Development, the Drug War, and the Limits of Security Sector Reform in the West African Sahel

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Abstract

This article contemplates how drug interdiction strategies influence the character of present counterterrorism efforts in the West African Sahel. I argue that the incorporation of drug interdiction strategies within a broader framework of security sector reform represents the emergence of a normative vision of security, which links policing, drugs, and governance. In addition, I suggest that drug expertise has become an important avenue for new ways of pursuing a wide swath of security interventions including counterterrorism projects. Amid numerous critiques of the War on Drugs and increased recognition of the limitations of criminalized approaches to drug use, the Sahel has emerged as a site of experimentation, where the coupling of counterterrorism and anti-drug trafficking strategies provides a way of salvaging remnants of an older style drug war, while also revealing the institutionalization of drug expertise as a mode of security governance.

Keywords

Sahel, West Africa, War on Drugs, War on Terror, Policing, Security Sector Reform

Introduction

Sitting in a cramped café at Kelley Barracks in Stuttgart, Germany, I watched a man draw an imaginary map on the wall. My informant, Jason[1], a program analyst with the "Strategy, Engagement, and Programs" (J5) Directorate at the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), explained: "You see, you have heroin coming in from Afghanistan and the Arabian peninsula across East Africa headed

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[1] The names of all informants have been changed.

towards Europe. You have the hashish coming in from North Africa. And you have Latin American cocaine coming in off the Atlantic and transiting through the Sahel." As he continued to map the parameters of illicit drug trafficking throughout Africa, my informant assured me that in the company of any Colombian drug baron, one was sure to find a West African, probably a "Nigerian smuggler."[2] I was not in Stuttgart to talk about drugs. I had ventured to the headquarters of AFRICOM to conduct interviews about the growing US military presence throughout the African continent, and particularly to learn about the growing wave of counterterrorism operations in the West African Sahel.[3] Over the last decade, counterterrorism operations funded and coordinated by powerful Western states and international organizations have grown exponentially, leading to an unprecedented militarization of a large stretch of the African continent (Kieh and Kalu 2013; Meché 2019; Schmidt 2013; Smith 2016). Yet as I began my research and posed questions about the character of foreign-led counterterrorism initiatives in the region, conversations with my informants routinely circled back to drugs. A particular kind of common sense has developed amongst transnational security actors who suggest that terrorist organizations operating in the Sahel acquire revenue through drug trafficking. These organizations purportedly do this one of two ways: either by directly transporting and selling narcotics themselves or by taxing other traffickers for safe transport through the Sahara. In policy discourse this is often referred to as the "drug-terrorism nexus."[4] Over the course of 22 months of multi-sited fieldwork in the US, Germany, Senegal, and Burkina Faso a range of security experts representing the US, France, and several United Nations organizations would continue to assert the veracity of these linkages between drug traffickers and Islamic terrorist groups, and advocate aggressive drug interdiction measures to buttress other security interventions throughout the region.

In this article, I explore the centrality of drug expertise in the making of security efforts across the present-day Sahel. Informed by critical studies of expert knowledge (Mitchell 2002; Sending 2015) and postcolonial approaches to contemporary security regimes (Asad 2007; Grewal 2017; Mamdani 2005, 2009), this article positions security as a unique field of knowledge production. I investigate how foreign security actors, primarily from the United States and Western Europe, lay claim to ways of appropriately doing security in the Sahel. In particular, I contemplate how drug interdiction strategies influence the character of present counterterrorism efforts in the region. I argue that the incorporation of drug interdiction strategies within a broader framework of security sector reform represents the emergence of a normative vision of security, which links policing, drugs, and governance. In addition, I show how and why despite ample evidence of the global War on Drugs' many failures (Frydl 2013; Merleaux 2020; Musto 1999), drug expertise remains an attractive avenue for pursuing a wide swath of security interventions including counterterrorism. Relatedly, the language of urgency and anticipation that has come to define the global War on Terror (Elden 2009; Gregory 2004; Masco 2014) offers renewed legitimacy for a drug war discredited in other places, specifically across the Americas. My research shows how the refractions of the United States' global War on Drugs have influenced assumptions about good policing that continue to circulate in multiple areas to address a range of perceived threats.

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[2] Interview, July 2015, Stuttgart, Germany.

[3] The West African Sahel refers to the area of the African continent from Senegal and Mauritania in the West to Chad in the East.

[4] For an elaboration of this idea see International Crisis Group 2018 and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2013, 2015, 2016a, 2016b.

