandits et al. 2009). By praying and going to church Stacey is actually doing something in order to move forward. When everything seems hopeless and there is no future horizon in sight, what is left is to have a positive mindset, to pray and to act according to God's will. Therefore, her third short term objective is to *invest more into her church community* in order to give back some of the (mental and spiritual) support she has been receiving and to prove her dedication to the church community. The head of her church (a "prophet"), plays a key-role in her religious activities and support system. He is celebrated like a superstar and together with his wife, who has a doctoral degree as Stacey devoutly told me, they represent a successful couple (see Figure 8). Both of them seem to pose a role model figure within the community and their word has a lot of weight (Fieldnotes 5.8.18). This became evident to me in several situations. For example, Stacey used a photo of the "prophet" as the screensaver of her computer. This suggests that his persona and what he stands for is of great importance for her and probably reminds her on what she wants to achieve and how to act accordingly to get there.

Her long-term objectives have far less priority in her life at the moment. She told me that she would like to eventually get a PhD. Furthermore, she would like to either work for an international organization or create her own flowing and unique business. These are vague dreams without any concrete attachments. Her current situation does not really permit her to focus on such dreams. She has to be focused on the today in order to have a tomorrow – not to speak of next week or next month. Her agency is therefore dominated by an attentive and foresightful grabbing of any promising opportunity in sight while carefully preparing for her future.

Figure 9: Advertisement for a service
event with "the prophets".

The importance of future orientated investments when being stuck in the present

Within the years, Stacey seemed to realize that she had to adopt another strategy to cope and to move forward, a more future-orientated strategy. If she wanted to be successful in the future, she had to invest actively into the present and hence act in order to be able to keep acting (Macamo 2017: 186). Instead of being passive and just hoping for things to get better or change eventually, Stacey focused on investing into the future and carefully planning for it while remaining attentive to any opportunity that might come up. In order to be able to do so and to establish some degree of independence, she had to draw on her social relations. It is her social relations which give her hope when no other support is available. It remains the most important source of support to restore some degree of social security (Benda-Beckmann 2007: 9) and enable her to invest in the future, and therefore actively shape it. Stacey invested mainly into three realms of her life: her *social relations* and personal networks, her *prestige and status* and her *children's upbringing*. In the following section, I will elaborate on this in detail.

1) *Investing in social relations (social capital)*

Social capital becomes vital when job opportunities become scarce, and the welfare system of the state fails to provide social security. Knowing many people of power from diverse professional backgrounds means having many potential (job-) opportunities in the future. Opportunities in the labor market increase when one has a more diverse network of social

relations. Accordingly, established relationships are most effective and useful when they exist in quality, quantity and variation. If that is given, they can provide a sense of social security for an individual. The price for the mitigation of insecurity in the present is a constant investment into social networks and relationships by offering help and talking to people. Consequently, the more an individual invests into a diversified network of social relations, the less dependent it is on specific relationships, which might eventually turn into rather demanding and trying relationships, as in Stacey's case; her parents expect economic and symbolic capital from her for having invested into her future. Apart from a short period in which she completed an internship for an international organization, Stacey can barely make a living for herself, not to mention her children. Consequently, the relationship with her parents is ambivalent and tense. She must rely on other relationships, too. It can be concluded that in an environment which is informed by uncertainty, social relations always bear a contingent and ambivalent aspect: they pose the most important source of support, but it's a capricious support which can sometimes backfire and hence produce new risks and uncertainties. As Bledsoe states "A sense of vulnerability applies even to intimate social relations, despite the security these relations appear to offer." (2002: 21). To reduce the contingency on the own social network, one must invest into as many relationships as possible and therefore reduce the dependency on specific ones, such as the parents, a partner or a specific friend. Stacey receives different kinds of support from friends; some give her beautiful dresses, another one made her aware of an online-programme which was designed to help to "plan for the future", and others again send her job-opportunities or even ask to work with her directly. In order to keep the balance between giving and receiving she constantly tries to support and give back when it seems reasonable and possible. That can happen through the passing on of interesting job-opportunities which are not fitting for herself or other related favors. Uncertainty permeates the way of knowing and planning: Stacey navigates carefully through life and makes use of her social relations to mitigate insecurity and invest into her future.

   2) *Investing in status and prestige (symbolic capital)*

Another tactic Stacey incorporated to manifest the future that she desires is to create an aura of success around herself and her children; she lives in a fancy and expensive neighborhood where mostly prosperous people live. Her own apartment is small and impossible to find by chance. Nevertheless, she and her daughters walk through this fancy neighborhood every day with the intent of giving them a feeling of elatedness. It is a way of manifesting the image

she wants to achieve in the future. For the same reason, she decided to send her children to a private school instead of a public school:

> "The school that they go to is expensive, it's a private school. They meet with rich friends. […] It's a place of high standard. So, I want them to incorporate that image. And me too. I might not be responsible to what happened to me when I was a child or the family that I was born into, but I have to be responsible to how my live will be." (Stacey 26.04.19)

It is common in certain parts of Cameroon to speak of expected events as if they have already happened, once they are already "in progress" (Johnson Hanks 2005: 367). For example, I was called "Doctor", simply because I was conducting research and pursuing an academic career and it is thus assumed that I will get my doctoral degree eventually. When being in a relationship with someone, one could be called by the partner's surname already since one is potentially in the process of getting married (ibid). It is logical for Stacey to manifest her future- vision of being a successful and affluent lady by wearing fancy dresses and living in a wealthy neighborhood and thus pretending to have already achieved this status. That way, she has started the process of getting where she wants to be in life already and is actively (but indirectly) approaching her aspired future.

3) Investing into the children's future

The third important strategy that Stacey uses in order to make a future is to invest into her children's future, from which she could eventually benefit herself. Sending them to a good private school despite a lack of financial resources is a sacrifice she is ready to make. There are days, when there is not even food on the table when the children come home and there are times when she has to bargain a special deal with the headmaster of her daughters' school for them to remain in school despite her inability to pay the fees directly. But she is trying her best to keep her economic struggles from her children. If they are not aware of their financial difficulties, it allows them to grow up without worries and it might help them to overcome the state of being poor and have a better future ahead, Stacey told me. She wants them to grow up differently than herself. Stacey told me that she was already planning their future concretely. She does that by observing them and seeing what kind of passion they show because she does not want to impose on them as her parents imposed on her. She wants to do things better:

> "I am really planning their future. Like for this [coming] holidays… Last year, they went to my parent's place. So, when they are there, they just play […] But this year, I want them to stay and learn their notes, learn the keyboard piano […] So, with that, it will also build their self-confidence, because they

love music. […] What I would like them to become is what they are already manifesting." (Stacey 26.04.19)

Stacey knows that one should not sit and wait until the children are about to finish secondary school. One should plan their future early and choose good schools and universities for them. Because she wants the best chances for her daughters, she would like them to study in Great Britain, or at least abroad, as this adds to their professional and social status (see Alpes 2011). She has already checked the options for a scholarship and looked up the application procedure even though they haven't even finished primary school. Planning and investing into the children's future is a natural and self-evident act of a mother. But it can also be a more indirect way of planning for her own future and reducing uncertainty in her life. If her children will be successful, she will surely profit from this success in one way or the other. At the very least it will mitigate the uncertainty in her life as she will know that her children will be well off.

To sum up

Stacey uses a combination of thoughtful reasoning and social investments to approach her future horizons and demonstrates flexibility and openness to whatever comes along in order to make a future. She remains attentive towards any opportunities that arise, mostly through her social network, and therefore acts according to Johnson Hanks concept of judicious opportunism. But it's not enough for her to stay alert, since she has certain expectations and responsibilities to fulfil. Therefore, she adopted a strategy of foresighted planning, reasoning and investing into her future within the realm that is possible for her. Her social relations were at times harmful and strenuous and in other times supportive and played a major role in her future-making.

In the next section, I will introduce Christina, an independent and quite successful young woman. Her story contrasts Stacey's much more conflicted life trajectory and gives insights on the cognitive and social dimensions of future-making when more social security is given.

