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## Claudia Roth's Work in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso. Introduction

Willemijn de Jong

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# Urban Dreams

TRANSFORMATIONS OF FAMILY LIFE IN BURKINA FASO

**CLAUDIA ROTH**

Edited by Willemijn de Jong, Manfred Perlik, Noemi Steuer and Heinzpeter Znoj

*This is a very timely project and an excellent way to bring out the larger contribution of Claudia Roth to Africanist anthropology. Roth's work is of very high quality and extremely original, especially regarding her focus on intergenerational relations, gender dynamics within the household, matters of love and marriage, and the problems of urban life with little income or job security.*

MAHIR SAUL, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

*Claudia Roth conveys a vivid image of the often separate, complementary and at times conflictive worlds of men and women, parents and children, and siblings. The reader gets a feeling for the effects of economic and social transformations on individuals.*

KATJA WERTHMANN, University of Leipzig

*Urban Dreams is a wonderful contribution to the understanding of contemporary social change, both in Burkina Faso and more generally.*

YACOUBA BANHORO, University of Ouagadougou

Claudia Roth's work on Bobo-Dioulasso, a city of half a million residents in Burkina Faso, provides uniquely detailed insight into the evolving life-world of a West African urban population in one of the poorest countries in the world. Closely documenting the livelihood strategies of members of various neighbourhoods, Roth's work calls into question established notions of 'the African family' as a solidary network, documents changing marriage and kinship relations under the impact of a persistent economic crisis and explores the increasingly precarious social status of young women and men.

**CLAUDIA ROTH** (1955–2012) taught and conducted anthropological research at the Universities of Zurich, Bern and Lucerne. She served on the board of the Swiss Society for African Studies (SGAS/SSEA) and was a member of the International Mande Studies Association (MANSA). *Urban Dreams* is the first collection of her work to appear in English.

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Cover image: Burkinabe family outside their home in Ouagadougou  
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CLAUDIA ROTH | URBAN DREAMS

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## Urban Dreams

### Transformations of Family Life in Burkina Faso

Claudia Roth†

Edited by Willemijn de Jong, Manfred Perlik, Noemi Steuer, and Heinzpeter Znoj

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## Reviews

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## Description

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## INTRODUCTION

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# Claudia Roth's Work in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso

Willemijn de Jong

Claudia Roth was an outstanding Swiss anthropologist who did comprehensive research on West Africa for almost twenty-five years, from 1989 to 2012, the year of her death. During this time, she concentrated on specific neighbourhoods in Bobo-Dioulasso, the second-largest city in Burkina Faso. This resulted in a unique ethnographic narration of local struggles against both persistent as well as new insecurities. In particular, her work has covered the research fields of urban anthropology; gender, work and family life; generational relationships, poverty and social security; and young academics and their careers. These scholarly fields were not entirely new when she started working on them. She was inspired, for example, by feminist studies on the negotiation of intra-household dynamics in the region. Yet, she reacted to this trend in her own specific ways and elaborated upon it in the new and changing conditions of an urban context. Thus, the research topics she focused on opened up new scholarly terrain in regard to Burkina Faso, and her long-term ethnographic work was truly pioneering.

Her work is unique because it is rich in factual details and it is a lively and, often, poetic testimony of many women and men, young and old, their relationships, their hopes and dreams, and the harsh existential challenges they experience in their everyday lives. With each piece of work she created, Claudia Roth provided readers with deeper and denser insights, both structural and practical, into lives that usually pass unnoticed in the media and in mainstream social science studies – of people who hardly raise their voices, unless an extraordinary anthropologist such as Claudia Roth listens to them, again and again, and gives them a space in which their voices can be heard and recognised. With this

anthology, we honour her and the people she worked with, and we seek to amplify this space once more with the stories, concerns and pleasures that they entrusted to her, as well as calling to mind the fascinating findings she extracted from them.

Until now Claudia Roth's articles were widely scattered throughout numerous journals and edited volumes. They have been published over the course of twenty years, and in three languages – German, French and English.<sup>1</sup> By uniting these articles in one volume, and by translating those originally published in German and French into English, we make her long-term ethnographic study available to a larger readership so that it can achieve the impact it deserves. From a broader perspective, the articles presented in this anthology meticulously depict the evolving life-world of an urban population in one of the world's poorest countries in the 1990s and 2000s.

