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**Author**

McCauley, John

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## Field Notes: A Cross-Border Study in West Africa<sup>i</sup>

John McCauley<sup>ii</sup>

### Abstract

*These field notes describe research that took place from August – September 2005 in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. The aim of the project was to understand the conditions that cause individuals to prioritize their religious identity instead of other identities. In exploring the role that different political environments might play, this project necessitated the collection of individual-level data in both countries. In these notes, organized thematically, I describe the selection of sites, enumerators, and respondents, and I explain challenges related to administrative authorization and survey formulation. A central theme is that organization and testing at the outset not only streamline the research but also preserve the legitimacy of the findings.*

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<sup>ii</sup> Department of Political Science, UCLA, 4289 Bunche Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90095.

## Introduction

The research described in these notes took place from August – September 2005 in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. The aim of the research was to explore the context-dependent nature of identity and, more specifically, to understand the conditions that cause individuals to prioritize their religious identity instead of other identities. The intention was to learn something about the political salience of religion as a social identity group.

The field notes that follow are organized in a thematic, rather than temporal, manner. During the course of my fieldwork, I kept a daily journal that served as a chronological accounting of the findings and I also kept separate notes on thematic issues that plagued the research or posed particular challenges that I wanted to highlight for myself. It is the latter set of notes that has proven most useful to me in writing up the results of the research and in planning subsequent field projects—I suspect, therefore, that they will be more useful to readers, as well. My objectives, in organizing the notes around a set of themes, are two-fold: first, I hope I can bring attention to a set of “lessons learned” that will serve my own future research and the research that others conduct, and second, I wish to allow for an informed evaluation of the conclusions I have drawn from my research.

Of the many lessons I learned during the course of this project, there are two that remained central from beginning to end, hence I wish to present those two points at the outset. First, conducting a cross-border project (as I did), or any project that involves sites in two countries, doubles the logistical duties of the researcher in many respects. Everything that must be done to establish sites,

gain access, receive authorization, and operate without complication, must essentially be done twice, as the tactics that work in one country are almost certainly not replicable in the other. To suggest that strategy x worked in country a and should therefore work in country b is a recipe for failure, particularly if that suggestion is made explicitly to decision-makers in country b. Secondly, an investment in time and energy at the early, developmental stage of the project pays great dividends for the final outcome. Data collection becomes more efficient, research questions can be refined to remove misunderstandings, variation across enumerators can be smoothed, and other pitfalls that would potentially undermine the research findings can be managed before they negatively impact the project. With these lessons in mind, I proceed with an accounting of the topics that figured prominently in my research.

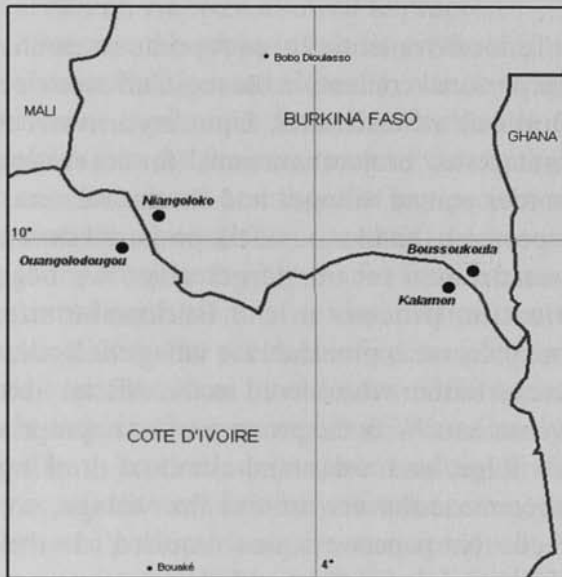
### **Selection of Research Sites**

The rationale for this project was that individuals living very close together and as part of a common population should self-identify in similar ways. By arbitrarily assigning some of those individuals to one set of national-level political circumstances, and the rest of the individuals to a different political treatment, we could thus learn something about the effects of political treatments on identity, holding other factors constant. Colonial-imposed national borders in Africa divided populations in an arbitrary manner—it was by historical accident that individuals ended up on one side of a boundary as opposed to the other—so the assignment to treatments was already done. The task of the research was to survey individuals on each side of the divide to account for differences in self-identification.

