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Lives opposed: perceptivity and tacticality in conflict and crime

This article looks at the way people tactically adjust to contexts of insecurity and danger. Building on fieldwork with disenfranchised urban poor in West Africa and marginal West African migrants in Europe, it clarifies how perspectives and practices are attuned to precarious situations and life conditions. The article argues that the struggle to identify threats leads to a nervous sociality in which figures and social forces are examined for hidden intentions and negative potentials. Such circumstances engender an apprehensive bearing, as an affective state, posture and approach, through which social life is sought, investigated and controlled. It augments perceptivity and leads to a scanning and probing of social life that feeds into a social version of the hermeneutics of suspicion and generates a range of pre-emptive practices.

Key words migration, conflict, cocaine, apprehension, tactics

Introduction

Building on fieldwork with urban poor in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau and with Guinea-Bissauan migrants in Lisbon, Portugal, this article examines the way people seek to grasp hidden dangers and perils in order to tactically adjust their practice and presence toward them. It looks at the struggle to identify and apprehend opaque dangers in situations of heightened uncertainty and insecurity and highlights the way people attempt to grasp the grounds of their vulnerability and grapple with what they see as an uncanny co-presence in social life (cf. Freud 1919). In doing so, the article moves, in Kierkegaardian manner, from angst to fear; that is, from an abstract disquiet to a search for causes of distress. While angst is an existential, inner state that stems from the realisation of infinity and abysm of being,¹ fear, on the contrary, is related to the object that evokes it (Kierkegaard 1980). It is situated and bounded, enabling us to engage, confront and cope with it.

As we shall see, the vulnerable position in which my interlocutors find themselves – in both Bissau and Lisbon – has given rise to an intense effort to grasp the perilous potentiality at hand. Kierkegaard wrote under the pseudonym of Vigilius Haufniensis, the Vigilant Copenhagener, as an indication of the way anxiety may trigger states of apprehension. Correspondingly, in such situations of insecurity, perspectives are put into practice as people become wary of the dangers embedded within their surroundings and strive to gain the insights and overviews needed to tactically adjust to or avoid them (Vigh 2011, 2015). This connection between sensing, understanding and

1 For Kierkegaard, 'angst' is fear without an object or clearly identifiable cause. Unlike the current concern, Kierkegaard's argument is a metaphysical one centred on Man's finite existence in the face of the infinite.

controlling can be found in the trivalent notions of ‘grasping’ and ‘apprehension’ as social bearings that are defined by a simultaneous striving for physical control, sensory awareness and understanding (verbal communication Sausdal 2013, 2017; Vigh 2015).

Ethnographically, the article builds on field notes and interview material obtained during fieldwork in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau and in Lisbon, Portugal involving Guinea-Bissauan migrants. As the title ‘Lives opposed’ indicates, my empirical focus has, for the last decade, been on people whose practices and very presence are deemed problematic. As a consequence, larger social forces and societal structures constantly seek to counteract them. More specifically, I work with unsuccessful militiamen in Bissau and low-ranking drug dealers in Lisbon and investigate the way that they tactically and perceptively attune to their social surroundings. The Guinea-Bissauan material consists of research with the Aguenta militia, which I have been following since the year 2000. The fieldwork conducted in Portugal has been with similar people, yet at a different time and place. While the first part of the article focuses on the way ex-Aguentas attempt to read the volatile social and political landscape in the city of Bissau, the second part looks at the way irregular and undocumented Guinea-Bissauan migrants, who survive by selling drugs in Lisbon, inspect their social environment for the presence of detrimental Others in the shape of state officials and law-enforcement agents. By moving ethnographically across time and space, the empirical material shows that such ‘lives opposed’ (Sausdal and Vigh nd) generate an antagonistic sociality among my interlocutors and invoke a certain kind of apprehension: a nervous sensory, ideational and practical grasp of their surroundings.

Tacticality and perceptivity

Theoretically, the article seeks an anthropological understanding of uncertainty and insecurity through a focus on perceptivity and tacticality. The notion of tactics has traditionally been juxtaposed with strategy (Clausewitz 1997: 75, 141; de Certeau 1984). Where strategy is seen as the practice of imposing and institutionalising an understanding or structuration of the world, tactics is, contrarily, understood as a way of navigating the structured space of others. Strategy is the act of ordering a political space, tactics the act of being and moving within formations controlled by others. The difference between tactics and strategy becomes, in de Certeau’s (1984) work, the differing capacities of the powerless and the powerful. While this lends us an interesting approach to what Scott (1985) later called the ‘weapons of the weak’, it tends to disregard the multifariousness and situationality of power. Power is never absolute or obsolete. As such, we all act tactically and strategically at times, depending on the relational configurations that frame the interaction, despite the levels of power or powerlessness that may otherwise characterise our lives. Tactics and strategy are, in other words, less convincingly seen as properties of different kinds of people and more productively understood as socially contingent modalities of practice. Despite this, de Certeau’s perspective grants us a view to practice in situations defined by a relative lack of control. As he so elegantly phrases it, a tactic must ‘*vigilantly* make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the *surveillance* of the proprietary powers. It poaches them’ (1984: 36–7; my italics).

