

# 1 Knowledge | Situating *La Chance* in Graduates' Knowledge.

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## [We are here]

In Bamako, there are institutionalized systems of job distribution which are supposed to make sure the most qualified applicant gets the job. However, graduates know that employment is *la chance*. How come?

This puzzle invites the examination of the relationship between knowledge and employment focusing on common-sense knowledge. The overall purpose of this chapter is to situate *la chance* in graduates' common-sense knowledge. The leading questions are:

### **What do university graduates know about their society in relation to the national labor market? How do they account for that knowledge?**

To university graduates, it is common sense that getting a job is *la chance*. But what constitutes the conclusion of that being common sense? There are three kinds: observational common sense, which is a result of external senses' perception of the environment; judgmental common sense, which is also referred to as "good judgment" as it is based on understandings of everyday experiences; and consensual common sense, which relates to facts everyone knows and agrees on (Rescher 2005,12). Common sense facts "appear to be transparently true through the circumstance that they are obvious and (in a certain way) self-evident" (ibid. 29). Common sense is "shamelessly and unapologetically ad hoc" (Geertz 1975, 23), and even though or maybe because every "solid citizen" is an expert on common sense (ibid 24), it "remains more an assumed phenomenon than an analyzed one" (ibid 9). It is in that sense that I proceed to examine what is "obvious" and "self-evident" about how to get a job in Mali according to university graduates.

Departing from the common-sense statement “employment is *la chance*”, I will describe three systems located at the intersection between employment and *la chance*, i.e. “le bras long”, “le concours”, and “l’homme propose, Dieu dispose”. I will elaborate graduates’ knowledge about each system’s routinized way of distributing jobs. My informants know that *la chance* makes the difference between those who gain employment and those who do not, or not yet.

One of the aspects that are crucial here is the question of employment and more specifically: who gets employed? Approaching this question, we are going to examine the relationship between knowledge and employment. In other words, what do graduates know about who gets employment?

On this journey, we look at the case of *le bras long* and *le concours*. We will encounter both as cases of routine and non-routine situations, which means as situations in which graduates find themselves knowing about the circumstances (knowledge about the presence of knowledge) that made up for the situation at hand and knowing they do not know (knowledge about the absence of knowledge) about these very circumstances.

Knowledge includes the known and the unknown. Knowledge is what is known and what is known to be unknown. Both are ways of knowing. *Le bras long* and *le concours* account for what graduates know, “l’homme propose, Dieu dispose” is a case of knowing what they don’t know – which is right where a *la chance* kicks in.

## **KNOWLEDGE: On the presence of *la chance***

If uncertainty is about knowledge, the question is: what do graduates know? And again, what do they know about what?

Throughout the next section, I focus on graduates’ common-sense knowledge about how to get a job in Mali. Examining this relationship between knowledge and employment, I focus on the case of *le bras long* (the long arm) and *le concours* (competition for government employment), both of which make a difference when it comes to getting employed or staying unemployed. *Le bras long* refers to social networks and plays a significant role when it comes to accessing employment, internships, information; passing *le concours* based on qualification and performance allows for direct access to steady life-time government employment.

## ***Le bras long* | A case of privilege?**

It's difficult to have a job here in Mali, because there is this kind of relation... Like, you are my sister and I have a company, so I take you. Even if you aren't qualified. It's like that in Mali. But if by chance we do find somebody who is qualified, of course we're going to employ that person. (My translation, interview, 2014, with Mohamed, graduated in Administration.)

That “certain kind of relation”, also referred to as *le bras long* (the long arm) is given as the reason why it is difficult to find a job in Mali, but at the same time, it does enable people to get employed. Family members are prioritized over qualification and graduates know that: “It's like that in Mali”.

*Le bras long* is best explained as advantage. If nature favors your parents, they might come up with an adequate and concrete solution for your situation. This means that you are going to be employed at a company because of their relations and not because of your merit or because of the studies you did. [...] I don't have this *la chance*. I don't have *la chance* of having parents with a long arm. (My translation, interview, 2014, with Amadou, graduated in International Law.)

Amadou explains that *le bras long* offers concrete solutions, such as employment, which is *la chance*. Some parents have *le bras long* to the benefit of their children; it is a primordial advantage. The power of *le bras long* lies in its ability to provide access to employment without the consideration of either merit or qualification. In fact, Amadou's account is about the expectation that jobs are distributed to those who deserve it based on their qualification, while the reality is that *le bras long* employs those who have influential family members. Amadou calls that *la chance*. To sum up, family and qualification lead to employment: if there is a business, and you are family and looking for a job, you get the job. At the same time, if there is a business and you are qualified when no family member is, you get the job. “Everybody has their *la chance* in life... maybe it's just like that, that there are people whose parents have *le bras long* and others' parents have short arms”. Everybody possesses individual *la chance* and the length of one's arm is part of it.

