

## State Violence Specialists in West Africa

By Jan Beek and Mirco Göpfert

On 18 December 2008, Nigériens celebrated the 50th anniversary of the foundation of their republic. On this occasion the national army organised a parade presenting the Forces of Defence and Security (*Forces de Défense et de Sécurité*) for dozens of political and diplomatic guests as well as hundreds of civil spectators. The parade was opened by the brass band of the National Guard (*Garde Nationale*; formerly called FNIS, *Forces Nationales d'Intervention et de Sécurité*) and by the cadets of the military school. The first ones to pass by were forest officers, closely followed by customs officers. Then police officers passed by, then members of the National Guard, the National Gendarmerie, fire service officers, and finally the Nigérien Armed Forces (FAN, *Forces Armées Nigériennes*). They all wore military-like uniforms, some in dark green, dark blue, black, some in khaki, desert or blue camouflage; they all wore military berets, in blue, brown, black, red or green; they all had assault rifles on them, mostly AK-47s.<sup>1</sup> For an inexperienced observer as I [Göpfert] was, it was very difficult to draw a distinction between the different *corps habillés*. It was when the former fire service officer sitting next to me gave his comments on the marching units that I learnt which corps I was looking at. The only corps I could not possibly identify was, according to him, the domestic secret service (*Renseignements Généraux*); but he assured me they were among us. Violence specialists in West Africa share a distinct feature suggesting a clear-cut division between the civil and military/police spheres – their uniform. Yet distinguishing between the multiple uniform wearing violence specialists is challenging. My difficulties in differentiating between them at the parade reflects the blurred division of their duties; in everyday policing it is often unclear which organisation will assume which task, ranging from traffic regulation to crowd control. This article analyses the functioning of an ensemble of violence specialists in

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<sup>1</sup> Police organisations presenting themselves as military organisations should not be considered unique to Africa. It has been used by several police organisations worldwide to convey a public image of discipline and authority (for the US in the 1900s see Allison 2006).

Ghana and Niger whose fields of responsibility are but diffusely separated.

Existing research on policing in Africa mostly focuses on the involvement of non-state organisations such as vigilante movements, or supra-national security networks and how these reconfigure notions of the state (see Buur et al. 2007; Comaroff/Comaroff 2008; Pratten 2008). Roitman (2005: 157) and Englebort (2009) are among the few considering the interplay of multiple state organisations but explain it in terms of embezzlement and corruption. Mehler et al (2010: 8) and Trotha (2000: 260) are both interested in the emergence of non-state policing organisations and assume a generalised loss of the state's monopoly on the use of violence in West Africa giving way to new market oriented forms of security provision.<sup>2</sup> However, the market may not be the most useful lense to understand the interplay of security organisations. Legal regulations, moral convictions of actors, attempts to gain legitimacy, and local necessities are just as important in determining the ensemble of violence specialists.

Instead of focusing on seemingly new non-state violence specialists and how they fundamentally reconfigure the state, we focus on the multiple state violence specialists, their web of relational references, and their practices, which have been largely ignored by the social sciences.<sup>3</sup> While police in Europe tend to be the sole violence specialist of the interior, in West Africa military and other paramilitary organisations are also charged with tasks of law enforcement and the maintenance of public order. Functional distinctions are rather vague, as they are often semi-officially and informally transgressed. Therefore policing actors position themselves in this field of violence specialists always in relation to other security organisations. Scholars subscribing to Security Sector Reform (SSR) perceive this interplay as disorderly and inherently flawed. These policy-oriented researchers argue for a

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<sup>2</sup> Others argue more cautiously: Schlichte (2005: 109) develops a model of contradictory orders of violence. Baker (2007: 229–230) maps the whole array of state and non-state policing institutions but emphasises that the latter are always in the 'gravity' of the state, and are often sponsored, regulated by, or even partly incorporated within it (see also Göpfert 2012).

<sup>3</sup> In contrast to most research on West Africa, scholars of policing in Europe do not necessarily portray the emergence of non-state policing as a fundamental re-configuration or recession of state control (see Jason-Lloyd 2003; Jones 2007). This new line of enquiry even prompted Loader and Walker (2006) to defend the state as a necessary and central actor in the production of security. Crawford et al. (2005: 83) describe the new set-up as policing networks which are ultimately regulated by the police. Beste (2003: 296) even considers the incorporation of non-state organisations as an extension of the state monopoly on the use of legitimate violence.

clear separation of fields of responsibility based on law, especially between the military and the police (GFN-SSR 2007: 11; OECD Publishing 2007: 118, 164). Yet some authors in this field also reflect on the Eurocentric underpinnings of SSR and call for a more cautious approach to the multiplicity of violence specialists (Albrecht/Buur 2009: 403; Jörgel 2011: 244, 255). The presence of multiple state policing organisations is not a distinct phenomenon of the state in Africa, as many policy oriented scholars imply. Waddington (1999: 9) lists government bodies in the UK, arguing that some of these are even more specialised in law enforcement than the regular police. Hoogenboom (1991) studied how multiple policing agencies exchange information and powers in the Netherlands; his description of informalisation and loss of accountability brings to mind the entanglements normally ascribed to West African policing organisations (Hoogenboom 1991: 29).

