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A Hausa Man Makes A Decision: A Contribution to the Anthropological Perspective on Decision-Making

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Abstract: In anthropology, decision-making has mainly been studied from two perspectives: rationalist and ethnographic. These approaches lack a theoretical basis which would integrate their findings in a coherent manner. Taking inspiration from Tugendhat and Berthoz, this article argues that a way out of this impasse is to conceptualise decision-making as an action. At the same time, this conceptualisation allows us to establish a continuum of decision-making processes from simple through complex to fundamental, and to understand these processes as malleable across milieux, societies and cultures. This article also goes beyond this by discussing the decision-making process that led a Hausa villager from Niger to decide not to migrate. This discussion shows that the anthropological literature has largely overlooked a type of decision that could be called a 'maturing decision'. It also sheds light on the role of emotions in decision-making and on the constitutive role of emic ideas about decision-making in these processes.

Keywords: Decision-making; Economic anthropology; Hausa; Niger; Emotions

Introduction

Decisions and decision-making are central terms in anthropology.¹ This is reflected in the frequent use of the terms in various fields of research, for instance, the anthropology of social change (Barth 1967, 668), economic anthropology (Geertz 1979, 203; Beuving 2006; Ensminger 2001, 191) or religious anthropology (Mossièrè 2007, 113).

According to the general understanding of the term a decision-maker chooses between at least two courses of action. The process by which a person actively reaches a decision is called decision-making and this process involves cognition (cf. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/decision>). A brief look at existing ethnographic evidence shows that people make decisions in many ways. Members of a Pentecostalist church in Togo search for signs of the beyond in the present (Piot 2010, 128) before they decide what to do. Hausa from Nigeria might choose a bride or bridegroom on the basis of a photo. Moroccan traders carefully evaluate information before they decide if and what to buy (Geertz 1979, 203-12). As the above-mentioned examples show, decision-making processes may vary significantly between actors, situations, societies or cultures. Given this diversity, decision-making is an appropriate subject of study for anthropology.

Among anthropological studies that explicitly discuss decision-making, there are two basic approaches. The first approach or *rationalist approach*, as I will call it, has developed in the wake of rational choice theory (cf. Boholm, Henning and Krzyworzeka 2013, 108). The proponents of this approach see decision-making as a form of mediation between the actors' preferences and situational circumstances by rational calculation of means and ends (Barth 1967; Ensminger 1996, 2001; Finke, Heady and Donahoe 2015; Görlich 1996; Henrich 2002; Schlee 2008). Following a term from Boholm, Henning and Krzyworzeka (2013, 106-8), the second approach could be described as an *ethnographic approach*. These studies examine decision-making from a variety of theoretical perspectives, but what sets them apart is the fact that they place a greater emphasis on the detailed description of decision-making processes than the proponents of the rationalist approach. Such studies are rare in number (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1989; Gladwin 1980; Johnson-Hanks 2002; Krzyworzeka 2013; Ortiz 1967; Sjölander-Lindqvist and Cinque 2013).

I will discuss both approaches in greater detail later. For the moment, suffice it to say that these approaches, as I see it, do not offer a theoretical foundation that could bring their findings together in a coherent manner. I argue that the philosopher Ernst Tugendhat (2003, 48-58), who interprets reflection as an action, and the neuropsychologist Alain Berthoz (2002, 13; cf. Humphrey 2008, 367), who sees decision-making as an action, provide such a theoretical foundation. I will take up their idea, propose to conceptualise decision-making as an action and try to develop this idea further.

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Outline of the Article

In a first step, I will show that decision-making is indeed best conceptualised as an action. To achieve this objective, I will turn to rationalist studies of decision-making, study their findings, and show that their focus on the rational calculation of means and ends creates difficulties in accommodating norms and emotions within their theoretical framework. This problem, as I see it, can be resolved by conceptualising decision-making as an action. I will then turn to ethnographic studies of decision-making and show that their research findings substantiate the thesis that decision-making is best conceived as an action.

Second, I develop the idea of conceptualising decision-making as an action further. I will argue that there are different modes of making decisions just as there are different modes of action. Ethnographic studies of decision-making exemplify this point and will allow me to establish a preliminary continuum of decision-making processes stretching across three stages: from simple through complex to fundamental. Finally, I will argue that decision-making processes are malleable across this continuum allowing different milieux, societies or cultures to develop specific ways of making decisions.

Third, I will present my own case study to provide further evidence for the thesis that there are different modes of making decisions by introducing yet another variety of decision-making which I will call the ‘maturing decision’. My case study also serves to highlight two aspects of decision-making which have not been highlighted in previous studies: the role of emotions in providing direction for decision-making processes and the role of emic understandings of decision-making processes.

Decision-making as an Action

As noted above, rationalist approaches developed in the wake of rational choice theory. Rational choice theory sees reflection on means-end relationships at the heart of decision-making processes. Through reflection on means and ends, the actor mediates between his desires and external circumstances and figures out the best option to accumulate benefit. Gary Becker (1976) spells out the details of this process; a rough summary will suffice in this context.

An actor has preferences, desires or wishes. He desires, for instance, health, prestige and sensual pleasure (Becker 1976, 5). He is embedded in a situation. Given his set of preferences, it is his aim to maximise benefit in a given situation. He weighs up the alternative ways to act that are open to him in the situation and chooses the one that promises the maximum benefit. The resultant action is always rational. Wrong decisions or inefficient action are due to a lack of information (1976, 7).

