



## Mobilities – In and Out of Africa

André Chappatte  
Andrea Kaiser-Grolimund  
Sandra Staudacher

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Bamenda 2013: An old man erected a wooden statue in the middle of Mobil Nkwen junction. Every evening, he performs a sacrifice on the reversed mortar. Nobody touches the statue, and very few people know why he does what he does.  
*T. Förster, February 2013*

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Editors:  
Till Förster and Lucy Koechlin  
Institute of Social Anthropology  
University of Basel  
Münsterplatz 19  
CH-4051 Basel

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# In and out of Africa

## Introduction: In and out of Africa

The Research Group on Political Transformations at the Chair of Anthropology at the University of Basel regularly discusses topical themes in African studies. It brings scholars with diverse disciplinary backgrounds together, working in different parts of the continent. Sometimes, the enormous disparities of contemporary social life surface in these discussions. The two contributions of this issue of the Basel Papers on Political Transformations illustrate the tremendous span of mobility in and out of Africa.

Though the authors, André Chapatte from the Zentrum Moderner Orient Berlin, and Sandra Staudacher and Andrea Kaiser-Grolimund from the Institute of Anthropology Basel, had no intention to make their papers fit to a general theme, their descriptions of African mobilities show to what degree the life-worlds of Africans may diverge today: Chappatte addresses the continent's political fragmentation by describing in a vividly written account his journey with a truck from Manankoro, Mali, to Odienné, Côte d'Ivoire. The border is and never was an insurmountable obstacle for drivers, even without the necessary papers. However, border and customs controls caused and still cause a sort of obstacle race where the government officials and drivers play cat-and-mouse. Trespassing a national border is exhausting, but never impossible. Just how exhausting and how intrepid such crossings usually are is illustrated in Chappatte's contribution.

The second example of African mobility comes from Tanzania and the Tanzanian diaspora. Sandra Staudacher and Kaiser-Grolimund analyse how a mobile app installed on smartphones can bring people together: Today, many Tanzanians make use of WhatsApp to sustain social ties across the country and internationally to relatives and friends across the world. The short but instantly sent messages allow them to participate in the lives of others over distances that, only a few years ago, were almost impassable. WhatsApp can be particularly transformative, as it allows not only for the sending of text messages at a very low cost, but also pictures, photographs, and voice messages – all of which open up whole new horizons of communication and interaction for, in the case described here, elderly people and their family and friends. The technology fosters the emergence of a new social reality that links face-to-face encounters to messages sent across continents. The short message software also allows researchers to stay in contact with their research partners and to trace current transformations of their life-worlds. As Sandra Staudacher and Andrea Kaiser-Grolimund draw our attention to, this also highlights new, interesting and sometimes challenging forms of “blurring” between the different roles of anthropologists.

The two forms of movement – bodily and virtual mobility – co-exist, and the latter will not replace the former. Whether they will integrate into one, perhaps more comprehensive form of sociality, or develop completely new forms that we do not know yet, is a question that the future will answer.

*Till Förster, September 17, 2016*



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- ① Korhogo 1989: The new bus terminal that links the savannah city to Abidjan and its port, the economic hub of the country.
- ② Sikasso 2012: Sama Transport's bus terminal with pictures of Bamako to the left and of Abidjan to the right.
- ③ Nafoun 1996: The bush taxi was an old *badjan*, a "big wether" that roams the bush. But the villagers baptised it *kondoro* after a spirit-being "because it's always a miracle that the car arrives."
- ④ Kumbo 2009: A breakdown behind the town. The passengers left and tried to find another bush Taxi to take them to their destination.

- ⑤ Between Yaoundé and Bafoussam 2008: The bus drivers have to work day in and day out. They are tired and often cannot pay attention to the traffic.
- ⑥ Yaoundé 2010: At the door of his house, Helman Ndofoa Zofoa shows a picture of a car stuck in mud – a typical scene of Cameroonian everyday life, he says.
- ⑦ Between Yaoundé and Bafoussam 2008: Sometimes, the drivers don't notice other vehicles in time.
- ⑧ Between Bamako and Kankan 2012: A blown tire, and the spare wheel is also flat. The passengers have to wait at the roadside until someone feels sorry for them.
- ⑨ Yaoundé 2013: When night falls, Muslims wash their feet and pray on a traffic island.
- ⑩ Yaoundé 2013: Midnight, waiting for taxis.

Photos: T. Förster, 1989–2013

# Encounter between tiredness, dust and Ebola at a border checkpoint of northwestern Côte d'Ivoire

André Chappatte<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract:

This article offers an in-depth ethnography of a cross-border journey from Manankoro (Mali) to Odienné (Côte d'Ivoire) during the early phase of the Ebola outbreak that recently hit the neighbouring countries of Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. In doing so, it explores how this journey's adversities, its unexpected length and detours and roadblocks illustrates that crossing the borderland of northern Côte d'Ivoire in a time when the state is still returning after a decade of rebel rule means facing a scattered presence and co-existence of state, non-state and state-like actors which renders difficult to know who is really in charge of the customs, security and control there. It ultimately considers Ebola as a possible metaphor of power in West Africa when its intervention becomes violent, arbitrary and insidious.

Since early 2014 West Africa has been facing the most severe Ebola outbreak in recorded history. In its 'epicenter', a coastal and forest area composed of the countries of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, Ebola has killed more than 10'000 locals.<sup>2</sup> Other countries, such as Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, the United States, Spain and the United Kingdom were also hit by this contagious virus via the international mobility of people and the treatment of infected medical staff back in their home country. Against the backdrop of a continuous deterioration of the situation within the virus' epicenter during the first half of 2014 and the correlative risk of its wider spread across West Africa and other continents, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared this epidemic of Ebola to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on August 8 2014 (Briand et al. 2014). In Liberia, for instance, from 300 to 400 new Ebola cases were reported every week during August and September 2014. As a consequence, the majority of the international airlines suspended their flights to Conakry, Freetown and Monrovia, the capitals of the three countries composing the epicenter of the outbreak. Supported by the arrival of substantial international aid (i.e. funds, medical infrastructure, doctors and medical staff), these most affected countries eventually managed to slow down the expansion of the Ebola outbreak by the end of 2014; the outbreak thereafter entered into a 'phase of reflux' in early 2015 (Tranet 2015). On 9 May 2015 the WHO declared Liberia

- 1 This paper benefited from the sharp and inspiring comments of Till Förster, Paolo Gaibazzi, Lucy Koechlin and Robert Launay. However, the author alone is responsible for its analyses and any remaining shortcomings.
- 2 Ebola data and statistics WHO, see <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/view. ebola-sitrep. ebola-summary 20150513?lang=en> (accessed 14.05.2015)

free of Ebola virus transmission.<sup>3</sup> Despite the parallel international effort in medical research there is so far no efficient vaccine and treatment against Ebola; once you are actively infected, death will be ‘the most likely outcome’ within the 10 following days (Martinez and Ramirez Ronda 1996).<sup>4</sup> The spread of the virus is also difficult to trace due to an incubation time which can last up to three weeks. In 2015 Ebola was still perceived as a sneaky and deadly threat which can deeply unsettle societies in its tortuous path, such as when people heard that Ebola is approaching their home.

Between the end of March and April 2014 I undertook a short period of fieldwork in a borderland of northwestern Côte d’Ivoire with Guinea, the country where the index case of Ebola dating back to December 2013 was later identified. The aim of this stay was to open a new field site: Odienné, an administrative town which is the *chef-lieu* (administrative capital) of *Denguélé*, the northwestern most District of Côte d’Ivoire. At that time the Ebola virus was reported in Guinea and suspected in Sierra Leone and Liberia; its death toll was roughly 60 (The Economist 2014). Although Côte d’Ivoire was not affected by the Ebola virus, the government was concerned by the possible spread of this virus into the country mostly for two reasons: (1) Côte d’Ivoire shares a long border with Guinea and Liberia; (2) Part of its inhabitants traditionally consumes meat of agouti and bat, the natural hosts of Ebola virus. Moreover, the swift and surreptitious propagation of this fatal virus was already causing fear, mistrust and disinformation beyond its epicenter, such as illustrated with the false alarm of Ebola that provoked panic reactions in the district of Faladjé in Bamako at the end of March 2014.<sup>5</sup> During a former early phase of an Ebola outbreak in the Republic of Congo in 2003 a group of medical anthropologists meaningfully discovered at the local level the existence of various explanatory models for the origin of Ebola, such as sorcery, religious sect and foreign intervention; they often related their emergence to regional contexts of deep social inequalities and exclusive accumulations of wealth (Hewlett et al. 2005). During my stay in Odienné I also encountered mixed feelings about the preventive information broadcast on a daily basis in local radios and national TV channels. While some locals interpreted the outbreak of Ebola in the neighbouring Guinea as a political lie of foreign origins, others were worried about the possibility of being hit by this new shape of curse. Rumours of the spread of Ebola towards the border were indeed circulating in town: the threat was discussed as dangerously approaching home. In parallel, people were regularly teasing each other’s by making jokes based on Ebola when drinking alcohol in discreet bars called ‘*maquis*’<sup>6</sup> during the night. Already on my way to Odienné, however, I encountered at a border checkpoint between Mali and Côte d’Ivoire on the 26 March 2014 the reference to Ebola which struck me the most due to its connection with state power.<sup>7</sup>

