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INTRODUCTION: WEST-AFRICAN WARSCAPES

Warscape Ethnography in West Africa and the Anthropology of “Events”

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Abstract

This article introduces some of the challenges of doing ethnography in contexts such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea—places where violence and the certainty of uncertainty have become the backdrop for social interaction. It also considers the potential contributions to anthropological theory of such an undertaking. In particular it outlines a fundamental re-orientation towards the concept of “the event.” Drawing contrasts with conventional anthropological understandings of how small scenarios (social situations) and paradigmatic social events (rituals) speak to broader processes, this piece argues for an analytical recasting of the “event” as a moment in which cultural creativity is harnessed to the tasks of effecting and legitimizing the social transformations that crises often demand. Such “events” affirm the continuity of social groups even as they participate in the re-organization of social practice and are thus ultimately relevant to any anthropology of actors who confront and seek to effect change. [Anthropology of Events, West Africa, War zones, Ritual, Social change]

For almost two decades, the lives of West Africans in the Mano river region¹ have been deeply marked by cross-currents of episodic and often exceptionally brutal violence, political volatility, physical insecurity, and massive displacement that have inexorably linked the Mano river states. The armed incursion of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in 1989, and the subsequent descent of Liberia into a civil war prosecuted by an array of multiplying factions and warlords, set in motion processes of violent political and social upheaval that continue to reverberate throughout the region. West Africa has suffered through the despotic presidency of Liberia's Charles Taylor and the junta government of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) in Freetown. It has experienced uncertain interventions by foreign troops and by irregular militias such as the Civil Defense Forces/Sierra Leone (CDF/SL) and Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD).

Many thousands of lives have been lost. Many more have survived what seemed to many to be particularly bizarre and barbaric forms of violence. Liberians and Sierra Leoneans have been displaced across the region in massive population movements, while violence and political upheaval are now also realities in neighboring Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire. Thousands of others have been cast further afield, creating highly politicized international diasporas. In short, for over a decade and a half, extraordinarily volatile, unpredictable, and violent circumstances have constituted the everyday reality for many social actors in the region.

The articles collected in this volume are all by anthropologists whose fieldwork setting and the social processes they explore are characterized by the disruptions and instabilities of this "warscape" (Nordstrom 1997). Anthropological fieldwork is, of course, always messy. But the realities of work in Sierra Leone and Liberia in recent years differ from those contexts in which many of the discipline's key concepts and questions have been forged. As a result, these authors each faced the challenge of doing anthropology by thinking through the meaning of extraordinary events.

The "Event" in Anthropological Method and Theory

Events are difficult to reckon with. They have, on the one hand, a certain undecidability. Is an event an example or an exception? Does it manifest a structure, a process, a situation—or does it invalidate it? An event is, by definition, a singular moment. Yet it is one that clearly speaks to both past and future, as

dependent on the one as it is formative of the other. As a phenomenon of both time and space, an event presumably begins at some point and ends at another. Yet more often than not, those points prove remarkably elusive.

We can safely say that what constitutes an “event,” what differentiates one moment from another or endows it with particular significance, is always socially constructed and locally meaningful. This is no less true for those who study events—whether as historians, philosophers, or anthropologists—than it is for the informants, subjects, or collaborators for whom the events in question make up the fabric of life.

Indeed “events” have long factored into anthropology’s methodological repertoire, in ways that have both reflected its theoretical thrust and defined borders with other disciplines. Whereas history as a discipline has often focused on “events” as the hinges of social process—causal markers of shift in social course—anthropology was once famously described as the history of “non-events” (Fogelson 1989), a discipline focused on structural continuities and their social reproduction. Accordingly very different anthropologies have examined occasions marked by apparent rupture with the past—i.e. “history’s events”—for the way they evidence various orders of structural continuity—social, cultural, or socio-logical—be these occasions of local community schism among the Ndembu (Turner 1957), the re-organization of circular Osage encampments (Levi-Strauss 1966), or the apotheosis of Captain Cook (Sahlins 1985). If history as a discipline has primarily focused on rupture as the marker of its “events,” anthropology’s paradigmatic “events” were “rituals” (Van Gennep 1909)—where even rebellion (Gluckman 1963) could be examined for its contribution to social and cultural continuity.

