

***A Curious Article:
Touring Multipurpose Venues in Yopougon, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire¹***

Susann Ludwig
(University of Leipzig)
susann.ludwig@uni-leipzig.de

Elusive objects require elusive methodologies. This article is a description of the urban and the ways in which the urban condition impacts anthropological research. Through the author's reflection on her own ethnographic practice in an elusive urban environment in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, curiosity takes centre stage. The discussion accounts for the author's personal experience being curious about multipurpose venues in Yopougon, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire and curious with Tchanbi, who is the tour guide. And just like the researcher, the readers are taken on a tour. However, readers do not have to follow a linear storyline provided either by the author or the tour guide, rather readers get a chance to follow up on their own curiosity by browsing links and signposts, skipping sections or digging deeper into them. How and to what extent does the city impact the way in which research is conducted? And how can ethnography do justice to the city's demands? The article curiously explores the relationship between those people who constitute these very concepts, namely, city dwellers and researchers of the urban and, thus, points attention to the ways in which the two inform each other.

Keywords: Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, curious anthropological research, multipurpose venues.

Introduction: Doing Anthropological Research in the City.

The city is everywhere; thus, we want to know about it (Werthmann 2014). The city is complex; thus, it is an ongoing challenge for research (Amin and Thrift 2017, Pellow and Sheld 2023, Prato and Pardo 2013). So, the question is how to research the city.

There are numerous descriptions of particular cities and city spaces as well as theorizations thereof (see for instance Prato and Pardo 2013, Werthmann 2022). Providing a case of doing research in the city, this article is a description of the urban and the ways in which the urban condition impacts anthropological research. It problematizes the relationship between those people who constitute these very concepts, namely, city dwellers and researchers of the urban. In its refusal to pick sides of either "anthropological research in an urban setting" or "urban anthropology" (Prato and Pardo 2013), the article points attention to the ways in which the two inform each other and, ultimately, adds the notion of *research with* the city (Swanson 2020).

To engage with the urban means dealing with "a research field constituted by elusive objects" and requires researchers "to constantly reflect on what makes it possible for us to know" (Macamo 2018: 7). But how? The urban condition is characterized by its instability, both produced by and dealt with by its people and we need our methods to account for that. Elusive objects require elusive methodologies. If an object is impossible to grasp, and if we do not want to be trapped in our own delusion, our objective cannot be to grasp it, but to look for alternative ways to engage with the object. I stick with ethnography — and its relationship with the city — and ask: How and to what extent does the city impact the way in which research is conducted? And how can ethnography do justice to the city's demands?

¹ I am grateful for the comments and criticism given by the Editorial Board of *Urbanities* and the anonymous reviewers. This final version of the article has significantly benefited from their input.

There are two distinctive streams of approaches to urban research in Anthropology. The first one sticks with what is called “the good anthropological method” (Herzfeld 2013) and the second one is “multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus 1995, in Prato and Pardo 2013: 96). Both of them face the same criticism of being too superficial to account for the complexities of the urban condition, but for different reasons. Whereas multi-sited ethnography is limited in depth, the good anthropological method is limited in scope. Now, I take this discussion as an opportunity to reflect on my own ethnographic practice in an urban environment. I realize that I am just as urban in my practice as city dwellers are described to be. It is revealed how the urban and ethnography inform each other. The physicality of the urban (Feuchtwang 2013) draws my attention to surface matters and my particular practice guided by curiosity. The first part of the article is an attempt to translate this experience of curiosity into writing. The second part, suggests that just like the urban population is adapting to the urban condition (Fischer and Kokolaki 2013), ethnographers do, too. In doing so, it accounts for one possible way in which this can be done without losing sight of the “good anthropological way”.

This Article is Curious

The discussion accounts for curiosity both in the process of conducting explorative research in the field and in the relationship between the city and ethnography. This article is an invitation to an urban experience being a tour along multipurpose venues in Yopougon², Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire.

The story sets out as the author’s personal experience being curious with Tchanbi, who is the tour guide. And just like I am taken on a tour as a researcher, so is the reader. However, readers do not have to follow a linear storyline provided either by the author or the tour guide, rather readers get a chance to follow up on their own curiosity by browsing links and signposts, skipping sections or digging deeper into them.

The first part is an account of a trip in the field on the relationship between anthropological research and the city. This is about me doing research curiously. I do research in the field. I analyze how I do research. And look at what my particular research approach adds to the particular findings of my research. The data I provide makes up for a case of doing curious research in the city. The second part is a reflection on curiosity within that relationship between anthropological research and the city.

And again, my simple point here is this: Curiosity matters in doing anthropological research. And this written piece is here to celebrate that curiosity.