### Milestones in Research

Claudia Roth graduated with an MA in social anthropology at the University of Zurich in 1982 with a theoretical thesis on women's work and power. The study was entitled *Woman and her Relationship with Man and Capital* (Roth 1982).<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, she additionally worked as a journalist and activist on issues of biotechnologies related to humans, animals and plants, and she became known in Switzerland as the editor and author of the volume *The Age of Genes* (Roth 1987).<sup>3</sup> Her own contributions in that volume discussed embryo transfer among cows, and human genetic diagnoses. She was amongst the first anthropologists to deal with these issues.

In the 1990s she continued her work on women and gender relations, particularly in the context of gender segregation, which were issues that were high on the agenda of women anthropologists internationally at that time. In Bobo-Dioulasso, she found her regional focus. Starting in 1989, she conducted fieldwork for her PhD for a period of fourteen months in the neighbourhood of Koko in Bobo-Dioulasso with people who identify themselves as Zara. Initially, she came to the town to study how young Burkinabè cope with the challenges of growing up in a culturally vibrant multi-ethnic town where strong tensions among the genders and generations as well as between cultural values could be expected. After she had lived there for a while, she began to focus her study on strategies of power of men and women in regard to love, marriage, property, money, and child rearing. The relationships with the families in the compound in which she lived had an important impact on her initial ethnographic

work. With every further field research she extended her social network, and she continued to cultivate these relations until the end of her scholarly career.

In the book that resulted from this first project, she developed a remarkable thesis: that gender segregation in this urban West African context limited patriarchal power because it enabled women to have the possibility to create a life of their own, based on modest economic independence – and this was also recognised by the men (Roth 1994). This differed significantly from earlier conditions, when women had been completely dependent on the elder male kin and husbands, who had the right to decide on many important issues regarding living conditions. In order to present examples for female economic independence, she curated an exhibition based on her research project with the title 'Work in Waste: The Soap Women in Bobo-Dioulasso',<sup>4</sup> which included incisive pictures by the Swiss photographer Susi Lindig and a catalogue with her own texts (Roth and Lindig 1998). The exhibition was showcased in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and at several venues in Switzerland, as well as in Burkina Faso and Mali.

With a grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation, in the first half of the 2000s she conducted research together with the sociologist Fatoumata Badini-Kinda on local social security, age and gender in Burkina Faso. This research was part of a comparative project between two countries in the Global South and between urban and rural regions within these countries. Willemijn de Jong and Seema Bhagyanath conducted a parallel study in Kerala, India. At that time Claudia Roth also worked at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Zurich. In a joint book publication – *Ageing in Insecurity* (de Jong, Roth, Badini-Kinda and Bhagyanath 2005) – as well as in several articles in journals and books, she denounced certain engrained social scientific and popular wisdoms of those years. For example, by closely documenting the livelihood strategies of women and men of various neighbourhoods, she called into doubt established notions of 'the African family' as a solidarity network. She showed that young women create personal space by mobilising both the kinship relations with their natal families as well as the relations with the families of lovers and husbands. Further, she pointed to the fact that it is often the elderly women who support their families with small-scale earnings. Therefore, she innovatively argued, they are often the ones who are able to maintain important relationships of social support. Without the economic and social efforts of the elderly, these families risked impoverishment.

Moreover, she dealt with the widespread phenomenon of chronically unemployed or underemployed men, who thus did not have the neces-

sary resources to provide for a family. She pointed out that this put conventional notions and structures of the family under severe stress. The consequences were destabilised marital ties and what she conceptually coined the 'inverted inter-generational contract', meaning that many young men and women cannot assume the role of providers for their aged parents and that especially young mothers remain permanently dependent on their parents. This inversion of the generational contract undermines the long-term viability of multi-generational households that have hitherto served to cushion individual risks and distribute benefits. The weakening of these social structures makes life for the poor ever riskier, and long-term social security increasingly elusive – a process that over time reinforces the impoverishment of whole strata of the urban population. In view of the process of rapid urbanisation in Africa, these structural social changes must be understood in greater detail. Claudia Roth's groundbreaking work is an essential and rich contribution to attaining this goal.

