Introduction:
Bureaucrats in Uniform

By Giorgio Blundo and Joël Glasman

This special issue deals with 'bureaucrats in uniform', an expression by which we like to designate the different administrative agents who have the task of enforcing the law through the legal use of violence, ranging from policemen to provincial and national guards, gendarmes, forest agents, customs officers, and so on.[1] There are at least three reasons for studying this particular group of state agents.

The first reason is factual and empirical: bureaucrats in uniform – together with the primary school sector (Bierschenk 2007) – represent a large proportion of state employees in Africa (almost half of them in some countries). Heirs of the oldest colonial administrative bodies (Glasman 2014), these agents nowadays play a central role in the day-to-day workings of the state, are the backbone of everyday administration and have the largest influence on people's perception of the state.[2] This is probably the reason why international development organisations such as UNDP, USAID or DFID are increasingly targeting this group of civil servants in their development programmes, either in the field of Security Sector Reform (SSR) or in New Public Management. In spite of this interest in bureaucrats in uniform in international institutions, scholarly literature on the topic is very sparse, especially regarding Africa.

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[2] Focusing on the relation between state agents and state users, this special issue thus pursues the theoretical and empirical project named 'state at work' by Bierschenk (Bierschenk 2010). See also: Debos / Glasman 2013.

In fact, the existing literature on security questions focuses more on the modes of policing than on the actors of law enforcement. When it comes to the actors, the literature is more concerned with informal actors (militia, vigilantes, private security agencies, community police, home guards, etc. see Dixon 2004, Fourchard 2008, Fourchard 2011) – or with the interplay between non-state actors and state actors (Hills 2000, Hills 2007, Baker 2008) than with regular law enforcement institutions. In the last few years however, several case studies on different corps of bureaucrats in uniform have showed the important role of conventional actors such as customs officers (Cantens 2010, Chalfin 2010), rangers and foresters (Poppe 2010, Blundo 2011), policemen (Hills 2007, Beek 2008, Steinberg 2008, Beek 2012, Owen 2013) or gendarmes (Göpfert 2013). Of course, this does not mean that the pluralistic actors of power in Africa should be neglected. As several authors have shown, African countries are characterised by the diversity of actors involved in delivering public services (Blundo & Le Meur 2009; Hibou 1999, Lund 2006). But, on the other hand, the role played by public employees is starting to be explored (Bierschenk/Olivier de Sardan 2014).

The second reason is a methodological one. Since most recent studies focus on one specific corps of bureaucrats in uniform (case studies on police or customs officers for instance), there is a need for a comparative approach. In fact, when on fieldwork, we often gets the feeling that each specific category of uniformed civil servants considers itself part of a larger group, a group which shares paramilitary hierarchies, similar working conditions, some common professional codes like the language of uniforms and, above all else, the duty to enforce the law. Moreover, members of such a group are used to working together, for instance when gendarmes and forestry agents conduct a joint operation. In order to grasp the logic inherent to this specific professional field, we have chosen to compile our case studies and to adopt a comparative approach. This does not mean that we overlook the particularities of each specific segment of this professional field, but that we have to think about this occupational group in terms of common values and skills (the use of weapons, of legal procedures, of uniforms, etc.) and in terms of distinctions and conflicts.

Although we use a single expression to designate this social and bureaucratic space, we do not claim that it constitutes a homogenous group. Each paramilitary administration claims command over a particular corpus of scientific or technical knowledge as a strong element of differentiation: thus, the customs officers and the foresters, who are placed at the bottom of the military hierarchy, represent themselves as the intellectual elite of the paramilitary bodies and stigmatise the other

corps as ignorant, obtuse and brutal. In contrast, the gendarmes stigmatise the latter as mere "civilians given the uniform" (*Jan Beek / Mirco Göpfert*). Moreover, the different paramilitary bureaucracies do not face the same 'public'; the same goes for the frequency of their encounters with service users and citizens. Finally, they neither generate the same amount of revenues for the central state nor do they provide the same kind of public services (security, protection of natural resources, contribution to the state finances, etc.). But we do think that there is an opportunity for comparison that aims to trace both the affinities and the competition involved in this peculiar sector of the state apparatus. Admittedly only two articles in this collection systematically engage in a comparative approach (*Thomas Cantens* and *Jan Beek / Mirco Göpfert*). But we think that the entire special issue, through its strong focus on the state agents' practices and representations based on the ethnographic observation of a variety of interactions between paramilitary administrations, between the latter and alternative or informal policing providers (see in particular *Alice Hills*, *Julie Poppe* and *Thomas Cantens*) and between paramilitary administrations and their public (especially *Thomas Cantens* and *Oliver Owen*), easily allows for such a comparative exercise. In this respect, we have also been careful to avoid the artificial and unproductive divide between Anglophone and Francophone research so frequent in African Studies.