Curiosity

In my own process of researching with the city, I stumble clues I was not looking for, and I realized I did only months later in my office chair. This is what the city does, and this is what curiosity supports. Curiosity does not settle, it is characterized by a “restless questioning, the

²With a population of almost five million Abidjan is one of the five largest cities in Africa. Yopougon is Abidjan’s most populous and most densely populated commune, with more than a million inhabitants (Institut National de la Statistique 2015, 8). Hosting bars, restaurants and nightclubs, the quarter is known to be “la cité de la joie” (the capital of joy).

untiring dialectic that accidentally produces systems and then projects them towards a horizon of fresh truths” (Hountondji 1983: 53, in Okyerefo 2021: 10).

This article is a non-comprehensive but encompassing account of my curious gaze and what escapes it. Whereas the first part of this article accounts for my experience of curiosity in the field, the second part of the article guards that spirit by keeping the curiosity alive. My practice is essentially about exploration guided by curiosity. Curiosity is sparked and maintained through exploration, which entails the uncertainty “about who one is and with whom one is being curious” but at the same time, the freedom “to allow one’s interests to be captured by another” (Swanson 2015: 33).

Curiosity characterizes my research approach both in the field and at the office desk in the following ways:

1. Curiosity guides my research; in the field, my curiosity is captured by Tchanbi and at the office desk curiosity allows for new questions to emerge from the data rather than stick to the questions I had in mind prior to starting my research in the field.
2. Curiosity redirects my attention and, curiously enough, I still end up with findings, which both contribute to the question I had in the first place and the question that emerged later in the research process.
3. Curiosity structures this article in a sense that it encourages the readers to follow their curiosities.

Dear Reader

This article is curious. It somehow starts with my personal experience of exploration in researching multipurpose venues in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire. Just like I am being taken along on a tour, I take you along. However, you do not have to follow us, namely, me and Tchanbi, or my curiosity. You can take turns whenever you feel like it (navigating by clicking the respective links and arrows → continue/back/...), you can decide to skip passages and you might not even come across certain sections. That is alright, because this attends to your curiosity, not everything triggers everybody’s curiosity.

Abidjan, Yopougon, 9 October 2018

Tchanbi is here already. Suuusiii! he is shouting standing on the other side of the road. It is only a few minutes after eleven. Happy to see him, I cross the four driving lanes of Boulevard Principal de Yopougon, which has sometimes even six lanes. We walk a quarter of a round around Ficgayo, talk about our weekends and enter the space next to where the toilets are. I ask him, if we are going to take a seat. “Bon, I thought I might introduce you to several places around: Ficgayo,³ CP1 and l’espace Jesse Jackson”. “Awesome! I’d like that!”.

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Ficgayo

Today, there are two soccer matches being played on Ficgayo. The goals consist of two car tires each. The two terrains are not physically separated from each other or the rest of the space. And yet, people crossing Ficgayo do not cross the soccer terrain. The cars of the driving school move

³ For more information on Ficgayo, see Ludwig 2021.

around in circles. Always turning left. Tchanbi says the kids playing soccer attend a school where there is no soccer field, so they come here for their physical education. When they arrive, they install the car tires, and once they leave, they put them back where they found them. I spot a car wash next to the parking lot. Next to the toilettes, there is a little tent advertising “traditional medicine”. We are standing here talking. In fact, it is him talking. I ask questions or mention things I see. “There is quite a lot of police here”. “Yeah, they show their presence. Right next to Ficgayo, are the main roads into Yopougon, and that is why the police is needed here”, he says, “The Boulevard Principal was once the only road into the quartier, but today, there are more ways to access Yopougon”.

Tchanbi says Ficgayo is a social, economic and strategic place. Social, because the space is owned by the population; strategic, because it administrated by the mayor’s office and, therewith, directly connects with the population; economic, because of its relevance to people doing business. Friday is funeral day, oftentimes more than one at a time; Sundays are for church and Saturdays for concerts. He went to Ficgayo twice already, one time to watch an Africa Cup game. “We all came together to support our team. Plus, there was beer for free.” He lives in Cocody, so he does not pass by Yopougon on a regular basis. Every once in a while, there is a promotion event at Ficgayo. Sometimes there is nothing at all going on. There are public schools executing their physical education lessons at Ficgayo. Driving schools use the space for their students first attempts, before they drive in real traffic. The actual driving exam again takes place at Ficgayo. Our conversation is interrupted. A guy collects money to buy school bags for kids living around Ficgayo. The list of people who have already contributed is a scam; it says that every person donated 10000F CFA or more. Clearly a fraud. Tchanbi notes the quartier named on the papers is not even close to Yopougon. He tells the guy that we would have brought money, had we known they are collecting money for school kids in need today. We did not know, so, of course, we did not bring much money along. Merci. And the guy is gone. I tell Tchanbi that I met the head of the neighbourhood organisation yesterday. He is the one responsible for keeping Ficgayo clean. “Well, everyone has their own definition of clean”, he responds. Back to the details required to understand Ficgayo: Tchanbi says that there are several parties in charge of the space. The mayor’s office, the population and the neighbourhood organisation. I have no idea what a neighbourhood organisation is or does. The head of the neighbourhood organisation was elected by the people in the quartier and he is in touch with the population and the mayor’s office. The two are in a dialectical relationship, without one of the two, there is no event going on at Ficgayo — at least not legally. The two need each other. The mayor’s office does not pay the neighbourhood organisation, they just encourage them with a small expense allowance for their work and efforts, when they do as they are told. Mostly, it is about cleaning up the space. Tchanbi says that the population does not like the construction of the supermarket across the street and, of course, they do not, because the people working there are not the kids of the one’s living around the area. This disrupts an equilibrium, he says. Ideally, spaces are administered in a way that benefits everyone around. Everybody eats. As soon as the food is denied to any one of the parties, it’s trouble. Tchanbi wants to crack on.