While anthropology has entered an era in which its concerns are weighted towards theorizing change, contemporary modes of ethnographic representation still fruitfully carry forward a long legacy of marking specific moments for their ability to reveal the unremarkably common patterns that operate at the general level. The legacy of focusing on small scenarios in order to speak to larger patterns (Hannerz 2005) can be traced across the ethnographic landmarks of some of the disciplines most well-worn topography—through head-hunters rage (Rosaldo 1986) and Balinese cockfights (Geertz 1973)—and at least as far back as a colonial-era encounter on a bridge in southern Africa (Gluckman 1940). In that famous “Bridge” essay, Max Gluckman wrote that the specific occurrence, which he called the “social situation,” is the “raw material of the anthropologist.” Preoccupation with

the relation of the singular to the rest has remained at the heart of anthropological theory and method—arguably all the more so in the wake of structural functionalism’s demise and the mainstreaming of feminist critiques, both seismic shifts that challenged the potency of “culture” as a valid method for drawing generalization within social groups.

“Event-full Living” in the Warscape

In their own way, the volatile contexts considered in this volume challenge the generalizing capacities of both the social actors who must navigate their perils and their ethnographers. Violence, and the threats and instabilities which surround it, have become unavoidable aspects of sociality in the Mano river region. In a context in which the certainty of uncertainty has become a fundamental reality in the lives of social actors, the relationship between the unpredictable moment and the predictable one have been normatively inverted. Inasmuch as instability has become the norm, unpredictability has become unremarkable, and the predictable moment the one marked as exceptional. Such “event-full” lives challenge both the subjects who must live them and strain the burden that historians have often placed on the “novel” and the “unique.”

As Utas’ article vividly suggests life-strategies in such unstable places require a “social navigation” of a very particular sort. In an environment in which the horizon of the predictable is highly circumscribed by the fog of war, and in which the perils that more suddenly and abundantly emerge from that fog are also more deadly, social navigation becomes a matter of exercising a highly reactive form of “tactical agency.” It is thus more analogous to navigation in the unforeseen gale or of the unknown rapids than to that of the chartable sea.

Chronic and continuous violence also has a tendency to sustain the indeterminacy of action—what saves the social navigator in one instance may kill him or her in the next. Such a dynamic constrains the ability of social actors in warsapes to string together individual acts into strategies with cumulative effects—rendering each moment and occasion as its own full reckoning. Innovation and improvisation prove to be particularly important navigational skills.

Anthropology in Warscapes: Ethnographic Strategies in “Event-full” Places

War can thus seem to inscribe a form of chaos theory into the everyday world. It can deprive the practices of social actors of their “normal predictive power,” rendering error the most likely outcome of any efforts to guess at the future based on past experience. As Richards points out in his article in this volume, war also confounds the anthropologist’s sampling frame, providing a subject that is only available through the “snapshots, chance encounters, unplanned observations” to which the anthropologist is exposed. Ultimately, as Utas’ discussion of a young Liberian woman’s uncertain and uneven trajectory as a social navigator reveals, those subjects immersed in warscapes are perhaps not any better off than the anthropologist in formulating their own self analysis. This raises therefore the possibility that the anthropologist’s own “confusion” echoes with a certain emic verisimilitude, that ethnographers of warscapes should be hesitant to too quickly dissolve in their representation.

It is nevertheless imperative to weave incomplete and often deeply personal encounters together with whatever ethnographic histories or theoretical tools are available, and to offer an analytic frame. How then to “do” the anthropology of such “event-full” lives? What manner of regularities—if indeed any—might structure the irregularities that characterize warscapes—and where and how might they be found?

The articles in this volume instead pose a different question. Taken together they suggest that anthropologies of unstable places consider the same problem the discipline has increasingly turned to in less violent and volatile contexts, namely: how is it that actors go about effecting change? The violence and volatility of warscapes invite the widest range of interests in effecting change—whether it be in order to mitigate and transition out of violence (Coulter, Jackson; this volume), to heighten its dramaturgical (Richards, this volume) or instrumental (Keen 1998) impact, or to simply survive its engagement (Utas, this volume).

