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# 'In Friendship One Does Not Count Such Things'

## Friendship and Money in War-Torn Yemen

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Every three weeks I receive a phone call or a text message from Noura Salem, one of my friends in Yemen, asking me to send her money for medication.<sup>1</sup> Noura lives in Hodeidah, the city that is currently the frontline of the Yemen war. Situated on the Red Sea coast, it is also the main entry point for humanitarian aid. I know Hodeidah well, and have many friends there, as I lived and worked in the city in the 1990s as an employee of a Dutch-Yemeni development project.<sup>2</sup> The war in Yemen has had devastating effects on the population, and all my friends are going through dire times. Yet my financial support to Noura precedes the war and goes back to the mid-1990s, when I occasionally helped her financially.

In 2015, I published an article about my friendship with Noura and its financial dimension. Inspired by

literature about 'friendship as method' (see Tillman-Healy 2003), I argued that friendship could be a useful research method, in particular in times of severe political crises and war when conventional research methods are less applicable. My phone calls with Noura gave me insight into daily life in Yemen, at a time when it had become impossible for me to conduct fieldwork there. I also wrote about the role money plays in our friendship. I discussed the clear power inequalities between us and how my role as 'money provider' went against my wish to have a relationship on equal terms. I concluded that I had transformed from a friend into fictive kin, with the moral obligation to help a member of the family.

In this article, I want to continue the discussion about friendship and money in the field, in particular in the context of war and conflict. Over the past four years,

Noura's demands for money have increased, and other friends in Yemen have also started to ask for financial support. What do we as anthropologists do when our research site becomes a war zone, and the people we worked with are increasingly in need of financial assistance? How does money, or financial dimensions at large, shape our definitions of the relationships we have with people we meet in the field? And why do I feel uncomfortable with the financial dimension of my friendship with Noura? What does this say about my own take on friendship, reciprocity and money?

In an attempt to answer some of these questions, I will start with a description of the background of my friendship with Noura. I will then look at conceptions of friendship cross-culturally, and continue with a section about the ways in which anthropologists have dealt with friendships and money. I will then zoom in on the issue of friendship and money in situations of war and conflict, concluding that friendships may come under pressure for a variety of reasons, but that they are of utmost importance for those living in war zones. I end with a call for more openness as anthropologists about the role of money in and beyond our fieldwork, and about the material and immaterial gains of our friendships in the field

## Noura and me

I met Noura at a wedding in 1993. We were sitting next to one another, we started chatting, and she shared her *qat*<sup>3</sup> and waterpipe with me. As it came time to leave, she gave me her phone number and I called her a few weeks later. I had just arrived in Hodeidah and was

interested in meeting new people. In the five years that I lived in Hodeidah, we became close friends. I spent many Friday afternoons with her and her three children, having lunch, chewing *qat* and smoking the waterpipe. While Noura was first and foremost a friend, she also gradually became an informant. When I was collecting data for my Ph.D. research about female health workers in a Dutch-funded development project in Hodeidah, I often shared my experiences with her, and I continued doing so when I did my post-doctoral research about migrant domestic workers in Yemen. Noura was neither a health worker nor a domestic worker, but she was very knowledgeable about the city and its inhabitants and had a large social network. In addition, she liked discussing social and political issues and we spent long afternoons chatting and chewing *qat*.

From the very first moment I met her, I was also interested in Noura's background: she belongs to the group of *muwalladin* (people of mixed descent), as her father was Yemeni and her mother Eritrean. I had developed a strong interest in the history of migration between Yemen and the Horn of Africa since I first met women of Yemeni-African descent in the early 1990s. In 2005, Noura brought me in touch with three Eritrean women in Hodeidah who had married Yemeni men and followed them to Yemen in the 1960s and 1970s. I interviewed them and wrote an article about it (de Regt 2012). In 2009, I interviewed Noura about her family history, in 2013 I recorded her own life story, and in 2017 I published an article based on these two interviews (de Regt 2017).

In 2012, my financial support increased when Noura underwent heart surgery and needed daily medication thereafter. The costs of the operation were

partly covered by Noura's employer, the Central Bank of Yemen, where she had been working as a cashier. I promised to cover the cost of the drugs, which amounted to 100 Euros per month at the time.<sup>4</sup> Since then, Noura calls me every two or three weeks or sends text messages asking for money because the drugs have finished. In the past few years, she has also developed diabetes and problems with her kidney, for which she also needs daily medication.