Meanwhile, the kids are gone. New cars cruising on Ficgayo. One of them cut off right

in front of us, the tires/soccer goals are still there and pedestrians cross the space from every direction. Always relaxed, always straight across the terrain. We are off to CP1. We just walk the Maquis⁴ street, turn right, past a little market and straight ahead. A five-minute walk.

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CP1

Abidjan, Yopougon, 9 October 2018

CP1 is about one sixth the size of Ficgayo. “CP1, c’est cloturé” (it is enclosed), which means there is a brick wall all around it. They did so maybe because it is small and people play soccer, Tchanbi thinks out loud. Ficgayo does not have walls around it. During concerts though, they install some mesh around it in order to be able to control the audience. Right now, people are preparing an election campaign, again for the current mayor of Yopougon Kafana Koné candidate of the RHDP⁵. Two sides of the rectangle are closed by walls: one long the other one short. There is a soccer goal on each side. The other long side is closed by the back of houses with people living inside. There are windows announcing services potentially useful to those using the space, a chair and a tent rental and a little boutique selling candy and all kinds of necessities. On the other short side of the space, there is a public toilette, which just received a fresh paint, and several little restaurants. We are standing on CP1 for a little while and Tchanbi explains that CP1 is administered by a neighbourhood organisation, which consists of members of the four neighbouring areas. The president of the quartier lives right over there, he says, we can just swing by and see, if he is around. Maybe he is not the president anymore, but at least he can share some of his experiences with us. Off we go. Right across from CP1, there is a huge, grey, metal door leading to a tight, obscure hallway. We walk through it, say hi to a few people, and eventually get to the inside of the block. There is sand and two trees, a few palm trees. It is clean and it looks a bit like a little village. Children are playing and all I can hear is their voices, later on, there is a little boom boom music playing, then again just the kids playing. On a little plateau in front of the entry door of a house, there are two elderly men sitting on comfy metal chairs, underneath the shadow of a tree. Both men are grey-haired, both in extravagant boubous, one thin, the other one with quite a belly. We walk towards them. Tchanbi greets the corpulent one wearing an orange boubou. If he remembers him, “comme ca fait longtemps” (It has been a while), Tchanbi says. “‘Bon’, like you said, it has been a while. Well, I am Tchanbi [...]” Chairs are coming up. The thin man leaves.

Tchanbi takes a seat right next to the elderly man. I sit on the left, where there is a chair already. That was unfortunate, because during the course of our conversation, the man, who speaks in French, but very softly, turns his head from one side to the other. So, whenever he speaks to Tchanbi, I do not understand a word. In the beginning, he seems rather reserved, but that changes quickly as the conversation moves along. Tchanbi asks a few questions. Exactly the questions I would have asked, even though we did not talk about this prior; slowly and with patience. When the man in the orange boubou is done talking, Tchanbi summarizes what he

⁴ A maquis is a restaurant-bar.

⁵ Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix.

understood for the man to confirm or correct. CP1 used to be somewhere else. First, it was him over there to administer the space. The elderly man points to a house to our left. Then there was a Lebanese, who bought and used the space, which we know as CP1 today. The truth is that half of the original CP1 is covered by his house. He points to our right. Later on, he was the president of the quartier, but he is not anymore for quite a while now. The money they make by renting out CP1 feeds the quartier's needs. That is how we maintain the area. That is why we have three doors here in sector three. We close them at night. Security. There is only one door missing, one right next to the house of the Lebanese over there. Oumar is the head of the neighbourhood organisation here now — “Un jeune” (A youth). “Mariam, Oumar, is he around?”, he asks a girl suddenly standing right behind me.

