

RESEARCH

Rites of Mobility and Epidemic Control: Ebola Virus Disease in the Mano River Basin

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When understood as an embedded practice in the Mano River Basin, the issue of mobility need not threaten Ebola Virus Disease epidemic control efforts. Rites of mobility in the Mano River Basin ensure that migrants are often enmeshed in circuits of knowledge and compliance that have important implications for epidemic control. Local hosts, with whom migrants frequently have very intimate relations, often know a lot about their migrant guests and can exercise significant influence over them. If properly engaged by public health officials, these hosts could offer significant leverage in mapping geographies of transmission as well as in promoting compliance with epidemic control measures.

Keywords: mobility; epidemic control; Mano River Basin; Ebola Virus Disease

*He took us to the chief and said, 'these are my strangers. If they do anything wrong you should hold me responsible.'*¹

Introduction

Discourses on mobility and epidemic control in the context of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) outbreak in West Africa's Mano River Basin have tended to treat mobility as a dis-embedded phenomenon shorn of the ensemble of rites and rituals in which movement is often immersed. In this mode of analysis – which is common to both those who argue for unfettered movement and their opponents who have called for curbs on mobility – migrants become untethered and illegible particles floating between locations. Because of this common misunderstanding, it is predictable that, in the face of a virus for which the legibility of infection patterns and compliance with stringent control measures have long been the only efficacious methods of control, arguments for curbs on mobility have tended to hold their own with policy makers as well as with the general public.

I argue in this work that viewing mobility as a dis-embedded and generic phenomenon, while appealing from an epistemological standpoint, is illusory. This is because mobility is always embedded in the rites through which it acquires meaning. Mobility has different meanings and implications, and takes different forms across time and space. The rites in which mobility is embedded in the countries of the Mano River Basin ensure that migrants are almost always enmeshed in circuits of knowledge and

compliance that have very important implications for epidemic control. Local hosts, with whom migrants have very intimate relations, not only know a great deal about their migrant guests, but can also exercise significant influence over them. If properly engaged by public health officials, these hosts could offer significant leverage in mapping the geographies of transmission as well as in promoting compliance with epidemic control measures. Thus, when mobility is properly understood as an embedded practice in the countries of the Mano River Basin, it need not pose the threats to epidemic control that many have assumed it might.

Clamping down on mobility in the face of a serious outbreak

The identity of the mysterious virus killing people in the Forest Region of Guinea was only confirmed as EVD in March 2014, three months after it claimed its first known victim in Guéckédou Prefecture (WHO, 2015a). By the first week of January 2015 the EVD outbreak had become the longest in history. Across the three countries of the Mano River Basin – Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia – it ravaged cities, towns and villages with an estimated total of 20,712 infections and 8,220 deaths (UNECA, 2015a: xii, WHO, 2015b). The disease overwhelmed healthcare services and wreaked economic damage on areas that were still recovering from the devastating Mano River Basin wars of the 1990s (UNECA, 2015a: xviii–xiv, UNECA, 2015b). Beyond the three countries of the Mano River Basin, infections were recorded in Nigeria, Mali, Spain and the US, and in August 2014 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a 'public health emergency of international concern' (WHO, 2014b).

The links between EVD and mobility are intimate. Physical contact with the bodily fluids of infected people

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who have already had symptoms of the virus is the only confirmed mode of propagation. Contaminated people who move about can spread the virus to those they come into physical contact with, either directly or indirectly through contaminated environments (WHO, 2015b). During the recent outbreak, the term 'imported case' (International SOS, 2015) came to signify infected people who travelled to new areas bringing the virus with them. High-profile 'imported cases' included Liberians who flew to Nigeria and the US, contaminating people in those countries, and a Guinean who travelled to Senegal and fell sick there (FrontPage Africa, 2014, Almendrala, 2014, RFI, 2014a). In an era where regional integration is purported to be a key goal both at sub-regional and regional levels, the problematic nature of 'imported cases' has not been lost on some.

If mobility is understood to be key to the spread of EVD, then the limitation of mobility is central to the control of the virus. EVD has long been regarded as a virus with no known licensed cure or vaccine. The main approach to epidemic control in EVD outbreaks has been to break contact between those that have been exposed to the virus and others in the communities in which they live and may have died (WHO, 2015b). This quarantining of infected people works to prevent others from coming into physical contact with their bodily fluids. Isolation and treatment of symptoms also reduces mortality rates in the face of a virus that can kill between 25 per cent and 90 per cent of those infected (WHO, 2015b). Curtailing the movement of the contacts of infected people allows for the monitoring of any signs of the development of the disease in those contacts. The proper disposal of the corpses of those killed by the virus prevents others from handling highly infectious cadavers and getting contaminated (WHO, 2015b).

The WHO's recommendations on travel and mobility in the context of the EVD outbreak can be summarized in two sentences: first, infected people were to be isolated and prevented from travelling; second, the contacts of infected people were also to be prevented from travelling for the 21-day window in which the virus could develop, so they could be monitored for signs of development of the disease (WHO, 2014b).

However, the WHO, *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) *Institut Pasteur*, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and other organizations that assumed a frontline role in curbing the disease, explicitly discouraged curbs on mobility and travel. Curbs on travel, it was argued, made it harder for health practitioners fighting the disease, as well as their equipment and supplies, to get into and leave affected countries. They also dampened economic activity and, in doing so, further impoverished areas suffering from EVD making it harder for societies to resist and recover from the outbreak. Further, given the important role of mobility as one of the time-tested resilience strategies for many locals in West Africa,² official curbs on mobility only promoted clandestine movement in an area where borders are very porous (Mackenzie, 2014). This made it harder for

officials to monitor the movement of sick people and their contacts (Mackenzie, *ibid*).

