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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Competition as participation: the collective struggle for a proper job

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Abstract

This article explores the increasing use of competitions to distribute scarce jobs among educated young people in urban Africa. Based on research on the entrepreneurship competition *Mashrouy* in Sudan and the government-run *Concours* in Mali, we explore how university graduates continued to join competitions despite considering 'winning a proper job' highly unlikely. Interweaving debates on neoliberalism in Africa with classical anthropological work on competitions as social forms, we remain critical of the 'contestification' of access to work, while showing how the graduates acted upon the structural oddities of competitions. We explore distinct modalities of *attending* and *partaking* in competitions as meaningful forms of participation that went beyond mere striving for success. The graduates' narrowing of their efforts to formal registration and 'good-enough' engagement (*to attend*) is tied to their general scepticism around the selection procedures and prizes of these competitions. By contrast, *partaking* refers to practices of joining and valuing these competitions in other ways, as spaces to strengthen friendships and connections, and as spaces of work. By documenting the youths' distinct practices of 'competing', we show how they were not just victims of misguided tools of governance, but used these events to reaffirm their value, exploring collective moral, expressive and futuristic potentials.

Résumé

Cet article explore le recours croissant aux concours pour distribuer les emplois rares parmi les jeunes diplômés des zones urbaines africaines. À partir d'une étude portant sur le concours d'entrepreneuriat *Mashrouy* au Soudan et le concours organisé par le gouvernement malien, les auteurs analysent comment les jeunes diplômés continuent de participer à ces concours malgré la forte probabilité de ne pas « décrocher un véritable emploi ». Entremêlant les débats sur le néolibéralisme en Afrique avec la recherche anthropologique classique sur les concours en tant que formes sociales, les auteurs restent critiques de la « contestification » de l'accès à l'emploi, tout en montrant comment les diplômés réagissent aux particularités structurelles de ces concours. Les auteurs explorent des modalités de participation distinctes en tant que formes de participation significatives qui dépassent la simple quête de réussite. Le fait que les diplômés limitent leurs efforts à une inscription formelle et à un engagement « suffisant » (à participer) est lié à leur scepticisme général

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quant aux procédures de sélection et aux prix de ces concours. En revanche, le fait de « prendre part » renvoie à des pratiques consistant à s'engager dans ces concours et à les apprécier autrement, en tant qu'espaces pour renforcer les amitiés et les réseaux, et en tant qu'espaces de travail. En documentant les pratiques distinctes de « concurrence » des jeunes, les auteurs montrent en quoi ils ne sont pas seulement victimes d'outils de gouvernance malavisés, mais utilisent ces événements pour réaffirmer leur valeur, en explorant des potentiels moraux, expressifs et futuristes collectifs.

Resumo

Este artigo explora o uso crescente de concursos para distribuir empregos escassos entre jovens instruídos nas áreas urbanas de África. Com base em pesquisas sobre o concurso de empreendedorismo Mashrouy, no Sudão, e o *Concours*, organizado pelo governo do Mali, exploramos como os licenciados universitários continuaram a participar nos concursos, apesar de considerarem altamente improvável 'conseguir um emprego adequado'. Entrelaçando debates sobre o neoliberalismo em África com trabalhos antropológicos clássicos sobre concursos como formas sociais, continuamos críticos em relação à «competitividade» do acesso ao trabalho, ao mesmo tempo que mostramos como os licenciados agiram face às peculiaridades estruturais dos concursos. Exploramos diferentes modalidades de assistir e participar em competições como formas significativas de participação que foram além da mera busca pelo sucesso. O facto de os graduados limitarem os seus esforços ao registo formal e a um envolvimento 'suficientemente bom' (para comparecer) está ligado ao seu ceticismo geral em relação aos procedimentos de seleção e aos prémios dessas competições. Em contrapartida, 'participar' refere-se a práticas de adesão e valorização destas competições de outras formas, como espaços para fortalecer amizades e conexões, e como espaços de trabalho. Ao documentar as práticas distintas de 'competição' dos jovens, mostramos como eles não foram apenas vítimas de ferramentas de governação mal orientadas, mas usaram estes eventos para reafirmar o seu valor, explorando potenciais morais, expressivos e futuristas coletivos.

Introduction

During the 2010s, new types of startup competitions, recruitment events and competitive bootcamps were mushrooming in Sudan's capital city of Khartoum. Imagine a hotel dining hall, a university lecture theatre or a company's large entrance hall filled with hundreds of graduates. Among different offerings, the annual, nationwide competition *Mashrouy* stood out by its sheer size. Each season, thousands of job-seeking youths submitted applications. Organized by the British Council and local partner organizations, *Mashrouy* consisted of several competitive stages of workshops, mentoring and project presentations. Over its five-season run (2014–19), organizers saw around 2,000 applications per season, selected twelve finalists, and finally chose three winners who received a small prize sum and a trip to London. While organizers interpreted the large number of applicants as reflecting a significant interest in entrepreneurship, many participants said they were 'just seeking a job'. When Stefanie (first author) started conducting research on *Mashrouy*, she talked to university graduates who continued applying while emphasizing that winning is unlikely. One running joke at the time was that the prize money would be only a temporary bonus that would enable them to pay for 'a car' or 'a wedding', but their

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major problem of unemployment would remain unresolved. Asked why they were joining despite their criticisms, participants highlighted the great atmosphere at *Mashrouy* as a place of collaboration, friendship and connection.