Over the years, I have started to feel increasingly uncomfortable with the financial dimension of our friendship. Sometimes I do not respond to her calls, afraid that she is in need of money again, and I refrain from contacting her myself. We have talked several times on the phone about this financial dependency, and I discussed it with her when I visited Yemen in March 2013, the last time I was in the country. Noura has always explained that my financial support is very valuable to her as there is nobody else who can help her. In a patrilineal society like Yemen, male family members are extremely important as providers and protectors. Noura is a 'woman without men' (see Jansen 1987). She lost her father at a young age and her husband died when her children were small. She only has a sister, who also has difficulties to make ends meet because she is divorced with two daughters. They lack an extended family: their mother had been a single child in Eritrea, who had moved with her Yemeni husband to Yemen in the early 1960s, and their father has very few remaining relatives in the village where he came from. The only man in Noura's life is her son, who is married with a child and doing odd jobs.

Despite my concerns about the financial aspect of our relationship, I continue to send money to Noura on

a regular basis, also when the prices in Yemen increased as a result of the political instability and subsequent war. I defend my choice to do so (to myself and others) by referring to the fact that I have a stable job with a good salary and no heavy financial responsibilities as a single and childless woman, while Noura is living in extremely difficult circumstances. In addition, she always took care of me when I was in Yemen. I spent a lot of time with her and her family, she cooked for me, offered me a place to sleep and took care of me when I was in need of a listening ear. So I see my financial help to her also as a form of reciprocity, of paying her back for all she has done for me in the past. Reciprocity is central to the formation and maintenance of human relations, and the 'gift economy' is an integral part of the making of human society, as Mauss has shown (Mauss 1990 [1925]). But how does reciprocity unfold in friendships?

## Friendship and reciprocity

In 2015, I concluded that my relationship with Noura had transformed from friendship into fictive kinship,<sup>5</sup> as I felt obliged to help her and was doing so voluntarily. I thus made a clear distinction between friendship and kinship, assuming that kinship relations imply more obligations than relations between friends. I realised later that I had used a rather simplistic definition of friendship, as a voluntary relationship based on equality and reciprocity. In Western societies, friendships have long been seen as voluntary, based on affect and equality and void of calculation and self-interest (see Paine 1969; Allan 1989; Carrier 1999). Yet more

recent studies have shown that friendships are far more complicated.

Affect and sentiment are often highlighted in discussions about friendship. Friendships are seen in this light as primarily emotional bonds between people who like and support each other. This view goes back to Aristotle's emphasis on the importance of mutuality in friendship.<sup>6</sup> As Allen (1989: 13) states, 'In these ideal friendships, the solidarity of the friends, based solely on their personal and voluntary commitment to each other, is taken to be unfettered by any selfish or instrumental concerns'. Yet while some argue that feelings of unselfish commitment to one another are required for friendship relations, others claim that this presupposes a particular concept of self and personhood, which can only be found in Western societies.

Carrier (1999), for example, analyses social relations and gift exchange in Melanesia to show that the Western concept of friendship, which is in his view based on the idea that people 'respond to their internal, spontaneous sentiments rather than the demands or expectations placed upon them by the ties of kinship, trade, propinquity, interest or the like' (ibid.: 22), is not present. Building on Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), Carrier argues that the Melanesian self differs from the Western self, as the first is constituted by and embodies others, while the second is 'an autonomous, irreducible entity that springs from a person's very being' (Carrier 1999: 30). Strathern shows that gift exchange was crucial for the maintenance of social relations in Melanesia; gifts circulated as parts of persons, and 'the items carry the influence that one partner may hope to have on another' (1988: 178). While gender is central to Strathern's analysis, Carrier mainly focuses

on the notion of the self in Melanesia, which in his view lacks the autonomy required for friendship (1999: 29). He argues, based on studies about social relations and friendships among working class and middle class people in the United Kingdom, that friendships are not possible in contexts where people depend on each other (ibid.: 32). He concludes that 'It seems, likely, then, that the modern notion of friendship, with its stress on involuntary sentiment unclouded by calculation or interest, is particularly congenial to those in certain socio-economic situations' (ibid.: 36).

