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Vigh, Henrik Erdman

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Life in the ant trails

Cocaine and caustic circuits in Bissau

Henrik Vigh

Abstract: This article looks ethnographically at the cocaine trade in and through Bissau, Guinea-Bissau. It clarifies some of the less obvious aspects of illegal cross-border trade and ties the minor flow of drugs, often trafficked by the desperate and disenfranchised, to larger global dynamics. While international media and commentators alike frequently depict transnational organized crime as a pathogen attacking the healthy global order, a closer look at the Bissau cocaine trade clarifies that the trade is neither external nor parasitical but integral to it. The trade's grasp of Bissau is anchored in enduring critical circumstance, stretching from the social to the political, and displays several ironic feedback loops and interdependencies linking misfortune in time and space. The article thus shows how negative conditions may travel and circulate in a manner that ramifies vulnerability across economic and political borders.

Keywords: caustic circuits, cocaine trade, interdependency, transnational organized crime

In many ways, the cocaine trade in Bissau has come to saturate the city's social and political environment. What used to be the sleepy capital of the small and geopolitically negligible West African country of Guinea-Bissau has acquired a rather spectacular presence within the past decade. Given the unflattering title of Africa's "first narco-state" by the United Nations, the country has, in that time, made an extraordinary number of headlines in international news. While many of these have been sensationalist, the fact remains that a large part of the cocaine trafficked into Europe, since the early years of the new millennium, has passed through the country's territory. The substance has entered

the country by air and sea from Brazil and been shipped and smuggled north toward the EU. In the process, Guinea-Bissau turned into a drug hub. What started as merely a transshipment point turned into a safe haven for the trading and trafficking of the drug. As the palms of the country's military and political elite were greased and the services of the state bought by cartels and international and local drug entrepreneurs, it became an important nexus within a billion-dollar trade (Vigh 2012). In the process, the small country moved from being a place of no international interest to being seen as a major matter of geopolitical concern, a pest and pariah on the global order.



This article takes an ethnographic look at the cocaine trade in and through Bissau and critically probes our conventional understanding of such developments. While academics and commentators often talk about transnational organized crime (TOC) as a pathogen or plague, simultaneously external to, but parasitical on, the global order, an ethnographic approach clarifies the intrinsic nature of it. The notion of TOC being “the HIV of the international state system” (Sheptycki 2002: 15), the “perverse connections” of the global (Castells 2010: 171), and the “uncivil” society among us (Annan 2000) paints a picture of cross-border crime as epiphenomenal and exceptional to the “normal” state of affairs, leading politicians and policy makers to imagine the solution to the problem can be found by leading “wars on,” “combatting,” and “exterminating” the phenomenon. However, rather than being external to the dominant global order, TOC is, as we shall see, more plausibly seen as contingent on the very same dynamics that define the uneven distribution of wealth and power within that global order. In the discourse of epidemics that defines the public imaginary on this issue, TOC is, we may say, not *ecdemic* but *endemic* to the current state of globality (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2008).

In other words, the understanding of TOC as an external contamination of otherwise healthy societal states, may in many ways, be preventing us from gaining a clear understanding of the phenomenon and processes that cause it. That is *not* to say internal factors are unimportant or that Guinea-Bissau’s specific historical, political and geographical past has not played a significant part in its drug-related development. The traces left by the prolonged liberation war in the country—which, for the liberation movement, the Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC), depended on para-state constructions and smuggling activities—may very well have singled it out as an interesting point of connection for the cartels. The fact that the postcolonial state became a “simulacrum of social order” and democratic rule, under the autocratic control of former President

João Bernardo “Nino” Vieira, was clearly instrumental (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2008: 11); equally, the country’s geographical proximity to the South American continent and its long and unpatrolled coastline make transportation and concealment manageable and add to its allure in smuggling terms. Yet, rather than exemplifying the way “the global” becomes infected from the outside in, the Guinea-Bissauan case appears to clarify the opposite. It shows how global disparities may generate critical interdependencies that connect local difficulties to larger orders.