From 2007 until 2011, Claudia Roth conducted research at the University of Lucerne on 'burdened generational relationships', which was also financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Roth 2011). In this project, she cooperated with the sociologist François Höpflinger, an expert on phenomena of ageing in Europe. In the meantime, she was also affiliated with the University of Berne and was invited to hold guest lectures there. In her desire to deepen her study of the inverted generational contract, she became interested in the emerging new habitus of different generations that expresses the contradiction between the normatively valid generational contract and the generational relationships existing in practice. The relationships between elderly parents who are chronically ill and their caring children, and those between 'children without employment'<sup>5</sup> and their caring elderly parents came into focus. The new and intriguing aspect of this research was that both the perspectives of the parents and their children were collected. In the first case, Claudia Roth found that young daughters and sons are overburdened when they simultaneously have to care for their parents by providing money and time and have to organise their own lives. Nevertheless, their caring task also gives them satisfaction. And the parents try to unburden the relationship with their children by striving to earn some money as well. In the second case, the elderly parents are overburdened – an inversion of the generational contract. This means that parents care for grown-up youngsters with daily food and accommodation, providing the younger generation with a protected space that should eventually enable them to look after themselves. However, parents in this case have strong feelings of ambivalence, and generational conflicts loom large in such situations



of intergenerational dependency. A further project was planned on young academics and their professional careers that should have started in 2012 at the University of Basel; she was, however, unable to take part in it anymore. Her colleagues Noemi Steuer and Manfred Perlik have continued the project.

## Theoretical and Methodological Notes

Claudia Roth was theoretically inspired by gender studies, anthropologically oriented social security studies, and practice theory in the mode of Bourdieu. Regarding the limiting effect of gender segregation on the power of men and its enabling effects on the agency of women in certain domains of their own, she drew on the works of Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) and Maya Nadig (1986). The theoretical approach she developed in her first book is also important for her later work: a materialist view at the core of which lies the control of resources that enable negotiating power, also as a base for social mechanisms of reciprocity in times of hardship. In this context, it was her teacher and doctoral supervisor Lorenz G. Löffler who provided useful theoretical inputs (Löffler 1990). With the women in Koko in mind, she writes, for example:

The reach of the effect that gender segregation has in limiting power is, thus, dependent on the resources that women control. Under the precondition that these are monopolies of the same strength as those of the men, egalitarian relations are possible. These can be restricted, as in the case of the Zara, to a subsystem – the material exchange in marriage. (Roth 1994: 30)

The most urgent concern of her interlocutors – to secure a livelihood – became her most important research interest in her second and third research projects. Here, Claudia Roth builds on the theoretical and empirical work of legal anthropologists Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann that looks at social security in the Global South from an inclusive perspective (von Benda-Beckmann and von Benda-Beckmann [1994] 2000, 2007). In contrast to state-led, top-down approaches to social security of the International Labour Organization, the von Benda-Beckmanns focus on the conversion of economic resources of individuals and groups into social security needs (regarding food, water, shelter, care, health, education and income). In doing so, they also take structural and ideological conditions into account. With a similar view from below, from the ways in which individuals and groups 'cope with (in)security' arising from the lack of state-sponsored security networks, poverty and

changing social structures, Claudia Roth looks at the people in the urban neighbourhoods in Bobo-Dioulasso as exemplary case studies. She thereby tested and refined this theoretical approach. Additionally, she took protection systems and relationships into account – concepts that had been developed by the French sociologist Robert Vuarin in his research in Mali (Vuarin 2000).

In her work on burdened generational relationships, Claudia Roth refers explicitly to the theoretical concepts and findings of Pierre Bourdieu in Algeria, in particular to the habitus concept, different forms of capital, processes of individualisation, and concepts of work and ideas about the future (Roth 2011). The habitus of the older generation in Bobo-Dioulasso is influenced by their rural socialisation with hard labour and periods of hunger, whereas their children are born in the city and have grown up with school education, television and other consumer goods such as mobile phones and elegant clothing. Moreover, sex before marriage is now a normal practice. The types of capital at one's disposal, thus, also differ between these generations. The children aspire to an occupation as a civil servant with a monthly income. But this is an unrealisable dream for the majority of them. In particular, it is out of reach for the two categories of youth that she looks at more closely: those who care for a sick parent, and those who are supported by their parents. They are unable to create a pragmatic plan to improve their lot. In a similar context, Bourdieu terms this 'the magical negation of their actual situation' (Bourdieu 1977). Only with increasing possibilities to improve one's economic situation do the aspirations for the future become more realistic (Bourdieu 2000).