Reflecting upon the medical challenges provoked by this ‘present global threat’ (Wiwanitkit 2014), some health experts have been investigating Ebola as a ‘bio-weapon’ due to its high rate of mortality (Adalja 2014, 161); I argue that such metaphor of the weapon can concurrently stress the non-medical dimensions of Ebola among the con-

3 See, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2015/liberia-ends-ebola/en/> (accessed 14.05.2015)

4 The mortality rate of the virus ranges from 25% to 90% depending on its strain (Semalulu et al. 2014).

5 See, <http://www.journaldumali.com/article.php?aid=8103> (accessed 21.10.2014).

6 For further information on maquis, see Chappatte (2014).

7 Instead of travelling from the south, I decided to reach Odienné from the north via Bougouni because this town of neighboring southwest Mali was the main field site of my recent doctoral studies in social anthropology.

cerned population (Desclaux 2006). In this regard, I attempt in this article to develop a “situational analysis” (see Gluckman 1940) of the aforementioned cross-border journey towards Odienné because the ‘sequential’ unfolding of its ethnographic description (Handelman 2005, 38) culminates in a very enunciative situation of Ebola which pointedly demonstrates the socio-political ramifications of Ebola discourses in post-2011 Côte d’Ivoire. This year [2011], the fall of Laurent Gbagbo and the succession of Alassane Ouattara at the head of the Ivorian state marked the reunification of the country and the progressive re-implementation of the state border service, the police and the *gendarmérie* (among other state officers) in its northern territories. Considering this cross-border journey towards Odienné via ‘the income-generating character of the border’ (Doevenspeck 2011, 138), this paper ultimately explores the meaning of this enunciative situation of Ebola within the fields of force, civil security and control framing a borderland which saw the return of the state only three years ago after a decade of rebel rule.

## A halt at Manankoro, a border locality along the international RN9/A7 highway

In the late afternoon of the 25 March 2014 I arrived by pickup truck in Manankoro, a Malian locality located right at the border with Côte d’Ivoire. The sole asphalt road crossing the border between Mali and Côte d’Ivoire is the RN7/A5<sup>8</sup> passing eastwards through the town of Sikasso down to the frontier localities of Zégoua and Pogo. As my plan was to reach Odienné from Bougouni, a town located in the southwestern most part of Mali, this itinerary option represented a detour of more than 500 kilometers. Therefore I opted for the RN9/A7, a national road which connects Bougouni to Odienné in a 250 kilometers straight line and passes by Manankoro half-way through. Although this axis is considered as the second most important routes to Côte d’Ivoire, the RN7/A7 down to Odienné remains a sandy road punctuated by dilapidated sections. In March I at least avoided the possible flooding caused by the rainy season which can cut off the road during a couple of days. Inhabitants of Bougouni mostly considered Manankoro as no more than a big village because of its relative small size (10’000 inhabitants) and difficult road access. For locals, however, the very recent arrival of electricity and water tap systems in Manankoro gave to their locality an increasing urban touch. They further thought that the tarring of the road RN7/A7 down to Odienné would bring traffic, goods and investments to Manankoro, and therefore definitively transform it into a proper town. This border locality represented the southernmost point of Mali in which I somehow felt I was in chartered territory due to two previous visits I did there. Beyond its walls lays a new country to explore: the Côte d’Ivoire. Before heading towards the unknown I enjoyed the hospitality of my local host Adama,<sup>9</sup> a mill-mechanic and seller of farming materials who settled in the area a couple of years ago. His patron, an entrepreneur based in Bougouni, was a good friend of mine. While a few people of the neighborhood watched a movie inside his house, we sat outside so as to enjoy the freshness of the night. Observing a bat flying over his courtyard from a man-

8 ‘Malian section’/‘Ivorian section’

9 All names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

go tree to another during the evening, my host and I exchange a couple of words about the terrifying Ebola epidemic which was striking in the neighboring country of Guinea. He told me that as a prevention he did not eat bush meat anymore although he partially mistrusted state media news about its spread. Thanks to being subscribed to Canal+ he regularly kept updated about the Ebola outbreak via France24 TV channel. Adama remained anyhow worried about the supposedly nearing of this threat expressed in the media: who really knows? Who shall we trust? Looking at this fruit bat, which I read could be the primary animal reservoir of Ebola in West Africa, whilst getting closer to the border with the infectious country of Guinea, I felt that the fear and the doubt caused by this deadly virus was becoming more than a media information in this border area: it inhabited the place as it invested people's mind.

Early in the morning of the following day Adama brought me to the town's coach station where he told me I could find an opportunity to go to Odienné. Except from a few passers-by the place was, however, quasi-empty. An officer of the local transport union informed me that Wednesday is not a market-day in the region. As a consequence, there was little traffic that day. Moreover the passenger transports drive weekly to Odienné on its market-day only, which is on Sunday. During the other days of the week only occasional trucks and few private vehicles go to Odienné. Luckily for me an old Mercedes truck was due to leave this very day. I also learnt that four other people wanted to head south as well: a young Ivorian from Duékoué (southern Côte d'Ivoire), a Fula from Bougouni, a Dogon woman from Sévaré (northern Mali) and another Malian from the hinterland of Bougouni. The atmosphere was tense because the four were arguing about the price of transport set by the officer and the truck's driver. For them, 6000 fcfa<sup>10</sup> (15CHF) was an expensive price for travelling by a freight truck to a town at a distance of 120km from Manankoro mostly because, for a similar amount of money, one can travel more than 500 kilometers on a proper coach on asphalt road in Mali. The officer and the driver of the truck replied that the numerous checkpoints punctuating the road to Odienné make the price go up. They argued that with a lower price all their profit would be 'eaten' by the numerous '*corps habillés*' (men in uniform)<sup>11</sup> found along the road. After three hours of endless negotiation the truck finally left Manankoro around 10 am when the passengers and I reluctantly accepted to pay their price. The Dogon woman and I were lucky to have a place in the cabin next to the driver, while the three others passengers and the apprentice had to stand up in its empty and open trailer.

## 'Voie clandestine'

Being in motion for two minutes only I already took my passport, visa and vaccination card in hands so as to get fully ready for the imminent border control which, according to my host, was just at the exit of Manankoro. Willing to avoid being subjected to the mood of border guards I had preventively opted to obtain my visa directly from the Embassy of Côte d'Ivoire in Berlin. After crossing the periphery of the locality the truck head for a small path which entered into a thick savannah. Since its departure the

10 In this paper 'fcfa' and 'francs' refer to the West African CFA franc or XOF (ISO 4217 code); 1CHF was worth roughly 400 fcfa in early 2014.

11 This French African expression can designate any state security forces (see Debos & Glasman 2012, 9).

truck did not take a similar two-lane sandy road on which I travelled from Bougouni to Manankoro. Going to a reputedly more developed country in terms of infrastructure, I was surprised by the very poor shape of what looked more like a trail than a road. Shortly after penetrating the bush the truck came across a couple of motorbikes coming from the opposite direction. As the path was so thin, the truck nearly provoked an accident. A motorbike had to fall in gliding so as to make an emergency brake and ended up biting the dust just in front of the truck; its driver got back on his feet with a few scratches on his left legs. I then asked the driver: 'But where are the Malian and Ivorian checkpoints? They should be located right at the exit of Manankoro?' He smiled at me and replied: '*Ici, c'est la voie clandestine!*' (Here, this is the clandestine route!). He explained to me that the detour we were making was kind of forced upon us because there were too many checkpoints along the main road to Odienné; after crossing the Malian and Ivorian customs a vehicle had to go through a series of checkpoints of the police and gendarmerie of both countries as well as those of the '*rebelles*', former members of the *Forces Armées des Forces Nouvelles* (FAFN) which defeated the regular army loyal to the former President Laurent Gbagbo in 2011.<sup>12</sup>

The post-2011 government of the President Alassane Ouattara integrated part of the rebel forces into the new national armed forces of Côte d'Ivoire: *Les Forces Républicaines de Côte d'Ivoire*. Nevertheless, the situation remained confused in the



View of the clandestine route from the cabin.  
A. Chappatte, March 2014

12 The FAFN was the military wing of the rebel movement; for further details on the FAFN and its transformation in March 2011 into Les Forces Républicaines de Côte d'Ivoire (FRCI), see Fofana (2011).

