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## Protocols for Conducting Drone Fieldwork in Togo, West Africa

**Abstract:** *Fieldwork is a hallmark of anthropology and the experience of being in the field features prominently in scholarly works. The processes by which anthropologists obtain permission to conduct fieldwork, however, are rarely described. The study presented here discusses in substantial detail how a research project in Togo, West Africa obtained official authorization to conduct uncrewed aerial vehicle (UAV or “drone”) fieldwork. Anthropologists are continually incorporating new technologies into their work and drones have the potential to become part of our methodological toolkit. For security reasons, however, drone importation and use is carefully controlled by governments. This article describes the processes and protocols by which a team of anthropologists obtained official permission for drone work in a West African country. As such, it provides a guide for how other researchers may obtain similar authorizations in other contexts and anticipate challenges in doing so. [drones, fieldwork, protocol]*

### Introduction

**F**ieldwork is a hallmark of anthropology and most scholars have to obtain some sort of formal permission by someone or something somewhere at some point in time before actually conducting it. Both the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) have adopted official ethical guidelines for research (American Anthropological Association 2012; Society for Applied Anthropology n.d.). At the very least, academic anthropologists must obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from their home institution. The IRB confers permission from the home institution, but authorization from a host university, foreign government, or local organization within the destination country may also be necessary. At many academic institutions, the requirements and expectations needed to acquire IRB approval are clearly specified, with established procedures, protocols, forms, personnel, and training all in place to facilitate the process in a timely and organized fashion. In contrast, the process for obtaining official fieldwork permission in many countries, however, is often not at all clear. In this article, we describe in detail the processes by which we obtained official permission to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in combination with the use of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs or “drones”) in Togo, West Africa. We present our experiences as a guide for others seeking to conduct similar research in foreign countries so that they may anticipate obstacles and obtain permission more efficiently and do so in ways that are consistent with local protocol.

Among social scientists, anthropologists tend to be extremely reflexive and openly critical of their own personal professional conduct (Scholte 1972). This is particularly true when it comes to fieldwork and working with communities

(Davies 2008). At the same time, there are still key aspects of doing anthropology that go unexamined. Many graduate students confront the same issues in the field as their advisors but have not been prepared for overcoming them. In their provocative article “Field of Screams,” Polard (2009) documents some of the traumatic fieldwork experiences of British cultural anthropology PhD students. Many of these frustrations revolved around obtaining research permission in local contexts. After going through a long and drawn-out official process for accessing their field site, one student was ultimately denied clearance. In another case, local women were eager to engage with the ethnographer on her project, but the institutions controlling access resisted and made speaking with them difficult.

In some countries, ethnographic fieldwork permission is tightly controlled by the government and especially for work with certain populations. Turner (2013) documents how access to ethnic-minority rural villages in the China-Viet Nam borderlands is exclusively authorized by local government agents. Official “red stamps” from these officials are informally obtained through discussions over “green tea.” This work underscores the formal and informal dimensions of the permission process and emphasizes how it can be negotiated. Using a historical lens in southern Africa, Straube (2020) describes how gatekeepers have controlled research in Zambia’s Copperbelt from the 1930s to the present. Anthropologists bargained with mine management to obtain permission to interview and interact with workers. This bargaining in turn determined ethnographic methodologies and, as Straub argues, the analytical lenses through which social change on the Copperbelt was ultimately documented and understood.

## Project Background

The permission process described here is part of an ongoing National Science Foundation (NSF) funded project titled, “Factors Influencing Vegetation Trends in Dryland Zones” (BCS-1759064). Interdisciplinary research by an anthropologist (the PI—West), a biogeographer (the Co-PI—Moody), graduate students, undergraduate students, and host-country partners investigates the dynamics among changing vegetation patterns and land-use practices of rural smallholders in Sahelian and Suda-

nian zones of West Africa. Remote sensing analyses of satellite images have detected large-scale patterns of enhanced greening in West Africa. Through participatory fieldwork with farmers and herders, we have sought to understand how local farming and herding practices drive these larger regional patterns (West, Ilboudo Nébié, and Moody 2020). Although previous fieldwork used high-resolution satellite imagery to elicit local perspectives on land degradation and rehabilitation, we proposed to use a drone to capture extremely high-resolution imagery in Togo. Two months of summer fieldwork with a geography graduate student (Maloney) from the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill (UNC—CH) was designed as a pilot study to assess the feasibility of using drones for additional fieldwork in the country.