Despite these recommendations and arguments, there was a rash of curbs and bans in an effort to stop the spread of the disease that went far beyond the recommendations of the WHO. They ranged from the cancellation and suspension of visas, to border closures and bans on entry for residents and citizens of the Mano River Basin countries that were worst affected by the outbreak (Bangura, 2014). While the international restrictions targeting these countries were met with much criticism, restrictions were also made both within the countries and between them. In Liberia, for example, the government quarantined neighborhoods of the capital city, Monrovia, preventing people from entering or leaving for days (Onishi, 2014). Sierra Leone quarantined multiple districts heavily affected by the virus (O'Carroll, 2014). Guinea, on various occasions, closed its borders with Liberia and Sierra Leone (The Associated Press, 2015).

Instead of regarding the clamp down on mobility simply as a precautionary measure taken by countries and populations worried about 'imported cases' of EVD, it is better to locate such a move in the wider processes of state formation, global anti-immigration politics, and global inequalities. Hastily resorting to the sedentarization of people is a practice common to states that wish to render their territory more legible in order to facilitate control. Because mobile people, and their assets, are less identifiable than sedentary people, states tend to use the pretexts of 'civilization,' 'development' or 'pacification,' to sedentarize nomadic populations (Fratkin, 2001: 2–16, Scott, 2010: 10–11, Knighton, 2012). The widespread resort to flight as a means of escaping and resisting various pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial state impositions across Africa has reinforced state apathy towards 'unfettered' mobility (Mamdani, 2001: 163, Richards, 1952: 67–70, Scott, 2010: 103–4, Herbst, 2000: 20, Hochschild, 1999: 161).

The specific characteristics of the EVD crisis also allowed its easy insertion into well-established anti-immigration and, sometimes, racist discourses (Bangura, 2014, Sullivan, 2014). Intra-African xenophobia centered on this issue was particularly disconcerting from a Pan-African point of view (The News, 2014). But properly projected against the background of global inequalities, the haste with which some African states have sought to dissociate themselves from the Mano River Basin countries can be understood as a performance of distance. This performance is a reaction to the tendency of other countries to homogenize and to punish the smallest 'infraction' in their dealings with African states. We see this tendency to homogenize in the propensity to speak of an EVD epidemic in West Africa, and more mystifyingly, Africa, instead of the Mano River Basin. Consequently, some African countries seek to obviate, through this distancing, the loss of foreign direct investment and tourism revenue that results from being linked, no matter how tenuously, with EVD (Ombok and Bennet, 2014).

The quarantine, as an exercise in state authority, has taken various forms across space and time in the three worst affected countries. In Freetown, warning tape

and a security guard posted at the gate of a quarantined house were often used to warn people away and ensure that those quarantined did not leave their compounds. In a city where many complain of cramped living conditions, staying at home for the 21-day incubation period only increased the feeling of asphyxiation.³ In rural areas of Macenta Prefecture in Guinea, quarantined people lived in what could be called open-air seclusion. They could not leave their compounds, and other people had to stay at least five meters away from the compounds. Larger rural compounds ensured that the quarantine was not as suffocating as it was in overcrowded cities.⁴

When quarantine regimes started in the three countries, there were cases of households quarantined with no basic provisions provided. But this situation was to quickly evolve in all three countries over time as those quarantined came to be provided with basic essentials, especially food. NGOs such as Plan International and the World Food Program played leading roles in providing basic essentials to quarantined people in Guinea. But complaints were common regarding the food and materials provided, as some peoples' essential needs were not met. For example, people could be supplied with rice and oil but lack fish, or fuel materials to cook the food supplies. These complaints were seen as one of the main causes of breaching quarantines, an issue that will be revisited in this work.⁵

The physical unit subjected to quarantine was varied, and it evolved over time. At Ebola treatment centers (ETC) the focus was often on individuals, specifically sick people, and those who were seen as contacts. But at the beginning of the outbreak, state quarantines targeted entire households regardless of whether the sick person had been in contact with every person in that compound or not. In a city like Freetown, where multiple families often shared apartment complexes, this meant that people who might have had little to do with the sick person were also quarantined. As the outbreak spiraled out of control, states began to quarantine whole neighborhoods. The quarantining of West Point in Monrovia made the headlines,⁶ but many neighborhoods of Freetown were routinely quarantined. The government of Sierra Leone extended these quarantines further to cover whole districts and even enforced a complete lock-down of the country on two occasions.⁷

The extent to which quarantines succeeded in limiting the movement of people varied. Efforts at quarantining single homes had mixed results at the beginning of the outbreak. In Freetown the presence of 'yard roads' — byways cutting through homes and compounds — meant that people could often go and come as they wished, even while under quarantine. It is important to note that people not only 'broke out' of quarantined compounds, they often 'broke in' after their business outside the home was done. But there were also cases, in all three countries, in both rural and urban areas, where people simply fled quarantines, sometimes resulting in transmission of the virus in new areas. Wanting to die near loved ones and seeking alternative treatment were often reasons for the flight of sick people. This was particularly prevalent when

the lethality of EVD was a leading campaign message from states officials as well as NGOs.⁸

While quarantining single homes was difficult, quarantining whole villages, neighborhoods and districts proved to be even more so. When the state decided to quarantine Tonkolili District at the height of the outbreak in Sierra Leone, they blockaded the main roads leading in and out of the district such as the highway from Makeni, through Magburaka to Kono. However, all this meant was that people could not travel along the road; it did not stop them from crossing in and out of the district through the countless paths and roads that the state had no way of policing.⁹ The intensification of policing of quarantined communities did not solve the problem of the spread of the virus either, as was seen in the occasional 'escape' of sick people that sometimes led to flare-ups of the disease in new areas.¹⁰

What seemed to make a difference in the effectiveness of quarantines was the improved messages concerning EVD, particularly around the significant possibility of survival in the case of early diagnosis and medical attention at ETCs.¹¹ Greater acceptance of messaging concerning EVD not only led people to respect quarantines, but it also seemed to encourage some local communities to enforce their own quarantine rules.