Yet, as mentioned above, this notion of friendship as voluntary and void of calculation and interest has been challenged by many. Killick and Desai (2010: 9) criticise Carrier for essentialising Western and Melanesian notions of the self and for disregarding the different histories of personhood in both regions. In addition, they argue that Carrier ignores the fact that there may be multiple ideas of personhood that can exist alongside one another in a society. They also point to the fact that those who see friendship as based on only affect and sentiment neglect power dimensions, which are also present in Western societies (see also Allan 1989). In his own research in the Peruvian Amazon, Killick (2010) discovered, for example, that sentiment does not play such an important role among different categories of friends, but that these relations had a much more instrumental character: 'they allow individuals access to otherwise scarce goods and therefore to act as a means of economic redistribution' (ibid.: 62).

Similarly, in Jimma, a rural town in Ethiopia, friendships are based on affection *and* the exchange of material goods (Mains 2012). Mains did research among young and unemployed men and argues that

we need a much broader concept of friendship. The idea that calculation and (self) interest are incompatible with feelings of affection and love is, according to him, too limited (ibid.: 336). He builds on Hruschka (2010: 68), who defines friendship-like relationships as ‘a social relationship in which partners provide support according to their abilities in times of need, and in which this behaviour is motivated in part by positive affect between partners. A common way of signalling this positive affect is to give gifts on a regular basis’. In his conversations with young men, Mains (2012: 338) discovered that ‘sharing, helping and gifting were mentioned as the glue that binds friends together’. This did not only refer to the sharing of material goods, but also to affection and mental support. The young men were embedded in complex webs of reciprocity (ibid.: 339). They shared, amongst other things, *khat* (the Ethiopian name for *qat*), tea, coffee, and money. Friendship relations were thus both emotionally and materially significant. One of the young men in Mains’ study said:

If I have a friend with a problem I will always help him. Maybe I will just give him money or maybe I will give him a loan, but I will always offer. Usually it won’t even be necessary for him to ask me. I will see the problem and I will offer help. If a friend has money and he does not share this with his friends then that person is not a real friend (ibid.: 339).

Balancing friendship in Jimma is nevertheless delicate. Friendship relations can easily come under pressure, leading to tensions and conflict. The challenge is to ‘balance affection and reciprocity’ (ibid.: 336).

‘Friends give on the basis of ability and need. Not to give when one has the ability to do so violates the rules of friendship, but not giving as a result of changes in one’s economic circumstances should not bring friendship to an end’ (ibid.: 343). Friendship is, according to Mains, a rather flexible category and people can move in and out of friendship relations; the ambiguity of the social category of friend ‘is one of the key features that distinguishes friendship from other types of relationships’ (ibid.: 337).

While I knew about Mains’ work because of my own interest in Ethiopia, I only came across his article about friendship and money after publishing my own article, *Noura and Me*, in 2015. I was a bit embarrassed that I had overseen such an important article, but also happy because it gave me insight into dimensions of my relationship with Noura that I had not analysed before. While I was aware that reciprocity, both materially and immaterially, is an essential part of friendships, I had not reflected sufficiently on the importance of ‘balancing affect and reciprocity’ in friendships. In addition, Mains’ statement that friendship is a flexible category, and that we can move in and out of friendship, appeals to me. Why am I so disturbed by the financial dimension of my relationship with Noura? Is it because of the imbalance I experience between affect and reciprocity? To what extent is this related to my own positionality? And what are the temporal dimensions of this imbalance? Was there more reciprocity up to 2012, before Noura was in need of daily medication and I could still visit Yemen?

## Friendship and money

In Western societies, the dominant view is that personal relations should not involve money, even though everyday language about personal relations is filled with ‘money talk’: we ‘invest’ in friendships, we are ‘indebted’ to our friends and we feel the need to ‘pay someone back’ when they have done something for us (van Berkel 2017: 75). Van Berkel, who studied the impact of the introduction of money on friendship relations in ancient Greece, argues that in Western societies, instrumental relationships are strongly monetised, while friendships are not. She warns that we need to be aware that these oppositions may not be universal or self-evident:

When making cross-cultural comparisons between the ways people conceptualise relationships, most of these oppositions are not so much useful analytical tools, but rather are themselves objects of inquiry: under what circumstances are these oppositions created, in what contexts are they used, how are they manipulated? (ibid: 77).

Van Berkel concludes that we ought to be careful when applying these oppositions to other cultural contexts, as they themselves are the products of cultural processes.

