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La recherche dans les « zones rouges » au Burkina Faso : L'expérience d'une recherche sur la contribution des VDP et des *Koglweogo* à la sécurisation du territoire.

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**Résumé**

L'analyse présentée se fonde sur un travail mené sur le terrain sur la contribution des Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie (VDP) et des *Koglweogo* à la sécurisation du territoire. L'article discute les implications des méthodologies employées pour le cadre d'une recherche effectuée en contexte d'insécurité. Notre analyse s'inscrit dans une démarche qui se situe dans une posture socio-anthropologique et le travail de recherche en équipe interdisciplinaire. L'article donne des informations peu connues la méthodologie et les principaux défis, les difficultés et les perspectives d'une recherche en « zones rouges ».

**Mots Clés :** « zones rouges », Burkina Faso, VDP – *Koglweogo*, attaques terroristes

**Introduction**

La prolifération des groupes armés et l'implantation rapide des jihadistes a conduit, en 2019, à une intensification de la violence au Burkina Faso. Le gouvernement devrait adopter une approche intégrée de la sécurité et mettre fin aux crises du monde rural en résolvant notamment la question foncière.

Le monde rural burkinabè traverse une crise multiforme. Avec la chute de l'ancien président Compaoré en octobre 2014, la capacité déjà limitée de l'État à maintenir l'ordre dans les campagnes s'est encore affaiblie, et la défiance populaire envers les élites, locales comme urbaines, s'est accentuée. La montée du banditisme, les conflits fonciers et l'apparition de groupes d'autodéfense, en particulier des *Koglweogo* (« gardiens de la brousse » en langue *mooré*, la langue des Mossi), sont les symptômes d'un monde rural en panne de régulation.

**I. Problématique et approche conceptuelle**

**I.1. La problématique de la recherche**

Depuis quelques années le Burkina Faso est devenu un pays déconseillé aux ressortissants de certains pays sauf raison impérative. Cette restriction fait suite à l'occupation de certaines parties du territoire par les terroristes et autres bandits de grands chemins.

Au Burkina Faso, les violences armées s'intensifient, sur fond de crise multiforme du monde rural. Les groupes armés prolifèrent, qu'il s'agisse de bandits, de jihadistes ou de groupes

d'autodéfense. En 2019, le Burkina est ainsi devenu le pays sahélien le plus ciblé par les attaques jihadistes.

Le Quai d'Orsay actualise régulièrement sa carte de conseils aux voyageurs sur le Burkina Faso et à ses ressortissants qui y vivent. D'une version à une autre, on note un agrandissement de la surface occupée par les « zones rouges ». La carte ci-dessous donne la situation en novembre 2020.



Source : Jeune Afrique, novembre 2020

L'observation de la carte permet de voir que la « zone rouge » s'étend désormais sur toute l'étendue des régions Nord, de l'Est et les régions frontalières de l'Ouest. Ces parties du territoire est formellement interdit par les auteurs de la carte. Quant au reste du pays, il est désormais classé en « zone orange » déconseillé sauf raison impérative. Jusqu'à décembre 2020, le centre du pays et la capitale étaient encore en jaune c'est-à-dire une vigilance renforcée. Cette situation est d'autant préoccupante pour les populations que pour les acteurs de la recherche. Les premiers pour vivre et vaquer paisiblement à leurs occupations quotidiennes et les seconds pour participer à la mobilisation de l'information pour la production des connaissances sur les réalités vécues par les populations. C'est dans ce contexte que nous réaliser une recherche qui a porté sur la participation des

## **I.2. Approche conceptuelle**

Qu'est-ce qu'une zone rouge ? Quelles sont les implications et les conséquences d'une zone rouge pour les populations ? Quelles perceptions des populations par rapport à la définition des « zones rouges » ?

D'emblée il faut noter que la notion de zone rouge est nouvelle pour les populations burkinabè qui n'ont vécu réellement l'insécurité qu'à partir de 2015.

La notion de « zone rouge » est négativement perçue et vécue par les populations. Des villages des zones dites rouges, les populations ont un sentiment d'exclusion par rapport aux autres localités. Ainsi, les perceptions sont négatives de la part des populations.

