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Henrik Vigh

Introduction

Cocaine is ambivalent matter. While the substance, in Bissau, is clearly seen as tied up with a globally condemned and criminalized trade, it is also seen locally as a potential provider of possible livelihoods and mobility. It is perceived as a disreputable business, yet engagement in it is something that may enable people to meet expectations of social provision and care. On the one hand it comprises an unethical arrangement; on the other it facilitates moral practices by trickling resources into impoverished family networks surviving on the bare minimum. So, while the transnational cocaine trade that has become prominent in Bissau within the last ten years may have given the country a bad name in international politics and the media, people on the streets stress its positive potential as outweighing its negative standing.

This article looks at the way in which young men in Bissau, the small capital of Guinea-Bissau, assess and value the transnational cocaine trade that has come to dominate the country within the last decade. It builds on an ongoing study of the influx and impact of the cocaine trade in the country, although it differs from my earlier work by centring specifically on moral obligations and ethical concerns. Bissau provides an interesting case for a study of large-scale transnational organized crime. First and foremost, the commerce has been relatively out in the open, making it a feasible research topic. Second, and on a related note, it is caught in an interesting tension between its negative status and what are seen as its positive effects. Rather than seeing the cocaine trade and trafficking as a criminal flow or path, the article seeks to illuminate the ways in which young men in Bissau understand and engage with it as a means of gaining positive social presence within kin and family networks, tying the volatile business into intimate social dynamics and coupling the unethical trade to moral practice.

In order to clarify the ethical ambivalence of the cocaine trade in the country, I situate it in relation to the political environment and ‘relational landscapes’ of post-conflict Guinea-Bissau (cf. Inkpen *et al.* 2007; Vigh 2016). The article looks at people’s engagement in the drug business from the perspective of care, thereby clarifying both the ethical ideals that condemn it and the moral evaluations that uphold it. As we shall see, the cocaine trade is intertwined with the prolonged state of crisis in Bissau, which has ‘enfrailed’ urban masculinities and has stagnated generational mobility, leaving a large group of men unable to attain

Henrik Vigh is Professor of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen. He is the author of *Navigating Terrains of War: youth and soldiering in Guinea-Bissau* and is currently researching the intersection between war and crime, focusing on the transnational movement of cocaine through political networks in West Africa. Email: hv@anthro.ku.dk

moral and social personhood, as they remain unable to contribute positively to households and family formations. The article thus focuses squarely on issues of gender by examining the predicament of masculine social positions in situations of decline and retrenchment, and by clarifying the sometimes desperate acts that are tied up in being and becoming a man in a morally acceptable way. It builds on fieldwork with militiamen and drug pushers – two male-dominated professions – and shows how young men in Bissau seek to move with the cocaine connections that cut through the city in order to gain moral standing, moving us from the introduction of the cocaine trade to Bissau to the way in which people become trapped in it in Europe.

Before providing more detailed ethnographic descriptions, I first set out the historical developments that led Bissau to become an important node within the world of transnational organized crime and the movement of cocaine from Latin America to Europe.

Cocaine developments

From 2005 onwards, the international cocaine trade engulfed Guinea-Bissau's economy and saturated its political environment. In the years prior to the influx of the drug, the country's meagre economy had been caught in a drastic process of conflict and decline. The country witnessed an array of coups, purges and minor episodes of warfare, leaving the economy in ruins and the political stage in disarray.¹ It was a compound disaster. While its meagre economy had formerly survived on cashew nut exports, petty trade, fishing, and – not least – development aid, the many coups and purges that ended the last millennium and started the new one were perceived by the international community as indicative of a lack of good governance and transparency, resulting in a drastic reduction in aid and investment and setting the country back even further. The economic setback resulted unsurprisingly in a further scramble for the few remaining resources and an intensification of the political struggle for control to the point where the economic and political crisis took on a chronic quality, leaving the population of Bissau without hope of better prospects and 87 per cent of the country claiming to regularly go hungry (Shepherd *et al.* 2014).² As the cocaine cartels moved in around 2005, they thus set up shop in a country caught in a prolonged period of crisis. It did not take long before the estimated profits from the cocaine trade surpassed official gross national product (GNP),³ making the trade and trafficking the central plank of Guinea-Bissau's economy.

The cocaine cartels did not, however, show up uninvited. The influx of the trade into Guinea-Bissau is commonly believed to have been orchestrated by the

¹In the last few years of the last millennium, development assistance comprised 60 per cent of the country's revenue. The country had seen a rapid decline in development assistance, from US\$180 million in 1996 to US\$124 million in 1997, yet as war broke out in 1998 this was reduced to US\$96 million and decreased further to US\$52 million in 1999 (Einarsdóttir 2007: 102).

²See also 'Guinea', World Food Programme <<https://www.wfp.org/countries/guinea-bissau/overview>>.

