

The EEA in an Urban, Post-Conflict Setting

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Introduction

Aiming at researching the imageries of the state and how they constitute everyday practice in post-conflict, urban Liberia, the EEA proved to be a helpful approach towards various dimensions on everyday life. Discourse- and practice analysis constitute the two main elements of the EEA, while mapping the actors aims at identifying the variety of actors in their social, ethnic or economic milieus, the dynamics therein, and most importantly: how the social actors relate to one another. Mapping includes the physical environment of social practice, i.e. the spatial dimensions of where the actors live, work, socialise, and which places they avoid and why (cf. Schensul et al. 1999), and for this reason, I started data collection at this angle of the EEA triangle. However, as Förster (above) outlines, to analyse these spaces, more detailed knowledge of the actors, and an in-depth understanding of the lifeworld of the actors and the intricacies they deal with is needed. Throughout my research, I conducted many narrative or semi-structured interviews which were helpful to acquire valuable background and specific information, and to access specific actors. However, interviews only offer partial insights, for they are, firstly, reduced to the spoken word; secondly, information acquired this way is often normative, and thirdly, much of the lifeworldly experience of actors seemed too obvious to talk about. Because of these limitations, the three elements of the EEA were very crucial to complement and embed the data on various dimensions of everyday life, by following various actors, listening to what they say about whom and why, and observe how they act for example when by encountering other persons.

This contribution highlights some challenges of field research in an urban setting characterised by the effects of a recent conflict. Mapping the actors was more tricky than assumed, and it proved to stand for the general challenges of my ethnography: Firstly, parts of the city are difficult to access and overview due to the shape, size, and density, diversity and mobility of its inhabitants; secondly, there is always a certain level of insecurity, as many local actors feel unsafe at night or in certain areas. As researchers in conflict-affected areas experience, insecurity thus is a constraint to the researcher, and certain physical and social spaces remain opaque; and thirdly, the scarcities of the Liberians to some degree were my scarcities too, and I had to learn how to cope with many of these to become more efficient in the everyday life.

Shared Experiences in the Urban Context

Monrovia is situated along the Atlantic seacoast and the Cape Mesurado peninsula; the rivers and swamp forcing the city to squeeze between and around this physical environment. The city centre started from the southern river bench of Cape Mesurado, and expanded to the Southeast towards the Red Light market, and North, over the New Bridge, towards Duala market. The city is bursting out of its seams: Communities have few roads to pass through; apartments are filled with up to 20 persons or more with core and extended family members, including adopted children. The diversity even within a

small community is high: Run down houses and shacks damaged by bullets next to renovated, modern architectures as remainders of the conflict. Much was destroyed, many families have not returned, or simply cannot afford to renovate their homes. Others use the unoccupied space to squat for a while. Similar to other cities in Africa, the number of inhabitants has grown massively in the recent past. Monrovia is expanding in all directions, with people crowding into already crowded compounds and apartments, and new constructions arising beyond the borders of the city.

Because the child was afraid of “the white woman” and started to cry, we all started to laugh.
Photo: Felesu F. Swaray.



Monrovia presents a challenge for inhabitants, urban planners, policy makers and -implementers, and, needless to say, to my endeavours. In order to participate in Liberian everyday life, I initially had envisaged staying with a family. The conditions of lack of space – as I would have needed a room for myself – made this quite difficult,²³ and after three months of living in a guesthouse in central Monrovia, I decided to rent an apartment in a peri-urban community. “Everybody lives

in Red Light!” said a friend, motivating me to move into that lively community when I was about to take a decision to rent the apartment, still hesitating about security issues. So I decided to move into the densely populated community and this way finally managed to experience a bit more closely the daily routines of ordinary Liberians. The way to central Monrovia though became very long. As the road system is not expanding as fast as the city, morning and evening hours are characterised by congested roads into, respectively out of central town and around the commercial areas. Hence, an ordinary trip from peri-urban Monrovia into town could take 20 minutes with low traffic, and up to two hours during rush hours. Having to stand up to an hour in line waiting for a bus made it even more unpredictable. These are challenges that dwellers of other urban environments experience as well. I observed how frustrated police officers attempted to regulate the traffic by whistling, waving and shouting, the road users who appropriate the road in any way; passengers that use the time to discuss marital problems or local politics, and though these situations provided interesting opportunities to observe how local actors deal with such scarcities, I shared the experience of unpredictable situations. I missed appointments with informants, and squeezed in a taxi for two hours in the heat was exhausting. These bodily experiences contributed to a more detailed understanding of the lifeworlds which could not have been accessed by discourses and observations.