The third reason to study this professional field is a theoretical one. Because of their large numbers, bureaucrats in uniform are at the core of the state apparatus. But because of their specific position within the state, they also find themselves in a peripheral position in relation to the sphere of bureaucracy. In other words, the civil servants in uniform endure on a daily basis in their professional lives a strong tension between their administrative work and the administering of violence. This may be the reason why they have long been forgotten by social scientists (bureaucrats in uniform somehow fell into the gap left between the sociology of the military (Hutchful/Bathily 1998) and the anthropology of bureaucracy (Bierschenk/Olivier de Sardan 1998; Blundo/Olivier de Sardan 2006; Blundo/Le Meur 2009; Anders 2010, Bierschenk/Olivier de Sardan 2014). Since they represent, at the same time, the repressive state and the state as service provider, they should not be studied only as violence specialists, but also as state agents. They constitute some specific segments of the state and need to be analysed with the same perspectives and methods we adopt when studying 'civilian' bureaucracies. Following this approach, the anthropological and historical study of paramilitary bureaucracies may contribute to a comprehensive inquiry into the everyday functioning of the state observed from below, through the daily activities of its agents.

We are aware that speaking of 'bureaucrats in uniform' entails a paradox. It is somehow provocative to speak of street-corner policemen or of remote forest guards as 'bureaucrats'. However, in our view, it is exactly this very tension, this dual position, both at the core and at the margin of bureaucratic phenomena that entails a specific heuristic value. In this context, the relation of norms and practices is a central one. Most authors agree that African states are characterised by a gap between norms, rules, legal standards on the one hand, and practices, everyday work and agency on the other.[3] The exploration of the institutions in charge of law and rules enforcement should give us new insights into this issue. In Africa, these institutions are given strong discretionary powers but work under conditions of financial and material penury. If these are the classical premises for the blossoming of corruption and informal privatization (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006), it seems necessary to us to avoid normative approaches to these phenomena, and to adopt a mix of emic and etic points of view. Most papers that address this issue suggest (see for instance the articles by *Oliver Owen* and by *Alice Hills*) that the discretionary powers conferred on agents to enforce the laws are strongly influenced by interventions coming from a plurality of formal and informal institutions and actors. Facing multiple and often conflicting pressures for accountability, state agents react by producing hybrid, "practical" norms. This leads to a public action characterised by the informalisation of administrative procedures (Blundo 2012).

In order to narrow our focus and to enable comparison, we have chosen to focus on the metaphor of uniform. Admittedly, this is not the only metaphor to designate these professionals of law enforcement. For instance, the customs and forest services have been animated for a long time by internal debates on the appropriateness of wearing a uniform. For the customs officers, as *Thomas Cantens* suggests, their uniform does not constitute the main source of their authority or legitimacy. For the foresters, there is a tension between their developmental tasks (reforestation, technical support for peasants) and their policing tasks (Blundo 2011, *Julie Poppe,* Ségalini 2012). They are faced with a dilemma between their role of protecting environmental resources through a reliance on repression and sanctions and their "participative" role emerging from the new decentralisation reforms. Moreover, their paramilitary status should not be considered an unchanging one, but is an historical process that can be reversed. In Benin for instance, the police was demilitarised in 1990, and became a paramilitary organisation un-

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[3] Of course, this is not only the case in Africa, but for every state. The question of norms enforcement has however taken a specific turn in the literature on African states (Olivier de Sardan 2008).

der the rule of the Minister of the Interior. In contrast, the foresters in Benin, in Ivory Coast, in Niger and in Senegal, who were ironically called "civilians in uniform", saw their civilian status changed to a paramilitary status in 2005.