The village of Boo in Macenta Prefecture, Guinea was a good example. When the disease was devastating neighboring communities, the people of Boo held a meeting and agreed on the following rules: 1) people were forbidden from travelling to places where there were EVD cases; 2) those who went to such places were supposed to stay away from Boo until the end of the epidemic; 3) no one was supposed to host anyone over night in the village, and; 4) the riders of commercial motorcycles operating in Boo were forbidden from carrying anyone that was not a Boo resident, and people from Boo were forbidden from travelling with any motorcyclist who was not from Boo.¹² This example is not an isolated case. Local authorities in Koinadugu District in Sierra Leone established rules to restrict all movement in and out of the district, except by those individuals who were 'providing essential services.'¹³

The promise of a rites approach

A key problem with discourses on mobility in the context of EVD is that they often focus exclusively on the act of mobility while ignoring the rites in which mobility is embedded. This concentration on activity with little reference to the rites in which it is embedded dismembers a social process by dissociating it from its field of meaning. In doing this, a severely myopic and stunted vision of this activity emerges limiting understandings of why it happens, how it happens, the ways in which different activities intersect with other processes, and the consequences of this across a social sphere understood both in a spatial and temporal sense.

The act of movement is similar to many important social processes in that it is steeped in rites. By rites I refer to a series of practices that give meaning to, communicate meaning about, and circumscribe the realms of possibility, of social processes. This definition of rites helps to sever

the links that scholars tend to make between rites and rituals on the one hand, and the religious on the other. While acknowledging the fact that many rites and rituals are religious in nature, the assertion here is that they do not have to be so and that rites can be void(ed) of religious meaning and religious features (Metcalf and Huntington, 1991). This distinction is linked to a related move from the focus on rites as extraordinary occasional occurrences to more quotidian practices that inform everyday life. It is usual for work on rites and ritual to focus on the extraordinary, including rites of passage like circumcision, secret society initiations, marriage and the enthronement of leaders. Their pomp and grandeur command attention, but as Salokoski has noted, even 'everyday life [can be] thoroughly ritualized' (Salokoski, 2006: 26).

The example of male circumcision among the Gisu of Uganda increases our understanding of how rites give meaning to social processes (Heald, 1999). The cutting of the foreskin of the penis is preceded and followed by an elaborate set of practices including the announcement of the intention to undergo circumcision, the wearing of distinct costumes, the blowing of horns, dancing by those to be circumcised, visits to relatives, and the brewing and drinking of millet beer and offerings to the ancestors (Heald, 1999: 15–17). The cutting itself is a well-defined activity pregnant with rules and expectations during which the person circumcised is supposed to stand completely still and show total control and bravery in the face of what is described as excruciating pain (ibid: 11–12).

It is through all of these rituals that the act of cutting the foreskin of the penis assumes 'the distinctive character of Gisu circumcision' (Heald, 1999: 31), that comes to define Gisu manhood as brave, controlled and unflinching in the face of the gravest danger. It is this rite that has also come to define Gisu manhood as a violent one, credited with higher than normal rates of homicide (ibid: 33–6).

Ntukula's account of marriage rites among the Ngoni of Tanzania provides another example (Ntukula, 2004). The union of a man and woman in marriage is embedded in an elaborate set of practices that transform it into what is known as the social practice of marriage among the Ngoni. This includes the boy proposing to relatives of the girl, various types of gift-giving, visits, the negotiation and payment of bride wealth, virginity tests and instruction of the would be wife in how to care for a husband and children (ibid, 2004: 55–61).

These and other studies (Janzen, 1992, Salokoski, 2006, Musabyimana, 2006), all point to the embeddedness of acts in fields of practices that give them meaning that stretches far beyond what could otherwise be seen as the core act – the cutting of the foreskin of the penis, for example. What is noteworthy here is the fact that these acts on their own do not necessarily carry any of the meanings that these rites imbue them with. The gulf in meaning between a Gisu circumcision and the circumcision of a week-old baby in an up-market clinic in Accra, Nairobi or Dakar shows the not so negligible contributions of the ensemble of practices grouped under the name 'rites and rituals' to the meanings and implications the act of cutting the foreskin of the penis assumes.

Exploring practices as embedded processes by considering the rites within which they are immersed has multiple advantages that are obvious from the evidence shared above. It allows for a better understanding of the significance of an act first in terms of the meanings, understood as connotation, which people ascribe to that act. Thus circumcision among the Gisu comes to signify the imparting and testing of a specific version of manhood and masculinity (Heald, 1999: 33–7). Similarly, marriage among the Ngoni as detailed by Ntukula comes to signify a union of two families instead of simply 'a private affair' in which two people move in with each other to found a family (Ntukula, 2004: 56).

The meaning of things is closely related to what they can do or the effects they can have. We cannot understand the causal implications of processes without properly considering them as embedded practices. For it is the ensemble of practices that they are immersed in and form a part of that enables them to do certain things and have certain effects. It is reasonable to expect that the marriage of two adults who meet and get married by signing a state register on their own without informing their relatives will have different effects on ties between their two families than the elaborate Ngoni marriage rites described by Ntukula. Thus discussing the impact of a marriage on ties and interactions between the families of the married couple will only be enlightening where attention is paid to the rites in which the union is immersed.