³See 'West Africa and drug trafficking', Africa Economic Development Institute <http://www.africaecon.org/index.php/africa_business_reports/read/70>.

country's former president, João Bernardo 'Nino' Vieira.⁴ Vieira had a history of using the country's state institutions for personal gain. The former president had quickly risen to power in the postcolonial state. As a former veteran of the liberation war against the Portuguese, he enjoyed the support of both the political and the military elite. Through a combination of political scheming and military ruthlessness, he managed to become Guinea-Bissau's dominant political figure of the next thirty years, during which he repressed and persecuted political opposition, reigned with impunity, and embezzled state funds to such a degree that he was accused – by the end of the millennium – of having amassed a personal fortune that equalled the country's foreign debt. Although he was expelled from power and exiled in 1999 after a year-long civil war, he returned to Bissau to run for president in the 2004–05 elections. To most people's surprise, he won the election and was reinstated on 1 October 2005.

As much a businessman as a dictator, Vieira negotiated his return by offering a deal to prominent figures within the Guinea-Bissauan army. The arrangement was that he would be allowed to return if he secured them a substantial and steady income by enabling Colombian cocaine cartels to use Guinea-Bissauan sovereign space to traffic cocaine from Latin America into Europe (Vigh 2012). According to my contacts, who were closely affiliated with Vieira in former times, he rekindled an old business deal from the mid-1990s connecting Guinea-Bissau to the international cocaine trade via the small but influential Lebanese diaspora in the country (see also Csete and Sánchez 2013).⁵ As Vieira was reinstated in 2005, the setup quickly showed its effectiveness. In the ten years following Vieira's return, Guinea-Bissau moved from being a transshipment point for the transcontinental flow of cocaine to becoming a drug hub in its own right (Shaw 2015), a place not just of storage but of large-scale deals and transactions (Vigh 2014). Protected by the political elite and key figures in the police, army and navy, the trafficking grew at an alarming rate. As the cartels made the most of being sheltered rather than persecuted by the state, Guinea-Bissau gained prominence as a safe haven within the global cocaine market.⁶ In fact, the trade became so influential that the country has had the unflattering honour of being designated 'Africa's first narco-state' by the UN, with the military, police and politicians all fighting for a piece of the profitable action, rather than seeking to combat it (Vigh 2012).

The development of the trade has been met with alarm by the international community. While the country was almost geopolitically invisible before the trafficking kicked in, featuring very rarely in international news, and was seen as an insignificant part of the sub-region, the sudden and substantial development of the country as a drugs hub placed it firmly on the map and made it an issue of international concern. Because of the size of the trade and the involvement of the country's elite, the EU, the

⁴See 'Analysis: Guinea-Bissau's links to drugs trade', *The Telegraph*, 2 March 2009 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocan/guineabissau/4928379/Analysis-Guinea-Bissaus-links-to-drugs-trade.html>>.

⁵Vieira was allegedly introduced to the cocaine trade via the Lebanese diasporic community in the country. According to the word on the street, his personal security aide, a man called Karim, was influential in forging the connections, yet currently these connections are managed directly by Guinea-Bissauan liaisons.

⁶See 'Guinea-Bissau: cocaine's traffic hub', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 November 2009 <<http://www.latimes.com/la-fg-africa-drugs16-2009nov16-story.html>>.

UN and the US have sought to combat it and to prevent the involvement of the country's political and military top brass.⁷ This has led to the capture of Guinea-Bissau's former navy chief and four other Guinea-Bissauan nationals by US anti-narcotics agents, as they were trading arms for cocaine in international waters, as well as to numerous international denunciations and condemnations of the involvement of Guinea-Bissauan politicians and military. The arrests, as well as the increased international focus on the problem, have led to the cocaine trade becoming more clandestine in the country. Where it was formerly out in the open, with cartel members riding through town in the cars of influential politicians and military figures, it is currently carried out behind closed doors and without directly visible participants. Yet, for the international community, the cocaine connection remains a problem that cannot be properly dealt with as the cartels continue to benefit from the sovereign status of the Guinea-Bissauan state, leaving little possibility of forcing the Guinea-Bissauan elite to abstain from engaging in what is seen, from the outside, as an unethical practice.

Guinea-Bissau's recent history is a fascinating one. It first of all demonstrates the irony of a country becoming so abject and invisible in the geopolitical order that its marginality ends up being a problem for the people who were formerly blind to its distress – a situation it shares with a range of other so-called narco-states around the world and that ought to alert our attention to the counterproductive aspects of international political disengagement. Second, the move from being a so-called weak state, to a failed state, to state capture (Helpman *et al.* 2000)⁸ raises important questions. In order to understand what is happening in a sovereign space such as that of Guinea-Bissau, we need to ask what use the state is put to. In other words, it is not enough merely to measure it against an ideal version of a Western state, since doing so will lead us into a barren discussion of lack and deficiency rather than to an actual and far more fruitful illumination of the way in which statehood is practised and appropriated on the ground (Vigh 2006). Seen from this perspective, Guinea-Bissau is not defined by its lack of a state but by an unfortunate yet creative and opportunistic repurposing of it. In the words of a popular song in Bissau by Cientistas Realistas:

news from the land was heard even on international radio
 ...
 Guinea-Bissau is a narco-state
 people of the state practising illegal businesses
 carrying out organized crime, but let's say in the name of the state
 ...
 narco-state raised dust
 everyone wants to leave this hole⁹

⁷See 'US agents seize suspected Bissau drug kingpin at sea', Reuters, 4 April 2013 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/05/us-bissau-traffickers-idUSBRE93400H20130405>>; 'Guinea-Bissau ex-navy chief in "drugs arrest"', BBC News, 5 April 2013 <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-22030847>>.