In terms of her methodological approach, she was initially inspired by the Zurich ethno-psychoanalytic school of Paul Parin, Fritz Morgenthaler, Goldy Matthey-Parin, Mario Erdheim and Maya Nadig (Erdheim 1982, Nadig 1986, Parin, Morgenthaler and Parin-Matthey [1963] 1989). This is the reason why she started out by engaging in intense research relationships with a few key informants who eventually became lifelong research partners. Over time these key informants became the foci of an expanding social network in which she carried out a series of research projects. Even despite the fact that she soon abandoned the demanding and somewhat artificial setting of ethno-psychoanalytic interviews, she remained committed to building up long-term research partnerships and kept her interest in the particular conditions and resources, as well as the particularities of agency, of the people living in Bobo-Dioulasso.

In her first book, she defined her methodology as 'situation-based research' (*situationsgeleitete Forschung* in German). This indeed echoes the ethno-psychoanalytical procedure, as she goes on to explain:

'Situation-based research' is characterised by the fact that open questions and unclear aspects are present but do not directly determine a conversation or an encounter. The *situation* is principal, which means that the primary concern lies with the person and with that which preoccupies her, the composition of the people who are present, the place and its atmosphere – everyday concerns. This implies having to wait with one's own questions for an adequate moment to arise. At the same time, due to a specific situation, issues will be raised that were not planned and which sometimes cannot be further pursued but which are nevertheless closely related to one's own field of interest. (Roth 1994: 19)

She substantiates this with the fact that asking questions is not part of 'African culture' and that relationships are the basis for her insights. She therefore also made verbatim records after the meetings. It was only as an additional method that she conducted targeted conversations and took notes directly. This is a procedure that in essence she continued throughout her years of research in western Africa, although guided interviews did appear to have gained in importance in later years. One could also call her methodology 'biography-based ethnography', as it is individual people and their lives and narratives that are most crucial for her analyses. It was also of utmost importance for her to learn Dioula, and this fitted well with her understanding of dialogical ethnography. After some time, she spoke this local language well enough to be able to use it exclusively in her conversations with her interlocutors instead of French.

### **Local Contexts, Global Connections**

What are the main characteristics of the local contexts in which Claudia Roth's research took place, and what are its global connections? Conducting fieldwork in one of the world's poorest countries<sup>6</sup> led her to scrutinise at an early stage of her research the livelihoods of those hardest hit by poverty. During the twenty-five years of her research, poverty increased in the neighbourhoods she studied. It was the result of the cumulative effects of the dismantling of the remnants of the former socialist regime's welfare policies due to the structural adjustment measures demanded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the 1990s; the food crisis due to recurrent droughts in the Sahel zone and the shift to export-oriented agriculture; and the AIDS epidemic that has tended, in Africa just as elsewhere, to strike the most productive members of families (cf. also Hagberg [2001] 2008).

In everyday matters, ethnic identification plays a significant role in Burkina Faso, also in relation to the state and its bureaucracy. In 2014 Burkina Faso had a population of 18.4 million inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> The two largest ethnic groups are the Mossi and the Fulbe, consisting of about 40 per cent and 10 per cent of the population, respectively. The people who are called Zara, with whom Claudia Roth mainly interacted, speak Bobo as a first language and Dioula as a second language (Sanou 1978). They number about fifteen thousand, and live in Bobo-Dioulasso as well as in the regions to the west and east of the city.<sup>8</sup>

The country is in a peripheral economic and political position due to its colonial past as a part of French West Africa, when it was a hinterland of the core trading areas of the then-British Gold Coast (now Ghana). Burkina Faso gained formal independence in 1960. The so-called revolutionary years of the Marxist regime of President Thomas Sankara between 1983 and 1987, sometimes alluded to by Claudia Roth's interlocutors, had a profound impact because local chiefs had to yield their political influence (Dafinger 2013: 28). In light of the recent revolution in Burkina Faso and the successful transition driven by a strongly involved civil society, Claudia Roth's work has received further pertinence. For many political protesters today, mostly young students, Sankara's ideals remain important points of reference and serve to inform their activism. Claudia Roth's detailed and rich descriptions also capture the spirit and the ideas of the era of the 1980s, and they give valuable insight into the context of their formation.