In addition, conceptualisations of money are highly cultural and contextual, as anthropologists have shown over the last century (see Maurer 2006; Senders and Truitt 2007; Hart and Ortiz 2014). Money is a central element in the maintenance or ending of affective relationships and has acquired many different social meanings (Zelizer 1994; Senders and Truitt 2007).

Buying presents for friends, settling court cases with former loved ones, and suing companies for the death of one’s children all show that social relations are strongly monetised. According to Zelizer (1994: 298):

We should stop agonizing over whether or not money corrupts, but instead analyze what combinations of economic activity and intimate relations produce happier, more just, and more productive lives. It is not the mingling that should concern us, but how the mingling works.

So what role does money, or any other kind of material support, play in friendships? ‘A good friend is a friend who supports you in times of need’ is a widely shared view. Yet the extent to which one helps a friend emotionally and/or financially highly depends on the social, cultural and economic context. In addition, the extent to which one is willing to help a friend is an individual and personal matter. People distinguish between different types of friends, ranging from best friends to acquaintances, and what we consider a friend can change over time. ‘We were good friends in the past but we have grown apart’ is a common phrase. Friendships develop in particular phases of one’s life, and whether they are maintained or disappear depends on a variety of factors, which are often related to one’s changing social position (Allen 1989: 154).

Allen (ibid.: 155) sees friendships in essence as relationships of equality, and argues that there is in general ‘resistance against making too many claims on a friend unless they can be repaid in some way’. Talking about money in friendship relations is often a sensitive topic. While friends can help each other financially, asking for

money is difficult and can lead to tensions and conflict. I once told Noura how much money I had transferred to her in the past few years and she responded in shock: 'In friendship one does not count such things, Marina!' I understood what she meant and felt bad, but I could not give up counting. My own background, brought up as I was in a Calvinist society and a Dutch Protestant family in which giving money to people in need is regarded positively but frugality is a value, clearly affected my own attitude toward money and my relationship with Noura. However, the Calvinistic virtue of giving is not purely altruistic but morally loaded with feelings of guilt and shame. Calvinists carry the burden of the world on their shoulders. They are brought up with the idea that they are guilty for the social inequalities in the world and therefore have a responsibility to diminish them. Being wealthy is considered shameful and sharing one's wealth is commendable. In Calvinist societies, people give because it makes them feel good about themselves; they help others who are less well-off, and in doing so increase their own feelings of importance.

Giving clearly has benefits for the giver. This is the case in many societies, as Mauss' discussion of 'The Gift' has shown, yet it takes particular forms in Calvinist societies. In addition, my position as a single and childless woman affects my attitude towards the financial support of friends. As mentioned before, I often explain the reason why I give money to friends in Yemen (to myself and others) by referencing the fact that I do not have children and therefore am not burdened with big financial responsibilities in the Netherlands. Feelings of guilt about being a single and childless woman with a good salary thus seem to inspire my financial support

to others. Yet the fact that I feel uncomfortable with the financial dimension of my friendship with Noura shows that there is more at stake.

In order to understand my negative feelings about the role money plays in my friendship with Noura, I return to Mains' conceptualisation of balancing affect and reciprocity (2012). Just like the Ethiopian young man who told Mains that he hated it when he felt that he was being used, I have started to dislike the financial dimension of our friendship. I have the feeling that I have become a money provider instead of a friend, and that the immaterial side of our friendship, which I valued so much, has disappeared. We do not share experiences anymore, nor do we discuss the situation in Yemen, mainly because I do not call Noura anymore because I am afraid that she will not be doing well and will be in need of money. I am experiencing an imbalance in our friendship, as I have the feeling that I am not receiving enough in return for what I give. But to what extent was our friendship immaterial in the past? What did Noura think when she cooked lunch for me or offered me a place to sleep? In addition, Noura has been the focus of a number of academic articles that I have published, which have helped me increase my publication record. She agreed to share her family story with me and allowed me to publish about it. So our relationship has always had instrumental sides as well. Our very first meeting at the wedding in 1993, in which she shared her *gat* and waterpipe with me, was the beginning of a relationship based on mutuality, reciprocity and care. Over the years, our friendship has developed and changed, and the financial dimension of it has, in my opinion, led to an imbalance. Yet I could still call Noura and continue our conversations about



our lives and the situation in Yemen, and in doing so restore the balance; that is, the balance in my own moral and experiential bookkeeping. I am often hesitant to do so, because my identities as friend, researcher and money provider have become diffused, which has affected my perception of our relationship. I wonder how other anthropologists deal with friendships in the field, and in particular with the required mutuality and reciprocity that is such an essential part of friendship.