The remainder of this article will focus on two such interdependencies, the first being of a social and transnational nature and the second of a political one. The focus on interdependency is obviously not novel and has been used in politics and systems theory to explain connections between events and developments that otherwise seem unconnected (see, e.g., Young 1969). It can thus be further subdivided into economic, political, social, economic, and ecological interdependencies (cf. Beck and Sznaider 2006: 11).¹ Positioned between the descriptive and the analytical, the concept has critical potential, as it can be used to clarify how vulnerabilities connect in social feedback loops. In this way, interdependencies become caustic circuits, that is, circulations and flows that stitch the world together while simultaneously hollowing out and corroding the social environments and relations from which their origins. Allow me to start with an empirical description to elucidate the point.

A crackhead in a container bar

Joaozinho was searching for his piece of *pedra*, “rock,” the small amount of crack cocaine he had dropped from the makeshift table where he had been sitting for the past couple hours. We were standing by a “container bar” in inner city Bissau. The bar, literally a shipping container with holes cut into the metal sides serving as windows to serve from, was a regular meeting place for the men of the neighborhood who were the focus of my research at the time.

Though sitting alone, Joaozinho had been the center of attention for a while. Fluctuating from fidgety to apathetic, his stoned presence had the quality of a performance. As his energy increased and decreased in tune with his intake, he was, at times, rambling and squirming only to stop and stare into the air a minute later. At this moment, he was putting all his efforts into finding the rock that had fallen off the table. Though it was out of sight, his desire to smoke it remained potent, and in an attempt to find, it he bent down, lit his lighter with one hand, and slowly swept the fingers of his other hand through the dry red dirt beneath him. As he lit the lighter, the handful of guys I was standing with burst out laughing. We had been at the bar for about an hour, and his erratic conduct had periodically interrupted our conversation and made the group marvel at his spectacularly coked-up ways. His attempt to illuminate the dirt beneath his feet to locate his lost cocaine was the last straw, leaving people unable to contain their laughter.² The issue was not that he was using his lighter in this way but rather that he was doing so in the middle of the day. The container bar had opened around noon, and being on a 24-hour bender, he was oblivious to the available daylight at hand. As he heard people laugh, he tilted his head—still between his legs—and looked up at the source of the noise.

Joaozinho was, at the time, one of a small but growing number of, primarily, young men who had become crack cocaine users in Bissau. When I first came to the city, around the turn of the millennium, cocaine addiction was the exception. The civil war had just ended, and though there were rumors of cocaine trafficking in the country even then, the drug was primarily mentioned in relation to the many conflicts elsewhere on the Upper Guinea Coast. The sub-region was, at the time, home to an array of civil wars—from Casamance to Liberia, in which the gruesome behavior of young combatants was rumored to have been stimulated by the use of brown-brown, an alleged mixture of cocaine and gunpowder. The substance was believed to increase the effect of the cocaine, decrease fear,

and boost the fighting capacity of children and youths (for a first-person account, see Beah 2006), as the extraordinary addition of smokeless gunpowder would potentiate the cocaine due to the nitroglycerin-induced vasodilation.

Combining the transgressions of war with the excesses of drugs, the idea of brown-brown was symbolically potent. It consequently made excellent gossip, most probably exaggerating the actual extent of the problem.³ A handful of years later, however, much larger and purer quantities of cocaine were the talk of the town. Around 2005, a large part of the cocaine consumed in Europe started passing through the country, commencing a turbulent drug economy in the otherwise financially and politically devastated place. Before that, the pipe, or *cachimbo*, had been used for tobacco and pot (*yamba* and *tobacco di iran*, or “spirit tobacco,” as the latter is jokingly called in Bissau). With the influx of cocaine, and its byproduct crack cocaine, termed *pedra* or *quisa*, the crack pipe became an addition to the urban environment. Currently, crack is easily found in Bissau and dealt openly in the areas of Reno and Caracol. The marketplace in the latter area is commonly nicknamed *aeroporto di caracol*, “Caracol airport.” While this once referred to the place as a venue for buying cheap cashew wine and spirits, which would lift people out of their misery, it presently supplies a “high” of a different order.