The above quotation pinpoints the way that marginality can spur both a specific set of practices and a specific kind of perceptivity. Perceptivity in this respect refers to

the endeavour to fathom what is otherwise experienced as politically or relationally opaque and is tied to politics and power in three different ways. First of all, the more distant people are from the central structures of power, the more they have to toil to predict their workings and consequences. In such situations politics may confront people as an impervious field of forces which nonetheless has the ability to act on them in powerful ways. Second, power can visibilise people and processes, commonly noticeable in the way that figures and formations seek to manifest and consolidate themselves in spectacular performances of presence (Strauss and O'Brien 2007), or in the way they may strive to illuminate and forcefully visibilise those that are perceived to pose a threat to their order. Lastly, as we shall see, power may work in terms of invisibilisation, a fact that becomes particularly clear when focusing on 'lives opposed'.

Moving across scales from larger formations to more minute affects, such social (in)visibility can be located *structurally*, *relationally* and *experientially*.² In relation to the first, people may be rendered structurally invisible by being positioned as external to the rules, regulations and recognition that defined a given figuration, paving the way for overlooking or disregarding their being and needs. This is so even if on the 'inside' they are seen as being external to it, as matter out of place within or between orders (Douglas 2003 [1966]; Turner 1979). However, social invisibility may equally be experienced on a more relational level. While the structural dimension of invisibilisation is an act of being nullified in relation to a larger entity, the relational one is an act of being invisibilised in interactional terms – of being in plain sight yet not noticed. The experience can be found *en masse* in everyday life: 'He saw right through me' or 'they behaved as if I weren't there' being mundane expressions of situations where one's presence is more intimately invisibilised and nullified (Jackson 2012: 172; Vigh 2016). Finally, invisibilisation may be analytically approached as experiential in relation to the affect caused by the two former aspects of the phenomenon moving us once again towards issues of nullification, marginalisation and ostracisation that can be seen to characterise the experience of lives opposed and antagonistic sociality. However, the way that (in)visibility touches us is fundamentally related to an element of control. And the fact that it may be positive when sought and negative if involuntary or imposed allows us to approach the phenomenon as a valuable ethnographic point of departure for political anthropology. In order to illuminate this, the remainder of this article will dwell ethnographically on the way that social life becomes perceptively and tactically adjusted to (difficult) social circumstances, moving us from Bissau to Lisbon, from perspective to practice and from being suspicious to becoming suspect.

Always on the move

Bissau is always on the move (*i ta ainda, ainda sempre*): it is never stable. We do not know stability. There is a kind of cold war (*guerra fria*). But how can there be peace when every garrison has its own commander?

As a former member of the Aguenta militia, Aliu spent his youth navigating the conflictual networks and events that have dominated Guinea-Bissau's recent history

2 Social invisibility is, in this perspective, never a question of unknowing absence, but of being out of sight.

(Vigh 2006). Having grown up in a politically turbulent city that changed from bad to worse, *mal a pior*, during the first decade of the millennium, he was accustomed to turmoil. He had been a member of the Aguenta militia in 1998–9 and had been mobilised and demobilised four times in the period after the initial civil war, yet each time he found himself back at his lowly point of departure as one of the city's disenfranchised urban poor.

At the time the above interview was conducted, he had recently been demobilised after the assassination of former president Joao Bernardo 'Nino' Vieira. His idea of a *guerra fria*, 'a cold war', as a generalised state of negative suspense is taken from experience. It is a description of the tension and insecurity that has saturated his life and the country's recent history. While things appear to be improving in Guinea-Bissau, and the country is currently not at war, the political environment is generally seen not merely as conducive to conflict and corruption but actually built upon them. Although there is currently economic growth and a number of positive international development deals have been signed in recent years, political tension is still high and the ongoing crisis in the country's government, which has led to six prime ministers in five years, continues to destabilise the country. This combination of opacity and volatility keeps people busy wondering when politics will turn violent, and conflict and suffering reappear. For my interlocutors, who have been in the thick of the civil war, what is presented as peace is thus a façade that hides the conflict within.