Much of the discussion about the impact of mobility on epidemic control and prevention is plagued by not treating mobility as an embedded activity. This is true both of those advocating curbs on mobility and those who have argued against these curbs. Mobility as cited, debated, assessed and evaluated in terms of its impact on epidemic control in the wake of the EVD outbreak in the Mano River Basin is often considered as a completely dis-embedded phenomenon (Bangura, 2014, Pailey, 2014, Friedman, 2014, Poletto et al, 2014, Ghose, 2014). The rites in which mobility is routinely embedded in the region are never considered. The movement of people from one place to another is understood in severely reductionist terms. An equivalent of this 'bare-bones' approach would be to treat marriage among the Ngoni simply as two people moving into a house together to start a family and of Gisu circumcision as the cutting of the foreskin of the penis among young Gisu men. This renders these acts as virtually empty containers whose meaning and significance are both severely circumscribed.

'Bare bones' conceptualizations of mobility in the discussions on EVD in the Mano River Basin represent the realization of a general mobility phenomenon that is of some epistemological value in facilitating cross-cultural conversations. This is because it obviates the need to be bogged down in the details of each social setting in terms of who is moving, how movement is planned, organized and implemented, where people are moving to, the reasons for which they are moving and how physical movement is understood. The problem is that conversations about mobility, just as those about circumcision, marriage, enthronement, or harvest, *have to be bogged*

down in specifics. The fluid and unfettered conversation afforded by 'bare bones' understandings of any of these concepts is deeply problematic because there is, in effect, no generic 'mobility' just as there is no generic 'marriage.' Anthropologists would argue that, beyond a very shallow level, what marriage means and what we can legitimately say about it from one community to another varies widely depending on the field of practices and meanings in which the minimal act of union is embedded. Therefore in order to understand the impacts of mobility on epidemic control in the context of EVD in the Mano River Basin, we need to examine the specific forms and substance of mobility in that area of West Africa.

Research methodology

In this work, I have embedded mobility in the Mano River Basin within the broader field of rites in order to properly understand its impacts on epidemic control. This work draws from an extensive literature on mobility in Africa and research on mobility and inter-communal relations that I conducted in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia between 2008 and 2011, long before the EVD outbreak. Focusing on population movements during the Mano River Basin wars and patterns of inter-communal violence involving refugees, I conducted 359 semi-structured interviews in the three countries. Research was conducted across spaces that ranged from urban areas to rural communities and from local settlements to refugee camps. Some of these areas were later to be heavily affected by the EVD epidemic. Work in Guinea was conducted in Conakry and in the prefectures of Guéckédou, Macenta, N'Zérékoré, Yomou and Lola in the Forest Region. The sites of research in Sierra Leone were Freetown and the districts of Kailahun and Kono in the Eastern Province. Monrovia and Salayea District in Lofa County were the sites of research in Liberia.

I interviewed a broad range of people including traditional authorities, local level state functionaries, farmers, sharecroppers, self-identified autochthones, migrants and refugees. A snowballing sampling method allowed me to deliberately craft a sample that included men and women of different generations, and to seek out people often identified as possessing important information on various issues.

I supplemented this with a series of telephone interviews in September 2015 with three respondents from Sierra Leone and Guinea. The respondent from Guinea was recruited in the early days of the EVD outbreak by an international organization playing a central role in fighting the EVD epidemic. His roles were to monitor food deliveries to affected communities in Macenta Prefecture in the Forest Region of Guinea. He was also made a focal point for the welfare of EVD survivors. In these capacities he roamed the prefecture, visiting towns and villages alike, interacting with local authorities, affected families and survivors. He provided rare insights into ground level efforts at EVD control and prevention, and the lives of communities and individuals in the worst affected region in Guinea.

One of the interviewees in Sierra Leone was a teacher based in Freetown who lived through the outbreak and whose neighbors were quarantined. She lost close relatives during the outbreak and offered insights into the lives and responses of the urban targets of EVD control and prevention interventions. A more rural perspective was contributed by the second respondent from Sierra Leone who lives in a village close to the Tonkolili District headquarter town of Magburaka. That village saw many EVD cases; individual houses, the village itself, and then all of Tonkolili District were quarantined at various times during the outbreak. This respondent also lost relatives and acquaintances during the outbreak.

Rites of mobility in the Mano River Basin

In this section, I quote the thoughts on mobility of a young African employee of a Pan-African organization because it provides a good entry point into a discussion on rites of mobility in the Mano River Basin:

Let's say I just discovered I have to visit a city somewhere in the world.... I go online to check the profile of the place: race, crime, hotels, trains.... Then I begin to work on couch surfing. I belong to a budget travelling site called www.couchsurfing.org. It has thousands of volunteers around the world who host travellers for free. These are total strangers, but we are all peace lovers, who want to prove to the world that capitalists are wrong and also enjoy the back alley street food, local culture...etc.... I've hosted over 50 people in my house. It's just 'Hey, welcome. Here's my couch, that's a spare key, a city map and a SIM card. See you for coffee when I close from work!' Then I look for the crowd from my country. There's always a 'Country X folks in this or that country' Facebook page. They know where I can get food from our country and do my braids.... If I were visiting long term they will help with comparing neighborhoods, school districts, banks.... I also have my graduate school alumni crowd. They are always so ready to help and we have at least 50 Facebook pages.