We sought formal research permission from the *Ministère de l’Environnement et des Ressources Forestières du Togo* (Ministry of Environment). Two Togolese graduate students (Saparapa and Nomedji) helped initiate and assist this process in Togo. The Ministry of Environment granted research clearance but stipulated that the use of drone would have to be granted by the *Ministère de la Sécurité et de la Protection Civile* (Ministry of Security) because drones pose a risk to national security in the specific area in which we proposed to conduct fieldwork.

The following sections detail the steps by which we obtained official permission for drone fieldwork. It includes where we went, the formal requests we made, the informal ways we followed up on these requests, the time it took for each step, and the official documents we eventually obtained.

## Methods

The account presented here is based on our personal experiences interacting with offices and officials of three Togolese ministries and one office: (1) *le Ministère de l’Environnement et des Ressources Forestières* (Ministry of Environment); (2) *le Ministère de la Sécurité et de la Protection Civile* (Ministry of Security); (3) *le Ministère des Armées* (Ministry of Armies); and *l’Office Togolais des Recettes* (Togolese Customs Office). We initiated the research permission process in May 2021, received the final authorization in July 2021, and completed the drone fieldwork at the end of July 2021. It is important to note that this fieldwork took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions were

beginning to be lifted. Universities like UNC-CH were granting limited permission for international research travel, and the team was granted a waiver from travel restrictions in late April, 2021. Thus, we could not begin the formal process for seeking research clearance in Togo until May once we knew fieldwork was possible. One or two months seemed reasonable at the time since we anticipated needing only permission from a single ministry—the Ministry of the Environment.

We did not take fieldnotes of these interactions but frequently reflected on what was happening as we overcame obstacles and strategized. This article is a product of our collective recollections of these events, which we have chosen to write up shortly after they occurred while they are still fresh in our memory. The Institutional Review Board at UNC-CH approved this project (IRB #17-3350).

## The Processes of Permission and Protocol

In this section, we describe in great detail the processes by which we sought and eventually obtained official research permission to conduct fieldwork using drones in northern Togo from government agencies. We do not present this as an “ethnography of state bureaucracy” (see Hoag 2010; Heyman 1995) because our goal is not to critique these structures or theorize them. Instead, our goal is pragmatic as we seek to provide other researchers with a roadmap of what to expect and how to navigate the permission process in countries like Togo. This process is likely to be similar in other francophone sub-Saharan nations and will help others anticipate obstacles and overcome them. The following account proceeds chronologically by ministry as we proceeded to request and obtain formal permissions.

### *Initial Permission—Ministry of Environment*

Because our research is geared toward understanding environmental change and land-use practices of rural producers in the Savanes Region of northern Togo, we initially contacted the Ministry of Environment for fieldwork clearance and presumed this would be the only clearance we would require. One of the Togolese graduate students, Rajah Saparapa, had previously conducted fieldwork in the country in collaboration with their agency and was fortunately in the capitol city Lomé where all government ministries are located. The PI West contacted

her by email from the United States and asked for her help. Because Ms. Saparapa had contacts in the Ministry of Environment and established relationships with their staff, this made them the ideal state institution to formally authorize our project.

Formal research permission to conduct fieldwork in Togo, however, is not required but strongly encouraged. Unlike other African nations, foreign researchers do not require a research permit. We briefly considered foregoing official permission because our goal was to do exploratory fieldwork over a short time period in the far-flung northern region of the country. Ms. Saparapa wisely advised against doing so because the mere presence of a drone would attract a great deal of attention and the Savanes Region borders Burkina Faso. As such, there is a large security presence in the north due to jihadist terrorist activities in neighboring Burkina Faso. She explained that possessing and presenting official documents would allow us to work with villages and local authorities would request to see these important pieces of paper. She was right.

The PI West prepared a formal written request for research permission that briefly described the project’s goals and methodology, including the use of drones. This was done on UNC-CH Department of Anthropology letterhead and emailed to Ms. Saparapa as a .pdf document in French. Both Togolese students, Ms. Saparapa and Koffi Nomedji, a PhD student in Anthropology at Duke University, carefully corrected spelling and grammar mistakes and formatted the letter to conform to proper Togolese administrative protocol in terms of language, tone, and structure. Formal requests have to “look” a certain way to be taken seriously. Through her contacts, Ms. Saparapa also crucially obtained the name and title of the person to whom the letter should be addressed. These contacts also advised us on how our request should be delivered to the Ministry and how we should subsequently follow up. Specifically, we learned that our request for research clearance needed to be printed and delivered in person at the Ministry of Environment’s main office. Again, Ms. Saparapa was in Lomé and able to do so.