Anos no ka ta kungsi paz, 'us, we do not know peace', Rinko, another former militiaman told me, continuing, 'this is what makes people tired. If Bissau had stability it would be sweet.' Similarly, Dario remarked, after an episode of shooting in the area where we lived in Bissau:

This is what does not work in this country (*es ki ka bali na es terra*). This type of confusion, you see? [...] Even us we do not know what is going on (...) Bissau is tiresome; you waste your time just [being] preoccupied.

The shooting was a skirmish between a group of youths and a handful of soldiers from a nearby barracks. Generally, among the people I talk to, soldiers out of uniform are singled out as the biggest cause of insecurity and the prime cause of violence in Bissau. Although Bissau does not appear to have many gangs in the city, they are embedded in numbers within the armed forces, making it difficult to trust figures of authority and the state. 'Bandits in uniform', people remark, as every barracks is seen to have its own alternative source of revenue and many of these will commonly be characterised as illicit or illegal by the civilian population. However, the above not only tells us something about informal networks and groups within military units. It equally addresses the frustrating combination of *preocupação*, 'pre-occupation', and the passing of time that is so prevalent in my informants' lives. Stuck in a stagnant everyday, characterised primarily by poverty, boredom and inertia, they have very little to do (Vigh 2006). Yet these slow days are passed in an uneasy manner as their attention is attuned to socio-political developments in order not to be caught off guard. They may look idle, but actually they spend a significant amount of time discussing the ever-changing political networks and pacts, as they seek to clarify how changes may provide new spaces of possibilities or threaten their

present or future space of being (Vigh 2015). *Bu ten ku fica attentivo*, ‘you must stay attentive’, my interlocutors say as a general guide to living in Bissau.

The emphasis on alertness indicates the manner in which perceptiveness and apprehension have become central capacities in relation to the everyday in the city. Not as a state of alarm but as an embodied and habituated state of awareness. The insecurity that defines Bissau has resulted in a tactical accommodation of it, thus engendering a social bearing by which people in Bissau are commonly on the lookout for signs of change or trouble in order to gain a forewarning of the actions of hidden figures and forces. Instead of taking the stability of configurations and representations (verbal or visual) for granted, people inspect their social environments for indications of possible alterations and transformations within them. There is, as such, a common idea in Bissau that there is more to political situations or relations than meets the eye, which entails that interaction and interpretation – even in seemingly calm situations – contain a partial focus on instability and an orientation toward compound yet precarious prospects (cf. Whyte 1997: 24). A closer ethnographic look reveals the passive act of hanging out contains a dynamic attempt towards disclosure. It is a scanning and probing of social scenarios, as a perspectival movement between insights and overviews, the panoptic and microscopic, that is encompassed in the act of staying attentive, *fica attentivo*, as a vigilant safeguarding of one’s present and future wellbeing (Vigh 2011, 2015).

The hermeneutics of social suspicion

My empirical material can, in this manner, be seen to constitute a vernacular version of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Such hermeneutics builds on two foundational ideas. On the one hand, that we can never be sure that we truly understand the act or utterance of another. Behind any interaction lies a being in the world that is multiply anchored and motivated. This multiplicity or transversality of interests, relations and obligations (Gluckman 1955: 18; Bailey 1964: 220) installs an element of ambiguity into social life as we never have full insight into the nodal interests and complexity of the extended situation; an aspect of social life that Robbins and Rumsey have defined as ‘the opacity doctrine’ (2008: 407). On the other hand, for any such interpretation to take place, the premise is that behind what is presented lies something common to our social understanding that can be made sense of (Gadamer 1984: 316). People and processes are, in this perspective, seen as containing and having the capacity to reveal more than they present.

This awareness of social and political life connects directly to the more formal notion of a hermeneutics of suspicion. It leads back to Paul Ricoeur and his description of an academic interpretative practice, whereby people look for meaning beyond the stated or obvious. Modernity, in Ricoeur’s perspective, gave way to ‘a school of suspicion’ whose intellectual *modus operandi* consists in a questioning of the otherwise taken for granted. Embodied in three masters, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud (Ricoeur 2008 [1970]: 33), the hermeneutics of suspicion relates to a philosophical tradition where *interpretation* is seen as *revelation* leading to an act of *liberation* (politically, intellectually and emotionally, respectively). It is a mode of thought characteristic of, for example, the idea that power hides or shrouds itself as a means to naturalise dominance seen in much critical theory (2008 [1970]: 32–5), and which clearly ties together the three aforementioned dimensions of apprehension.