While not necessarily partaking in online country and alumni groups, or couch surfing, many communities in the Mano River Basin have rites of mobility that are no less elaborate. We could divide these into pre- and post-movement rites, while acknowledging the act of movement as only a brief episode inserted in and nourished by this broader field of practices.

Paramount to many in these communities, where movement is pervasive and has for a long time been a key strategy of resilience, is the need to have people who will receive and help care for others in destination sites. This preoccupation is best evidenced in the deep culture of making and cultivating friends elsewhere that could one day act as hosts.¹⁴ Chance encounters during market days, secret society initiations, burial ceremonies, marriages, etc. are quite often transformed into deep friendships. People will approach others and explicitly ask them

to become their 'friends,' 'aunts,' 'uncles,' 'daughters' and 'sons.'

People are careful to sustain relations with their friends through routine short visits, where this is possible.¹⁵ Trips to weekly markets, visits to family members, trips to participate in ceremonies including marriage, childbirth, secret society initiations and burials were often taken advantage of to spend a few days with or briefly call on friends.¹⁶ The visitor will invite the friend to visit her as well. These visits sometimes include the exchange of gifts,¹⁷ and are also occasions for the presentation of a friend to relatives and key members of the community. These extra-jural relationships co-exist with more jural ones between families located in different places that are tied together, for example, through marriage.¹⁸

Another way in which relationships are sustained and valorized is through sending children to stay with friends. This could be for short visits during holidays or for much longer periods. While the longer-term placing of children sometimes has economic motivations, this is not always the case. It is sometimes employed as the ultimate sign of trust and friendship. It is not uncommon for people to name children after their friends or the relatives of their friends. Sometimes, these children are then sent to live with the person after whom they are named.¹⁹

The act of movement itself is often well planned and choreographed. Not unlike our postmodern respondent extensively quoted above, people in the Mano River Basin often do not just get up and go. When time and circumstances permit, they will often contact a friend or relative who lives in the destination area. Where they know no one there, they will seek out a relative or friend who has a friend or relative in the place of destination. Very often it is these contacts in the place of destination that will receive and host a traveler before the traveller settles down on their own. Even during the Mano River Basin wars, when refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) were (often hastily) fleeing violence, there are many who reported picking the villages and towns they settled in as refugees on account of having friends and relatives in those places.²⁰

This need to know people in the place of destination and inform them of travel plans is critical in many Mano River Basin communities. It is not uncommon for villages in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia to have stringent rules requiring all visitors to have local hosts who will stand for them in front of the community. In these villages, people often will not interact with a visitor, including providing him or her a place to sleep, without knowing the local host to whom that stranger 'belonged.' People receiving guests have to formally introduce them to the chief before they can host them.²¹ Visitors who lack hosts before their arrival will often go to the home of the chief who will adopt them as his guest or place them with another family in the community.²² An old man in the Guinean village of Dongueta, in Yomou Prefecture on the border with Liberia's Lofa County put it this way:

As a stranger if you have no host the chief has to be your host I have never seen a stranger here who

has not been to see the chief and who has no host.... All the strangers here should be shown to the chief and have a host. Our ancestors started this. Without this things will not go well here. Before someone comes to live with you, you need to know what he is able to do, what he is doing, etc. If you do not know those things you can tell him to leave. This was so even before the time of President Sekou Touré.²³

In many of these communities a visitor, through these processes, comes to be recognized as a guest 'belonging' to a specific host. This host could be someone recognized as an autochthone of the community or an earlier migrant. A key facet of this relationship involves the host's assumption of legal responsibility for the guest in the community. This means that he or she speaks and facilitates exchanges on behalf of the guest. People complain to him or her when the guest offends someone and they can be forced to pay compensation on behalf of the guest in these situations.²⁴ The host is supposed to facilitate the integration of their guest in the wider community.

The guest repays his or her host partly through the symbolic demonstration of respect. The use of titles of respect to address one's host,²⁵ the naming of children after the host, the consultation of hosts concerning important things in the life of the guest, and helping the host with various tasks are all common.²⁶

While much of this is facilitated by the fact that guests often stay in the homes of their hosts, there are many instances in which guests stay elsewhere in a community but maintain these relations with their hosts. Sometimes, it is hosts who, lacking enough space at home, seek alternative sites for their guests to stay. Where guests are long-term visitors in farming communities, it is their hosts who often provide them with land to farm.²⁷ They often end up farming plots adjacent to the farms of their hosts.

The fundamental things of relevance about processes of movement here are not unique to rural areas. During the same wars in the Mano River Basin many Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees fled to the Guinean capital, Conakry. The decision to seek refuge there was often guided by knowledge of the presence of friends and relatives in the city. While some of those receiving these refugees in Conakry were Guineans, often it was just refugees or migrants who had gone there earlier during the war that acted as hosts. Other refugees, who did not know anyone in Conakry, just hoped they would meet an acquaintance there or strike a relationship with their fellow citizens who were already there (Onoma, 2013: 85–90).

The Sierra Leonean Embassy in Conakry came to play a central role in the settlement of refugees in the Guinean capital. It was often the place where those who were in Conakry went to meet 'their people' coming from Sierra Leone and Liberia. It was not unusual for public transport vehicles coming from Sierra Leone to offload some passengers at the embassy. Lucky refugees went home with those who had knowledge of their arrival and were waiting for them there. Others often stayed in the grounds of the embassy for days until they struck a hosting or home/sharing agreement with one of the many settled refugees

who used the embassy grounds and its environments as a meeting point (Onoma, 2013: 89).