## Friendships in and after the field

Friendship has become a topical theme of research in anthropology, yet relatively little attention is being paid to the friendships anthropologists develop in the field. Anthropologists often thank their so-called key informants in the acknowledgments, and sometimes refer to them as friends, yet in their ethnographies they rarely appear as friends, or not explicitly so. In his seminal work *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, Rabinow concludes that the only person he could consider a friend could not be an informant (1974: 147). Building up relationships of trust and confidence is, however, one of the key aspects of anthropological fieldwork. Anthropologists emphasise the importance of close relationships in the field to ensure the collection of high quality data. Yet as Van der Geest (2015) rightly states, this automatically turns research relationships, including friendships in the field, into utilitarian relationships: 'Informants who are "valuable" are cherished and those who fail to provide information are left aside. The inability of the fieldworker to become a "total participant" shows itself in his/her inability to

fully experience people as "people"' (ibid.: 4). Van der Geest is wary of the claims of anthropologists who say that they have built friendships in the field. For him, anthropologists always functionalise friendships, and in doing so, do not live up to the true sense of friendship. He reflects on his own friendship with Kwasi, his first research assistant, with whom he developed a very close bond, and whom he asked to write the appendix of his first book. When Kwasi read the manuscript, he accused him of not having been open about the amount of money he had and where it came from, which made Van der Geest question whether their friendship was as equal as he had assumed (ibid.: 5).

Reciprocity, which is such a central element of the forging and maintenance of human relationships and one of the most important concepts in anthropology, seems to play a rather dubious role in ethnographic research. Anthropologists use ethnographic research methods to collect data, build close relationships with those they study and become part of their daily lives, but they often set clear boundaries when financial issues are involved. Paying informants for interviews is *not done*, as this may affect the presumed objectivity of the data (see Moodie 2007). Sharing information about one's own financial situation is also *not done*, as this may confirm the oftentimes stark material inequalities between researcher and researched. In place of money, anthropologists and ethnographers prefer to offer goods and services to their informants and interlocutors. It is a well-known fact that Evans-Pritchard's tobacco was one of the most important reasons the Nuer were willing to be interviewed by him (see Evans-Pritchard 1969: 13).

In the past few decades, anthropologists are increasingly 'studying up' (Nader 1974). Yet even in these situ-

ations, money continues to shape ethnographic experiences and anthropological knowledge production. In the edited volume *Money: Ethnographic Encounters*, Senders and Truit (2007) rightly point out that anthropologists have rarely written about the role of money in the field. They argue that this can be explained with reference to the fact that the field demands ‘intimacy’ and therefore depends on the denial of commoditisation: ‘The introduction of money into fieldwork relationships appears to entail the commoditisation of culture itself, and it risks exposing the intimacy cultivated in fieldwork as nothing more than commodity exchange’ (ibid.: 6). The essays in the book are reflections on anthropologists’ encounters with money in the field. Moodie (2007) describes how she refrained from giving money when one of her Ecuadorian family members (she is married to an Ecuadorian) told her that she had cancer and could not afford the medication. Her Ecuadorian relatives told her that it was good that she had not given her any money, thereby protecting her from establishing a relationship of exchange. Yet she realised that she may have wanted the relationship, because it could have given her the opportunity to collect ethnographic material.

Moodie (2007) refers to the work of feminist anthropologist Behar, who wrote a book about Esperanza, a Mexican market woman who offered to tell her life story in exchange for money (1993). Money did not corrupt the relationship but defined it, according to Moodie (2007: 51). Behar transformed their ‘spoken words into commodity’ (1993: 12), namely the book, and continued to send money and bring gifts every time she went back to Mexico. Yet when Behar at a certain moment mentioned that she might not be able

to continue sending money, Esperanza’s pride was hurt and she even sent a copy of the book back to the us (1995: 76). Behar’s remark had clearly broken the unspoken rules of reciprocity in their friendship.