The multiplicity of security organisations raises the question of the state monopoly on violence. We understand violence as physical coercion.<sup>4</sup> According to Reemtsma, the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of violence is not a state or a condition (*Zustand*) that is either present or absent; we instead regard it as a regulative idea, as a tendency (2003: 9–11). Max Weber identifies the process character of the state monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Only the state as ideal type successfully claims the monopoly (Weber 2002: 29, 822). Considering that empirical reality never fully matches the ideal type (Weber 2002: 4), the process of claiming this monopoly is never completed but 'relative and unstable in actual practice' (Benda-Beckmann et al. 2009: 15), subject to the boundary work by police officers (see Beek 2012). The police are not the instrument of the state monopoly but are rather one of many organisations that the state provides with a license for the exercise of violence (Reemtsma 2003: 11; see Weber 2002: 125).

We thus conceive *violence specialists* as organisations which can legally use means of physical coercion, that is, organisations that are provided with a licence for the exercise of violence. Their ability and potential to use legitimate force is, according to Waddington, 'the essence of policing' (1999: 15–6; see Bittner 1978: 34–6), although the actual exercise of violence is still an exception and always problematic for police officers (Beek/Göpfert 2013; see also Diphorn 2013). We do not focus on violent practices as such in this article but on the ability and potential to use violence as a shared characteristic of these organisations. Blundo and Glasman (in this issue) discuss bureaucratic practices

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<sup>4</sup> We do not use the terms force and violence to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate actions, as both are not neatly separated; instead, we use the term violence (*Gewalt*) in the broader German sense (Beek/Göpfert 2013).

as another essential feature of organisations with uniformed personnel, and indeed for some of them the use of violence is rare. While the use of violence seems to be of minor relevance to some of these organisations, the same could be argued for bureaucratic practices; many uniformed officials lack offices and not all their duties are regulated by bureaucratic procedures. Both the use of violence and bureaucratic practices permeate police work and are equally relevant registers of their work (see Beek 2011: 209–211); we focus on the potential to use violence as more productive for our exploration of the interplay of these organisations, as it emerges more strongly in emic self-descriptions and as a source of legitimacy.

Ideally state organisations have distinct tasks to fulfil (*Prinzip der geordneten Kompetenzen*) and are given necessary coercive powers to fulfil this function (Weber 2002: 125, 551). However, Max Weber notes that there may be several organisations charged with the same function (2002: 165), in our case policing. As a consequence, according to Weber, organisations with similar fields of responsibility arrive at informal situational compromises in order to work effectively (2002: 165). Rather than presuming this negotiation takes the form of a compromise, we analyse the practices and discourses of different violence specialists about the appropriation of specific fields of responsibility.

Our comparative research brings together two such state security ensembles in West Africa and is based upon 15 months of fieldwork, respectively in the Ghanaian police and the Nigérien gendarmerie.<sup>5</sup> As researchers ‘attached’ to diverse police units we observed everyday practices of policing, conducted narrative and semi-structured interviews with police officers and gendarmes of all ranks and consulted organisational charts, case files and legal documents. This article explores the interactions and ascriptions of members of the multiple violence specialist organisations of the state. This ethnographic approach allows us to closely link everyday interactions with the emerging organisational configurations, a link that is presumed but not explored in the literature on security networks (see Dupont 2004: 84). Through this focus, what seems to be characterised by weakly defined functional differentiation manifests as a relatively stable ensemble of forces.

Our comparison of security ensembles in Ghana and Niger suggests that the proposed model has explanatory value despite different political set-ups and historical trajectories. Ghana is often described as one of the most developed countries in Africa and Niger is counted amongst the poorest countries of the world. Ghana, Anglophone, has been con-

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<sup>5</sup> On our difficulties in accessing these organisations see Beek/Göpfert 2011.

sidered a stable democracy since 1992; Niger, Francophone, has been struck by three military coups d'état since 1996. We decidedly do not compare Ghana and Niger through a contrasting presentation of distinct national characteristics. By intimately connecting our data from Niger and Ghana we rather go beyond a simple comparative scheme in order to propose an analytical model applicable to violence specialists beyond our regional focus. In the first section of the article we will present the functional differentiation of these organisations – what does each do? In the second section we will analyse the discursive positioning of policing actors in relation to other violence specialists – how do they talk about each other? In the last section we will analyse everyday practices of appropriating, contesting, and defending fields of responsibility – how do they oppose each other?