Unlike their colleagues in the Forest Region of Guinea who had to form relationships with Guineans, the refugees in Conakry mostly established and sustained intra-refugee networks (Onoma, 2013: 85–90, 111–18). What is of relevance here is that the same networks of knowledge and compliance that characterized rural migration were also evident in the rather cosmopolitan capital. Both before and after their arrival, people moving in the Mano River Basin, regardless of whether to rural or urban areas, often had very close relationships with hosts in the areas of destination. This is not a Mano River Basin phenomenon. These rites of mobility are common in many areas of the African continent and have characterized processes of movement going back to the colonial and pre-colonial period (Richards, 1952: 76, Colson, 1970, Dorjahn and Fyfe, 1962, Brooks, 1993, Shack, 1979, Onoma, 2013: 43–7). Furthermore, these practices characterize mobility among people from West Africa and the rest of the continent, even outside of Africa (Koser, 2003: 7, Arthur, 2000: 17–34, Garneau, 2010). For example, when a tailor friend of mine in Dakar decided to migrate to Brazil he informed me that his first move was to look for friends and relatives who knew people who had settled in Brazil and that could serve as his hosts.

Rites of mobility and EVD control

There are three specific ways in which mobility, when considered as an embedded phenomenon in the Mano River Basin, can contribute to epidemic control and prevention. First, the rites in which mobility is embedded provide opportunities for influencing the movement patterns of sick and exposed people. Second, these rites can render ill health more visible, thus increasing treatment and contact tracing. Finally, they can also influence the seeking of medical help by the sick, thus reducing mortality rates and new infections.

Much of the discourse on how mobility helps spread EVD is not infused with recognition of the rites and rituals in which movement is embedded in the Mano River Basin. People who are on the move are often going to specific hosts whom they sometimes inform ahead of time, and whose consent they sometimes get before they set out on their journeys.²⁸ This means that state health officials have an opportunity to influence the movement of people by working with local communities. Would-be hosts of people coming from intense EVD infection zones can let their guests know that it is necessary to delay their trip due to public health concerns, and local rules and regulations.

It is the case, at the very local level, that consideration and exploitation of well-known rituals is part of the repertoire for controlling high-risk movement by those grappling to control the spread of the virus. In the example of Boo in Macenta Prefecture Guinea, the community decided at a meeting that village members should discourage all potential guests from EVD affected communities from visiting. Those who came unannounced had to be sent away immediately. So it was that when a young lady arrived unannounced from the EVD-affected village of Irie

at the home of a relative in Boo on a motorcycle taxi, her would-be host instructed her to immediately return to Irie without getting off the motorcycle. It turned out that her father-in-law and mother had both died of EVD and on her return to Irie she was transported to the ETC in Guéckédou town where she died.²⁹

The personal relations that often exist between would-be hosts and would-be guests can impact the efficacy of such modes of public health messaging in two ways, suggested by the story of the young visitor from Irie who was turned back from Boo and who later died. The personal relations between would-be hosts and their would-be guests means that this information would be better targeted, and relayed in more personalized ways. The close relations characterized by respect between locals and their would-be guests also means that there is a far greater chance of people respecting counsel from their would-be hosts than impersonal non-targeted information from public health officials, which may not reach them in the first place. Building on the rites in which movement is embedded in the Mano River Basin can allow states to influence movement in highly intelligent and effective ways that avoid blanket curbs.

An exploitation of the rites of mobility in the Mano River Basin can also help render the virus and its geography more legible. The nature of EVD makes the legibility of the disease paramount to control and prevention efforts. Knowledge of infected people allows for their isolation to prevent the infection of others. It also permits the identification of their contacts and the tracing and monitoring of these contacts to break chains of infection. While it is clear that having the resources to effectively hospitalize and treat cases, and to monitor contacts, was a problem early on in the EVD outbreak in the Mano River Basin, it is also true that states lacked even the ability to know and properly map the geography of infections. As some commentators have noted, the predatory and exploitative colonial origins and history of African states has meant that African societies have often sought to keep the state at arm's length. Abuses by the postcolonial states that have been hardest hit by EVD – Liberia (Onoma, 2014: 138–9, Sesay et al, 2009: 19–39), Sierra Leone (Onoma, 2014: 138–9, Abdullah, 2004: 43–8, Kpundeh, 2004: 90–5), and Guinea (McGovern, 2012) – have not done much to endear those states to their societies (Bangura, 2014).

States in Africa have often struggled to build the capacity needed to render attention-shy societies legible in order to subject them to routine interventions that would fall under what Mann refers to as the exercise of 'infrastructural power' (Mann, 1984: 185, Kohli, 2004: 9, Jackson, 1990, Bates, 2008, Herbst, 2000, Grindle, 1996, Reno, 1998: 26, Scott, 1998: 235–7, Hyden, 1980, 24–8, Obadare and Willems 2014). Lacking such capacity, a system through which information on infection patterns and the movements of infected people and their contacts is volunteered to the state is essential for EVD control. Rites of mobility in the Mano River Basin provide excellent possibilities for this. Hosts often have extensive information about their newly arrived guests that sometimes includes

the state of their families and the nature of their activities in the home areas they arrived from. Hosts would know whether people are arriving from areas of intense EVD infection and, sometimes, whether they have recently lost relatives. Further, because guests are often in the presence of their hosts, the hosts are bound to know if these new arrivals fall sick, and also the people they interact with during their illness. These hosts could play an invaluable role by providing information about new arrivals, their contact history and state of health to public health officials.

