The Kouandé gendarmerie brigade was established in 1962. When we visited it in March 2009, it was manned by five gendarmes, of whom only four were present as one was on a training course in Porto-Novo. It is the only police force in an area of 4,500 square kilometres (almost twice as large as the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg which has an area of 2,600 km²) and with a population of almost 100,000 people. The outermost frontiers of the commune are 100 km from the municipal centre. Apart from the road linking the town of Kouandé to Natitingou some 50 km away, where the regional gendarmerie headquarters are located, there are no other tarmac roads.

The brigade registers between one and five cases per week, which are documented by official reports, and there had been 123 official written communications with the commander of the gendarmerie company in Natitingou since the beginning of 2009. In fact, it appears that these official documents relate mainly to more serious crimes and misdemeanours in flagrante. A good deal of the work of the gendarmerie is informal and actually involves the dispensing of justice; there is a preference for ‘amicable arrangements’ (reglements à l’amiable), as they are called. These settlements, which are moderated by the gendarmes, often include cases which, like financial debts, would be considered as warranting the resort to civil, and not penal, justice in other places. In making these judicial settlements, the gendarmerie is in competition with other regulatory instances, such as the ward heads (chefs de quartier) and the conciliation tribunal.

The gendarmerie has one Nissan pick-up vehicle which is broken. To find spare parts, the brigade chief himself had to go to the city of Lama Kara in Togo, about 200 km away, by bush taxi. The car will be repaired locally using the gendarmes’ own resources as the officially stipulated procedure, e.g. towing the car to the repair shops of the gendarmerie in Natitingou (50 km) or Parakou (100 km), would be very awkward. In theory, the brigade has an annual budget for petrol of 12,000 CFA francs, which equals around EUR 18. However, this money never arrives. (In fact, it would be interesting to find out where this money is actually used in the hierarchy.) If it did arrive, it would buy about 35 litres of gas oil, which would enable the

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1 A first version of this chapter was read as a key-note paper at the conference ‘States at Work in Sub-Saharan Africa’, LASDEL, Niamey, 7.–12. December 2009 and published in 2010 as Working Paper No. 113 of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/92.php).
pick-up to travel around 300 km. For their official missions, the gendarmes use their own private motor-bikes. They also do this when they have to transport arrested persons to the Natitingou prison, and when they evacuate victims of mob justice to other gendarmerie posts to bring them to safety. In the former cases, the arrested person is handcuffed and put on the back-seat of the motor-bike, behind a gendarme. A second gendarme will be seated behind the detainee, or may follow the first on his own-motorbike. There is no telephone and the in-service radio-station has been broken for two years. As is the case in all Benin administrations, the gendarmes use their private mobile phones for all communications, including those carried out with the hierarchical chief. The brigade also boasts an old typewriter, however paper and everything else must be bought locally by the gendarmes themselves. The brigade chief comments that they are “doing the work of the state” but “the state doesn’t send us anything”.

He sees the present situation, in which, as he says, they “endure” (nous souffrons), as the result of a long process of deterioration, which accelerated after what Beninese refer to as the ‘democratic renewal’ of 1990. Their predecessors (les anciens) still had work equipment, he says, and there were 15 staff "under the revolution", e.g. at the time of the Marxist-Leninist regime which lasted from 1974 to 1989. At the same time, he continues, democratization has translated into a loss of respect, both the respect that people have for the police and the respect of subordinates for their superiors. In other words, their work has become more complex as they cannot rely on the old means of repression, and, at the same time, their working conditions have deteriorated.

In order to maintain a minimum of service, the brigade needs the help of what one of the gendarmes calls “well-disposed people” (gens de la bonne volonté). However, their number is limited as there are no big businessmen in Kouandé who would be capable of "giving a helping hand" (faire des gestes), as exist in bigger centres and, in particular, in border posts. The town hall recently gave them a computer, and one of the small Igbo merchants has given them a car tyre. This was the point at which, without any prompting by us, the chief began to talk about corruption. (From the author’s field notes, March 2009)

THE OBJECTIVE: BRINGING THE STATE BACK INTO ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

This chapter—like most other contributions to this book—makes the case for the anthropological or, to be more precise, ethnographic study of statehood, which is severely lacking in the case of Africa. In concrete terms, it summarizes the findings of an international research programme carried out by a team of African, French and German researchers in four countries of West Africa (Benin, Ghana, Mali, Niger), which are occasionally