While the hermeneutics of suspicion relates to an intellectual tradition that is tied into three 19th-century male academics, the mode of thought is obviously a more common one in both intellectual and public life. The work on ‘social paranoia’ (Shapiro 1965; cf. Taussig 1992; Lepselter 2016), for example, provides an empirically distant yet analytically resonant analogy of my interlocutors’ approach to their surroundings as an intense attention to what is ‘really’ seen to be going on within the areas of social and political life that are hidden to me (Shapiro 1965: 80). In the case of social paranoia, however, social interaction and interpretation is noticeably haunted by doubt. Such social suspicion is the result of tense and unsettled social conditions producing states of hyper-vigilance (Vigh 2011) in which foresight, foreboding and forewarning become primary matters of concern. This focus on perceptivity is directly evident in Bissau in relation to the obsession with the notion of ‘having eyes’, *tene odju*, as an extraordinary ability to detect and see hidden powers and presences (see Vigh 2015). ‘Having eyes’ is seen as an aptitude that enables people to gain a perspective on underlying configurations and coalitions, allowing them to clarify and detect hidden others and intentions before they reveal themselves in detrimental ways.

The idea becomes emblematic of a more common striving for the insights and overviews that may grant people the knowledge needed to protect themselves and tactically adjust to oncoming changes. Although this, in a perspectivist perspective (Viveiros de Castro 1998), can be portrayed as an example of radical (African) alterity, it is more akin to being attuned to a common social concern. It is derived from people’s need to illuminate the dense and volatile relations that constitute their social surrounding. Instead of being an ontologically different perspective, it is a socially specific one (see also Mbembe 1992; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; Sanders 2008: 107) related to the fear of being caught off guard as the underneath of relationality bares itself in dangerous ways – a condition that ties into myriad strands of social life from politics to religion, romance and everyday concerns.

From suspicion to suspect

Building on my prior fieldwork in Bissau, within the last ten years I have begun following my interlocutors as they move out of West Africa and into Europe. After 2005, Guinea-Bissau became tied into the transnational flow of cocaine from Latin America to Europe. Due to its combination of geopolitical insignificance, ‘flexible’ state structures yet recognised sovereignty, the country became an international drugs hub. As the former Aguentas were mobilised by the network that initially connected the militia to the cocaine cartels and their transnational criminal enterprise, their services were once again put to use, this time for trafficking and dealing cocaine (see Vigh 2009, 2011, 2015, 2016, 2017). The development was a startling one that took the international community by surprise. It made the geopolitically abject country a ‘margin in the middle’ (Vigh 2014), an oxymoronic space so geopolitically negligible that it became central to the billion-dollar flow of cocaine.

An increasing number of former Aguentas, and the people associated with their specific political network, have managed to come to Europe by navigating the cocaine trail in one way or another, or to survive in Europe via the livelihood it provides. Dealing drugs is seen as one of the few social openings available to male Guinea-Bissauan migrants. ‘Life is difficult here’, Raul told me, referring to his conditions in Lisbon as an undocumented migrant: *e de tempo unica trabadju ke bu na odja i suma*

bindidur, ‘nowadays the only job you will get is as a pusher’, he added. Not only do my interlocutors constitute one of the most marginal groups of people in Bissau as disenfranchised urban youths, Guinea-Bissauan migrants generally constitute one of the most marginal population groups in Portugal as they are often uneducated, undocumented or irregular migrants. Furthermore, the nature of their legal status and the illegal nature of their work means that many of my interlocutors inhabit a position of compound illegality on arrival in Europe. The irony, for those of my informants who navigate the drugs trade in or into Europe, is that their lives very quickly become steeped in much the same uncertainty and insecurity that impairs their wellbeing in Bissau. However, whereas social invisibility may centre on the imperviousness of political structurations for the marginal, it gains an extra sting when looking at the intersection between crime and migration, as it becomes structurally produced, relationally prevalent and experientially salient.

Dealing drugs is both a relatively unprofitable and highly insecure business. While people higher up in the commodity chain may be making large profits, the trade is, for the dealer on the street, both risky and unglamorous. It involves aggressive competition and police intervention, which entails trust being seen as an idiotic sentiment and suspicion as a key to survival. Engaging in the drugs industry may thus, which is again similar to people’s experiences in Bissau, spur an apprehension of hidden figures and forces, yet this time the gaze equally becomes turned upon the street dealers themselves. They become the figures seen to embody societal decay and danger and to pose an underlying threat to societal wellbeing and security. Instead of merely being suspicious, they become suspect. The compound illegality that my interlocutors face in Lisbon, i.e. the fact that most are ‘illegal’ in both status and livelihood, leaves them in a particularly difficult position.