She immediately checks. The younger generation is responsible today. They have an office and negotiate with the heads of the other sectors surrounding CP1. The money they earn through their activities is administered by Manou, the treasurer. They are very well organized. Oumar always reports to him, the elderly man, after their sessions, Tchanbi assumes. “Hmmm”, the man nods his head. So, if I want to organize an event at CP1, the first thing I do is ask for the president of the quartier and I will be sent to Oumar. I will then present my ideas and it is on him to agree or disagree. Only if he agrees and signs my request, I am eligible to present it to the mayor's office. I pay the mayor's office officially, but I also pay the neighbourhood organisation. Everybody eats. Oumar is not around today, but I can come back anytime or just ask him, the elderly man says. He is always there to help me. “On demande la route” (We ask for permission to leave.). “Il n'y a pas de problème” (You're good to go.). We leave, walk past the secured door. I take a few pictures of CP1 as we walk past it. Tchanbi says that he sensed some generational conflict. The man does not seem to agree with the way in which the younger generation handles the business. The fact that there is one door still missing to secure the sector shows that there is something left undone. He assumes that the younger generation uses the money for its own purposes. He repeats the process to me and keeps emphasizing that there are negotiations taking place on every step of the way. Some of them institutionalized, you cannot leave out one stop and if you do, it means trouble. Not sure what he meant by trouble though. We arrive at our next stop: Jesse Jackson.

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Jesse Jackson

Abidjan, Yopougon, 9 October 2018

The sun is scorching hot. The space is completely surrounded by a two-meter brick wall. This is a space for sports. Kids are playing soccer and basketball. There are many fields. One handball terrain, and a basketball court and a soccer terrain. And then there is a soccer field with artificial turf; it is surrounded by metal wires. We are watching people doing sports. This seems to be uniquely about sports. The kids we see are waiting for the physical education classes to start. They just arrived early, Tchanbi explains. The lessons restart at two. It is quarter to two now. We keep walking and watching. We respect visible and invisible marks of the sports terrains. I have to pee. We walk towards a maquis. There are no toilettes. Tchanbi hands me a Kleenex. I will find a solution. The kids watching me walk back to where I came from say

“elle va pisser” (She is going to use the bathroom.). Well. Once that is taken care of, I walk back to the maquis. They have Beaufort. We share one and another one. We talk about life and careers. Tchanbi is 34. During the crisis, the university was closed for two years for renovation, but that was just a poor excuse. During those years, he sold several products and worked for an NGO. It aimed at improving students’ French, so they set up events and playful competitions for the kids. Tchanbi’s task was to promote these events and talk to people. This is where he learnt the most for what he is doing today: present ideas, listen to people, find arguments and speaking in general. Back then, he was in his first semester at the university, so “Le gout de la recherche” (the essence of research) had not quite kicked in yet.

Susi

Leipzig, 6 January 2022

I am a social anthropologist with an interest in practice, space and chance. Through university graduates in Bamako, Mali, I encountered “*la chance*”, which means “luck” in French. As a concept it accounts for graduates’ everyday knowledge production in uncertain contexts in Bamako. In life-courses — it seemed — *la chance* can only be articulated and accessed in retrospect, which made me wonder about instances in which *la chance* is visible and, therefore, observable in the present. I reached out to multipurpose venues, which are material infrastructures based on a past vision of multiple future purposes, or, as I put it: possibilities; they are there to be maintained and transformed in the present for future purposes, namely events. The event gives a multipurpose venue its tangible purpose. As new relations, trajectories, identities and histories emerge, “nowhere” is transformed to “now here”. And it is precisely the space between the two concepts that I find so intriguing.

During my PhD, I met a fellow doctoral student working on food restrictions in Côte d’Ivoire. His name is Koné. For almost two years, we wrote on our thesis sitting across from each other in a shared office space, thoughts, ideas, food and lots of laughs. So, two years after we last saw each other in Switzerland, we met again in Abidjan, where he lives and works and I set out to explore multipurpose venues.

At the time of my field trip, I was employed as a post-doc on a fifty percent one-year contract at an African Studies Institute at the German University. In this position, my task was to teach four hours a week and develop my own research project. I also had the immense pleasure to participate in a professional, yet, privately organized retreat in the Swiss mountains, in which the readings and the discussions shaped my thinking significantly. In this professional environment, I benefited from the fact that my curiosity and ideas were supported by my colleagues and that my three-week explorative field trip (that includes the flights, visas and accommodation at a friends’ place) was funded by the University after a smooth application process. Being able to basically fly into West Africa for free with the mission to explore is definitely a luxury. However, there is no denying that there is pressure involved, for instance, concerning the necessity to find a phenomenon worth exploiting within the context of a potential future research project required for the continuation of my career in science. The circumstances I find myself in promote my curiosity: At the institute, I was encouraged to pursue my current interest in multipurpose venues and provided with the financial means

necessary to freely wander and investigate. Precisely because I am an early career scholar supposed to broaden and expand the expertise gained through previous work, I am free to follow my curiosity within the limits set by the purpose of developing a research project. So, what is at stake here is nothing more and nothing more than my career in science. And yet, this is a contested thought, since no one really knows in advance what does or does not matter in pursuit of an academic career. I think curiosity might matter.