Meanwhile, in Bamako, Mali, thousands of job-seeking urban middle-class young people were similarly drawn to competitions that provided a minuscule chance of entering into employment. Another annual mass competition for jobs, *Le Concours de la Fonction Publique* (in short, *Le Concours*), is organized by the Ministry of Labour and Civil Service in Mali. It is an official system of recruitment for civil servants of various categories. The recruitment process takes place sporadically, depending on the government's needs, and is open to everyone who has the necessary educational degree. The number of applicants exceeds those for *Mashrouy* (almost 58,000 applicants in 2024–25 for fewer than 800 jobs),[1] but the chances of success remain equally low. Much like *Mashrouy*'s event halls, *Le Concours* gatherings evoked both a sense of density of participants and a relaxed atmosphere, with people going about their business of 'competing'. *Le Concours* takes place on consecutive weekends at one of the bigger lycées in Bamako – a complex of four two-storey rectangular buildings arranged around a square courtyard. Upon entering the lycée, Susann (second author) expected people to be both excited and nervous about taking the exam that held the potential to provide them with access to employment. People related quite differently to the event: '*On est tous des débrouillards*!' – 'We are hustlers, all of us,' a young man said while scanning the crowd. *Le Concours* took shape not so much as a heated head-to-head race, but as a collective project and social gathering where young graduates had come to *participate* more than to compete.

This article builds on ethnographic studies of two nationwide competitions, *Mashrouy* and *Le Concours*. Our studies were embedded in larger research endeavours: Stefanie's eleven months of field research on Khartoum's startup world;[2] and Susann's total of fourteen months of working with university graduates in Bamako.[3] Both of our projects centred on the conduct, challenges and aspirations of urban middle-class youths who joined competitions geared towards their goal: a 'proper job'. This article builds upon a striking similarity in *how* youths in Mali and Sudan participated in these competitions. Joining competitions had become a routine activity for youths who perceived winning as a matter of chance more than performance. Yet, they clearly

[1] See <https://mali24.info/concours-directs-de-recrutement-dans-la-fonction-publique-detat-773-postes-a-pourvoir/?utm>, accessed 3 October 2025.

[2] The wider research project on Khartoum's startup world was realized during several stays: two months in 2016, two months in 2017, five months in 2017–18 and two months in 2019. The material consists of: (1) field notes on different kinds of startup events, visits to office spaces, workshops, university campuses, companies, startup competitions, lectures and other events; (2) roughly fifty hours of video material of the *Mashrouy* competition and transcripts of all five seasons; and (3) fifty-two individual and group interviews (and many informal conversations and chats during events), primarily with organizers, candidates/participants and a few corporate leaders, academics, one director of a bank and one investor, more than half of them involved with *Mashrouy*.

[3] The project examined how university graduates navigate uncertainties in their life courses (see Ludwig 2024). Field research with graduates in Bamako, Mali, was conducted over several months between 2011 and 2017. During this period, more than 100 semi-structured narrative interviews were carried out with university graduates, professors and government officials, then transcribed and systematically analysed. Even though Susann attended only one *Concours* in person, the events have been omnipresent in graduate efforts towards 'a proper job'.

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valued competitions as places of social encounter, networking and clean, dignified work. Throughout our research, their engagement was shaped by practices of both distancing and immersion.

By paying close attention to their conduct, tactics and narrative framings, we argue that graduates in Khartoum and Bamako did not exactly compete, but rather *participated* in job competitions. We use the terms *attending* and *partaking* to describe the nuances of their activities within and beyond these competitions. *Attending* refers to the mere act of having secured entry and being present at an event. The term accounts for vernacular framings such as 'I am just here to participate' (as expressed by a Malian graduate) or 'I just want a proper job' (participants of *Mashrouy*) and other instances in which participants distanced themselves from the spectacle created around these events. The formalistic tone of *attending* also helps us explore youths' indifference to performance achievements and the focusing of their efforts on good-enough, distributed engagement or 'hustling' in different places where job opportunities may arise. *To partake*, by contrast, indicates a claim to partial ownership and access, and to the means to become involved and to care about mass competitions as social gatherings. The notion of *partaking* helps us recognize that, despite their disappointing outcomes, these events brought participants together as part of a social collective of people who reaffirmed their worth and built new relations on these occasions.

Describing the graduates' actions as participation moves beyond interpretations that portray young people as passive, naive or helpless victims. Instead, we show how Sudanese and Malian youths collectively responded to cynical demands for improvement, as they hustled across different zones of job search and imbued individual events with alternative values. Our emphasis on participation aligns our work with a vein of scholars who challenge the perception that practices of competition undermine relational forms such as solidarity, trust or cooperation (Ferguson 2015; Zidaru and Hopkinson 2024). We extend this view by demonstrating that mass competitions for jobs – despite their structural ironies and tensions – offer contingent forms of sociality (Hopkinson and Zidaru 2022). While we situate competitions within broader patterns of how governments and development organizations govern scarcity, we show how youths did not simply 'buy into' meritocratic expectations; instead, they entered competitions as games of chance, in which winning was unlikely, while creatively refiguring what these events were ultimately about (McCarthy 2022). Together, a shift in focus away from competition and towards rich and ambivalent practices of participation takes seriously graduates' habitualized forms of distancing and immersion, portraying them as active agents in the 'contestified' world of job seeking.

Guided by the premise that competitions are shaped by contextually situated practices, our article proceeds as follows: the first section introduces readers to the central challenge facing young people in contemporary Mali and Sudan – finding what they themselves call 'proper' employment – and situates our study at the intersection of critiques of neoliberalism and anthropological studies of competition. The second section presents short biographical episodes of two participants, Maya and Boubacar, to show how urban middle-class youths' practices of searching for a job were shaped by broader patterns of kinship, networking and mobility. This is followed by a more detailed account of *attending* as emerging from participants' multidirectional search

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for a job, and *partaking* as a rich array of practices of building relations, sharing knowledge, and doing 'normal' work by turning competitions themselves into spaces of normality. We conclude that mass competitions for jobs have also produced contingent effects: the large gatherings of young people make a generation visible to itself – and to their social surroundings – thereby feeding into a broader process of generational consciousness building.