4. Preparing for Various Future Horizons: Christina

Christina is a thirty-three-year-old woman from the Anglophone region of Cameroon. She is the mother of two girls and shares her home with her younger brother's three children, who

remained in the village where they grew up. Their mother passed away, so it is now up to her to take care of the children. Christina is not married and had no boyfriend at the time of our encounter. She is a determined and self-confident woman who seems to stand with both feet on the ground. She is working as a diplomate at the ministry of external relations and hence has a professional title she is admired and respected for. Her job in the public sector guarantees her a stable income and a certain degree of temporal flexibility. It allows her to dedicate some of her time to her mother's role, which is often difficult for career women. Though she already has a master's degree in international law, a post-graduate diploma in international relations from IRIC (International Relation Institute of Cameroon) and a job as a diplomat, she still longs for more; she wants to build on her career and become a renowned female diplomat which is very rare in Cameroon (Fieldnotes 22.08.2018). At the same time, she aims to finalize her PhD which she registered for two years ago. What constrains her from realizing her plans is a lack of financial means and her social responsibilities towards her mother, her own children and the children of her brother: "It's around two years now. But as I can tell you, to be sincere, my work has not advanced because of lack of finance. Because the workload now is really much on me and at times… It's not easy. To handle family, bookwork and the extended family." (Christina, 21.09.18). A job in the public sector is popular for those who seek social security, but the payment, which is better than for most private sector jobs in Cameroon, is less than the earnings from international jobs. International jobs are the most difficult to get and require very high qualifications and specialisation. In Christina's case, it was her various social responsibilities that pushed her to try her chances in the labour market of the public sector, which in turn gave her the stable income she needed. In order to fully comprehend her decisions and her attitude, it is helpful to look at her family background and her past experiences: Christina grew up in a small village in the Anglophone region of Cameroon. Her father, who was a policeman, passed away after she completed secondary school. That same year she became pregnant. Christina told me that this pregnancy was not planned or desired at the time. The father of the unborn, who was a student himself, feared the consequences and punishment of both of their parents and decided to leave Christina on her own during her pregnancy. Her mother, a farmer, had no financial means to support her. This left Christina with no choice; she had to drop out of school and stay at home for two years. She did not want to burden her mother who was, like herself, a single parent, more than it was necessary. So, Christina resorted to working very hard, doing menial jobs, to make ends meet. Since there were no prospects in the village, she moved to Buea, a small town in the south west, where her father owned a house that she could live in. In Buea, she sold dresses, sheets

and female underwear on the street and in shops. Sixteen years old, at the time, Christina learned at an early age to be responsible and that the responsibility came with others depending on her. She realized that she had to do whatever it takes to move forward in order to meet her family's expectations and needs, which lay all on her:

> "So, after two years I have raised a bit of money and I decided to go back to school. So, I went to school. [pause] So, to be sincere, I have never been to lower sixth[22] because I went back to school and even in school it was not a day-school. Yeah, because I had to get up in the morning, go, move around and do my business, see how I can raise some money, because I was taking care of my mom, taking care of my child and at the same time taking care of my junior brother. So, I had to do everything at once. After that, I had my advanced level. And when I had my advanced level and when I saved some money, that is when I told my mother that I want to further my education. Yes, and I discussed it with her because I wanted her to support me like… If I cannot pay my fees, then she should be able to give me foodstuff. So, from time to time she could send me some food from the village. I could pay my rent; I could pay my fees." (Christina, 21.09.18)

Christina, who had a lot of responsibility and social obligations towards her kin, was at the same time profiting from those kin relations when it was possible. The fact that she wanted her mother's blessing to further her education indicates that she was aware of the reciprocal character of the social responsibilities she was involved in. Her pathway finally led her to Yaoundé, because the University in Buea (the town where she lived) only accepted her for Environmental Science, which was not of interest to her. Instead, she started to study law in Yaoundé, as she had always dreamt of. Meanwhile, her daughter lived with her cousin in Yaoundé. She shared a cheap apartment with two other students and lived from the food supply her mother sent her from time to time from the village. That way she had little expenses and could live from the money she had put aside the last few years. What was most expensive were the school fees for her daughter. She sent her to a private school instead of a public school in order to provide her with the best education possible. After receiving a *matrice*[23] in business-law, her financial savings were nearly finished, so it was time to look for a job. Together with a friend, who was in the same situation, she went to drop her CV in different firms and institutions. With their combined knowledge, they could identify many more possible job opportunities than would otherwise be the case. After a while, Christina

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[22] Cameroon has two separate educational systems, divided between Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon. High school in the Anglophone system takes two years. The first year, is "lower sixth", while the second year is "upper sixth". After the second year, one has to pass the A-level exams, which are needed to meet the university entrance requirements. Since Christina had to work during the day, she took some preparatory classes for one year in an intensive evening school.

[23] In Francophone Cameroon, a master's degree composes two independent parts: one theoretical part, masters one (*matrice*), and masters two, a practical part in which research is carried out and a final thesis is written.

managed to get a well-paid job in a call-center. The contract should last for four months. With the money she saved while working there, she was able to register for her *Master Two*. When she had finished and validated all her courses, her employer at the call center called again to employ her for another four months. She gladly accepted the offer. Just as before, the saved money enabled her to finish her research for her master's thesis. Christina told me, that there was one lecturer who strongly encouraged her to continue with her education. He told her that she had the potential to do a PhD and become a lecturer. She has always liked teaching and was flattered and motivated by the teacher's encouragement. After the contract with the call-center ran out, she was offered some small assistance work by her lecturer at the university. Since there was no better option in prospect, she accepted the offer. Who knows what doors would open next? The lecturer gave her some small tips, as she recalled. With the little money she had saved up, she was now able to open the next promising door that presented itself to her. A *concours* from IRIC was launched and she decided to take it:

> "I needed to have a permanent job, for the sake of my mother, my daughter and my brother. You see? And then secondly, because I knew having a job, if I want to follow my education, I don't have any problem. Because from the job I can pay my fees now. If I want to do my PhD, I can be able to buy a book for myself, I can be able to go and do some research, because research entails spending money. So, those were the reasons why I decided to write a concours." (Christina, 21.09.18)

The past jobs she had done were enabling her to save some money and go forward, but they were only temporary and thus did not give her the security she needed in order to fulfil her responsibilities towards her family. A job in the public sector was going to change that. And she succeeded. That was also the moment, when she decided that it was time to settle down and create her own family. At the time, she was with someone, who claimed to be a lawyer and thus seemed to be a possible pathway to a promising future horizon. It was only after she got pregnant again that she found out that he had deceived her and was in reality unemployed. That was the end of the relationship. She decided the best option was to take all the responsibilities and workload solely on her, as she did not want a partner who was dishonest and dependent on her. She said: "Let me just pay my bills and see what the future has reserved for me." (Christina, 21.09.18).

4.1 "To know where you go, you must know where you come from": Social Investments and the Seizing of Promising Opportunities

How Christina's family background shapes her reasoning and her priorities

Christina's family background and her early experiences in life, such as the loss of her father which coincided with an unplanned pregnancy, clearly had a big impact on the choices she made later in life, as well as the way she reasoned. She learned to be responsible from an early age and experienced indirectly social pressure to fulfil her obligations towards her kin. She repeatedly told me: "To know where you go, you must know where you come from" (Focus Group Discussion 22.08.2018). For Christina, the experience of growing up in a polygamous, rather destitute household – which she had to take care of instead of receiving financial support from – was the main driving force to focus and long for something else, something better, not just for herself, but also for her children, so that they are provided with a solid foundation.

> "I can say that whatever thing I am doing; I always think of where I am coming from [repetition]. You see? That is why I am looking at my family setting. I came to realize that my parents, just like my father's siblings and my mother's siblings, they did not actually invest in education. You understand? So, these things have actually shaped the way I behave […] and the kind of decisions I take. That is why one of my priorities now is to invest in my family. To bring them to a certain level, where I can be proud that tomorrow, if you come to my family, you will meet a lawyer, you will meet a magistrate, you will meet a doctor, you understand? So, families like, if you go there, everybody has a title. Everybody has a position. And together they grow and do big things. You understand? […] There are some things that I don't take into considerations. Because if you look at me now, I'm a diplomate since four years, I don't have a car. I don't have a house. Because I think that my main priority now is to invest into the education of my children." (Christina, 21.09.18)

There are several interesting points raised in this quote that illustrate Christina's way of reasoning and approaching the future. For Christina, to have a place in society can solely be achieved through a "title", a certificate that enables one to "do big things". The fact that she prioritizes to invest in the future of her children suggests that she will eventually benefit from this investment, one way or another. Her children will depend less on her and will be able to compensate for what she, and the rest of her family, were not able to fully achieve. They will thus add to her social standing. To have a social and kinship network that is socially and financially potent reduces social contingencies to a certain extent and is thus worth investing in. Though, it needs to be stressed, that the investment in the future of her children being her main priority, does not mean she is giving up her own career. She equally forges opportunities

that she can benefit from. For example, she told me that she had applied for a diplomat training abroad, in which she had already invested money. Unfortunately, this pathway became a dead-end a few months later, as she was not granted the necessary visa to travel.