There is a robust literature concerning drugs and security in contemporary Africa. Debates within policy and academic literatures have considered the cultural specificities of drug use throughout Africa (Obot 1992; Odejide 2006); the proclaimed successes and failures of international donor-funded drug policies in African countries (Carrier and Klantschnig 2012; Ellis 2009) and the possible entanglements between drug traffickers and organized political violence (Klein 1999, 2001; Sandor 2016). While more recent scholarly writing has explored whether or not claims about an emergent drug-terrorism nexus in the Sahel are indeed accurate (Alda and Sala 2014; Vaicius and Isaacson 2003), my research takes an alternate approach. This article is less about the truth claims surrounding the drug-terrorism nexus or the efficacy of drug interdiction programs per se, but instead considers how such programs come to signpost the extension of certain forms of security making. I suggest that the incorporation of drug interdiction policies in the Sahel does not automatically follow from extensive drug use in Sahelian countries, or even a sizeable increase in the amounts of drugs transiting the region. Instead, I posit that transnational drug programs exist as part of a broader set of interests around security sector reform and attempts to teach "good policing" in the present. Additionally, I argue that drugs have become a type of conceptual and programmatic shorthand for the demands of contemporary policing in the Sahel. In this way, transnational security experts frame an imagined accrual of drug expertise by local security forces as a sign of improved governance outcomes. On this point, I follow the work of scholars who have highlighted the discursive imbrications of good governance, order, and policing in global politics and the lingering imperial undercurrents which orient many of the development projects espoused by large international institutions (Anghie 2006; Comaroff and Comaroff 2008; Miles 2012). Scholars further note how the emphasis on "good governance" in West Africa often absolves powerful states of their role in exacerbating violence in the region (Dowd and Raleigh 2013; Raleigh and Dowd 2013).

My work moves beyond existing studies by attending to drug interdiction strategies as a modality to assess the progress of governance reform efforts. While acknowledging that policing is a capacious category, which includes a host of different goals and strategies, I am emphasizing here how contemporary transnational policing is oriented towards a specific object: drugs. Writing about the mutability of drugs as a peculiar type of political object, Eva Herschinger argues "…that the ambivalence of the material object 'drug' is the condition of possibility of the global drug prohibition regime" (2015, 184). This ambivalence stems from the place of drugs as both licit and illicit commodity form, and also from an ever-shifting transnational regime of making sense of, categorizing, managing, and disciplining drugs. This regime is institutionalized within three United Nations Conventions, ratified in 1961, 1971, and 1988, and within the epistemological networks that produce knowledge about drugs, drawing on expertise in biochemistry, public health, nutrition, and agriculture. Indeterminacies demarcating licit and illicit substances provide for a constantly expanding and mutating assemblage of control and monitoring. Following from Herschinger's useful formulation about the conceptual and categorical ambiguities of drugs themselves, my work traces the mutability of drug interdiction expertise and its transferability across multiple sites of security making. Relatedly, my research demonstrates how projects aimed at teaching about drugs through security sector reform are accompanied by a host of other technical interventions: the creation of laboratories to test materials seized during raids, the establishment of informant networks and expanded surveillance of telecommunications networks, the rewriting of domestic legal code, and the creation of new detainment facilities. This attendant institutional infrastructure illustrates how forms of expertise developed in and through drugs attempt to order the material world.

The article proceeds in three parts. First, I draw from ethnographic encounters to trace the rise of international donor-funded security sector reform projects in West African states, and I link these developments to an expanding sphere of security and attempts by large international organizations to

establish new priorities for the appropriate parameters of African statehood in the wake of a panic about "failing" states. Second, I outline the emergence of the global drug prohibition regime and the central role of the US in shaping its punitive and highly militaristic character. I further tie these developments to the growing importance of constabulary power in global politics and the place of police power within the United Nations system. Finally, I show how contemporary security interventions working to reform local forces to address the twinned problems of terrorism and drug trafficking are linked to long-standing projects of racial ordering and attempts to violently manage difference and dissent.

Security Sector Reform, Policing, and the Pursuit of "Good Governance"

As my attempts to map the imbrication of the War on Drugs and War on Terror snaked from Stuttgart to Dakar and Ouagadougou, informants at AFRICOM introduced me to partners "on the ground" working in a number of UN agencies in Sahelian countries. The networks of security experts flowed across different institutional entities and geographies, involving informal friendships and acquaintanceships and also formal networks of institutional collaboration and cross-agency policy development. In early interviews with experts at the regional headquarters of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Dakar, they stressed how the agency's drug interdiction expertise was being used in service of other efforts in the region. Smoking cigarettes on the balcony of his office, Ricardo, a security expert who had previously worked with the UN in Afghanistan explained to me that terrorism and trafficking in the region spoke to deeper governance failures in the Sahel.[5] In his position, he had collaborated on projects with AFRICOM to "improve" governance outcomes and counter armed groups. Ricardo asserted that drug projects spearheaded by UNODC, and buttressed by a number of other UN offices and financed by international donors, worked to advance a broad vision of regional security, taking up while also extending beyond drug interdiction specifically. These sentiments were echoed by other staff within the agency, as a senior Sahel specialist noted: "In the Sahel in particular, drug control and drug trafficking do not have a big role. It's much more the other mandates that UNODC has such as terrorism and other types of transnational organized crime. It's pretty vast."[6] Additionally, policy documents produced by UNODC, the UN Development Program (UNDP), and other UN agencies further describe the Sahel as insufficiently governed.[7] As a 2017 report from UNODC explained:

> Flows of illicit drugs, migrants, firearms and terrorists have flourished [in the Sahel] along traditional trade and migration routes—at the cost of security, good governance and development. Extremely high fertility rates, culminating at 7.4 children per woman on average in Niger, are adding pressure on governments to create economic opportunities, contain related migratory pressures and prevent the recruitment of children and youth by criminal, violent extremist and terrorist groups.[8]

After outlining these regional challenges, the report goes on to link improving governance outcomes to increasing numbers of police trainings, the adoption of new laws by local governments to dismantle trafficking networks and prosecute terrorism suspects, and enhanced collaboration across local and regional security sectors. Here, security benchmarks become the signposts of good governance reforms. Yet, these oft-repeated refrains about governance failures must be understood within a broader history of state formation in the Sahel and the emergence of an expansive transnational security/development apparatus.