Imagine *le bras long* as a branch of a tree which comes in different shapes and sizes, different qualities and quantities, with dense and sparse bifurca-

tions, some flourishing others dry, maybe just temporarily due to the season of the year; every single one of them pointing into a different direction.

The tree image is productive here, because it helps us to see and remember that every graduate has successfully climbed up the stem of a tree by graduating from university.

Up there, graduates engage with the trees' traits in terms of (1) movement and in terms of (2) fostering. (1) Moving around, they climb and descend branches, they jump and swing between them, a branch might fall off taking the graduate down with it. In the following accounts we see graduates accepting to stay on and reach for a branch, switch between branches, making their way from one branch to the next. (2) They also invest in growing branches, leaves and fruit, which might or might not pay off. Sometimes they find help, fertilizer, or too much sun for a sprout to take off.

Yet, it is not only about the graduates' actions, but also about the nature of the trees around them. Some trees are further apart, others grow closer together, some branches might fall off and some branches might even connect different trees, which then allows for the movement of graduates between trees.

*Le bras long* is always both about origin and destination, it has heterogeneous origins, i.e. family, friends, colleagues, and it might (or might not) take various paths: directly and via intermediaries, towards an initial or a new goal emerging on the way. Graduates know that "here in Mali", employment is *la chance* and it is provided by *le bras long*, which is *la chance*, too. The following empirical examples show how the length of one's arm mobilizes and constrains graduates' access to employment.

So, the following section is a description of *le bras long*, its constitution and its capabilities. With the help of graduates' knowledge, I am going to describe what *le bras long* looks like, what it does with graduates and what graduates do with it. We will see how graduates take and grow branches.

## **TAKING branches.**

### **Accepting a branch (Amadou).**

*Le bras long* has been crucial throughout Amadou's life: his family's arm brought him to Bamako for his university studies. Thanks to his aunt and uncle, who looked after him and provided him with a room in their house, he

was able to go to university. He lived on his scholarship, bought a moto and did little jobs from time to time in order to be “a bit independent”. Amadou also worked at the telephone stall attached to his uncle’s house and later took over the business. This job was provided by his uncle. Later on, Amadou tried to set up a cleaning business and reached out to influential people like the mayor of one of the six communities in Bamako, though none of them could pay him on time. The network he created for that purpose came into existence, but its arms remained too short. After some time managing his own telephone stall with the profits diminishing, he started working at his auntie’s cafeteria. Though he did not earn much, he liked the responsibility and the fact that he was finally able to return a favor to her. In 2015, Amadou is back in Segou working at a mediating company affiliated with a well-known brand company. It is his own business, and he is one of the first in charge of a business like this in Segou. Initially, it was not his idea, but his other uncle’s, who lives abroad. He provided Amadou with the capital to start off this new business.

His family’s arm worked how it was supposed to work according to common sense knowledge: Amadou received a job at his auntie’s restaurant and his business was funded by his uncle. That is not a surprise. However, to Amadou, the fact that the *bras long* worked is *la chance*. He did not get any money from the professional contacts he acquired himself, which is no surprise either. “C’est comme ça au Mali”: it is common sense that family helps out family members – depending on what is accessible to them. You see, Amadou is a lawyer, but his auntie owns a restaurant and not a law firm. Amadou wants to set up a cleaning business, but his uncle, who is also a businessman, does not credit Amadou’s idea and instead wants his nephew to execute his own ideas. In this case, *le bras long* leads into directions determined by others. Grateful, yet, also for the lack of other options, Amadou has to accept the helping hand.

### **Switching branches (Simone).**

Simone always wanted to be a journalist. Two arms lead her to an internship at national TV: the family arm of her uncle and the professional arm of her university professor rewarding her for being one of his best students. She says her uncle had nothing to do with her getting the internship – unlike common sense about *le bras long* would suggest. Today, people at the station

know and appreciate her journalistic work. In the end though, neither of her long arms, i.e. her uncle, her professor, colleagues at the TV station were long enough to get her the contract she wanted. Instead, there was another family arm pointing to a different employment opportunity:

I have an uncle, who works for the UN. [...] He suggested that I should go see an Indian businessman. In fact, I sent him my CV and he then sent it to my current boss. And he was pleased and interested, so he called me. (My translation, interview, 2015, with Simone, graduated in Law.)

Here, Simone talks about her current job at the International Airport Bama-ko-Senou. She had learned about the job through her uncle, and he was also the one to send her CV over. Ultimately, Simone was employed in airline administration. Though her uncle was involved here, Simone presents it as the long arm putting her in a favorable position by delivering access to the information of a job vacancy, as well as access to the hiring person. Simone switched from one branch to another once her preferred one did not extend any further.

