

Research Project

The Work of the State Imageries: How Imageries of Governance and the State Constitute Everyday Practice in Conflict Affected West Africa.

Third-party funded project

Project title The Work of the State Imageries: How Imageries of Governance and the State Constitute Everyday Practice in Conflict Affected West Africa.

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General theme

The aim of this project is to understand how imageries of governance and the state are negotiated and how they influence everyday practices of the local population in conflict-affected West Africa. The research adopts a comparative approach of two cross-cutting perspectives on processes of political transformation and the state: one looks at how such imageries emerge and transform through daily interaction, the other asks how they affect the everyday practices by which local actors try to cope with the crisis and in particular with the difficult economic situation. The field of enquiry is the urban and peri-urban space of two countries that were heavily affected by the West African conflict since the early 1990s: Liberia and Guinea. While much has been written about the violent conflict itself, there is an urgent need to document and analyse the practices through which local actors try to find a way out of the crisis and to negotiate their relationships to the state. The analysis thus will lead to a conceptual rethinking of the West African conflict beyond the immediate agenda of the main political actors. The key questions of this project focus on this gap in research, namely:

- What imageries of governance and the state exist? Is there a normative understanding about services, duties or other activity?
- How do imageries of governance and the state emerge? In what **arenas** are they negotiated and shaped by the local population and who are the main agents therein?
- How is the imagery applied in **fields** of social practice? How do people manoeuvre in order to gain access to resources, assets and social spaces in a context of post-conflict and economic scarcity?

Approach

The present project adopts an actor-oriented, inductive approach avoiding normative Western concepts. The local population has experienced the state as untrustworthy and the government as being unreliable and not fulfilling its duties – and apparently still conceives of them thus. In this context of insecurity in a post-conflict setting, people struggle through livelihoods, adopt plans and strategies to survive. The project starts from the assumption that imageries of governance and the state are continuously shaped and reshaped by all social actors in everyday encounters, as, for instance, between government employees and “ordinary” citizens. Arenas in which the social and cultural construction of the state are debated can be found in public spaces such as bars, political assemblies, and in many media, including newspapers, radio, TV and the Internet.

Empirical research

Empirical research will deal with a) questions about the practical and symbolic language of the state and how the imagery of the state is shaped by the people in everyday encounters, and b) how this imagery is translated into everyday practices, based on the shaping process in social arenas. Two case studies, carried out by PhD researchers, will address the two questions in different but closely related social and economic settings in the border area of Guinea and Liberia.

- Study 1: Negotiating Crisis Through the Imagery of the State: a Case Study in Guinea (Sarah Zuber)
- Study 2: Coping with the Intricacies of the Everyday: Liberia's Post-War Context (Andrea Kaufmann)

Methodology

Research will be conducted in the urban and peri-urban social space of Liberia and Guinea by comparing the capitals as well as two towns in the borderland of both countries (of Liberia as well as Guinea). Towns and cities in this borderland zone were heavily affected by the conflict for many years. Violence did not stop at national borders; it spread out and has affected diverse countries in Western Africa and Northern Africa, even in Europe, the USA and Russia. Empirical research is planned for a one year term and a short additional fieldwork stay. The methodology is based on the Emic Evaluation Approach proven and tested in the project of the Institute of Social Anthropology, Basel, [“Trust in Post-Conflict Societies” \(SNF 100012-1177 66\)](#), incorporating mapping, interviewing, participation, observation, and discourse analysis.

Cooperation

The project is integrated in the [Research Group on Political Transformations at the Institute of Social Anthropology, Basel](#), and cooperates with the working group on political geography, Zürich, the European DYLAN-network, Lausanne and Basel, the Institut für Afrikakunde in Hamburg and with the working group on Transformations of the State in Africa at the University of Bayreuth, as well as several Institutes in West Africa: CODESRIA, the Université de Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire and the Institute of Political Science at the University of Ibadan.

Keywords Guinea, Liberia, West Africa, Conflict, State, Statehood, Political Anthropology

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