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[5] Interview, July 2015, Dakar, Senegal.
[6] Interview, October 2016, Dakar, Senegal.
[7] See UNDP 2019; UNODC 2016a, 2016b, 2017.
[8] UNODC 2017, 3.

The vexed history of political sovereignty and state formation in West Africa since independence continues to be a popular subject for scholars. This well-tread narrative traces the rise of postcolonial nationalist state-building efforts which were eventually stymied by international debt crises in the 1970s; the subsequent hollowing of the public sector by structural adjustment programs in the 1980s; followed by forceful critiques of Washington Consensus policies coupled with a burgeoning discourse about so-called state failure in the 1990s (Bekele and Oyebade 2019; Desai and Masquelier 2018; Ferguson 2006). The twinned concerns about governance and security became a way of reasserting a prescriptive vision of the African state (Bayart 2009; Klein 1999). These efforts were spearheaded primarily by the very same large international governing bodies (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, the United Nations) which had in previous decades derided the wastefulness of African states. Fears of new brokers of violence—variably referred to as insurgents, rebels, terrorists, gangs, traffickers—and the possible spillover into the spaces of the Global North, spurred the outpouring of funds to strengthen and professionalize state-run security forces, while also ensuring political arrangements still conducive to the needs of global financial capital (Andreas and Nadelmann 2008; Duffield 2007). During this moment, post-Cold War triumphalism was tempered by the ominous specter of "new wars," collapsing states, and illicit economies resulting in the large-scale restructuring of international governance along the parameters of an interventionist liberal internationalism (Duffield 2007, 2014; Greener 2009). These developments transformed the role of security forces in this new world. Theorizations of security regimes often stress the amorphous character of the concept. Scholars following the work of Michel Foucault highlight security as an apparatus of liberal governance (Foucault 2007[1977]; Grewal 2018; Neocleous 2008). Security in these formulations is best understood as a diffuse assemblage of projects, which both encapsulate and exceed institutions like militaries, militias, and police. As Jan Bachmann explains, following the end of the Cold War, the broadening of the term security to mean "human security," as defined by the United Nations, opened up new methods and sites of intervention in the Global South (2010, 563). As Stuart Schrader suggests, the US War on Crime, and subsequent War on Drugs, emerged out of an effort to use police to manage the stakes of global decolonization. Schrader describes "law enforcement modernization" projects taking place in the decolonizing Global South, identifying 52 countries receiving US public safety assistance between 1962 and 1974, including several West African countries, most notably Burkina Faso and Niger (2019, 5-7).

While transnational military trainings have a long history, the rise of the policy prescriptive known as security sector reform in the 1990s marked a new attempt to standardize and institutionalize security through foreign-led development projects. SSR combines the logic of progressive improvement and the valorization of transnational expert trainings which have been the hallmarks of development projects in the Global South for at least four decades (Benton 2016; Escobar 2011; Pierre 2020). Security sector reform as a method of "good governance" asserts a particular vision of state functionality by demarcating the parameters of appropriate state violence (Schroeder and Chappuis 2014, 134). SSR fuses developmentalist logics of improvement with a Weberian ideal type of sovereignty in which state actors are authorized as legitimate brokers of violence. Consequently, security sector reform has become an integral part of what has been theorized as a style of law-and-order development (Bachmann 2014; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 2008). Yet even amid this renewed investment in particular state processes, the NGO-ization of social services has continued apace bolstered by neoliberal privatization schemes (Ferguson 2006; Mann 2015).[9] Gregory Mann (2015) has described this process as a flouring of nongovernmentality, whereby "the postcolonial West African Sahel became

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[9] Thank you to Jordan Camp for helping me elaborate this point on the effects of neoliberalism and transnational security trainings.

fertile terrain for the production of new forms of governmentality realized through NGOs" (2). Alongside the erosion of state welfare in favor of individual responsibility (Simone 2014; Watts 2015), Sahelian states as purveyors of security retains appeal as a development imperative. These trends raise questions about the relationship between governance and violence and the particular ways that SSR operates as a key technic normalizing liberal warfare (Dillon and Reed 2009; Ryan 2011; Schroeder and Chappuis 2014).

In the West African Sahel, this paradoxical dichotomy is especially stark. Sahelian states are routinely ranked as some of the least "developed" in the world, part of what Jemima Pierre (2020) has called the "racial vernacular" of developmental lack attached to West African spaces. According to a recent report by UNDP (2019):

> The Sahel region faces a multi-dimensional crisis of insecurity, heightened by terrorism and violent extremism, humanitarian crisis with thousands fleeing their homes and environmental challenges characterized by strong climatic variations and irregular rainfalls, which pose two of the biggest obstacles to food security and poverty reduction in the region. These inequalities undermine community life and result in repeated tensions and violence.