### **Swinging from one branch to the next (Madou).**

Similarly, Cheick swings from one branch to the next. Cheick (see people) wanted to do his PhD in physics after his studies. In order to accomplish that, he needed to go abroad. His parents had the money to pay for the flight, a history of reliability that convinced the embassy to give him a visa, and a place to stay in Germany. Madou's dad used to be a lecturer at that university, but he was a linguist. Because Madou wanted to become a physicist, the long family arm brought him there, but not to the physics department. It was Madou himself who contacted the physics professor, who then offered him a scholarship for his doctoral studies. In the end, he was unable to take advantage of his scholarship and stayed in Mali looking for a job:

Mom gave me that idea saying, 'Did you talk to your uncle at the company?' [...] Getting that internship took me more than a year, even though I have relatives over there. I didn't even know the person who ultimately decided to take me as an intern. I was introduced to him when I got there. Also, the people with whom I work... I didn't know them. Same with my boss, I didn't

know him... he's a burkinabé. My boss is a burkinabé. (My translation, interview, 2014, with Madou, graduated in Physics.)

Madou's long arm is a prolonged arm that stretches via his mother to his uncle to his boss, and it pointed towards a telecommunications agency. At first, this account seems to present a long arm situation, but not quite, because there are two facts that Madou presents as unusual: one, it took him so long to get a job, and two, he received the job even though he did not know the person who employed him. Had *le bras long* worked in accordance with his expectations, he would have received the job instantly. Instead, Madou had to remain persistent for over a year. In the end, he got the job, not because of his arm, but because of his enduring effort and a decision made by his boss, whom he "did not even know" and could not possibly have known, since his boss "is a *burkinabé*". From his emphasis, I conclude that it is unusual to get a job without having any relatives in the company and that he assumes I think he received his job because of his uncle. Madou did not get the internship because of his long arm, which is itself *la chance* since it usually ensures a job; Madou got employed anyway.

### Reaching a branch (Oumar).

When Oumar was still a kid, his father lost his job as a government official. Ever since, his family has faced financial problems and has had difficulties affording their children's education. During university studies, his best friend Adama had his back. He also introduced Oumar to the company they are both working for today:

My friend Adama works over there and sometimes they organize soccer tournaments, in which their company plays against another company. They called me and I played. And when they were recruiting new employees, they called me as well. That's how it all happened. (My translation, interview, 2014, with Oumar, graduated in Economics.)

Adama invited his friend Oumar over to a soccer tournament organized by his company. Oumar, who used to play for a second league club, accepted the invitation and obviously impressed them. Initially, he did not apply for a job, but after the match he received an offer. Consequently, when asked how he

got the job, Oumar refers to a soccer event and his friendship with Adama – not to an application or a job interview, for example. It was his friend’s long arm Oumar was able to reach for.

### **GROWING branches.**

#### **A flourishing branch (Safiatou).**

Safiatou kept working at the radio station long after her internship was over. She made a name for herself; she even had her own radio show and collaborated on various TV projects with other journalists. Just like for Simone, this professional arm never led to a contracted employment at the station, so, she decided to get into communications via another professional arm originating at the TV station:

It all happened because of me. In order to get to national TV, I’ve had a professor who suggested us to go there and get in touch with them. So, I benefited from that and networked for real. After that it was easy for me to get access to other internships. Voilà, that’s how I found myself over there. And it was the same contacts that got me into the other communications agency. I played my relations I created at the TV station. It all started with these contacts, and it is because of them that I’m here today. (My translation, interview, 2013, with Safiatou, graduated in English.)

Today, she works for a well-known communication and marketing agency. Starting off as a private student in journalism, Safiatou received the opportunity to conduct her internship via a professional long arm. She points out that she was the one who created a professional network for herself, which has been beneficial to her ever since. Safiatou “played her relations,” knowing that the long arm provides access, she put herself in a position to use it once it flourished.

#### **A dry branch (Mohamed).**

Just like Safiatou did at the radio station, Mohamed worked on his professional network during his internship at a bank. He studied economics, because he thought that this decision might enable him to work both in the public and the private sector. His parents are on good terms with the univer-

sity, especially with the faculty of social sciences and languages. His dad was professor and his mother occasionally cooks at university events. Mohamed always helped his mom at the restaurant as a supervisor and accountant. He also received the opportunity for an internship as an accountant at the faculty of social sciences, as suggested by his mother. He is not getting paid with money, but with experience, he says. In this case, the long arm of his family suggested another direction; Mohamed followed and ultimately benefited from that. He would have preferred to work for a bank in the private sector, particularly at a bank in the capital where Mohamed did an internship several years ago. Back then, he did not get a contract, but he is still in touch with his boss, who promised to find him a job.

People at the bank appreciated me a lot. They wanted me to work there, but they didn't have the means to recruit me... This happens via concours, you know. But the concours, we don't even talk about that anymore. [...] So, they want to help me, but they don't know how. (My translation, interview, 2013, with Mohamed, graduated in Administration.)