Understanding Security and Insecurity

Retrospectively, I forget what blocked my approach to ordinary Liberians during my first weeks of field research: fear. I entered the field seemingly well prepared, ‘knowing’ that there were thousands of ex-combatants and war criminals hustling about. I had read the reports on the dark past of the country, and was well warned about

23 Other factors such as mutual trust play a role too, and especially trust needs time to develop. As experienced by other contributors in this paper (see Förster or Heer, above), some Liberians told me at a later stage that it was quite odd to them that a foreigner would want to live like ordinary Liberians.

the prevalent high crime-rate of the aftermath. However, with the shared experiences and the better knowledge about the social reality, the more normal it became to me to live with certain facts that ordinary Liberians live with. They have adopted strategies to keep safe, they explained, such as staying home at night, barricading the doors with furniture at night, organising into neighbourhood watch teams, which all made me assume that at night time, it is insecure all over Monrovia. However, one night I passed Duala Market at ten in the night in a car, and found the place as lively as during the daytime (cf. Heitz, below). I started to learn that actors have a normative understanding of security; however, various reasons lead them to act differently. Understanding their notion of security and insecurity in their respective context is important to the understanding of social reality as a whole, which the researcher can learn from long-term observation of and participation in such scenes. But as I did not want to expose myself to risk, I had to reduce data collection on these specific issues to discourses and mere occasional glimpses.

The capital city is a mosaic of secure and insecure places, and the latter are avoided by many Liberians. As these places may exist just next to each other, I had to learn about them. Mamba Point is generally known as a safe part of town with street lights and many gated communities in central Monrovia. But right behind some of the most luxurious compounds and hotels are run down communities, such as South Beach, which are considered unsafe by some local actors as well. Besides South Beach, there are a few local beach bars, visited by tired workers to pause, and idle youth. JR Beach is a place where informal conversations happen easily, where life plans or ideas are aired about while looking into the rough ocean waves. As it was considered an unsafe place and not so “up to standard”,²⁴ it was quite challenging to find someone to accompany me there, and once accompanied, the informal discussions were not uninfluenced anymore. As a researcher, I enjoyed the freedom to cross boundaries – at times to the discomfort of those who accompanied me. However, these experiences revealed again valuable data, connections and ascriptions which I would not have gathered otherwise.

Conceiving the Social Setting and Its Tensions

Participation and hence sharing experiences helped me to understand what I did not when I lived in central Monrovia for the first period of time: So many issues are uncertain and unpredictable for the local actors, even if they have lived under these difficult conditions for a long time. Apart from the above-mentioned traffic problem was the question of where street selling, a quite common economic activity, could take place, whereas at the same time, the Monrovia City Corporation (MCC) aims at cleaning up the city. Daily routines were interrupted, and actors had to reorient themselves. Renovating a street can mean demolishing buildings and constructions, especially the makeshift-shacks and squatted areas, the livelihoods of many Liberians. And the implications: a new challenge to the researcher as all of a sudden whole houses vanish. Many local actors do not understand the work of the MCC, although it is praised by some. For them, it is simply destruction and seems an act of domination by a government that does not have the Liberians at heart. I felt uncomfortable observing such a scene, as there was also a level of violence around it. “Waiting for someone” at a street corner with street sellers was a possibility to grasp a bit of everyday life of street sellers and helped me to understand what is going on from their perspective: not understanding why this is ordered by the government, and hence, for them, it reminded them of narratives of the past:²⁵ the ruling elite who does not care about the “small man”. This example

24 Not only in Liberia do people prefer socialising with members of their own milieu.

25 Street sellers are often young men who have not experienced elite-based rule of the past.

As the city changes its face, the social actors – including me as ethnographer – try to reorient themselves.
Photo: Andrea A. Kaufmann, 2010



highlights a challenge of practice analysis. Observations like scenes of the MCC were not plannable for me, and informants did not always know what is going on. As the city changes its face, the actors therein experience quite a high level of physical and social mobility. For me as a researcher, these changes are interesting, but the negative side of it can be quite depressing, for example the consequences of a person who loses a job. In addition, catching up with them changes is time consuming. For these reasons, I started to sample more selectively (Strauss/Corbin 1990) and focus on a few informants, which I followed in more depth (cf. Marcus 1995).