The rites in which mobility is embedded in the Mano River Basin, if properly utilized, could also contribute to the seeking of treatment by the infected. It is true that even after the shortage of hospital beds was addressed in many communities, people did not always seek treatment when they fell ill, and this refusal to enter treatment facilities is only one element in the resistance of suggested behavioral changes aimed at stemming the spread of EVD (WHO, 2015c). So how could one ensure that new arrivals to an area from a zone of intense infection seek treatment when they fall sick and in doing so potentially break the chain of infection?

While these arrivals may look on the state and its agents with some suspicion, they go to great lengths to demonstrate respect for their hosts. This means that guests who begin to develop symptoms are unlikely to refuse to seek medical attention if their hosts tell them to do so. What public health officials need to do in these situations is to work on engendering the goodwill and collaboration of local hosts, who can then exert influence on their guests to comply with epidemic control measures. Given the embedded historical influences on poor state-society relations in the Mano River countries (Bangura, 2014), this is a challenge that will require committed political will, and progressive and creative relational change.

Investing in fine institutions

An opportunity for such collaboration was lost when a young Guinean student, who had lost close relatives to EVD, and had been exposed in his home country, travelled to Senegal in August 2014. He settled in the home of relatives who acted as his hosts in the Parcelles Assainies neighborhood of the city. After falling ill, he visited a local health post several times before eventually being diagnosed with EVD during a visit to the Fann Hospital three weeks into his stay in Dakar. The Senegalese authorities were able to correctly diagnose his illness as EVD aided by information from Guinean health officials about an Ebola contact they were monitoring who had travelled to Senegal (RFI, 2014a, 2014b). None of the people that hosted him, knew of his arrival from a zone of intense infection and of his subsequent illness volunteered information to the Senegalese authorities.

The story of the Guinean student shows that the mere existence of the rites of mobility described above does not guarantee their positive contribution to epidemic control. Public health officials have to deliberately engage local communities that play host to people from zones of infection in order to build links for the flow of information and

exertion of pressure for compliance with public health regulations.

The suggestion that local communities can play valuable roles in state efforts at epidemic control by rendering social dynamics more legible, and influencing compliance with state policies, is not an original one. Many in the ongoing struggle to deal with the EVD epidemic in the Mano River Basin have voiced this suggestion (WHO, 2015c, WHO, 2014c, Shrivastava, Shrivastava and Ramasamy, 2015: 318). What is new is the suggestion of ways in which, what is otherwise seen as threatening in the context of EVD – for example movement, holds potential for EVD control.

The engagement with local communities that is advocated here departs from the path of encouraging states to engineer social relations, which has provoked resistance and encouraged people to either flee from or push away the state (Scott, 1998, Hyden, 1980). It instead merely recommends tapping into existing local knowledge and compliance circuits. This needs to go beyond the focus on space, which often informs state interventions, to emphasize the geographies of fluid networks of knowledge and compliance that traverse national and local borders, and that are often spatially amorphous. This better permits the mapping, investigation and exploitation of flows in ways that the focus on spatially delimited zones does not allow for. It requires forms of cooperation and exchange between authorities at different levels and across different territories. Limiting interest in the specific sort of information required for EVD prevention and control, and making commitments against the use of information gathered for other state ends, may help reduce the rather predictable skepticism and fear with which many communities and individuals are likely to regard such a move. Placing public health officials at the head of such an exercise might help diminish predictable and rather reasonable social resistance.

Conclusion: the need to transcend the 'two publics'

In 1975 the late Nigerian intellectual, Peter Ekeh, published his highly influential 'Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: a theoretical statement.' In it he reflected on how the abusive and exploitative colonial history of African states had led to the creation of a primordial public steeped in morality and a civic one marked by amoral logic (Ekeh, 1975). At the heart of his argument was the widespread crisis of legitimacy that state structures have suffered in the eyes of African societies, usefully described by Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni as the 'coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Suspicion of the state among societies of the Mano River Basin (Bangura, 2014) will act as a stumbling block for immediate and sustained efforts to build and exploit the links and relationships that are contemplated in this work. However, if African states invest in significant efforts at reform that can help improve trust among their societies for better state-society relations, this can only put them in a stronger position to deal more effectively with future epidemics such as EVD.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Notes