Richards’s insight on the dramaturgical character of war provides an important point of entrée for any ethnography that seeks to understand how social change is effected in unstable places. War is, as he points out, “a matter of acting together to forge strength, and acting against others to cause demoralization and fear” and is consequently instrumentalized through the communicative effectiveness of dramatic performances as much as it is through the technical capacity of weapons. The dramatic, communicative dimensions of violence are also at the center of Hoffman’s analysis of the dis-

armament proceedings at Bo, Sierra Leone. These are ethnographies which take seriously the theater of war, though it is appropriate to refine the analogy by emphasizing that the wartime dramas described by Richards and Hoffman are most akin to improvisational theater—situationally rather than canonically scripted—more rap than Mozart, more poetry slam than Shakespearean sonnet. If, as Hoffman makes clear, they gain their force from images with broad—even global—currency, they also gain their potency from the creative juxtapositions that their narrators invoke in light of the specific circumstances and audiences to which they speak.

As several of the pieces in this volume demonstrate, much of the drama-turgy in warsapes is constituted by subjects through narrative. As rhetorician Susan Wells explains: "narratives establish connections...(such that as analysts) we must ask how do connections in a story suggest or invoke other stories. How do they invite the writing of stories of sociation? Given all possible arrangements and presentations of events what is gained and what is lost (and for whom) by the arrangement the story (ultimately) undertakes?" (1990:228). In his analysis of a pre-war storytelling session, Jackson is able to identify thematic potentialities of forgiveness and revenge, both of which can be invoked by a population dealing with the aftermath of war. As he points out, the past thus "contains both the germ of antipathy, defensiveness, and violence, (but also) the possibilities of trust, openness, and reconciliation." In his account, what ultimately predominates in the constitution of a representation of history are the "uses of that past for the living." His analysis suggests that in focusing on the narration of the past in warsapes—of noting the "connections" emphasized as well as those suppressed from within a broader hermeneutic potentiality—we can better understand the ways in which individuals and social groups are attempting to "foreshadow the shape of things to come."

Utas' and Henry's pieces both caution the ethnographer of warsapes about the importance of accounting for social positionality. In reflecting on Bintu's narration of her turbulent navigation of the Liberian warscape, Utas is well aware of the fact that the connections and emphasis in this narration are as shaped by his (and his wife's) social characteristics as an audience as by Bintu's actual lived experiences. He openly speculates that the narrative would likely have emphasized other connections had it been told to the representative of an international aid agency.

Henry's account establishes that the degree to which "event-full" moments mark a change can be contingent upon the gender and status of

the different social actors involved. The arrival in Kenema, Sierra Leone, of a tank driven by Guinean peacekeepers ostensibly signified the end of war in the region. Yet poverty, the HIV pandemic, and the stigmas of illness are so much a part of the “violence of peacekeeping” for young women that they call into question easy distinctions between war and peace, structural and political violence, the ravages of physical assault from those of crippling disease. In this instance, we are reminded that the “event” for some categories of social actors may constitute a “non-event” for others.

Mary Moran’s discussion of the role of the Liberian diaspora in homeland politics challenges us to expand our thinking about the location and processes of production of events and “event-full” places. Hoffman in his discussion here, and Richards in previous work (1996), both highlight the ways in which the dramaturgy of warscapes draws liberally upon a global currency of imagery and upon narratives that circulate internationally. Moran pushes us even further by suggesting that the “immediate backstage” (Goffman 1959) of dramaturgical production in war-making and peace-building may be—at least for highly diasporic nations—a “locality” of a very “non-local” order. Indeed what are we to make of the fact that one of the major insurgent groups in Liberia (MODEL) is often designated as “the Philadelphia Boys,” or of the fact that four of the leading aspirants to the upcoming Liberian presidential elections could be found campaigning (and fund-raising) on the same September weekend in Minneapolis, Minnesota (Lubkemann 2004)?

In earlier work, Richards (1996) also emphasized the international scope of the audience contemplated by the performers of Sierra Leone’s warscape dramaturgy. In examining the diaspora’s consumption of these performances, Moran reminds us that from the perspective of the performers, it is not only true that “our audience is the rest of the world,” but also that the “rest of the world also includes ‘us’.” In a world in which wartime displacement increasingly generates global diasporas and transnational involvements (McDowell 1998, McGaffey 1999, Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001, Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001, Levitt 2001, Klimpt and Lubkemann 2002, Abushara 2002), anthropologists of these “unstable places” need to understand not only how such locations are (and have long been) “remotely global” (Piot 1999), but must also explore how it is that events are produced and consumed in these “globalized localities.”