Combining foresighted planning and judicious opportunism as a strategy to cope with uncertainty

Regarding Christina's life trajectory, her own parents were not able to provide her with adequate financial capital, nor did they seem to see the relevance of motivating her to follow up on an academic career. This is rather unusual these days in Cameroon. According to my research, the most promising strategy for parents is to invest in their children's education and to motivate them to follow up on an academic career. A good education is significant for an individual's social standing in society.[24] In Cameroon, a high academic degree has a value in itself and is more than just a guarantee for a secure income, as people describe it. But Christina's case was different since her mother could not support her financially, nor motivate her mentally to follow up an academic career; she had to achieve everything by herself, as she proudly recalled. Her situation, which required a lot of responsibility, demanded the use of different strategies which address both, the near and distant future at the same time. She learned that taking any promising opportunity that presents itself to her, and thus to act according to the theory of judicious opportunism, and at the same time keep track and focus on the distant future by saving resources and investing them in potential future horizons – in her case education – is what works best. Consequently, she makes use of both, short- and long-term planning strategies. Instead of envisioning one particular future horizon, she stays flexible and has many different visions concerning her own future in mind; she is working on her PhD, to become a lecturer while still investing into her career as a diplomat by applying for training programmes abroad to become a renowned female diplomat, which is rare in Cameroon because the key-positions are usually taken by men. She also dreams of working for the UN. Her ways of approaching the future address different temporal future horizons simultaneously and entail both, opportunistic and foresighted planning. To work towards her PhD and to invest into her children's education can be identified as long-term planning strategies and demonstrate her engagement with the distant future. At the same time, she is constantly looking for opportunities in the present, such as training programmes abroad,

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[24] Since this research only focused on young educated Cameroonians, other alternative pathways which lead to success and a high social standing have been left out in this thesis. To name one, the concept of *Feymen*, which can be described as young professional swindlers and successful urban tricksters (Ndijo Basil 2006), constitutes another promising alternative for young people who try to make a future in Cameroon.

which confirms the theory of judicious opportunism but can be seen as an investment into the future at the same time. Looking at her life trajectory indicates that she uses this combination of strategies ever since she lost her father and became a mother herself. She had goals in mind which she invested in, but always stayed flexible and seized promising opportunities, such as the job at the call center or her training at IRIC. The investment into her educational pathways has already paid off:

> "That's why I tell my friends that this going to IRIC, for me is just like a stepping stone. It's just like an open door. Through this platform, I can be able to meet some kind of people. For example, meeting you now. Because if I was not a diplomate, Dr. Aliou would not have brought you to my office. You see? I would not have the privilege to have you in my home. Thanks to the title that I'm having! You understand? So, it can actually... It is really helping me [repetition] because [pause] when you stand somewhere and you tell people: I am a diplomat, they look at you and they are like "this is a big man. You are a great woman". But it's just a name. In Cameroon here, it's just a name." (Christina 21.09.18)

When talking about "some kind of people" that she meets due to her job as a diplomat, she means people that have a certain social standing, a position of power, which she possibly could profit from. For her, going to IRIC served two purposes: firstly, it would lay the ground for a job in the public sector which guarantees her a stable income and hence allow her to take care of her family. Secondly, it serves as a "stepping-stone" for her to get closer to her distant future horizons. She is able to meet people of power, who constitute social capital and thus can open up new opportunities for her. However, Christina stresses that ultimately a title is just a name. It does not necessarily come along with affluence, but it can certainly help to establish some social security.

To sum up

Christina's story illustrates that due to her family background, her social position and her stable economic standing, she focuses on investing into her children's education and thus engages in coherent planning while still being attentive and open to any promising opportunity that reveals itself to her, which correlates to the theory of judicious opportunism. The humble background that she comes from has motivated her to aspire "more" from an early age on. The relative social security (a stable income and a high social standing) she has already established for herself allows her to focus on her long-term objectives and to approach the future in a foresightful anticipatory way. In the next section I will present the case study of a young man, who seems to have become a successful person. But at what price? And what does success really mean in urban Cameroon?

5. Be(com)ing a Provider and a Role Model: Stanley

I met Stanley and his wife Audrey within the first week of my second visit to Cameroon in early 2019. I was supposed to work with them for the next four months in the local grassroots NGO they founded a couple of years back. The young couple and their three children had just arrived recently to Yaoundé, as they had to leave their hometown in the north west of Cameroon due to the ongoing Anglophone crisis. They proudly presented me their new to-be office which was still lacking furniture. Not long after that first encounter the office was ready and we started working together on a daily basis. I was invited several times to their house and taken along different kinds of social events they were invited to. We became good friends and I got to know the young couple as kind, goodhearted people that were incredibly dedicated to their work: the upbringing of their NGO. They persisted to sacrifice everything they had to ensure the successful establishment of the NGO; a future pathway that seemed promising enough. With me on the team, they hoped for a better access to funding. In Cameroon, there are NGOs involved in fraud and misuse of funds which makes it more difficult for sincere organisations to get better funding opportunities from international sponsors, according to the couple. I was impressed by the unshakable optimism with which Stanley started every day. No matter how little reaction came from international sponsors, Stanley was always confident. "It will come!" he insisted undeterred.

Stanley, 36 years old at the time I met him, did not have an easy journey through life. He had to fight for most of the things he had achieved. Today, he is a respected member of his community, a caring husband, a responsible family father with a master's degree in law, a professional certificate as a technical high school teacher and he is the executive manager of an NGO he and his wife are running. The support from his own family and the family of his wife played an important role in his "success story". It was the first thing he started talking about in our interview:

> "I want to say my family supported me so much and my wife's family gave me a lot of encouragement
> – both financially, materially and morally. They did all of that to see that I become a successful person.
> And I am proud today that I can say I am a young successful Cameroonian." (Stanley, 18.06.19)

Stanley comes from a rather destitute and humble family background. His parents were both farmers and he was the youngest in a family of seven children. He told me that he received a lot of support from his elder siblings, but sadly, two of his brothers, who were very supportive of him, passed away in 2004 and 2005. His father followed not long after: "Unfortunately, my father died in 2009, the same day when I had my degree […]. So, unfortunately, my father

died without actually enjoying anything from me." (Stanley, 18.06.19). Luckily, Stanley had an uncle who decided to support him and helped him out along the way, "to see that I become a successful person", as Stanley narrated. His uncle, to whom I was once introduced, was already a "big man"; he is a PhD holder from the University of Boston, works as a university lecturer and is the vice chancellor of the American University in Cameroon, in Yaoundé Campus. Besides that, he is also a pastor. Hence, he is a man who has "made it" and who can now uplift others. He posed as a role model and a guide for Stanley in his early years. Soon enough, Stanley was also convinced to pursue an academic career. But before that, he was aspiring to become a journalist. Ambitious as he was, he started to prepare for this career choice when he was still in secondary school. He joined the journalism club in school and was even made their president. During youth week events he worked for CRTV (the main national radio and television station in Cameroon) and reported events live on the radio. It seemed like he was on a good and solid pathway to success, but something stopped him from pursuing this future-horizon further. Stanley told me about a determining day that made him realize that this career pathway was very likely to lead to a dead end and is not worth pursuing any longer: when he was still in secondary school, he participated in a programme from CRTV in which a journalist gave a talk about the not so promising prospect of this career pathway. While in the "old days", when they were growing up, it was a solid career in which one could be certain to get a good position at CRTV after joining the school of journalism, today it has all changed for the worse. One does not get so easily into such a school anymore or find a job in this position, no matter how many journalism clubs one has joined in the past. That lingered in Stanley's mind. After secondary school he had to make the important decision on how to continue. Some of his friends encouraged him to study economics or law, which brought him back to his childhood dream, which was to become a lawyer. Emboldened by one friend he enrolled in law and never regretted this choice as he proudly tells me. The new future horizon he was envisioning brought him together with his present wife, Audrey. They were university lovers Stanley recalls, and eventually became serious. Instead of pursuing a career as a magistrate or anything related after his first degree, he wrote a *concours* to get into a professional teacher training for office automation:

> "Because after my degree I actually wanted to work. I dropped a number of applications here and there. But no one would call you. Not because I was not qualified, but because of the society. Because of the rules, the norms […] because of the corrupt and tribalistic nature of the system. So, I had to accept it and I thought about it and I said, well at this point in time if I get anything I will go in for [it]. And I will do it. So, teaching is just one of those fields which anyone can think of getting in to. And so, I then went into the teaching." (Stanley, 18.06.19)

While doing his professional training as a teacher, he still decided to continue with his *Master Two*. He was able to carry out his research thanks to the salary he received during the first month of his training as a teacher. That same year, Stanley and Audrey had their first child. Like many things in Stanley's life, this was a conscious decision and not the result of "fate", as some people would describe an unplanned pregnancy. They decided that this was as good as any other time because waiting until one has a good job or enough money can be waiting in vain:

> "Because we realized that if we keep waiting until we are too old, or until we have a lot of money before we get into it, it may not work out very well and we would probably be delaying each other for too long. So, we decided to have the baby." (Stanley, 18.06.19)