### I. Functional Differentiation

All the corps in Niger, apart from the foresters, can be described as the offspring of the *gardes-cercles*, a principal colonial police force in charge of censuses, mail transport, collecting taxes, the security of the colonial authority, and securing prisons and convoys (Tidjani-Alou 2001: 101). With Niger's independence the *gardes-cercles* were transformed into the Republican Guard (*Garde Républicaine*), which became the first recruitment pool for the newly founded National Army (which was the Nigérien offspring of the French colonial *tirailleurs*), the National Police, and the National Gendarmerie (Mahamane 2008: 55–61; Tidjani-Alou 2001: 101–102). The multiple forces that have emerged out of colonial times constitute what Hills (2000: 10) coins the *police sector*. What appeared in the described parade as indistinguishable units is, in fact, a structurally differentiated ensemble of forces that are, according to the corresponding laws, expected to fulfil specific functions: forest officers primarily fight against poaching and desertification; customs officers fight against tax fraud; the police lead criminal investigations, maintain public order and control traffic in cities; the National Guard is primarily charged with securing prisons and public buildings and patrol remote desert areas; gendarmes have the same functions as the police, but in rural areas, although they are also military police with military status; the National Army is charged with the defence of the integrity of the national territory. In Ghana there are multiple state sanctioned violence specialists as well, but born out of different historic trajectories, they are organised differently – originating from the British model. While the customs, immigration, prison, and fire services fulfil functions very similar to their Nigérien counterparts, there is no gendarmerie or National Guard but the newly estab-

lished community police. An analysis of their practices when operating together reveals how these organisations fulfil distinct tasks.

During a cultural festival, the main street of a town in Western Ghana was crowded with several hundred revellers.<sup>6</sup> At both ends of the street the national security agencies were stationed. A police officer in dark blue, a soldier in camouflage green, and a community police officer in a bright yellow uniform were posted there. Despite different colours the uniforms all looked similar, all having a decorative lanyard on the left shoulder. I [Beek] was accompanying an inspector who explained that the presence of the army was necessary during these turbulent election times. During elections customs, immigration, prison, and fire service personnel would also be present. The soldier was the only one armed and stood slightly in the background, and the military had a pick-up truck patrolling the vicinity. The police officer was responsible for signalling cars to take a right turn, looking intently at the drivers of approaching vehicles, stiffening and making sharp gestures to them. After a while we saw a small crowd approaching, gesticulating in an agitated manner. They carried a heavily injured man, blood running down his head, he appeared stunned. The soldier immediately cocked his assault rifle. At this point, my perception of the crowd changed, the noise and their erratic movements now had a menacing aura. They completely ignored the state officials, walked by, and lifted the injured man into a taxi. Initially the three policing actors did not interfere or act as more and more people surrounded them. Some members of the crowd began explaining to the community officer that an assailant had beaten the injured man with a belt. The three policing actors first spoke with each other then split into two groups: the community officer enquired further about the assailant, the police officer and the soldier went into a street that some people had pointed to. The next day I met the police officer again and he narrated what had occurred. They had spotted the assailant in the parallel road, but he ran away. He and the soldier pursued and managed to arrest him at a nearby farm. As they tried to bring him back, the suspect's brother and friends tried to free him. The soldier 'brutalised him, beat him, blood flew' (snapping his fingers). The police officer told him to stop and everyone calmed down. He brought the assailant and his brother to the cells of the police station and charged them with 'assault' and 'assaulting a peace officer'.

Each policing actor took on a specific task of policing: The community police officer, as a member of the community, assisted the police by trying to find the assailant. The police officer regulated the traffic

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<sup>6</sup> Place and date of edited field notes and interview extracts are withheld to protect sources.

and later acted as a mediator, controlling the violence, and ultimately engaged in regular law enforcement. It was the soldier who effectively enforced public order by using physical violence. All violence specialists together presented themselves as encompassing and protecting the public on this occasion, by establishing barriers at both ends of the main street. Policing can be analytically broken down into several distinct and disparate tasks, like traffic control, criminal investigations and crowd control, all involving the potential use of violence (Waddington 1999: 16). Hills describes such tasks as a 'relatively structured activity with an identifiable boundary' (2000: 10). We conceive these tasks as functional slots that are filled by violence specialists. However, these slots are neither neatly separated nor pre-given objective realities. The notion of 'functional slot' is a mere heuristical tool, inspired by the reflections of Ghanaian police and Nigérien gendarmes, in our attempt to make sense of the complex ensemble of violence specialists in West Africa.<sup>7</sup> Their notion that these slots have to be filled is grounded on preconceptions of stateness (Migdal/Schlichte 2005: 14–15).