Sahelian states depend heavily on remittances from diasporic communities abroad and bi- and multi-lateral aid. International policy documents often describe these states as ill-equipped to provide social services and distribute the spoils of extractive industries, yet Sahelian governments are nevertheless tasked with achieving good governance outcomes by assuming their proper role as brokers of violence and authoritative control.

Recent studies of SSR projects in West African contexts primarily assess their perceived effectiveness. This literature emphasizes the challenges of implementing SSR projects, often offering policy prescriptions for improving outcomes (Clarke 2008; Hendrickson 1999). The focus is on military forces and militias in post-conflict states; the disarmament and re-integration of former combatants; and the building of community faith in security forces. Within these studies, military trainings receive considerable attention. While it is important to elucidate trends in military trainings, narrowly conflating militarism with security misses a brand range of efforts. This is especially important in understanding the circumstances across the contemporary Sahel, which has seen a proliferation of other joint security-development projects which do not have an easily identifiable or achievable military goal (Andersson 2016; Frowd and Sandor 2018; Niang 2014). SSR in these spaces involves a range of actors including police, border and customs officials, and legal experts. And police reform remains an important, though underexplored, facet of a broader security sector reform mandate. For example, a report by UNODC (2016b) described the integral role of police in Sahelian states as stewards of good governance, noting a number of ongoing trainings and workshop to build law enforcement capacity across the region. Thus, if in the most popular formulation SSR seeks to "professionalize" military forces and encourage these forces to "return to the barracks" once an immediate security crisis has passed, police reforms operate within an alternate temporality, as these forces remain threaded throughout the architecture of daily life.

Pre-colonial West African communities had longstanding organized public safety institutions; yet, the modern history of police in West Africa dates back to the colonial era and the creation of armed units, comprised of both local residents and colonial officials, to maintain colonial rule (Baker 2009; Francis 2012; Hills et al 2000). Critical histories of policing often trace its rise to 19th century Europe—particularly France and England—as a form of power that extends beyond narrow confines of law enforcement and recalls a much broader sphere of engagement, governing social and political order and

buttressing the sovereign state (Foucault 2007[1977]; Neocleous, 2014). This genealogy often elides the formation of policing strategies away from the metropole in European colonies (Goldberg 2002) and in ante- and postbellum North America (Browne 2015; Muhammad 2010; Wagner 2010). Subsequent efforts to advance global security in an emergent international system of sovereign states during the mid-20th century refashioned European imperial policing, with its extant racial hierarchies, as nominally non-racial "technical police assistance" and, later, security sector reform initiatives (Schrader 2019, 29). Consequently, understandings of transnational policing expertise must account for the ways that policing has operated as a strategy of racial ordering and managing difference for centuries (Gilmore 2002, 2009; Hönke and Müller 2012, 387).

The late 20th century witnessed changes to the scope of policing on the global stage. Beth Greener describes this moment as the rise of a "new international policing," detailing "an increase in the scale, institutional support, and roles and expectations attributed to civilian police in international peace support and other like deployments" (2009, 3). The imperial circuits of policing colored the subsequent institutionalized of police expertise within international bodies like INTERPOL, the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. (Andreas and Nadelmann 2008; Corva 2009; Greener 2009; Schrader 2019). Within the UN system, specifically, police power expanded rapidly, through the incorporation of police experts within UN peacekeeping missions; the deployment of police and policing experts to Mozambique, El Salvador, Somalia, and Haiti in the 1990s; the creation of the UN Police Division in 2000; and the elaboration of cross-agency law enforcement standards (Bewley-Taylor 1999, 2012; Greener 2009). The growing importance of international policing within the UN system was further heightened by the actions of powerful member states, namely the United States, which also increasingly deployed police and policing consultants abroad (Bachmann 2014; Camp and Heatherton 2016; Schrader 2019). Proponents of international policing envisioned a world in which conventional military power was no longer necessary, replaced by the police as the guardians of social order. Ideals of good governance asserted an investment in making of "good cops" (Duffield 2007; Francis 2012; Greener 2009). The tethering of policing to development framed investments in policing as an avenue for encouraging foreign direct investment and economic growth in low-income countries.[10]

The security sector reform paradigm reveals an effort to manage a wide array of problems which extend in multiple directions. The multiplicity of these actors demands attention to SSR beyond mere effectiveness. Indeed, studies of myriad internationally funded development projects on themes ranging from agriculture to health to education have shown that they often have social, political, and cultural effects beyond their stated goals (Escobar 2011; Ferguson 2006; Li 2007; Watts 1993). More importantly, a narrow focus on the effectiveness of such projects often misses how they proscribe and legitimize assemblages of expert worlds while making claims on ideal methods of governance. The ongoing consequences of this history are often omitted in assessments of security projects in the Sahel; an omission that indicates, what Amy Niang (2014) describes as, a myopic presentism about the causes and responses to violence in the region. My emphasis on the contextual antecedents of such efforts highlights an assortment of knowledge practices that congeal within security expertise. A fine-grained attention to expertise points to ongoing attempts to build authoritative knowledge, regardless of the effectiveness of the resulting projects. In what follows I detail how specific objects become targets of SSR and the ways policing becomes elaborated through drug interdiction expertise. And I trace the growing role of

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[10] For a contemporary elaboration of this point see World Bank, 2017. "World Development Report 2017 Governance and the Law." Thank you to Michael Watts for bringing this World Bank initiative to my attention.

transnational policing efforts, emphasizing the coterminous emergence of policing expertise and the global War on Drugs.