Mais, l'État burkinabè est entré dans la danse en identifiant ce qu'il a appelé « zones à forts défis sécuritaires » qui couvre les régions de la Boucle du Mouhoun, du Centre Est, du Centre Nord, du Sahel, de l'Est et du Nord.

## **II. Méthodologie**

C'est principalement une méthode de recherche qualitative. Nous avons conduit des entretiens semi-structurés avec les acteurs sociaux de la sécurité que sont les VDP et les *Koglweogo* mais également avec les populations et les FDS.

Notre recherche a couvert quatre (04) des régions dites zones à forts défis sécuritaires. Il s'agit des régions du Centre Nord, du Sahel, de l'Est et du Nord.

Pour y arriver nous avons adopté une démarche d'identification des interlocuteurs par la méthode de boule de neige. En effet, cette technique d'échantillonnage des enquêtés d'augmenter la taille de notre échantillon en nous basant sur nos réseaux sociaux dans un premier temps de notre carnet d'adresse personnelle. Ensuite, les premiers contacts nous ont orienté vers d'autres personnes préparées et informées de notre objet de recherche et de visés scientifiques de la recherche.

Un guide d'entretien a été conçu afin de canaliser les échanges avec les interviewés.

Un élément important également de la méthodologie a été la préparation du terrain et des missions. Il s'est agi de d'identifier les personnes ressources sur lesquelles nous devons nous appuyer sur mettre en œuvre notre technique d'échantillonnage.

Les entretiens ont été effectués dans l'aide d'un enregistreur (dictaphone) et des notes ont été prises. Nous avons réalisé des entretiens informels également réalisés.

## **III. Les principaux points de la réflexion**

### **III.1 L'accès aux acteurs et à l'information : la première barrière à franchir**

Afin d'accomplir notre mission, il était impératif de faire une immersion sur le terrain de la recherche. Cela a été la première difficulté à franchir.

L'accès était notamment d'ordre physique. Il s'agit surtout de l'accès au site et aux acteurs eux-mêmes. A cause de l'insécurité de nombreuses routes ne sont plus praticables ou sécurisées. Elles sont barricadées et le passage est contrôlé par les terroristes qui vérifient l'identité des usagers de route. Nous avons été contrôlé 5 fois par en 15 missions de collecte de données notamment lorsque nous nous rendions à Djibo, à Kelbo et Kantchari.

En plus, le terrain (villages, villes) est un lieu d'insécurité pour les fonctionnaires de l'État.

La haine contre les serviteurs de l'État ses institutions nous a mis dans une situation de personne à risque d'enlèvement ou d'attaque. Il faut rappeler que les enlèvements et les assassinats de fonctionnaires de l'État dans l'exercice de leur fonction ou non sont monnaies courantes dans ces zones dites rouges. Afin de minimiser ce risque, nous avons opter d'utiliser notre carte d'identité d'étudiant et notre extrait d'acte de naissance comme pièces d'identité pour ce voyage. Ainsi, lorsque nous sommes en face à un barrage de terroristes, nous présentons notre acte de naissance. Mais, il s'agit d'un contrôle des forces de défense et de sécurité (FDS), nous présentons notre carte d'identité de chercheurs et notre ordre de mission.

Pour ce qui est des personnes ressources, du fait du contexte, elles ne sont pas à s'identifier comme telle et/ou s'ouvrir aux personnes étrangères. Face cette situation, nous avons recouru à anciennes connaissances pour nous introduire et rassurer les cibles identifiées.

### **III.2. Les principales difficultés de la recherche en « zones rouges » au Burkina Faso**

#### **- Problèmes sécuritaires**

Les problèmes de la sécurité se sont faits sentir tout au long du travail de terrain. Des voyages et aux séjours dans les villes et villages, le sentiment d'être en insécurité était présent.

Nous avons décidé de ne pas dormir à l'hôtel ou à l'auberge de peur de nous exposer. Les domaines des personnes ressources ont constitué notre gîte dortoir. Cela a l'avantage de faciliter notre immersion et de responsabiliser notre hôte sur notre sécurité.