ground; the process of rebels' demobilization was not complete yet, while others were still operating as a parallel state in their rear bases of northern Côte d'Ivoire. A post-conflict context is by nature transitional; such period of former state demise and new state construction is often marked by the proliferation of 'forms of wealth and power in its margins' (Raeymaekers 2009, 58). Contemporary Côte d'Ivoire, however, cannot be exactly characterized by a changeover between two states. Indeed, the state institutions were absent from northern Côte d'Ivoire during a decade; after the failed coup d'état of September 2002 this part of the country became controlled by a rebel movement until 2011.<sup>13</sup> During this 'stateless' period the security was in the hands of various actors, such as the FAFN, the traditional hunters' association,<sup>14</sup> private security companies, and quarter or village based self-defense groups (Förster 2012, 11–12). This specific period was not a mere rupture of state power; it instead should be understood in the wake of a post-Cold War process of 'state's retreat' [as an institution] observed across numerous African countries in the 1990s; this latter was marked by a greater influence of international neoliberal institutions in internal African affairs which led to a 'state atrophy' (see Hellweg 2011, 28–30) partially caused by structural adjustment programmes. In Côte d'Ivoire crime rose due to the resulting deterioration of police force;<sup>15</sup> therefore private initiatives, such as the Benkadi [hunters] movement, could legitimate their presence, activities, and interventions within the space of civil security neglected by the state (ibid.). Although the police and the gendarmerie progressively returned to northern Côte d'Ivoire in the aftermath of Ouattara's accession to presidential power in Mai 2011, they still could not claim the monopoly over force, control and security in the Denguélé due to the presence of other security forces which dated back from the period of the rebellion. In this regard, contemporary northern Côte d'Ivoire is still characterized by a 'statehood', as 'the practices that shape the popular understanding of a [state] institution' (Förster 2010, 701–2) which is performed by reentering state actors, and former rebels and civil state-like actors. The driver meaningfully concluded by moaning that: 'Even sometimes someone puts on a uniform and sets up a *'clando checkpoint'*<sup>16</sup> by putting cans and poles across the road! Everybody wants a share of what is crossing the border!' After having heard his comments I initially wanted to tell him that he also wanted his share of what is crossing the border because he previously argued that the high price of our ticket was for paying the numerous checkpoints that we are now avoiding. While the owner of the truck makes a substantial profit on the transportation of merchandise, the business of passengers de facto ended up in the hands of the driver. I at the end remained silent because a new argument over the price of the ticket, except from wasting my energy, would have not brought our money back. This very journey was already taking the shape of an adventure made of unexpected twists.

At one o'clock the truck was still on this small path which was now sinking deep into the savannah. With the high heat of the midday sun that characterizes the dry season, the temperature inside the cabin was above 40 degree. The truck was moving very slowly due to the uphill and downhill slopes, potholes, cracks and narrowing of the paths; the air entering from the side of the cabin was therefore warm and stagnant. As a consequent I was abundantly sweating and my clothes and hairs were getting red-

13 'The police and gendarmerie were the first institutions to disappear after the failed coup' (Förster 2012, 11).

14 For a in-depth study of the traditional hunters called 'dozo' as enforcers of security in contemporary Côte d'Ivoire, see Hellweg (2011)

15 'In the early 1990s [in northern Côte d'Ivoire], still under the old regime of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, banditry had achieved a rate that many ordinary people found unacceptable' (Förster 2010, 701).

16 '*Clando*' is the diminutive of '*clandestin*'.



dish by the dust of the soil raised by the passage of the truck and other vehicles. When the path crossed a wooded savannah, we found ourselves lashed by the branches which penetrate the cabin through its broken side-windows. Within the cabin our body were constantly swinging and often leaping because of the numerous bumps of a path which sometimes was barely traceable. I felt pity for the three other passengers and the apprentice who had to stand up in full sunlight because the trailer had no roof! Although I carefully quenched my thirst by slowly sipping my only bottle of drinking water, its content was shrinking and getting warm. In the cabin we were progressively becoming tired by what turned to be a demanding cross-country road experience. The Dogon woman, who made do with a container as a seat, regularly grumbled and heaved a sigh. We were both starting to complain about the harshness of the journey and the truck's slow progression towards Odienné. I also wondered myself how the driver could find his way in a savannah interspersed by numerous trails. Anyway, we had no choice than to accept these difficult travelling conditions because no other alternative could be found in this remote countryside. Despite having come across few hamlets, a village and a few farmers working in their fields, I was not able to know whether we already crossed the border because not a single convention, whether natural and cultural, indicated its presence. In this vast savannah, country dwellers were indeed farming the same crops, going to the same village markets and speaking the same language. As our truck was trying to navigate in-between an opaque network of checkpoints, I had the impression that the border was a strip of land delimited by imprecise contours and marked by an 'itinerant territoriality' (Mbembe & Rendall 2000, 263). After a five hours drive, we finally reached a proper sandy road. Were we close to Odienné? Hope might be just ahead of us. A few kilometers later while crossing a traditional village of mud houses, I regretfully realized that, since we left Manankoro, we only moved a few tens of kilometers eastwards when our truck stopped in a checkpoint of the Malian police. Due to this exhausting detour we at least avoided the customs of both countries, maybe other checkpoints as well, but not all those located along the various roads to Odienné.

## Showing our ID card and vaccination card at the border

From the cabin I observed that our arrival woke up a policeman who was dozing on a traditional wooden chair in the shade of a dilapidated hay roof. Our truck was likely among the rare vehicles which passed through this village on that day. We all got off the truck and moved to a nearby ageing house which looked like a frontier post. Although in a bad state, its cement walls distinguished from the mud houses of the villagers and hence marked the presence of the state. In the rural localities of this part of West Africa constructions in cement are a common sign of wealth, power and status. There we discovered that the policeman was now waiting for us behind the iron bars of a counter. As an agent of state regulatory authority he interrupted his nap so as to inspect us in a formal way. The driver and his apprentice greeted the policeman and then leisurely sat on a chair, whereas the passengers were asked to give their documents, i.e. their identity card and vaccination card. Three passengers had no vaccination card on them. The policeman hence requested them to pay 1000 francs each for being granted the right of passage; they obeyed without much resistance. Apparently such amount of money was a reasonable price to pay for what seemed to be a misdemeanor. No receipt recorded their fine: the money went directly to the policeman's pocket. The Fula did not pay anything because his vaccination card was in order. For West Africans, crossing a checkpoint

at the border above all means showing a valid ID card; someone who dares travelling without ID card risks to paying a considerable fine (or not given the right of passage at all!). The ID card is also employed for claiming numerous official documents to the state administration; it is therefore the official document central to the notion of state and statehood across West Africa.<sup>17</sup> Given that travellers' ID cards are usually in order, border guards take the opportunity to make a little extra money out of the fact that they know that numerous people do not travel with a vaccination card. Travellers seem also to know that this negligence is dealt with a small fine and without facing humiliation. After all, the vaccination card is only demanded when one crosses a border.

Knowing that my documents were in order, I confidently gave them to the policeman when my turn arrived. He neatly opened my passport, carefully examined it page by page, and then commented: '*Ou sont les cachets de sortie et d'entrée*' (Where are the exit and entry stamps)? I was taken aback and then realised that this forced detour was playing an unexpected trick on me. His meticulous checking of my passport was motivated by the fact that he knew that the truck did not pass by the customs service which officially stamps the passports. Quickly pulling myself together I, however, knew that he knew that I did not intentionally provoke this situation: I carried no valuable or commercial goods, and my passport and visa were in order; such detour had simply been imposed on me by the driver who wanted to bypass the numerous checkpoints located along the main road to Odienné. I therefore could have pointed to the driver's responsibility in this issue. I did not do so because I noticed at first sight that they were in collusion. The policeman likely closed his eyes on the fact that the driver opted for this suspicious detour because such strategy brought clients to the secondary and remote frontier post he was in charge of. I consequently looked down and played the innocent and naïve foreigner who does not want to argue. My host in Manankoro indirectly advised me to behave in such a way with the border guards when the day before he reproachfully pointed out that most of them are ashamed of asking money from white people while they eagerly do it with their fellow Africans. The policeman admonished me about what he called a 'procedural fraud'. I did not reply. He thereafter tried to intimidate me by telling me that I must go back to the customs service so as to get those official stamps. I remained still and passive. He finally let me go without asking me anything. The truck continued its journey to Odienné. The hunger, the thirst and the fatigue plunged its passengers into a silence interspersed with sighs and grumbles.

The sandy road was now larger than the so-called '*voie clandestine*' we came from; nonetheless potholes, cracks and bumps still gave rhythm to our discomfort and the truck's slow progress. When I asked the driver whether we were still far away from Odienné he replied that '*we are coming closer, we are coming closer*'. At least he did not say that '*we did not do the half of it!*' anymore. At the sight of the next village the driver told us that we were now in Côte d'Ivoire. A worn-out sign with painted letters '*poste de contrôle stop Tahara*' (checkpoint stop, village of Tahara) on its front loomed within the village which looked emptied most likely due to the heat of the sun (see below picture). The truck stopped.

