Just Police Work: Ethnographic research on the police in Africa

Veranstalter: Carola Lentz / Jan Beek / Mirco Göpfert, research project 'Boundary Work: Police in West Africa', hosted by the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany
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The international workshop 'Just police work: Ethnographic research on the police in Africa' brought together scholars from different disciplines such as social anthropology, political science, peace and conflict studies, and history. The research presented in this workshop had in common an ethnographic approach that was focused on the everyday interactions between police personnel and their civilian counterparts in eleven African countries; one case study concerned India. The participants offered a multifaceted and non-normative picture of ordinary police work in Africa, stimulated discussions about the specificity or non-specificity of policing in Africa, and invited theoretical reflections on the state, normative pluralism, justice and security.

After an introductory presentation of the workshop theme by CAROLA LENTZ the conference started with a **keynote lecture** by KLAUS SCHLICHTE (Bremen): 'Policing the world: global history or local peculiarities?' Adopting a broad comparative perspective, he argued that the global history of policing, including that of policing in Africa, is indeed a connected history, due to the diffusion of certain policing practices, but also to the convergence of the challenges of police work world-wide. Elements like bureaucratization and professional investigation techniques are certainly exported, but the question remains how they are adopted in the local context. Some policing techniques and ideas may not have been 'diffused' unidirectionally, but developed like 'fashions' in several places simultaneously, as for example the concept of community policing. If similar policing structures are introduced in different parts of the world, do they produce similar professional images, police cultures and discourses? How do police practices reflect general political and social orders? In short, if the global history of policing is a connected history, what is the nature of these connections and how do they change?

In the **first session**, 'Fragmented police: transnational, political, normative and military sediments in the police', LISA PETH (Mainz) presented her work about normative pluralism in everyday police work in Parakou, Benin. Focussing on the officers' point of view she analysed how policemen deal with situations of normative double-binds, how they define their profession within this often ambivalent professional context. MAMOUDOU SY (Dakar/Amsterdam) presented a paper on the Senegalese police during the pre-electoral crisis in 2012. The police's line of action changed in the course of the demonstrations, and several acts of violence challenged the police's legitimacy. LAURA THURMANN (Mainz) talked about a newly established special police unit that was created in order to fight against gangs and organised crime in Kinshasa, DR Congo. Despite the effort to demilitarise the Congolese police, the structure and organisation of this special unit resemble those of military forces. Analysing the self-image of the unit's personnel and how they are perceived by their European partners from development aid organisations, Thurmann showed how the unit, in their everyday police work, straddles a paramilitary and a civil police character.

JOEL GLASMAN (Berlin) gave an **afternoon lecture** on 'The historicity of police work'. He addressed the gap between historical approaches to colonial policing on the one hand, and approaches by anthropologists that focus on contemporary police work on the other hand. One solution to bridge this gap, according to Glasman, would be to analyse policing in terms of a 'security field' in which various security organizations (police, gendarmerie, etc.) were set up over time, with circulating personnel, techniques, rhetorics and practices, but each fulfilling a unique role concerning degree of autonomy and distance to civilians.

The **second session** focussed on police officers' careers within and outside the po-

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lice. AGNES BADOU (Parakou) demonstrated how career management of the Beninese police and gendarmerie leads to different advancement strategies pursued by policemen and gendarmes. Furthermore, she explored changing recruitment and career policies and the effects this has on the hierarchical structure and the relationships within the police corps. TESSA DIPHOORN (Utrecht/Istanbul) described the phenomenon of 'moonlighting' in the South African Police Service, namely policing practices performed by policemen outside their official working hours when they worked for (or even owned) private security companies.

The **third session** treated the issue of police legitimacy. JAN BEEK (Mainz), focussing on traffic checks, analysed how policemen aim at rendering their actions more legitimate by applying different registers of police work (violence, law, social order, sociability, market), that are predicated on different moral orders. MIRCO GÖPFERT (Mainz) showed how gendarmes in Niger solve disputes through arrangements between the disputing parties without bringing the cases to court. HELENE MARIA KYED (Copenhagen), also focussed on how the police, in Mozambique, settles disputes and straddles notions of formality and informality. She showed that the binary categories of formal/informal have only limited explanatory value with regards to everyday police work. DAVID PRATTEN (Oxford) focussed on vigilantism and informal justice within contexts of radical insecurity in Nigeria. He highlighted the importance of exploring vernacular understandings of insecurity and the aesthetic evaluations that people make of their (violent) actions on the bodies of others. He explored vigilante practices in terms of the embodied semiotics of difference that mark them from thieves and differentiate insider from outsider.