When she made this request, Ms. Saparapa also left her personal contact information with the secretary of the official who considers such requests and made sure to obtain the name and cell phone number of this individual to follow up on its administrative progress and to ask this secretary when a determination would be made, providing an esti-

mated time window for when we could expect to hear back. It is only *after* this date that it is culturally appropriate to follow up. Doing so beforehand makes one seem in a hurry and appear they are not respecting administrative protocol.

Approximately three days after submitting our letter, the secretary informed Ms. Saparapa that our request had been approved, and that she would need to pick up the letter of authorization in person. Although the Ministry approved the fieldwork, they could not authorize the drone component. This would have to be done by the Ministry of Security. Nonetheless, this official letter of fieldwork authorization from the Ministry of Environment was crucial because it would provide a state-sanctioned rationale and justification for the drone component. Ms. Saparapa kept the original and a digital copy was emailed to the PI West by the Ministry of Environment.

The letter of authorization is printed on official letterhead and, as Rees (2020) and Turner (2013) point out, features blue “stamps” with the official seal of the Ministry of Environment that stand out from the text. Overall, it appears very impressive and formal as a visual representation of state-sanctioned research approval (Fig. 1).

### **Secondary Permission—Ministry of Security Part I**

The use of drones in Togo necessitated authorization from the Ministry of Security. Over several days and through contacts, we attempted to identify the proper processes and protocols for requesting this but found no one who was sufficiently knowledgeable. Likewise, there was no information available on Togolese Government web sites. Thus, we decided to simply visit the Ministry of Security to find out how to proceed. This underscores two important aspects of the permission process in Togo. One, it is advantageous to work through existing personal relationships that can facilitate the flow of information and possibly expedite the process. Being able to mention the name of someone outside the agency who recommended we speak to a particular agent, official, or secretary can often open doors that are otherwise closed. Two, without any sort of network connections, it is best to simply show up in person because only staff within a ministry have sufficient knowledge to guide and assist. In our case, these gatekeepers could not be contacted by email

or phone but had to be physically visited in their offices.

We visited the Ministry of Security at around 9:00 a.m. on a Tuesday. The Ministry has a high concrete wall and armed guards at the gate. Entering entailed leaving one of our passports or ID cards at the gate as one of the guards registered our name, time of entry, and reason for visiting in a large logbook. The guards directed us to an information desk within the Ministry where we explained our request. Requests for drone clearance for research purposes are rare and this required the knowledge of very specialized staff. After meeting briefly with at least two other offices, an official directed us to a specific office on the third floor of a nondescript building within the Ministry complex.

This was an office in which at least five staff worked. We again stated our purpose and one of the staff carefully explained that obtaining permission to use drones has two components—the Ministry of Security has jurisdiction over one of these but not the other. He told us that the Togolese Ministry of the Armies provides authorization for the *use* of drones. The Ministry of Security, however, authorizes the importation of drones. Since we were bringing our drone from the United States into Togo, we would need both. In our case, however, the Ministry of the Armies would have to *first* grant permission in writing to *use* the drone *before* the Ministry of Security could grant permission to *import* one. This meant we could submit a request to import the drone immediately at the Ministry of Security, but that they would not consider it until we obtained the use authorization.

We returned to one of the first offices, the Reception Desk, where they informed us that our “Request for Permission to Import a Drone” would require a formal letter as well as a “deposit stamp.” This deposit stamp would have to be obtained and purchased at yet another office within the Ministry for 500 CFA (approximately USD 1.00). The stamp resembles a postage stamp and presumably pays for the nominal administrative time it takes to process a request. It also marks that our request has been formally submitted following correct administrative protocols. We purchased two of these stamps and quickly left. The guards returned our passports and IDs as we exited. We then rapidly prepared a formal request letter on one of our laptops, printed it in color on university letterhead, and returned to the Ministry of Security and the Reception Desk. Here, a staff member carefully wrote our names,

MINISTÈRE DE L'ENVIRONNEMENT  
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SECRETARIAT GÉNÉRAL

DIRECTION DES RESSOURCES  
FORESTIÈRES

N° 0154/MERF/SG/DRF

REPUBLIQUE TOGOLAISE  
Travail - Liberté - Patrie

Lomé, le .... 1.4 MAI 2021

**AUTORISATION DE RECHERCHE SUR LES ASPECTS  
ENVIRONNEMENTAUX DANS LA REGION DES  
SAVANES AU TOGO**

Une autorisation de recherche est accordée à **Monsieur Colin T. West**, Professeur Agrégé au Département d'Anthropologie à l'Université de Caroline du Nord à Chapel Hill aux Etats-Unis, pour son projet de recherche intitulé : « *Facteurs influençant les tendances de la végétation dans les zones arides* », dans la région des Savanes au Togo, de Juin à Juillet 2021.