'All of us are excellent!' Middle-class youth, contestification and desires for 'just' a proper job

'I just want a proper job' stuck with us as a poignant statement encapsulating why young people joined the competitions. The 'proper job' was an articulated object of desire in both of our field contexts. University training in Mali and Sudan is shaped by an aspiration to gain careers as civil servants who work indoors in 'clean' offices, drive a car, have a family, own houses and can afford a decent education for their children. The equivalence between visions of bureaucratic jobs and middle-class respectability is linked to a pattern inherited from colonialists. In a context of indirect rule, colonial leaders needed a few local bureaucrats and engineers, either to help administer cash crop production (in Sudan) (Bernal 1997) or to support lieutenant governors in different sectors (in Mali) (Sabatier 1978). These loyal bureaucrats were compensated with a regular wage and a distinguished status, which set them apart from earlier pastoral lives. According to scholars who write on contemporary middle-class lives in urban Africa, this colonial moral economy continues to shape values such as respectability, nobility, cleanliness and modernity (Bernal 1997; de Koning 2009; Schielke 2015). In postcolonial Mali and Sudan, the subsequent socialist, Islamist and/or military leaders maintained the emphasis on creating an educated elite, while also expanding higher education, arguably also to maintain ideological control over the citizenry (Bleck and Guindo 2013; Ille 2017; Steuer 2020).

Meanwhile, the combined effects of urbanization, structural adjustment and economic downturn have led to a profound mismatch between academic qualifications and contemporary labour market opportunities (de Koning 2009; Engeler and Steuer 2017). The public sector has been downscaled either in size (Mali) or in wages (Sudan), so government jobs are much less accessible or barely pay enough for people to make a living. During Mali's post-independence years and the country's transition from a military regime (1968–91) to democracy in the 1990s, a university degree almost guaranteed formal employment in government administration. Today, however, less than 2 per cent of graduates attain formal employment that corresponds to their qualification. Stefanie's descriptions of unemployment in Sudan are set in a pre-war context and do not reflect the current realities experienced by millions of civilians in Sudan. The *Mashrouy* competition was discontinued in 2019, due to street protests (in which youth graduates took a leading role) and rising political instabilities after the toppling of the decades-long reign of military leader Omar Al-Bashir. Since the outbreak of the war in April 2023, many middle-class families have fled to Egypt and other countries where they are still relatively safe compared with Sudan's internal refugees, many of whom are suffering from hunger, a lack of medical treatment and tremendous violence (such as mass atrocities in El-Fasher; see Andersen *et al.* 2025).

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Back in the 2010s, the use of the word 'just' (as in 'just a proper job') meant that graduates felt that they were calibrating their expectations of finding a decent job that would maintain (rather than improve) their families' social status. Because job positions had value as symbols of class status, many would rather remain unemployed than accept a job that diminished their families' dignity. The focus on office work as respectable labour overlaid other aspects, such as the specific domain of work, job satisfaction, or how well the role suited one's personal abilities and preferences. While finding their own ways of muddling through (Sambaiga 2017), the youth described their job search as an opaque, quest-like game and expressed anxieties that this transitional stage would never end (for similar issues in other parts of Africa, see Honwana 2012; Mains 2012; Schielke 2015; Sommers 2012).

Beyond being an aspiration and index of class status, the proper job is tied to a wider imagination of economic progress in African countries – one that universalizes salaried employment as a domain of development (Ferguson and Li 2018). Confronted with large numbers of graduates, public, corporate and development sector agents organize spectacular annual competitions to enable talent-based selection (jobs for the best). Despite their different histories and forms, *Mashrouy* and *Le Concours* offer comparative ground by being paradigmatic cases of how states and development organizations use competitions not only as a standardized low-cost tool to administer scarcity (of jobs), but also to enable 'development' (following a logic of 'the more competition the better') (McCarthy 2022). By design, *Mashrouy* and *Le Concours* imply that the graduates' degrees are not a sufficient qualification for a job, and that only the best deserve one. At the same time, the strong focus on only specific occupations – the engineering entrepreneur or the civil servant (as professional roles framed as prestigious outcomes of these competitions) – reinforced older colonial ideals of loyal state workers and kept the youth occupied while failing to improve their situation. Despite the fact that there were barely any jobs available, the overall rationale of these competitions was to motivate youth to 'fight their way into' work. Instilling in youth a competitive 'mindset' was the declared aim of some of the organizers we interviewed. For instance, various leading employees of the Malian Agency for youth employment mentioned 'the lack of entrepreneurial spirit' as a key factor in youth unemployment; and a *Mashrouy* organizer emphasized that Sudan needed a 'mentality change'. The implicit or explicit messages uttered about youth were that they should acquire additional capacities to deepen their expertise both within and beyond their field to qualify for jobs in different state sectors (*Le Concours*) or to improve their risk affinity, creativity and business ethos (*Mashrouy*).

Particularly striking were cases of youths who kept on returning to *Mashrouy* and *Le Concours*, year after year, seemingly not discouraged by the sheer number of competitors and repeated failures. In their biographical stories, interviewees presented long lists of events they had joined. Our interviewees often reflected on the unlikeliness of winning through recurring statements such as 'few jobs, many people' (Mali) or 'we are just too many' (Sudan), and emphasized that the whole cohort, and by extension this present generation of youth, was *already* 'excellent'. *Mashrouy* candidate Emad, echoing others who similarly included numerical analyses in their reflections, proposed that all participating youths were the 'same', 'excellent' and 'special':

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> In the beginning, we were 1,271 contestants, and then 100 contestants on stage. I saw that each of the 100 projects had its own special place. Those twenty-four that stayed: they were all excellent. I could not have chosen from the twenty-four. I felt there was no choice! Qualified and excellent people in their ideas and the way they will be implemented. They have good plans and every time their skills increased ... I also think that the remaining twelve projects were excellent projects and the differentiation between them is even more difficult.