After their first child, two more followed and not long after that they got married. It seemed like things were going well: Stanley had a stable job as a teacher while Audrey was raising the children and pursuing her own academic career. The idea of founding an NGO did not come over night. It was planted into Stanley's head during his time in university, when he was exposed to a few NGO's. There, someone told him that he could simply create his own NGO and thus would not have to work for anyone. The idea kept growing in his mind for some time and like every relevant topic relating their future, he would discuss it with Audrey. She liked the idea and started preparing and working toward this future horizon by doing internships in NGO's. Finally, they founded the NGO in 2013 and got it officially registered as such in 2016. Meanwhile, Stanley was still working as a teacher and with a small source of income from a property Audrey's family inherited, they were able to build up the organization bit by bit. In 2017 and 2018 the Anglophone crisis in the North West region of Cameroon intensified and they were suddenly confronted with a new challenging and uncertain future. The moment when Stanley and his family got threatened and blackmailed, they decided to leave their hometown and search for safer grounds. They came to Yaoundé in the winter of 2018, not long before I came back to Yaoundé as well. With the sudden change, Stanley found himself without his job as a teacher in a new town with a different language. Since he was the one that decided to leave his position as a civil servant in Buea, the government would not provide him with a new position which meant that he would not be able to work in a state school again. Being left with few options, he decided to go all in with his work in the NGO and invest everything into this future horizon. Despite the delicate situation they found themselves in, the couple decided to announce an open job-position for a project-manager. The act of hiring someone to write and execute a successful project for the organization was the hopeful attempt to finally get access to bigger funding Stanley and Audrey kept reading about on the

internet. A funding that would allow the small grassroot organization to grow, produce a solid income and attract more international funders. They decided to try hiring someone despite their own financial difficulties. Without hardly any references or former funded projects, no big international funder would grant them the amounts they were hoping and praying for. So, the decision to hire someone who is well experienced in writing and implementing successful projects was a risk worth taking. Unfortunately, they did not succeed in finding that person, but with all the steps towards professionalization, eventually they managed to get some minor funding, just enough to give them hope and to keep working hard. Stanley, "the successful one", is now at a point in his life in which he already established a certain reputation among his family and his friends. A reputation that needs to be fed in order to be maintained. He tries to balance his work with his duties as the head of his family. However, Stanley has learned how to prioritise his duties and therefore, he rather keeps investing into the future of the NGO instead of wasting too much time and money on keeping up his appearance of a successful person; the risk of ending up with nothing in the long and distant future when losing focus of his future-horizon would be too high.

5.1 The Dilemma of Being Successful and not Being Successful

What it means to follow a role model and to be a role model

It is not easy to figure out how to approach a future that is uncertain and contains so many unknown variables. In the Cameroon context, ideas for future pathways most often come from role models and individuals that young people admire for one reason or the other. Most interviews and informal conversations I had with young well-educated men in Cameroon would circle around one particular topic: social expectations and role models. Such role models can be a father, they can be an uncle – as in Stanley's case – but they can also be a completely unrelated person, a stranger so to say. Stanley's father passed away the day he received his bachelor's degree. His uncle, a highly respected man, became a new father-figure for him and was his role model and guide for the future with all the duties and benefits this role came with. Nevertheless, Stanley could never be the uncle's first priority because he had his own children, he had to take care of and he was faced with financial limitations. Nevertheless, he had a great impact on Stanley's life and his decision-making, as the following quote indicates:

"That [Stanley's uncle] is somebody who has pushed me so much into who I am. He has been my role model, made me to see every reason to push forward with education to the level where I am with my master's degree. And even today he dreams that I get a PhD. More sooner than later. He prays and he always indicates to us and tells us our level. He wants to get us to the PhD." (Stanley, 18.06.19)

Going ahead as a shining example of a successful and admired person, he did not have to put direct pressure on Stanley, who gladly took his advice and followed his example to become a successful role model to others. Still, Stanley comes from a rather underprivileged background and does not take success for granted. He worked hard for it. His humble upbringing and his uncle who saw the potential in him had a crucial impact on his decision-making and the way he reasons. Being put into leadership positions since primary school, he has learned early on that he had to be mature, reasonable, and responsible to be seen by others in that role. Therefore, his main strategy to approach an uncertain future is to weigh his options carefully and always keep in mind his long-term goals. That has not gone unnoticed by his family:

"My family respects me so much, even my uncle. Because he knows that I am someone who reasons so much and that I am mature. So, I won the trust of even my father. Before dying, he made me the next of kin. Do you know what the next of kin is? That's a successor. That's someone to inherit him or to stand for the family. You understand that? So, my father, before dying made me so, instead of my elder siblings. So, that they must always listen to me and hear my advice on anything. That is the role I am playing. Even my uncle, whom I call today my father. […] He considers me first in the family […] He thinks that he has to hear me first before anything. Sometimes I decide and I inform the rest of the family. So, that's the role I play." (Stanley, 18.06.19)

No need to mention that this position and role that he maneuvered himself into is one of great honor and privilege. Many young men are aspiring to have such a status within their family, personal networks and community.

Subsequently, Stanley has become a role model due to two major factors: firstly, he was greatly influenced by a family member, whom he admired and who posed as a role model for him. Naturally, he would like to play the same role in somebody else's life. He worked hard towards becoming a role model for someone else and made that a priority in his life. Secondly, early in his life, he adopted a future-orientated agency which turned to work out for him; he approached every decision with reason and would not act impulsively. Yet, he remained attentive and open towards promising opportunities and would drop future-horizons which suddenly turn out to have slim chances of success, like the future horizon of a journalist.

"I reason before I do": Sacrifices, foresighted flexible planning and mutual support as a route to success

> "When I was young, I have been inspired to become a lawyer. Because in the quarter in our village we had somebody who was studying law in the university. So, each time he comes he would talk about law being such a wonderful field. So, in these early days, I started dreaming that I shall become that lawyer too. And while I was thinking that I was also smart enough to think about another profession what I could become if not a lawyer." (Stanley, 18.06.19)

This quotation demonstrates that Stanley is someone who always has a backup plan and is aware that things can turn out not as planned. Unlike Stacey, who had to learn this lesson much later in university, it seems like he has always been preparing for all eventualities. This suggests that his humble upbringing and the uncertainty in his life had already informed his way of acting early on in inasmuch as he does not take anything for granted and always tries to bring social security, risks and future benefits in to balance with each other.

In secondary school, he got inspired to become a journalist and invested successfully into this potential future horizon. But when he learned from an actual journalist that this was a future horizon with slim chances to success, he decided to abandon it and instead follow the future pathway of a successful and notable lawyer, which was more secure. This career choice seems particularly promising and popular to many young Cameroonians, according to my data. It was by far the most desirable field of studies among my interlocutors. As Christina puts it "I discovered that when you read law you can not only be a lawyer. You can not only be a magistrate. I have discovered that I can become a legal consultant. I can become an international lawyer. I can do international relation. Law has so many openings." (Christina, 21.09.2018). A field of study that is not just limited to one profession is highly attractive and prepares for the needed flexibility in live.

Knowing that at the time the only person who could support Stanley was his uncle, he would not take risks which are based on hopes and dreams. Consequently, planning and reasoning became an indispensable strategy for him. After his first degree in Law, Stanley had difficulties finding a job. Adding up to it, he now had a family to look after and thus there was the urgent need for a stable and good income. To pursue the pathway of a magistrate and keep studying was not an option that he had at the time due to his family obligations and financial constraints. So, instead of going to law school, he decided to enroll in a *concours* to become a professional high school teacher and thus a civil servant. This step would ensure

financial stability and hence social security for his growing family. From there, he was able to continue pursuing his academic career.

Later in life, when he initially got together with his wife Audrey, he gained another source of social support. His wife's family supported him financially and Audrey mentally, such as mutual decision-making. This support went both ways and Audrey would profit from the relationship as much as Stanley, as she recounted. They have been supporting each other in many ways, lifting each other up mentally and financially when it was necessary and have thus formed a deep and respectful relationship in which they seem to appreciate one another: "We complement each other, we are just a push to each other. So, we work together." (Stanley, 18.06.2019). The stability they constructed within their relationship seemed to make it easier to tackle an uncertain future. Instead of leaving their future up to fate, they started to plan and model it carefully together.