⁸The non-bureaucratic work of state is arguably more complex than the development theory of the demise of the postcolonial state may grasp (see Olivier de Sardan 1999; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006).

⁹See 'Rap musicians take on Guinea-Bissau's drug trafficking problem', West Africa Commission on Drugs <<http://www.wacommissionondrugs.org/rap-musicians-take-on-guinea-bissaus-drug-trafficking-problem/>>.

Situationally attuned

Moving from abstract ideals to situated practices and interpretations not only helps us understand politics and the state in Bissau, but may also provide an insight into the ways in which people engage with and make sense of the cocaine trade.

While cocaine trafficking is generally seen as an ethically questionable enterprise, in Bissau the prolonged critical state of affairs has morally attuned people's engagement with it in a quite different manner (cf. Throop 2012: 157). '*Situason ki pui* [the situation placed it in me],' the young men I worked with in the country around the turn of the millennium would say when referring to the human rights violations that they committed during the civil war of 1998 to 1999 (Vigh 2006; 2011). In the aftermath of the conflict, the *Aguentas*, as the militiamen in question were called, were singled out as the primary culprits of physical and sexual violence against civilians. Having lost the war, they became the target of a range of retaliations, punishment beatings and abuse for the crimes they had committed. The attacks were less severe and persistent than many feared, however, as the *Aguentas* excused themselves and were excused by referring to the situational dynamics of the context of conflict. *Situason ki pui* was thus a way of referring an unethical act or practice back to the exceptional state of affairs that was seen to have shaped it. It was a collective process of situating ethics by placing the blame for the transgression on the context rather than on the person committing it. What we are looking at is the opposite of common 'fundamental attribution error', where moral blame is ascribed to agents in a manner that disregards the context or situation that surrounds an unethical act (Ross 1977; Harman 1999). Instead of relating a negative act to morally flawed agents, in the above example it is positioned in relation to the negative situation that is seen to afford it.

Much the same situational dynamics can be seen to be at play within the current evaluation of the cocaine trade, where people's involvement in it becomes morally attuned to the prolonged period of decline and instability that is viewed as underlying the country's emergence as a narco-state. From the perspective of my interlocutors, the cocaine trade, as noted earlier, may be seen as an unethical business, yet it affords them the possibility of generating an income and taking care of intimate relations, thereby meeting the expectations and obligations that are placed upon them – obligations that, due to economic decline and retrenchment, they are otherwise unable to honour. In this way, the unethical trade becomes the vehicle for practices that positively position people with regard to morality. The decline and retrenchment of crisis caused people to struggle to find ways of positively contributing to households and networks, and, in a context of abandonment and abjectness, the cocaine trade is generally seen as a means of doing just that. Critical conditions not only make explicit otherwise implicit everyday ethics but also underscore the importance of regaining a moral bearing in relational terms. They highlight the fact that relational obligations were not being met but simultaneously provide alternative avenues of provision and ways to maintain one's interpersonal moral obligations.

While the trade is thus seen as an unethical political practice, it looks somewhat different when seen from within. As the lyrics quoted above convey, there is a general dissatisfaction with the way that Guinea-Bissau has developed (Barros and Gomes 2014). Yet from the perspective of the disenfranchised youth I work

with, the trade is also pragmatically evaluated in terms of the obligations it may enable them to fulfil and the social worth this may bestow. From a pragmatic perspective, misappropriation and corruption are taken for granted in Bissau as the dominant modality of the political order, just as cocaine is currently recognized as one of its most flourishing economies:

The drug came to Guinea and shuffled up the scenario ... everyone turned businessman ... they change wives as they change clothes, have money even in Europe. Where did you get all that? We do not know!¹⁰

Despite the cynical tone that surrounds many descriptions of the drug trade, noticeable in the lyrics above, and of the people involved in it, most of the young men I talk to in Bissau are focused not on how to mend the economy, distance themselves from its ascribed illegality or improve the state of the polity, but on how to navigate its alterations, survive its various manifestations, and move towards better social, political and gendered positions within it. Although cocaine is described as a volatile commodity, it embodies prospects in terms of merging the three in a positively valued masculine position, which in Bissau is defined by the ability to support and secure the well-being of one's relatives (Vigh 2006; 2015; 2016). In this respect, the context of crisis and decline makes 'constructive' or traditional masculine positions increasingly difficult to attain (Connell 1998); 'men are often unable to live up to their idealised role as breadwinners, and their failures to provide for their families undermine their status and identity' (Perry 2005: 210). For the young men I talk to in the city, Bissau is seen as having reached rock bottom in terms of liveability and prospects, making the cocaine trade and the economic activity it generates stand out as a possibility to mend one's relational failings and to regain moral personhood.