Mohamed extended his professional network by conducting his internship at a bank. Afterwards, it seemed as if everything was set for him to get employed: he worked well, people liked him and wanted to recruit him, but then there was no official recruitment scheduled, i.e. there was no vacant position he could apply for. In other words, qualification, effort, and *le bras long* combined cannot overcome the fact that there is no job. Within the framework of his internship, Mohamed grew a professional long arm, which turned out to be dry. At least for the time being, it is worthless in terms of potential employment, due to the overall job situation at the bank. Unlike in Safiatou's case, in which her self-grown professional long arm in journalism created an opportunity for them in copy writing, Mohamed's *bras long* was not able to achieve that.

### Let's recall:

To Amadou and Simone, *le bras long* is like a tree with branches attached to the root and reaching only so far. Other more attractive trees are too far away for them to reach via the branches they have access to. To Madou, *le bras long* allows him to move like Tarzan in the jungle from one vine to the next, which again provides him with the necessary momentum to reach even further

towards destinations interesting to him. Oumar is the guy looking around on the ground and is suddenly being grabbed by a friend swinging on a vine. Each of them acts in relation to the environment they find themselves in. We see that *le bras long* is about the environment and about the person engaging with it.

We saw that family members, friends or colleagues might play a significant role in graduates' entry to the labor market. However, graduates made sure to emphasize that in their individual case, it was different and the fact that they had procured jobs was explained by something other than *le bras long*. In Madou's, Oumar's, Simone's, and Safiatou's cases, their contacts were mediators between potential employers and the graduates themselves. They provided access to information, which in turn facilitated access to the job, rather than furnishing the job itself. It is striking, though, that neither of these arms points into directions they would have preferred professionally.

Maybe things would have been different if Amadou, for instance, had not been willing to execute his uncle's business idea instead of his own, Madou switched from physics to marketing, and Safiatou from journalism to copy writing. They identified these opportunities and, consequently, decided to work with them.

For some of my informants, *le bras long* unlocked spaces which otherwise would have stayed closed or at least unnoticed. Madou's uncle provided him with information<sup>1</sup>, Amadou's uncle with money, and Oumar's friend with an important contact. *Le bras long* represents the idea of favoring family members, especially when it comes to employment distribution. If one member of a social group gains access to certain kinds of resources, any other member of that same social group is more likely to be provided with at least the possibility to access those resources as well – by the means of that very first member. *Le bras long* is *la chance* to those who have it; *le bras long* reproduces *la chance*. Similar to 'social capital', *le bras long* is constituted by both the actual and potential resources available to the individual (Bourdieu 1983, 190). Graduates either have a *bras long* already or they create one of their own themselves.

Up next, we see how Safiatou and Mohamed grow branches of their own, yet again, with different results. University graduates know about *the bras long* and the way it operates ("C'est comme ça au Mali"), and yet, every individual experiences it differently. There is no single *bras long*, but each one is

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1 For further reading on the nature of exchange networks and its benefits in terms of access to information see Powell 1990.

different in its constitution, and its function is dependent on both external circumstances and ways in which individuals engage with it.

### ***Le concours* | A case of random selection?**

The *concours* is an official government system of recruitment for public service – a competition for employment positions – and is equally open to everyone who has the educational degree required. People who meet certain qualification criteria compete as they take an exam. Ultimately, people are selected with reference to their performance.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the number of those who pass is determined from the very beginning. This means that the difference between the results of the last ones who pass and the first ones who fail is minimal. However, the actual effect of passing or failing a *concours* produces permanent and brutal discontinuities (Bourdieu, 1983, 190). For instance, also somebody who brings up the rear in the *concours* will receive a life-long contract in public administration, which comes with a secure monthly salary and possibilities for promotion. The last one passing will be as privileged as the first one, the one following the last one though will not have anything – just like the other thousands of participants.

In October 2016, the Ministry of Labor and Civil Service announced a *concours* for civil service in the categories B and C (Walanta 2016). Applicants for category B are required to have at least a baccalauréat diploma and not to be older than 35. Applicants for category C need a DEF (diplôme d'études fondamentales) at least and their age needs to be between 18 and 32. University graduates qualify for category A, but at this point in time, there are no vacant posts for that category. Graduates are, however, free to apply for categories B and C. In that *concours*, 230 civil servants will be recruited in various domains, such as technicians (health, mining, and agriculture), controllers (treasure, finances, customs) and administrators. There is one month between the announcement and the application deadline, at which point applications are processed and lists with participants' names are published. The actual *concours* takes place at the end of December. The test consists of a technical part, a professional part, and a general part, each lasting two hours.

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2 This is in contrast to the lottery system, e.g. the green card lottery system (Piot, 2010, chapter three), in which winners or losers are determined by batch. The system of selection is based purely on hazard.

According to a grading coefficient, the results of the technical part and the professional part count three times more than the general part. Applicants need to achieve a minimum of 10/20 points in order to qualify. Here are some numbers<sup>3</sup> of participation: there were 873 people applying for 30 category C jobs in administration (Anon 2016). This is thirty people applying for one job. There were 1,644 people applying for 13 category B jobs in treasury controlling (Anon 2016). Again, this is 126 people per job. And there were 8,498 applicants for 10 category B positions in finance controlling (Anon 2016); in other words, 850 people applying for one job. All in all, not a single position corresponds to a university graduate's qualification and the ones for which they can apply count thousands of other applicants.