Concernant l'utilisation des drones, l'intéressé devra s'adresser au ministère de la sécurité et de la protection civile pour l'obtention d'une autorisation y afférente.

La présente autorisation n'est valable uniquement que pour une recherche de terrain au cours de laquelle le requérant est tenu de respecter les mesures barrières contre la COVID-19.

Tout changement d'intention doit faire l'objet d'un consentement préalable avec l'autorité nationale compétente.

Aux termes de ses travaux, **Monsieur Colin T. West**, devra partager les résultats obtenus de sa recherche avec le ministère de l'environnement et des ressources forestières.



**FIGURE 1.** Ministry of Environment Research Authorization.

the date, the time, and the nature of our request in the very large logbook. We gave them a hardcopy of our request for permission to import a drone and attached a copy of our research authorization from the Ministry of the Environment. This person took our documents and also attached the deposit stamp to our letter. Our request for importing the drone was now officially submitted pending approval for its use from the Ministry of the Armies.

**Secondary Permission—Ministry of the Armies**

Immediately after submitting our documents to the Ministry of Security, we prepared a similar letter for the Ministry of the Armies and printed it. Instead of trying to obtain information about the Ministry of the Armies through our network, which would have used up significant time, we simply went directly to their offices in person. Again, a pair of

us—the PI West and student Ms. Saparapa—entered the offices together. We had to provide our names at the gate and leave at least one ID. This name, the date, and time were again logged into a list of visitors. Guards at the gate directed us to the Reception Desk. Here, we waited our turn and then presented our case to an army officer sitting at the desk. She carefully listened to us, logged our names into a large logbook, and took our written request for the use of a drone along with the initial permission we had received from the Ministry of Environment. She informed us that she would forward this to her “*chef*,” or “boss,” who was responsible for reviewing such requests. We carefully and diplomatically asked her to tell us the name and title of this person, which she declined to do. Instead, we were told to wait and someone else would provide us with this information.

After about 30 minutes, another officer entered the room from behind closed doors and briefly spoke with us. He gave us his name and contact information but did not provide the name of the officer responsible for formal permission. He did, however, tell us to call back in two days to check. He also took one of our names and contact information and said he would be in touch. This person became our crucial contact to the Ministry of the Armies.

After two days, we called our contact at the Ministry of the Armies and he said he had no progress to report. At this time, we were becoming quite anxious because another graduate student was traveling to Togo from the United States with our drone. Because we had neither the authorization to use the drone or import it, we were concerned it would be confiscated at the airport. Indeed, this is exactly what happened and the consequences of this are described below.

On the third day, we returned again to the Ministry of the Armies to follow up in person hoping that our presence might expedite the process. It did not. The same officers we met with before provided no new details and explained we would have to wait. At this point, we began trying to open up other channels to people within the Ministry of the Armies who might be able to assist. This is also common in Togo, and in many other places, where ordinary citizens who lack the necessary professional relationships within a company, office, or ministry attempt to establish a connection to someone who can help from within. By this time, our drone had been confiscated at the airport and we

had only one month left in Togo for fieldwork. We started mobilizing our network to find out who within the Ministry of the Armies was responsible for making these decisions and how this individual could be contacted.

Within about one week, one of our Togolese contacts determined the name of a colonel within the Ministry of the Armies who was responsible for drones. Our contact had only the name of the officer but not their phone number. Instead, they told us to return to the Reception Desk, tell the person at the desk that we sought to speak with “Colonel X,” and state that we had been referred to him by “Colonel Y.” This was a way of exerting external pressure using established and culturally appropriate forms of protocol. Ms. Saparapa returned by herself to the army offices and stated that she was again there regarding our drone. This time, however, she stated that she wished to meet with “Colonel X” regarding the drone. This immediately produced a prompt reaction by the female soldier at the desk who quickly dialed a number. While on the phone, the secretary then asked Ms. Saparapa who had referred her. She told the secretary the name of “Colonel Y” and was told to patiently wait; Colonel X would be with her shortly.