This basic paradigm has been applied to social life (Geertz 1979, 198). However, in the process, some anthropologists found it difficult to apply it seamlessly to their observations (Chibnik 2011, 1-19; Görlich 1996). They point out that actors do not necessarily strive to maximise benefit, but might aim to attain a certain level of satisfaction. An equally well-known argument is that actors not only strive for their own aims, but might also pursue altruistic goals or try to live up to ethical standards. These arguments, as Henrich (2002, 5)

rightly points out, can easily be accommodated by rational choice theory. They only require minor modifications, but the structure of decision-making remains intact. Actors still figure out alternatives, weigh them up against their expected benefits and choose the one that promises the most.

Some authors, however, found that the cognitive process by which actors decide is not accurately captured by this theory. To cite an example, Frank Cancian (1980, 162) assumes that actors not only think through various courses of action but also assess the probability of these courses of action leading to the desired effect. To cite another example, some researchers argued that actors often reflect inaccurately because they tend to regard conclusions based on small samples to be as reliable as conclusions based on large samples (Henrich 2002, 11; cf. Kahneman 2011 for psychological research on cognitive imperfection).

This is not the place to analyse the entire discussion on rational choice theory. Instead, I will turn to one part of the discussion which is directly related to the point I would like to make. In her illuminating and highly influential writings, Jean Ensminger (1996, 4,12-16) integrated rational choice theory into the new institutional economic approach. She also discussed emotions and norms as factors that interfere with decision-making. In her 2001 article *Reputations, Trust, and the Principal Agent Problem*, Ensminger deals with the problem of integrating the issue of trust into decision-making. In her case study from Kenya, Orma herd owners decide to entrust or not to entrust their herds to herders. Ensminger (2001, 199) comes up with the solution that, at least in her case study, trust is based on rational calculation:

Trust occurs neither randomly nor prematurely. It occurs in direct measure to a decreased risk of the probability of cheating on the parts of both the principal [herd owner; jph] and the agent [herder; jph], and this assessment is based on their incentives for long-term corporation, their reputations, and the general context of norm enforcement.

In Ensminger's account, herd owners never trust blindly. She considers the emotion of trust to be a function of rationality, not a force of its own in decision-making processes. Rational choice theory as the cognitive mediation between desires and external circumstances remains intact. However, Ensminger's proposal is unable to cover decision-making processes in which trust would prematurely be granted to others and the possible role of emotions in decision-making processes thus remains unexplored.

A similar point can be made with respect to the role of norms in decision-making. Ensminger (1996, 13) calls norms 'constraints placed on choice'. Actors prefer some norms to others, they negotiate them, monitor them and enforce them (Ensminger 1996, 127-8). A similar strategy is used here, as we saw in the case of trust. Norms are interpreted as objects of desire or external circumstances in the decision-making process. As such, rational choice theory can, or so it seems, deal with norms and does not need to be modified. However, as Finke, Heady and Donahoe (2015, 2,8) point out, there is still another side to the role of norms in decision-making. Norms can also put pressure on decision-makers by making them feel obliged to behave in certain ways. In this case, norms influence decision-making processes in

a different way. Actors may shy away from breaking norms, and norms can prevent actors from devising ways of action.

In summary, studies in the wake of rational choice theory find it difficult to accommodate norms and emotions into their theoretical design and show a tendency to assimilate them to desires and external circumstances of action. This difficulty permeates other authors' writings in which decision-making plays a central role. Joost Beuving (2006), for instance, analyses decision-making among Nigerian car dealers. Although he focuses on his field subjects' conformity in a hierarchical setting, he does not use the terms 'norms' or 'emotions' and attributes their conformity to their elders to a 'propensity' (2006, 353, 355) or a 'desire to live up to their (older) relatives' expectations' (2006, 369). He interprets his field subjects' behaviour as being rooted in desires, and his interpretation thus becomes compatible with the rationalist paradigm. Responding to this difficulty, Günther Schlee (2008, 17), who makes ample use of the rationalist paradigm in his analyses, even admits openly that he emphasises rationality, but feels helpless when dealing with emotions.

At first sight, this seems to be a minor issue. However, it reflects an underlying and more important problem. It calls into question the possibility of reducing the decision-making process to a predominantly or solely cognitive process in the course of which an actor rationally mediates between his preferences and external circumstances. In line with Ernst Tugendhat (2003) and Alain Berthoz (2002), I suggest that a way out of this impasse would be to view decision-making as a form of action. Actions allow us to conceptualise norms in both ways: as external circumstances and as obliging and steering the actor to act in a certain way. They equally allow us to think of emotions as a factor in their own right that can influence the course of action independently of reflections on means and ends.

Substantiating the Thesis

When social scientists speak of action, they have in mind an actor who purposefully tries to bring about an end (Giddens 1993, 16; Parsons 1937, cited in Kalter 2015, 76; Tugendhat 2003, 48-9). At the same time, the notion of action does not imply that rational cognition on means-end relationships necessarily predominates, as it does in rational choice theory. Action involves other constitutive elements as well. To illustrate this point, Weber's (1922, 12) classical definition identifies emotions and habits as constitutive parts of any form of action. Finally, more complex actions evolve over time in a gradual manner (Dewey 1949, 151, cited in Joas 1996, 227). To identify decision-making as an action, I would thus have to demonstrate that that these three characteristics are actually an integral part of decision-making processes.