Yet, for my interlocutors, it is as if their earlier precarious micro-history and vulnerability, and not least their suspicious bearings, are repurposed. The difficult situation in which they find themselves leads, once again, to apprehension, but this time in a manner that is centred on grasping the figures trying to apprehend them. Portugal has some of the most progressive drug laws in the world, and possession of illegal drugs for personal consumption has been decriminalised, yet dealing and distribution in these drugs are not. The Portuguese police consequently intervene in their trade by making arrests, leading to imprisonment and deportation, and once again spurring an intense awareness of the way social life unfolds around them.

Sensing danger

Raul started running in the middle of my sentence. As he set off, he seemed to trigger a chain reaction and within seconds the place changed from monotonous to complete disarray. The dark alley became crammed with entangled figures. People in dark uniforms were running towards me from all angles. Some ran past me, others ran into the small bar behind me, and even more were chasing people trying to escape. I stood in a stupor. As I began to realise what was happening, details of the event started to stand out. The police had blocked off the area by placing their blue vans in the intersections connecting the street to the surrounding area. The streets are narrow and only just wide enough to fit the blue Mercedes Sprinter police vans – the personnel carrier of the Portuguese police – when driving down them. When parked across the street at their intersections, they block them off completely. The van has a large sliding door centred

on the side of it, enabling the police to block the roads while simultaneously allowing their personnel to charge out into the street.

The raid came from three sides simultaneously. Raul, who had made a run for it, was out of sight. A handful of the other Guinea-Bissauan pushers with whom I had been doing fieldwork were less lucky. After the initial chaos had died down, a group of them stood leaning up against the building next to me. Facing the brick wall, they were being restrained and searched by a team of policemen. I stood in the same place I had been standing when the raid started only a moment ago. Although I had been in the midst of it, it was as if I had been an almost invisible spectator. I obviously did not fit the profile. The target of the raid had been West African dealers and a middle-aged, white academic was a poor match.

I had, at the time, been doing fieldwork for only a couple of weeks and ended up spending a couple more months in the dark street. It was generally unspectacular work, mainly consisting of long working hours during the night with very little social interaction to participate in or observe. I would arrive in the afternoon and go home early the next morning, having spent the night observing the languid rhythm of dealing cocaine. Although sales vary with the seasons, every week is more or less the same; early in the week deals are few and far apart. As the weekend approaches, things intensify, culminating Friday and Saturday night when demand is at its highest. In similar terms, the days reproduce a pattern; early in the evening business is slow with only the more serious addicts and regular customers paying the dealers a visit; later on at night, transactions increase, just as they cool down again in the early hours of the morning. As it was autumn, business had been generally slow. There was a constant small flow of customers, but the combination of bad weather and the ebb in tourists made it difficult to sell enough cocaine to survive.

The lack of deals soured relations between my interlocutors, who were competing to make a living out of selling cocaine. It simultaneously slowed down time and increased stress, resulting in the place being characterised by an inert tension. The specific social mood was, however, not only a question of business being down but equally influenced by the constant presence of underlying threats, revealing themselves in raids, arrests and investigations. The specific one described above was my first experience of one of a range of targeted police interventions. While the ways police acted on my interlocutors differed in style and intensity, all were equally uncanny. From the large-scale round-up of people to the more low-key intrusions and arrests, they stood out as manifestations of the presence of a hidden Other and clarified that the space we were in was contaminated with a veiled detrimental force.

When I met Raul again later, I asked him what had happened. He replied in his usual nonchalant mode of meeting adversity, *kila ka staba nada*, 'that was nothing', continuing, 'the police bother us all the time. If you stay attentive (*fica attentivo*) you can elude them (*fugilis*).' His comment dismissed the drama of the situation, yet the very idea and capacity of staying attentive equally came to differentiate those who wound up arrested from those who did not, making me explore the issue further. As I asked about his state of attentiveness, he initially answered: 'I sensed that things were not right', *suma m'sinti ke kussas ka staba dereito*, he then paused for a moment and said: 'I don't know, I heard that sound. You know, that sound of the car door going *kratjing*.'³ As he evoked the sound, it became present in my memory. Rather than

3 The sound can be heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBGqUwuADhM>.

making me proactive, the sound had merely been a background noise to a situation that turned bafflingly chaotic. For Raul, in contrast, the state of apprehension led him to a premonition or a sixth sense; a 'holistic surplus of our senses plus experience' (Vigh 2011: 103).