US "Narco-Diplomacy" and Transnational Drug Expertise

The character of security sector and police reform efforts are intimately intertwined with transnational drug interdiction regimes of the same period. United States President Richard Nixon officially launched the War on Drugs in 1971 and created the Drug Enforcement Agency in 1973 as part of a conservative backlash against protest movements and popular agitation during the 1960s (Alexander 2010; Hinton 2016; Musto 1999).[11] While some scholars have traced a longstanding US prohibitive orientation towards narcotics as deriving from a religious ethic of a "Protestant culture" and moralism (Bewley-Taylor 1999, 5), others have drawn attention to drug prohibition as a means of governing and disciplining problematic populations within the US, most notably racialized others and working poor (Cohen 2006; Frydl 2013; Hinton 2016; Mitchell 2011). The US War on Drugs reached a critical inflection point during the late 1980s and 1990s. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush championed more aggressive drug laws and increased funding to and the power of the Drug Enforcement Administration, emboldening the agency to pursue drug control at home and abroad (Klein 1999, 57). Stricter drug laws also heralded increases in the size of police forces nationally throughout the US, especially in urban centers. Narcotics investigations granted police enormous discretion as they conducted patrols and seizures, established relationships with informants, and formed undercover networks (Frydl 2013, 304). Methods of drug interdiction and pursuing drug-related prosecutions became the orienting framework for domestic policing in the United States. Policing drugs opened up new methods of security experimentation, part of what Jonathan Simon (2007) has called "governing through crime." Additionally, as historian Kathleen Frydl (2013) argues: "In a sense, entire police departments had become vice squads with a primary interest in narcotics and, conversely, illicit drug enforcement emerged not just as something to police but as a *way* to police, especially in urban minority neighborhoods" (10). Thus, much of the work of domestic police in this moment became mediated through the War on Drugs. Moreover, the course of the War on Drugs strengthened relationships between US domestic police departments and the US military. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan authorized the Military Cooperation with Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies Act, which "permitted defense agencies to provide local police forces access to weapons, intelligence, research, and military bases to improve drug interdiction efforts" (Hinton 2016, 311). These reorientations of US domestic policing further shaped the transnational circulation of policing expertise.

The US has played an outsized role in establishing and maintaining a punitive transnational drug paradigm. The criminalization of a wide range of substances, within the United Nations Narcotics Conventions and embodied by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, represents "the desire for the transnational replication of US-style prohibition" (Bewley-Taylor 2012, 8). US American "narco-diplomacy" advances law enforcement as the preeminent sphere through which drugs become knowable and actionable (Bewley-Taylor 2012; Klein 1999; Merleaux 2020). This punitive approach criminalizes drugs at multiple levels—producers, traders, and users—with little attention to addiction treatment and the economic and political inequalities driving demand (Bewley-Taylor 1999, 2012). Compliance with drug policy often serves as a means of leverage, linked to the ability of a country to receive particular forms of financial assistance, both through bilateral agreements and through international financial

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[11] The work of Kathleen Frydl (2013) has challenged this chronology somewhat suggesting that many of the policies elaborated following Nixon's official declaration had precursors in the immediate post-WWII era. Relatedly, Elizabeth Hinton insists that the War on Drugs must be viewed as the "culmination" of expanded US law enforcement priorities that began during the Civil Rights era (2016, 4).

institutions like the World Bank and IMF (Klein 1999, 63). Linking development assistance to drug interdiction has also served as a way to bolster domestic support in donor countries for aid expenditures (Frydl 2013, 9). West African countries have been particularly susceptible to these external pressures because of entrenched international economic inequities and a wide-reaching international development apparatus throughout the region. The proliferation of ideas about West Africa as a haven for criminality coincided with the War on Drugs in the Global North (Ellis 2009; Klein 1999). Externally funded drug control programs in West African states often ignores the cultural specificities of narcotics in indigenous African communities, and instead frames the drug trade as a necessarily violent enterprise.

Still, while studies have shown that the drug prohibition regime has exacerbated violence and, in many cases, fueled narcotics trafficking (Bewley-Taylor 2012, Buxton 2006; Csete and Sánchez 2013; Klein 1999), drug interdiction as a method of teaching "good policing" retains traction as a style of highly mobile development and governance expertise. The character of "good policing" has become indelibly linked to transnational War on Drugs, informing the normative ideal of policing advanced in security sector reform projects in several places. Returning now to efforts in the West African Sahel, I suggest that drug interdiction has become a way of effectively teaching policing to address problems which extend beyond narcotics trafficking, namely terrorism and armed insurgencies.