Although ethnographic studies do not explicitly discuss the goal of decision-making, they allow us to define its goal. Decision-making will typically *not* occur when action is unproblematic, and actors immediately know what to do. As Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1989, 102) put it, we do not make decisions when we talk, ride a bicycle or carry on most social activities. However, ethnographic studies show that decision-making *does* occur when actors do *not* immediately know what to do. They interrupt an action and reflect in order to find out

how to proceed in this situation. To exemplify this point, Sutti Ortiz's (1967, 214) Colombian farmers engage in decision-making when they have to plant new fields. Under these circumstances, they do not know which crop to plant on which field, reflect on this and eventually decide how to cultivate the fields. Similarly, Johnson-Hanks (2002, 875-876) reports about Marie, a Cameroonian schoolgirl, who unexpectedly becomes pregnant. This would bring an end to her school life. She does not know what to do and engages in a lengthy period of reflection and decision-making. In summary, the goal of decision-making is to determine a course of action when the actor does not immediately know what to do.

As noted above, conceptualising decision-making as action not only implies that decision-making has a goal, but also that elements other than rational cognition on means and ends can be part of the decision-making process. Ethnographic studies show that decision-making involves rational reflection on means-end relationships, but also involves memory, possibly literary techniques, norms, emotions and social interaction. I will exemplify these points.

Ethnographic studies show that *rational cognition on means-end relations* is a component of decision-making. In Krzyworzeka's (2013, 132) article on decision-making in farming households in eastern Poland, the farmer Wieslaw adapts his plans to plant potatoes to the timing of an anticipated stay in a sanatorium. Similarly, the chess player in the Dreyfuses' (1989, 100) account studies his opponent's position, discovers that the latter has weakened the king's defences and decides to attack the king.

The Dreyfuses' article also illustrates the role of *memory* in decision-making. As noted above, decision-making occurs in situations in which actors do not immediately know what to do. However, if decision-makers are familiar with a situation, then they already have memories that allow them to roughly grasp the situation. On the basis of this, they already have an understanding of what is important in that situation and merely have to consider the details. If decision-makers are less familiar with a situation, they will have to analyse it in more depth and plan more carefully (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1987, 100-102). An experienced chess player, for instance, does not need to reflect intensively in order to know how to react towards his opponent's first moves on the chessboard, as he has experienced these situations many times before and can remember them.

Christina Gladwin's article exemplifies the possible role of *literary techniques* in decision-making (1980, 55-62). Her decision-makers want to buy a car. In the process, they apply a number of literary techniques. They make a chart and fill in the different characteristics of the alternatives (for instance, price, colour, fuel consumption). Later, they select one criterion and rank all the alternatives according to this criterion (they might select the criterion 'price' and rank the cars according to this: 'A is less expensive than B, B is less expensive than C').

Ethnographic studies also provide evidence for the fact that decision-making is shaped by *emotions*. When the farmers in Krzyworzeka's (2002, 874) article reflect on planting potatoes, they hesitate, but later they become optimistic and continue making plans. The Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1989, 100) argue that decision-makers feel responsibility. Ethnographic studies also allow us to identify *norms* as elements of decision-making processes. In Krzyworzeka's (2002) case study, men and women make decisions in their respective fields of competence and do not interfere with the other gender's tasks. Finally,

Ortiz provides an example of the importance of *social interaction* in decision-making. When Indian farmers have to decide on how much coffee to plant, they engage in intense discussions with others before they eventually make a decision (1967, 216).

Ethnographic studies also allow us to show that complex decision-making processes evolve over time in a gradual manner, similar to complex actions like steering a boat through a sluice. In her article mentioned above, Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2002) conducts interviews with female Cameroonian students who have become pregnant and can no longer pursue the future they had initially planned. The students either have to get married and become housewives or have to give up their child through abortion or adoption in order to continue their education. She presents the reader with the case of Marie (2002, 872-878) who, fearing a shameful entry into motherhood, follows her father's wishes that she move in with the family of her child's genitor. She tries to be a good wife and finally moves into the new household. In her new home, however, Marie suffers under her mother-in-law, converts to her new household's religion and after a longer period of time, she seeks advice from her former parish priest and decides to return home, leaving her child behind. Marie makes two decisions: she moves in with her child's genitor, and later decides to return home. In both cases, her decision evolves over time and goes through several stages in the course of which she gradually discovers the different components of her situation. To sum up, decision-making qualifies as action for three reasons. First, it is a purposeful activity. Second, decision-makers engage in rational reflection on means and ends, but they may also draw on memory items, employ literary techniques, follow or break norms, have and respond to emotions and might engage in social interaction. Third, this process might evolve gradually over time.

Modes of Decision-making

When we speak of modes of action, we think of actions that differ with respect to their elements and structure. Some actors carry out the different steps of a procedure hastily, some slowly, some follow norms, others break them and so on. The same idea pertains, of course, to decision-making. We would thus assume that there are different modes of decision-making. This point has already been made by Ortiz in 1967 (214-9), who distinguished between two types of decision-making. Ethnographic studies allow us to develop her point further. However, it needs to be stressed that ethnographic studies are too rare in number to cover the whole field. More research is needed here. Ethnographic studies do, however, provide enough evidence to set up two preliminary hypotheses. First, there is a continuum of decision-making processes, which can be divided into three prototypical stages: 'simple', 'complex' and 'fundamental'. Second, there is plenty of room for variation along this continuum, allowing different milieux, societies or cultures to develop specific ways of making decisions.

A Continuum of Decision-making Processes from Simple through Complex to Fundamental

As noted above, Ortiz differentiates between two types of decision-making. The simpler mode occurs, for instance, in the production of staples when a farmer is planting cassava. At a certain point, he might discover that the seed is not as good as he had assumed and then reflects on how much more seed he will need to plant in order to have a sufficient harvest. According to Ortiz (1967, 217-219), these decisions are made on the spot, taking into consideration only a small number of situational aspects and satisfying a given need. The second type is more complex and occurs when farmers organise production (Ortiz 1967, 214-217, 222-223). When a young farmer becomes independent from his father, he decides once in his life on how much coffee to plant on his land. This decision is a careful one that involves the consideration of many situational components, the anticipation of consequences, the projection of alternative courses of action, advice-seeking, and one which aims at maximum benefit.