Among the most important analytical strategies shared among these ethnographers of “warscapes” is the way in which they explore the interplay of history and biography. Whether in terms of memory or narrative, ritual or repre-

sentation, each of these contributions offers theoretical insights into how the immediateness of an event is largely a question of the subject's encounter with the past. Indeed each of these pieces also makes one of the biographies at stake that of the author her- or himself. Richards' reflexive description of four moments of war-time fieldwork underscores the extent to which a direct experience of movement, rumor, conversation, and even sound lends itself to theoretical insights on the nature of war-time events—and indeed war itself. What he identifies as the "unplanned observations of war" in Sierra Leone become a part of the "cultivated informed instinct" anthropologists bring to the occasions they witness—and then constitute as "events" and moments whose potency for analytical insight renders them noteworthy.

The material from which that instinct is drawn extends well beyond the warscape itself (both chronologically and geographically), as Hoffman suggests with reference to globalized images of violence, and as Jackson makes clear by returning to narratives and insights from fieldwork undertaken before the war visited Sierra Leone. Moran and Coulter demonstrate how the particulars of the anthropologist's own biography can open certain events for inquiry, highlighting the importance of relations and encounters outside the narrow confines of the field for understanding what goes on within it. Taken together these pieces suggest that as difficult as the challenges of an anthropology of unstable contexts can be, they are not paralyzing. Moving beyond simply calling for further critique, additional inquiry, or extra vigilance, these articles actually demonstrate the possibility of an anthropology of unstable places (Greenhouse 2002) and map the potential contribution of a theoretically re-vitalized and re-directed "ethnography of events."

What is the "Event" that Anthropology Should be Mindful of It? Theoretical Contributions from War-scape Ethnography

While each of the articles in this volume deals with the anthropology of events in unstable, war-time contexts, none makes the case that this therefore makes their analyses unique. While the insights they give into the nature of events and their concern for anthropology are perhaps more visible when set against the backdrop of a volatile field site, this does not mean they are qualitatively different from other ethnographic locations. In particular, the articles in this volume suggest a broader approach to "events" that dissolves the divide between those definitions emphasizing "rupture" and commonly

associated with social history, and the “meaningful social practices” that would be anthropology’s special beat (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:37).

Arguing against the disciplinary convention of equating Durkheim’s functionalism with stability, and the ritual—long anthropology’s “paradigmatic event”—as the guarantor of stasis, Richards points out Durkheim’s interest in ritual as social experiment. He proposes that a more careful reading of Durkheim shows how his notion of ritual as creative collective action serves as a compelling model for understanding the sodalities that develop *in* war and thus a valuable insight into the processes *of* war. Looking specifically at four series of events in southern Sierra Leone throughout the early and mid-1990s, Richards traces the permutations of a war that cannot be reduced to either its material or ideological underpinnings. As he explains, this was a conflict in which there was “very little ‘strategic’ action” but “a great deal of ritual inventiveness.” The formation of opposed sodalities, the emphasis on masquerade and charade all constituted the performance of war-as-ritual not only for the invading RUF and local militias but for foreign private security companies as well. The latter’s role in particular is often overestimated when considered in purely technical terms—and underestimated when we consider their dramaturgical aspects.

For Jackson, it is the “ritual” of storytelling and recounting the past—a well known form of “socially marked event” in many societies—that opens creative spaces for reinvention. Even as Kuranko narratives collected before the war offered their protagonists the possibilities of either revenge or reconciliation in the face of injustices, Jackson suggests that events of the past offer the same potential for those narrating that past in the present. In post-conflict Sierra Leone, the narrated past can “be about” avenging *or* forgiving, a possible ratifier of grievance *or* acceptance modes of response—but not an *a priori* determinant of either. Emphasizing the performative aspects of this often ambiguous decision, his piece underscores the extent to which communal life is a matter of ethics: “storytellers” of the present carry a certain responsibility for the way they craft that present from events of the past, and do so in a way that anticipates the future for themselves and those around them.