When I conducted fieldwork in 2011, I visited a *concours* and most of the applicants I talked to that day said they only participate in order to be able to say at least they tried – not because they really believe in being chosen. So, the following section is about university graduates' experiences with the *concours* and their knowledge about how *le concours* works. Malian university graduates know how the *concours* is supposed to work, but it is common-sense knowledge that the *concours* is a pro-forma event and decisions are made according to the rules of the *bras long*. It is said that ministers' and employees' kids and friends are preferred by *le concours*. However, there is another factor even more significant to the results of the *concours*: *la chance*.

### ***La chance* intervenes (Mohamed).**

Mohamed knows that passing a *concours* does actually not depend on knowledge:

They ask you questions which are fundamental for a financier. So, if you don't manage to respond to those... honestly, you shouldn't even participate in the concours. [...] But there is another criterion for selection. [...] For example, you need 100 people, and more than 350 knew (all the answers to your questions). How are you going to make your selection? That's where *la chance* intervenes. [...] The questions asked are simple. That's how it is with *le concours*! (My translation, interview, 2014, with Mohamed, graduated in Administration.)

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3 I have chosen these examples because graduates in economics are more likely to apply for these positions in administration, rather than for positions in nursing or mining.

Passing the concours depends on *la chance*, because if you are an economist and people ask you questions about economics, you will be able to answer them for sure – and so will any other economist participating in the *concours*. Now, if everybody knows the answers to all the questions asked, the distinguishing criterion can no longer be the performance in the *concours*; it has to be something else, which Mohamed says is *la chance*. *La chance* picks the one who will be employed. Consequently, the distinguishing feature is not the performance only, but performance plus *la chance*.

### **Le bras long intervenes (Boubacar).**

Boubacar, an economist, is the only graduate I know, who passed the *concours*. Several family members – his father, mother, older sister, and one of his two younger brothers – work in government offices. When Boubacar started working at the ministry of commerce shortly after his graduation, people say it was his family connections that put him in this position. In the following account, I ask for his opinion on that issue:

Susann: So, your parents didn't help you?

Boubacar: No, no! My parents didn't help me. They helped me, of course, of course they helped!

Susann: No. Since they are also working in...

Boubacar: No, no! Not at all. No! We are not in the same domain. And imagine, how many functionaries are there here in Mali? Now, if everybody helped their children, how could we get out? [...] Your parents can't do anything for you. We were more than 1,000, more than 3,000, 4,000 candidates and they were looking for 5 or 10 people. Imagine the probability of getting le concours. I told myself that maybe, if I have *la chance*, if God is with me, I can have the concours. (My translation, interview, 2013, with Boubacar, graduated in Economics.)

This interview extract is interesting, because there seems to be a difference between helping and helping. So, let's get a bit into detail here: Boubacar's parents "did not help him, but they did help him. I did not explicitly ask if his

parents worked on his examination results, or if it is because of them that he received the government job; I did not ask about *le bras long*. However, he instantly understood that this is what I was meaning to ask. His reaction highlights the common sense of the *bras long*, which is about parents ensuring their children's employment. "No, no! Not at all. No!" He insists being fully aware of the usual assumption about parents putting their children into civil service. Then he switches saying "they did help me", which gives credit to their parenting. He acknowledges their contribution to the fact that he was in the position to become a civil servant. His parents were the ones to put him into that position that enabled him to do the rest of it himself. They helped him in general and throughout his life; but they did not make him pass. In the conversation, I then try to justify my question and at the same time I insist: "Since they are also working...". He quickly interrupts me saying, that they are not working in the same domain, so they could not have possibly made him pass. "Tes parents ne peuvent rien pour toi!" – "They cannot do a thing for you". He adds some numbers: 1,000 to 4,000 competing for 5 to 10 jobs. Statistically, it is highly improbable to be amongst the five or ten people that pass. So, even if you do, it is *la chance* and God. Departing from the assumption that it might have been his family arm that gave him access to public administration employment, he introduces me to probability and statistics and ultimately, to *la chance*.

## THE KNOWN | What they DO know

In Mali, the *concours* results determine future public service agents; however, graduates account for the selection process of the *concours* with reference to *le bras long*. Malians know how both systems operate: the *bras long* puts family members first; the *concours* puts performance first.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there are cases in which these official rules of *le concours*, or *le bras long* do not apply – and still, they are not perceived as arbitrary. Either way, graduates are not surprised; they know how things work in Mali.

Now we know that:

1. Getting employment is *la chance*.
2. *Le bras long* is a way to get employed. *Le bras long* is *la chance*.
3. *Le concours* is a way to get employed. Passing *le concours* is *la chance*. People pass *le concours* via *le bras long*. *Le bras long* is *la chance*, too.