Cocainebougou[12]

The story of Cocainebougou circulates as both a warning and a myth in certain circles. I first encountered the story in 2015 while conducting interviews at AFRICOM headquarters. I encountered the story again in 2016 in Dakar, Senegal and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso as representatives with UNODC insisted that the rise and fall of Cocainebougou pointed to the entrenched challenges and bleak future of the region as a whole. One of the first prominent depictions of the town, a suburb of the northern Malian city of Gao, appeared in a 2013 *Foreign Policy* article. Writer Yochi Dreazen details the infrastructural spectacle of a formerly booming drug town in rural north central Mali. The framing of the article relies on the juxtaposition between the poverty of Mali and the "garish mansions" owned by "Arab kingpins." The article goes on to applaud a 2012 French-led military intervention in Mali, which in addition to driving out "Islamic extremists," also rid the town of drug traffickers. The article continued:

> The mansions of Cocainebougou are more than just a morbid tourist attraction, however. They are also a vivid illustration of why it will be so hard to fully defeat the shadowy Islamists who until recently ruled the north. Drug use is strictly prohibited under Islamic law, but militant groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Taliban in Afghanistan have long profited from turning a blind eye to — or actively participating in — the sale of hashish and other drugs cultivated in their territories.

Subsequent studies continued to depict Cocainebougou as a key node encapsulating social upheaval and regional instability (ENACT 2017; Gomis 2015). As a report from ENACT (2017), a collaborative partnership to address organized crime in Africa financed by the European Union, averred:

> It is not clear to what extent the large, conspicuous villas of 'cocaine-bougou' were actually financed by drug trafficking, as opposed to other sectors of informal and contraband economies, but the name indicates the extent to which narratives of 'narcos' and 'drug barons' became part of the social discourse among a Malian population increasingly frustrated with the political class.

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[12] The suffix bougou or bugu means town or village in Bambara, a local language in Mali.

Relatedly, political scientist Edoardo Baldaro (2018) suggests the confluence of networks that helped establish Cocainebougou further entrenched social and political cleavages, fragmenting local authority and allowing a number of violent groups with operate with relative impunity within Mali.

Afghanistan has been the principal site for theorizing the relationship between the War on Drugs and the War on Terror, and the linkage between counterterrorism operations and drug interdiction was enshrined in UN Security Resolution 1373 passed one week after the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States (Björnehed 2004; Friesendorf 2007; Hutchinson and O'Malley 2007, 1096). Still, the circulation of drug expertise in tandem with counterterrorism projects operates through multiple geographic blurrings, linking across several continents, North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. The opium trade in Afghanistan exists in a complex social, political, and economic network, at times serving as a source of revenue for fighters; however, in the West African Sahel these links are more tenuous and less clear. Violence coded as "Islamist" in the region is not necessarily unique but speaks to broader patterns of marginalization, disaffection, and social and political fracturing taking place in several African states in the wake of global neoliberalism (Clarke 2018; Dowd 2015; Ferguson 2006). Scholarly studies continue to question the pervasiveness of ideas about entrenched links between armed groups and drug traffickers, contending that such groups have greater reasons to compete than cooperate (Hutchinson and O'Malley 2007, 1101; Lacher 2013). Yet, despite these ongoing debates about the veracity of the linkages between different armed actors operating in the region, many of my research informants continued to assert that the relationship between traffickers and armed groups designated as "Islamic terrorist" organizations revealed worrisome trends for the region. For them, it seemed that Cocainebougou was a clear testament to righteousness of expanded joint counterterrorism and drug interdiction strategies across the Sahel.

This sentiment was embodied by one of my informants Eddie, a former US military reservist and law enforcement official turned UN security adviser. He explained:

> In Mauritania, one of the heads of their law enforcement agencies there, he told me there is no difference between transnational drug traffickers and terrorists. They are the same people…He had evidence. He gave us a photo of a convoy they had stopped with a military helicopter, and it was a large 4x4 vehicle with a ton of cannabis resin—which is worth a lot of money—coming from Morocco—which is the best in the world—and 50 caliber machine guns. Now most drug traffickers don't have 50 caliber—they don't have heavy arms. This is obviously a terrorist group which also does drug trafficking…We see it in cities like Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu [in Mali]; they never had an economy, and now they do. They have big huge mansions and European appliances. And what is that based on: kidnapping and probably drug trafficking. And there's [sic] interviews with mayors of those towns. They are brutally honest. They say, "Of course I'm corrupt. My whole town is corrupt. I have to be. If I'm not, they will kill me. My family, my mother, my wife demand it. I have to drive this Range Rover, everyone else does."[13]

In our previous conversations, Eddie had again contrasted this influx of resources into an area presumed to be a wasteland, insisting: "But there's nothing up there. They don't deserve an economy up there. They don't deserve an economy. This is Gao where they have beautiful European houses and

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[13] Interview, October 2016, Dakar Senegal