Youths like Emad avoided evaluative judgement between different candidates and perceived themselves as being the 'same as' them. Further, people criticized or ridiculed the selection process (*Le Concours*) and even the 'prize' (*Mashrouy*) of these competitions. Participants of *Mashrouy* frequently made fun of the prize ('a wedding only'), whereas many participants of *Le Concours* were convinced that winners had been decided in advance. Since hundreds of candidates get full points in the test, it was obvious that other criteria were at play. See how *Le Concours* participant Muhammad openly reflects on the selection process:

> 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 *Le Concours* ... But there is another criterion for selection ... For example, you [the selectors] 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 chance intervenes ... The questions asked are simple. That's how it is with *Le Concours*![4]

Both Emad and Muhammad argued that a large pool of people were good and qualified enough to get the 'prize' and work in the respective jobs. In their view, performance alone was not decisive for success. In *Le Concours*, participants also found the questions so easy to answer that they felt they were being made fun of. By design, both competitions were organized around meritocratic ideals that did not play much of a role in how participants themselves (not even winners) rationalized individual success. The majority of our interviewees even ruled out the possibility of getting a position through *Le Concours* or *Mashrouy*. Arguably, displaying a sense of indifference may itself be part of performing in a competition. Yet, Emad's and Muhammad's statements reveal how youths asserted their dignity and capacities for work, rather than accepting the overall rationale of qualitative distinction.

Our shared observation that the participants insisted on their existing qualification provokes questions concerning critical literature on neoliberalism and competition in Africa. Critics of neoliberal competitions have explored competition as a tool of meta-governance (Jessop 2015), creating a particular bond between 'nation, market and person' (for a review, see Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002: 114). Reflecting on competition and gambling in Africa and beyond, scholars show how all kinds of 'goods' are shaped by expectations of performance and (self-)improvement. They problematize how processes of 'contestification' and 'gamblification' create a

[4] Author's translation from French.

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collective hunt for inaccessible goods and turn people into subjects of luck (Da Col and Humphrey 2012; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Dolan and Gordon 2019; Fumanti 2015; Gaibazzi and Gardini 2015), whose labour of hope only reinforces their precarity (Pettit 2023). In their announcement of the yearly events, organizers and advocates of *Mashrouy* and *Le Concours* indeed framed these formats as if winner-takes-all competition is the gateway to middle-class life, for instance through messages such as 'Make your dream come true' (*Mashrouy*) or by further emphasizing the singularity and rarity of stable, well-paid employment contracts as something for which only a few people are eligible (*Le Concours*).

While we align with the critique of 'contestification' at a more abstract level of political organization, our analysis diverges from claims of a radical transformation of personhood and relationality, or the assumption that people become 'involuntary gamblers' subjected to contests, games and principles of neoliberal competition (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). In a second strand of literature we consider here, competitions create fields of practice that always exceed distinct ideologies or systems of political organization (Hopkinson and Zidaru 2022). Ethnographic insights into 'actually existing' forms such as sports, beauty contests, fishing grounds, diamond mining, singers' competitions and more have revealed that competitions can foster solidarity (see, for example, Baann 2024; Kovač 2023) and can also work towards tempering individualism and competitiveness (Crawley 2024), and how competitions 'for development' often fail to achieve desired ends (McCarthy 2022). Scholars have also investigated how the value of being in competition may diverge from the competition's surface appeal and symbolism (Alegi 2008), and how people in marginalized contexts may establish competitive sociality as a positive aspect of a desirable future (Buitron 2022). With a similar focus on practice, James Ferguson has argued that critiques should not too swiftly lead to presumptions about people's behaviour as wholly transformed by neoliberalism, which are then juxtaposed with forms of solidarity or collaboration 'outside' market-based competition (Ferguson 2015: 124–8). As others equally note, this dichotomous way of reasoning conflates knowledge about capitalism with knowledge about competition, and makes analyses slide too easily into a 'capitalist slot' (Hopkinson and Zidaru 2022; see also Crawley 2024). Overall, the point of these enquiries is not to celebrate competition, but to deepen understanding by privileging what competition *does* for people who engage in it.

Inspired by such calls to explore rather than presume 'what competitions do' (Hopkinson and Zidaru 2022), our contribution centres on distinct values and practices of participation as shaping the ways in which youths in Mali and Sudan engaged – and engage – in competitions. First, our cases show how contemporary competitions in realms of scarcity indeed mobilize mass activity, but that activity is not necessarily shaped by 'competing' as in the sense of 'to battle', 'to challenge' or 'to contest'. While job schemes claim to reward merit, participants recognize how slim the chances of success are, and adjust their efforts accordingly. Whereas other research has documented manoeuvres oriented towards the 'prize' (see Piot 2019 on visa lotteries), our cases show, in contrast, how Sudanese and Malian youth tailored their efforts to *attending* as good-enough engagement. Such tactics are what a classical analyst of competition, Georg Simmel, argued long ago: if a prize is too scarce, people stop competing (Simmel 2008 [1903]: 964). While we do not aim to provide general

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meta-contextual observations, Simmel's analysis of general sociological processes of competition makes us consider how Malian and Sudanese youth intensified or lowered their engagement depending on what they felt was at stake. As evident in Emad's and Muhammad's statements on excellence and sameness in qualification, we realize that participants may not necessarily adopt the notion that competitions assess their value, instead presuming that they are already valuable (qualified, respectable) people who must hustle and network to get a job. Muhammad's and Emad's calculations and reflections reveal that participants developed their own takes on competing, most notably by insisting on the qualifications of the many, rather than the exceptionality of the few.