Going to Abidjan, my mission was to explore an abstract idea of possibilities materializing in an urban setting. One could argue that I did know what I was looking for prior to finding it, but I did not know what it would look like. I was looking for a material setting that would allow me to best investigate an idea; i.e., *la chance*. In my previous research, I learnt about the materialization of possibility (*la chance*) in life-courses, which university graduates in Bamako were able to account for retrospectively. I wanted to know more about the nature and the temporality. So, the idea was to observe the materialization of possibility as it happens in a concrete urban setting. Being in Yopougon for the first time ever, my mission was not to find answers to my questions right away, but to explore.

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Koné > Abidjan > Yopougon > Maquis

Abidjan, 2 October 2018

At the airport, I queue for the entry until I am sent back to get a visa first. My vaccination card is checked by a guy wearing a doctor's overall. Health authorities. At the visa office, I take a number. I smile throughout the entire process. However, the official could not care less about my cheerfulness. The fact that I speak Bambara a bit has always been a door opener in Mali; French is nothing special, it is rather the mistakes I make when I speak French that make me seem somehow special. At the exit, the first thing I see is Burger King. There is nobody waiting, just a vendor selling sim cards and phone units. I spot Koné. He seems proud. We greet each other with a handshake hug.

- "Koné! Je suis à Abidjan!... Et il fait chaud, deh!!"
- "Ouaaaais, on est en été! On est toujours en été!"⁶

Both of us happy. He says me visiting him here is the fruit of the friendship we grew back in Basel. A friendship we keep cultivating. He owns a green Opel Astra. We put on the security belt. No hesitation. And leave the parking lot. A woman asks him for his parking ticket, only to put it in the slot of the machine, which then opens up the gate for us to pass. Koné does not even look at her. I tease him about his bossy behaviour. "Elle doit même pas être la!" (She is not even supposed to be here.) We continue our ride. Akwaba. Welcome. That is Akan. On towards the city. "Les embouteillages sont la merde" (the traffic jams are the worst), Koné says. We pick up friends of Koné's, who live in the same neighbourhood as he does. Lots of talking on the phone to make sure we find each other. We stop. Koné tells me about his first journal publication. So awesome! He buys me some water. He remembers my green water bottle I

⁶ "Koné! I am in Abidjan! ... It is hot here!" "Yeah, it is summer! It is always summer here!"

frequently used back in Basel. Memories. I look outside the car window. People are busy. They do not look at me. I am smiling, rarely does anyone smile back. We meet Nixon and Maxim. Both IT-guys working in Marcory. Another two hours of traffic until we get home. Past a construction site. Lots of traffic. Koné explains: Cocody, where the rich ones live. The guys joke around saying that Koné is a rich one, too. Maxim was in Morocco recently in order to study some new printing technology; he shares a few observations. People know how to enjoy themselves there, he says. Every day, he takes the boat taxi to get to work. Like I said, a lot of water here. Men have to work harder in Côte d'Ivoire, because what causes more pity? A poor man or a poor woman? A woman can still marry a rich man, but what is a man going to do? Will a rich woman marry a poor guy? Never ever, he says. The sun is setting. It is getting dark at around six in the evening. We are traversing the de Gaulle Bridge. There is another one named after the first president of the Côte d'Ivoire, Felix Houphouët-Boigny. Everything is named after him, it seems. We continue past the Plateau, the city's administrative centre, with skyscrapers and neon lights. "In a few years, this is going to look like a real global city. C'est le boum", Koné says. "Après la crise, c'est le boum" (This is the boom! After crisis, there comes the boom!). We are arriving in Yopougon. Remember Aya? Koné locks the car. "I always do that", he says. Didier Drogba's face is on every billboard. Koné wants to know about my current research. I try to explain my interest without using the word "multipurpose venue", because I am curious to find out how he is going to label the idea. "Ah! Les salles polyvalentes", he says. We stop in the middle of an intersection for a few minutes. He wants to turn left. We leave the paved road and enter Koné's hood. On our way, I asked Koné which area in Bamako his part of town resembles. Koné is driving slowly. A few traffic lights illuminate the bumpy, plashy road. We stop in front of a complex of two connected five-story buildings. "On est arrivé!" (We have arrived.) Maxim is still with us. We dropped Nixon somewhere along the way. Koné lives on the fourth floor. Koné's sister Blandine is at home.