A couple of men in uniforms were scrutinizing us from under the shade of the thick foliage of three big mango trees. We all got off the truck to directly notice the presence of two young police officers armed with truncheon at the rear of the trailer. One of them got it on and diligently inspected its nooks. Except from the passengers' personal luggage, the trailer was empty. With a strong voice they thereafter asked all of us to open our luggage. Given that our private affairs did not contain commercial goods, they

17 For a study of the centrality of ID cards to the notion of statehood in northern Côte d'Ivoire during rebel governance, see Förster (2012, 18-9).



Rusty checkpoint signpost in the village of Tahara.  
A. Chappatte, March 2014

could hardly tax us. I could feel that their authoritarian attitude was partially driven by a hungry tension. They were seeking for a concrete pretext so as to squeeze our money out, but they did not find any. They then required us to move towards the mango trees. Their chief, wearing stylish black sun glasses, was comfortable manipulating a mobile phone while lying on a camp bed and smoking a cigarette. He barely looked at us. Fresh water, a bottle of Fanta and some fruit were put on a little table next to him. Similar to what Förster observed in the attitudes of former rebels and police at roadblocks of northern Côte d'Ivoire, his indifferent and haughty attitude came 'close to an obvious demonstration of superiority, willful ignorance and conspicuous boredom' (2012, 22) which announces who "got the upper hand" in what will come next: the control of identity papers. By contrast, our throats were dry and our belly empty. While other policemen were observing us from nearby camp beds and chairs, their chief calmly got up and sat, drank a bit and asked for our ID cards and vaccination cards. Standing silently next to the policemen, we just hoped that their chief would not be too harsh on us. We were exhausted from more than five hours of difficult travel conditions and needed to be on the road as soon as possible if we wished to reach Odienné by the same evening. I was myself concerned about the fact that I did not have any exit and entry stamps in my passport; I just hoped the chief of this frontier post would not notice it! He carefully examined all the documents. Then in a memorable voice he loudly uttered the below moralizing speech in French with a smile on his face while looking first at me and then with an unsettling gaze while staring at all the remaining truck's passengers.

'The difference between you and the Africans is that you are in order. All the vaccines are here; all has been done in 2014.<sup>18</sup> But these people do not have even a vaccine whereas the Ebola fever is hitting the neighbouring Guinea and hanging around our borders! This is not serious!'<sup>19</sup>

18 It was a coincidental timing that I renewed all my vaccines just before going to West Africa.

19 '*La différence entre vous et les africains c'est que vous êtes en règle ! Tous les vaccins sont là. Tout a été fait en 2014. Tandis que ces gens n'ont même pas de vaccin et que la fièvre Ebola sévit en Guinée voisine et rôde à nos frontières. Ce n'est pas sérieux!*'

After further disgraceful comments towards the African passengers, the chief of the police vociferously reprimanded one of them who, turning his head away of the scene, supposedly did not listen to what the chief was saying. Noticing this person's ignorance of French language, the chief especially denigrated him for his lack of 'civilised' manners.<sup>20</sup> One of the two young officers who checked the trailer then stared at me and openly added that: 'You are in order, but you anyway have to give something because we are under the sun here.' I remained silent. His chief gave me my documents and ordered me to go to the truck.

## Exploring the 'corps habillés' beyond the logic of professionalism

I felt relieved and angry at the same time. The chief of the police luckily did not pay attention to the fact that I did not have any exit and entry stamps in my passport. On the other hand, I was bitterly disappointed by his comments because I thought that they mostly expressed arrogant lies, using me as the supposedly "traveller of reference". I was above all flabbergasted by the way he brazenly drew a parallel between vaccine and Ebola; at least I hoped that he did not want to suggest that an updated vaccine card provides protection against the Ebola virus! Whatever was on the mind of the chief of police that day, such nonsensical speech was nothing else than one of the multiple forms that the abuse of security power can take in this part of West Africa when an ordinary African wants to cross a national border. At the end of the day a border guard is always right because he is the one who wears a uniform, full stop! In this regard, the French African expression '*corps habillés*' which designates the state security forces in Côte d'Ivoire is etymologically meaningful; a *corps habillés* is literally a body which is dressed (in a uniform). Then, who dresses (i.e. gives power to) this body? It is the state. Although dressed, Ivoirians know that a body (someone) lies underneath. This expression suggests that a member of the state security force can never be the state; he/she at the most represents the state. Although the uniform of a state security force indexes professionalism, as a *corps habillé* Ivoirians know that he/she remains a human being, that is to say someone made of interests, emotions, origins and experiences. The study of state security forces in action therefore needs to go beyond a purely instrumental and mechanistic interpretation of their role towards civil security and public order (see Debos & Glasman 2012, 10). My first impression was that this very reference to Ebola that descended upon us after five hours of difficult travelling conditions acted like a rhetorical threat which aimed at morally weakening the patience and bargaining power of the African passengers. I was also aware that the chief sent me back to the truck so as to freely do his "under-the-counter" border business with the Malian and Ivorian passengers.

20 It is not rare to come across 'corps habillés' in the Denguélé who come from southern Côte d'Ivoire. Following a longstanding logic of transfer set to fight the emergence of patrimonial networks based on a regionalization of state career, they were transferred to the north of the country after the fall of the former President Laurent Gbagbo. Although serving under the current government ruled by the northerner Alassane Ouattara, southerners of the state security forces still associate the mastery of French language (a language skill widespread among southerners) as a sign of genuine Ivorian identity and a marker of civilization (by contrast to the Dioula language which they relate to what they perceive as the foreigners from the north). The chief's comment on education hence emphasizes 'the domestic political contestation and the politics of identity' that especially shapes borderland regions of young countries across the world (Megoran et al. 2005, 723).

My mind was also grasped by the heat. The truck was parked right at the center of an empty square and I consequently had to content myself with standing in its shade because the temperature inside the cabin was like in an oven. Thirst finally compelled me to ask for water in a nearby courtyard; as a precaution I came back to the truck directly afterwards. After a while the chief came and asked me how much I paid for the transport. I told him the truth. He then left without saying anything. 20 minutes passed.

The first passenger to come back at the truck was the young Ivorian who went through this checkpoint with 1000 francs of fine because he did not have any vaccination card on him. The Malian from the hinterland of Bougouni and the Dogon woman from Sévaré were each deprived of 3000 francs (7.5 CHF) at this frontier post for a similar offence. Knowing that the daily wage of a builder in southern Mali was roughly 1000-1500 francs, such a fine represented a considerable amount of money for ordinary travellers. The young Ivorian was charged less than the others most likely because he shared the same national identity than the policemen. In a way I also had the feeling that the moral twist disdainfully expressed in the enunciative situation of Ebola allowed the border guards to raise their fees; but one could instead argue that the reference to Ebola in the speech held by the chief of the police was just a further pretext for extortion. Its performative and contextual dimensions shed light on this issue: the chief of the police vehemently intimidated the passengers through his loud voice, inquisitive look and grim face at the very moment of referring to Ebola; he therefore loaded it with an emotional outburst which put more pressure on the passengers. Compared to the banalization of Ebola that I observed among the inhabitants of Odienné in early 2015,<sup>21</sup> a year ago in April 2014 the private and state Medias across West Africa were broadcasting on a daily basis information that depicted a context of medical emergency around the spread of Ebola; the threat was spreading and therefore real anxieties were in the air.<sup>22</sup> In such context of imminent threat of Ebola the reference to this disease was a well-timed rhetorical ploy for additional demands. Thus, the information about this deadly virus was opportunely transformed by these border guards as a discursive weapon for extorting even more money from ordinary border crossers.

To my utmost surprise the Fula also had to pay a fine of 3000 francs for holding an outdated vaccination card. He was particularly upset about this fine because he thought he already handled this issue while in Mali. In fact, he had gone to Bamako a couple of months earlier so as to honestly pay for receiving the vaccine against Yellow Fever (which was the sole mandatory vaccine for travelling in Côte d'Ivoire in 2014):<sup>23</sup> he simply wanted to carefully prepare his travel to Côte d'Ivoire. His vaccination card thus showed that the vaccine dated from the end of 2013. However, taking me as an example the chief of the police told him that his vaccine against Yellow Fever had not

- 21 During my return in Odienné in March-April 2015 I noticed that the fear of Ebola had considerably decreased; the Medias broadcasted less information about Ebola and people rarely talked about it. For locals, Ebola simply did not and would most likely not reach Côte d'Ivoire. People thought that the Ebola threat was not approaching the country anymore. In such a context of banalization of threat and media withdrawal, Ebola discourse could no longer be used by border guards to raise their fees.
- 22 In Sierra Leone people perceived Ebola as a threat to communal life when the virus began spreading; they then spoke about Ebola in relation to occult power and witches when the outbreak deaths accelerated, in other words, when Ebola became 'evil out of control' (Bolten 2014).
- 23 In early 2015 when I crossed the Malian-Ivorian border by coach, travelers were also asked at the customs to have the meningitis vaccine for entering Côte d'Ivoire. On my way back I took a flight from Abidjan to Bamako; the Malian border guards did not control travelers' vaccination card. My flight neighbor confided to me that border guards behave leniently with flight passengers because most of them are wealthy traders, senior civil servants and politicians; only the poor travel by coach between West African economic centers.

been done in the same year, therefore it was outdated. I was furious and told him that the validity of the vaccine against Yellow Fever is of ten years.<sup>24</sup> The Fula nonetheless did not want to claim back his money because he feared of again being subjected to the police's daunting arbitrariness and to end up paying another bigger "invented" tax. In line with Debos and Glasman's comments over the changing and unexpected nature of checkpoints' experiences in Africa (2012, 16), on that very day I realized that Africantravellers anticipate and fear these obligatory stops whether their documents are in order or not.