I targeted Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire to eliminate colonial legacy as an explanation (since both were colonized by France), and because of religious similarities. Both Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire have Muslim pluralities with prominent Christian minorities: Burkina is 50 percent Muslim and 10 percent Christian, while approximately 40 percent of Ivoirians are Muslim and 30 percent are Christian (CIA 2005). Both also have vibrant animist populations, particularly in the most rural areas.<sup>1</sup> Religious heterogeneity in both countries protects against a *prima facie* difference in Burkinabé and Ivoirian responses along religious lines. Finally, research suggested that this boundary was in fact arbitrarily-imposed: it had been demarcated along a set of seasonal streams and riverbeds without regard for the socio-cultural characteristics of the individuals it divided (Brownlie 1979: 377; Delafosse 1912: 41). The selection of countries was thus appropriate for this cross-border project exploring the political salience of religion.

I selected two research sites—one rural and one urban—in each country (see Figure 1). The two rural locations were the predominantly Lobi villages of Boussoukoula, Burkina Faso and Kalamou, Côte d'Ivoire. The villages are situated seven kilometers apart in the eastern section of the border zone, near Ghana. The two urban locations were the market towns of Niangoloko, Burkina Faso and Ouangolodougou, Côte d'Ivoire. Both towns lie on the main road connecting Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, approximately 300 kilometers west of the two rural research sites. Niangoloko is situated 18 kilometers north of the border; Ouangolodougou lies 30 kilometers south of the division.

Figure 1. Map of the Research Sites



The four research sites were selected with two criteria in mind: homogeneity in the cross-border pairs of villages, and heterogeneity in the within-country sites. The two rural villages, located across the border from each other, had populations between 800 and 1200, one primary school, an extremely limited government presence, and a largely agricultural economy. The urban sites had populations of between 25,000 and 30,000; several schools, places of worship, government offices, and civil service organizations; and a lively informal job sector. Cross-border homogeneity in sites protected against explanatory factors correlated with the “national treatment” explanation, while differentiation in the urban and rural sites within each country eliminated the possibility that my findings could be driven by the type of village I chose.

### **Administrative Authorization**

To locate potentially appropriate research sites, I relied on personal contacts in the regional capitals closest to the Burkinab research sites. Upon my arrival, I enlisted those contacts as "project assistants" for the eastern, rural cross-border pair of villages and for the western, urban pair, respectively, and I scouted the proposed sites myself. Once we decided on our target sites, we began the authorization process in the Burkinabé sites. In Boussoukoula, we approached the village *délégué*, a local commercial farmer who served as the official liaison for the government. With the promise of an appropriate gift for the village, and a day-and-a-half of drinking local millet beer in *cabarets* around the village, we were welcomed. No paperwork was required. In the urban town of Niangoloko, we met with the town commissioner and were required to produce documentation from my home university. The research was sanctioned after a perfunctory vetting of the survey questions and research agenda.

Obtaining authorization in the Ivoirian sites was much more complicated, due to the political conflict in the northern part of the country (which motivated this study in the first place). Getting to the rural site of Kalamou posed no problems, as one can cross the border on a barren stretch of dirt road without even realizing it. Upon entering the village, however, we were greeted by rebel leaders with guns drawn and were made to wait a day before gaining access to the rebel leader. His skepticism was matched only by his curiosity in our research agenda, so he deferred to the village chief. The chief proved to be very accommodating, so, with

assurances that we would avoid questions of an explicitly political nature, we were allowed to proceed.

Because the urban towns lie on the major access road between Burkina and Côte d'Ivoire, it took us four tries to cross the border from the Burkinabé town of Niangoloko into the Ivoirian town of Ouangolodougou. When my documents and those of my project assistant and enumerators were finally accepted, we were required to pay to the rebel leadership the fee for a *laissez-passer*, the informal equivalent of a visa. After two days of negotiation with the rebel chief of security, we were allowed to see the local rebel leader. Offering handouts at each step in the process, we were finally given permission to proceed, under two conditions: first, our survey questions were carefully vetted, and any questions that appeared political in nature were removed. Second, we were to be accompanied during all interviews by (armed) representatives of the rebel movement, ostensibly "for our own safety." My intention had originally been to move back and forth between the Burkinabé and Ivoirian sites during the course of the project, but, because of the tenuous acceptance we met in the Ivoirian sites, we stayed at those sites after receiving authorization until the surveys were complete.