There is a grey L-shaped couch in the centre of the living room. Koné jumps on the couch and instantly falls in a comfy position: "This is my spot!". There are a few cushioned chairs with armrests arranged around the walls of the living room. Four. The TV is huge and running quietly, too quiet for me to understand what people are saying. Everyone is staring at the screen right now. The news. The candidates running for the elections introduce themselves. Elections coming up on the 13th. Placed right next to the wall, there is a small dining table surrounded by four chairs. And there is another little table with a surface that just fits a laptop and a tiny notebook. And a tiny, tiny plastic kids table with two blue chairs. Koné give me a tour: There is no running water; not enough pressure to get it running all the way up here. Blandine shares the room with me. Koné's master bedroom is spacious and tidy. We walk up on the roof. Both the view and the breeze are amazing. The lights are orange and I do not recognize a single landmark we passed on our way here. Koné introduces me to the neighbour, who is looking forward to receiving some Swiss chocolates. I did not bring any though. Dinner time! Cucumber, tomatoes, onions with an oil, vinegar, mayonnaise, Maggi cube dressing. Rice with sauce legumes. Nice and spicy. Papaya for dessert. We talk about the upcoming elections and about the fact that every candidate is talking about change — "le changement". "The

opposing party has to do that, otherwise: why vote for them?”, says Koné laughing. After dinner, the guys chill in front of the TV; Blandine and I have a nice little chat. She is 30, lives in Korhogo and came to Abidjan to participate in the concours in order to work as a teacher. She does that every year. In the meantime, she works as a technician for a satellite TV provider in her hometown up North. She enjoys being a mom, though it is a bit exhausting. Her daughter Mayeline is four years old and she carries her pink kindergarten backpack like a boss. “Allons-y. C’est l’occasion!” (Let’s go! It is time!), Koné decides that we are going to have a beer. Right by the maqui in front of the building. We sit in a non-illuminated space, surrounded by brick buildings. The tables and the chairs are wet from the rain, but the waiter dries them up right before we sit down. We get cups and later on the Ivoire beer in 0,6 litre bottles. The bottles are a statement. We have him take back the cups, we drink from the bottle. We talk about Basel and Morocco and Côte d’Ivoire and about how open spaces are used in cities. The maquis here is an open space, which has become the neighbourhood’s meeting point. It is just a piece of property somebody owns, but did not start using yet. Now, somebody else built a small metal cabin on it. With a TV and some light and a few crates of beer and that is how it is being used in the meantime. The guy across from this space runs a copy shop, but he also offers money transfer. Orange money is just twenty meters away. “chaqun a son clientèle” (Each of them has their clients), Koné says. The waiter picks up a chair and has a seat right in front of the cabin. All of a sudden, Koné seems restless. Time for us to leave. The owner wants to close. I do not finish my beer; we are headed out. We drop off Maxim at his place. It is 11pm by the time we get back home. I am beat. I get the WIFI passcode and a shower and some low volume Jimmy Fellon with French subtitles.

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A couple days later, Koné has an appointment with one of his supervisors to discuss his thesis. They meet at a private research institute in Cocody. I accompany him. As soon as they start their conversation, I sense that this is going to take a while, so I decide to go for a walk.

Tchanbi > Public Green Spaces > Ficgayo

Abidjan, Cocody, 4 October 2018

The exit door is locked, but then a guy in a black button-up shirt opens it for me. Tchian Bi. Enchantée (Pleased to meet you!). “Je peux t’accompagner?” (May I join you?). “Bien sûr” (Sure!). Cool. We tour around the block and then continue going on for an extended round. He is a doctoral student in sociology. He submitted his thesis already and is now waiting to defend it. He is working on public green spaces in Yopougon during the 1970s and 1980s. He is interested in how people used, negotiated and defined these urban spaces. He explains a lot; I listen. The conversation is in flow. I am only partly noticing the surrounding area. We walk downhill past an old telephone booth which now serves as an advertising column, but actually not anymore either. We walk past a market and a giant red restaurant, through a housing area called “cité du Bonheur” (Capital of Luck). I take a picture of the sign that says so. There are also garbage bins that say “I want to keep my city clean” or “Feed me with garbage”. Of course, I take pictures of these, too. I am offered a napkin. I decline. I do not have a runny nose. We

walk a few more steps and he is taking a napkin himself to wipe off the sweat on his forehead. Now I get it. It is about noon right now and the sun keeps buttering. Tchanbi worked on ten green spaces within social housing projects built and administered by the government and rented out to the population. Back then, there was staff responsible for the maintenance of those green spaces. Ten years in, the houses' worth was revaluated and by paying their monthly rent, the houses slowly passed into the ownership of the people living in them. Concurrently, the areas' administration was taken care of by the population itself, neighbourhood organisations were formed and as things changed, so did the green spaces.