Having been displaced due to threat and conflict in the North West region of Cameroon, Stanley was not able to continue working in his profession as a government teacher. He was forced to take another immediate turn. Finding himself in a situation with few options for another kind of income, Stanley put all he had on one card and kept sacrificing everything for the NGO – for the sake of a better future:

> "Sometimes I don't even sleep. Often, I sleep less than 6 hours. I sacrifice just everything. I sacrifice all my salary. I don't bother about dressing so gorgeously and I sacrifice a lot so that everything gets going. […] So, I see a reason why we should sacrifice everything, because if we do so, it will become an organization of international status, and at that time we can have support which can also help us. We can also have a salary which can make us smile again. Which can be able to put us at a particular higher level. So, we sacrifice so that the future can be better, so that we can better serve the community." (Stanley, 18.06.19)

His way of carefully and nuanced reasoning and his flexibility brought him to where he stands today. Sacrifices were an indispensable part of his success story. Stanley knows that in order to keep up with the good reputation and the position he has in his social network, he must manage his resources wisely:

> "I am highly respected; I am always given titles here and there. I am so glad. Its only, what has been putting me down and what has made me to be more reserved this time or for over the past three years or so is the fact that we are building our NGO. It really made me to be more conserved and to be more concerned with the organization because the workload is much more. So, I don't really have a lot of time to interact and interrelate. People are always calling me… Like yesterday a friend from childhood and university saying "wehh you are missing. I said: "I am so busy […]"" (Stanley, 18.06.19)

Instead of investing into his social network and meeting up with friends, he rather focuses on working for his organization because the risk of it not to bear fruits if he does not solely focus on it is too high. He needs to balance and manage his activities wisely and differentiate between social duties and simple socializing. His tactic of sacrificing is a vital part of his foresighted planning strategy to tackle an uncertain future.

Aspiring symbolic capital: The social meaning of titles and certificates

Stanley knew from his uncle that it was important to go as high as possible in the education sector. This would increase his reputation and possibly open more and better (job-) opportunities for him in the future. It also seemed to be the decision his friends and family expected him to make. His family, especially his uncle noticed how he excelled in secondary school and he pushed him hard to become a highly educated and successful person with a PhD, in the best-case scenario. The kind of function and effect a title, such as a PhD, has is well captured in the following quotation:

> "First of all, it is very clear that someone who has a PhD, even in a village meeting, is highly respected. (…) So, whenever they speak, they may be in a meeting and everybody has spoken, once the doctor, or once the title holder speaks it is like: Let's consider what the doctor has said because he has more knowledge, he has more insight, he has more exposure then all the other people who have spoken. So, I think certificate acquisition in Cameroon has something to do with status, has something to do with my position in the society. The position I want to gain in the society. […] It's the same with me. Today, when I am in the society, or when I am talking in my community, they respect me because they know I have gone a little higher than the ordinary. (Stanley, 18.06.19)

Certificates and titles, such as a PhD, are not just seen as a straight gateway to a good job, but they bear a value in itself. They make an ordinary member of a community a highly respected member whose voice counts more than others and whose presence is always desired and appreciated. It serves as cultural capital which can be passed on to the next generation and/or be transferred into economic capital (Bourdieu 2012). Titles and certificates are part of status acquisition and are seen as a desirable gateway to a successful and shiny future-horizon.

Two sides of the same coin: A privilege and a burden

But a title alone does not do the trick. Success must be visible, either through a fancy and elegant wardrobe, other material symbols of success, constant and determined hard work and most importantly – the obvious results of hard work: economic capital, which allows to share

and distribute the wealth and to "show off". It was notable that Audrey would always make sure to wear fancy dresses in the office and get a new hairstyle at least every month – a clear sign for prestige. As for Stanley, who does not care as much about visible success but rather convinces through his talking and decision-making, he has already achieved a position he is being worshiped for:

> "I can be a role-model to somebody who can become a better person because they talked with me […] or because they followed my footpath. […] That one was a situation that occurred when I was vice president of my student teachers' body in a village. […] Whenever I spoke, everybody would shut up and everybody was silent and wanted to know what the vice president had said." (Stanley, 18.06.2019)

The constant mentioning and stressing of his success since primary school indicates that he is very proud of the position that he acquired through hard work and determination. Even though this brings him a lot of advantages, it comes with a price. Being the only one in his family who went to university, he is charged with a heavy burden: the role of a provider. As much as he would like to fulfil these expectations, these days, he finds himself in a situation that does not allow him to:

> "As for responsibility, I have a huge responsibility, given that I am the only one in my house amongst my siblings who has been to university and has a government job and is doing something officially. I have a lot of pressure from all of them because their children whom some today are in the university, they look up to me as their role model and as a role model you have to support them financially, you have to oversee that they are comfortable that they are going to school very well. So, unfortunately at the moment I am not able to play that role because I have been concentrating so much effort into our organization." (Stanley, 18.06.19)

Stanley has been on the "track to success" since secondary school when he started to join journalism clubs and become involved in leadership positions. With every step he has taken ever since, he has improved his reputation. However, with a better reputation - the expectations from others on him increased. On the one hand, he is expected to become even more successful in the future, but on the other, he is expected to play the role of a successful provider, who looks after his extended family and friends.

The NGO he and his wife founded is not only his own future, but also the future of his entire family, especially his children, whom he expects to be working for the organization when they are older. Investing into the NGO was the one promising pathway that was left after they had to leave Buea, and it is therefore of highest priority for him to focus on it and make it become successful. Pursuing social contacts which are not related to the work with

the NGO and being a role model to others cannot have the same importance and thus plays a subordinate role at the moment. Most of his capital is flowing into the organization.

Nowadays, when he meets former classmates, they seem mostly surprised that he did not become a famous journalist, as everybody expected him to. Does that mean he has "failed" in their eyes? Not necessarily. To exchange one future horizon with another can have various reasons and is very common in Cameroon. It is not a reason to be socially condemned, especially if one is more or less successful in another chosen trajectory. It is a necessary to remain flexible and adapt to the circumstances one finds her or himself in and part of everyday life for most people.

The hidden price for success

During my last week in Cameroon, I had a farewell dinner with friends. After dinner the atmosphere was relaxed, and the conversation moved to the ordinary struggles of daily life. Stanley and his good friend barrister Moussa talked about the difficult situations they find themselves in; they are both already seen and perceived as successful young men in society, but this does not mean that they actually possess the financial capital they are supposed to have, according to their status. This imbalance brings them in a difficult situation. They are role models, and they are highly respected members of their community. This position is always accompanied by direct financial demands and expectations. They are expected to support those who have less and are in need, no matter if they actually possess enough resources or not. So, as a role model to younger ones, one is not only expected to give moral support "but material and financial support always needs to follow" (barrister Moussa, 32 years old, Fieldnotes 21.08.). Stanley told me that a year ago, Barrister Moussa's father passed away and that he was a very popular and respected man in his village. He arranged a massive funeral in which the whole village was invited to - "like a real big man", Stanley recalled. Funerals are important social events where the family who suffered the loss is expected to invite everyone. Unlike in the European context, it is not a private and rather intimate occasion. It is a public festivity in which drinks and food are prepared and after the mourning, the life of the person that passed is celebrated. The higher the status of the person expected to arrange the funeral, the bigger and the more abundant it is expected to be. About a year after I left Cameroon, Stanley told me that his brother passed away due to an accident and that he left behind four children and a wife with no income. It was all up to Stanley to organize a big funeral and take care of the wife and children of his late brother. That brought him into an exceedingly difficult position; being charged with the responsibilities of a father

and husband himself as well as with the running of an organization that is not yet producing an income on a regular basis. But since he is the head of the family, the only one among his siblings with a university degree, it is obvious that it is up to him to cover for the expenses, such as school and university fees of his nieces and nephews as well as the funeral.

Being successful in Cameroon is a double-edged matter because the success assumed by the social setting does not necessarily reflect the reality, especially economically: "They use witchcraft to take your success and money from you, but they don't use witchcraft to check whether wealth is even there." (Stanley, Fieldnotes 21.08.2019). This dark side of success is less obvious and well-hidden because it could take away some of the carefully acquired social recognition and could simply make one look like a failure. In other words; someone who has already achieved much has far more to lose than someone who has nothing.

To sum up

Stanley's life-trajectory provides deeper insights in the cognitive and social dimensions of future-making of young, educated men in urban Cameroon. Stanley comes from a rather poor background and has learned to be mature and ambitious early on. Stanley constantly adapted to his surroundings and remained flexible in his way to approach the future. He changed his future-horizon several times when it was necessary. He reasoned well and always tackled the long distant future within his future-making activities. But Stanley's story also demonstrates a less obvious side of success; (social) expectations rise and reality most often does not provide for the social obligations one is faced with when becoming a role model.

III Analytical Discussion

6. Overcoming or Routinizing Uncertainty?

In this final section, I will bring the three case studies in context to each other and to the presented theoretical framework. Firstly, I will concentrate on the cognitive process of future-making under conditions of uncertainty. In a second step, I will add the social dimension to the discussion and dwell on the outcomes of the analysis of the three presented case studies, which will be supported with further material from my research.