appliances they never had that before… There's no reason for them to be rich; they never were before."[14] This discussion about the perceived anachronism of pockets of wealth in Northern Mali occurred poolside as Eddie and another informant Christian (a former French police officer turned UN advisor and crime fiction writer) smoked cigars in a heavily fortified luxury hotel in Ouagadougou.[15] If the wealth accrued from the illicit trafficking of drugs and weapons had opened new economic opportunities for rural communities in the Sahel, it had also helped support a parallel economy of high-end restaurants and hotels catering to the growing numbers of European and US/American security consultants flooding into the region to intervene in its many perceived problems. As Eddie and Christian reflected on a drug interdiction training they had conducted earlier in the week, attended by local Burkinabe security forces as well as magistrates, prosecutors, and border and customs officials, they mused that their efforts might be "making better drug traffickers" given what they identified as endemic levels of corruption within the Burkinabe security sector. These assumptions gained currency through stereotypes about a specifically "African" corruption and the selective use of histories about West Africans as master traders and smugglers. Eddie and Christian invoked the figure of the West African trafficker whose expertise in navigating the specifics of the physical environment threatened to undermine regional stability. Their claims further leveraged ideas about the presumed barrenness of the arid-and semi-arid environment of the Sahel as they asserted the absence of "legitimate" forms of economic life in this kind of landscape. In this way, their perspective echoed my informant at AFRICOM who insisted that West Africans offered South American drug traders a form of localized expertise in the movement of illicit goods. Relatedly, unlike in the US and Western Europe where the body of the drug user is pathologized and opened to regimes of surveillance and discipline (Cohen 2006; Herschinger 2015; Musto,1999), here the racial contours of both the global War on Drugs and the global War on Terror meet the multiple significations of race in West Africa, which are both hypervisible and invisible (Hall 2011; Pierre 2018), through the figure of the trafficker. As AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) has shown West African informal economies involve a plurality of activities, including unconventional trade in foodstuffs, narcotics, precious metals, and other raw materials 25,62). These trade networks draw together "a mélange of characters, including well-off business persons, soldiers, militias, middlemen of various nationalities, and petty traders" (25). And yet, such histories of long-standing forms of trade and regional transit become fodder for transnational security experts who insist that Sahelian communities trade the wrong kinds of things. There remains an inherent contradiction to drugs not being viewed as a valid source of revenue for countries routinely framed as economically "underdeveloped" and that the pressure to pursue drug interdiction measures comes primarily from high-income countries who drive the global demand for narcotics (Duff 2013; Ellis 2009; Klein 1999).

For proponents, these trainings, sponsored by the United Nations and funded by the European Union and the United States, offered an opportunity to outline certain facets of legal, managerial security culture that forces in Burkina Faso, and in neighboring countries, were perceived to be missing. Christian described how the training was fairly straightforward focusing on the basics of policing: intelligence gathering and sharing, infiltration, assembling informant networks, building a prosecutable case through evidence. The ability to resolve a drug case from start to finish—from initial investigation through to evidence gathering and prosecution—was seen to be an ideal skillset which would further demonstrate the robustness of policing in the country. Trainers stressed their desire to develop "intelligence-led"

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[14] Interview, August 2016, Ouagadougou Burkina Faso

[15] The capital city of Burkina Faso witnessed a popular revolution in 2014, an attempted coup led by a general trained by AFRICOM in 2015, and high-profile terrorists attacks in 2016, 2017, and 2018.

policing in Sahelian countries, the necessity of cultivating street informants and developing ways of infiltrating criminal networks to disrupt diffuse drug transport networks. This repeated refrain of intelligence-led policing further emphasized multiple forms of surveillance, monitoring telecommunications networks, computer databases, and banking institutions. Moreover, drug cases, and the materiality of drugs themselves, were seen to rely on particular kinds of evidentiary burdens which extended into multiple spheres. UNODC trainers and policy documents routinely emphasize a number of skills and projects—police handling of substances; the construction of scientific labs to test seized materials; legal reform to standardize protocols for drug offenses; expanding personnel in prosecutors' offices to advance cases—as teachable components of drug interdiction that will subsequently bolster counterterrorism efforts. These skills were advanced through donor-funded workshops and trainings. Yet, the measurable outcomes of such trainings remained opaque, pointing to the ways that investments in these kinds of trainings often overstate foreign experts' ability to influence the actions of local actors. Still, within an emphasis on capacity building, drug interdiction emerged as a modality though which to train law enforcement in service of more expansive security goals.

For Christian and Eddie, the relatively few successfully prosecuted drug cases in Burkina Faso indexed an inability to meet the demands of policing in practice. In these assertions there was little room to consider alternate priorities of local security forces or local resistance to these kinds of workshops. Instead of reading presumed "failings" as pointing to other more pressing interests for local governments and/or complex local understandings of drugs and trafficking broadly, enumerating the successfulness of drug interdiction programs became a way for these foreign security experts to assess the limitations of local security forces themselves. These inefficiencies were then extrapolated into other areas: if local forces could not successfully pursue drug traffickers and build drug cases, how could they fight terrorism or organized crime. In this way, the frequency of these kinds of trainings suggests an effort to both confirm the ineffectualness of state governance in Sahelian countries, while also shaping the parameters of future state priorities. And these drug control measures effectively work to "harden the state," despite the impossibility of their stated mission to eradicate narcotics trade (Klein 1999, 71). In Burkina Faso this is especially worrisome given that during a 2014 popular revolution that ousted long-term leader Blaise Compaoré, several protestors were killed by security forces loyal to Compaoré. Indeed, under the decades of Compaoré's rule, domestic security forces were the greatest threat to public peace and safety (Miles 2012; Harsch 2017), and there are well-documented occurrences of violence against communities by police in West African states.[16] Now, through security sector reform initiatives, those forces are front and center in social life, buttressed by ballooning budgets for the Ministry of Defense. Unsurprisingly, there remains an adversarial relationship between some local communities and security forces, even as there has been increased funding to security projects and a growing emphasis on policing, with drug interdiction making up a crucial aspect of those efforts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to briefly turn to the issue of legitimacy and credibility within the War on Drugs as it is unfolding in the West African Sahel. None of my informants expressed an investment in the War on Drugs as a moral crusade, and only in a few cases was there any concern offered for drug users or discussion of drug use as a kind of social scourge. For me this was somewhat unexpected, though it is perhaps unsurprising given that recreational drug use amongst the workers of large international organizations in the region is not unheard of. Still there was something perplexing as I watched