The driver was the last to return to the truck. He urged us to get on the truck and then hurried to leave the village. His face was wrathful because he had been accused of '*transport illicite de passagers*' (illegal transportation of passengers). As a truck the vehicle he drove could not transport passengers for a commercial purpose according to the Ivorian law. While the other passengers told the policemen that they did not pay anything for the transport, I realized that I unfortunately trapped the driver by honestly responding to the chief of the police about the price I paid for the transport. The driver did not blame me because he knew that the frontier guards and the truck's drivers both are aware of their respective business; the point was rather to reach a fair deal between them. The chief of this frontier post, however, decided to use the power of the state his uniform carried to his advantage. Deploying an asymmetric 'state-market relations' at the border (Raeymaekers 2012, 346), the policemen kept the official documents of the truck, a strategy which will oblige the truck's driver to come back to Mali through the same frontier post so as recuperate them in exchange of a fine of 5000 francs. Besides the interplay of national identities, the different treatment the driver received at the Malian and at the Ivorian checkpoints demonstrates that the relationships between state regulatory authority and local populations over the transborder economy are 'highly ambiguous; they are often reciprocal and complicitous as much as they are competitive and antagonistic' (Roitman 2004, 19). Except from me, the only one who did not have anything to pay was the apprentice, probably because all knew that an apprentice never had any money at all! In the end it is often ordinary travellers who suffer the most from the consequences of the schemes and transactions at the border, which are lucrative only for some actors involved, such as the policemen and customs officers.

The money taken by the border guards finally illustrates that the fiscal power of the state as 'the nature of [the citizens'] economic relationship to the state' (Ibid., 9) has been concretely transformed into a private good which challenges the public utility of the state professed in the media by the Ivorian government. Consequently this behaviour nurtured the very same non-medical interpretations of Ebola that other state officers, medical staff and volunteers grappled with because they substantially undermined the efforts to build a transparent and trustful communication with the concerned populations so as to efficiently tackle this dreadful Ebola outbreak (see Wilkinson & Leach 2014; Fairhead 2015). To put differently, such behaviour shape the 'structural violence' of state institutions and practices which have unfortunately allowed Ebola to flourish in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone in the first half of 2014 (see Wilkinson & Leach 2014). Luckily Ebola did not spread to Côte d'Ivoire. This experience ultimately makes me think of Ebola as a possible metaphor of power (whether traditional, state<sup>25</sup> or of other nature) in West Africa when its intervention becomes violent, arbitrary and insidious.

24 I narrated this anecdote to two corps-habillés I met in Odienné. They did not blame their colleagues. They just said that the Fula was fined over his vaccination card due to his lack of education.

25 This especially the case when its power abusively supports the personal accumulations of wealth of its officers to the detriment of the ordinary people of West Africa.

## Who is who across the borderland of post-2011 northern Côte d'Ivoire?

After the police checkpoint described above we stopped at numerous checkpoints located at the entries and exits of larger localities found along the way to Odienné. There, men in uniforms (police, *gendarmérie*, army and members of the former FAFN), however, did not check the passengers. The truck driver, in a quasi-ritual way, swiftly got off the truck with a file (which probably contained the documents of the truck and his driving license and a small banknote),<sup>26</sup> greeted the security forces in a familiar way,<sup>27</sup> gave the file to the officer in charge of the checkpoint, stood for a little while, retrieved his file and returned to the truck. The vehicle and the passengers were not checked most likely because within this borderland we were no longer near the border. Our journey was also prolonged for two hours because the 'patron' (the owner of the truck) called the driver so as to ask him to fetch bags of rice in a village located off the main road to Odienné. Approaching Odienné at night, we also stopped in a roadblock, which consisted of one barrell and was guarded by only one visible man wearing a worn out uniform; when the truck driver returned in the cabin he suspiciously told me that 'this is a clando checkpoint'. After twelve hours on the road we finally reached Odienné around 10 pm. Dog tired I sought for a hotel. Emerging out of the trailer like a zombie the young Ivorian decided to stay overnight at a relative's house in town before continuing his journey to southern Côte d'Ivoire. Given that the total cost of transport of the Manankoro-Odienné border road section raised over 10000 fcfa (25CHF), the others probably did not have the money to stay overnight in this town; they therefore pursued their journey southwards to the town of Man. Besides this journey's adversities, its unexpected length, detours and roadblocks illustrated that crossing the borderland of northern Côte d'Ivoire in a time when the state is still returning after a decade of rebel rule means facing a scattered presence and co-existence of state, non-state and state-like actors which renders difficult to know who is really in charge of the customs, security and control there.

Due to economic difficulties and budgetary discipline, rise in crime<sup>28</sup> and the arbitrariness of 'controls', Côte d'Ivoire in the 1990s was characterized by a general confusion over the actors of civil security. As Förster wrote, 'the distinction between bandits and the police, in particular, became unclear'; people therefore used to say '*on se sait plus qui est qui*'<sup>29</sup> (2010, 703-4). In the north of the country during the rebellion, however, the providers of the security became clearer in the eyes of locals who consequently said that '*maintenant on sait qui est qui*'<sup>30</sup> (Ibid., 705-10).<sup>31</sup> At the roadblocks,

26 For further details on similar behaviors that happened between drivers/apprentices and officers at roadblocks in northern Côte d'Ivoire during the rebellion, see Förster (2012, 21).

27 The truck driver seems to know most of the men in uniform working in this area.

28 On the rise of the so-called 'road cutters' (*coupeurs de route*) in Côte d'Ivoire during the 1990s, see Hellweg (2011, 46).

29 "One does not know who is who."

30 "One does know who is who now."

31 When I was undertaking my PhD fieldwork in 2008-10 in Bougouni, each coach travelling from Bamako to Sikasso carried two soldiers on board. People told me that the Ivorian crisis brought road cutters in southern Mali.

for instance, northerners were no longer harassed by the police because of their allegedly non-Ivorian names written on their ID cards (Förster 2012, 18); drivers and passengers received a receipt from what they paid in roadblocks around Korhogo (Ibid., 20).<sup>32</sup> What can we say about the identity of the actors of civil security in post-2011 northern Côte d'Ivoire? Reflecting upon this cross-border journey towards Odienné via Manankoro I wonder whether the truck driver, an actor of this border economy, would rather say that *on ne sait plus trop qui est qui*<sup>33</sup> in a post-2011 northern Côte d'Ivoire the civil security and control of which are in the hands of reentering state actors, former rebels and civil state-like actors. Possibly my fellow passengers would say that one does never really know who is who when crossing a border in West Africa as a foreign and transient passenger.

32 The saying '*on sait qui est qui*' must be further explored through two factors: the rule of *commandant de zone* and the degree of autochthony of an individual into the local community. In Odienné, most state services were vandalized and burnt during the rebellion, whereas in Korhogo they were not; inhabitants of Odienné explained this discrepancy to me through the fact that 'Fofié [*commandant de zone* of Korhogo] worked for Korhogo'. For them, the rule of Fofié was unique because he valued the collectivity at large, protected the public good, and therefore did not allow arbitrary controls in roadblocks within his zone. Road cutters circulated in the Denguélé during the rebellion; however they did not strike randomly. For instance, they once targeted early in the morning a few kilometers after the exit of Odienné a wealthy Guinean trader on his way to stock up in Korhogo. The trader confided to me that the road cutters were most likely informed of his trip by security forces; he suspected that he was perceived as an acceptable target because autochthones envied his economic success.

33 "One does no longer know exactly who is who."