Like many urban populations, the Monrovia population is quite a heterogeneous setting with more than 16 ethnic groups, various nationalities, religious beliefs and social milieus. Tensions between or among some groups are common, but they are latent. It takes some time and knowledge to discover these issues in the daily activities and the media discourses. Looking into a neighbourhood, one finds communities made up of socially or economically divided groups. Not all neighbourhoods interact with each other so openly. Of course such detailed knowledge cannot be acquired of all neighbourhoods. For example, tensions between the Mandingo and other ethnic groups are quite widespread, and may cause members of the Mandingo ethnic group to switch identity under certain conditions. It needs some time and observations, for example at Hatay Shops, where strong sweet green tea and simple meals are consumed. Consumers are often those who do not receive a cooked meal at home: men and young men of the community, and often travellers. Observations of scenes of people interacting with members of this ethnic group reveal ascriptions towards the latter. Therefore, identification of social settings requires a deeper knowledge that can only be acquired in a long-term analysis of the context. These ascriptions are often heard incidentally, by passing such a shop with someone, for example. But following the actors is not as easy as it sounds. Many are quite busy during the day time, as even a person who is looking for a job is active, is involved in family or small business activities or just “hustling” around, looking for opportunities. I hardly ever met an idle person “just sitting around”. Consequences for the conversations or interviews where that these almost always had to

be planned in advance. Even at a less busy moment, the person would have to answer phone calls, make arrangements or meet people. And as soon as the evening comes close, many rush to store their goods and find transportation back home before sunset. Once at home, one sits on the porch and discusses with family members or neighbours.

The neighbourhood I lived in welcomed me and was very friendly, though a bit diffident. Now and then, people revealed their impressions that I must be from the CIA or so, and could not really understand why I would chose a peri-urban neighborhood to stay and what the purpose of my stay really was. It was a more or less middle-class milieu: most people had their own house; one was a teacher, one a bar owner, a shop owner, a pastor, etc., there were two landlords, of which one was my direct neighbour, a deaf man and his fiancée. There were also less economically strong neighbours. Though I shared a certain level of everyday life with them, as going to church, sharing free time and evening conversations, or going out for a drink, a direct living in common was not possible, and intersubjectivity therefore had its constraints. I interacted with socially, culturally and economically different persons, overreaching various tensions. As an example, I learned about present discourses on ethnic tensions, of course, the legacy of the conflict and debates on national identities contributed to these sentiments. Then again, in everyday life, I met the members of the various groups interacting seemingly normally. Discovering in what situation ethnic identity played a role and where not, was not obvious. My own, personal values and norms at times hampered an objective approach on such issues. But in sum, the long-term field work period and experiences gained through various discourses, participation and observations remains crucial to the understanding of these subtleties in the local context.

Concluding Remarks

This contribution aimed at highlighting through selected examples what challenges can occur while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a post-conflict, urban context. Access to observation and participation was in some realms limited, as some examples showed. I visited informants, spent time with them, and gathered valuable information through informal conversations. But I have not participated or observed some of the major events that turned the lives of many Liberians: the incidents of the conflict. Neither had I experienced the change to the peaceful, reconstruction period. Many incidents and experiences that shaped the agency of the people, their livelihoods, hopes or dreams were only accessible to me through discourses. However, by returning to my informants and following them for a certain time revealed other aspects of their life trajectories. The EEA with its three elements hence proved to be a helpful approach to the various dimensions of social reality. By experiencing scarcities, uncertainties and insecurities over a longer period of field research, by hearing what people say about their concerns and how they interrelate, perspectives began to overlap, and I could comprehend the local realities in more depth.