Nonetheless, the uniform proves to be a useful entry point into the study of these institutions. In fact, the language of the uniform seems to be one of the common denominators of the different groups of actors under scrutiny. The uniform is used both by African populations to designate the law enforcement institutions (they speak for instance of "men in uniforms" or "*corps habillés*") and by the agents of law enforcement themselves to distinguish themselves from each other. Herein lays the strength of the language of the uniform: it is both a language of homogeneity and a language of distinction. Hence, the language of the uniform, highly polysemous, is used by different actors to make all sorts of different claims. For instance, some agents would say that their uniform marks their distance to the public, while other would argue on the contrary that their uniform allows the public to identify them as state agents, thus building a relation of mutual trust. As accurately shown by *Julie Poppe*, a uniform is first and foremost a stately identity marker. That is why the rangers in Burkina Faso, as simple auxiliaries of paramilitary foresters lacking in public authority, find in the wearing of the uniform a strategy for appropriating one of the most impressive symbols of state power. Conversely and paradoxically, forestry agents wear their uniform less frequently, mostly during forestry policing activities. According to the same rationale, high-ranking officers in African customs prefer to wear plain clothes and impose the uniform on their subordinates, thus implicitly showing that "the uniform is generally a sign of inferiority" (*Thomas Cantens*).

This leads to our second argument which is that the 'uniform talk' is a specific avatar of a broader concern of these institutions: the question of the 'right distance'. The question of the right distance between the institutions of law enforcement and the population is a major concern, both in the official discourse of the state and in the representations of local populations. As a result, the language of the right distance functions as much as a tool of justification for the institution as a tool of criticism against it. As for the language of the uniform, the language of the right distance is also used by the agents themselves, sometimes to compliment their colleagues, sometimes to criticise them. When a Nigerian gendarme explains to *Mirco Göpfert* what differentiates forest agents from gendarmes, he stresses the proximity between the former and the locals: "they know local languages, when they have a particular zone, they know it" (they are "*connaisseurs*"), they are "very close to the local population", as Göpfert sums it up. But stressing the closeness

between agents and users can simultaneously be an accusation of collusion. A Ghanaian policeman quoted by *Jan Beek* explained that the first quality of the community police is that they are part of the community, so they know its needs and values. At the same time, community police officers are accused of being lax with laws and official norms. They don't know how to use a pen properly, the interviewed policeman argued; they don't know paperwork.

Hence, the articles presented here stress the ways in which agents in uniform speak about their work and situate themselves both in front of users, and in front of the institution. They talk about their competences and skills, their values and their interests. This talk is simultaneously a description and a prescription, a representation of a specific occupation and a normative vision of how things should be. It is, first and foremost, a discourse on the distance that the agents consider they should have in their relations with the public. Some actors value close contact with the population, stress face-to-face interaction with the public, hold skills like the knowledge of local languages in high esteem, value politeness and good behaviour; they speak in favour of a confident and direct relationship to citizens. At the other end of the spectrum, other agents view their duty as a bureaucratic one. For them, officials should take their distance from the service users, in order to be more neutral and closer to the letter of the law and to implement official procedures. These agents value strong reading and writing skills, good reports and efficient paperwork. Thus, on the one hand, there are agents wishing to spend more time within the population, on the streets, in the villages, and on the other hand, agents who wish to spend more time in their office.

Secondly, this is also a discourse about the distance between agents and the institution they are working for. Here again, testimonies oscillate between two poles. On one hand, there are agents praising a close relation to the institution, stressing the importance of discipline and of values like punctuality and obedience. On the other hand, other agents cherish a more distant relation to the institution, stressing the importance of the autonomy of the agent. While advocates of the first position value hierarchy and time spent in training camps and barracks, those who hold the second position value discretion, leeway, adaptability and reactivity. What is at stake is the system of representation underlying the professional field of bureaucracies in uniform. It is not our aim here to enter into naïve and sterile discussions about whether one category of agents (say soldiers) is truly more disciplined and more punctual than another (say police inspectors), or whether the latter is truly more independent and retain more leeway than the former. It is not ours to decide whether some categories of agents (say forestry

agents, or community police for that matter) are really better at managing face-to-face interactions with users than other categories (say gendarmes), the latter being seemingly more confident with standardised procedures and report writing. However, what is intended here an increased awareness of the way these agents situate themselves in a set of values and make claims on the basis of the language of the right distance and the language of uniform.

Drawing both on recent studies on state coercion and on the new anthropology and sociology of state servants, this special issue explores the genesis and the structure of the professional field of men and women in uniform. We analyse the circulations, competitions and distinctions between the different institutions involved in the maintenance of order and the different professional practices and skills included in their day-to-day work. We also describe the reactions of paramilitary agents to the recent modernisation reforms and how these affect their discourses and practices. In short, we offer an ethnographic exploration of how Africans engage in state policing, in law enforcement as well as in coercion.

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