Distributive inertia

This does not mean that the cocaine trade is not a cause for local complaint, but most grievances related to the drug flow focus on the unequal distribution of its spoils rather than on the illegal or unethical nature of the business. In other words, it is not the criminal elements of the economy that are seen as unethical, but the fact that resources are not shared and distributed according to social obligations and cultural norms. As Aliu told me in an interview,¹¹ when I asked him: 'What do people think of the cocaine trade?'

People do not think anything. But it is just that ... if [only] they [would] do like in Cape Verde. There is a lot of cocaine but their government uses it in a good way so that others can have something as well. That is what is good. Here that does not happen [*kila ka ten*]. We have more cocaine than them but [the big men keep it] between them. We do not see anything.

¹⁰Torres Gémeos, 'Culpadus' ('The culpable'), 'registro sonoro', Bissau, 2008 (quoted in Barros and Gomes 2014), my translation.

¹¹All of my interlocutors have been given pseudonyms.

Cape Verde is a common point of societal comparison in Bissau. The two countries, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, came into being as a single entity as the liberation movement, the PAIGC (Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde), fought for their independence as a unified country. In 1980, the countries were partitioned when the ethnically Cape Verdean President Luis Cabral was ousted following a coup by the later President Nino Vieira, the man responsible for introducing the large-scale cocaine trade into the region. Because of their former unity, the problems in Guinea-Bissau are often contrasted with the perceived progress in Cape Verde. Where the latter has become one of the most stable and well-functioning states in the region, the former has excelled in the very opposite, making people ponder the different trajectories that the two countries have taken.

As can be seen from the above quotation, Cape Verde is seen as a society in which riches are distributed and greed harnessed. 'There they use it to build schools, to build hospitals and everything,' Iko, another young man in Bissau, said with equal parts astonishment and envy while commenting on the money made through the cocaine trade in Cape Verde. The Guinea-Bissauan elite's immoral failure to disseminate the revenue is contrasted with the more morally sound distribution of the same revenue in Cape Verde. The common complaint is thus anchored in a disregard of established patrimonial logics that define what people *ought* to do as a *homí garandi*, a 'big man'. Disregard for the distributive principle turns patrimonialism into a system of simple misappropriation. Rather than encouraging influential politicians, businessmen and military personnel to disengage from the trade, people are asking them to do it in an acceptable and morally justifiable manner.

The point is not that there are no ethical valuations of the trade, but rather that, when overshadowed by the severity of poverty in Bissau, there is a shift from a general ethical denunciation to a more socially attuned and pragmatic moral engagement (Shepherd *et al.* 2014). 'Look at his car, look at that beast of a car [*bruta di carro*],' Lopes exclaimed as a manifestation of drug money drove past us on the streets of the city. While the vehicle itself stood in contrast to Lopes' lack of transportation, its size almost seemed to mock him. Lopes knew the driver and was connected to the same social circles. Yet he is a marginal and ostracized part of the network in which the driver is pivotal. He knew the person in the car, had fought for the same network in the civil war in 1999, and had followed its up and downs as one coup after another shifted the network's proximity to power. While Lopes lived a life of poverty, of uncertainty and a lack of social worth, the person driving past had reconnected and resurfaced as an important big man who was making a fortune by facilitating the flow of drugs through the country. 'Our big men disrespect us,' people say,¹² yet the resentment is born not as much of envy as of the fact that the lack of sharing and redistribution of network resources leaves my informants vulnerable to the very same stigma of miserliness, and hence at risk of being seen as people defined not by their ability or potentiality but by their social incapacity (Vigh 2016).

In other words, while being miserly is a complaint directed at people who appear unwilling to meet obligations (cf. Lambek 2010), it is simultaneously a profound concern and dilemma. By offering inclusion into chains of distribution, patrimonial networks hold the key to granting and gaining positive emplacement

¹²The word used is *lepsi*, signifying a mixture of disregard and contempt.

within relational landscapes for the younger echelons of society (Vigh 2006; see also Lemarchand 1972; Eisenstadt 1973; Bayart 1993; Reno 1995; Olivier de Sardan 1999). They enable young men to redistribute the little they earn to people dependent upon them as a necessary first step towards attaining adulthood and becoming a proper man, just as their inability to do so leaves many youths cut off from the possibility of acquiring social substantiation as people who count within their relational landscapes (Vigh 2016). In a patrimonial system, the non-distribution of resources means that the ascription of moral shortcomings trickles down through social arrangements, leading people to rethink and refigure their possibilities of caregiving and provision. In this regard, the unwillingness of big men, *homi garandis*, to share and distribute their wealth amounts to more than an economic problem; it also positions their dependants as failures in 'care ethical terms' (cf. Gilligan 1982).