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[16] In October 2020, thousands took to the streets in Nigeria to protest police brutality and the violence of a secretive police unit called the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The protestors rallied around the social media hashtag #EndSARS. See Attiah 2020.

legalization efforts unfold in my home country, the United States, and encountered a self-described liberalness amongst my informants about drug use, alongside, a profoundly dangerous commitment to asserting the ongoing important of the drug war in West Africa. As Kathleen Frydl has demonstrated about the US itself, "…government officials adopted punishment and rejected illicit drug regulation as part of a calculus of power that initially had little to do with drugs…the [US] government remains invested in the drug war despite its daily disappointments because the set of institutions and instruments that comprise it perform other tasks, and are valued for other reasons" (2013, 2). These consequences reverberate across several spaces. And yoking such efforts to counterterrorism stands to breathe new life into a dangerous and discredited drug war. Moreover, the repeated emphasis on teaching drug interdiction, what I have elaborated as developmentally-inflected transnational drug expertise, serves to circumvent ideological or political challenges to the course of the War on Drugs by offering up interdiction as a discrete set of technical tools applicable to a broad swath of perceived problems. My informants regardless of their personal history with or interest in drugs emphasized how in West Africa drug interdiction provided several programmatic and pragmatic opportunities. The denouement of drug prohibition in specific places has furthered the re-assertions of drug-informed policing to meet new kinds of threats. Consequently, despite the apparent dwindling importance of drugs as a controversial social issue, drugs retain their importance as a technique of security governance, informing the orientation and enactment security sector reform.

This article has argued that the reverberations of the global War on Drugs color normative ideals of policing in the present. I have shown the ways drug interdiction as a technic of governance continues to inform how strategies for training policing. Despite numerous popular critiques of the War on Drugs and increased recognition of the limitations of criminalized approaches to drug use, the Sahel has emerged as a site of experimentation, where the coupling of counterterrorism and anti-drug trafficking strategies provides a way of salvaging remnants of an older style drug war, while also revealing the institutionalization of drug expertise as a mode of security governance. Such strategies are advanced by UN agencies and in bi-lateral security sector reform efforts targeting constabulary forces. Amid a transnational reckoning with police violence in numerous places around the world, and growing attention to police brutality in African countries in particular, (O'Dowd and Hagan 2020; Pailey and Niang 2020; Sakpa 2020), it is important to consider how police reform remains an attractive policy advocated by foreign actors in West African states. The reformist impulse towards policing enables the centrality of these actors at the global scale through continued investments in security sector reform projects.

Yet often such reform efforts do little to curb violence and histories of postcolonial states show the ways that investments in good governance and security sector reform can exacerbate state violence (Comaroff and Comaroff 2008, 9; Francis 2012, 21). These projects can also work to criminalize multiple forms of dissent and curtail oppositional politics. For a closing example, Ibrahim, a senior UN advisor and liaison to ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States), explained to me that it was advantageous to build intelligence-led policing capabilities to support increasing levels of surveillance across the region. He asserted that intelligence gathered in drug cases could be transferred to other projects, providing a more comprehensive accounting of security problems in the Sahel.[17] This conversation took place against the backdrop of a highly visible student protest movement and recurring labor strikes in Dakar, Senegal, which Ibrahim referenced as a potentially threatening source of further upheaval. Amongst my research subjects, there was a recurring insistence that building prosecutable drug cases had particular kinds of evidentiary demands, making it an attractive way of developing policing as

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[17] Interview, May 2018, Dakar, Senegal.

a skillset. In this way, both explicitly and implicitly, several of my informants spoke affirmatively about the collapsing things like riot and crowd control, traffic stops, drug interdiction, and counterterrorism into mutually reinforcing projects. They jettisoned the specificity of different kinds of oppositional movements, collapsing these into a generalized picture of upheaval and disorder. Perhaps, then, the most worrisome upshot is how this collapsing serves to embolden efforts to address multiple issues—disenfranchisement, poverty, social and political alienation—through investments in security forces. This ultimately criminalizes political opposition, armed or otherwise, and entrenches the presence of local and foreign security forces as violence workers across the Sahel.

Acknowledgements

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<u>Author postscript</u>

In 2020, 3 Harvard graduate students accused prominent anthropologist John Comaroff of sexual harassment and retaliation. Their accusations were part of a broader reckoning within the academy about gendered abuses of power. The above article was accepted for publication before these allegations were made public, and it includes a reference to John Comaroff's work. This moment demands a careful consideration of citational ethics and the politics of scholarly genealogies. It also prompts a series of questions: who do we cite, when, and why? When might we choose not to cite someone, and what are the possibilities and limitations of that choice? While I do not have any concrete answers to these questions, I've chosen to include this postscript in solidarity with those who have bravely come forward and who might come forward in the future to demand accountability in service of building a more equitable academy.