Circuit 1: Feeding dependency

Joaozinho’s story ties into the development of the trade in several ways. Besides the absurdity of the aforementioned situation, indicating how far from shared reality his drug use had brought him, his addiction illuminates a set of ironic feedback loops related to recent developments in the city. The story, as we shall see, clarifies some of the social dynamics at stake, moving us from social obligation to intoxication. I initially knew him through his uncle Raul. Raul was one of a group of militiamen, the *Aguentas*, I have followed in and outside Guinea-Bissau

since the turn of the millennium. As with many of the *Aguentas*, he was one of the urban poor, from the ethnic group of *Papels*,⁴ who had attached themselves to the political faction built around former President Vieira. A former soldier during the liberation struggle,⁵ Vieira transitioned in his 40-year political career from war hero to Afro-Marxist dictator, democratically elected president, warlord, and drug lord. Raul followed Vieira in moving from conflict to cocaine. He belongs to the generation of youth that came of age around the turn of the millennium in Bissau and grew up during a period of structural adjustment programs, economic crisis, and political conflict in the country. In an attempt to gain security, he joined the *Aguentas* in 1998, serving as a presidential guard for Vieira. In the following years, he was repeatedly mobilized and demobilized and ended up engaging in the transnational movement of cocaine through Guinea-Bissau.

As I spent time in Bissau, Raul came to be one of my closest interlocutors. He lived with his mother and nephew in an adobe house with a corrugated iron roof and a small *quintal*, a yard, that led to a latrine shared by the surrounding houses. The family was poorer than most and, being the eldest man in the household, the obligation to support them fell on Raul (Vigh 2016). Yet living in one of the world's poorest countries, where jobs are few and far between, and having lost the support of the political network he had aligned with in 1998 as a result of it losing the war in 1999 and 2009, he was incapable of doing so. As with many of my interlocutors—and young disenfranchised men in general—he lived the social strain of being expected to be a breadwinner while stuck in a desperate socioeconomic position where that was all but impossible (Agnew 1992; Merton 1957; see also Vigh 2006, 2009).

The ant trail

Seeking to better his situation, Raul managed to migrate to Europe in 2010. He did so by connecting to the remnants of the network he had

fought for during the war and had subsequently lost. Though the network had been decapitated in 2009 by the murder of its prime figure—the late Vieira—the remnants of the network remained influential through the role it played in relation to the cocaine trade passing through the country. The trade had grown explosively after the return of Vieira in 2005 (see Vigh 2016), when smaller quantities of cocaine began trickling into the local networks that facilitate the larger-scale smuggling activities of the cartels through the country. As the substance entered into these local networks, they would accumulate the drug and traffic it in the form of *cabaças*, literally “heads,” that is, kilos of cocaine, or by further subdividing it into *dedos*, “fingers” in Creole,⁶ as capsules of cocaine to be swallowed and carried to Europe by drug “mules” (*ngullidurs*) or “swallowers,” finally to be sold as *ngallas*, one-gram packets of the drug, in Europe.

The primary, large-scale flow of cocaine through the country thus creates a secondary one that feeds into an “ant trail,” a flow of smugglers sent as mules, trafficking lesser quantities or facilitating sales and redistribution within the EU. I have written about the specifics of this elsewhere and lack the space to do so again here (Vigh 2009, 2016, 2018). The important point is that, while Guinea-Bissau has little in terms of natural resources, it has plenty in terms of people desperate enough to risk their lives for the possibility of getting a better one. For the disenfranchised, such as Raul, the cocaine trade provides a means of escape from poverty through the prospect of becoming a migrant. The “drug road,” *caminho di droga*, as the movement of drugs is called in Bissau, may thus define both the “corporate” shipment of tonnage by the cartel, the movement of kilos by local networks, as well as the microscopic drizzling of cocaine into Europe carried by people seeking migration, livelihoods, and better lives.

For Raul, the *caminho di droga* was a way of moving out and up. He faced the risks head-on as the opportunity presented itself. “Bissau is sweet, but poverty breaks (*darna*) people,” he told me in an interview, as his continuous in-

ability to support those he was expected to hollored out his social personhood (Vigh 2016, 2017). The precariously gendered position is a common one. While much has been written about vulnerable masculinities in an African context (cf. Abbink 2005; O'Brien 1996; Richards 1995; Utas 2003), little of this attention has been given to transnational crime and criminalization: a focus that interestingly highlights how such gendered vulnerabilities connect in high-risk livelihoods and become part of emerging global developments and precarious circulations. As a result, trafficking is seen by many disenfranchised urban men in Bissau to provide the possibility of escaping the social and physical difficulties of being a poor man, *um algin coitado*, and moving toward a positive masculine position as a migrant in Europe able to send back remittances.