In Ghana each violence specialist assumes specific functional slots. This arrangement can be described, following Mehler et al. (2010: 10), as a heterogeneous oligopoly, in which multiple policing organisations offer different products. While this functional differentiation can also be observed in Western countries, there it mostly takes the form of internal functional differentiation of the main violence specialist, the police. In West Africa state violence specialists multiply; new agencies are created to improve policing, fight corruption, gain funding from abroad by responding to international demands for specific forms of policing, and create new government posts as part of patronage party politics. In Ghana even investigations into narcotic crimes and corruption were taken from the police and assigned to other newly founded violence specialists – the Narcotic Board and Economic and Organised Crime Office.

In contrast to Western countries where the fields of responsibilities of violence specialists are highly regulated, in Ghana and Niger they are not clearly demarcated by law. While all the violence specialists at the festival were sanctioned by law, the specific tasks they carried out were not. In reference to formal legislation, the police officer is responsible for maintaining public order and is mandated to use necessary force (Government of Ghana 1970: 3), whereas the soldier's divergence from his task of national defence is only supported by vaguely formulated 'functions for the development of Ghana' (Government of Ghana 1992: 129). Civil control of the military was re-established in the 1990s

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<sup>7</sup> We are grateful to David Pratten, who made us aware of this point.

(Hutchful 1997: 273) and the Security and Intelligence Agencies Act (Government of Ghana 1996), passed as part of the internationally requested security sector reform, has improved the accountability of violence specialists but without corresponding regulation of their practices. The community police officer's work is not covered by any laws, and prison and fire service personnel have no provisions for such public order operations whatsoever. Laws give a general outline of the functions of violence specialists, but their vagueness leads to potentially overlapping fields of responsibilities.<sup>8</sup> Bierschenk calls this the functional openness (*Funktionsoffenheit*) of state organisations in West Africa (1999: 329). Due to unclear fields of responsibilities, the assumption of specific functional slots by different violence specialists is decided in everyday practice. The emerging configuration of violence specialists can be called an ensemble because it does not provide clear rules for the interplay of the organisations (see Olivier de Sardan 2011: 38). At the festival the police officers claimed a police commander would always be the authority in such public order operations, but this seems questionable in light of the relationship between the police and the army and because higher-ranking soldiers have command over lower-ranking police officers – their respective competencies are instead negotiated in each situation. The competence of security forces is also influenced by other criteria (spatial, temporal, the assessment of incident seriousness, and political implications).

The assumption of specific functional slots is not only a result of contemporary practices, but also past ones: The avoidance of the police officer in engaging in the forceful arrest at the festival result from a recent shift in functions assumed by the police. Schlichte (2005: 96) describes a similar shift in Uganda and attributes this to general police incompetence, but in Ghana it may be more adequately described as a historical development resulting from specific scandals. Both the army and police were formed from the 'Gold Coast Corps' of the 1840s, which divided in 1894 into distinct military and police organisations (Gillespie 1955: 32). Yet the policing style of this Gold Coast Police was not adopted from the London Metropolitan Police, but from the more heavy-handed Irish Constabulary and other colonial police organisations (Anderson/Killingray 1991: 13). The renamed Ghana Police Ser-

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<sup>8</sup> This under-regulation is the result of historical trajectories, because violence specialists in Ghana have often been used as a resource to gain political power (Hills 2000: 63). At times the police were equipped with armoured personnel carriers to keep the military in check, but most of the time the military managed to appropriate funds of the police (Quantson 2003: 166). Even in the current democratic two party system each strengthens either the police or the military as their power base.



vice retained its function of forceful public order maintenance in post-colonial times (Tankebe 2008: 76); this physical role became more pronounced during military regimes.

Following democratisation in the 1990s, the violent practices of the police in a series of public order operations came under public scrutiny, most notably the Accra Stadium incident of 2001 where 126 spectators were killed (Aning 2006: 20). As a consequence of the trials against some of the low-ranking policemen involved in this and similar incidents, police officers are now very reluctant to use force in crowd control situations, as they feel unprotected by their organisation. Police officers securing a demonstration explained they would just flee the scene when it became dangerous. Even when they are armed with AK-47 assault rifles, demonstrators often mockingly dare them to shoot. When agitated relatives threatened to attack a police station in Accra after the stadium incident, the army was called to 'defend the police', in the words of one demonstrator. This pattern of calling the army when encountering resistance is now entrenched in Ghanaian crowd control procedures – the army absorbed this functional slot that was formerly occupied by the police. The community police, formally called the Community Protection Unit, was established as part of the National Youth Employment Program of the late 2000s and began to assume the task of acquiring local knowledge and regulating traffic which had formerly been fulfilled by the police. Which functional slots are covered by which violence specialists is the result of such past negotiation processes and is still shifting.