## KNOWLEDGE: On the absence of *la chance*

Now we know what graduates in Mali know about getting an employment. But if employment accounts for the presence of *la chance*, does that consequently mean that unemployment accounts for the absence of *la chance*?

Let us look at this by asking the opposite question: what do graduates know about not getting a job?

### L'homme propose, Dieu dispose | Nothing is certain

“L'homme propose, Dieu dispose” (Man proposes, God provides) is a frequently used expression. It highlights the connection between individuals' efforts and God's plan, which is unknown to the individual. The underlying principle of the expression is the recognition of effort; it is about making God see that man wants something. Now, if God provides in response to what man asked for in the first place, it is *la chance*. Most of the situations concerning the long arm and the *concours* which I have described earlier in this chapter are situations in which graduates did receive *la chance* in the form of employment. However, graduates also know that hard work does not always pay off. As we are going to see, sometimes God just does not provide – at least, “differently” or “not yet”.

The difference between God and *la chance*? That's difficult, but it can be explained. I'm going to put myself in the position of all these people now... I'll say that God provides *la chance*. God is the programmer. [...] According to religion, God is the foundation of everything, of *la chance*, and everything that's going to happen to you. Even if I'm going to have a job tomorrow, it's God's plan. God will create the conditions for me to have *la chance* to get that. (My translation, interview, 2014, with Amadou, graduated in International Law.)

The difference between God and *la chance* is not a difficult question to answer for a believer. As “the creator”, “the provider” and “the programmer”, God is the “foundation of everything”. Being the “programmer,” God created the past and the present, just as God knows and will create the future accordingly. Everything that happens is designed and provided by God and so is *la chance*. Talking about the origin of *la chance*, university graduates refer to

God's plan in relation to their own.<sup>4</sup> *La chance* is an interplay best summarized by the common expression: "L'homme propose, Dieu dispose." However, God's plan is only revealed as it unfolds.

Mohamed, for instance, passed his exams. He says that he did so because he studied hard, and because "un peu de chance" was granted to him – he was healthy.

I've been working, so I was given a bit of *la chance*, hein! I can work, I can even spend all night studying... and I do not pass. God making things right... During the exams, I might have malaria or get sick... think I'm going to pass? We can't control sickness. Voilà, this is *la chance*! I've had *la chance* to be healthy and so I made it. (My translation, interview, 2014, with Mohamed, graduated in Administration.)

Being healthy on exam day was a bit of *la chance*. "God making things right" provided him with the conditions enabling him to open up *la chance* on his own as he passed the exam. This was preconditioned by his previous studies, but also by his health. Preparation for the exam is in Mohamed's control, but it is God to determine *la chance*, which is out of his control. He could have been sick that day, and this would have been out of his control. Being healthy, though, put him in a position to prove that he studied hard in the first place. In his account, Mohamed acknowledges that things could have happened differently. *La chance* is that all the negative things that *could* have happened did not happen and everything worked out as he desired. In this case, the two driving forces of his success were himself and God. Both were directed towards the same goal: Mohamed wanted to pass the exam, God approved.

### **God provides differently: quality.**

Sometimes God provides *la chance*, but differently from what people had expected. In the following account, Mohamed talks about "God's plans":

*La chance* comes from God. I think that everything is written down already. Everything that I have to do, the way I have to take... I think everything is well-traced already. But *la chance*, that is really what you want... so, pray to God

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4 Except for Simone, who is Christian, all of my informants are Muslim.

for he can give it to you. If he doesn't, don't get mad, hein! Because he saves something even better than that for you. [...] In everything I do right now, there is improvement. And I think that maybe we can influence *la chance*, but not every *la chance*. (My translation, interview, 2015, with Mohamed, graduated in Administration.)

Mohamed says that *la chance* comes from God. Everything that happens is predetermined in God's plan. *La chance* is what you really want; *la chance* is if God provides you with what you have been praying for all along. This also means that God's plan and an individual's wishes do not always coincide. In that case, it is important for the individual to not get mad, but to trust that what God provides is even better than what has been wished for, and this can be good, but not necessarily *la chance*. However, it is considered *la chance* when an individuals' plan coincides with God's.

Mohamed wanted to become a successful soccer player, but God provided something else for him. Though his career as a soccer star did not work out, everything else he did, such as his career in administration and his wedding plans, has been rewarded with improvement by God. Mohamed concludes this thought with the idea that individuals might be able to influence some kinds of *la chance* and others not. The difference between these various forms of *la chance* remains unclear.