Raul traveled to Europe, via Dakar, with his guts full of drugs. Despite the ordeal of swallowing the goods, the fear of being caught, and the possibility that the parcels would rupture in his bowels, the actual trip had been a smooth one where everything was arranged for him and papers and passport were taken care of. Furthermore, being a mule has the benefit of having a livelihood included, as the people who get involved are often given the chance of dealing the goods they have been part of trafficking once they arrive in Europe. On closer inspection, this kind of migration is, obviously, ungenerous. Not only does it involve a hazardous journey, but also undocumented or irregular Guinea-Bissauan migrants commonly reside at the very bottom of their unwilling European host societies. Poorly educated and without proper papers, they survive through so-called 3-D jobs seeking to make a living as day laborer's doing work that is "dirty, dangerous and degrading" (Fong 1994). The "illegal" job market is steeped in uncertainty and insecurity. The risk of injury is frequently present just as people are regularly cheated of their pay or only paid a fraction of what was promised. The alternative to such licit yet illegal jobs is to move more fully into the criminal economy and sell the drugs that one

has been part of trafficking. As both lie within the realm of the clandestine and illegal, dealing drugs appears less transgressive for my interlocutors than one might expect. It is most commonly spoken of as just another (bad) job and, rather than being seen as a drastic fall from grace, is perceived as a horizontal move from one kind of criminalized employment to another.

In general, many undocumented sub-Saharan Africans appear less convinced that they have traveled from periphery to center. Despite their physical mobility, they commonly talk of their lives as stuck at the bottom of a society—a society now only more global in scope. Similarly, most of my interlocutors live a life of double illegalization in Europe. They are criminalized in terms of both status and livelihood, and their statutory illegality prevents them from being able to move on in life. However, what is experienced as a state of exclusion in Europe potentially gives way to a process of inclusion in Bissau. They endure being unwanted and criminalized in order to gain respect and recognition in Bissau as people who can send occasional remittances, or have the potential to do so. People in Bissau often know when migrants are caught up in the trade, yet the ethical evaluation of such entanglement is commonly related to the way money is spent rather than the way it is earned. Moving into the ant trail is morally evaluated not so much in terms of the nature of the livelihood but in terms of the remittances sent home.

Raul was constantly on the lookout for a secure job, *um trabadju certo*, but would spend most of his time dealing cocaine from the street corner in Lisbon, where I did my fieldwork in 2012 and 2015. It was unglamorous work, characterized by a lack of the cash that is associated with it in the public imagination. Yet, though he would work long nights, struggling to make any money at all, he would nonetheless send a part of his meager earnings back to his family in Bissau. He complained bitterly about the endless requests placed on him, but the few times he would announce he had sent money to his nephew or mother an element of pride would

shine through. In such situations, the ant trail and its concomitant dealing will often be spoken about as *commercio so*, “just business,” and remittances commonly be allocated according to underlying kinship obligations. The Papels, Raul’s ethnic group, are matrilineal and avunculocal. From a kinship perspective, traditionally the most important person for Raul was his mother’s oldest brother, a person now deceased, just as the person who officially looks after his interest while he is away is his eldest sister’s oldest son, the young man Joaozinho.

Contemptible addiction

As Raul worked nights selling relief to addicts and partygoers in Lisbon, parts of the remittances he sent home were, in other words, being used to feed Joaozinho’s growing addiction. The very same substance that granted Raul in absentia social status in Bissau, as a migrant providing for his family, was steadily undermining Joaozinho’s health, social standing, and the very same family’s reputation back home. “This one is worth nothing (*Es ka bali nada*),” Ido said of Joaozinho as we passed him by while walking through the neighborhood. For Ido, a person who could afford to eat only once a day and whose life was constantly focused on finding the next meal, Joaozinho’s addiction was almost contemptible. Joaozinho had the good fortune to get money from abroad. All he had to do was to redistribute it relatively fairly, and he too would be known as a patron in his own right. Instead of doing so, he was seen to “eat,” *kume*, the money intended for others. *Ki banditto*, “the bandit,” people in the *bairro* would remark of him, criminalizing not the money received but Joaozinho’s management of it.