To summarize, I started the survey process in Boussoukoula (BF), went to Kalamou (CI) and completed the surveys there, then returned to Boussoukoula to finish out the rural surveys. I did the same in the urban locations, starting in Niangoloko (BF), crossing the border and completing the surveys in Ouangolodougou (CI), and finally returning to Niangoloko to finish the project. We worked at about twice the pace in the Ivoirian villages, fearing that the project could be terminated at any moment.



### Selection of Enumerators

I enlisted a project assistant and two enumerators for each pair of sites (the rural and the urban). My intent was to ensure that the same enumerators posed the survey questions on each side of the border, to remove cross-border bias in the way the questions were asked. For language and time reasons, however, we were not able to maintain the same enumerators for both the eastern, rural pair of villages and the western, urban pair.

Both project assistants and all four enumerators were enlisted in Burkina Faso, in order to limit the logistical process of finding help in the uncertain Ivoirian environment. To eliminate bias, however, I took two measures: I selected enumerators from the regional capitals (instead of enlisting residents of the Burkinabé villages), and I used as a criterion for enlistment familiarity with villages on both sides of the border. In the end, all six assistants, though residents of Burkina Faso, were either born in Côte d'Ivoire or had spent significant time there. Because of the local market culture, the enumerators had experience in crossing the border between the respective pairs of research sites.

The enumerators played an invaluable role, and I owe much of the success of this project to these four people and to the project assistants. To select enumerators, I asked the project assistants to develop a list of possible candidates from the respective regional capitals (Gaoua in the east and Banfora in the west). In each case, we spent a day interviewing between six and ten candidates. In addition to having had experience on both sides of the border, we considered the candidates' education, experience with community-based projects, and language skills (French and the local language(s) were necessary).

We required that the enumerators be able to spend up to a month at the research sites.

Fortunately, the academic year did not begin until early October: three of the four enumerators we chose were primary school teachers, and the fourth was a university student. Having selected the team, we spent four to six days training the enumerators. It should be noted that I ran the eastern, rural sites and the western, urban sites as completely independent projects, so the training of enumerators was conducted separately. We worked through the survey questions to agree on the appropriate translations. We tried out different methods for approaching survey respondents and for actually conducting the interviews—from where to sit, to how to hold the papers and recorder while writing responses, to how to deal with excessively curious family members. Most importantly, we conducted extensive pre-test surveys, which—based on some of the responses we received (noted below)—revealed critical flaws in some of the survey questions.

### **Selection of Respondents**

At each of the four research sites, we aimed for a sample of 50 respondents. Taking into account the number of household compounds in the study areas, we decided that one respondent should be chosen from approximately every other household in the rural villages and from approximately every fifth household in the urban towns. Because individuals located in places outside of the home (i.e. the local market or places of worship) could potentially be in those places for reasons correlated with our outcome of interest (self-identification choices), all interviews were conducted in household compounds.

We generated simple maps of the research sites, divided the areas into two, and assigned each half to one of the two enumerators covering that site. Niangoloko in Burkina Faso and Kalamou in Côte d'Ivoire were conveniently divided by a road, so each enumerator covered the households on one side and thus avoided overlap. In Boussoukoula and in Ouangolodougou, we chose landmarks to divide the sites; the enumerators then started at a central location and worked outward, in opposite directions. We took care to cover all neighborhoods, in the event that residents were clustered according to characteristics—such as religion or ethnic group—that could be correlated with our outcome of interest.

Chosen randomly, the ensemble of our respondents would provide a representative sample, reflecting on average the characteristics of each study area. We knew in advance, of course, that each site would be home to approximately equal numbers of males and females and of young, middle-aged, and elderly adults (according to our own age divisions). Thus, to ensure that we included approximately equal proportions of these categories, we used a random stratified sampling procedure, stratified by gender and age. Each enumerator, responsible for 25 interviews per research site, was given a sheet with five tables like the one replicated in Figure 2. Upon conducting an interview, he would mark the box that corresponded to the person he had interviewed: for example, an elderly woman or a middle-aged man. The table could be completed in any order, but the goal was to fill each table (with six different respondent types) before moving to the next table. Ideally, four tables of six respondents would be filled, leaving one last respondent of any age group and gender for each enumerator to complete his sample of 25.