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- ① Tanzania Union Day celebrations in Maryland.  
*A. Kaiser-Grolimund, Maryland 2014*
- ② University students using smartphones.  
*S. Staudacher, Muscat 2014*
- ③ Woman prepared to attend a wedding.  
*S. Staudacher, Zanzibar 2014*
- ④ Sisters chatting with another sister in the UK.  
*S. Staudacher, Zanzibar 2014*
- ⑤ Andrea and an elderly woman in Dar es Salaam .  
*A. Kaiser-Grolimund, Dar es Salaam 2012*
- ⑥ Visit to a rural research site where Sandra and Andrea talked to elderly people.  
*Simon, Rufiji 2013*
- ⑦ Researcher and research assistant exploring the field.  
*S. Staudacher, Muscat 2014*
- ⑧ Smartphone user takes pictures of a wedding couple.  
*S. Staudacher, Zanzibar 2014*
- ⑨ Picture of a funeral in Dar es Salaam that was sent to Andrea.  
*Anonymus, Dar es Salaam 2016*

# WhatsApp in Ethnographic Research: Methodological Reflections on New Edges of the Field

Sandra Staudacher  
Andrea Kaiser-Grolimund<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract:

The mobile phone and the increasing worldwide use of smartphones with applications such as the instant messenger WhatsApp are revolutionising ethnographic research. Drawing on transnational, ethnographic research in Tanzania, the USA and Oman, this paper shows that WhatsApp constitutes a valuable tool in ethnographic research in three important fields of interaction and communication: first, between researchers and informants simultaneously in different places; secondly, as a tool to exchange with field assistants; and thirdly between researchers.

Building on expanding theoretical reflections on transnational networks and practices this paper adds new insights to corresponding methodological consequences. It critically reflects on the usefulness of integrating WhatsApp into ethnographic research. It argues that by incorporating such technologies we can not only keep an actor-centred focus, but also support methodologically the theoretical shift from understanding the field as a 'location' to grasping the field as a 'network' – or even a transnational social field.

*Keywords:* WhatsApp, smartphone, ethnographic research, methodology, transnational social field, actor-centred, communication, Tanzania

## Introduction

In Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar, two cities in Tanzania, where an extensive part of research informing this paper was conducted, smartphones became available in 2010. Since 2012 they have been widespread. As in several Tanzanian cities, the mobile data network is well developed. Many people communicating in or with Tanzania perceive messages sent through the smartphone application WhatsApp to be much more reliable than normal messages. Especially when families are spread across national borders, the application is valued as a communication tool in order to stay connected.

WhatsApp is a freeware for smartphones that belongs to the mobile instant messaging applications (MIM), which are independent from the network used. It delivers content across the Internet; either via Wi-Fi or mobile data networks. WhatsApp offers

1 We wish to thank Till Förster, Lucy Koechlin and Constanze Pfeiffer for their valuable comments made on this paper. Furthermore, we would like to thank the critical voices who discussed our presentation on the topic at the conference of the Swiss Anthropological Association (SEG) in Basel in 2014.

various capabilities for sharing media through images, video and voice messages. The application “allows people to tell stories anytime and place, but it allows those stories to include images from where the storyteller is” (O’Hara et al. 2014, 3). Amongst the many similar instant messaging applications such as Viber, Facebook Messenger, We-Chat, BBM, or Skype, WhatsApp is currently the most popular tool on the European and Tanzanian market. WhatsApp chats can take place either between two individuals or within a chat group. Messages are time stamped and show one tick if the message has been sent and a second tick if the recipient has read it. There is no constraint on how many messages can be sent or on words within one message, as is usually the case with regular short-messages (SMS) (O’Hara et al. 2014, 4).

The few studies existing on the use of WhatsApp or other instant messengers mainly concern understanding how people use WhatsApp in particular (European) contexts (cf. Church and Oliveira 2013; O’Hara et al. 2014). Furthermore, it is largely companies with vested interests in the results that finance such research around instant messengers. To date there is neither literature on the practices of WhatsApp in different contexts from a social scientific perspective, nor studies focusing on the use of it as a research tool. This gap of methodological reflections on the topic is understandable considering that smartphones are a relatively new technology in the everyday lives of many people.

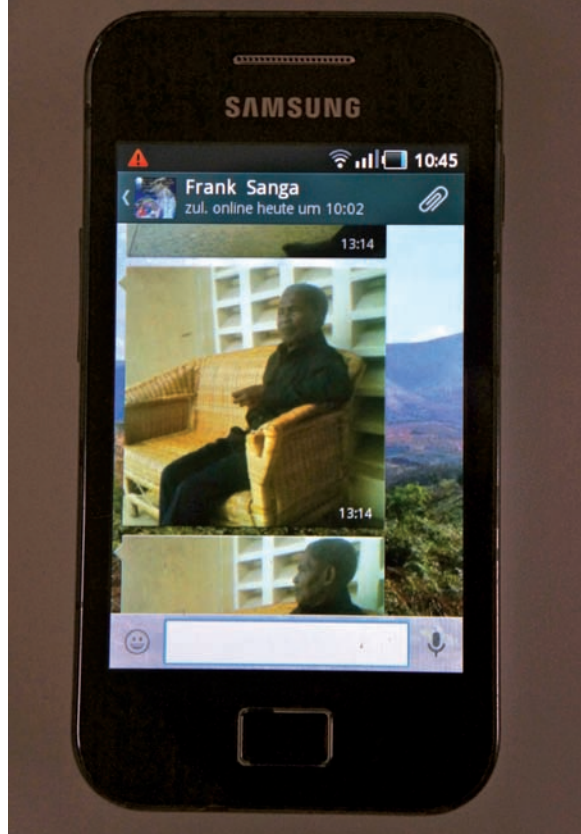
Although not many sources are available concerning the coverage of smartphones in Tanzania, a U.S. research institute estimates that in Tanzania in 2015, only 11 percent of adults owned a smartphone (Poushter 2016, 4). Calculations by an NGO working in Tanzania show that the use of smartphones in the country is higher in Dar es Salaam, the biggest city of the country and the northern Kilimanjaro region than compared to the rest of the country.<sup>2</sup> During the period of this study we observed that smartphone ownership and use increased rapidly also in Zanzibar. According to observations of this study, smartphone users were often young and literate, however illiterate people also operated applications such as WhatsApp by using the voice recorder to communicate with others.

The present paper provides insights into WhatsApp use in two Tanzanian cities, namely Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar. We base our findings on research that was conducted among elderly people and their relatives in Tanzania, Oman and the USA.<sup>3</sup> Especially younger relatives from middle class environments used WhatsApp on their smartphones in order to communicate with others in Tanzania and abroad. These relatives can be described as a relatively heterogeneous group (when considering gender, age or occupation) of smartphone users. In this study, the instant messenger seemed crucial for communication, not only for the informants but also for the researchers of the present study. WhatsApp proved to be an important research tool to cope with the social and

2 Cf. calculations made by Tetea, an U.S. non-profit-organisation: <http://www.tetea.org/relative-smartphone-penetration-in-tanzania/> (13.09.2016).

3 This study was conducted as part of a comparative research project “Aging, Agency and Health in Urbanizing Tanzania” (<http://socialresilience.ch/old-age-agency/>), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation [Nr. 140425 and Nr. 152694] and in collaboration with the University of Dar es Salaam and the State University of Zanzibar in Tanzania. The project was led by Prof. Dr. Brigit Obrist, and supervised by Dr. Peter van Eeuwijk, both from the University of Basel in Switzerland. The National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR/HQ/R.8a/Vol.IX/1376 and NIMR/HQ/R.8a/Vol.II/266) in Tanzania and the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH No. 2012-386-NA-2012-125 and No. 2013-305-NA-2013-81) supported the conduct of qualitative research in Tanzania, while Prof. Dr. Sarah Lamb from Brandeis University supervised the research in the United States. In Zanzibar, the Zanzibar Research Committee supported the qualitative research conducted in Tanzania and Dr Salem Said Al Touby, Dean of the Oman Nursing Institute of the Ministry of Health supervised the research in Oman.





WhatsApp communication between Frank and Andrea when Frank conducted his monthly visits to the elderly people in Dar es Salaam.  
A. Kaiser-Grolimund, 2014

geographical conditions facing the older people and their social network in Tanzania and abroad. On the methodological level, we show that the use of WhatsApp facilitates a transnational actor-centred methodology since researchers can digitally follow people and ideas across national borders. By doing so, the researchers nevertheless rely on previous ‘face-to-face’ encounters with informants in order to be able to communicate through the application. Especially, embodied aspects are excluded when communicating through WhatsApp alone. On the theoretical level, we argue that WhatsApp as a research tool can support the (theoretical) move in our globally connected society from understanding the field as a ‘location’ to grasping the field as a ‘network’.

## Methodology

The design of qualitative research in a comparative project on aging and health in Tanzania did not initially focus on the use of the instant messenger WhatsApp. The application was introduced to the Tanzanian market during our field research and we decided to incorporate it as a communication and organization tool in our research, since our informants and research assistants started to use it extensively. Therefore, data for this paper derives from the analysis of our experiences while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Dar es Salaam and the USA as well as in Zanzibar and Oman.