## II. Relational Self-description

Policing actors define their position by referring to other violence specialists who are expected and known to cover other slots. This positioning takes place in direct interaction with members of other violence specialist organisations, as seen above, and by referring to them in discourse. In the aftermath of the festival the Ghanaian police officer explained their relationship to the military. 'As police officers we mingle with the public. The soldiers are only in their camps or in the bush. We take you like a friend, or like a brother or sister. We uphold the peace and solve issues. They do not fear us as much as the soldiermen.' In his view, soldiers are positioned as distant from civil actors.<sup>9</sup> He describes their own close relationship to the public as necessary for everyday policing but indicates that this proximity reduces the capacity of the

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<sup>9</sup> On the police officers' perception of civil actors in Ghana see Beek 2010.

police to discourage resistance. He further elaborated on the function of the police: 'You have to know how to use your pen. We do not use violence but the slow way of the law. The soldiers only know how to fight.' In relation to the military he portrays the police as peaceful and fulfilling functions of law enforcement; the military are represented as the true violence specialists. When asked about the community police his self-description changed: 'They are part of the community, they assist us. But they are not allowed to handle paperwork. And they are not policemen. They do not handle rifles. You are only a policeman if you handle a rifle.' His first remark on paperwork reiterates the representation of the police as oriented towards law enforcement. Characterising the potential use of a rifle as the core trait of the police, he describes the police as the true violence specialists as compared to the community police. His descriptions are relational, distancing the police in each case from a different competing security organisation. The emerging depiction of the police seems contradictory – they are non-violent, but their main symbol is the AK-47.

Institutionally the Nigérien gendarmerie holds a special position in the ensemble of violence specialists. They act as the military, public order police, the criminal investigation department, and traffic police. In political discourse and in descriptions of paramilitary agents, gendarmes are always described as members of the 'family' of the Forces of Defence and Security (FDS). The family metaphor highlights the vaguely codified relation between all the corps, veiled as a quasi-natural 'being one'. For gendarmes, this metaphor seemed irrelevant to their own positioning in the ensemble of forces. They regarded the FDS as a strategic creation of the former Minister for the Interior in order to give his first creation, the National Guard, a more prominent position in the national security ensemble. Gendarmes rather referred to the *porteurs de tenue*, a more open category that expressed a sense of solidarity with both Nigérien and non-Nigérien security forces; in their positioning towards specific forces they were more precise.

In the gendarmes' view, forest and customs officers are only given the uniform in order to be able to frighten civilians in rural areas. They are not military, 'they are civilians given the uniform'.<sup>10</sup> Otherwise they were indistinguishable from civilians. However, gendarmes often described forestry officers as great *connaisseurs* of the rural area they are working in: 'They are in the countryside, they are in the villages. [...] They are everywhere in the bush. They mostly have perfect control over their zone. Because they have a lot of local informants. A lot!' They are

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<sup>10</sup> We have translated all quotations from Nigerien gendarmes into English to make the text easier to read.

seen to be very close to the local population. But they are also represented as lacking assertiveness. Although they are wearing the military uniform, the populace understands that they have only limited coercive powers, gendarmes explained. They need to bring the gendarmerie into play and habitually do it by pretending to call the Brigade Commander (*Commandant de Brigade*) of the nearest gendarmerie unit in front of a particular offender. The offender's fear of the gendarmes most certainly persuades him to cooperate with whatever agenda the forest officer is trying to push through 'because there is no force that is feared as much as the gendarmerie'. Apparently both forest officers and civil actors know about the forest officers' specific functional slot and where it ends. Forest and customs officers are not military and have only limited coercive powers; compared to them, gendarmes present themselves as rather distant and feared violence specialists.

The police were not very respected by the gendarmes I [Göpfert] talked to. They were invariably described as impolite, undisciplined, badly trained, corrupt, guilty of harassing civilians, and associating with thugs and thieves. Most of my interlocutors highlighted the constant transgression of a respectful distance to civilians by the police. An officer of the gendarmerie explained: 'We don't have the same work methods as the police. This is what's important: we have military status. We work in uniform. I can't put on plain clothes and go and listen to what you say to your girlfriend, and then tell ... That is not a job. I work in uniform, I collect pieces of evidence in uniform, and I arrest you in uniform. Voilà. [...] We don't sniff in people's lives. That's not our mission. It's the police who do that.' 'They are true secret agents', another gendarme told me.<sup>11</sup> They also see themselves as more competent and rigorous. We will write you something very good! Because we don't want to let you go. If we, the gendarmes, arrest you, it's for taking you to prison. Because you are an obstacle in the community.' The gendarmes see the police as mingling with the population, be it in their function as spies or in order to gain some extra money, unlike gendarmes who always wear the uniform as a visible marker of distance. One result of this distance, according to the gendarmes, is their professionalism in criminal investigations and their rigour in professional writing (see Göpfert 2013). Interestingly though, when asked why this was the case, gendarmes remarked that they were more sensible to the needs and fears of the local community. Distancing themselves from

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<sup>11</sup> This attitude towards policemen could be the result of the long-time entanglement of the National Police with the national secret service (*Direction des Renseignements Généraux*) which is currently under the supervision of the national police headquarters (*Direction Générale de la Police Nationale*).

police, gendarmes drew on a fragile balance between distance and proximity to the population.