Second, we show that the competitions came to mean much more than just spaces where people hoped for a slim chance to get a job. They were also spaces of participation as *partaking* where people struggled for membership in social collectivities and for recognition by 'third parties'. Again, following Simmel, competition in society is a 'competition for human beings, a struggle for applause and attention, for acceptance and devotion of every kind' (Simmel 2008 [1903]: 962). For Simmel, competitions are places of 'expressiveness, communication, and creative responsiveness' (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002: 114) to a 'third party' or a 'customer' who holds a 'prize' (see also Gane 2020: 41–3; Simmel 2008 [1903]). The 'third party' is not necessarily those who organize the competition; they can also be family, community and wider 'society', which are being addressed in a nuanced struggle for recognition and approval. Scholars have shown how, in times of un(der)employment, African youths who are being excluded from the arena of work and wages begin to forge new expressions of sociability and new spaces of belonging (Masquelier 2019). In our case, job competitions were to some degree also forged as spaces of work. Standing distinct from other studies that ask what middle-class youth do in place of work, we explore how extant activities were to some degree also *rendered* work, with events providing occasions to collectively affirm respectability.

On *le bras long*, transnational mobility and the desire to work: from competition to participation

In this section, we show in more detail how participation rather than competition shaped graduates' conduct, and how jobseekers' tactics and practices are situated within broader cultural frameworks, relational networks and forms of transnational mobility. In Mali, *le bras long* (the long arm) was often mentioned in interviews; this is a local concept used to describe the actual and potential resources available to an individual, similar to Bourdieu's (1983) concept of 'social capital'. *Le bras long* represents the idea of having a favourable position as a family member, especially when it comes to employment distribution. It is portrayed as an advantage: 'You are going to be employed at a company because of your parents' relations, and not because you [have] merit or because of the studies you did,' asserted another graduate in Mali. While *Le Concours*' results determine future public service agents, graduates often characterized the selection process as shaped by *le bras long*. Boubacar, for instance, was recruited by a Malian ministry via *Le Concours* immediately after graduation in economics at the University of Bamako back in 2010. Both his parents worked in a ministry. He has two younger brothers and an older sister; all of them

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were employed by the government, two of them in ministries. Boubacar, a man who was often claimed to have a 'long arm', denied that his family had helped in his victory in *Le Concours*. In an interview in 2013, and depicting again the graduates' typical weighing of probabilities addressed earlier in this article, Boubacar recalled his trajectory. Susann took the chance to ask him straight away:

> *Susann:* Did your parents help you [pass *Le Concours*]?
>
> *Boubacar:* No, no! Not at all. No! We are not in the same domain. And imagine, how many government workers are there here in Mali? Now, if everybody helped their children ... 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 five or ten people. Imagine the probability of getting *Le Concours*. I told myself that maybe, if God is with me, I can win.[5]

Boubacar argued that *le bras long* cannot be a guiding principle if so many participants have relatives in public services. But we cite Boubacar here to show another variant of how youth challenged the idea that the competitions were principally about performance. When prompted to connect success with personal accomplishment, Boubacar instead invoked the slim odds of winning, framing his chances in terms of contingency and God's assistance. Thus, both the people suspecting the family of using *le bras long* and Boubacar himself deny that winning in competitions has anything to do with being the 'best' or outcompeting others through exceptional performance. Rather, kinship relations, contingency and chance, and the belief in 'God being with me', were key in graduates' envisioned routes towards getting a job.

In Khartoum, Stefanie made recurrent observations on how jobseekers participated in many competitions, recruitment events, internships and part-time jobs simultaneously, engaging in a multidirectional job search within and beyond Sudan. Those running events, co-working offices and one startup investor complained about high dropout rates, and about people registering for events and then not attending. Such fluctuations or forms of partial participation are related to how people's strategies involved showing up in different zones of job search and following new opportunities as they arose. The same graduates who joined competitions were, to shifting degrees, not only well networked in Khartoum, but also transnationally mobile, with their families maintaining kinship ties in a range of other countries. A temporal move to another country was very much part of their map of possible trajectories.

Such engagement in multiple, distributed and even border-crossing attempts at finding a job clearly affected how graduates engaged in Khartoum-based competitions and other offers. In 2016, Stefanie joined an entrepreneurship exhibition at a campus at Khartoum's Technical University, where she was going to meet Maya for a second interview. Maya, a graduate in biomedical engineering, had developed breast cancer detection software; this had found much favour among the jury and she had landed the third prize in *Mashrouy*. Upon searching for her at the event, Stefanie located the stand but Maya herself was nowhere to be seen. Stefanie called Maya, who explained

[5] Author's translation from French.

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that she had spontaneously arranged a trip to Saudi Arabia. Her husband had just moved there and she wanted to check out employment opportunities for herself. Maya's mobility is quite typical of how job search stretched across different types of jobs, domains and branches, and different geographical locations where family or spouses resided. Sudanese middle-class families maintain extensive kinship networks in different countries. These stretch and multiply possible routes towards employment and allow people to continue their hustling abroad. When Stefanie reached out to people including former participants of *Mashrouy*, it was not unusual to find some of them in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and even China. Even if many returned after their visas had ended or because labour markets in the UAE and elsewhere have tightened, jobseekers like Maya were simply weighing up effort, gains and other obligations, and pursuing alternative opportunities if they looked more worthwhile. Transnational mobility and partial presence were thus a self-evident part of jobseekers' 'muddling through'.