In a first research phase of the initial project, which did not focus on the use of smartphones, we interviewed 100 men and women aged above 60 years and their relatives living in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar.<sup>4</sup> Selected case studies were then followed

4 We base our definition of old age on the Tanzanian Aging Policy that defines old age starting from 60 years of age: “For the purpose of this policy, an older person is an individual who is 60 years and above” (URT Ministry of Labour 2003, 3).

over a period of almost two years (from 2012 to 2014). These consisted of in-depth interviews on the living and care arrangements of these older persons as well as their perceptions of 'aging well'. In addition, observation and participation in daily activities helped us to learn more about embodied aging and care practices as well as agentic orientations during the aging process. Throughout this phase WhatsApp was mainly used to communicate with research assistants in order to organize appointments for interviews and visits of informants. The two researchers returned to Switzerland for shorter periods. During these absences from Tanzania they used WhatsApp to coordinate research assistants in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar's monthly visits. Furthermore, especially during the initial phase of the research, WhatsApp communication between the two researchers in Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam respectively was crucial to compare data gathered in the two sites.

In 2014, the project followed 50 children and relatives of older people from Dar es Salaam to the USA and from Zanzibar to Muscat, the capital of Oman in order to find out more about their ideas on aging as well as practices of care giving from a distance. In this research phase WhatsApp became extremely important to communicate with elderly people and their social network in all four research sites. Since relatives living in the USA or Oman mainly used the tool to communicate with their social network in Tanzania, adopting the same channel of communication provided many advantages while conducting research.

## WhatsApp Practices

Today starting from about USD 40 people in Tanzania can purchase a smartphone. A data bundle in order to use Internet and chat possibilities can be bought starting from

An older couple in Zanzibar and their son are holding a picture into the smartphone camera that Sandra took in Oman together with another son of theirs. This picture was then sent back to the son in Oman. S. Staudacher, Zanzibar, 2014



USD 13 for one month (5GB). Since in urban contexts, the mobile data network is well elaborated, WhatsApp messages are known to be more reliable than ‘normal’ messages (SMS) through the networks of the telephone providers. Especially among the younger generations therefore, having a smartphone became very common or at least desired (if financial means are lacking). The application is used to chat among friends and family members based in different localities. Furthermore, it helps to organize social life by agreeing on appointments through the application. Especially when families are spread over national borders, the application is valued as a communication tool to not only share information but also pictures in order to stay connected.

Relatives of the older people in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar living abroad in Oman and the USA very much relied on the WhatsApp application in order to stay connected with their parents, relatives and friends back home. However, while communication with the aged parents usually happened through ordinary phone calls on a regular weekly or monthly base, communication with siblings or friends from a similar (younger) age group was on a daily basis thanks to smartphone applications. Our informants used the instant messenger together with Skype and other communication tools, and perceived it to be much more accessible and easier to use than for example email. As Sarah Pink already observed in 2000 when focusing on mobile phones, also for our informants “communications technologies, interwoven with telephone practices and discourses, become part of everyday experience” (Pink 2000, 108).

The present research project was consequently launched in the existing WhatsApp landscapes in Tanzania and abroad, and adapted its tools to the existing communication context. Thereby, WhatsApp proved to be a valuable tool in doing ethnographic research with three important fields of interaction and communication:

Firstly, WhatsApp allowed communication between researchers and informants simultaneously in different places. Through the application we were able to communicate with informants through sending and receiving texts, pictures, videos, voice messages, phone numbers, addresses, greetings or invitations. Thus, the application allowed us researchers to be ‘present’ in several countries at the same time and to observe reactions on exchanged medias. The informants as well as the researchers were asking from time to time about the *hali* (condition) and informants announced if somebody was ill, died or a baby was born by sending short texts. When we travelled between the two research sites Dar es Salaam - USA and Zanzibar – Oman, we were involved in sharing pictures when meeting with relatives in the other research site. In addition, our informants sent contact data and maps that helped us to meet them. The data that we generated through those communications was saved on our mobile phones and is now accessible anytime.

#### **Fieldnotes on WhatsApp during field research in Zanzibar and Oman**

When I travelled to Oman, having many phone numbers of Omani relatives from older people in Zanzibar in my luggage, an extensive WhatsApp phase started. Freshly arrived in Oman my research assistant and I contacted those relatives at first still through ordinary phone calls. Once we met them and a certain trust and affection was created I communicated with most of them through WhatsApp. Sometimes they gave me directions where to drive to, they simply asked about my condition, they sent pictures, images with good wishes, movies, updates about important incidents and voice messages. WhatsApp was really useful in coordinating meetings and staying in contact. I could show the informants in Oman photographs of their older relatives in Zanzibar and we took pictures to send them back to their relatives. Those pictures stimulated people to talk, and created a bond between researcher and informants. Once back in Zanzibar I went again to the older relatives and showed them the newly made pictures.

Secondly, we used the application as a research tool to exchange with our field assistants in Tanzania. WhatsApp provided fast and cost-free chat possibilities that allowed direct exchanges with the involved research assistants even over far distances. Hence, WhatsApp could be used as a communication tool while being in the field but

also while being physically absent. Assistants were able to share critical moments (e.g. health crisis, death of family members) as well as important events (e.g. wedding, graduation, child birth) of our elderly informants with us – while we had the possibility to engage and ask back simultaneously also when we were physically absent. As a consequence, our older informants who did not use smartphones never perceived us to be away and we were able to take up data collection anytime or could ask back for clarifications while having already completed our data collection.

#### **Fieldnotes on WhatsApp use during field research in Dar es Salaam**

When I was in Dar es Salaam my assistants and I visited the older people every after two weeks and spent full days with them; doing whatever they were doing; cooking, going to the market, going to church, doing garden work ... In order to extend the period of following them, my two assistants, Frank and Monica were assigned to continue with monthly visits when I was absent for four months.

With Frank, who had a smartphone by then I started to communicate about his planned visits through WhatsApp. He informed me through the application about his schedule and while being there he sent me photos of and with the older person and I was able to ask back questions about changes I saw on the pictures, or about what Frank reported back to me from the older persons' health condition while being there. Thanks to the tool, once back in Tanzania after four months I was very much on track about what had happened in the older people's lives during the past months and could easily continue with my visits and data collection.

Monica who was assigned to visit the female older people at first did not have a smartphone, and it was striking to me that it created for me a greater distance to the informants.

Thirdly, WhatsApp facilitated communication between the researchers of the current project. Within our comparative and transnational project therefore, we had the possibility to engage in constant exchange with each other while based in different field sites. Frequent chats allowed comparison of the study approach as well as of first findings. Thereby, adjustments of the research design while still being in the process of data gathering could be made.

## Critical Reflections on the Use of WhatsApp as a Research Tool

Without doubt the mobile phone brought a revolution to ethnographic research. However, the current development of the worldwide increasing use of smartphones with the instant messenger WhatsApp, which we also observed in Tanzania, urges us to think of its usefulness and its limits.

Although in qualitative ethnographic research reaching the same depth of data collection with each informant is not a principal requirement, WhatsApp can foster a selectivity that has to be critically reflected. When being more intensively in contact with smartphone users, because communication with them is much easier, the risk is that people who do not (or less frequently) use the application – in our case the older people – are left out and thus the collected data only represents a particular group within a society. People who do not own a smartphone can still communicate through WhatsApp by using other people's phones to send greetings, information, pictures, etc. It is challenging as a researcher using WhatsApp not to reproduce an internal digital divide of smartphone users and non-users. We tried to handle this imbalance of communication by staying in contact with non-users through other means like mobile or landline phone calls or by contacting them through other people. Access to smartphone



A wedding ceremony of a research participant's brother in Zanzibar. Sandra received the picture and the information about the wedding through WhatsApp while she was back in Switzerland.  
*(Anonymous, Zanzibar 2014)*

technologies, especially in Africa, is highly influenced by economic capital, age and transnational relations. In our project education and gender did not have a major impact on the use of these devices and also illiterate people easily used the application, especially through sending voice messages.

Information that we received through WhatsApp communications was rather informative (e.g. containing information on hospital visits, deaths or child births), but short – without going into depth and not capturing the underneath of things that we would be able to capture as participants. Thus information helped the researchers rather to deepen certain topics during the next 'face to face' encounter. In addition to the selectivity that the tool is likely to foster, anthropologists who work with WhatsApp have to critically reflect their own role when replying to the texts of their informants: How much do they influence the setting and the answers they receive through their own acting? Furthermore, private topics might mix with relevant aspects for the research. This reflection is of course not only valid for the communication with WhatsApp but applies in general for ethnographic data collection. Also, when it comes to communication with research assistants, texts that the researcher receives already contain an interpretation by the assistant and have to be treated as such when incorporating them into the analysis.

While in the past and especially in the beginnings of ethnographic research the anthropologist was often in a very powerful position compared to the ‘studied subjects’, since the 1980s anthropologists reflect more on the ownership of anthropological research, the study design and interpretations. The use of WhatsApp in research can be analysed accordingly: as a way of relating, ‘kinning’ or even democratizing relationships between researcher and informant as well as research assistant and researcher.