Relational landscapes and ethical fields

'*Ronka si fama mas riso mon* [flaunting his fame but only tight-fisted],' Lopes said, as a close ally of the former president drove by while we were walking down a dirt road in inner-city Bissau. Being 'tight-fisted' or 'hard-handed', *riso mon*, is the local term for penny-pinching and being unwilling to share (Vigh 2016). In other words, the above sentence translates into 'showing one's wealth but not distributing it', which is considered a social failing, a failure to honour the ways in which one is connected in the world. It means disregarding one's obligation to share with one's relatives and acquaintances. Obligations are interesting in this respect as they perhaps provide one of the clearest connections between ethics, morals and social life. The word quite literally means 'bound to', *ob ligare*, tying ethical concerns directly to relational landscapes. We may feel grateful that we are able to honour relational ties as an act of social affirmation, just as we are fearful of not being able to do so as a potential act of detachment – a cutting of the relation or a moral flaw. Social obligation, in this way, links social embeddedness and ethics in what the Danish theologian and philosopher Løgstrup terms *forvikling* or 'entanglement'.

Fra det grundvilkår vi lever under, og som det ikke står til os at ændre, nemlig at den enes liv er forviklet med den andens, får den etiske fordring sit indhold.

From the basic conditions we live under, and it is not up to us to change, that one person's life is entangled with the other, the ethical imperative gains its content. (Løgstrup 1956: 27, my translation)

According to Løgstrup's perspective, ethics are situational and relational, rather than abstract and ideal (cf. Zigon 2007; Jackson 2013: 55). We are all ethically bound but in situationally different ways. His work focuses on a move from deontological ethics towards a relationally situated ethics – what he terms *nærhedsetik* or 'ethics of proximity'.

Løgstrup builds his work on the concept of *sorge* – 'care' or 'concern' – and a Heideggerian ethics in order to work towards an understanding of an other-oriented ethical demand (Pattison 2013: 95). The affinity between care and concern comes across clearly in the initial concept used by both Heidegger and Løgstrup, namely

that of *Bekümmerung* or *bekymring* (Heidegger 1995 [1920–21]: 206–9; Løgstrup 1956), which combines a responsibility towards the other with both compassion and anxiety. To what extent the phenomenological approach to ethics informed the focus on ‘care ethics’ is up for debate (see Bradshaw 1995), yet the work on care ethics resonates with Løgstrup’s ideas as an understanding of the term that is anchored situationally and relationally (Gilligan 1982: 14). It is an intersubjective advance that, in Allmark’s words, holds that ‘[t]he detached, impartial observer ideal of morality, characteristic of ethics since the enlightenment, is flawed and inappropriate’ (1995: 19) for understanding social life, and which offers an alternative to the Kantian ‘impartialist’ understanding commonly framed in terms of universal principle, impartiality and formal rationality (Blum 1988: 473). The focus on care ethics was originally a feminist alternative to the more abstract philosophical discussion of ethics and morality. With the current focus on young men, it ties into the gendered aspects of our moral positions and practices, which are obviously as masculine as they are feminine, and moves us from abstract principle to relational bearings. Both care ethics and Løgstrup’s work may thus assist us, more generally, to focus on the social underpinnings of moral reasoning, and, more specifically, to approach the engagement of young men in the cocaine trade in Bissau as something more than merely yet another unethical act of African youths.

Focusing on care and provision enables us, then, to make sense of drug trafficking in more nuanced ways. Seen from the point of view of the majority of the population, who remain politically and economically marginal, the cocaine trade has not alleviated local poverty or changed Guinea-Bissau for the better. However, acquiring access to the trade and trafficking of the illegal substance is longed for as a social opportunity. It is identified, when seen against the current state of affairs, as a possibility of making a living and engaging positively rather than parasitically in social formations and affective circuits (Vigh 2015).

Bom, serio et di respieto

‘All of those who are building houses. You see them? If you see a big car then you know that that one went and found his money there [in the cocaine business],’ Dario told me. Although not all built on cocaine money, the haciendas that have begun to dot the urban landscape within the last decade exemplify the potential profits of the illegal trade. Dario, like Aliu and Lopes, was merely a spectator of the rapid emergence of wealth. In his thirties, he was extremely poor, living off the meals his kin could spare him, and without a better future in sight. However, while the fortunes amassed through the cocaine trade come to highlight the destitution of my interlocutors, they also represent, much like mobilization into militias (Vigh 2006), a possibility of escape from poverty and existential truncation, as they offer young men a chance of getting out of the country and thereby gaining social centrality in Bissau as a distant provider. In Denilson’s words, as he commented on the mules, *engulidurs*, who manage to make a trip to Europe by trafficking drugs:

When this cocaine thing started to come, many people went to Europe. You swallow [*enguli*] it, you see, and when you come to Europe you go to the toilet. [He laughs.] If you are lucky, they give you a ticket, passport and send you to Dakar, then you take the plane again from there.