Back at the institute, Tchanbi opens his laptop and shows me some pictures illustrating how these spaces have changed. They were turned into soccer fields, maquis and restaurants, businesses, gas stations and pharmacies. Basically, there are several phases of change, he explains: First, there is an open space ready to be used. This is when people start inhabiting it, for instance, by using it as a space for a business. This is legal. The state officials will come around and collect taxes. It is important though that the business is of provisional nature or else it will be shut down directly. Provisional means that the business can be removed quickly at any given moment, so that the area can be used differently. However, it is through their businesses that their owners then begin to make friends with people in the neighbourhood — they establish themselves in the neighbourhood and become a part of it. As the businesses grow, people of the surrounding houses are employed and the temporary wooden or sheet metal structure of the little business cabins are replaced by bricks. This is still not legal before the state, but the consent of the residents weighs heavier. Thus, business owners are slowly appropriating the space they do not own legally.

I show Tchanbi a picture of the square in front of Koné's apartment building. With just one glimpse, he analyses: the guy with bar has brick walls, so it must be the oldest of all the businesses there. The small shop is of sheet metal set in concrete. The maquis has a lockable storage space for the beverages, tables and chairs. All other businesses use temporary structures, so they are more recent.

Once we are done going through his pictures, he talks about Ficgayo — “un espace polyvalente” (a multipurpose venue) in Yopougon. Plenty of things happen there: soccer matches, funerals, politics, markets and fairs. I am hooked. This is where I want to go next.

→ back

Ficgayo

Abidjan, Yopougon, 4 October 2018

We drive past Ficgayo. That is what I have been looking for. Huge open space in the centre of Yopougon, one of the most densely populated areas in West Africa. Surrounded by stores, maquis and a gigantic mall in construction right across from it. Right now, it is a soccer field. The sun is about to set.

Abidjan, Yopougon, 5 October 2018

We drive past Ficgayo on our way back. “There is nothing”, a friend comments. I take a few pictures. Boys are playing soccer. The space is empty. The fact that everything around it seems

cramped turns its emptiness into a thing. The guy knows Ficgayo. A week ago, he attended a funeral there. There were several funerals running at the same time. “The actual name is Ficgayo. The c is silent, but it is there. Foire industrielle, commerciale, gastronomique de Yopougon (Fair of industry, commerce and gastronomy of Yopougon)”, he says.

Leipzig, Südvorstadt, 13 July 2022 – 18 April 2023

My interest was captured by Tchanbi through the practice of curious anthropological research in the following ways:

Tchanbi's Curiosity.

One could argue that going to Abidjan, I did know what I was looking for prior to finding it, but I did not know what it would look like. I was looking for a material setting that would allow me to further investigate an idea I learnt about in previous research. That idea is about the materialization of possibility (*la chance*) in life-courses, which university graduates in Bamako were able to account for retrospectively (Ludwig 2023). Now, I wanted to know more about the nature and temporality of possibility and, thus, to observe how possibilities materialize in an urban setting. Being in Yopougon for the first time ever, my mission was not to find answers to my questions right away, but to explore and be curious with what there is to explore in relation to my questions. For me, exploration also meant to focus on focusing, rather than focus itself. Exploration is characterized by a constant “looking around”, “moving on” and allowing curiosity to take the lead⁷. On our tour around Yopougon, clearly Tchanbi takes the lead; he introduces me to curiosities I did not anticipate prior. For instance, I expected the tour to be centred around Ficgayo; Tchanbi had three different spots in mind, his curiosity leads us further behind the huge metal door. He guides our movement in space, but also our movement in time beyond the now, for instance, by referring to a week at Ficgayo or his personal history with the space. Tchanbi and I are observers, commentators to the action until we are addressed by a person collecting money at Ficgayo. All of a sudden, we are part of an action I did not even notice at first. Similarly, Tchanbi's understanding of what constitutes CPI takes me across the street from the actual spot, behind a huge metal door and into a neighbourhood.

My gaze is guided by questions of orientation such as “Where am I?” and, thus, I focus on the tangible structures that make up for the place I find myself in (a carwash, restaurants, toilets, walls, streets [...]) or “What is going on?” And, thus, focus shifts to what people currently do (playing soccer, driving school lessons, campaigning, doing sports).

On the Good Anthropological Method.

The “good anthropological method”, Michael Herzfeld (2013) insists, requires “time and intense dedication” in order to be able to demonstrate the “achievement of intimate relations with informants, regardless of the kind of site involved” through “the anthropologist's writerly

⁷ Even though Tchanbi was not a designated field assistance, I do want to acknowledge the research and reflections on the significance of local collaborators in the field. On this, see further Kaiser-Grolimund et al. 2016, Gupta 2014, Middleton and Pradhan 2014.

skills at depicting minute details as expressing encompassing social and political processes” (Herzfeld 2013: 119).