Combined with insights from the previous section, which illustrated participants' views on the unlikeliness of winning and their insistence on their professional qualifications, cultural patterns like *le bras long* and transnational mobility help explain why an emphasis on good-enough engagement and building relations across settings made much more sense than focusing on how to outperform others within singular events. Many Malian youths proactively described themselves as 'hustlers' or as people who 'just' participate. '*On fait le concours seulement pour le concours. C'est tout quoi*' – 'We take the exam just to take it. That's all, really' – said a twenty-three-year-old graduate applying for the position of accountant in *Le Concours*. In Sudan, applicants for various competitions divided their efforts to remain eligible in multiple contexts, while literally often saying that they were 'just giving it a try' in each of them. The following two sections move deeper into two major practices of participation, *attendance* and *partaking*, and situate them in participants' urban, postgraduate livelihoods and aspirations.

Participation as *attending*: multiple job paths, proper registry and collective tactics of a 'good-enough' engagement

In order to provide context for young people's practices of participation, it is important to note that even though *Mashrouy* and *Le Concours* are unique in size and reach, they do not stand alone as opportunities for advancement. These bigger events were surrounded by a broad range of similar (if smaller-scale) developmental offers and activities, including NGO work, part-time jobs, further training or exploration of employment options abroad. It follows that none of the persons we talked to dropped everything else to commit themselves solely to the competitions. While youths invested work in the competitions, they also integrated and adapted their participation along with their other job search efforts.

Some *Le Concours* participants travelled all the way from Mali's regions to Bamako, although the majority lived in the capital city. Most of them did not have a fixed or secure work contract; they were working or taking part in an internship that was directed towards some future opportunity. Some helped their parents, and some undertook vocational training. Participation in *Le Concours* is thus part of what youth in Mali refer to as 'making do' – '*On se débrouille un peu*.' In competitions, such

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established practices of making do took the form of 'just' participation, a reduction of efforts to the merely necessary: 'We are just doing the competition for the sake of the competition. That is all,' summarized a twenty-three-year-old graduate applying for the position of accountant.

Such 'making do' was distributed across many offers, spheres and relational networks. Another of Susann's interviewees, Siaka, reported a long history of participation in multiple *concours* and other offers, approaching them with a strategic mindset: given the challenging labour market, it makes sense to keep learning and developing new skills rather than specializing too narrowly in one domain. Two years after graduating in physics and completing an internship with Mali's main energy supplier, Siaka passed a *concours* for further higher education at ENSUP (École Normale Supérieure) in order to become a secondary school physics teacher. Shortly afterwards, he also began a study programme in telecommunications at a private university. At the time of finishing his studies, he was admitted to ENI (École Nationale des Ingénieurs) for another three years of training, this time to further specialize as an electrical engineer. His daily routine became intense: leaving home at seven in the morning for classes at ENI, then in the early afternoon skipping part of those courses to attend his internship at a secondary school, and finally heading to ENSUP for classes until eight in the evening. In the years to come, Siaka will be eligible not just for teaching, but also for engineering jobs distributed via *Le Concours*. Just like youths in Sudan, Siaka's individual educational/occupational assemblage diverges from purist and purposive ideals of professions, and is oriented towards securing a 'foot in the door' by being present and professional in multiple milieus from which job opportunities may unfold. Siaka did not improve his qualification for one particular job description; instead, he worked on increasing the number of employment competitions he would be able to participate in, thus his practice of *attendance* was distributed.

Not only did youths test their luck in different spheres, our ethnographic encounters themselves became potential avenues. In Sudan, Stefanie frequently interacted with a young man, Omar, who had joined a range of competitions. Omar had meanwhile secured himself a small startup fund to get his project going, but also asked Stefanie whether she could check his application to become a UNIDO youth ambassador, an unpaid representative role. The ambassador role was an appealing offer because of the wider prestige of working with international development organizations that could eventually lead to longer (and paid) involvement with these organizations. For Omar, this did not mean that he would stop his entrepreneurial project; rather, it would open up the possibility of an additional career track. During further conversation, Omar also asked Stefanie to advise him on study pathways into a master's degree programme in Europe. Susann experienced a similar encounter with Issa, a graduate preparing for *Le Concours* to become an English teacher at the national school, who was also actively involved with an NGO that promoted access to language learning. The two of them lived in the same neighbourhood in Bamako and had regular informal conversations over tea for some years. At some point, Issa assisted Susann with interview transcriptions – small projects that he referred to as opportunities that arose because of his efforts to 'stay in touch', a bet on a potential future.

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Both Omar and Issa worked on multiple options and pathways, in the hope that they would further multiply. The importance of the multiplicity, rather than depth, of pathways explains why we found many people dropping existing commitments when more promising opportunities popped up. Given the general difficulty of finding a job and the precariousness of income in times of inflation and political turbulence, it was essential to always hedge one's bets. This observation is again not new; scholars have long highlighted manifestations of hustling in urban Africa (e.g. Reumert 2023), but we address it here to highlight that this general pattern of distributing efforts and attention affected jobseekers' modes of participation in singular competitions. Next to the pursuit of quantitative diversification (many options), we must also consider the repetitive nature of these events, and the fact that repeated participation (even if met by repeated failure) was an established pattern to increase chances of landing a job. Mamadou and Bourama, for instance, are both graduates from the same class in law school at the University of Bamako. Both find themselves in very different situations today. While Mamadou runs several smaller businesses, Bourama works full time as a non-contracted intern at a government institution. However, they both view *Le Concours* as the pathway to a stable contract in a proper job. Therefore, both of them participate in *Le Concours* every year.