This was the afternoon and offices close at 5:30 p.m. After nearly an hour, Ms. Saparapa asked if she should still wait since it was nearly closing time. The secretary informed her that the Colonel often works well into the evening and that she would wait with her. Around 5:30 and after most of the other staff had left, the secretary informed Ms. Saparapa that the Colonel would now see her and she was led to his office. Colonel X welcomed her into his office. He asked about her last name because it is a rare Togolese surname. He wanted to know if she was related to another male Saparapa. She responded, “yes,” and informed the Colonel this person was her uncle. To this, the Colonel responded that he knew the man well and this made her *his* niece. Again, this is common throughout West Africa. People often create fictive kinship relations based on first names, hometowns, last names, and numerous other factors. This put Ms. Saparapa at ease and she stated that as “his niece” she needed his help.

They briefly discussed the drone and the research project. After a few minutes, the Colonel stated he would approve the authorization for use of the drone and that she should wait outside momentarily while the document was drawn up and signed. The initial secretary presented this signed authoriza-

tion to Ms. Saparapa and carefully explained two important caveats. First, this only authorized its use; the Ministry of Security would have to approve its importation. Second, the authorization was valid for only one month.

### **Drone Confiscation—Togolese Customs**

#### **Offices**

Our drone arrived in Lomé with a graduate student, Devon Maloney, on Friday, June 25, 2021. We did not have the proper paperwork to import it into the country and our drone was confiscated by Togolese custom officials at the airport. She was given, however, a receipt for the drone and told that we could recover it with the proper paperwork. Since it was a Friday, we could not return to the airport until after the weekend to start the process. Moreover, the following Monday was a Togolese state holiday and the Customs offices at the airport would be closed.

The following Tuesday, June 29, the PI West and Ms. Maloney returned to the airport to retrieve the drone. First, we showed our passports and the drone confiscation receipt and passed through security where we were given badges. We were brought to a nondescript Customs office within the airport where we were told to wait outside until the chef arrived. This took over an hour. Once inside, we were asked to sit at a desk of a female Customs officer who was dressed in uniform. She looked at our receipt and our passports to confirm that the name on the receipt corresponded to the name on the student's passport. Then, she took out a ruler and a pen and opened a very large ledger book. With the pen and ruler, the Customs officer drew a line and wrote down the name, passport number, date, and type of request. She also called someone else on the office phone. Another customs official entered with our drone. She asked if indeed this was our drone and we confirmed that it was. She explained that this officer would escort us and the drone to a different Customs office outside the airport for further processing.

We were led to the Main Airport Customs Office complex about one kilometer from the airport. None of the buildings or offices featured names or descriptions of what specific aspects of importing or exporting goods they controlled. For the purposes of this article, we simply call the first office we visited the "Confiscated Items Office." First, we waited

outside the closed door while several other individuals waited with us on a bench. From what we could witness, this appeared to be the office where people could pay fines or duty taxes for imported items that were confiscated by Customs at the airport. After about 20 minutes, we were told to enter the office to speak with the "Confiscation Officer." We showed him our receipt for the drone and the other officer who escorted us from the airport gave him the drone. We explained that the drone was for research fieldwork and presented him our receipt from the airport, the authorization from the Ministry of Environment, and the letter we submitted to the Ministry of the Armies. The Confiscation Officer read all these documents and informed us that until he received official forms from the Ministry of the Armies and Ministry of Security, he could not release our drone.

At this point, the Confiscation Officer introduced us to "Mr. Bouly" (a pseudonym) and informed us that he would be able to assist us with the *formalités* (Fr. "formalities"). Formalities refer to the numerous complex bureaucratic procedures one must navigate in order to accomplish any task. Mr. Bouly is not a civil servant but an entrepreneurial "fixer" (see Piot 2019). He acted as an informal liaison between Customs officials and outsiders like us who could not navigate the system and did not know key people or where their offices are located. Mr. Bouly was able to make phone calls, contact people, and follow up directly with them in ways we could not. After our meeting with the Confiscation Officer, he took us to another nearby Customs office to meet with another official.

Again, this office and agent had no apparent title but it became clear that he was someone charged with interacting on behalf of the Customs Office with other state agencies. Formal authorizations, receipts, permissions, or other official forms had to pass through him before continuing on to other Customs officials. For purposes of simplification, we refer to this agent as the "Document Clerk." It appeared to us that the Document Clerk works closely with the above Confiscation Officer and is likely the latter's subordinate. Because he would be involved in the recuperation of our drone, Mr. Bouly wanted to make sure we met and were acquainted with him. It also seemed to us that Mr. Bouly wanted to be as transparent as possible and ensure that all the agents with whom we were interacting knew that *he* was our interlocutor with *them*.