And in her account of the first major post-war staging of a girls’ initiation in Kamadugu Sokorala, Sierra Leone, Coulter also examines the creative permutations in purposes and protocols of the “ritual event.” Formerly excluded, men become active participants and all in attendance capitalize on the

dimusu biriye initiation as a moment of celebration and play, allowing the ritual to serve as a forum in which post-war social continuity is re-invented through cultural innovation.

These pieces shift the emphasis away from conventional anthropological readings of ritual by examining it as a tool for the creation of meanings rather than for their mere conveyance. Approached in this manner, the analytical significance of ritual lies in its capacity to be socially generative rather than culturally replicative. Ritual as the paradigmatic “socially marked event” becomes a mechanism for harnessing cultural creativity to the tasks of effecting and legitimizing the social transformation that crisis contexts often demand—at least for those who hope to survive them. As Jackson, Richards, and Coulter each demonstrate, ritual events do their work by affirming the continuity of social groups even as they participate in the reorganization of social practice. Together these pieces propose a fundamental anthropological reorientation—suggesting that we should no longer be studying Gluckman’s rituals of rebellion so much as the rebellion of rituals.

In summary, the “events” that anthropology seems to be crafting are now of a different order, whether recognized and marked by informants as “socially meaningful” (i.e. ritual) or by anthropologists in their effort to capture small facts (i.e. “social situations”) that effectively speak to larger issues because they are “meaningful to the social.” Richards populates his account of four visits into the Sierra Leonean hinterland-at-war with “events” that illustrate the improvisational techniques at work in the dramaturgical technology of war, technologies which “reshape minds and reconfigure collectivity.” Hoffman’s analysis of the dramatic disarmament focuses on the ways in which narratives are both generative of, and constituted by and in, the moment of their telling. Even as the “violent event” draws on broadly circulating narrative elements, these narratives are original in their re-telling: “in the sense that they are always told in a new context and shape both the moment of their narration and the lives of those who tell them”...and who in doing so “imagine themselves as lead characters in their own stories.”

Events—analytically designated as such because of their “generative capacity”—present themselves as moments of shifting possibility and constraint for the crafting of subjectivity—which in warscales are inevitably transformed. Such moments highlight the complexity of social agency—and open new avenues for fruitful theoretical deliberation. Thus, in proposing that we consider Sierra Leoneans’ efforts to reconcile themselves to their recent history in terms of grievance and acceptance modes, Jackson explores

the difficult conceptual space of coping in ways that cannot be thought of as simple “mundane strategies” of maximizing benefits but do not necessarily “go all the way down” to a level of unquestioned belief or feeling. Uta’s reflections on tactics of *victimcy*—of the enactment of powerlessness by a female combatant in the Liberia war in order to pursue desired ends—highlights the contingency of the agent/victim paradigm and suggests that the categories we often use to decide whether actions are voluntaristic or forced by circumstance reduce the complexity of war-time events.

Henry’s contribution also underscores the ways in which events can simultaneously proscribe the limits of subjectivity. In his ethnographic analysis of the intersection of military intervention, poverty, and the HIV pandemic in Sierra Leone, Henry begins with a single incident, the arrival in town of a foreign peacekeepers’ tank, the signifier of the end of war. Yet the opportunity for creative renewal that should characterize a post-war peace is subject to a complex political economy of sexuality, that engenders the choices available within Sierra Leone’s warscape.

These articles together suggest revised criteria for the rendering of certain “occasions” as the analyst’s “events” (i.e. “social situations”) and for understanding the analytical significance of the subject’s “socially meaningful practices” (i.e. “ritual”). Even as they demonstrate the usefulness of both for a possible ethnography of war-capes, they also point to the potential of the re-theorized “event” for the anthropology of other lives variously volatilized. Some may be more obviously so as in the structurally adjusted lives of the contemporary Zambian copperbelt (Ferguson 1998), the history-prolific lives in Tanzanian refugee camps (Malkki 1995), and the morbid maternal ones of Brazilian urban shantytowns (Scheper-Hughes 1992). Ultimately however, we suspect that an “anthropology of events” may play a significant role in revitalizing anthropology’s capacity writ large to “use small facts to speak to large issues” (Geertz 2005) in an ever more eventful world.

ENDNOTE

¹Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and now Côte d’Ivoire

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