Joaozinho was, in other words, seen as using money made from criminal dealings in immoral ways. While Raul had suffered the predicament of not being able to achieve positive social status in Bissau and had engaged in high-risk migration to improve his social standing—even if doing so came at the cost of living a life at the very bottom of European society—Joaozinho

blatantly disregarded any demands placed on him. Raul’s life was enslaved by social obligation; Joaozinho’s addiction made him immune to it. The former used the cocaine trade to mend his poverty-derived social failures; the latter was seen as a social failure because of his mismanagement of cocaine-derived means.

While it is commonly held that cocaine—especially crack—is a drug industry that preys on the poor (cf. Baumer 1994), Bissau actually provides an example of the disenfranchised often being too impoverished to develop an addiction. Certainly, people who are addicted become impoverished by their cravings, at times resulting in other kinds of crime and prostitution (yet another kind of interdependency). But the people I know with cocaine or crack addictions in Bissau are mainly people with access to resources. And these resources often stem from remittances. Crack is cheaper than powdered cocaine and may be available for as little as a 1,000 West African francs a hit (approximately 1.50 euros), yet the high it provides is notoriously short-lived, making it a drug that often leads to binge abuse and an expensive addiction in the long run. It quickly becomes out of reach for the poorest parts of the population who are struggling to survive as it is. “It is not in the countryside that people are crying of hunger (*chora fome*),” Carlos, a young man from the city, told me. “It is inside the city proper,” he continued, describing the state of urban poverty in the capital as particularly brutal. For these people, like Joaozinho, the possibility of addiction is, in other words, ironically made possible through feeding other peoples’ addiction in Europe.

Joaozinho’s story clarifies an array of interdependencies that critically and paradoxically intersect. Members of Raul’s household in Bissau would curse Joaozinho and complain about him not distributing goods and money adequately, and Raul would scold him on the phone and threaten to withhold further transactions, yet he continued channeling money toward him as Joaozinho’s standing reflected on his own. The case provides an interesting example of a “caustic circuit,” an ironic feedback loop that under-

mines the very forces upholding it. Circuits, in this sense, refer to the circular movement of people and remittances (Cole and Groes 2016), while *caustic* directs our attention to the corrosive nature of the cocaine trade, nested within larger formations and flows of capital and processes of extraction. Caustic also connects to the drug itself. It is an alkaloid, and while it brings elation in the moment, its properties disintegrate bodies, lifeworlds, and social relations. It spurs an aporic movement between the potential and the depleted. The trade that supports and socially substantiates Raul in terms of family obligation and standing comes to undermine and hollow out the family he feels obliged to. Yet, the cocaine trade in Bissau is also tied to a higher-level interdependency.

Circuit 2: Dependency's backlash

Though cocaine on the Upper Guinea Coast has been tied to primarily combatants and conflicts in the 1990s, the trade has a longer history in the region (cf. Ellis 2009). The substance was part of financing and furthering the wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire and the current crisis in Mali (cf. Gberie 2013), but it has had a less remarkable presence within the regions' polities, economies, and conflicts for a couple decades. Likewise, the drug's presence in Guinea-Bissau exceeds what is commonly presumed (by, e.g., Chabal and Green 2016). This becomes more evident if we move from the lowest link in the trade—Joaozinho as a local consumer and Raul as a local trafficker—to one of the highest—the late Vieira. The president amassed parts of his enormous fortune by facilitating the trafficking of cocaine through the country. Cooperating with a Lebanese contact who served as his security adviser and—allegedly—with the Italian Mancuso group, the cocaine trade can be tied to Vieira from the early 1990s with the initial setup of the business on Ilha de Maio, an island within the Bijagós archipelago. However, though the trade has a longer history in the country, the influx and availability of cocaine in

Bissau exploded in 2005, drastically increasing its scope.

The influx of cocaine was, at the time, the last episode in a turbulent yet constant process of decline in the country. Guinea-Bissau had become increasingly marginal since its independence. Being a small Lusophone enclave within a larger francophone area of interest, with no natural resources to speak of and little strategic significance, the country quickly became, as a postcolony, irrelevant to the geopolitically dominant orders and economies. While PAIGC and its leader, Amílcar Cabral, had been hailed as visionary and progressive during the independence struggle, the country was met with indifference once it ceased to be a proxy battleground for the Cold War powers. Independence came, in this manner, to embody a move from progressive to regressive—from being a space of visionary politics to becoming one of economic and political decline and irrelevance (see Vigh 2009). Though the country came into existence with a clear aim of staying independent in both political and economic terms, it had, 30 years on, drifted into a state of dependency and was rapidly heading toward one of abandonment.