Sometimes God's plan is different from the one people imagine for themselves. Here is an example of how God provides "differently", which is a different *la chance*. Mohamed's father was a hardworking professor at the University of Bamako, but he never intended to climb up in administrative hierarchy, all he wanted was to teach and research. Now, the research proposal his father submitted for funding was denied and, yet, without any intent and effort, he became head of department at the University of Bamako. God's plan was different from his own and it did not include research abroad, but it made him become head of the department. "L'homme propose, Dieu dispose différemment." – "Man proposes, God provides." Mohamed describes the situation as follows:

*La chance* will come! It's on God to agree. Because I'm a believer... It's God who provides *la chance*. [...] Nobody can do anything when it comes to *la chance*. It's what my dad has been telling me about him not wanting to become the head of department or the dean or vice-dean. All he wanted was his passion: he

didn't need anything else. But he told me that if *la chance*, if God really wants him to be the boss... he will have *la chance*. They almost forced him to become head of department then. But this is really what he told us: Don't do anything, it's *la chance* that... but, me, I'm being honest with you: do it and do it right and the rest will follow. Voilà! (My translation, interview, 2015, with Mohamed, graduated in Administration.)

*La chance* will come, if God agrees. *La chance* is provided by God. Mohamed frames this as his religious belief. He further confirms this with the example of his dad becoming the head of the department as a result of God's plan. *La chance* comes just like that. There are two different frames of reference Mohamed uses: him "being a believer", saying God only provides *la chance* and him "being honest", saying doing things right leads to *la chance*. The frame of "belief" is supported by a story of his father, who did not fight for a higher position, simply because he did not desire it. Because God wanted him to be promoted nevertheless, there was nothing he could have done about it. Mohamed, on the contrary, argues that there is something individuals can do about *la chance*. Following up on this, I argue that his dad was a bright, hard-working man, and if this was not the case, nobody would have wanted him to be in that position and that *la chance* might not have come if it was not for his work. Mohamed responds that "Everyone else in the department is bright and hard-working, too!" Here again, *la chance* intervenes as a difference-maker. There is a mass of people that are perceived to be the same, then one happens to have *la chance*, and all of a sudden, that person is different from the others. That person suddenly has an advantage that cannot be explained by anything but *la chance*. Everyone is the same, but those who have *la chance* are recognized as exceptions.

### **God does not provide yet: temporality.**

What happens if an individual's and God's plan do not coincide? Or, put differently, what happens to *la chance* when it is absent? According to Safiatou, the two will coincide "certainement un jour" – "one day for sure":

The biggest success in life is not that of finishing studies. That's only one part of it. But the most difficult thing is to find yourself a job. Now, finding a job is *la chance*. I believe in God and I say that God gives you *la chance* of finding one.

If you don't find a job... maybe it's not the right time. So, I suggest to young people to fight, to not give up and to continue looking for a job. It'll come one day, for sure. Even if it's going to be years later. (My translation, interview, 2015, with Safiatou, graduated in English.)

*La chance* is finding a job, which, along with finishing one's studies, is one of the most difficult and biggest successes in life. God provides *la chance* of finding a job. Safiatou speaks from the perspective of somebody who found internships quite easily in the past and is employed today. Nevertheless, Safiatou knows that finding a job is difficult and that there is the possibility of not finding one. If that is the case, young people should continue to fight, try to find a job and be persistent, because "one day" or "years later" they will find a job "for sure". In other words, Safiatou does not doubt the existence of *la chance* in general, but believes in its temporal absence. She knows *la chance* will appear, provided people keep looking, she just does not know when *la chance* will appear. What is important when it comes to *la chance* is this: effort, God and timing. Individuals are responsible for the effort; God is responsible for the timing of *la chance*. If people did not find a job, they do not find *la chance* – yet. However, this does not mean that they will never find a job.

Just as Safiatou says that *la chance* will come "one day," Boubacar argues along the same lines in referring to *la chance* "next time". He is in charge of the distribution of internships in his ministry and he encourages people to keep applying. "Maybe you did not have *la chance* this time, but next time, you will," he says.

There are so many people graduating every year. [...] We have to look for people we are going to employ. Now, if we don't take you the first time, don't get discouraged. Maybe you did not have *la chance* this time. Next time, you're going to have *la chance*. You have to go and apply again! But the people are always discouraged saying "it's because of personal relations and if we don't have *la chance*, if we don't have parents there, it's not going to work. (My translation, interview, 2015, with Boubacar, graduated in Economics.)

*La chance* is to be chosen for an internship at the Ministry. Boubacar talks about the situation in which somebody is not chosen to be an intern given the enormous number of applicants. The reason a person was not chosen is

because this time, s/he did not have *la chance*. *La chance* is “maybe not this time” but “next time”. He distinguishes between two different times: “this time” and “next time”: “This time” with no *la chance*, when the person did not become an intern, and “next time” when the person will be provided with *la chance* and will be taken as an intern. Interestingly, Boubacar speaks from an insider’s perspective; he decides which interns the Ministry is going to accept, he knows the criteria according to which he chooses the candidates, and yet, he refers to *la chance* – as if it were not up to him to decide, but *la chance*. If people are not selected, they get discouraged and they blame *le bras long*. This is not going to work, he says. Rather, people should apply again. Boubacar acknowledges the fact that not everybody will be an intern due to missing *la chance*, and not due to missing relations. Note that he does not say there is no such thing as *le bras long*; he says that those who blame *le bras long* and do not apply again will not get the job. Only those who keep applying qualify for *la chance* “next time”. The distinction between “now” and “not now” is interesting. “Now” is the time in which *la chance* is absent. Something did not work out. “Not now” is “next time”, “later” or “one day” is the time of *la chance*; it is when something has worked out. In other words, God might not provide *la chance* “this time”, but “next time”. This turns the “now”-absent *la chance* into a *la chance* which is “not yet” provided by God. Consequently, the absence of *la chance* is not absolute, but temporal.