One characteristic of WhatsApp communication is that people are expected to answer instantly when receiving a message. We cannot decide when to stop communicating with informants and a field visit rarely ends when we leave an informant’s house. Informants see when we are online and if we have received their message. After having received a message, we usually have to respond in time (cf. Church and Oliveira 2013, 355) – if we do not want to be unfriendly and lose their trust. Through this tool we are therefore always reachable<sup>5</sup> for our informants and assistants as a researcher, friend or ‘family member’. The informants can decide when and what they want to tell or ask us, or what they do not want to tell us. Additionally, the use of WhatsApp is much cheaper than making for example international phone calls, it is accessible for many younger members of the middle class in Africa. Hence, WhatsApp could contribute to a more ‘collaborative ethnography’ (Lassiter 2005) and even be a chance to further democratize research for not only the researcher decides when and what to talk about but also the informants and assistants.

A typical aspect of ethnographic research is to view informants as rounded, multifaceted individuals, embedded in their life situation. A researcher cannot only engage with an informant during interviews, observation and participation but also in other aspects of his or her life. Further, in ethnographic work intimacy is important to create trust and thus rich data (cf. Amit 2000, 2). WhatsApp is a good tool to create closeness and (imagined) proximity, even if the researcher is not physically present. The possibility of getting easily in touch and exchange sometimes even seemingly banal things produces proximity for the anthropologist as well as for the informants, boosts trust<sup>6</sup> if expectations are met and facilitates coming back to a place if one is far away.

While WhatsApp can boost trust and (imagined) proximity as depicted above, vague distinctions between friends, informants and researched subjects can also raise important ethical questions when it comes to the use of the data generated through the process. Ethnographic fieldwork typically implies living with a tension between personal and professional aspects (Amit 2000, 3). Through using WhatsApp informants are likely to (mis)interpret the communication as a sign of friendship since WhatsApp is normally used among friends and family members. The study subjects might not be aware that their chat statements form part of an on-going research project. Even though, in our research project, the informants signed an informed consent and consented that we can use their information in our research, the informal WhatsApp communication risks that informants forget that they are part of a study and thus give us information rather as a friend than a researcher.

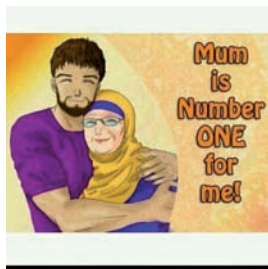
The blurring boundaries between research and friendship however, do not only concern the informants. Also for the researcher it is getting more difficult to keep a social distance to her or his research subjects, since data collection does not stop when

5 More on the topic of being always reachable using a mobile phone in the context of migration in Tazanu (2012) and Frei et al. (2013).

6 We understand trust as the expectation that the other will act in a specific way. It does not depend on the media alone but we would also need to satisfy their expectations. As Groys (2012) writes in his seminal work, media are never one-sided. If we act as the others expect, their trust may be fostered through their mediation – but if we do not, they can also destroy trust.

she or he leaves the field. In addition, the researcher might become involved in family issues much more through being accessible all the time, as it was the case with regular phone calls or messages.

Despite the ethnical challenges, WhatsApp communication is a source of information for researcher, which can be discussed and further explained in a later face-to-face situation. The use of WhatsApp facilitates thus not only trust building processes but also provides links to personally discuss things which happened in the time the researcher was physically absent, whereby without continuous communication researchers often lose information. It thus makes long-term research with phases of physical absence of the researchers in the field easier for three reasons. First, it helps to keep trace and contact with informants, who sometimes move and change their domicile. It is very common to exchange phone numbers for Whatsapp use with people who are close to informants and thus, even if the actual informant loses her or his mobile phone we can get in contact with him or her. Whatsapp thus helps reducing 'drop outs' during research. Secondly, the researcher can maintain a relationship through Whatsapp chat and is able to directly continue with the research activities once she or he gets 'back to the field' in person. Thirdly, the application supports the coordination and continuation of data collection through research assistants in the field site. Research assistants can easily communicate with the coordinating researcher about data they gathered, questions, which arise or send pictures of things they find interesting in connection with the research. Thus, during periods when the researcher is absent at the research site, the assistants can bridge the gap. Therefore, in our current academic context, where funding is usually short and long field stays are normally even shortened because of the lacking financial means and available time, such tools can help to study important processes or periods over time – as this was the case in our projects in which we focused on agency and critical health moments.



Images received by the authors through the application WhatsApp.



These aspects show that it is crucial to reflect more about the methodological and ethical implications of WhatsApp and other instant messengers in anthropological research (positive and negative ones), especially considering the important question on how we define the ethnographic field.

## New Edges of the Field and the Use of WhatsApp

In the past, ethnographic research had some clear characteristics such as being away from home, being in another locality and not having much contact with people in other places besides the ones in the 'field'. The ethnographic 'field' had well-defined geographical boundaries, which allowed to enter and to leave it, normally, after a considerable long enough stay. Hence, being 'in the field' was a central rite de passage (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). While after the research, the contact to the 'field' broke in general as a result of the spatial separation. Today, many informants are not less or some even more transnationally living compared to anthropological researchers, and thus methods have to be adapted accordingly.

While some researchers are concerned with rectifying their research 'at home', which is, then at the same time 'in the field' (Knowles 2000), others accept that many people are involved in transnational realities since cultures are "[...] no longer fixed in places" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 4 in Kokot 2007). Hannerz claims therefore, that social anthropology is conceptually primarily about "social relationships, and only derivatively, and not necessarily, about places" (Hannerz 2006, 29). Already in 1995 Schiller and colleagues wrote about social fields, which span over national boundaries connecting people. Building on the work of Bourdieu (1984) Levitt and Schiller elaborated the concept and defined theoretically social field as "a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed" (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, 1009). Hence, the theoretical discussions show that the edges of the field are shifting and blurring.

However, deconstructivist approaches to space suggest not only theoretical but also methodological consequences of the new edges of the field. Kokot (2007) argues that if we can no longer only define research sites in spatial terms "a relational notion of the 'field-as-network' has to replace the 'field-as-location'" (Kokot 2007, 18). Consequently, according to Kokot "being in the field' means being part of a shifting web of relations and, if necessary, following these relations to wherever they may spread to" (Kokot 2007, 18). Thus, when it comes to diaspora or transnational research 'multi-sited ethnography' has to take global dimensions since fieldwork does no "longer limit itself to the application of standard procedures like participant observation or interviews within the boundaries of a given locality" (Kokot 2007, 14). Instead we should think of ethnography rather as 'polymorphous engagements' (Gusterson 1997 in Hannerz 2006, 33), in which we try to link up with informants in manifold ways.

WhatsApp is thus a great tool to complement ethnographic interviewing, observation and participation in multi-sited research. It facilitates (transnational) ethnographic research and research on transnational practices and ideas as it allows to be simultaneously transnationally connected with different people at different places and in different time zones belonging to one transnational social field.



## Conclusion

This paper shows, that the use of WhatsApp in ethnographic research accommodates methodologically the theoretical shift from understanding the field as a 'location' to grasping the field as a 'network' or even a transnational social field with shifting and blurring edges.

We illustrated that the use of WhatsApp as a supplementary research tool offers a lot of possibilities but also some limitations for researchers. While previously, appointments for interviews and visits had to be arranged carefully and staying in contact implied to be physically present, smart phones brought along the possibility for the informant, the research assistant, as well as for the anthropologist, to find each other irrespective of where a person is located and to make arrangements also spontaneously. Even though the organization of meetings needs less time and important events can be announced through WhatsApp, ethnographic interviews, observation and participation in direct contact with the informants can never be replaced by WhatsApp. However, once a relation of trust is personally established – through shared and embodied experiences when meeting face-to-face, the contact can be maintained through WhatsApp and then also personal information can be shared.

The application allows overcoming long distances, even over national borders and permits the presence of the anthropologist in several fields at the same time. As the context of doing research has changed enormously since the first classic ethnographies, also methods need to be flexible in order to adapt to new realities. Going with time and informants, especially in a very transnationally connected context, seems to be the only logical consequence. As many scholars theoretically moved from an understanding of a locality bounded 'in the field' approach to a more social actor oriented 'in the transnational social field' approach, also methods and methodological reflections should be reconsidered and adjusted accordingly. WhatsApp can thus foster a transnational actor-centered methodological approach since it allows connecting with the informants no matter where they and the researchers are.

Building on the expanding theoretical reflections on transnational networks and practices this paper adds new insights into corresponding methodological consequences. The paper thus demonstrates the usefulness of integrating WhatsApp in ethnographic research. By incorporating technologies such as WhatsApp we can not only keep an actor-centred focus, but also support methodologically the theoretical shift from understanding the field as a 'location' to grasping the field as a 'network' – or even a transnational social field, with shifting and blurring edges.

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