Although Ortiz does not think along these lines, her evidence shows that the simpler form of decision-making transforms into the more complex one when five conditions change: In the first case, the situation is simple, the actors are experienced in dealing with the situation, the consequences are predictable, the aim is moderate and the result is of limited importance to the actors' future well-being. When farmers reflect on the use of land for coffee trees, however, these five conditions have changed, the situation is complex, the young actors are not experienced in dealing with the situation, the consequences are shrouded in uncertainty, the aim is ambitious and the result is of greater importance to the actors' future well-being. At this preliminary stage, we can thus assume that changes in these conditions transform simpler modes of decision-making into more complex ones.

What is remarkable in both of these decision-making cases is that actors can carry on their lives in harmony with what is fundamentally important to them whatever choice they make. None of the choices endangers their status in the community, the stability of their family lives or their prospects to remain agricultural producers. The situation is different, however, if actors have to choose between courses of action that threaten aspects of their lives that are fundamentally important to them. To illustrate this point, we can turn to the example provided by Johnson-Hanks (2002) and develop it further.

As noted above, Marie and other female students have to deal with an unplanned pregnancy and have a choice between two options. They either marry and give up their studies, or they give up their child and continue to study. In some respects, their decision-making resembles the complex type: the situation is complex, the alternatives are shrouded in uncertainty and so on. Therefore, the decision-making process stretches over a longer period of time during which the potential futures are 'under debate' (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 872). However, Johnson-Hanks also mentions two points that indicate that this process is indeed different from complex decision-making. Actors now have to question their aims or, as Johnson-Hanks (2002, 872) puts it, 're-evaluate their aspirations'. The actors are also more deeply involved, emotionally, as they later remember these times as periods of 'promise and fear'.

These points indicate that this type of decision-making is best conceived as a dilemma. The futures between which the students have to choose imply the loss of an element of their lives

that is fundamentally important to them. They have to choose between their child or schooling. Correspondingly, they are emotionally much more deeply affected than in the first cases. It seems as if the complex type would transform into the fundamental type when actors have to choose between aspects of their lives that are fundamentally important to them.

Variation in Modes of Decision-making across the Continuum

So far, I have outlined a continuum of decision-making processes and established three prototypical stages on this continuum. These prototypes do not exhaust the possibilities of making decisions. There is ample room for modification around and between them because the number of factors shaping decision-making processes goes beyond the above-mentioned factors that determine if a decision is made in a simple, a complex or a fundamental way.

The anthropological literature provides examples. As Gladwin (1980) has shown, literary techniques can have an impact on the way decisions are made. American car buyers can break down the whole process of reflection about the pros and cons of cars by making charts and arranging cars lineally against a selected criterion. Optimism might reinforce a decision-making process (Krzyworzeka 2013, 874). To cite a famous example, actors may apply religious techniques in making decisions. The Azande practice of administering poison to chickens fulfils the function of anticipating the future and saves the Azande from reflecting on a decision when the consequences of each alternative cannot be anticipated (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 120-145; cf. Humphrey 2008, 364).

Decision-making processes therefore appear to be the result of a much wider array of factors than those which informed the above-mentioned classification, and we can expect different milieux, cultures and societies to develop different ways of making decisions.

I will now turn to my case study. It focuses on a Hausa peasant from Niger who I will call Musa and who has two options: to leave his home village and settle in Nigeria or to stay at home. Through this example, I will contribute to the anthropological study of decision-making in three respects. First, I want to elaborate on the continuum, prototypical stages and cultural modifications of decision-making processes by introducing a mode of decision-making that I call the ‘maturing decision’. Second, I will further elucidate the role of emotions in decision-making processes, as previous studies refer to emotions but do not clarify their role. Third, I will show that emic notions of decision-making play a role in these processes.

The Case Study

Field Site and Methodology

Musa lives in the village of Kimoram², located some 150 km east of Zinder, the major city of southern central Niger. It has a population of around 400 inhabitants. Most of the villagers live in mud huts, which typically house husband, wife and their children. In a typical

² The name of the village is anonymised.

Kimoram household, the most important economic activity is field cultivation. The man owns one or more plots of land on the sand dunes around Kimoram. Before the rainy season, the man clears the fields. When the rain starts to fall, he sows millet and cowpeas. Later on, he harvests the crops and brings the harvest in to be stored in his granary. In theory at least, the man is able to feed his family with this harvest and even sell some of it to buy necessities such as clothing. While her husband is working on the fields, the wife looks after the children, does the cooking and brings food to her husband in the field. Although she is not obliged to help him cultivate the fields, she might do this too when she is not occupied with her own work. Older children help their father on a more regular basis. The husband also provides his wife and each of his older children with a small plot of land. They cultivate these plots for their own use. The large field is called a *gandu*, the small plot a *gayauna*.

Every household has access to land. Some households also own a small number of fowl, goats, sheep or cattle. However, agriculture in this area is a rather precarious economic activity. The harvest often does not allow the family to sustain itself for more than three to seven months per year. Extra income is needed. Some men manage to raise money in the local area by working as barbers or blacksmiths or by providing transportation services with ox carts. Nevertheless, many need to travel further afield. Young men, in particular, leave the village during the slack period, when no rain has fallen and there is no work in the fields. They go to Nigerian cities such as Gombe, Zaria or Potiskum. In the mornings and afternoons, they roam the streets selling bread and tea. They bring home their earnings to make up for the insufficient income from agricultural produce. Some households are quite successful and are able to support themselves. Most households are less fortunate: they have debts, an unfavourable dependent-worker ratio, and they even lack food during certain periods of the year.

