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Special Edition
**Everyday Prison Governance
in Africa**

Editorial Comment

Everyday Prison Governance in Africa

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This issue of PSJ is about everyday prison governance in a handful of African countries. There are fifty-five recognised states in Africa and we explore prison governance in just seven of them — Rwanda, Ivory Coast, Zambia, Cameroon, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Uganda. On this basis we can hardly claim to be exhaustive or comprehensive. Nevertheless this collection of field-based insights into the prisons of specific African countries is the first of its kind and we believe offers a valuable glimpse into the worlds of places which until recently have received very little scholarly attention.

Cameroonian political philosopher Achille Mbembe⁴ has argued that much scholarship on Africa in general has focussed on what Africa is *not* rather than on what Africa *is*. The same can be said to be true of what we know about prisons in Africa. We know — from critical human rights reports, for example — that they are not humane, they are not spacious enough, they do not provide adequate food or health care, that they are not just, that prisoners are not adequately classified and so on. We know that they do not often live up to externally derived standards and norms. But — until now — we have known very little about how they actually are. There are various reasons for this. Some scholars have claimed that prisons in Africa are too difficult to study or that their systems are too undeveloped to warrant comparison. This collection puts both those myths to bed.

The articles in this collection are fundamentally empirical. Drawing mostly on extensive fieldwork in prisons, amongst staff and inmates or former inmates, read together they offer a glimpse of the ways in which these prisons are governed, the ways in which staff and inmates interact and the way authority is distributed. Most of the articles focus on what we might call the micro-dynamics of prison climate,⁵ often with an explicit focus on relationships between guards and inmates. With the exception of Tertsakian's and Le Marcis' pieces

most of the articles have a contemporary rather than a historical focus. It is worth noting however that all the prisons with which we are concerned have their roots in colonial history.

We deliberately chose to include contributions from people with a more activist background, for example Carina Tertsakian of Human Rights Watch as well as articles jointly authored by scholars and activists, for example the article by Jefferson, Feika and Jalloh. In addition this is a collection that cuts across disciplines featuring, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and teachers.

The collection begins with Carina Tertsakian's article on the experiences of prisoners following the Rwandan genocide, based on her book *Le Château: the lives of prisoners in Rwanda*. Overcrowding is common in prisons in Africa but the situation in Rwanda after the genocide was quite exceptional as is the degree to which the prisoners took upon themselves the responsibility for running the prisons. Prisoner self-governance is a theme which crops up repeatedly in the collection but it is at its starkest in this article.

Our second article focuses on the co-presence of formal and informal rules in the main prison in Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast. Anthropologist Frederic Le Marcis emphasises the hidden meanings at play within the prison as guards and inmates administer prison life according to separate yet, in a way, interdependent logics. Attention is also paid to the use of space and to transactions between inmates and this is a central theme of Anne Egelund's article on sexual relations within Zambian prisons. Based on interviews with inmates Egelund makes a persuasive case that transactional same-sex relationships in the prisons reproduce rather than challenge the hetero-normative standards of the surrounding society.

Marie Morelle's article also focuses, like Le Marcis', on informal governance and movement, and like Egelund on transactions, this time in Cameroon. Here

1. DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture. www.dignityinstitute.org

2. We'd like to express our thanks to Jamie Bennett for his initial and ongoing enthusiasm for the theme of this issue. Also a special thanks to our oft-neglected families who faithfully endure our many absences: thanks to Helle, Jakob, Aksel and Joakim; and to Lotte, Marie and Joshua.

3. Danish Institute for Human Rights. www.humanrights.dk

4. Mbembe, A. (2001) *On The Postcolony*. University of California Press.

5. For more detail on what we mean by prison climate please see the introduction to the thematic section of *FOCAAL: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* (2014), 'Prison Climates in the South' edited by Jefferson; A.M., Garces, C. and Martin, T.

the focus is on delegated authority rather than on the existence of two parallel separate systems of governance but again the interdependence of guards and inmates is a strong theme. Subtle differences can be discerned between Le Marcis' account of Ivory Coast and Morelle's of Cameroon. The prisoners in Ivory Coast are presented as having more agency than those in Cameroon. For Morelle, somewhat paradoxically, what little agency the inmates are able to conjure seems to be acquired at the cost of maintaining the system that confines and deprives them.

The next two articles both feature Ghana. Lilian Ayete-Nyampong analyses juvenile correctional institutions and shows us some of the predominant features of everyday institutional life. Partially inspired by Goffman she offers us glimpses of initiation and arrival rituals and emphasises the agency of the young inmates showing how they refuse the authorities' attempts to oblige compliance. Based on extensive field observations and interviews emphasis is put on the intimate and mundane features of everyday entangled encounters.

In a second paper on Ghana, Thomas Akoensi turns our collective attention to the subject of prison officers and their symbiotic relations with inmates. Similar to the former article's focus on the hierarchies amongst juvenile inmates Akoensi portrays prisoner leadership structures, explaining why these are necessary and how the delegation of authority can have unintended consequences, for example in the form of violent or authoritarian enactment of discipline. As in Morelle's paper on Cameroon the Ghanaian experience suggests a form of delegated authority. Staff chose to share power, though the degree to which this is a real choice or simply inevitable given the specific conditions on the ground, is debatable.

Staff are also the focus of the seventh article which considers the way prison officers in Sierra Leone present themselves as both demoralised and satisfied,

passionate about their jobs but frustrated. Jefferson, Feika and Jalloh draw on field observations, interviews and a survey to draw rather paradoxical conclusions about the conditions of work of prison officers and the meanings they attribute to those conditions.

Finally, by way of substantive article we have Tomas Martin's account of the way human rights are locally appropriated by prison staff in Uganda. Here, the focus shifts somewhat from descriptions of the everyday dispersal of authority to a discussion of how prison staff make meaning out of a set of global norms that are at their disposal. Once again drawing on a lengthy period of ethnographic fieldwork, Martin demonstrates the importance of attending to the perspectives and practices of staff themselves in order to understand the effects and products of a global discourse like human rights. At the same time we are offered an important glimpse of some of the dilemmas faced by officers struggling both to make meaning and survive.

We round off the collection with a poem by Jack Mapanje, an acclaimed Malawian poet, linguist, editor, and human rights activist, held without trial in Malawi between 1987 and 1991, for his dissenting views expressed in radical poetry. In defiant style, 'Skipping Without Rope' casts some personal light on everyday governance in an African prison.

At this point the cross-cutting themes would seem evident: interdependency, entanglement, diffusion of authority, pragmatic choices and so on. As mentioned this is the first collection of its kind. It is our hope that this, at least, is just a beginning and that our studies of prisons in Africa might give added impetus to the field of non-western prison studies and encourage others to join in.⁶ We also hope that the empirical material presented might serve as a useful juxtaposition or even challenge to dominant notions of what prison is or might be, or at least provide food for thought.

6. If interested, check out the website of the Global Prisons Research Network www.gprnetwork.org