His reaction and description of what had happened clarify two things. First of all, that in such states of uncertainty or insecurity people will often be engaged in an (ongoing) optic and haptic scrutiny of the social environment in which even minute matter that stands out from the ordinary is sensed and made sense of, what I have described as a tactical apprehension. Second, that this apprehension feeds into tactical practice. While only some managed to avoid getting caught in the raid, the example points to a more general need for my interlocutors to stay alert to early warning signals and pre-emptive measures. Although there is a logic to the timing of the raids when seen from the perspective of the law enforcement agencies that carry them out, the unpredictability of the phenomenon, when seen from the perspective of the dealers, is interestingly reminiscent of the way trouble intersects the passing of slow days in Bissau. Not knowing when, but knowing only that it will happen, leads my informants back to the practice of scanning environments for signs of anything out of the ordinary. Behind the tediousness of dealing cocaine in a period with few customers lie the potentially devastating interventions of the police, meaning that people are attentive even when nothing really appears to be happening. They retain a minimal level of awareness needed to allow them to detect the start of a raid, to avoid violent customers and to counter aggression from competing groups. Just as in Bissau, apprehension and the connection between perceptivity and tacticality become keys to surviving and moving in the city.

Fighting probes with probes

While raids are spectacularly dramatic, other police actions are less conspicuous and seek to remain hidden. As we stood and chatted, police cars would periodically drive slowly past us. Any car driving into the area would generally be noticed. The place was on the edge of a pedestrian zone and, hence, not a very heavily trafficked spot, and cars that seemed suspect would cause conversation to stop and people to shift, as they would be ready to make a run for it, if required. At times, vehicles clearly marked as police cars would drive slowly past us with only the muzzles of over/under shotguns sticking out through the window. *Ka bu panta – e ka ta fassiu nada*, 'don't be afraid they won't hurt you', Garandi once reassured me as he saw me noticing the weapons. I rarely was afraid, as I was so evidently not the target of the intimidation campaign, yet whether my interlocutors felt intimidated was hard to tell. Masculinity is often performed in stoic ways among the Guinea-Bissauans I talk to, by emphasising calmness and disinterest in the face of danger. Customers and other dealers at times become aggressive, and my interlocutors in this situation turn toward them as if they do not register their existence. Looking straight through them, they continue their conversation as if the threat is not present.

In the end, the more blatant displays of force were often the least worrying. As a police car would drive past in a show of guns, its hyper-visibility signalled that a raid was not imminent, making it merely a momentary annoyance. This was not the case with the patrol units that would linger in the vicinity without actively confronting

us. From where we were standing they became occasionally visible as they passed by the intersection at the end of the street some 50 metres away. The momentary presence and the intermediary distance made their intentions less clear and their presence more disruptive. ‘They are just waiting to pounce on us (*no attaca*)’, Americano said, as the police had driven by the connecting street a couple of times during the earlier part of the evening. The uncertainty of their intent moved them from spectacular to spectral, as a presence that was there even when out of sight. The resulting unease was, I presume, intended. It unsettled people’s interaction and created a paranoid tension between the dealers.

Similarly, the police would often seek to hide their presence altogether, entailing that there is constant attention not just to raids but also to undercover police officers, variously termed *policia secretas*, *agentes encobertos* or *disfarcados*. Much like danger in Bissau, even when not directly present, such agents’ potential threat generate, once again, attempts to fathom the cause of one’s angst. Outsiders are scanned and perspectively probed for indications of being other than what they present themselves to be, as the knowledge of possible pretence fuels distrust. The result is that almost everyone – friends, customers, bystanders and fieldworkers alike – become seen as potentially harbouring ulterior intentions (Bourgeois 1996: 12, 29–34). ‘There are secret police that speak Creole’,⁴ a young man from Bissau said, as I was standing with a group of Guinea-Bissauan dealers. The comment was directed at me as a potential liability. ‘There are even secret police that speak Fula’,⁵ he added. My reply, which was that although I did speak Creole, I did not speak Fula, and was surely not a secret police officer of any kind, seemed to slightly calm his suspicion, yet the comment emphasised the distrust and attention toward the clandestine or camouflaged nature of people interacting with them. ‘We will not talk to you. We are paranoid, paranoid’, a dealer yelled at me, as I passed a group of Guinea-Bissauans in the Bica district of Lisbon. The notion of paranoia indicates an awareness of his hyper-vigilant state of being but also that there is a cause for concern: ‘Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you’, as Woody Allen has remarked.⁶

Camouflage

No ka ta fia ningin, ‘we trust no one’, Fernando exclaimed, as unquestioned faith in others is seen as a liability. Business deals, movements and intentions are kept to oneself, as people are never certain of what others will use the information for. Similarly, all business interactions are conducted with an element of suspicion. Although the interactions need to take place, most of my interlocutors will only sell drugs to people whom they perceive to be ‘safe’. As Latino told me; ‘they [the police] send someone to buy a gram (*ngalla*). Like this they will know your face, where you put your cocaine, all [of it]. [You] must just look at his face ... you will know.’