If not from a historical point of view, then at least from an analytical viewpoint, the more complex household structures are based on the simpler structures that I mentioned before. Children work on the father's fields and contribute to the family income. Later on, adolescent sons establish their own huts in the same village as their father. Then the children marry, young men at the age of approximately 18, girls at the age of approximately 13 to 16. Either immediately upon marriage or after a transition period, the newly-wed wife moves into her husband's hut. The new household slowly gains economic independence. At the beginning, the son continues to work on his father's fields and his father also feeds him. While the son grows more mature, he continues to work on his father's fields, but he builds his own granary. At harvest time, the father hands over part of the harvest to his son, who stores it in his granary. When the son has reached the age of about 35, the father divides up his fields and the son then cultivates his share independently. The process repeats itself with each son. However, households containing fathers, sons and brothers are still linked together by a variety of social obligations. In the case of a shortage of food, each household can demand help from the other. In the case of marriage, the father might still contribute to the marriage expenses if his son divorces and wants to remarry. Between uncles and nephews, or between cousins, there are the same social obligations that require them to help each other in case of food shortages or financial needs. These are, however, far less strong and far less reliable than the obligations between fathers, sons and brothers.

It is worth noting that all the inhabitants of the village engage in field cultivation – this is their main economic activity. All the villagers are Muslim, and the village has two imams. It is located in the canton of Birnin Gabas, which is ruled by the canton chief who resides in the town of Birnin Gabas, about 12 km from Kimoram. His main duties with respect to the village are tax collection and jurisprudence. The main market where the villagers sell their cowpeas and buy their provisions is also located in Birnin Gabas. At the time of research, there were no schools or administrative offices in the village. Furthermore, the region was not an important recipient of development aid.

I collected my data during three field visits in Niger (July-October 2006, July-September 2007, July-September 2009) and one in Nigeria (Nimari³, Plateau State, December 2010-February 2011), where Musa and many villagers from Kimoram spent their slack period. The main method used was participant observation in its intensified form of shadowing (Czarniawska 2007). Shadowing means that the participant observer spends most of their time with one person and focuses their observations on this individual. I focused my observations on Musa. It should be noted that this approach entails a perspective on decision-making that complements that which is most commonly chosen in the anthropological study of decision-making. Anthropologists usually observe a variety of decision-making situations and draw general conclusions on the basis of these observations. Although indispensable in the study of decision-making, this approach creates a tendency among anthropologists to overlook long-term decision-making processes that are tied to individuals. Shadowing brings these processes back to the anthropologist's attention.

Musa

When I first met him in 2006, Musa was approximately 37 years old. He lived on his own compound with his wife and their baby. Shortly after my arrival, he married his second wife, Mariama. As a consequence of this, his first wife left him, taking their daughter with her because the baby had not yet been weaned. His father – one of two imams – was around 70 years old and lived on his own compound. He had two wives, one about 40 years old, the other about 60 years old. With the former, he had two small children, the other was childless. Also living on the compound were three teenagers named Babangida, Awalu and Ali, who were Musa's nephews. Musa had two brothers, one of whom had died, and one sister. They had stayed in Nigeria before Musa and his father moved to Niger many years before. The nephews were his brothers' children. Although Musa had his own compound, economically he was fully integrated into his father's household. He worked his father's fields, and the field produce was stored in a granary belonging to his father, who controlled the contents. After going to Nigeria during the slack period, Musa would hand over the money he had brought home to his father. In all economic matters, his father had the final say. Musa and Mariama each had their own small part (*gayauna*) of the family fields. It was primarily Musa who bore the burden of providing for both households, as the father was too old to work the fields and the teenagers too young to be efficient workers. As Mariama had just moved in, she rarely lent a helping hand – neither did the imam's wives. This was more than one person could

³ The name of the town is anonymised.

handle and both households therefore suffered from a shortage of food. By 2009, Mariama had given birth to two children. In the meantime, the baby girl his former wife had taken with her had been weaned and Musa had reclaimed her. His father's childless wife took care of her. In 2009, his father made the decision to split the fields. Musa now had his own household, fields and granary, and he controlled his own harvest and the income he earned from labour migration. Furthermore, Musa integrated Ali, one of his nephews, from his father's household into his own. Babangida and Awal stayed with the imam and, since they had meanwhile both grown older, they had to work his fields under his supervision.

Musa and His Father

Since Musa's relationship with his father plays a central role in his decision-making, I will describe it in some detail here. In the course of the re-arrangement between the two households, Musa gained autonomy in relation to his father and responsibility in relation to his own family. This was also reflected in decision-making processes pertaining to economic matters. According to Musa, prior to the separation of the households, if he wanted to make a major investment, he had to ask his father for money or wait until his father offered him some. For example, Musa would have liked to have bought a bull in 2007. But he could not go to Nigeria in order to make up for insufficient field-produce *and* to earn the additional income needed for this purchase, because he would have been obliged to hand over the earnings to his father (cf. Hill 1972, 47). Instead, he had to speak of the merits of an ox and see if the imam took to the idea. After the separation, Musa was able to make autonomous decisions regarding his own labour. He was also able to decide for himself how to spend his money and cultivate his fields.

Thus, the separation of the two households represented a decisive change in Musa's life and in his relationship with his father. When I met Musa again after the separation of the households, I found that his newly acquired autonomy and responsibility had changed him. His own goals suddenly seemed within reach and now depended more on his own efforts. He was more motivated and self-confident than before. His previous concerns about being slowed down or hindered seemed to have vanished.