6.1 Combined Strategies to Approach Many Futures in Sight

"Who you are, what you have, and who you know can dramatically recast your range of possible futures […]" (Johnson-Hanks 2016: 7)

The capacity to aspire and to reason

Firstly, I would like to come back to Appadurai's argument concerning the capacity to aspire, a future oriented cultural capacity, which is unevenly distributed in societies, according to Appadurai. Due to a lack of practical experience of linking action and outcomes, the poor have a less developed capacity to aspire. In the introduction of this thesis, I have connected Appadurai's argument, which is based on research in the poor slums of India, to the Cameroonian context and posed the question: what does it take, beside material and monetary means, to develop the capacity to aspire? Appadurai indirectly delivers the answer to this question himself:

> "To repatriate them into the domain of the culture, we need to begin by noting that aspirations form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms. Aspirations are never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think). They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life." (2004: 67).

Social relations are vital for the decision-making processes of an individual and they can establish social security to a certain extent. Hence, they are an important factor for the development of the capacity to aspire. Even though the economic situation of my informants cannot be compared to the poor living in the slums of India, they still do not have the same opportunities as somebody living in Sweden, for instance. Do they thus have a less developed capacity to aspire? This argument does not hold in the Cameroonian context without some adjustment, as my research material suggests. Due to the all-encompassing arbitrariness of life in which almost nothing can be taken for granted and trial and error are part of everyday life, one has to constantly maneuver and try different approaches to fulfil one's aspirations. Even the aspirations and visions themselves eventually have to change to meet the requirements of the prevailing time. It is a context which does not provide much certainty, but just enough room to at least have opportunities – without any guarantee for success. In this context, a diverse set of experiences and links between action and the fulfilment of aspirations on the one hand and the failure thereof on the other is established. The more (positive and negative) experiences are being made, the better one can tackle future obstacles and approach new aspirations. Accordingly, a more provident capacity to aspire is developed. Though, as Roth

has argued, a minimum of social and economic capital is necessary to develop a scope of action *and* the capacity to aspire.

Future orientated agency: planning, future investments and judicious opportunism

Social action is informed and shaped by its environment, on the basis of localized values and beliefs (Greider and Little 1988). Hence, an environment informed by uncertainty will impact social action to the extent that it becomes less predictable, too. Stanley changed his trajectory radically various times in his life, according to the theory of judicious opportunism; first, he aspired to become a journalist and invested into this potential career. When he learned that his chances of succeeding in this domain were very low, he exchanged this future-horizon with that of a lawyer/ magistrate. When he started a family, he instead became a technical high school teacher at a public school with a secure and stable income. Today, he runs a small grassroots NGO to which he dedicates all his financial and rational efforts to.

The rejection of long-term planning, as it has been illustrated by Johnson-Hanks, cannot be confirmed unconditionally in my research. Unlike in her study, my informants were at a point in life where concrete planning became necessary. Most of them had children and had entered the labor-market already. Social obligations require a foresighted way of acting. The majority of Cameroonians I engaged with did have dreams and sometimes even quite concrete plans for their future, as was visible in the presented case studies. Chrystelle, a 33year old single mother I met at a public event dedicated to the youth of Cameroon, said to me: "I think everything in life must be planned. If not, you don't know what you are doing, when and how." (Chrystelle 25.08.18). Consequently, planning can be identified as a way of reducing uncertainty in the present. It gives *the doing* meaning and purpose and ultimately - it gives social action prospects and a sense of future. However, planning can constitute new risks and challenges in a volatile context, as highlighted by Johnson Hanks: "The more things are contingent on other things, the more unpredictable they are" (2005: 370), and the higher the risk of planning or investing into a concrete future horizon which is bound to specific conditions in the future. Planning as strategy to mitigate uncertainty is therefore highly ambivalent and always needs to be understood in its concrete context.

I identified a clear separation between the short-term objectives of my interlocutors, which were rather pressing goals relating to basic needs (most often a job and thus, a steady income), and long-term objectives, slightly less attainable goals which can be realized eventually and are not urgent (e.g., getting a PhD or getting a good job in an international

organization). The latter are vague and quite indefinite, appointed to an unknown point in time. Once the basic needs, and thus the short-term objectives, are met one can focus on long-term objectives, as Christina's case study illustrates. But instead of developing an accurate and straight forward concept or plan with precise steps to take action in order to reach the desired future horizon, it seems to be more helpful to act in subtle, more indirect ways towards the future(s) in prospect. Planning is not understood and, more importantly, used as a fixed concept. Rather, it describes a much more attentive and flexible way of engaging with the future, by building up carefully every step of the way to reach one of the many potential future horizons in sight. It is often not appointed to a specific outcome, but can be of use for the realization of different potential future scenarios. The main difference to a more conventional understanding of planning, in which one plans accurately one trajectory towards a specific desired outcome in the future, is that not just one future is tackled, but many potential futures simultaneously. That is important in an environment informed by uncertainty because firstly, the conditions can change any time, therefore flexibility is a necessity. Secondly, there is hardly ever a direct road to the fulfilment of future endeavors. One has to maneuver, deal with a change in direction and other uncertainties.

Different kinds of social investments (e.g., investments into social capital and symbolic or cultural capital) pose essential strategies to plan and act in uncertain environments. They proved to be sustainable because social investments can serve more than one purpose and do not have to be dedicated to a specific objective. They can target various objectives and different temporal future horizons simultaneously, which mitigates uncertainty. Contingency, however, will remain because every act and every social investment is part of a broader network of interdependent variables which influence and determine each other. We can therefore not speak of overcoming uncertainty but routinizing it. With the increased quantity and quality of social investments, the likelihood for one of the investments to pay off in the future increases. For Stacey, her social networks have become an important target for her social investments. She is well aware of the potential support that can come from connections to other people and constantly tries to invest into promising relationships. She is a woman who knows many people and is smart enough to nourish her friendships and relationships accordingly. The opening up to new collaborations and urban sociabilities (Glick Schiller 2018) in times of difficulties has great potential to result in "more diverse configurations of solidarity" (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 4). Besides social capital, the other important realm Stacey invests in is her symbolic capital. To dress well and live in a fancy neighborhood surrounds her with an aura of success and wealth and should help her to attain

such goals in the future herself. In which way such investments pay of, if they do at all and at what point in time remains unknown, nevertheless. Uncertainty remains but becomes somewhat bearable. It penetrates a process of diversified social investments and hence social action and agency. A future-oriented agency, as illustrated by Engeler and Steuer, in a context of volatility with little prospect for change can be understood as an act of empowerment, irrespective of the result. It's the process that matters, not the result. The capacity to act in the present is a guarantee to still be able to act in the future. Macamo (2017) describes this unwavering resistance against the incapacity to act as "the taming of fate" which addresses the ability of individuals to rebuild and reshape their lives against all odds.

Uncertainty is highly contingent, as highlighted by Cooper and Pratten (2016); it can be a driving force for agency, change and productivity, but at the same time it poses new risks and challenges because it is not possible to foresee the close or distant future and hence rely on the fulfilment of one's aspirations.

Judicious opportunism becomes vital in two scenarios: firstly, in the acquisition of jobs that provide a basic income and thus the pursuit of short-term objectives. Stacey mostly focuses on her short-term objectives and remains attentive and flexible in her attempt to find a job. When Christina did not yet have her secure job as a diplomat, she acted vigilant and spontaneous according to what presented itself to her. The second setting in which judicious opportunism becomes essential is by finding subjects, objects or concrete future horizons worth investing in and thus planning for the more distant future. A certain degree of opportunism and flexibility that still foresees the future, and therefore is intentional, is necessary in order to act according to the changing environment, as Stanley's case study demonstrated.

Similar to Stanley and unlike Stacey, Christina has a stable income and a good job already. She has established some social security in her life already. The combination of different future-oriented strategies has paid off for her. Nowadays, she mainly invests into the future of her children, so that they can have a better future and won't have to depend on anyone. When a promising opportunity for her own career arises, she does not hesitate and tries simultaneously to remains flexible. It is impossible to say whether her social investments will turn out to be a source of support in the now, the near or distant future – or ever. It is a contingent investment into an unknown future, driven by its potential to be of use one day.

I therefore argue, that in conditions of prolonged uncertainty, a combination of different strategies addressing the near and the distant future are the most effective. Whether the near or the distant future is the main focus depends on the social and economic capital at

hand. The most potent and frequently used strategies are firstly, the attentive strategy of judicious opportunism in which one has to act directly and almost spontaneously in the present in order to make a future. Secondly, to plan, reason and to invest more indirectly into an uncertain future with social investments into social, symbolic and cultural capital. It constitutes a diversified way of making a future, tackling long term goals and hence a broad field of different kinds of potential futures. Ultimately, these strategies give hope, create a certain degree of social security and allow to keep acting instead of resigning to an overwhelming present. Johnson Hanks critique to the taken for granted rational choice theory in social science remains; this mode of action does not target a specific end but rather a broad range of possible ends and therefore constitutes an alternative to the dominant (and Eurocentric) understanding of modes of planning.