**Secondary Permission—Ministry of Security and Civil Protection Part II**

Because we now had the Authorization for Drone Use from the Ministry of the Armies, we returned to the Ministry of Security with this important document. We optimistically hoped that they would simply record this in their vast ledger book, refer to our original request for importing a drone, and provide us with a letter we could take to the Customs Office. Unfortunately, this was not the case. The secretary who met with us asked where the drone was and we informed her it had been confiscated by Customs at the airport. She explained that because of this, we would instead have to make a formal “request for restitution of the drone” since we were no longer importing it.

Luckily, we were now very familiar with many of the subtleties of working with state officials and asked the secretary to write down in French what we were specifically requesting. This gave her the opportunity to provide us with additional information in front of her colleagues and subordinates. On a piece of paper, she wrote “*Demande de Restitution de Drone*” along with her first name and cell phone number. Thus, we now had a contact within this particular office for following up on our request. We quickly returned to our hotel, re-worked the previous letter of request to conform to Togolese bureaucratic prose and style, and printed it on UNCH official letterhead. Sadly, the hotel printer was black-and-white and it was running low on toner. Thus, the request for recuperation of the drone was not visually very appealing. We, however, still had an additional Ministry of Security deposit stamp, which we attached.

Again, we presented our passports at the gate, entered, and proceeded to the desk where we had already been twice before. The request for recuperation of the drone was submitted along with a copy of the authorization from the Ministry of the Armies. The secretary again came out and checked our documents. She expressed concern that our letter was not in color and that the ink was faint in some parts. We apologized and asked her to forgive us because it was not our fault but the hotel’s fault. The secretary instructed the person at the desk to record the PI’s name, date, and type of request in the official ledger. As always, we thanked her and asked the Secretary when we might expect to hear back. She replied that this would take at least five days but that we could call her and check.

**Venez-chercher!—Ministry of Security Part III**

After five days, we anxiously called the secretary and she informed us that the permission was not yet ready and that we would have to wait. By this time, we had only two weeks left in Togo to conduct our drone work. On the sixth day, we decided that rather than call, we would simply drop in at the Ministry of Security and inquire early that morning—just as we had done with the Ministry of the Armies. The secretary did not come out and we took this as a bad sign. Instead, a young man who spoke English very well approached us on her behalf. He asked who we were working with at the Customs Office and we informed him we did not know any of the names of the actual Customs agents but gave him the name and number of Mr. Bouly. This person explained that our authorization for the restitution of the drone would be granted soon, but that it would have to be signed by someone in another office across town. He could not specify when. This was very disappointing and disheartening. At the same time, we had a sense that our persistence was drawing some sympathy.

Later that afternoon, the PI chose to call the secretary of the Ministry of Security on her cell phone. He knew this would likely annoy her, but time was truly running out for fieldwork. He called, she answered and simply stated, “Venez-chercher.” This is the imperative form of the French verb *venir*, which means “to come” along with the French verb *chercher*, which means “to seek” or “to get.” This meant “come and get.” We were elated and drove straight to the Ministry of Security for what we hoped would be our last time. The Secretary came out to the main desk and gave us an unsigned copy of the Ministry’s “approval for the restitution of the drone.” She explained that the original would go to the Ministry of Security official who actually signs such documents and that this signed original would then go to agents at the Customs Office who would release our drone. The young man who spoke English was also present and showed us a stack of official-looking packages that were stamped and bound with twine. He informed us that our original letter was in one of these packets and would arrive on the official’s desk in a matter of hours. He also stated we needed to take the unsigned copy to the original office of the Ministry of Security where we began the whole process on our first visit.



We did so immediately and they provided us with another form that this office signed and dated as a sort of receipt. By this time, it was approximately 4:30 in the afternoon and we were anxious to try and get our drone from the Customs Office near the airport. We called Mr. Bouly and told him we were headed to the office of the Document Clerk. He met us there and escorted us into his office. We presented the original Authorization for Drone Use from the Ministry of the Armies and the unsigned copy of the Authorization for Restitution of the Drone. The Document Clerk informed us that he needed to see the original signed copy of the latter form and log it into his records before letting others release our drone. This could possibly be done the next morning.

By now, it was nearly 5:00 and we returned to the hotel. On our way back, however, Mr. Bouly called and told us to return to the office of the other Customs official—the Confiscation Officer. This was clearly after hours and Mr. Bouly escorted us to the office where the Confiscation Officer was on the phone. He was clearly speaking Moba, which is the dominant local language of the Savanes Region. The PI had been a Peace Corps volunteer in the region and spoke some Moba. Once the Confiscation Officer hung up, he greeted him in Moba and directly addressed the Customs official as “*t yaal*,” which means “*notre grand frère*” in French or “our senior brother” in English. This again creates a fictive kin relationship and makes it clear one is requesting a favor from a brother of higher status to help his junior sibling. This junior–senior sibling trope is commonly used when making requests of people who have substantial power or influence. Using the plural first person possessive “our” also implies that granting the request will benefit some collective group rather than just an individual. The hope was to make the Confiscation Officer more empathetic.