With the reallocation of resources, both households had the same economic resources at their disposal now and could theoretically have supported themselves independently of one another. However, the relationship between father and son was not only defined by the availability of material means. The impact of this change was mitigated by certain social institutions. Both households remained linked through strong ties of solidarity. For example, the households helped each other with certain minor tasks in the organisation of labour, and they would still ask for a share of each other's food supplies. They also shared responsibility for the adolescents' marriage expenses.

The relationship between Musa and his father was also an authority-based relationship (cf. Raynaut 1972, 92). In Kimoram, a son owes respect and obedience to his father throughout his life. The father's authority over Musa found its outer expression in several forms of behaviour. Being the son, Musa squatted, for example, in front of his father when he greeted

him in the morning and in the afternoon. This kind of authority relationship also implied that the person lower in status was not able to speak his mind and had to withhold his objections. For example, the father once received three sacks of food. Musa was disappointed when his father only gave him three bowlfuls (*kwanuka*), but chose to keep quiet and not to address the issue with his father. Despite the authority of father over son, the imam did show respect for Musa too, in accordance with his age and status. For example, when entering his son's compound, he did not pass through the *tsai da bak'i* ('stop the guest') fence. Children's duties towards their parents also had a religious dimension. Obedience towards one's parents was considered to be one of the most important religious duties, and disobedience would result in divine punishment. On the other hand, a child could curse his parents if they failed to fulfil their duties towards him, and the parents could be punished by God as well. The father-son relationship was also shaped by a sense of indebtedness (cf. Marie 1997, 73-80). As Musa said, he owed his life to his father and was therefore obliged to be patient and obedient towards him. As we will see later, this idea of being indebted had an impact on his life. When Musa was considering moving from Kimoram to Nigeria, thus leaving his father behind, he tried to dismiss this idea by remembering that he owed his life to his father.

But there were more aspects to this relationship. Musa valued good relations with his father and clearly stated that he wanted to be on good terms with him. Furthermore, their interaction showed that they were fond of each other, even after the separation of households. When Ali broke his elbow, Musa tried to solve the problem by treating his arm himself. Later, when Musa wanted to take Ali to a bone specialist in Garin Gabas, his father advised him to see Awwal, gently adding that one should react to such issues more quickly than Musa had. Similarly, when the imam discovered that a bull had entered his field, he initially thought that it must be Musa's bull, which he had acquired after my second field visit. He quietly and calmly said this to Musa, who quietly and calmly responded that it was Garba's bull. I could perceive no signs of confrontation or aggression.

I do not know what Musa and his father talked about when they were alone. Musa reported that they spoke about their daily tasks, about ways of earning money, getting access to food or financing marriage, about how the village population responded to Islamic teachings, about their migration plans. However, Musa did not discuss all issues with his father. This became clear when Musa talked about wanting to ask Menau for a loan. He said he had discussed this issue with Mariama, but not with his father.

However, the relationship was not without difficulty, which mainly revolved around Musa's and his father's divergent interests. Musa spoke of several instances when, in his view, his father had got in his way and thwarted his will. The differences of opinion between Musa and the imam revolved around economic progress and remained a point of contention between Musa and his father. I will provide three examples to illustrate this:

Once, Musa spent his slack period in Diffa. He sold fried wheat balls at the motor park and invested his profits in dried pepper. He bought the pepper when it was still cheap and wanted to keep it until its market price had increased. However, his father sent him a message through a travelling villager. He told Musa to come back home. Musa sold the pepper at a

low price and came home with the little money he had earned. He bought two animals with the money, but both of the animals died later.

Musa and his father differed in their general approach to economic matters. Several times, Musa complained of a difference in opinion between the old and young generations with respect to economic thinking. He said the village's older population was mainly concerned with producing food for the year and eating it. The younger ones, as Musa put it, planned for the long term. They thought about acquiring 'means of production' (*kayan aiki*) and accumulating wealth.

The imam had assumed responsibility for financing Babangida's and Awalu's marriages because they lived permanently in his custody. However, the father could not afford to pay for Babangida's marriage, so Musa had to share the burden. He spent the slack period in Nigeria and then spent his earnings on Babangida's marriage. During the following cultivation period, he did not have the means to make up for the previous year's harvest deficit. He said that if Awalu and Ali wanted to marry in the future, they would have to either wait for a good harvest or earn money themselves. However, when I listened to the father, I sensed a different attitude. He spoke to me about the most pressing problems he had recently had to resolve. He said that he had divided up his household and married off Babangida. From what the father said, it appeared to me that he saw marrying off Babangida as an unconditional, unnegotiable duty.

These three examples show that Musa assigned greater importance to economic affairs than his father did, a difference of opinion which would resurface in their relationship time and again.

The Decision-making Process

Throughout my three stays in Kimoram, Musa was torn between his own desire for economic progress and his father's needs and expectations. On the one hand, the imam needed Musa in Kimoram. He was economically dependent upon Musa, being the main worker in both households. He also depended on him socially, since there were no other close family members in Kimoram. Musa knew that his father wanted him to stay in Niger. These expectations weighed on Musa as he cared about his father and wanted to maintain good relations with him.

On the other hand, Musa wanted to advance economically. It was difficult to do this in Kimoram. Harvests and the money earned from seasonal labour migration hardly provided enough to sustain both families. Musa explained that from an economic point of view, it would be wiser to move to Nigeria, where the family still owned fields and had close kinsmen with whom they could live. Harvests would also be better in Nigeria. Extra money earned would not need to be spent on making up for a shortage of food, at least not to the same extent. The farmers could slowly but surely accumulate wealth.