Figure 2. Random Stratified Sampling Table

	Male	Female
18-27		
28-45		
46+		

Each enumerator conducted between four and eight interviews per day. The project assistants and I accompanied the enumerators on some interviews and did not on others, to guard against the possibility that respondents' answers changed based on our presence (we coded interviews based on the presence of a project assistant, myself, or no one other than the enumerator). Enumerators had little problem finding female respondents; working-aged males, on the other hand, were easiest to find at the home during the hours of *sieste* or in the evening. We encountered very little opposition from potential respondents. Some respondents in the Ivoirian sites were understandably more skeptical than their counterparts in politically calm Burkina Faso but, after an explanation of the project goals and the types of questions we intended to ask, almost all targeted individuals graciously participated. They were, in fact, very interested in being heard; we did not need to provide any motivation or payment to participants, as is often the case when individual-level surveys of this sort are conducted.

## The Survey Questions

Our primary research goal was to develop an individual-level data set in order to infer a probabilistic relationship between political circumstances and self-identity, controlling for personal characteristics. Thus, we asked a set of systematic questions of our respondents, the answers to which could then be coded and analyzed using statistical methods. In short, the surveys were the crux of this research project.

We administered the surveys in Dioula and/or French in the western, urban sites and in Lobiri (and occasionally French) in the eastern, rural locations. Respondents were asked several background questions, as well as four key research questions:

- Each person has several ways of identifying him/herself: nationality, religion, ethnic group, occupation, gender, personality, point of view, etc. For you, what identity is most important?
- After that, what identity would you place in second position?
- Could you marry a person of a different religion?
- To whom do you feel closer: a person of your country who is not of your religion, or a person of your religion who is not of your country?

Methodologically, questions regarding self-identification can be posed in a variety of ways. Open-ended questions ensure that responses are free from constraints (Bratton et al. 2005: 56), but in pre-test questioning, we found that an open-ended question regarding self-identification (with no example responses provided) was difficult for some respondents to

comprehend. Another approach is to provide respondents with a list of responses that can be ranked (see Miles and Rochefort 1991). The advantage to this method is cohesion in responses but the limitation is that respondents are constrained to a set of choices. I chose a middle ground, offering a systematic set of common examples<sup>2</sup> but allowing respondents to answer in any way they desired. We also recorded individuals' secondary identities, which provided some of the insight that a ranking conveys.

Several challenges emerged during the course of pre-test questioning. We suspect that the choice of self-identities was difficult for some simply because they had never previously thought about their own answers to this question in a systematic way. In posing the question regarding willingness to marry across religious lines, we were faced with a challenge that I am not sure we ever overcame: males seemed more willing to marry across religious lines, but some indicated that they were willing to do so under the assumption that their wife/wives (whether hypothetical or actual) would convert. Regarding the fourth key question, pitting feelings toward co-religionists against feelings toward co-nationals, we confronted particular difficulties in finding the appropriate wording choice. In pre-test questioning, we began by asking the respondent:

"If you could be friends with one person, someone who shared your religion but was from a different country, or someone from your country but a different religion, whom would you choose to be friends with?"

Phrased as such, several respondents found the choice between friends to be unrealistic, resulting in vague

and unreliable responses. In the course of one of those responses, we arrived at a second framing of the question:

“Two people are drowning, one who shares your religion but is from a different country, and one who is from your country but has a different religion. Who would you save?”

For that particular respondent, the light bulb went on—she exclaimed, “Why didn’t you just say that in the first place?” So we tried the same framing with subsequent respondents. Uniformly, they were appalled that we would suggest they had to choose life for one and death for another, even in a hypothetical situation. Eventually, we arrived at the framing presented above, in which respondents were asked to whom they felt closer.