I end this article with three open ends discussing the effects of the urban on “the good anthropological method” based on three considerations: (1) the city is the primary informant and (2) researchers are city people and (3) on the relationship between time and intensity.

1 The City is the Informant.

The urban condition shapes ethnographic fieldwork and that has been widely acknowledged: “In urban contexts it is clear one has to use samples in the form of cases studies, surveys and selective participant observation. The best one can do is to collect fragments of experience, social relations and the city itself” (Fischer and Kokolaki 2013: 114). And there is a thin line between collecting as well as relating fragments and being at risk of “pointless butterfly collecting” (Leach 1961, in Prato and Pardo 2013: 87). A combination of the two approaches might do the trick. Let me explain: The practice of butterfly collecting is about finding and capturing living beings, but it does not have to. The task might also be to first experience, follow around and fly along with the living being and in a second step capture, pin down and map out that very experience and not the living being. The result then is not a colourful framed collection of stabilized butterflies, but a colourful account of lived experiences. This image is particularly useful to describe the urban condition, because in an urban environment you never know for how long you will be able to focus on one butterfly. I focus on curiosity, rather than on a fixed topic or question and suggest to adapt the way in which we ask our research questions to the demands of the urban: be flexible, moving, becoming. The idea here is not to capture parts of phenomena within the swarm of butterflies, but to account for being surrounded by and part of the swarm. Now, when it comes to accessing the urban condition, the city is the actual informant and, thus, impossible to disregard. *The Streets are talking to me* by Maria Frederika Malmström (2019) is a great example of this. Inspired by Brian Massumi’s (2002) take on affect, vivid insights to the transformation of Cairo during and in the aftermath of the revolution are revealed. Malmström renders links and connections between living and non-living matter and, thus, the city of Cairo itself over time visible to the reader.

2 Research People are City People.

“African urban settings erase the distinction between observer and observed, and heightened sensitivity does not translate into less feeling towards others. Rather, taking the other into account becomes the condition of possibility of life in African urban settings” (Macamo 2018: 7).

I spent most of my adult life in cities. Thus, my everyday practices are shaped by that long-term experience. I am a city dweller myself, an African Studies researcher with a particular research interest in the urban. So, when I do research, I can awe about the adaptive skills of people in urban Africa, but I also have to acknowledge the fact that I am myself subject to adaptation, both as a person who lives in the city and as a researcher who researches the city. This matters because it shows that the ethnographic method is not something out there to use, but that it is shaped by the people who use it, by people who are themselves shaped by the surroundings they are inevitably part of. I tell myself that I am doing participant observation in the field, but what are we actually

participating in? I participate in this flexible, adaptive, moving practice city life is characterized for and I do so as a researcher and, thus, practice an ethnographic exercise that accounts for the qualities of the city. Simply put, just like the urban population is adapting to the urban condition (Fischer and Kokolaki 2013), ethnographers do, too.

3 On Time and Intensity.

Time and its meaning are crucial when it comes to the production of ethnography (see Pandian 2012). The pursuit of newness in “contemporary anthropology depends less on the objects of our investigation and more on the temporal and affective relations we nurture with them” (Pandian 2012: 567), and I would add that time does not equal affect. In other words, the quantity of time spent does not necessarily indicate affect or the quality of time spent. Three weeks in the field cannot substitute three months or three years; the warrants of different amounts of time spent in the field vary. Early periods in fieldwork are characterized by a lack of familiarity and routinized ways of making sense of what is around us; early periods in fieldwork are intense. Long periods of fieldwork are intense, too.

I believe the concepts of quality and superficiality do not contradict, but need each other. When there is no hierarchy of knowledge, no normative judgement of what counts as deep and superficial knowledge, everything happens on the ground. Bottom line: Surface matters. Surface research is proper research. The way in which the city affects us affects the ways in which we do ethnography. The urban calls for research in which surface matters, that means research that is guided by diversive curiosities. In other words, the urban requires research that privileges exploration as opposed to explanation. To be very clear, this is neither an excuse to take shortcuts, nor an argument for fast fieldwork, instead this is an attempt to describe the conditions in which fieldwork takes place, namely, within short and intense periods of time. My point here is not to dismiss the warrants of long-term fieldwork in cities, but simply to add to the toolbox by exploring what is possible between depth and surface. And this is where curiosity picks it up.

Curiosities are different in nature: Whereas specific curiosity digs deep into one issue, thereby covering no ground, diversive curiosity cares about many issues and operates on a surface level, covering lots of ground (Engel 2015: 131).

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