During the first three years of my being acquainted with Musa, he was constantly pondering how to resolve this dilemma. Staying with his father meant poverty. A decent living, however, implied leaving his father behind. Within those three years, he came up with a

preliminary solution to the problem, but the deliberation process went through several stages to which I will turn now.

When I first came to Kimoram, Musa lacked food, was angry about the economic impasse he was in, and was seriously considering leaving for Nigeria. However, he was conscious of his moral obligations towards his father and this weighed on him heavily. It would have been shameful to leave his father behind. Neither did he feel that his leaving would be right, nor would the public have endorsed it and he tried to dismiss this idea by remembering that he owed his life to his father. Since he had only recently married Mariama, he had not yet discussed these issues with her. At the same time, being a member of his father's household meant that he could not independently own resources and build up an economic existence of his own. Since he did not have a solution to his problem, he remained in Kimoram.

During my second stay, Musa had started to discuss these issues with Mariama, who did not want to stay in Kimoram. She thought village life was harsh and found it difficult to make friends in Kimoram. Mariama was in favour of moving to Nigeria. At the same time, Musa had become aware of the importance of the fact that the family held written title deeds only for their fields in Nigeria, and not for their fields in Niger. He assumed that if all members of the family left Kimoram, others would appropriate the land. Therefore, if Musa and Mariama left for Nigeria, the imam would have to stay in Kimoram, and Babangida would have to work the fields. This solution implied a physical separation from his father. During my fieldwork, however, the imam had changed his attitude towards migration. As the village imam, he considered it his duty to watch over the village, educating the community in Islamic standards and helping it to live up to these standards. However, he felt that he was unable to have sufficient influence over the village community, so he was open to leaving for Nigeria. Meanwhile, Musa came up with yet another idea. Instead of staying in Niger and continuing to work as a labour migrant and instead of moving to Nigeria, he reconsidered his former idea of buying a bull. Following the example of a travelling petty trader who came to the village once a week, he thought he could also acquire an ox cart and engage in petty trade. On market day, he could carry goods to the markets just like every other ox cart owner. On other days, he could tour the nearby villages as a petty trader and sell consumer items such as soap, salt and rice. Since Musa was still dependent upon his father, he needed the latter's consent to buy a bull. He therefore still had no solution to the problem.

Before my third field stay, the situation had changed again. For reasons unknown to me, the imam was no longer open to moving to Nigeria. Furthermore, Musa had realised that his father was becoming ever weaker and would depend on him even more in the future. Moving away was no longer an option. Musa could not leave his father alone. He was also tired of labour migration to Nigeria. Then the father split up the households and Musa gained more economic independence. With money I had given him in the previous year, he had gone to the market and bought a male calf that would become a bull one day. He could now conceive of becoming a petty trader in the future. Musa said that although Mariama supported this idea, she would still have preferred to move to Nigeria. The new solution accommodated both desires: his desire to stay with his father, support him and comply with his wishes, and his

desire for economic progress. However, this was only the plan at that time, and Musa said he would try to achieve his goal within two to three years. This prospect gave him hope.

A short note might be in order here. The reader might object that I had intervened in the social process. Since Musa was poor and I was close to him, I could not, however, simply stand by and watch his and the imam's families starving, but bought them a sack of millet once or twice during my field stays and also left them with the equivalent of between EUR 80 and 100 at the end of my field stays. My gifts had to be shared among both families, as well as with other villagers in need. Musa used part of the money to buy a calf. However, I consider the impact of my intervention on Musa's courses of action as minor. For a certain time, it helped the families to eat two or three times a day instead of just once or twice. Similarly, Musa's economic trajectory was not decisively affected in the long run. As he has subsequently informed me by telephone, he had not become a petty trader, but was still muddling through. At the same time, the validity of the theoretical conclusions I have drawn from this case study remain unaffected by my intervention.

Discussion

In the introduction, I claimed that decision-making is best conceptualised as action. My case study, I feel, further corroborates this thesis. Musa does not know how to carry on and strives to find out what to do. At the same time, his reflections are part of a larger process in the course of which cognition combines with norms, social interactions and emotions. His decision-making also evolves in a gradual manner.

Furthermore, this case study comes closest to the fundamental decision-making type, as Musa is in a dilemma. He has to choose between two courses of action: staying put or leaving, but each option implies that he would have to renounce something that is fundamentally important to him – his father or economic progress. As with the Cameroonian students in Johnson-Hanks' (2002) article, Musa engaged in situational analyses, figured out alternative courses of action and imagined potential futures in search of a perspective that would satisfy both desires. He was also very involved emotionally, he discussed the issue with others, and the process stretched over a longer period of time.

Yet, my description of Musa's decision-making also differs from Johnson-Hanks' analysis. Part of these differences are characteristic of the fundamental type of decision-making and serve to define this type in more detail. Three points stand out.

First, it becomes clearer that Musa does not pursue a single line of thought but several different lines of thought which could lead him in different directions. He reflects on staying put and the implications of such a decision. He considers leaving his father behind and the ramifications of this. He imagines splitting the households – with one remaining in Niger and the other moving to Nigeria – and the resources and children being reallocated accordingly. Second, it becomes clearer that the situational aspects are continually shifting, and Musa has to re-examine his situation and his plans several times. Initially, Musa cannot discuss the issue with Mariama, later he does. Initially, his father does not want to migrate, then he agrees, only to later return to his initial position. At a later stage, I give him money and he

buys a calf. In the process of reflection, Musa also discovers new aspects of the situation, such as the importance of written title deeds. Third, we can see that a decision-making process that stretches over a longer period of time requires the decision-maker to hold decision-making processes temporarily in suspense and come back to them later.