Initially the country sought to secure a viable foundation for a socialist state through strengthening its self-sufficiency and social foundations. From Cabral's (1973) perspective, international capitalism had rigged the system against the struggling postcolonial states. Even if it granted former colonies their freedom, the West maintained control of global trade leading to the continuous pauperization of the postcolonial state. In such a case, freedom was merely, Cabral argued, liberation toward unremitting exploitation, and to avoid such dependency, he envisioned a self-sustaining country with an agricultural sector strong enough to feed the country's population and a social system vital enough to secure the growth of the coming generations. Cabral was assassinated just before independence, and instead of emerging as a viable self-governing and self-sustaining polity, Guinea-Bissau turned into a country that was fully dependent on the goodwill of international

society to survive as a viable sovereign body at all. “Precarity” etymologically means “obtained by prayer”; it can be seen as defining of a state of affairs where one has merely what one begs for, and exactly this came to characterize the country’s position in the international order as it became entrenched in a negative spiral of loans, rents, and handouts.

While it lost its ability to sustain itself, the country gained a brutal political makeup. Instead of becoming a soft socialist state, it turned into an Afro-Marxist dictatorship and politico-military oligarchy under the ruthless control of Vieira, who turned it into one of Africa’s poorest and himself into one of the continent’s wealthiest. In place of self-sufficiency, it became a place where 87 percent of the population report commonly going hungry (CPAN 2016) and where schooling and health services are all but nonexistent. Instead of gaining independence, it became geopolitically abandoned: at first, fully dependent on international aid and, later, having a large part of this economic assistance withdrawn in the years following the civil war in 1998 and 1999 (from \$180,770 million in 1996 to \$66,760 million in 2005) (Einarsdottir 2007; WB 2019). In other words, not only was Guinea-Bissau in a state of regression, but the decline was further aggravated by the fact that 90 percent of the state budget was dependent on aid at the same time as it was witnessing severe donor flight (Horta 2007), leaving the country struggling to pay civil servants and secure even the most basic necessities for its citizens.

Abandonment and alternative connectors

Amid the general downturn, the withdrawal of aid was experienced as an act of desertion. *E de-jano* (They have left us behind),” I was told, as a testimony to the feeling of “abjection” that characterized public sentiment (Ferguson 1999). The mood was, as we have seen, one of having been abandoned. It was perceived as a withdrawal and withholding of aid by those who ought to intervene, making it a negative deed. The non-act became an act in its own right. The experience

of decline and abjection turned into desperation in the city, with the military and politicians fractionalized in brutal competition for insufficient funds and the population struggling to survive in the mix of insecurity and poverty. However, when Vieira came back to the country in 2005, things started to change. Striking a deal with the military factions that had ousted him only a few years earlier, Vieira bought his way back into the presidency via a cocaine connection and the prospects of the political and military elite profiting from transnational organized crime. The cocaine business settled rapidly and drastically in the country from 2005 onward. The combination of being poor, out of sight, and institutionally weak made the country a perfect match for criminalized trade within the global order. As a political entity, perpetuated by persistently high levels of poverty and corruption, the country opened up to the cocaine cartels, seeking novel transshipment points for the trafficking of cocaine into the expanding European market (Vigh 2009, 2014, 2018).

Abandonment becomes, in this manner, a mode of power whereby the international society denies a certain kind of politics. It is an act performed on states seen to lack transparency, accountability, order, or centralized bureaucratic control. Ironically, while international commentators mostly commonly describe the state in Guinea-Bissau as “weak” or “failed,” the combination of abandonment and fragmentation actually made it functional in terms of facilitating the illegal movement of people and goods through it. Within the criminalized cocaine trade, abject people and places becomes pivotal. As the navy became engaged in facilitating the movement of drugs, the army in protecting and storing drugs, and the police in punishing those who did *not* comply, the various remnants of the state adapted impeccably to smuggling activities and the redistribution of spoils.⁷ In other words, while the trade made a handful of “big men” wealthy, and minor quantities of cocaine would trickle through local networks, the cartels gained, in return, invisibility and the protection of a vacant sovereignty whose alternative

makeup was perfectly suited to the smuggling of goods within the global order.