Latino is literally fighting probes with probes and investigation with investigation. Most encounters and situations are, in this manner, accompanied by a probing of people and scanning the situation for signs of outside forces within. It is a restless

4 The *lingua franca* of Bissau.

5 The language of the second biggest population group in the country, the Fulani, which I speak particularly poorly.

6 Woody Allen, *Annie Hall*.

investigatory modality, of adjusting their senses and social expectations to becoming tactically aware of their surroundings. The underlying insecurity results not only in a specific adjustment of the way people perceive their surroundings, but equally in a specific way of engaging in it. It generates, as I have said, a certain tactical practice and comportment. The gaze of a powerful and inimical other is thus counteracted in a variety of ways – from the simplest of security measures to more cunning notions and acts of camouflage (Bourgois 1996; Lombard 2016).

In relation to the former, telling people's true intent by studying their face is a way of avoiding the negative impact of hidden others, just as not actually having drugs on your body will, obviously, reduce harm if arrested. The first group of dealers I worked with would store their cocaine in various cavities and gaps on the side of the dilapidated building that we would stand in front of. As a deal was made, they would enter into the small alley between the buildings, pick up the required amounts of grams, then go back and finish the transaction. My second period of fieldwork, with some of the same people, was in the same area but this time beside a scaffold, which provided an abundance of hiding places. For my third period of fieldwork, only a couple of the people that I used to work with were left. Of the people who were missing, some were imprisoned, some deported and some had managed to move further north toward more prosperous and legal labour markets. Dealing had, at the time, become both more competitive and more difficult, and instead of staying close together the group had spread out over a 50-metre area, with people to a larger degree than before looking after their own supply and safety.

While in all three bouts of fieldwork – approximately adding up to a full year of research – dealers would try to minimise the risk of arrest by not having drugs in their possession, the actual transaction still has to be made and this is, in itself, an illegal act that makes people vulnerable to being apprehended. Such transactions may be observed and documented in ways that can be used against them, just as the punters interacted with may not be who they seem. There is, in this manner, a constant fear of undercover police as a spectral presence that leads to a range of avoidance tactics. At one point I witnessed Seku refuse to sell cocaine to a person approaching him. Seku is one of the most active dealers in the area, has an amazing work ethic and at times will be so set on making a deal that he will cut in on another dealer's business. Under normal circumstances he would have spotted the potential punter, approached him and probably tried to persuade him to buy more than he actually planned for. Yet, this time he remained aloof and disinterested, reluctant to pay attention to the person at all. As the young man in question approached, Seku turned sideways, looked straight past his face and disregarded his presence completely. It was a blatant act of nullification. As I asked, afterwards, why he had reacted that way, he simply answered; 'I will never trust (*fia*) a guy like that, never.' Turning down a customer is a decision taken in relation to indications of people being other than presented. 'Types' of people, in terms of phenotypical markers, would in this manner be indicators of how safe a customer was. 'There are no Arabs (*nars*) in the police', Latino told me, just like Africans were considered unusual in the force. As I further questioned how they knew who was who, the conversation led to a more detailed description of types and distinction and ended in a strange discussion about shoes, with the point being that the police would, apparently, not wear anything out of the ordinary. Long and pointy shoes were, as such, a sign of the benign, just like sandals and flip-flops would move their wearer beyond suspicion. Similarly, as Americano told me, long hair was not 'the style of the police',

nor was dressing smartly, *bisti sabi*, as cool 'street wear' and 'real' style was seen to be beyond their competences. *Policia ka sta na moda*, 'the police are not into fashion', he said laughingly.

The examples were many, including descriptions of how some dealers, who do not know any better, will disregard even the most obvious signs and reveal themselves in unfortunate ways. 'If you show your face', *monstra kara*, 'you are stupid', Eliseu said, commenting on being caught while pushing. Showing your face referred to being apprehended while dealing smaller or larger quantities of cocaine. It means being seen making the actual transaction. 'Telling' who is who and what is what is a complex interpretative practice, directed toward identifying outsiders on the inside and pre-empting getting caught on the wrong-foot. 'Showing your face', as a negative description of having revealed yourself, equally points attention to an issue not just of disclosing, but also of being disclosed and thus exposed to danger. My interview material is hence dotted with practices of how to protect oneself by avoiding suspicion. This kind of camouflage (cf. Lombard 2016) includes a theory of mind as an alter-centric idea of what the world may look like through which people seek to fathom the Other's point of view (cf. Viveiros de Castro 1992; Spyer 2002; Hollan 2008; Hollan and Throop 2008; Bubandt 2009).