Il faut signaler qu'au préalable, nous avons pris le soin de faire établir un ordre de mission qui nous autorisait à mener une mission de collecte des données. Une fois sur place, nous nous sommes présenté à la gendarmerie et à la police pour signaler notre présence. Cette étape s'est avérée cruciale puisque nous avons reçu des conseils pratiques de sécurité de la part des FDS.

#### **- Problèmes éthiques**

Du point de vue étatique, nous avons été confronté à un problème lié à l'éthique en sens que nous avons eu à faire une catégorie d'acteurs qui ne sont trop aimés par les acteurs

institutionnels de sécurité. Il a fallu pour nous mettre en branle la méthodologie afin de ne pas nous laisser dominer par les prénotions et les préjugés des pro et rétracteurs des VDP et *Koglweogo*.

#### - **Problème politique**

Il s'agit d'éviter au maximum de centrer les échanges les questions politiques hors et pendant les entretiens. Ainsi, lorsque lorsqu'un interlocuteur orientait les échanges sur la politique ou les acteurs politiques, nous essayions de recadrer le débat.

#### - **Éviter d'être pris pour un journaliste**

En Afrique, il n'est pas rare de confondre le chercheur à une journaliste. Le souci pour les personnes ressources est de retrouver leurs propos dans les colonnes de média ce qui les expose. La présentation de l'ordre de mission et la précision sur le caractère anonyme des informations collectées

### **III.4. Les principaux défis à surmonter lors d'une recherche en « zones rouges » au Burkina Faso**

- Gérer l'information : Faire face à l'information, aux informations souvent étrangères sur l'état de la sécurité dans les zones concernées.
- Protéger les informateurs et les personnes ressources
- Rester en sécurité

### **III.5. De la réalité du terrain vécu**

- Des populations prêtes à accueillir et à s'ouvrir : en dépit de la réticence aux premiers contacts, les populations s'ouvrent entièrement lorsque la confiance s'installe.
- Un besoin de se confier de la part des populations qui vivent par parfois des réalités atroces.
- L'hospitalité des populations : de toutes les localités que nous avons visitées, l'hospitalité des populations a été remarquable.

### **Conclusion**

Il ressort de cette analyse qu'une recherche en contexte d'insécurité comporte des particularités qu'il convient de prendre soin et de tenir compte. Dans le cas d'espèce de la recherche menée sur la contribution des acteurs sociaux de la sécurité (VDP et *koglweogo*) au Burkina Faso des difficultés énormes se sont dressées à nous, des défis multiples et multiformes devaient être surmontés et des perspectives ont été dégagées.

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# Vigilantism on the Margins of 'Red Areas' in Burkina Faso: Epistemological and Ethical Challenges

Melina C. Kalfelis

Draft paper for the Africa Knows! Conference

Panel "Decolonizing the academe in 'red areas'" (E33)

This paper is a work in progress. It reflects epistemological as well as ethical challenges of my research on and with the Koglweogo self-defense groups in Burkina Faso. It puts my personal experiences in this research up for discussion and recapitulates, reflexively and descriptively, how I adapted my research to those challenges. Starting with a brief critical reflection on the general knowledge production on the conflicts in the Sahel, I tackle my methodological limits as an anthropologist and the problem of (dis)information. In the second part of this paper, I will look more closely at ethical issues, which concern my own well-being, the way state-centered norms influence my work, and my own ethical responsibility in response to a particular international prioritization of articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Apart from a discussion of these issues, I will give brief introductions to some concepts I am currently trying to develop. The paper concludes with some questions for further discussion.

Keywords: Conflict, Violence, Ethics, Methodology, Knowledge

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Melina C. Kalfelis is a postdoc in social and political anthropology. She works in the Cultural and Social Anthropology Faculty at the University of Bayreuth and currently focuses on vigilantism, trust, and violence in the Sahel. Her dissertation deals with lifeworlds and biographies of NGO-actors in Burkina Faso, transnational development partnership, and poverty concepts in the language of Mooré. In March 2020, she published the book *NGO als Lebenswelt* [NGOs as Lifeworlds] with Campus. Together with Kathrin Knodel, she co-edits the book *NGOs&Lifeworlds in Africa. Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, which will be published with Berghahn Books in June 2021. In the past two years, Melina has been working as a visiting fellow at the Cluster of Excellence "Africa Multiple" in Bayreuth, at the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies (funded by the Volkswagen Foundation) as well as at the "Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa" at the University of Legon in Ghana. Melina is also active as a photographer and filmmaker. Her latest documentary 'NGO Crossroads' (40 min.) deals with power, norms, and bureaucracy in NGO-partnerships and the resilience of grassroots organizations in Burkina Faso. The film has been officially selected by the Science Film Festival 2020.