- ¹ Interview with a with former Liberian refugee in Korete Village, Lofa County, Liberia on December 9, 2010 (MRB 356).
- ² Interviews with village leader in Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 22, 2009 (MRB 120); with farmer in Yende-Douane, June 27, 2009 (MRB 38); farmer in Kiligbema, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 28, 2009 (MRB 46); and with farmer in Tofawonde, Kailahun District, Sierra Leone, September 16, 2009 (MRB 194) - all brought out the important role that flight had played in helping people deal with impositions and threats from pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial authorities.
- ³ Phone interview with teacher in Freetown, Sierra Leone, September 2015.
- ⁴ Phone interview with Guinean EVD worker in Macenta Prefecture, Guinea, September 2015.
- ⁵ Phone interview with teacher in Freetown, Sierra Leone, September 2015.
- ⁶ The Guardian, 2014. 'Ebola quarantine in Liberia's capital sparks violence in slum.' Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/21/ebola-quarantine-violence-west-point-monrovia-liberia> [accessed October 15, 2015].
- ⁷ BBC News, 2014. 'Ebola outbreak: Sierra Leone in lockdown.' Online: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32083363> [accessed October 15, 2015].
- ⁸ Phone interview with Guinean EVD worker in Macenta Prefecture, Guinea, September 2015.
- ⁹ Phone interview with teacher in Masoko, Tonkolili District, Sierra Leone, September 2015.
- ¹⁰ Reuters, 2015. 'Sierra Leone imposes Ebola curfew for northern districts.' Online: <http://news.yahoo.com/sierra-leone-imposes-ebola-curfew-northern-districts-091236513.html> [accessed October 16, 2015].
- ¹¹ Phone interviews with EVD worker in Macenta Prefecture, Guinea and a teacher in Freetown, Sierra Leone, September 2015.
- ¹² Phone interview with Guinean EVD worker in Macenta Prefecture, Guinea, September 2015.
- ¹³ Cinnatus Dumbuya, 'In Koinadugu, the Paramount Chief who quarantined his district,' [Eboladeeply.org](http://www.eboladeeply.org), online: <http://www.eboladeeply.org/articles/2015/04/7754/koinadugu-paramount-chief-quarantined-district/> [accessed October 16, 2015].
- ¹⁴ Interviews with former Sierra Leonean refugee who was visiting a friend in Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 20, 2009 (MRB 10); Guinean who used to work at a Firestone Plantation in Liberia in the Vianga, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 23, 2009 (MRB 69); and Guinean who hosted Liberian refugees in Vianga, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, July 23, 2009 (MRB 70).
- ¹⁵ Interviews with lady in Gorlu, Lofa County, Liberia, September 25, 2009 (MRB 212); man in Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 19, 2009 (MRB 1); with woman in Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 19, 2009 (MRB 3).
- ¹⁶ Interviews with man in Woroma, Kailahun District, Sierra Leone, September 12, 2009 (MRB 168); man in Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 19, 2009 (MRB 4); man in Gotoye, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea July 22, 2009 (MRB 63); woman in Gotoye, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 24, 2009 (MRB 78).
- ¹⁷ Interviews with woman in Gorlu, Lofa County, Liberia, September 26, 2009 (MRB 214); woman in Dongueta, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, September 30, 2009 (MRB 114); with man in Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 19, 2009 (MRB 4); and with man in Forofonye, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 27, 2009 (MRB 94).
- ¹⁸ Interviews with woman in Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 19, 2009 (MRB 3); and man in Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 20, 2009 (MRB 8).
- ¹⁹ Interviews with man in Vianga, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 23, 2009 (MRB 73) and man in Forofonye, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 26, 2009 (MRB 87).
- ²⁰ Interviews with former refugees in Gorlu, Lofa County, Liberia, September 25, 2009 (MRB 207); Kamiendor, Kono District, Sierra Leone, September 3, 2009 (MRB 123); Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 22, 2009 (MRB 22); Kamiendor, Kono District, Sierra Leone, September 3, 2009 (MRB 124); Simabu, Kono District, Sierra Leone, September 12, 2009 (MRB 164); and Gorlu, Lofa County, Liberia, September 25, 2009 (MRB 209).
- ²¹ Interviews with former hosts of refugees in Dongueta, Guinea, July 8, 2011 (MRB 360 and 362); and July 9, 2011 (MRB 363).
- ²² Interviews with former hosts of refugees in Vianga, Guéckédou Prefecture, July 23, 2009 (MRB 73); Dongueta, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 28, 2009 (MRB 99); and Dongueta, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 30, 2009 (MRB 118).
- ²³ Interview with village elder in Dongueta, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 8, 2011 (MRB 362).
- ²⁴ Interviews with former refugee in Korete village, Lofa County, Liberia, December 9, 2010 (MRB 356); former host of refugees in Dongueta, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 29, 2009 (MRB 112); former host of refugees in Foedou-Kollet, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 29, 2009 (MRB 50); former host of refugees in Gotoye, Yomou Prefecture Guinea, July 22, 2009 (MRB 68); and former host of refugees in Vianga, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 23, 2009 (MRB 69).
- ²⁵ Interviews with former hosts of refugees in Kolomba Guéckédou Prefecture, June 19, 2009 (MRB 4); Kelema, Guéckédou Prefecture, June 21, 2009 (MRB 20); and Foedou-Kollet, Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea, June 29, 2009 (MRB 50).
- ²⁶ Interviews with former hosts of refugees in Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, June 19, 2009 (MRB 4); Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, June 20, 2009 (MRB 9); and Gotoye, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 22, 2009 (MRB 63).

²⁷ Interviews with Liberian in Gorlu, Lofa County, Liberia, September 25, 2009 (MRB 212); Sierra Leonean in Woroma, Kailahun District, September 12, 2009 (MRB 168); Guinean in Kolomba, Guéckédou Prefecture, June 20, 2009 (MRB 10); and Guinean in Gotoye, Yomou Prefecture, Guinea, July 22, 2009 (MRB 63).

²⁸ Interviews with two Liberians in Gorlu, Lofa County, Liberia, September 25, 2009 (MRB 207 & 209); Sierra Leoneans in Kamiendor, September 3, 2009 (MRB 123 & 124) and Simabu, September 12, 2009 (MRB 164) in Mafindor Chiefdom, Kono District, Sierra Leone; and with Guineans in Yabema, June 23, 2009 (MRB 24 & 25), Tombou, June 24, 2009 (MRB 30) and Foedou-Kollet, June 29, 2009 (MRB 49) all in Guéckédou Prefecture, Guinea.

²⁹ Phone interview with EVD worker in Macenta Prefecture, Guinea, September 2015.

Acknowledgments

To Emeliane Faye of the CODESRIA Documentation, Information and Communication Center for assistance with accessing published work, and to Christine Cubitt and three anonymous Governance in Africa reviewers for invaluable comments and suggestions that helped make this work better.

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How to cite this article: Onoma, A K 2016 Rites of Mobility and Epidemic Control: Ebola Virus Disease in the Mano River Basin. *Governance in Africa*, 3(1): 1, pp. 1–12, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/gia.72>

Submitted: 29 June 2015 **Accepted:** 08 December 2015 **Published:** 22 January 2016

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