This clearly had an effect and the agent’s demeanor changed. Again, in Moba, the PI asked him which village he was from. The Confiscation Officer replied that it was a place called Sanga (a pseudonym), which happened to be one of the villages we had visited and planned to conduct drone work. We explained this and it seemed to again make the agent more relaxed and compassionate.

The Confiscation Officer, however, explained that he could not release the drone without the original signed approval for its restitution. He and Mr.

Bouly then briefly conversed with each other in a different local language. Afterwards, the Confiscation Officer proposed that we should pay a security deposit to the Customs Office to ensure that once we had the drone, we would not leave it in the country. Equipment that is imported into Togo is subject to an import tax and this can be very high. He implied that paying this deposit would expedite the process. When we left the country, we would show him we were taking the drone with us and they would give us the deposit back. We explained that this was all possible, but that as an official NSF project, we needed a receipt.

At this point, the office became very quiet and tense. On the one hand, this “deposit” could be construed as a bribe that would personally benefit just the agent and our liaison. On the other, it could be legitimate and part of standard Customs protocol. After a moment, the Confiscation Officer stated we would receive a receipt and use this to get our deposit back. We discussed how much the drone cost and negotiated how much the deposit should be. Because this deposit would have to be paid immediately, we explained we only had so much cash on us at the moment and asked if CFA 50,000 (approximately USD 100) would be sufficient. He accepted and we gave Mr. Bouly the money who left to deposit it with their cashier. He returned with a receipt bearing the amount and the name of the PI. The Confiscation Officer told us to return early the next morning at 8:00 a.m. He assured us that the paperwork would be signed and our drone retrieved.

### **8:00 a.m. and the Final Step**

Elated and relieved, we returned promptly at 8:00 a.m. sharp. Mr. Bouly was not there but the Confiscation Officer was. He explained we would wait for him before proceeding. At around 8:30, Mr. Bouly called to explain he had an emergency and could not meet. Our hearts sank. The Confiscation Officer assured us that someone else would come and help us on Mr. Bouly’s behalf. Shortly after, the same young man who spoke English well at the Ministry of Security showed up and the agent explained that this person would now complete the transaction. He promptly took the PI and student to yet another room in the complex, which—unlike all the other rooms and offices—did have a name on its plaque. It was “*Salle d’Attente*,” which ominously translates to “Waiting Room.”

We waited here for two hours. The young man would stop in periodically and assure us the

paperwork was almost signed. A woman from some other Customs Office called the PI on his cell phone and asked if he was the owner of a drone that he was trying to retrieve. The new liaison finally returned again and explained that we would have to drive across town to yet another Customs Office where the person officially responsible for releasing our drone would actually sign the letter of drone restitution. Another junior Customs officer, however, would accompany us there with the drone. We would have to pay him for his “go-come.” Once everything was signed, the drone would be returned to us.

By around 11:00 a.m., we all left and traveled to a very obscure building with guards in a residential part of Lomé. We passed through several offices before arriving on the top floor where we entered a very large office, with two secretaries and a female Customs official sitting behind a very large desk. Clearly, this was someone very important. We will call this person the “Customs Imports Director,” although we never knew her exact title. After exchanging greetings, the Customs officer handed her the drone, and she opened a packet tied with twine from which she removed a folder. The Director then asked if the drone on her desk was our drone to which we responded, “yes.” She then signed a document, showed it to the Customs official who escorted us, and provided him with a signed copy. He then gave us the drone and her secretary handed us the signed original of our Drone Restitution Authorization. We were ecstatic.

We thanked the Director and left her office. On the balcony outside, we paid the Customs official for his go-come and the young man explained that we would now have to pay him. He explained that Mr. Bouly needed CFA 20,000 for his fee. We refused as a matter of protocol. In Togo and West Africa, people who provide personal services state their fee upfront before agreeing to take on any task. We did not seek out Mr. Bouly and it was actually the initial Customs official, the Confiscation Officer, who introduced us to him. We had already paid a deposit for the drone to this person’s office, which implies that any fee to which Mr. Bouly would be entitled would be paid for by the Confiscation Officer out of this deposit. Plus, we had expected to meet him at 8:00 a.m. that morning to rapidly complete the formalities and it was now nearly 1:00 p.m. We offered to pay the young man CFA 10,000 instead, which he accepted after calling Mr. Bouly.