Breaching notions of radical alterity and incommensurability,⁷ it ranges from contemplations of what type of clothes one should wear in order not to stand out in relation to an outsider's gaze, to where one should stand and go, to how one should move. 'You must walk like you have the right to', Domingos said, while straightening his back and broadening his shoulders, trying to resemble someone whose body language signifies the right to full being. The point is to be inconspicuous in order not to be hailed into being (cf. Althusser 2006). To adopt the form of the legitimate posture and legal persona. Or rather, the point is to be noticeable enough for people to see you if they need cocaine, yet unnoticeable enough for you to avoid the attention of the police. In order to secure the latter, the people I talk to talk about and reflect on what they look like in the eyes of the Other: not as a self-examination of one's identity but as a way to avoid unwelcome attention. In practical terms this means blending into the dominant surroundings in order to avoid apprehension. Italiano and Americano were the street-names of two of my interlocutors. They had gained the names because they tried to dress in a stylish yet unobtrusive manner mimicking, correspondingly, Italian elegance and American street wear. They were, in other words, named in relation to their efforts to present themselves in a manner that they perceived to be similar to what respectability would look like when seen from the vista of the police.

Conclusion

Angst, Kierkegaard holds, is part of what defines us as human beings, it is an existential anxiety that stems from the schism between our finite being and infinite potential (1980: 320). The schism opens up an uncanny space of being other to ourselves – exteriorly or interiorly – which unsettles and destabilises us. Yet, the unseen and unknown

7 The notion of camouflage unsettles the re-emerging 'belief' in radical alterity within anthropology. Camouflage logically means that we share a theory of mind and perception. It highlights commensurability.

stirs not just trepidation but equally a search for certainty and the means to manage. As a response to the perceived threat posed by volatile politics, social forces and agents of the state, my informants remain suspicious, not just of strangers, but also of each other. They attempt to apprehend the volatility of the socio-political environment in Bissau and Lisbon by attuning their perceptivity and practices to the opacity and unpredictability of the places in question.

My empirical material demonstrates how everyday life may become attuned to insecurity and uncertainty for the more marginalised among us. It shows how insecurity generates a constant struggle for overviews, insights and ways of acting that connect perceptivity and tacticality. Yet, having followed my interlocutors from Bissau to Lisbon, equally it clarifies how this bearing may be of a more enduring nature. As my interlocutors' lives become steeped in insecurity, their reading and interpretation of their social environment intensifies to the point where it resembles a 'hyper-hermeneutics' as an 'anticipatory practice in the context of extraordinary, violent circumstances' (Spyer 2002: 35). The unsettled surroundings settle as an apprehensive bearing that is simultaneously acutely perceptive, interpretative and reactive, and through which they are tactically countering apprehension with apprehension, investigation with investigation and camouflage with camouflage. When I asked Djibril what he did to avoid the attention of the police, he replied: *m'ta bisti simples, simples*, 'I dress simply, simply'. Simply, in this context, meant modestly and casually. One time I caught him dealing during the evening in worn builder's overalls. Reacting to my puzzled expression, he approached me with a smile. As he walked past me, he said softly: 'the police do not bother you (*policia ka ta chatiau*) if you look like you have a job'.

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Vivre en opposition : perceptivité et tactiques dans le cadre de conflits et de crimes

Cet article examine la manière dont les individus adaptent leurs tactiques aux contextes d'insécurité et de danger. S'appuyant sur un travail de terrain auprès de pauvres privés de leurs droits en milieu urbain en Afrique de l'Ouest et de migrants marginaux ouest-africains en Europe, l'article met en lumière les perspectives et les pratiques d'adaptation aux situations et aux conditions de vie précaires. Il est suggéré que la lutte pour identifier les menaces résulte en des rapports sociaux tendus dans lesquels les figures et les forces sociales sont scrutées pour dévoiler des intentions cachées aussi bien que des potentialités néfastes. De telles circonstances engendrent une attitude de méfiance, en tant qu'état affectif, position et approche, par laquelle la vie sociale est recherchée, abordée et contrôlée. Celle-ci augmente la perceptivité et conduit à une scansion et à une exploration de la vie sociale qui à leur tour alimentent une version sociale de l'herméneutique du soupçon, générant différentes formes de comportement préemptif.

Mots-clés migration, conflit, cocaïne, appréhension, tactiques