## Introduction

In 2016, as a reaction to an intolerable increase in crime in Burkina Faso, the Koglweogo self-defense groups mushroomed nation-wide. Today, they have established a trans-regional order through which they catch and punish criminals within the framework of public conflict processes. During these processes, they negotiate guilt and decide on proper punishments of which public whippings are the most common (Kabore & Kouraogo 2016). This proceeding is one of the main reasons why they are internationally accused of human rights violations (Barry et al. 2018).<sup>1</sup> To the state, they have maintained a generally peaceful relationship but are nevertheless seen as weakening its legitimate monopoly of force. The ethnographic material was collected within two months of fieldwork between November 2018 and March 2020. Within that period, I conducted participant observation at three Koglweogo centers in the semi-urban areas of Ouagadougou (Yamtenga and Goudrin) and Zorgho (Ganzourgou Province) as well as narrative and open-ended interviews. I took part in more than 30 public conflict processes, accompanied the group in Yamtenga on a mission, followed the Koglweogo during their everyday activities, and collected audio-visual material. Additionally, in 2016, I documented perceptions about the Koglweogo's emergence and follow policy debates, news articles, and social media on the current conflicts in the Sahel.

Ethnographic fieldwork in a tense security climate is challenging in many ways, one of the major obstacles being access to conflict-ridden regions and places. While freedom of mobility was no issue when I started to research in Burkina Faso in 2009, it slowly crumbled away after the fall of Blaise Compaoré's semi-authoritarian regime in 2014. Not long after, the crisis in Mali started to spill over the borders of Burkina Faso, slowly destabilizing the country. "Red zones" unfolded in embassy maps, piece by piece restricting access to northern and eastern provinces. In March 2020, even the 1.5-hour bus ride to my former main field site Zorgho appeared like taking a risk. Particularly striking was when my colleague closed the window curtain to hide that a *nassara* (white person) is among the passengers. A precaution that exacerbates an unsettled feeling. However, not only issues of security, access, and lately the pandemic have decisively changed my methodological options and the possibilities of scientific rigor. It is also me working *with* vigilantes that raises epistemological and ethical questions and challenges. This paper puts my experiences in this research up for discussion and recapitulates, reflexively and descriptively, how I adapted my research to the epistemological and ethical challenges. The first section tackles epistemological constraints I am facing in this research. The main focus will be the knowledge production on the conflicts in Burkina Faso in (inter)national discourse, the problem of (dis)information and polarization, as well as on how limited access has changed my methodology. These remarks will then lead me to present my idea to reconceptualize vigilantism as a political process, which is still a work-in-progress. The second section starts with legal concerns in this research and then reflects ethical issues on different levels, which concern my own well-being, state-centered norms, and international human rights. I will conclude with some further questions raised by this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25299&LangID=E>.





Figure 1 Two Koglweogo speaking with a prisoner in Yamtenga (Ouagadougou), photo by the author