Nevertheless, Musa's decision-making process cannot simply be subsumed under the third prototype. This is due to its protracted nature. Whereas Johnson-Hanks describes her actors as being in a state of crisis, in which the decision-making process takes centre-stage in their lives, Musa keeps his decision-making process in suspense over several years; it accompanies him in the background and surfaces time and again. This points to the existence of a type of decision-making that has not played a prominent role in anthropological discussions so far. I call it the 'maturing decision'. Musa has long-term desires that go far beyond the situation in which he is engaged at any given point in time. The incompatibility of these desires and his living circumstances produce a conflict within him, which continues to simmer in the background. It is as if the unresolved issue breaks open at different moments in time. He gives it some thought and then it falls back into the background again, only to be reconsidered in another situation later on when the conflict resurfaces again and the same process repeats itself. In the meantime, however, the situation has changed, so he needs to reassess the situation in order to reach a decision later on. Throughout this process, however, the decision gradually matures.

As noted above, I also want to elaborate on the role of emotions in decision-making. Ethnographic studies refer to emotions as part of the decision-making process. The Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1987), for instance, point out that decision-makers are invested emotionally in a decision-making situation. They feel responsible for their actions, sense uncertainty and risk, or even feel fear (1987, 100). Johnson-Hanks' decision-makers oscillate between hope and fear (2002, 872) or they fear future shame (2002, 873). These studies, however, let emotions appear as merely concomitant to the decision-making process. Research on emotions has, however, shown that emotions trigger impulses to behave in certain ways (cf. Ben Ze'ev 2009, 66-70). Fear makes the actor run away. Love makes the lover seek the beloved one. By extension of the same argument, we can claim that emotions also trigger deliberations on how to achieve the aim induced by an emotion. This feeds into the whole decision-making process. Emotions, sometimes conflicting ones, play a role, providing an incentive to take various courses of action and making the actor pursue one line of deliberation, and later another. This process can be observed in Musa's case.

During the first stage of Musa's decision-making, his economic impasse triggers anger. Yet the alternative thought of leaving Kimoram and abandoning his father triggers feelings of shame. However, when he later considers the option of becoming a petty trader, this gives him hope. These emotions are not only concomitant with the whole process of decision-making, but also play a constitutive role in it. The anger intensifies his efforts to search for a solution, shame mitigates his incentive to migrate to Nigeria, and the hope of finding his way out of his impasse by becoming a petty trader motivates him to reflect in that direction. In Musa's case, emotions provide incentives to act and to pursue the corresponding courses of deliberation.

The analysis of Musa's decision-making process highlights yet another aspect of decision-making that has been largely overlooked in the literature. Musa's decision-making is rather slow. This is partly due to the complexity of the issue, the changing nature of the situation and his relatives' positioning. However, an emic understanding of what constitutes a proper decision-making process influences how Musa makes his decision. This emic notion is implicit in everyday behaviour and discourse. It therefore needs to be deduced from people's behaviour and conversations. Thus, Musa's decision-making process was not unusual, as Musa and other villagers generally favoured a slower mode of reflection and decision-making. I often noticed that they usually took their time before making a weighty decision and considered immediate decision-making as prone to failure.

This preference for a slow mode of decision-making was also expressed in proverbial expressions voiced by the villagers in conversations. They explicitly view haste as detrimental to achieving one's goals. They express this idea with the exclamations *aikin gaugawa* (the work of haste), which they use to attribute mistakes to haste or they say *sannu-sannu bata hana zuwa* (doing it slowly does not prevent you from arriving). Furthermore, the idea of a prolonged process of decision-making is contained in the expression with which Hausa refer to decisions. In contrast to the German word *Entscheidung* (decision) which refers to the idea of cutting off ways of action (*am Scheideweg*, at the crossroads), taking one way instead of another (*Wasserscheide*, watershed) and separation (*Scheidung*, divorce), the Hausa term *yanke shawara* refers to cutting off (*yanke*) counselling and advice-giving (*shawara*). In contrast to the German expression, the Hausa word does not identify decision-making with the reduction of possibilities, but as the end of collective deliberation. Finally, this mode of decision-making reflects an idea of patience, one of the peasants' chief social values. In everyday discourse, the importance of patience is often stressed. Furthermore, everyday behaviour is often marked by patience. The most powerful example might be the two arranged marriages which Musa went through. Finally, the villagers believe that their key values, including patience, are endorsed by God. One person said, for instance, that God wanted people to be patient. He argued that God bestowed a destiny upon people, so accepting one's destiny, i.e. accepting God, implied being patient and was thus prescribed by religion.⁴

Conclusion

The rationalist approach conceives decision-making as a rational calculation that is subject to a defined structure. According to this perspective, decisions are always made in the same manner, while their constituent components, such as preferences or goals, change. Yet, as we have seen in the first part of this paper, this conception cannot be easily supported. Decision-making should instead be conceived as action. In decision-making, the rational calculation of means and ends is embedded in a complex process in the course of which it intersects with norms, social interactions and emotions. This approach allows us to conceive decision-

4 One reviewer asked if Islamic values played a role in shaping Musa's decision-making. The value of patience is a case in point.

making as malleable and to identify a larger variety of modes of decision-making. Beyond what has been achieved in empirical studies of decision-making, I have tried to show that one type of decision-making has been largely neglected: the maturing decision. I have also tried to show that decision-making can involve a variety of emotions that can play a constitutive role in shaping decision-making, and that emic ideas about decision-making can influence how decisions are made.

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