When I decided to write about Noura, I was also inspired by Behar’s work. Feminist anthropologists have been at the forefront of the discussion about power relations in research, and have sometimes proposed turning research relationships into friendships (see for example Whitaker 2011). Yet they have also pointed out that friendships are never a-political or free from power, and that this becomes particularly clear in the field, when researcher and researched befriend each other (see for example Visweswaran 1997: 614). In 2015, I argued that friendship could be a useful research method when field sites become inaccessible, as friends can give anthropologists access to data, such as insights into their own lives, their communities and the country at large. I was inspired by Tillman-Healy (2003), who built up friendships with gay men in order to study gay friendships. For her, developing friendships was a method to access data. She argues that ‘Friendship as method demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying them to studying us’ (ibid.: 735). Yet while this radical reciprocity may be possible in research conducted with people in similar economic circumstances, it is very hard if not impossible in situations where there are stark social and/or economic inequalities. In addition, I am now of the opinion that friendship is not so much a research method as a way to gain access and collect data. And last but not least, building up friendships with the aim of collecting data is, in my view, ethically not sound.

In 2015, I concluded that I had not achieved radical

reciprocity in my friendship with Noura, which is not so remarkable in view of the economic differences between us. In contrast, our friendship has come under great pressure due to the deteriorating situation in Yemen, coupled with Noura's increasing financial needs. Yet instead of seeing it as radically unequal and unreciprocal, with me as money provider and Noura as recipient, I could also redefine reciprocity and include the ways in which Noura also helps me, for example by telling me her life story and allowing me to write about our friendship.<sup>7</sup> In addition, it is of utmost importance to take the temporal dimensions of our relationship into account, and to reflect on the ways in which the war has affected our friendship. What do we do as anthropologists when our research site becomes a war zone and the people we have worked with, including our friends, are in need of assistance, both in a material and immaterial sense?

## Friendship and money in times of war and conflict

Despite my questions and arguments about friendship as method in times of war, the war in Yemen had not yet fully started when I submitted the article in early 2015. While I had been worried about the deteriorating situation in the country over the past decade, I had not foreseen that it would culminate in a full-fledged war which would hold Yemen in its grip for years. Since the outbreak of war, I have been struggling to find ways to stay in touch with friends. Friendship is, in my view, one of the main ways in which we can show our solidarity with and support for people in difficult political

and economic circumstances, as I also argued in 2015. But how far can and should we go to meet the financial needs of our friends and research participants? And how do war and conflict affect our friendships in the field?

In Yemen, a clear war economy has developed, in which those in power have access to money and material goods, while the large majority of the population struggles to make ends meet. More than 80 per cent of the population of 29 million people is in need of humanitarian aid, with eight million people on the brink of starvation.<sup>8</sup> In the summer of 2016, the Central Bank of Yemen moved its offices from the capital Sana'a to Aden,<sup>9</sup> and stopped paying the salaries and pensions of government employees. Noura had spent her entire working life in the Central Bank, and was thus an immediate victim of this policy. She retired in 2012, but has not received her pension since 2016. Moreover, inflation in Yemen has increased tremendously over the past years, and the cost of Noura's daily medications has more than doubled. Supporting her financially feels like one of the few things that I can do to help her.

In addition to sending money to Noura, I occasionally send money to two other close friends, both of whom are also 'women without men'; a divorced woman with two married daughters in a rural town and a single friend in the capital Sana'a who lives with her sister. When they ask for money, it is specifically for medical treatment and on an irregular basis. I have refrained from sending money on a regular basis because I do not want to establish more financial dependencies, but I know that both of them have great difficulties making ends meet, just like almost all of my friends, former colleagues and former research participants. The biggest difference between these other two and

Noura is that they only occasionally ask for financial help, while Noura contacts me regularly every two or three weeks. As a result, I have a more positive view of my friendships with them; I enjoy being in touch with them, though the situation in Yemen always looms large over our conversations. I know that they would like to be in touch with me more. They often contact me via WhatsApp, asking me how I am doing and wishing me a good day. I always respond to their messages, but I call less often than they would like. I dread the phone calls to Yemen, as the situation in the country is so bad and the conversations with my friends often depress me. Their need for friendship is greater than ever, however, as they feel isolated and forgotten by the world. They do not want anything other than to be acknowledged. For me, however, maintaining these friendships has become a challenge. It is comparable to situations in which friends around us are in need of support, for example when they are depressed or going through very difficult times, and an imbalance develops, in which one may have the feeling that one gives more than one receives. Balancing affect and reciprocity is challenging in such situations, and restoring the imbalance may take a while. This may affect our perception of the friendship, yet it does not mean that the friendship is over.