### Epistemological Constraints During Fieldwork in Red Zones

For a start, I would like to make some general remarks about the knowledge that circulates about conflicts in- and outside of the 'red zones' in Burkina Faso. First and foremost, in the context of political rivalry and inter-communal tension, it is impossible to evaluate the credibility of information circulating in social media, international reports, and local news. It does not matter if we look at the knowledge produced by international watchdogs like Amnesty International, organizations like the International Crisis Group, Event Data Projects like ACLED, or local and (inter)national news channels: again and again, I am struck by how the premises of many of those reports' insights rest on unsteady foundations. While this has of course, among other things, something to do with access, security constraints, and a politically tense climate, it is the ignorance towards the epistemological fragility of this knowledge that puzzles me. Not only because this knowledge contributes to the dissemination of possible disinformation that is reused and recycled into global narratives and policies, but because uncaredful statements in such a sensitive conflict setting can contribute to the polarization and escalation of conflicts. A cleaving language used in reports further exacerbates this spiral, e.g. when labeling Burkina Faso as the 'new Rwanda'. In other words, information and interpretation are often presented as facts without any critical remarks, which then again shape policies, discourse, social media, and interventions. Beyond that, when reflecting on *who* has a voice in this discourse, many reports seem to systematically ignore open-source papers and analyses published by researchers living and working in the conflict region (see e.g. Barry et al. 2018, 2019; Kibora et al. 2018; Soré 2019); papers that often provide readers with more nuanced insight about certain phenomena. My starting point, in short, is the absence of critical reflection to contextualize the political and epistemological dimension of the knowledge produced on conflict; especially in the international realm.

With this in mind, I myself do also face epistemological constraints in my research on self-defense groups in Burkina Faso. Whenever I write a paper on the Koglweogo or the Sahel conflicts, I cannot get rid of the impression that there is not one single sentence I can put on paper that will be still valid in an hour, tomorrow or next week. And to be honest, I do not think this field research will ever allow me to do so. This is maybe one of the trickiest parts for anthropologists working on and in violent conflict: on the one hand, anthropology means to deeply immerse into a field before coming to conclusions, while on the other hand, political shifts, violence, and conflicts emerge and transform the Sahel region quickly enough to constantly throw the diligently collected field material into doubt and disarray.

One of the primary obstacles I encountered was the impossibility to make generalized assumptions about *the* Koglweogo while relying on evidence only from one region. The Koglweogo are not a homogenous entity. Depending on the region, province, or even the community, the groups proceed in different manners. However, due to security issues, fieldwork is restricted, which means that research partners (or I myself) can collect material only in informal conversations and interviews via Whatsapp and telephone or, more rarely, interviews on-site. Two problems come with this. Firstly, information on the Koglweogo's activities in a particular region is only second-, if not third- or fourth-hand. Secondly, most of the verbal conversation about the Koglweogo is politicized, which means that this methodology only creates more epistemological doubts. The polarizing effect of the Koglweogo should not be underestimated. It divides society into supporters and opponents of the groups. The consequence is, to put it on a more general level, that interviewing is not the most useful way to gather data about vigilantes or should at least be combined with triangulation and, ideally, participant observation.

The knowledge I hence arrive to collect about the self-defense groups in the "red zones" only remains a vague shadow of the social reality and political dynamics unraveling on-site. Once compared, inconsistencies and contradictions come to the fore, disclosing implicit combat of (dis)information that seems to only serve the purpose to scapegoat, blame and divide groups, communities, or society as a whole. There were days when two different people sent me two local media reports on a violent incident in the north of the country, each telling the exact opposite story about what had happened. One blamed the Koglweogo for being responsible for the violence, the other claimed that the Koglweogo were the ones who had prevented the whole situation to escalate further. The epistemological doubts these situations trigger make me, more than ever before, have an appreciation for the power of participation and observation. Collecting ethnographic data by *being* there, participating with "heart and soul" as Justin Stagl (2002: 273) puts it, is irreplaceable. In 'red areas', however, participation is rarely an option, which unquestionably raises the question of what this means for anthropologists. Should we take the risk and ignore, how Janina Pawelz (2018) writes, our responsibility to stay alive during fieldwork? Should we accept that research on 'red areas' will not still our scientific claim and nevertheless continue? Should we turn to different subjects?