Denilson generally referred to cocaine in terms of the social possibilities it encompassed. Just as the trade and the involvement of senior military and political figures are broadly accepted, the people I spend my time with see it as an opening in an otherwise closed landscape. Instead of condemning the flow of drugs in ethical terms, they view it as a means to a moral end in an ethical care perspective – as a possibility of gaining standing as someone who is seen as *bom*, ‘good’, *serio*, ‘serious’, and *di respeito*, ‘of respect’. Socially, the trade thus enables people to move into a position of moral standing in the relational landscape in which their lives are set. The physical movement out of Bissau, in other words, is seen as a move into a social place in Bissau through the status acquired by becoming a migrant and the concomitant possibility of supporting kin and friends via remittances (see Stark and Lucas 1988; Taylor 1999). The point is not to generate individual prosperity but rather to acquire the ability to sustain intimate others and gain valid personhood.

From around 2005 onwards, increasing numbers of the youth I worked with in Bissau began to migrate to Europe (see Vigh 2012; 2015; 2016). The movement of cocaine was tied to them through their connections to the *Aguenta* militia and the political network that mobilized them in 1998–99. Although the upper echelons of the network, as we have seen, were criticized for being ungenerous and immorally inattentive to their obligations to share wealth, they were in need of manpower to distribute and sell the cocaine in their possession – received as payment for their services to the cartels. And the people used to do the dirty work of trafficking and pushing the drug were taken in part from within the group of youths who had earlier committed themselves to the network in question. The introduction of the cocaine trade was welcomed as a flow of resources into a socio-economic environment that had become bleak and barren. ‘*Campo kinte* [the field is hot],’ people say, when I ask them about the state of affairs in the country (Vigh 2015). The term designates a dried-out and dead social landscape, a social equivalent of ‘scorched earth’. As the prolonged postcolonial *déroute* has cut the majority of the population off from flows of resources, leaving them struggling to survive, the people I talk to see the societal circumstances in which their lives are set as too hot to dwell in and too burnt to sustain life. *Campo kinte* does not, as such, express an idea of all-encompassing suffering but rather an infertile point of departure for achieving a positive and viable existence, as the metaphorically burnt ground leaves them without immediate possibilities or envisioned futures. ‘Perhaps it will now get better,’ Domingos told me with reference to the cocaine trade. ‘In all parts of the world people want cocaine.’

Cocaine as livelihood

While the trade has not produced an abundance of jobs or livelihoods in Bissau, it has had a more pronounced impact on the Guinea-Bissauan migrant community (see Vigh 2011; 2015). Since the late 2000s, I have been contacted by people I knew from Bissau who have made it to Europe as migrants. As I found out, many of these had relied on the cocaine connection as a means of leaving and many were reliant on cocaine for their livelihood in order to move to and survive in Europe. My research field has accordingly shifted increasingly close to home

and has increasingly focused on the conditions of illegality and criminality that characterize this kind of migration.

The cocaine boom in Guinea-Bissau preceded the financial crisis in Europe by a few years, and as the financial crisis set in, it became progressively more difficult for African migrants in Europe to find work of the legal or licit kind. The jobs that were formerly offered to migrants on building sites and as manual labourers became attractive to local workers, making competition fierce, and undocumented, uneducated Africans struggled to find any employment at all. In the midst of a financial crunch that saw up to 40 per cent unemployment rates and a massive downturn in living conditions in Southern Europe (ILO 2013),¹³ many of my interlocutors found themselves stuck in a social environment that was as barren and polarized as that of Guinea-Bissau, and in a social position of equally little possibility and worth. They had managed to traverse the geo-political segregation of Africa and Europe only to find themselves radically excluded once again. In this situation of marginality and illegality, cocaine very quickly came to be seen as the only job around – as a default possibility of earning money, even if from Guinea-Bissau. As Toni phrased it:

If you are black here you do not have possibilities. The Portuguese, they will not hire you, they will not give you a job. Only the street [will give you a job]. You can be a bouncer, drugs, whatever, but never a secure job [*trabadju certo*].

The informal orders and economies of ‘the street’, *na rua*, become, for the most marginal of my informants, the only remaining niches where young Guinean migrants are able to get employment. In this manner, many of the young men I work with end up depending on the cocaine trade in order to survive in Europe. In fact, the current financial crisis is seen as so severe in relation to West African migrants in Europe that selling cocaine is understood as one of the few ways in which people are able to send back remittances, tying the trade, once more, into questions of moral bearing and the ethics of care and concern.

In local and international news, an array of stories of organized trafficking – some confirmed, some unconfirmed, mixing truth and fiction – has cemented the idea of Guinea-Bissauan migrants as being particularly closely connected to the trade, reinforcing the old impression of ‘unethical Africa’ (cf. Bochow, Kirsch and van Dijk, this issue), though this time in a modern global, transnational and mobile incarnation. But the connection between Guinea-Bissau, the cocaine trade and migration has not merely come to preoccupy the external social imaginary of Guinea-Bissau, but has also become a central imaginary within the country itself and for its inhabitants. Cocaine has gained an almost mythical status as both a fantasy and an actual possibility for marginal youth. It is seen to represent the chance to obtain documents, airfares and income that are otherwise inaccessible.