The National Guard are counted amongst the worst of all security forces, 'where everything is raw, where everything is stupid', a brigade commander stated. This is primarily thought to be the result of the integration of former Tuareg rebels since 1999 who had no school education whatsoever, even in the higher ranks (Abdourhamane 1999: 89–90; Deycard 2007: 132–4). The other members of the National Guard also had a poor reputation, 'they have nothing but their military training!' In the bush the guards do what they want, the gendarmes often said. National Guard soldiers who often work in extremely remote areas would catch supposed thieves, usually beat them up, handcuff them, and drive to their families to threaten taking their relative to prison unless they pay for the release of their relative. 'That's plain extortion', a gendarme said. The gendarmes' distancing appears strongest with regards to the police and National Guard. Members of the police, the National Guard, and the gendarmerie are all, even if to different degrees, endowed with the functions of public order control and criminal investigation. They all cover a similar functional slot. The police and gendarmes often work in the same geographical area and thus come into conflict over the responsibility of specific cases. The National Guard, a military trained corps, have since their creation in 1999 (at the time as the *FNIS*) also been endowed with competencies in the area of criminal investigation; but they have only recently been trained in this. In the view of a non-commissioned officer of the gendarmerie this was 'pure stupidity' (*connerie*). 'A piece of wood will never become a crocodile!' From the gendarmes' point of view, their functional slot has become more and more threatened by the guards. They have become military trained actors endowed with criminal investigation competencies, which had always been the gendarmes' distinctive feature.

The gendarmes' perception of the army was more ambiguous. Army officers were highly respected by rank and file gendarmes, particularly because of their skills as military leaders under whom a lot of gendarmes served during the Tuareg rebellion. Some gendarmes even regretted having gone to the gendarmerie instead of the army. Asked why this was the case, one gendarme explained: 'Up to now, I am more like a soldier than a gendarme. I am always on time; I never leave my post; I don't argue; I don't mingle with people. I do my job and that's that.' However, gendarmes often highlighted the lower level of education of rank and file army soldiers. 'First, they are recruited in the streets; second, they were never given a text of law. [...] That's what makes the difference between us [gendarmes] and soldiers. The gendarme is a man of justice. He knows the law and what is right and what is wrong. Soldiers

don't.' Their violent behaviour is accentuated in missions where they are in direct contact with the population, such as public order situations.<sup>12</sup> Gendarmes highly respected the discipline and the military qualities of army officers, in other words, their competencies as violence specialists. They are soldiers, but they are not soldiers of the law (*soldats de la loi*).

The gendarmes' views on the other corps of the Forces of Defence and Security highlight the complexity of their own positioning in this ensemble of military and paramilitary forces. Their descriptions may even seem contradictory: the police are criticised for mingling too much with the population, yet gendarmes often argue that they themselves live together with the population, make friends with them, and even see them as family.<sup>13</sup> Other gendarmes maintained that they do not mingle with the population at all and try to keep their distance which they conceive as the major source of their authority. Relating to soldiers or guards however, gendarmes explicitly mentioned their not being mere soldiers but experts of law. By referring to members of the other armed corps, gendarmes defined their own position and function. The relational distancing from other violence specialists enables them to find a common language, to communicate amongst themselves about their daily work and therewith find orientation in this ensemble. At the same time their distancing allows them to veil individual differences among them, thus creating the gendarmerie as one cohesive violence specialist. When talking about the other violence specialists altogether, they have to fuse the conflicting descriptions: 'There will always be a soldier who thinks he is better military than the gendarme; there will always be a police who thinks he is a better investigator than the gendarme; there will always be a customs officer who thinks he is more lawful than the gendarme. But we can do the job that almost all the others do. We are multifunctional. This is why we sometimes show off, why we feel we are better than the others.' Gendarmes ultimately have the ambition to cover more than one functional slot; their rivalry with the National Guard reveals the conflicts arising out of these appropriations.

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<sup>12</sup> In 1983 the army violently put down student protests, in 1990 another student demonstration was forcibly shut down by police forces. According to my interlocutors, gendarmes would never, never shoot at civilians.

<sup>13</sup> This is also often said by and about gendarmes in France (Mouhanna, 2007: 151).