6.2 The Contingent Aspect of Social Relations in Future-making

Halfway between harmony and discord,
protest and silence, horse and rider,
individuality and interdependence,
the real ubuntu may just be able to stand up.
(Mboti 2015: 144)

Being a role model as a way to make a future

> "When I look at the way they [project managers] do things, I tend to admire them. Because the best thing is if you carry out a project with which the community will be very satisfied with. […] The people are happy and you got the respect of your father […]. Like in my village. We had a water crisis. So, one person, a project manager, he came and established a framework how the project will be done. I just started admiring him, the way they are talking to him, the way he was responding. The respect that they were giving him. […] So, from there, I said no, I want to be a project manager, that is my dream" (Awa, 07.06.19)

Role models seem to play an important role in future-making for young, educated Cameroonians. Such role models are people who are admired and seen as successful in what they do, as apparent in the quote above. They provide orientation and thus security in an otherwise uncertain environment. They make the future seem attainable. If someone you know has made it, why wouldn't you? Another interesting aspect this quote reveals is the

respect of others that a role model gains and that seems to be highly desirable and worth striving for. The social recognition constitutes a motivation for others that seems almost above all the other admirable qualities of a role model. Emic moral concepts, such as the Kom[25] concept of personhood called *Wul* (to be human), praise a communitarian way of living in which sharing wealth is worth more than accumulating it, similar to the concept of *Ubuntu* (Tosam unpublished manuscript). According to this emic perspective, a high social status can therefore only be obtained by someone who invests into the life of others, hence the community, and is thus generous and kind. Being a role model contains therefore an intrinsic motivation that derives from passed on moral and philosophical African concepts.

Furthermore, a high social standing and hence symbolic capital (Bourdieu 2012) can open new doors and enable access to a more affluent and powerful circle of social relations. In Cameroon, having access to influential relations means having access to power (Guyer 1995, Fleischer 2007: 433). Social relations can help to have access to an attractive job and are generally indispensable for future-making: "Networking is everything. You can be talented, but if you don't know the right people, it doesn't help you." (Claudette, 21.08.18). That indicates that aspiring to become a role model is not just an aspiration but a strategy to mitigate uncertainty and to have a better future. With social recognition and respect of others, one has a higher social standing and more access to symbolic and social capital and ultimately better chances for a bright future. That is at least the common notion from the distance, but when looking more closely, a different picture becomes apparent.

The Ambiguity of social recognition and "success"

"Quelqu'un est quelqu'un derrière quelqu'un" [Somebody is somebody behind someone else] is a saying I was told about by a Cameroonian. It can be understood in two ways: one becomes a person through someone else (see *Ubuntu*), or one is constantly chasing for something that somebody else has or is and therefore is always *behind* someone. Certainly, the first interpretation is the more common and obvious one and the one that is actually meant, as I was told. However, the second one might be the more interesting one because it reveals another important aspect of social relations: the hierarchical strive for social recognition.

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[25] The Kom constitute one of the principle ethnic groups in the North West region of Cameroon (for further reading see Nkwi 2015).

Roth describes social recognition as a necessity to preserve social relations and the social status. In a context of poverty, it often results in a staged appearance which hides the state of precarity in order to not lose face. The disguise of volatility is a tactic to overcome the overwhelming and wretched present. In other words, social retreat and disguise is used to avoid conflict and further social degradation (2014). To link Roth's observation with my own research material, I would like to come back to the three key informants, Stacey, Christina and Stanley. Social relations and social recognition constitute important and much-desired elements in their life. In Stacey's and Christina's case, it is evident that they did not only actively use their social and symbolic capital in times of precarity to enhance the present and make it somewhat bearable; they did so to make a future and get a little closer to a potential future horizon. Stacey, for example, constantly nurtured her relationships and tried to surround herself and her children with an aura of success to suggest wealth. Christina, equally valued and invested in social relations so as to eventually harvest the fruits of her investments in the future. This kind of agency did not benefit her in the present (as in Roth's case study presented), it was linked and devoted to the future and can therefore be identified as future oriented agency, as in Steuer and Enegler's theorization of social action and elusive futures.

Looking at Stanley's case, Roth's argument regarding the disguise of failure to maintain social recognition is helpful again. In her paper "Entre rêves de grandeur et pragmatisme: les jeunes en milieu urbain au Burkina Faso" Roth (2012) portrayed the case of a young man who was stuck in his present life and did not see a chance to move forward. So, he withdrew most social contacts and isolated himself for fearing shame and humiliation for not being able to succeed and partake in consumption. But unlike the young man in Roth's study, Stanley has been successful in his life and therefore has a good reputation. He does not need to isolate himself. Nevertheless, he needs to conceal his actual economic situation. I argue that in an environment informed by uncertainty and a dysfunctional state apparatus failing to provide for the majority of the population, social recognition, and hence symbolic capital, can produce new hidden challenges; often seemingly successful people are expected to share a great deal of their social, cultural and especially economic capital, which, again, has a moral dimension derived from local epistemologies. The problem lies with the economic capital which is most often insufficient and therefore needs to be spent and invested wisely. Apart from own personal expenses it is expected to be used to support family members who are close or who have sponsored the individual and/or to sponsor other talented young individuals on their endeavor to become successful. To comply with these social expectations takes economic capital which is often not available. Therefore, similar as in

Roth's illustrations, it becomes necessary to disguise the struggle behind the obvious success. Stanley has already established himself as a high social standing and thus symbolic capital, which can serve him in certain situations to achieve more social or economic capital, but it also makes him to be the one who is expected to support and guide his (extended) family. In his current state, he has little economic capital at hand and decided to invest all his resources into the NGO he and his wife have founded. At times it seems difficult to correspond to all expectations he is confronted with. Since he cannot come by all of them, he has to negotiate and weight up carefully which relationships to nourish and invest in and which to neglect, at least for a temporary amount of time. Since he is a person who plans carefully, as he has stressed many times, reason most often wins and he chooses to invest into the relationships which are likely to benefit him in the future. That should not mean that he abandons those who are close to him and who are in need. It simply means that he is in a position in which he needs to economize wisely and future-oriented with the limited resources he has at hand. As Stanley's case study demonstrates, the common notion of a role model and its desirable position in society does not necessarily apply to reality. The social and the economic status quo are not necessarily aligned. Seemingly successful people who are supporting others might still be economically struggling. The aura of success they have established for themselves might come with great sacrifices. This is not known to the admirer - the person who decides to follow in their footsteps. And so, the vicious circle of keeping the veil that hides the struggle and shortage behind the apparent success and the longing for ultimate success continues.

Navigating through social life

Maintaining reciprocity, and thus a balance between receiving and giving has been understood as an unwritten social contract in Africa, which can have social consequences if not maintained (Fleischer 2007: 436). Keeping Mboti's critique to the concept of *Ubuntu* in mind, I theorize this social contract not as fixed and static concept, but instead understand it as a flexible and fluid orientation to navigate through social life and adapt if need be. It appeared to me that it is not necessarily the social pressure that maintains the reciprocity in a relationship, but that there is also a deep intrinsic need to give back the support that an individual received and thus to keep up a balance and reciprocity in life in general.

> "The individual owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce

the individual…The individual can only say 'I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am.'" (Mbiti 1969: 108-109).

Mbiti explains that there is an everlasting dept to the community and more specifically to those who had a direct impact one's life. Therefore, it is essential to give back the received gift to the specific giver and to society in general.

Mankha, a young woman I met in a collaboration project with a local NGO told me: "When you look at my life, I needed somebody to be what I am [today]. So, I also think I should choose another person and change his or her life to maybe reach her dream." (Mankha, 13.06.19). In her case it was the principal of her school who saw her potential and decided to treat and sponsor her like a daughter, which meant a life away from the village she lived in with her grandmother, a better life. Today, Mankha would like to give back the gift she received and enable someone else with the same chances she was granted, thanks to the men who treated her like family. But apart from the desire to become a role model to someone, she is also aware that she has to give back some of the support she received from her sponsor:

> M: "Normally it's my own place to look for him. Because since we separated, I have never really looked for him. I was thinking of paying him a visit. Like a visit of acquisition for him to know that I am still his daughter. We can sort out things. It's not his place to look for me. It's my own place to look for him."
> D: "So, you haven't seen him in a long time?"
> M: "Yes. […] Maybe he thought I was ungrateful, but that's not the case. And I was expecting that when I will have a job with a stable salary, I could give him like 50 percent of my salary. Just to show him that I am grateful." (Mankha, 12.06.19)

Mankha is reluctant to contact her sponsor because she cannot yet claim to be successful and hence honour his sponsorship by sharing her economic capital with him. To avoid conflict and disappointment, she rather waits and withdraws from the relationship they had. Unlike in Roth's analysis, in which a total retreat and isolation is the solution to the precarious economic situation someone is in, we can only speak of a partial social retreat in Mankha's case because it seemed that she still engages in social relationships and remains active, whilst only avoiding the very person expectations are coming from. Stacey equally remains socially active and instead of isolating herself due to her depressing present situation, she values her social relationships and invests into her social capital whenever she has the chance. At the same time, she is well aware that her parents, especially her father, still have expectations which she cannot yet fulfil. Therefore, she keeps some distance and makes sure to remain independent from them, financially. That way she cannot be bothered too much by their

demand for support. It can be derived that social capital is key to maintain social recognition and social status and can replace economic capital at least for some time.