ALICE HILLS (Durham) gave the second **afternoon's lecture** concerning the question 'What is policeness?' She asked if police itself is a concept of the global North and what the defining features of a police officer are. Referring to her work in Somalia she showed that a state police does not necessarily need bureaucratic structures or uniforms to be recognized and accepted as such.

In **the fourth session** about everyday interactions between police and their civilian counterparts SARAH BIECKER (Bremen) talked about police posts in Kampala, Uganda, that are being financed by business men and private donators. Although the police has a rather bad reputation, there is still public demand for more police presence in order to heighten security, and private actors create incentives for the police to come closer by building up police posts while the personnel is financed with public funds. JULIA ECKERT (Bern) discussed police violence and torture as an everyday practice in India. From the police officers' point of view, it is a necessary means to obtaining general knowledge about the population, criminal evidence, i.e. confessions, and, more generally, the 'truth' in a context of deep suspicion towards civilians. OLLY OWEN (Oxford), finally, focused on states of informality in the Nigerian police. He analysed police officers' practices of partially using state procedures for the informal settlement of cases. This represents an 'informalized use of the state'.

THOMAS BIERSCHENK (Mainz) closed the workshop with a **general discussion** of the major results of the workshop. As the title of the workshop suggested, police work in Africa is not fundamentally different to elsewhere in the world, it is just police work. However, the police in African countries works in environments that are characterized by particularly low rates of police officers per population, lack of resources, and rapid urbanization. Policing has to deal with 'low trust societies' marked by uncertainty and precariousness. Additionally, career trajectories as well as the police organizations themselves appear more opaque and unpredictable for policemen in Africa than in the Global North. Also the presence of military elements in the police, the focus on ideal images and military aspects in training, rather than on practical instructions, seems to be more pronounced in African police organisations. The relative inefficiency (or absence) of professional policing techniques and the more visible police violence and corruption is reflected in a tendency to improvisation and 'bricolage' as well as in an especially pronounced 'twilight zone' between the public and the pri-

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vate.

This twilight zone is particularly visible in the police officers' boundary work, their maintaining and partially dissolving the boundary of their institution; in other words, how they do or do not draw on formal procedures. But even when the law is not applied and official procedures are not followed, they are still relevant for the police officers' actions – they are the backdrop against which even informal dispute settlements take place.

The scholars of policing in Africa at the workshop shared the basic assumption that police work in Africa is not essentially different from police work elsewhere. They therefore build heavily on theoretical concepts developed by scholars of state institutions and policing in the global North; this global comparative perspective is certainly important and fruitful, but it is, until now, unidirectional. Some aspects of police work, such as those mentioned above, become more visible, more pronounced when we focus on the everyday work of policemen in Africa. Empirical research on police work in Africa and the consequent development of theoretical concepts, and the refinement, modification or distortion of concepts drawn from police work in France, the US, the UK, or Germany, is not only the precondition for a truly comparative perspective on policing worldwide, but can also be a fruitful contribution for studying the police in the global North.

Conference Overview:

Keynote lecture
Klaus Schlichte (Bremen): Policing between global history and local peculiarities

Session 1: 'Fragmented police – transnational, political, normative, and military sediments in the police'

Lisa Peth (Mainz): Everyday police work in the face of normative pluralism (Parakou, Benin)

Mamoudou Sy (Dakar/Amsterdam): Senegalese police forces and the management of pre-electoral crisis (from June 23 to March 25). Are Senegalese policemen professional or professional killers?

Laura Thurmann (Mainz): Somewhere between green and blue. A special police unit in the DR Congo

Afternoon lecture with discussion
Joel Glasman (Berlin): The historicity of police work. Fitting the past into police studies

Session 2: 'Police work as a job. Careers within and outside the police'

Agnès Badou (Parakou): In search of the stripes. The police profession at the test of internal promotion

Tessa Diphoorn (Utrecht/Istanbul): Moonlighting. Crossing the public-private policing divide in Durban, South Africa

Session 3: 'Police legitimacy. „Just" police work?'

Jan Beek (Mainz): Money, morals and law. Police patrols in Ghana

Mirco Göpfert (Mainz): Arrangements. Police work as moral work.

Helene Maria Kyed (Copenhagen): Inside the Police Stations in Maputo City – between illegality and legitimacy

David Pratten (Oxford): Punishment & personhood

Afternoon lecture with discussion
Alice Hills (Durham): The question of policeness: The applicability of Western concept in police research

Session 4: 'Everyday interactions. Using the police'

Sarah Biecker (Bremen): The everyday life of the Ugandan Police Force

Julia Eckert (Bern): In the police station

Olly Owen (Oxford): Policing Nigeria. States of informality

Morning lecture with general discussion
Thomas Bierschenk (Mainz): Police and the state

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