There are no simple answers to these questions and until today, I have only arrived at realizing three important things. Firstly, I will continue my research on the Koglweogo and the conflicts in the Sahel. Secondly, I will never be able to say something credible about the role the Koglweogo play as "nonstate security providers in Burkina Faso" and that my urge to understand what was "really going on" in 'red areas' would never be stilled. It might sound strange, but I am still struggling to let go of this ambition; maybe because I am, after more than ten years of fieldwork in the country, personally attached to the events unfolding. Secondly, I realized that an actor-centered approach would never

allow me to describe the Koglweogo phenomenon in an adequate, preferably unbiased, and value-neutral way. It is these small conclusions and insights that sparked my idea to reconceptualize vigilantism as a political process (forthcoming Kalfelis 2021a). I am still developing this approach and my thoughts on it would exceed the goal of this paper. But let me just briefly mention that investigating vigilantism as a process, on the one hand, describes how the phenomenon changes how different continuums of violence (Bourgois & Scheper-Hughes 2004) unfold in the everyday of people. On the other hand, it means to take to particular starting points, some of which I just mentioned, for my analysis: the normative biases towards vigilante groups, the decade-long political experiences of citizens with impunity, and my personal ethical doubts.

## **Ethical Considerations - From Personal Experience to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

I haven't always been so firm about the idea to conduct fieldwork with vigilantes<sup>2</sup>. First of all, it was these very same policy reports that reinforced my belief that it was too dangerous, even world-weary, to strive for an emic perspective on the Koglweogo. Stories and opinions I heard during my fieldwork on NGO partnerships in Burkina Faso (2009-2017) further fueled my anxieties. In 2020, in Ghana, I encountered similar narratives. If you would ask someone if he or she thinks that fieldwork with such groups is possible, the percentage is high that they will strongly argue against the idea. Vigilantes trigger our worst fears and strong resentments; ideologically, ethically, legally, and politically.

Especially my ethical and legal concerns set a strong impetus against the research I had in mind. Freshly graduated, I was afraid that working with groups violating international human rights would be a dead-end within academic institutions; maybe even a step too far that would hurt my academic career. And nobody, I figured, would finance this research in the first place. Today I can say that I was proven wrong in so many ways that it would lead too far to sketch my thoughts out. Let me only briefly say that academic institutions indeed did support this research and that audiences listening to my presentations would not put me against the wall as I had feared. Parallel to that, throughout the last years, the field logically changed as I did. Many Koglweogo groups registered as civil associations with municipalities, dampening my worries of conducting fieldwork "outside" of the law.<sup>3</sup>

Albeit a certain debilitation of my legal concerns, I am still in the process sort my ethical concerns and stances in this research. In the following, I will try to sketch out three interrelated levels of consideration. The first level is personal. It concerns my own social background, my political experiences, and related privileges as a white-skinned woman who grew up in Germany, as well as my, habitually shaped, ethical convictions. From this standpoint, the idea that people decide on whether a person is guilty or not and punish that person physically is problematic in many ways. At the same time, after 12 months of fieldwork in Burkina Faso, observing and experiencing the social injustice, political hostility, and impunity in the everyday of people, I was unable to deny the Koglweogo's 'governance' (Förster 2017) a social functionality. This ambivalence grew even stronger during fieldwork. I experienced situations that made me worry about my own psychological health, but also situations of positive astonishment. I observed people exposed to shame in uncomfortable ways, but also conflict

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<sup>2</sup> Without my colleague Dr. Amado Kabore and Hermann Konkobo it would have been impossible to gain access to the Koglweogo and I would like to thank them sincerely for their on-going support.

<sup>3</sup> Conducting participant observation with the Koglweogo is nevertheless challenging and I would not recommend to conduct such a fieldwork without knowing the people, the culture and the history of a place. When I gained access to the groups in 2018, I had already worked in Burkina Faso for almost ten years, which definitely gave me a certain intuition to assess the options and dangers for this research.

processes whose outcomes I would personally evaluate as just. Ethical ambivalence, as a consequence, is omnipresent in this research; and indissoluble to a certain degree. What I lacked, however, were the reflexive conceptual tools to properly describe its nuances.



Figure 2 Device for punitive practices in Yamtenga (Ouagadougou), photo by the author.

This is how I arrived at differentiating between *ethical divergence* and *ethical discrepancy*. The former describes a state in which ethical considerations are drifting apart. It means to rethink one's own habitually shaped convictions and to empathize and relate to new moralities. Nevertheless, *ethical divergence* describes a tense condition of being torn, which underlines ethical considerations as a non-fixed, dynamic process that never arrives at conclusive moments. *Ethical discrepancy*, on the other hand, tackles situations that I find my ethical convictions to be more firm. It means that I experience anxiety and resentment towards the situation I am facing; situations I, from a methodological point of view, should try to avoid. I am still figuring this out, but the two notions helped me significantly during research to define my own limits in a less biased, but more reflexive, less ultimate, but more sensitive way.