As part of trying to attend in many different spaces, our interlocutors laid particular emphasis on the short time span of registration or application. As illustrated by Omar's act of reaching out to Stefanie for help with his UNIDO application (whiteness being perceived as having attributions of expertise), the youth invested quite some time and energy to make sure they were in the pool of potential 'winners' of opportunities. In Mali, participants must provide documents to register for *Le Concours*: a form indicating planned exams, their diploma, a CV, and a covering letter with a 200 CFA franc stamp affixed in the top right-hand corner. Before submission, making sure the dossier is correctly completed became one of the hottest topics at the daily tea-drinking sessions. Night after night, future participants brought their dossiers along, asking fellow participants to check the documents and spot any mistakes. Alassane, an English graduate who shared Susann's commute, would head downtown for weeks before submitting his papers, with his dossier rolled up in his hands, meeting different people to ensure that everything was in perfect order. In Sudan, organizers themselves noticed a strong focus on the 'entry document' in *Mashrouy*'s two-page application form, as project manager Amir recounted. Amir observed that people seemed more concerned with this document than with the development of their business ideas. Similarly, Hoyam (Amir's colleague) complained that a few business ideas kept reappearing because people handed in the same submissions again and again, rather than improving rejected proposals or developing new ideas.

This shows that attending – as the more formal among the two practices we describe – on the one hand required quite some work and graduates had ambitions to submit a proper application. On the other hand, we need to consider the repetitive nature of 'submitting applications' to (in the graduates' view) rather dubious selection processes, and how youth diversified their engagements more than bundling all their energies into one competition event. This shows that the mere existence of competition as a system of selection does not necessarily mean that people adopt competition as a 'mindset'; rather, they tried to rationally manage their 'hustling',

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submitting good applications but also submitting them many times to different places. Rather than believing that they must do better to win, participants followed a logic of repeated and distributed attendance in different formats and on multiple occasions. This doesn't mean that youths didn't suffer because of their situation, but they clearly saw the challenges as being structural rather than due to personal failure. In this way, the mere activity of *multiplying* participation showed that graduates had developed practices that allowed them to act upon their recognition of how unlikely winning actually is.

Partaking: friends, connections, work

The previous section has demonstrated how participants multiplied and distributed their engagements. Our second key term of *partaking* considers how participation was shaped not only by young people's tactics, but also by their desires to belong and be included. While they were ambivalent about the process and 'prize' of competitions, they still valued these occasions as *social* events. In and around both field sites, we focus on two ways in which people *partake*: (1) by making friends and building relations; and (2) by transforming competitions into 'normal' spaces of work. First, much of the socializing at competitions involved forming connections with other people of the same generation, and spending time with 'friends' (a term used in both contexts) from similar academic backgrounds. When joining competitions, participants not only connected with people they saw regularly, but also reunited with former classmates they had not encountered since graduation, reinforcing a sense of community at *Le Concours* and *Mashrouy*. Such seeking of connections was not merely an emotional project, but to some degree was shaped by familiar patterns of 'hustling towards a job'. Social ties are often essential for accessing jobs, political positions and other opportunities – what is referred to as *le bras long* in Mali and *wasta* in Sudan.

In Mali, graduates either already had a *bras long* or worked on creating one, partly by using *Le Concours* as a sphere for relationship building with potential providers of jobs. Administration graduate Mohamed had undertaken an internship at a bank in Bamako several years previously. Despite never gaining a job contract there, he is still in touch with his former boss, who has promised to find him a job. 'They wanted me to work there, but they didn't have the means to recruit me ... This happens via the *Concours*, you know.' Through his internship, Mohamed expanded his professional network. Everything seemed aligned for employment: he worked well, people liked him, they even wanted to recruit him. Still, Mohamed had to wait until the next *Concours* for his job opportunity to materialize and thus for a chance to partake in formal employment. In other words, qualification, effort and even *le bras long* cannot overcome the general absence of jobs; yet, participation in *Le Concours* is itself preconditioned by the strategic mobilization of jobs. In line with Mohamed's account, recent events have shone a brighter light on the ways in which personal connections, favours and information circulate at *Le Concours* – often determining who gains access to opportunity. In 2023, the results of *Le Concours* were annulled after the discovery of large-scale fraud. Official investigations revealed that civil service jobs were sold through a corrupt network involving intermediaries and senior ministry officials. The fraud included tampering with admission lists, document forgery and collusion inside exam committees.

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In Sudan, *Mashrouy* also became a place where people developed their connections or *wasta* (personal intermediation in Sudan's professional labour market; see Mann 2014). A few young men managed to secure jobs through the competition, even without 'winning'. Because these events were often attended by employers – as sponsors or trainers – some participants were able to build connections with corporate representatives, or were recruited by the British Council. Contrary to the competitions' stated aim of fostering entrepreneurship, these men had successfully used these events to establish proximity to, or *to partake* in, circles of businessmen and development actors in Khartoum. In other words, the patrimonial networks that had excluded these jobseekers from employment also became more accessible *through* competitions.

Second, because they had become somewhat routine, the competitions adopted features of the 'normal, proper job' in allowing youths an embodied experience of going to work or being at workplaces, notably in local worlds in which most forms of employment are temporary or underpaid. Let us return to the scenes we addressed at the beginning of this article. When Susann first arrived at *Le Concours* in Bamako, she found the *lycée* resembling a busy office building – like a company or a ministry – where everyone seemed to have a task or a deadline. People hurried in and out of classrooms where others were already writing their exams, or walked briskly along the corridors checking door signs that displayed the day's exam schedules. All around the courtyard, there was motion – people eating, reading, flipping through documents, typing on laptops, talking to each other or on the phone – each person absorbed in what felt like the collective rhythm of a workplace in full swing.