Language and cultural misunderstandings were not limited to the key research questions; some of our original attempts at obtaining simple background information also led us astray. We began our pre-test questioning, for example, by asking respondents for their age, rather than classifying them in age groups based on our own observations. This worked well until one elderly respondent in Boussoukoula gave his age as “somewhere around 200-years-old.” It turns out that, traditionally, members of the Lobi ethnic group count each season, of which there are two annually, as a separate year. This, combined with the fact that he had likely lived a long, eventful life without bothering to keep careful seasonal accounting, led to an answer that would have biased the effects of age on our outcome variables. We decided thereafter to rely on age group classifications rather than specific ages. Measuring education levels was also problematic. Many respondents had received very little



schooling; the average level of scholastic achievement across our sample was about what it would take to complete primary school. But, some respondents had received informal education, either in Qur'anic (Muslim) schools or in traditional settings where schools were not present or accessible. Were we counting these years of schooling in the same way? Were respondents answering consistently? We decided to simply ask how many years of schooling the individual had received and we allowed the respondent to answer in whatever way he/she desired. Finally, measuring religious participation (a factor presumably correlated with one of our outcomes of interest, the propensity to self-identify in religious terms) was not straightforward, because Christianity and Islam (the predominant world religions in the region) have different expectations regarding the frequency with which a practitioner should attend services. Fortunately, conventional practice among both Muslims and Christians in the study area was to attend formal services once per week (on Fridays and Sundays, respectively), so this served as a baseline. It was important, however, to offer quantifiable choices—once per month, once per week, daily, etc.—rather than interpersonally incomparable choices, such as “sometimes” or “often” (see King et al. 2004).

These challenges underscore the importance of devoting significant time and energy to the pre-test questioning stage of the research. If questions that allow bias sneak into the final questionnaire, survey responses could be tainted in a way that critically undermines the research findings. Pre-test training and questioning took longer than we had anticipated, but that time was well-spent in the end.



## **Other Challenges**

### *Travel*

Cross-border travel between both the eastern and the western pairs of research sites was challenging and time-consuming. In the eastern zone, poorly maintained roads had been made worse by the summer rains, so travel between markets in the two villages was limited. We ultimately made arrangements with a local transporter but were forced to compensate him at higher-than-anticipated levels. Travel between the urban towns in the western zone would under normal circumstances have been very easy. However, due to the political climate in Côte d'Ivoire, transportation was not running regularly. We attempted first to cross the border with a cement transporter but were turned away. In subsequent attempts, we traveled by motorcycle, bringing along a local transporter who had become familiar to border agents on each side of the divide.

### *Recording Interviews*

I provided each enumerator with hand-held tape recorders and a pack of cassettes to record all interviews, and I would do so again in future fieldwork projects. Recording the interviews allowed us to return to ambiguous answers during the coding stage, and it also served as a monitoring device to ensure that all of the interviews were actually conducted. The use of recording devices, however, was not without complication. Some respondents were made uncomfortable by the process, wondering why we needed to record their responses if we did not have the intention of sharing the information with the government.

*Surveillance*

We had reason to worry that answers from our respondents in Côte d'Ivoire would be calculated or withheld as a result of the tense political environment. Care was taken, therefore, during our introduction at each household, to clarify our research agenda and to separate our mission from the political circumstances. This was particularly challenging, of course, in Ouangolodougou (CI), where armed rebels accompanied us to each interview. Our strategy was to provide these "bodyguards" with cigarettes and ask that they wait outside the compound. When respondents remained skeptical, we asked the rebel to come in, greet the family, and ensure the respondent that the rebels had no interest in our study and that they were only there for our safety. Ultimately, because the questions were largely sociological rather than political, answers came forth freely.

**Conclusion**

This research was predicated on the existence of cross-border political differences—I hypothesized that otherwise identical individuals, exposed to different political treatments, would self-identify in systematically different ways (which they did—Ivoirian respondents were more likely to favor their religious identities, because elites had politicized religion during the political conflict). Of course, the conditions that made this study an interesting and potentially valuable one were the very conditions that made its undertaking more difficult. Getting across the border, obtaining unfettered access to respondents, and documenting the effects we wished to explore were all made more difficult by the circumstances we encountered in Côte d'Ivoire.

As a result, more time was needed at the front end of the project—in administrative processes and in pre-test questioning—than I had anticipated. Nevertheless, we were able to complete the study, and I have no reason to question the general findings based on the research design or on the responses we obtained. What began as an effort to familiarize the enumerators with their jobs turned into a trial-and-error refinement of the survey, which ultimately preserved the validity of the project.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Burkina Faso: 40 percent animist; Côte d'Ivoire: approximately 30 percent animist (CIA 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Research has shown that these responses are generally among the most common for questions regarding self-identification (Miles 1994: 48-49), so I feel comfortable that this design clarified the question without biasing respondents.

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