### III. Appropriating and Defending Functional Slots

These discursive self-descriptions show the tendency of violence specialists to appropriate multiple tasks. Violence specialists assume specific functional slots, but who appropriates which slots is the result of a fierce negotiation process in everyday practices. While the Ghanaian police officers mostly stressed their non-violent approach, especially during crowd control, at times they violently enforce public order anyhow.<sup>14</sup> They reassume the functional slot of forceful public order policing in these situations that is normally appropriated by the Ghanaian military, despite possible repercussions. Violent interventions are motivated by the belief that such actions are part of their moral duty of 'bringing order'. The appropriation of one functional slot has positive effects on their work in other functional slots.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the formation of the community police has not stopped police officers from developing their own informant networks or from acting as mediators without referring to law in local conflicts. In Ghana such practices are necessary for criminal investigations. Another reason to appropriate a functional slot is the expectation of financial rewards. This is particularly the case for traffic controls, but also criminal investigations which enable policing actors to gain 'tips' or 'dash' as a reward for services rendered (see Blundo/Olivier de Sardan 2006). Roitman (2005: 162) and others only highlight financial motivations, but it is merely one amongst many. Organisations assuming new fields of work in such a way are not a specific African phenomenon. Luhmann (2000: 272) argues that organisations devise their own fields of action, based upon the initiatives of their personnel; public administration has an inherent tendency to expand these fields. Because of a belief in a moral mission, legitimising effects, necessity, and financial rewards, violence specialists try to appropriate as many functional slots as possible.

The described absorption of functional slots, like the army taking over public order policing from the police, are semi-sanctioned by law with its vague formulations. Yet this unclear demarcation of responsibilities enables single violence specialists to assume tasks in contradiction to their stated functions, often off-duty. Civil actors bring criminal

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<sup>14</sup> Although *generally* avoiding violence, Ghanaian police officers routinely use it in low visibility situations. They openly employ it against persons seen as being outside of the community. Violence against armed robbers can also take quite extreme forms as such practices are a source of legitimacy.

<sup>15</sup> When the practices of a violence specialist in a functional slot are linked to scandals, for example taking bribes at traffic checks, it can have delegitimising effects on their general work. The assumption of forceful public order policing by the military can also have a severe negative impact, as the main role of the army is ordinarily their use of force against outside threats (see Waddington 1999: 23).

cases to soldiers, secret agents or other violence specialists not-sanctioned to exercise law enforcement. These violence specialists then investigate, arrest and interrogate suspects, routinely using violence. One of the main reasons stated by civil actors for preferring the army and the intelligence service is that the Ghanaian police are considered to be 'too weak'. The loss of the functional slot of forceful public order policing and other overtly violent tasks deprives the police of the legitimacy of a true violence specialist. Violence specialists will seldom refer cases to the appropriate organisations, but aim to keep them as long as possible. These constant transgressions of violence specialists further erode the formal assignment of functional slots; in everyday practices violence specialists tend to assume all of them and thus cover the whole spectrum of policing. These transgressions lead to a disregard by some policing actors towards the tasks of others, from which conflicts arise between violence specialists. In one case, senior officers of the immigrations service declined to assist the police in order to protect one of their colleagues who had smuggled in illegal immigrants as part of a fraudulent scheme. Soldiers are generally reluctant to accept the authority of police officers, especially at traffic checks. In June 2010 soldiers attacked a barrier after one of them had been checked, injuring three police officers with hammers and raiding a police station in Kumasi.

Gendarmes in Niger are also confronted with other violence specialists semi-officially transgressing into their field of responsibility. Yet gendarmes claim authority over what they perceive as their core slot. A gendarme told a story highlighting this: He was on duty near the market of a small village when people ran towards him, excitedly shouting that a National Guard soldier was beating up a woman in the market. The gendarme rushed there and saw the guard who was about to beat a woman with his belt. Apparently there had been an argument whereby a man had accused a woman of theft. The man called the National Guard member who briefly listened to what they both had to say and took the decision that the woman was wrong. The woman was not willing to accept this so the National Guard soldier slapped her in the face. The woman became furious and returned the strike causing the guard to prepare to fight back with his belt. When the gendarme arrived on the spot he calmed them both down, declared authority over the situation, and took them all to his briged commander. The gendarme listened, first to the man and the woman, then to the guard. He decided that it was actually the woman who was right and the man who was wrong. He finally took them all to his brigade to conduct the criminal investigation.