In Sudan, Stefanie's interviews with *Mashrouy* candidates revealed an alignment between working on projects and the 'real job' imagined as the competition's ultimate outcome. During a multi-day startup weekend held in Khartoum, for instance, Stefanie observed people spontaneously forming small project teams that mimicked real firms, complete with departments for marketing, operations and finance, each led by a team member. During these 'corporate meetings', people experimented with the potential professional roles they might one day inhabit, for instance when a young man said: 'I tried marketing, but this ain't me. Now I am doing product development, this is what I am good at!' Thus, the young man had 'changed jobs' and reoriented towards an occupation that he felt played to his talents and interests. Many also enjoyed 'being entrepreneur' for some time and involved their families or friends in their tinkering on prospective business projects, even if these never became real. In any case, within the atmosphere at entrepreneurship events, the experience of searching for work in a company and operating this company became more closely aligned.

This shows that people – alongside their hustling and moments of critical distancing – also actively immersed themselves *in* these events. Somewhat paradoxically, *Le Concours* and *Mashrouy* afforded occasions to dress for work, leave the house and work. In both settings, it was important to remain active and occupied, and also to portray such activity to their respective families and neighbourhoods. Participating in a competition, in combination with job search activities, reflects Simmel's emphasis on competitions as shaped by desires for social recognition. Activities such as sending applications or calling a distant relative were perceived as work not only by the graduates but also by their families, who valued their activities

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purely due to the fact that they were trying in a difficult situation. In that sense, being in a competition allowed the momentary cultivation and enforcement of *partaking* in a setting in which graduates could either 'make new friends', including professional friends and potential employers, or be 'just' office people who do their work or run their businesses. The habitus of being working professionals who *already* participate in work-as-practice further explains why they were not particularly receptive to the meritocratic messages of the competitions. Instead, we found that many participants insisted on their worth as educated people, and sought ways to make connections, or enjoyed the competition for reasons other than competing itself.

Conclusion: job competitions and a generation becoming visible

At a broader level, competition as an organizational form increasingly shapes the cultural terms through which social actors grapple with the contingent nature of economic life in Africa; this is evident in how normalized participation in competitions had become in our study contexts, and how muted open critique or resistance was. Yet, our research also complicates generalizing claims that gambling, play and competition become a 'centrifugal' economic modality repositioning subjectivities (Da Col and Humphrey 2012). Instead, our analysis reveals how young graduates understand what they potentially gain through job competitions (and what they do not) and act on their own interpretations. Taking their collective qualification for granted, they do not attempt to outcompete each other, and instead focus on participation. To increase their chances of success in attaining 'a proper job', they distribute their efforts and participate (*attend*) repeatedly in multiple events, while gaining other things such as friendship, connections and temporary experiences of work-as-normality (*partaking*). Our article has shown not only how youths navigated within these competitions, but also how their practices of participation shaped the nature of competition events. The distributed and multiplied participation in several spaces from which jobs may emerge to some degree transforms job competitions into just another space of hustling, approached by already established practices of 'making do'. Furthermore, participants' focus on competitions as opportunities for friendship and professional development highlights the connection between competing and seeking connections, as well as the desire for recognition and approval from society (Simmel 2008 [1903]).

We close this article where we started: young people's embodied feelings of being at the events themselves, adding one more speculative loop to our argument, that participation matters. Of note is a final, more subtle effect of participation as contributing to the visibility of a generation *to itself* – a capacity that has been long described in classical ethnographies of events (see Geertz 1973). The mass effect we addressed in the opening scenes, participants' recognition of being one of 'so many people', also rendered *visible* the embedded structural inequalities and the misguided measures aimed to address them. People's observations of the masses present prompted numerical analyses of the (non-)likelihood of gaining one of the few prizes on offer. In that sense, job competitions in Bamako and Khartoum did not merely respond to or address the problems of 'a generation'; they were also performative spaces through which 'a generation' became visible. Like other forms of social

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belonging, being a member of a generation is not a given, but needs social and narrative practices to come into being (Ortner 1998).

The anthropology of competitions and events has highlighted how their anticipatory and prefigurative politics often exceed their formal purpose. The sheer intensity of participation in events comes with a potential to render shared values visible to unite people through shared affect and commitment.[6] By providing a spatial experience of the sheer size of a jobseeking generation, competitions such as *Le Concours* and *Mashrouy* created feelings of belonging and 'being the same', and provided reassurance that failure is *not* a matter of individual shortcoming. The simple recognition is: it is not laziness or a lack of effort that produces our unemployment, but a system that fails to provide adequate job opportunities. Look how many we are! This recognition indicates not only that scholarly critiques of neoliberalism underestimate young people's vibrant practices of reflection and critique, but also how some political potential rests in the competition (as a *gathering*), not in the sense of preparing youth for rebellion, but in their capacity to *visualize* what is otherwise much harder to perceive. While scattered groups of up to ten people across different parts of town may give the impression of youths sitting around and practising 'waithood' (Honwana 2012), the mass gathering of thousands of educated young people in downtown Bamako competing for only a few hundred jobs reveals the striking improbability of securing employment. Thus, the large gatherings should be read not only as signs of tremendous social issues, such as mass unemployment, but also as social spaces in which people collectively anticipate potential futures (Masquelier 2019). Paradoxically, then, the mass character of a competition anticipates the potential of a generation's potential beyond currently confined political realities. Young people refer to excellence ('all of us are excellent') – this is not a desperate or delusional response, but rather an expression of young people's insistence on their own value, even in the absence of material proof, 'a proper job', to substantiate it. Seen in this light, the youth participated not only in competition, but in manoeuvres to collectively affirm their value as members of society.

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[6] See Alegi (2008) on beauty contests in South Africa, or Buitron (2022) on dramatic play in Amazonia.

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