In addition, context and temporality are important aspects defining friendships. Friendships change over time, and people can move in and out of them. My friendship with Noura has changed over the past 25 years, which is very normal for long friendships, but the war has altered our relationship in particular. Noura's financial (and medical) needs have increased because of the war; and even more importantly, I am unable

to go to Yemen, something that has hampered any opportunity for Noura to return my gifts in her own immaterial ways. This does not mean that our friendship has disappeared. It is just going through difficult times. Moreover, Noura is very willing to give back, for example by allowing me to write about her, even though she has not yet read what I have written. I am thus still gaining from our friendship, even though it comes at a financial and emotional cost.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have used my own experiences with sending money to a friend in Yemen to address questions about the role of friendship and money in ethnographic research, and in a situation of war and conflict in particular. Writing this paper has been a way to unravel what is at stake in my friendship with Noura, as I have analysed my dilemmas and questions surrounding the financial dimension of our relationship and why I feel so uncomfortable with it. I have come to the conclusion that friendship relations are both emotionally and materially significant, and that the idea that friendships are solely based on mutual affection falls short. Mutuality and reciprocity are essential elements of friendships, yet balancing affect and reciprocity can be a real challenge, especially where there are (stark) economic differences. In the case of my friendship with Noura, I have increasingly come to see myself as a money provider instead of a friend, a (fictive) sister and a researcher. Yet these different roles and identities are all in action at the same time, albeit with different meanings and dynamics.

Returning to the discussion introduced at the beginning of this paper, we need to be very careful when applying our own definitions of friendship and reciprocity to other cultural contexts. Noura may have very different ideas about the nature of our relationship, and the role that money plays in it. During the writing of this article, she called me again and we talked about her financial needs, the situation in Yemen and the fact that I can only support her to some extent. For her, my financial support is a sign of our strong bond, and she continues to emphasise the important role I play in her life.<sup>10</sup> Talking to her and sharing our thoughts and emotions turns out to be an efficient way to restore the imbalance, as I feel much closer to her through this than when I simply transfer money.

In addition, writing this article is also a way of restoring the imbalance: by telling the story of my friendship with Noura, I aim to come to terms with my ambivalent feelings and respond to questions (posed by myself and others) around the impact of money on friendship, in particular in times of war and conflict. Moreover, I am turning my thoughts into an article and a publication. It is, in my opinion, high time that as anthropologists we become more open about the role of money in and beyond our fieldwork, and about the material and immaterial gains of our relationships in the field. While there is now an increasing body of literature available about friendship cross-culturally and reflexivity is high on the agenda of anthropologists, very few anthropologists have discussed the ways in which they benefit from their (intimate) relationships in the field. This article is a call for more openness and discussion about these issues.

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## Notes

- 1 I use a fictive name in order to protect Noura's privacy.
- 2 After finishing my MA in Anthropology, I worked for six years in two development projects in Yemen (see de Regt 2007).
- 3 *Qat* is a shrub, the leaves of which can be chewed, producing a mild stimulant effect. It is the most favourite pastime in Yemen.
- 4 In the first years, the costs were 100 Euros per month. But since the start of the war in March 2015, the costs have rapidly increased as a result of the war economy to around 300 Euros per month.
- 5 In 2015, I called this 'fictive kinship', though I realise that this term is an anthropological invention, as there are many different forms of kinship, with blood kinship being just one of them.
- 6 *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, Chapter 2, p. 129 in the translation of W.D. Ross (1999), Kitchener: Batoche Books.
- 7 Both articles (the one about our friendship and the one about her family history) have been translated into Arabic so that Noura could read them, but we have not yet found a way to get them to her. She does not have email or internet and it is

impossible to send hard copies to Yemen as the postal system is no longer working. In view of Houthi surveillance, I am hesitant to send it to someone else.

- 8 From the website of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA): <https://www.unocha.org/yemen/about-ocha-yemen>, accessed 14 April 2019.
- 9 This decision was taken by the so-called legitimate government of President Hadi, as it was no longer in power in the capital Sana'a (the Houthis have occupied Sana'a and other major cities in north Yemen, including Hodeidah, since September 2014). For more background information about the war in Yemen, see Brandt 2017 and Lackner 2017.
- 10 One of the text messages I received in February 2019 read as follows: 'My sister and my friend, thank you, the most important person in my life, because you are present in my life, and your help and support to me in these circumstances and in all the difficult circumstances since I got to know you and also now I say, you are great and sweet, Marina, I love you, I love you, my dear sister'.

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