Seku got caught up in the cocaine trade after having arrived in Europe only to find himself unable to find licit employment. The group of young Guinea-

¹³See also ‘Chapter 1: EU labour markets in time of economic crisis – relatively resilient, but persisting weakness and slow job recovery expected’, Employment in Europe 2010 <http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/eie/chap1-5-2-page-2_en.html>.

Bissauans with whom he hangs out, at a small junction in a buzzing Lisbon neighbourhood, has been one of my key group of interlocutors over the last few years. 'There is a mafia, our mafia,' he told me on a rainy and chilly April night, as he was waiting for customers wanting coke. 'We call it a mafia. They are our elders [*nos garandí*], but they do not play [around],' he said. Iano added:

There are those who are bigger than you. If you disrespect him [*sic*] you will suffer.

Who is it that is bigger?

Those higher up, those who have more power. For us [Guinea-Bissauans] they are the ones who have power.

How do they have power?

They have money, they have the thing [*kussa*, i.e. cocaine], they know people. If you come [to Lisbon] and you do not have anything, they will show you [how to get it]. If you have problem at work [i.e. pushing] they will help you. But don't you wrong them.

Both Seku and Iano occupy the lowest rung of these transnational criminal flows. They are the petty retailers of a larger trade and their profits are as meagre as their insecurity is high. The scant proceeds forced Seku to toil selling cocaine even on days when few clients were to be found. 'You do what is needed,' such migrants tell me, and selling coke is a necessity of life for some of the Guinea-Bissauans in the city. 'It was the only job I could get,' Seku told me. Most of the young men I have followed from Bissau to Lisbon and Paris dream of getting good jobs, appreciation, and the ability to live worthy lives outside the illegality-induced social paranoia of transnational organized crime and the cocaine trade. But within their sphere of possibility, cocaine is treated as a legitimate point of departure for those who have no alternatives (Williams 2002: 164).

Being at the very bottom of the supply chain and constituting an interface with customers and competitors, my field site is an environment where the dangers of the substance sold are plain to see. The levels of violence are high, the rivalry between different groups intense, and the personal tragedies many. The clientele varies throughout the day, from partygoers to people with more serious cravings. The most physically destroyed addicts are regulars and the destructive effects of the drug are almost constantly evident. Despite this, the trade is justified through reference to absent possibilities and social obligations, and through the way it is practised. As Jorge explained to me, during an interview in a rundown bar in Lisbon's Bairro Alto:

This is my life. This is what I have to do. You know I am tired of standing here, really. Sometimes you earn [well], but a lot of the time almost nothing, and even if you earn you must think of your family. Even if you see [i.e. get] money, you must send it to them so they do not suffer. The Portuguese come, the police come, everyone can cause you trouble.

Jorge is – ironically yet commonly – stuck in a situation where he has to engage in an unethical activity in order to be moral in relational terms. He has to push cocaine in order to support those dependent upon him. 'Who are you if you do not help your family?' people ask rhetorically, indicating the lack of worth that would follow from the inability to meet the obligation placed upon them. Dario lectured me:

You know, here, if you do not give to your family you are bad [*mau*]. If you are a man [then] even if you have only a little and someone asks for it you give it. If you want to be a man you must find money to put in the mouths of your family; if you do not give you are worthless.

Articulated as obligation, the ability to provide is experienced as both care and concern. It is a longing for a position where people are able to fulfil the expectations placed upon them, a desire to be recognized in terms of what you offer others. Cocaine is understood as one of the few ways in which West African migrants can survive, if not otherwise employed, and so be able to send back the remittances expected. As Seku said:

If you are in Europe, everyone who knows you in Bissau will ask you for money. All the time people call me to ask me: 'Do you know what I want?' They think that if you are in Europe you have made it [*saffa*], but it is not easy here.

Seku sends money to his mother and sister, and politely declines requests to sponsor most others. 'I do not put money in his mouth,' he remarked, complaining about a distant relative asking for help, ending his protest by stating: 'Everyone is your cousin.'

Playing the kinship card when asking for money is, of course, a way of emphasizing the obligation to give to people to whom you are related. For those who inhabit the lower echelons of patrimonial networks, relatedness is a prime qualifier for entitlement, yet, in a country where cousinhood is not necessarily defined in close family terms, but also used in a classificatory manner to refer to anyone within the same generation from one's kindred group, the term can be extended or curtailed as needed. Regardless of the actual relationship involved, the point is that remittances, like all other forms of provision, offer positive emplacement. 'If you send money home, people say that you are someone serious, that you are someone good,' Salifou explained to me. With no other work to be found, he was obliged to do what he could, including distributing drugs. The way of making the money that he sent home was less important than the actual process of doing so. Or, we might say, relational obligations have ethical priority over the legal status of the act.

What do people say if you are caught and sent to jail?

That is it. If you send money home, even if you work selling cocaine, people say, 'Ah, he has worth. He works hard in Europe. This is someone good.' But if you get caught and you go to jail there is none of that. People just say, 'He is worth nothing, just a criminal.'