The second level relates to the Weberian norm that the state is the only legitimate monopoly of violence. Although vigilantism is a heterogeneous phenomenon that is neither new to the African continent nor to other world regions (Pratten and Sen 2007), its actual practices, the actual scale of alleged human rights violations (e.g. in comparison to state security), the negotiations on-site as well as the views of those concerned often remain either superficially documented or completely in the dark (Bachmann and Gelot 2012; Bellal 2018). It is mostly social scientists who have illuminated vigilantism from different vantage points and carved out its heterogeneous appearances and nature. In regards to Africa, there is a rich body of literature about popular and pre-colonial justice as well as on vigilantism as an ambiguous expression of citizenship (Bidaguren & Estrella 2002; Comaroff & Comaroff 2006; Grätz & Kirsch 2010; Hagberg 2019; Harnischfeger 2003; Meagher 2007; Smith 2004). However, maybe

because these groups have rarely been studied from within, two analytical perspectives dominate in those studies. One perspective investigates the phenomenon as popular and pre-colonial justice, the other analyses vigilantism as an ambiguous expression of citizenship and, hence, with regards to the state.

The latter perspective is what I am interested in. It roots in the idea that vigilantes are the opposing binary to the state, the 'nonstate', the other side of power; the antithesis to the state's monopoly of violence. This not only neglects the processual, entangled, and multiple relations between vigilantes and state (Thelen et al. 2018, forthcoming Kalfelis 2021b), which I observed during fieldwork. Coming back to my research, I, firstly, took note that this angle implicitly shapes my ethical concerns towards my research with the Koglweogo. It is, indeed, almost impossible to *not* examine, write and reflect about the phenomenon without thinking about state security, legal institutions, and the notion of the state's monopoly of violence. But what then about places where "the state" is completely absent or hostile towards its citizens? How then do justice to the inter-generational political experiences with the postcolonial state and the distrust in its institutions? Should we, as researchers, continue to stay close to state-centered norms, and if not, what would be the (utopian/dystopian) alternative? In how far should we distance from such norms as part of the decolonization of academic knowledge? Consequently, ethics, in this research also lead to questions of power, violence, and the state as well as my own margins of thinking. They are, hence, not only inherent to my methodology but also guide the epistemology behind my analysis.

It is these state-centered norms that lead me to the issue of international human rights and the way related discourse emphasizes violations committed by the Koglweogo. My thesis is the following: Human rights discourse is turning a blind eye towards structurally embedded human rights violations, those deeply rooted in the institutions of the postcolonial state. Put differently, to fall back on Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philipp Burgois (2004) again, it is everyday violence towards which human rights discourse is blind. I made two observations in this regard: firstly, these blind spots illustrate how, since decolonization, the international community has tended to ignore the large gap between the formal status of African political systems and the *Realpolitik* that is happening on the ground. Secondly, blind spots indicate that the articles in the human rights declaration are not of equal value. While the violations of article number 5 "No one shall be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" raise a lot of international attention, there is much more silence about, for example, Article 6 "Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law" or Article 17.2 "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property". With this, I do not want to imply that everyday violence is equal to murder, torture, and systemic killing. However, when looking at the dynamics unraveling in the Sahel, the silent violations of dignity and citizens' rights are undeniable. This is why my research, in regards to the phenomenon of vigilantism, explicitly shifted the attention to everyday forms of violence and the traces it leaves in the lifeworlds and biographies of people.

## Conclusion

The epistemological, ethical, and political issues this paper raised lead to more questions about our political responsibility during research in and on 'red areas' as well as our knowledge production on conflict in postcolonial contexts.

1. How can we, as researchers, politically engage in the conflicts we work on apart from writing papers? Where are ethical limits to this political engagement?

2. How can we cope with polarized (dis)information in a productive, scientific manner from afar?
3. How can we epistemologically approximate and write about violence in postcolonial research fields in less biased, but at the same time non-apologetic manners?

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