In Burkina Faso, more than 80 per cent of the population work in the informal sector. They live off subsistence-based agriculture and pastoralism (World Bank 2006: 81). Recently, land has been increasingly used for cash cropping and agro-business, controlled by the cotton and sugar cane industries (Dafinger 2013). Cotton and cattle are export products with volatile prices. The insecurities involved are partly cushioned by the substantial development funds for poverty reduction,<sup>9</sup> which generally have a strong impact on the national and local economy. Since the end of the 1990s, Burkina Faso has had an annual economic growth rate of over 5 per cent, allegedly due to structural adjustment programmes. Yet, this mainly applies to the small sector of the formal economy in the two cities of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso (Labazée 2013) rather than to the informal sector in which most people seek their livelihood. Burkina Faso is part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which allows freedom of movement within member states. High numbers of people, mainly young men, have taken advantage of this and migrated to Cote d'Ivoire, but many of them returned home again in 2002 due to political unrest. Altogether more than 25 per cent of the population

work abroad (Dafinger 2013: 31), a situation that affects the economies of many households. The hope of the poor for remittances is often frustrated, and additional insecurities may ensue, as the work of Claudia Roth impressively shows.

### Structure of the Anthology

The anthology is divided into four parts. Part I discusses methodological issues. The article selected for this part deals with the production of ethnographic knowledge that is fruitfully influenced by the irritations and the culture shock experienced by anthropologists if they immerse themselves in a process of reflexivity. Part II deals with the negotiation of love and marriage. Topics that come into focus here are the important institution of *sunguruya*, meaning a space of freedom for women before marriage, which they also try to expand into marriage; and ideas of romantic love and living in a nuclear family that are in conflict with principles of conjugal respect. Moreover, tensions in marriage in the context of global economic developments become visible. These developments urge women to contribute to household income, although not in an official manner because this, normatively, is the exclusive domain of men. Part III is about elderly parents and their children on the edge of poverty. It gives detailed accounts of transformations in family and household configurations through processes of ageing. Compelling topics in these articles are shame and the silencing of existential hardships and other issues; the 'inverted intergenerational contract' and its tensions and conflicts; and the institution of *badenya*, implying support relationships among siblings of the same mother as an important means for social security in old age. In Part IV the focus is on youth. It particularly problematises new generational conflicts, the increasingly precarious situation of young women and men, their dreams of autonomy, and their struggles to open up new arenas of action. The reader will find some repetition in these chapters, particularly regarding the field site. We have not omitted these due to our desire to retain the original form of Claudia Roth's texts and to permit readers to read each chapter independently from the others.

#### NOTES

1. See the complete bibliography of Claudia Roth's work at the end of the book.
2. In German, *Die Frau und ihr Verhältnis zum Mann und Kapital: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der Arbeit der Frau und daraus resultierender Macht resp. Ohnmacht – mit einem Beispiel.*

3. In German, *Genzeit: Die Industrialisierung von Pflanze, Tier und Mensch – Ermittlungen in der Schweiz*. It has been published in three editions, the first of which appeared in 1987.
4. In French and German, *Travail dans uns décharge: les femmes de la savonnerie de Bobo-Dioulasso / Arbeit im Abfall: die Seifenfrauen in Bobo-Dioulasso*.
5. This means that these young people may earn money through casual jobs or by engaging in small-scale trade, but that this does not suffice to support elderly parents or to start a family.
6. Burkina Faso ranks 183<sup>rd</sup> out of 186 countries in the UNDP's Human Development Index of 2013, with 44.6 per cent of the population living below the poverty line, that is, on less than 1.24 USD per day. Source: <https://www.wfp.org/countries/burkina-faso> (accessed 27 February 2015).
7. Source: CIA World Factbook 2014. [https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print/country/countrypdf\\_uv.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print/country/countrypdf_uv.pdf) (accessed 27 February 2015).
8. Source: Ethnologue 14. Languages of Burkina Faso. [http://archive.ethnologue.com/14/show\\_country.asp?name=Burkina+Faso](http://archive.ethnologue.com/14/show_country.asp?name=Burkina+Faso) (accessed 27 February 2015).
9. In 2009, Burkina Faso received development funds of over 1 billion USD (World Bank 2011).

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