### THE UNKNOWN | What they know they DON'T know

In its absence, *la chance* has “not yet” come into being in the present and is, therefore, still to come in the future. *La chance* might also be present, but in a “different” shape. *La chance* continues to exist in its absence. *La chance* is not questioned by its absence; it is “protected against induction” (Silverman 1998, 75). The presence of *la chance* in its absence is a practical accomplishment which contributes to the common-sense knowledge on *la chance*. As a result, the absence of *la chance* is explained by its “different appearance” or “temporality”.

1. The focus on content presents *la chance* as subjective, because sometimes *la chance* is different from what people expect it to be. Mohamed’s father recognized it was *la chance* for him to become head of the department, and Madou decided it was his *la chance* to start working at the telecommunications com-

pany. Both had imagined another *la chance* for themselves. The recognition of *la chance* here is a matter of perspective. So, while a graduate might not get the job he or she wants, they might be able to get another job. In other words, *la chance* is not absent; *la chance* is there, but unrecognized.

2. The focus on time presents circumstances as temporal instead of as absolute givens. Absent *la chance* is *la chance* still to come. So, if someone does not get a job despite all efforts, it is just “not yet”. If *la chance* depends on timing, *la chance* might emerge from its very absence at any point in time – just that the exact time is unknown. To Ernst Bloch, the notion of “not-yet” status is essential to hope: “[...] the power of hope as a method rests on a prospective momentum entailed in anticipation of what has not-yet become: ‘a relatively still Unconscious disposed towards its other side, forwards rather than backwards. Towards the side of something new that is dawning up that has never been conscious before [...]’” (Bloch 1986 in Miyazaki 2006, 14). In other words, looking at things retrospectively is limited to “what has become” already. Though by looking at “what has not yet become” opens up spaces for the future in the present.

### Summary.

*La chance* is an empirical phenomenon university graduates experience and know about. *La chance* is knowledge in a sense that it indicates the very intersection of what graduates (1) know they know and (2) know they do not know.

Absence and presence co-constitute each other. Absence is recognized through an idea of something being present, i.e. something used to be there before, or is supposed to be there, but is not. Jean Paul Sartre notes that absence has the power to make disappear what is actually present (Bille et. al. 2010, 5). For instance, when a friend does not show up to a meeting, we sometimes forget what is present around us, in other words, the person's absence overshadows whatever is present. Similarly, the absence of employment potentially disguises other activities, or the absence of knowledge about one thing disguises knowledge about others. However, as much as absence has the power to disguise presence, it also has the power to create it. “The paradox of immateriality”, for instance, describes that in the absence of an object, an objectification is created, which addresses that very lack (Baudrillard in Bille et. al. 2010, 10). Research uses this constitutional relationship between absence and presence when accessing absence through the presence of, for

instance, materiality, experience, the body, the memory and discourse (Tali 2018, Malmström, Bille et al). Analyzing absence in the context of a museum archive, Tali (2018) says that it “is only through comparison and in reference to what is present that I can come to analyse these different forms of absences” (Tali 2018, 2).

In a similar manner, analyzing the relationship between absent and present knowledge among graduates, I put non-knowledge in relation to knowledge. More specifically, by examining the frequently used expression “L’homme propose, Dieu dispose”, which accounts for something graduates do not know, yet knowing they do not know. Through that lens, we were able to see that they know THAT (fact) something will happen, however, they do not know WHAT (content) it is and WHEN (temporality) exactly it is going to happen.

We have seen that there are systems of job distribution, which are supposed to work in accordance with different maxims: *le bras long* favors family members, *le concours* employs with reference to performance and “L’homme propose, Dieu dispose” rewards effort. University graduates know how these systems are supposed to work, but they also know that these systems do not work accordingly. The discrepancy between the jobs available and the graduates applying reached a point at which the criteria set for the distribution of jobs no longer apply. Graduates know that job distribution works differently: *le bras long* does not provide jobs, but it does provide information about jobs. *Le concours* employs according to the rules of *le bras long*. And God provides some version of what man proposed in the first place.

Simply put, we now know that:

Employment is a result of the presence of *la chance*. Graduates know that employment is *la chance*. Unemployment is a result of the absence of *la chance*. In the absence of *la chance*, *la chance* is made present.