

Distantly Close Violence Specialists: Paramilitary State Organisations in West Africa

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Corps habillés in West Africa share a distinct feature suggesting a clear-cut division between the civil and military spheres – the uniform. Yet the distinctions between the multiple uniform wearing violence specialists are mostly inscrutable. While the police in Europe tend to be the sole violence specialist of the interior, in West Africa the military and other paramilitary organisations can also be charged with tasks of law enforcement or the maintenance of public order. For an inexperienced observer they all look alike and their scope of duty is obscure: police, gendarmes, firemen, customs officers and forest agents are all uniformed and oftentimes armed with AK-47.

Scholars ascribing to theories of Security Sector Reform perceive such entanglement as inherently flawed. Yet, despite constant struggles between these organizations over powers, funding and legitimacy, they each tend to fulfil distinct tasks of everyday policing. Historically and institutionally these law enforcement organisations are placed in particular distance towards the population, differing in frequency and intensity of direct interaction, ranging from rather close community police to remote military units, therewith covering specific functional slots. Paramilitary actors are not entrenched in a particular slot – they have room to manoeuvre, allowing them to strategically move forward and backward on a continuum of proximity and remoteness towards civil actors in specific interactions. They also define their position on this continuum by referring to other violence specialists which are expected and known to cover other slots. This positioning takes place in direct interaction with members of other violence specialist organisations and by referring to them in discourse.

Our comparative research brings together two such state security ensembles in West Africa. Based upon 14 months of fieldwork, respectively in the Ghanaian police and the Nigerien gendarmerie, our paper explores the interactions and ascriptions between civilians and members of the multiple violence specialist organizations of the state. Additionally it analyses how members of different organizations relate to each other. In our view, the security ensembles in West Africa are not inherently different to ensembles in Western countries, although the former are structured rather by everyday interactions than by formal regulations. Violence specialists creatively modify their degree of distance towards civil actors, yet their room to manoeuvre has a distinct shape in each organization. And violence itself, enabled by the actors' remoteness, can be an important source of legitimacy.