The unethical and the moral may then converge within the same act. 'I don't force anyone to buy it,' Americano said, while we were standing in an alley in which he pushes cocaine. 'I don't put my hand in your pocket, I don't steal, I don't hurt people,' he continued, explaining to me that selling cocaine was merely another form of 'commerce', *commercio so*. Similarly, Latino, another Bissauan pusher, positioned his line of work by saying: 'Go over there [points to a bar] and you can buy beer, go over there and you can buy cigarettes; here you can buy cocaine.' In Latino's opinion, he was working within the boundaries of a capitalist society rather than outside it.

Closure

As in many places where the drug industry comes to dominate economies and societies, the cocaine trade gained a foothold in Guinea-Bissau after a prolonged period of conflict and decline. The cartels entered the small country at a time when it seemed abandoned and discarded by international society. With drastic cutbacks in development aid and the withdrawal of diplomatic and institutional ties, the feeling in Bissau was one of being deserted and left to deal with the city's intensifying dilapidation. Unlike in many of the surrounding countries on the Upper Guinea coast, which were also affected by the cartels' movement into Africa, the gravity of the situation in Guinea-Bissau meant that the cocaine trade was met with a measure of acceptance as a development tool that would bring possibilities, mobilities and livelihoods. The risks and difficulties of the trade were known, yet its potential social effects were appreciated. From the point of view of the population in Bissau, cocaine is thus ambivalent. On the one hand, the illegality and ruthlessness of the trade are recognized. On the other, the business is socially appropriated and stands as a means of regaining momentum; as a possibility of acquiring the capacity to honour social obligations and meet expectations of care and provision. Following Michael Jackson, we may say that cocaine became an avenue to gain moral worth in relational terms and was 'integral to the lives of others' (Jackson 2011: 92). Seen from this perspective, moral bearings and positions are related to our positive engagement with the social environment that we are thrown into. Yet the ability to participate as someone who counts is not equally distributed. In Bissau, the brutality of poverty and decline thus lies in part in one's inability to support those to whom one is obligated, leaving people socially superfluous and perceived as morally flawed. The engagement of young Guineans in the cocaine trade does not mean that ethical concerns disappear but rather that one ethical orientation overrides another. 'One of the virtues of practicing ethnographic fieldwork is that you see how people act in good faith, how they try to do what they think is right in the face of conflict and try to maintain self-respect in conditions that work to undermine it,' Lambek states (2000: 318). In the current situation, doing what is 'right' is seen to be possible through engagement in an externally defined wrong. The fact that people endeavour to achieve subsistence and social worth through what is considered a criminal and unethical practice, when seen from the outside, does not mean that criminal livelihoods are not morally anchored or practised in ethical ways. On the contrary, it clarifies that ethical ideals may be morally performed even in conditions that appear to run counter to them.

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Abstract

This article examines the way young men in Bissau, the capital of Guinea-Bissau, make sense of and engage in the transnational cocaine trade, which has established itself on the Upper Guinea coast. It describes Guinea-Bissau's emergence as a regional centre for the trafficking of cocaine from Latin America to Europe, and shows how the illegality and volatility of the commerce are socially assessed and valued. The drug connection impacts on the lives of the young men in the city

in a variety of ways. While it is seen to have brought with it a range of political and societal insecurities and uncertainties, it is also perceived to offer potential livelihoods and prospects. On the one hand, cocaine is positioned as an ethically dubious commodity; on the other, its revenue and concomitant social effects are seen as morally reasonable and required. The article therefore centres on the ethical dimensions of the trade, as seen from the perspective of the youth in question, and argues that it needs to be understood in terms of situational obligations rather than abstract ideals. It approaches ethics from a relational point of view and shows how the moral evaluation and ascription of the cocaine trade are defined inter-subjectively and understood in relation to social responsibility, care and accountability.

Résumé

Cet article examine comment de jeunes hommes de Bissau, la capitale de Guinée-Bissau, donnent un sens et participent au commerce transnational de la cocaïne qui s'est établi sur la côte de la Haute-Guinée. Il décrit l'émergence de la Guinée-Bissau en tant que centre régional du trafic de cocaïne d'Amérique du Sud vers l'Europe, et montre comment l'illégalité et la volatilité de ce commerce sont socialement évaluées et estimées. Le trafic de drogue impacte la vie des jeunes de la ville de manières diverses. Il est perçu comme ayant apporté des insécurités et incertitudes politiques et sociétales diverses, mais aussi comme ayant le potentiel d'offrir des moyens de subsistance et des perspectives. D'un côté, on juge que la cocaïne est une marchandise éthiquement douteuse ; de l'autre, on considère que les revenus qu'elle génère et les effets sociaux concomitants sont moralement raisonnables et nécessaires. L'article se concentre donc sur les dimensions éthiques de ce commerce, perçues du point de vue des jeunes en question, et soutient qu'il faut le comprendre en termes d'obligations situationnelles plutôt que d'idéaux abstraits. Il aborde l'éthique d'un point de vue relationnel et montre comment l'évaluation et l'attribution morales du commerce de la cocaïne sont définies de manière intersubjective et interprétées au regard de la responsabilité, de la prise en charge et de l'imputabilité sociales.