A soldier of the National Guard whose task was the collection of market taxes acted as a police officer, even as a detective. He probably

knew that he was not sanctioned to conduct a criminal procedure and the woman did not accept his claim for authority, fought back, and the situation escalated. When the gendarme arrived, he successfully claimed authority over the situation, and therewith over his functional slot. In other words, he perceived the National Guard soldier as intruding into his core functions, the settlement of disputes and investigations into criminal offences. In Ghana violence specialists also constantly defend their functional slots. The events of the festival already contained such a defence, as it was the police officer who convinced the soldiers to bring the assailant to the station, transforming the procedure into legal law enforcement by the police. In specific situations violence specialists can also temporarily recede from occupying a functional slot when another organisation is more capable of doing a specific task. As such, the transgression of functional slots is not always contentious; slots can be (temporarily) delegated to other policing actors, mostly in order to cope with a shortage of manpower or equipment, lack of practical skills, or even a deficit in legitimacy. In this sense, the ensemble of violence specialists is flexible enough to adapt to the requirements of specific situations. But in general it is through these everyday practices of defending a slot, in more or less open conflict with competing violence specialists, that functional slots are occupied.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Referring to each other in discourse, policing actors find orientation in the ensemble of violence specialists: in their distancing from others they reflect the degree of distance they maintain towards civil actors and they find a discursive common ground which allows them to communicate amongst themselves about their daily work. Relational self-description thus serves as a guideline about the rationalities and practices their organisation mainly refers to. In our view the interplay of violence specialists can only inadequately be described as a market situation, in which competing security providers compete for consumers who adhere mainly to rational choice models (see Englebert 2009; Mehler et al. 2010: 11–14). While this concept reflects the relative stability of the ensemble, it disregards the moral motivation of policing actors and the legitimising effects of fulfilling a specific task.

Violence specialists in West Africa assume functional slots rather due to everyday negotiation than due to fields of responsibility ascribed by formal regulation. Laws are not irrelevant, yet there is a gradual, not essential, difference in their enactment between European and West African countries. Often lawmakers in West Africa, aware of these realities, attempt to enact as law what has already been practiced on the



ground. The ensemble of violence specialists emerges out of negotiations between them (see Bierschenk 1999: 323) and can be considered a 'temporal equilibrium' following Gluckman (1958: 27). The arrangement is not chaotic, but a relatively stable ensemble formed by everyday conflicts between violence specialists, constantly competing for, contesting, and defending functional slots. Which violence specialist assumes which function is permanently shifting, and also shaped by past negotiations.

Swift reconfigurations enable the security set-up to react in a flexible manner to any deficiencies of specific violence specialists. What an organisation called 'police' or 'army' does in the respective country is therefore not universal but depends on the assumed functional slots. There is a tendency by violence specialists to appropriate multiple policing tasks because this can have positive effects on their work in other slots. The emerging multiple slots that one organisation occupies provides its members with a distinct room to manoeuvre and vary their degree of distance to civil actors. Despite the conflicts arising out of overlapping claims of responsibility, the emerging ensemble of violence specialists is not chaotic or unordered, but relatively stable, while retaining flexibility. The ensemble is not born out of a single mutual agreement, but out of the continuing mundane quarrels and conflicts in everyday practices.

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## Summary

When encountering uniformed personnel in West Africa, as an inexperienced observer, they all appear alike and their scope of duty is obscure: soldiers, gendarmes, police officers, firemen, customs officers, immigration officers, forest officers, and community police are all uniformed and often armed with AK-47s. The duties of these different actors are not clearly delineated and seem to be self-selected rather than delegated by legal authorities. Scholars ascribing to theories of Security Sector Reform consider this overlap to be inherently flawed. This article examines the ensemble of state violence specialists and how it emerges out of everyday practices and self-descriptions. Violence specialists each tend to fulfil distinct tasks of everyday policing. Despite the conflicts arising out of overlapping claims, the emerging ensemble of violence specialists is not chaotic or disorderly, but relatively stable whilst retaining flexibility.<sup>16</sup>

## Zusammenfassung

### Staatliche Gewaltspezialisten in Westafrika

Bei der Begegnung mit Uniformierten in Afrika ist es für unerfahrene Beobachter schwer zu sagen, welcher staatlichen Organisation diese angehören und welche Aufgaben sie haben: Soldaten, Gendarmen, Polizisten, Feuerwehrmänner, Zollbeamte, Förster und *community policemen* sind alle uniformiert und meist mit AK-47 bewaffnet. Ihre Aufgaben sind nicht klar voneinander abgegrenzt und machen oft den Eindruck, von den Akteuren selbst bestimmt, anstatt von oben delegiert zu werden. Vertreter der ‚Security Sector Reform‘ betrachten diese Überlappungen als inhärent problematisch. Dieser Artikel untersucht das Ensemble von staatlichen Gewaltspezialisten und wie es aus den Alltagspraktiken und Selbstzuschreibungen der Akteure heraus entsteht. Gewaltspezialisten tendieren dazu, jeweils unterschiedliche polizeiliche Aufgaben zu erfüllen. Zwar führen die überlappenden Ansprüche zu Konflikten, jedoch ist

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das Ensemble der Gewaltspezialisten keinesfalls chaotisch, sondern relativ stabil und flexibel.

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