Guinea-Bissau became in this manner a geopolitical example of “central marginality”—an entity that turns so economically and politically marginal that it becomes central for something else, namely illegalized transnational flows. It became a margin in the middle, as a place stitched onto the global order by caustic circuits. The poverty of Guinea-Bissau, and the unsettled frailty of the political order, connected perfectly with growing cocaine production in Latin America and its increasing use in Europe.⁸ In other words, the geopolitical abandonment aligned with the criminalized nature of the cocaine industry and the disenfranchisement of the urban poor in the country. These new developments brought hope to the people on the streets of the city. As Kio told me, “if you know someone who trusts you, you can see a ticket and all (*bu na odja billhete e tudo*)” (Vigh 2016: 98), even if, as shown, the possibility presented is often one that disappoints in the long run.

Conclusion

Looking ethnographically at the drug trade in and through Guinea-Bissau highlights how cocaine connects people and places through critical circulations. The transnational movement of the drug clarifies some of the interdependencies that sustain it. In this way, the case brings nuance to the divide between the central and the peripheral in the contemporary state of globality. It shows how one of the most geopolitically marginal spaces in the world, the state of Guinea-Bissau, gains centrality within the transnational movement of drugs and comes to pivotally connect three continents in an alternative movement of people, goods, and capital. The country’s abandonment makes it “a margin in the middle” as an example of expedient insignificance. Similarly, the lowly status and lack of life chances that characterize the urban disenfranchised make them the core components of a larger movement of people and goods that

turns migration into circulation, creating an eerie feedback loop of poverty and addiction.

Though relegated to the shadows of the global, the drug trade is, thus, not external to the current world order but rather departs from, connects with, and profits from the zones of abandonment within it. This example shows that postindependence Guinea-Bissau developed into a country so ruined that it became a vacant sovereignty in which the drug cartels were able to hide and facilitate their business under the protection of, rather than in opposition to, the remnants of state. In similar terms, the disenfranchisement of the urban poor came to supply the workforce for the “ant trail.” Initially the cocaine trade was treated with relative optimism in Bissau. It was seen as an opening in a space of social and political closure. Currently, however, engagement with it has become less optimistic. With the swelling number of deportees, the international arrest of some of the country’s key political and military figures as drug kingpins, and the sting of its feedback loops, people have become cautious of the trade. Life in the ant trail is increasingly recognized to be life in the entrails.

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Henrik Vigh is Professor of Anthropology and Head of the Centre for Global Criminology at the University of Copenhagen. He is the author of *Navigating Terrains of War* (2006) and has written extensively on conflict, crisis, and crime. He has researched issues of youth and conflict in both Europe and Africa and is currently researching the intersection between war and crime focusing on the criminalized movement of people, goods, and drugs from Africa into Europe.

Email: hv@anthro.ku.dk

Notes

1. In relation to TOC more generally, the concept has equally been used to focus on the relation between members and groups, chains of supply and demand, and formations and flows (Benson and Decker 2010).
2. The phenomenon is termed hen picking within crack cocaine consuming circles.
3. I have conducted more than 10 years of off-and-on fieldwork with people affiliated with the Aguenta militia in Bissau, who were rumored to have used it in the civil war in Guinea-Bissau, without being able to substantiate the allegations.
4. The Papel/Papelis constitute the ethnic group indigenous to the area of Bissau. It is the fourth-largest ethnic group in the country with approximately 9.1 percent of the population.
5. The war against the Portuguese colonial power from 1963 to 1974.
6. A finger weighs, I was told, approximately five grams. The name apparently being derived from the shape of the packet to be swallowed or because they are rumored to be made from the cut-off fingers of surgical gloves.
7. The level of involvement of state institutions became clear with the arrest of the rear admiral and a range of other top officials in a DEA drugs bust just outside Guinea-Bissauan territorial waters in 2013. The investigation further incriminated the country's president at the time, Nhamadjo, and the head of the army, Indjai.
8. In 1998, the value of the cocaine market in Europe was one-quarter of the US equivalent. Twenty years later, they are on a par (EMCDDA 2018; Parkinson 2013).

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