The concept of *Ubuntu*, as it has been portrayed in public discourses, focusing mostly on positive values within a community, such as harmony, oneness and solidarity (Ramoses 1999), cannot be supported in the context of my research. The reciprocal character of social action is more complex and messier than a moral codex as such can entail. Social action contains many layers of harmonic and conflicted relationships. Interdependence changes to independence and back. The interdependence within family members seems to be perceived as a burden and a blessing at the same time. Africans cannot be defined solely through their relationship with others. To put it with Mboti's words:

> "Substantially, what do Africans want? Who can claim to know, decisively, what Africans want? What gives Africans – a people marked by the complexity, richness, and profundity of their differences – peace, happiness, and satisfaction? What if Africans simply want to live *alongside* other Africans and not *through* them?" (Mboti 2015: 140; emphasis in original).

They are not bound to just one moral code, such as *Ubuntu*. They are subjected to change and a constant re-interpretation of their current state. I would therefore like to support Mboti's call for a more critical perspective on the concept of *Ubuntu* instead of abandoning it altogether (see Maris 2020: 318-319).

7. Conclusion and Outlook

Conclusion: The social dimension of future-making

This thesis focused on the future-oriented agency of young university-educated Cameroonians and how they deal with uncertainty. Countless informal conversations and many interviews that I had conducted during my stays in Cameroon pointed out that people always remain active, even in circumstances with little hope for a better future. This unshakable agency displays that young people in Africa are not passive and resign to an overwhelming present. They recover from times of crisis and precarity and use different strategies, such as judicious opportunism and planning for the future through social investments to approach an uncertain future. They adapt to the given circumstances of precarity by diversifying coping strategies, which address the direct and the distant future. In line with Cooper and Pratten and Steuer and Engeler, I demonstrate that uncertainty cannot solely be seen as an obstacle that paralyzes and slows one down. Nor can it be celebrated as always bringing about potential for

change and productivity. It has the potential for both and most often traverses various changes in direction in the life of an individual which again shapes its habitus.

As has been argued by many scholars, agency needs to be seen in its social context in order to be fully understood in its complexity and nuances (White and Wyn 1998; Lawless 2017; DeJaeghere, et. al 2016). In the Cameroonian context, social relations hold a particularly important role in the life of an individual. That is even more the case when institutional social structures are weak. But as I have illustrated, the impact of social relations is always multidimensional and can change various times in a lifetime. For example, a relationship can develop from a dependent to an independent or a mutually dependent relationship and vice versa. Social relations can pose a burden and a blessing at the same time and are thus highly ambiguous and contingent. In order to understand the future-making of young educated Cameroonians, it is essential to take the individual present social context as well as the social history of individual life stories into account.

In this thesis I have discussed the ambiguity that social relations possess in the Cameroonian context. The ethnographic narrations of be(com)ing a role model, a highly desired position in society which brings a lot of social responsibilities and hidden challenges with it which are not openly displayed, highlight the ambivalence and contingency that exists in the social dimension of future-making.

I have integrated emic perspectives and sources of knowledge into my work, such as Mboti's critique to the common understanding of the African concept of *Ubuntu*, to add a decolonial perspective to this work. Instead of reinforcing dominant "White narratives" by explaining phenomena in the Global South merely with concepts of the Global North, I want to follow the call of many scholars (Martin and Dandekar 2022; Mignolo 2011; Smith 2017) for a decolonization of knowledge.

Mboti's article offers a diverse and realistic perspective on the concept of *Ubuntu* and the dimensions of social relations in the African context. The simplistic saying "I am because we are" that defines *Ubuntu* in dominant global discourses reduces an individual to its position in society and the relationship it has with others. It suggests a co-dependency that stands in contrast to the so-called highly individualized Western individual, marked by freedom of choice and rational thinking. I would like to argue against this narrative by telling the (life-) stories of three young educated Cameroonians, who, at some point in their life, where dependent on someone and supported by others. But they overcame these temporal dependencies and found other ways and tactics to navigate through life. Stacey, Christina and Steven made use of their social network and were at times also troubled by them through their

expectations and the need to keep the balance of reciprocity or to maintain an image they have constructed. However, they were also able to free themselves to a certain degree from toxic or dependant relationships and take their destiny into their own hands. During my research, I met numerous highly ambitious young people who would not let themselves be withhold by pressing expectations of others. On the Contrary, they remained active in whatever way possible and made sure to make a future not made for them but by them.

Outlook

This thesis highlights some of the most effective strategies to make a future and combat economic deprivation in urban Cameroon. Young people "[…] are both social navigators of the present and social generators of individual and collective futures." (Christiansen et al. 2006: 21). Coping strategies develop from pre-existing patterns and experiences. Therefore, listening to individual life stories and narrations is key to understanding and situating practices of future-making. Now, nearly two and a half years after my last visit in Cameroon, I wanted to take a look at the current situation of my key informants and see where future oriented agency, such as social investments and judicious opportunism has taken them. Thanks to social media, it was easy to remain in touch and update each other on the current situation. All of them can look back on some promising steps forward and new opportunities appearing and paving the way to new future horizons.

Stacey's communication was often somewhat vague and did not go into details. "God is faithful… Though I had to stop my business and stay home, we still have food to eat." (Whatsapp message 6.04.21), she wrote me. But recently, things finally turned around for her. She got a job in an international NGO (Danish Refugee Council) in the south west. She wrote to me: "The Grace of God smiles on me. It's a story of grass to grace. From nothing to something. My father is so happy. Even some friends who neglected and abandoned me are all coming around!" (Wahstapp message, 15.01.2022). Stacey finally reached one of her main goals and is now able to take good care of herself and her family. The job helped her not only to be affluent, but also to raise her social recognition as friends who had abandoned her earlier now want to befriend her again. She must enjoy these conditions and use her resources wisely for as long as it lasts.

Christina's trajectory led her out of Cameroon a couple of times. She had applied for a diplomat training in Russia and in the USA. Fortunately, she was granted both. Therefore, she initially went to Moscow for a couple of weeks and afterwards to the USA. After completing

the programmes, she stayed a few months longer and gave birth to another child. After some time, she returned to her job in Cameroon. Recently I found out that she had already returned to the USA again with her daughter. She is planning to return to Cameroon and continue on her promising pathway to become a successful diplomat. Who knows what else the future holds for her?

Steven and his family had some achievements and funding opportunities for their NGO within the last couple of years. Not the kind of funding they were expecting, but at least enough to keep hoping, investing and acting. Steven and Audrey always try to think of new opportunities if things don't turn out as anticipated. For example, they came into the ownership of an abandoned piece of land, an hour away from Yaoundé. The villagers living nearby did not have much use for it and so Steven and his wife started growing different kinds of food crops like cocoa, tomatoes and plantain. Steven told me that he would like to export these goods and thus generate an income for the NGO and for his family. Until this new plan becomes reality the food crops at least can sustain and nourish them in the present. However, all of a sudden new uncertainties have presented themselves to them; Bushfires have destroyed large parts of their land and thus of their investments into the future. Whether the "Urgent Action Fund", where they applied for financial support, will grant them funding still remains uncertain.

Shedding light on the diverse ways of coping, planning and acting in conditions of prolonged uncertainty in Cameroon constitutes a small piece of the big puzzle to understand ways of relating to the future. As mentioned in the introduction, uncertainty seems to spread globally and has significantly increased since the Pandemic of Covid 19 has started to dominate the life of the majority. It has become a companion that does not intent to leave anytime soon. The economic gap between the better off and the poor is continuously growing and is being reinforced by a neoliberal agenda which only serves a small elite. An expanding proximity among a global working class due to economic convergence results from it. Therefore, it is indispensable for future research on uncertainty and future-making to shift the gaze from issues in the Global South, where the situation partly takes on threating dimensions, especially ecological wise, and equally see how people cope in cities of the Global North, where uncertain future horizons start replacing stable and well predictable future horizons.

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