At last, we had our drone and were able to travel north to the Savanes Region to conduct fieldwork. We were asked on several occasions to present these official documents as our research partner took us to regional *préfets* (Fr. “prefects”—roughly equivalent to county commissioners in the United States). As Rees (2020) poignantly illustrates, these authorizations with their stamps, seals, and signatures impressed these local leaders and indicated we had followed all the proper administrative norms at the level of the national government and that we had the support of their superiors. As regional representatives of the Togolese government, they had to also grant us permission and often stated, “*Alors, il y a des papiers*” (Fr. “It’s done, there are the papers”). We left a copy of our three authorizations with each préfet so that they would have proof we followed the proper protocol.

## Conclusion

Obtaining official permission to conduct drone work in Togo was challenging and exhausting. We had to shuffle between numerous offices and constantly wait patiently for government agents to make a decision. We had originally planned for the entire permission process to take perhaps one or two weeks but it wound up taking nearly four. This seems fairly standard for a complicated bureaucratic process in the country involving several ministries and government offices. Fieldwork was supposed to take place in at least nine villages over the course of a month, but we wound up only having ten days to work in just three. There were many days of high anxiety and disappointment when someone told us their chef had not yet made a decision, the document was not ready, and we would have to again patiently *wait*. Our patience often wore thin and we became desperate at times—we even contacted the U.S. Embassy for help. No assistance materialized from this, however. Though we have provided fine-grained details in this account, there is actually much more to this story. We have included only the events and interactions that are most salient and instructive.

For other researchers who might conduct similar fieldwork with drones, our case provides many important lessons. First, getting official permission demands extreme patience and some persistence. Trying to rush things or appearing like we were in a hurry only made us look like pushy foreigners.

At certain points, however, we had to simply return and show up in person in order for things to move forward. Second, understanding and following local protocol was crucial. Formatting a letter in proper French and ensuring it conformed to bureaucratic style indicated we were serious and respected Togolese norms. Third, there are times that external pressure has to be sought. Having Togolese contacts who can find out the right names to include at the right time was immensely helpful and helped us break through the busy everyday work life of important officials to make our permission a priority.

We did not actually return to the Airport Customs Office and the Confiscation Officer to retrieve our CFA 50,000 deposit. This seemed very risky at the time and would likely entail a great deal of waiting and shuffling among different offices. It was likely we could miss our flight because of some bureaucratic delay or the absence of some “chef” who could not sign off. We were also concerned that this was a formal way of obtaining some sort of personal “fee” and that we simply would not even get the deposit back if we tried. This could also result in a very awkward situation at a moment when we would not have precious time (and patience) because of our impending departure.

We indeed plan to conduct drone fieldwork in Togo again. Instead of relying on Togolese students such as Ms. Saparapa and Mr. Nomedji, we intend to use our crucial insider contact who was able to learn the names of the two colonels in the Ministry of the Armies with the requisite authority to make determinations. We have kept in touch with this “fixer” who became our friend and colleague. He helped us with numerous other research and logistical tasks and is very connected with other agencies and professionals doing similar work. This person will initiate contact with the three ministries, submit our written requests in person, and follow up. Someone with these professional relationships and networks is much more appropriate than graduate students. We will also start the process months in advance. Now that we understand the process and sequence of permissions, we will again start with the Ministry of the Environment and then the Ministry of the Armies. The Ministry of Security cannot grant permission for the importation of a drone until the Ministry of the Armies authorizes its use. We suspect that being White foreigners also complicated the process because officials often spoke to

one another in local languages or used subtle verbal cues we did not understand. We optimistically hope that we will have all three signed authorizations in hand as we enter the country so that the drone will not be confiscated at the airport.

Was all of this waiting, uncertainty and anxiety worth it? Yes. Flying a drone in Moba villages with men, women and children was extremely rewarding. We would set it up, connect it to our smart phone, and then slowly watch it rise up from the ground like a miniature helicopter. Next, we would let local residents watch its flight on the smart phone screen as it passed over hills, fields and homes. When it landed again, people would laugh and clap. As a token of our appreciation, we always gave the *komanaab* (Moba for *chef du quartier* or village chief) a small gift of CFA 5,000 (US 10) to purchase *tchockpab* (local sorghum beer) for the community. This gift was followed by a verbal commitment from us to return and share the imagery with the village. In terms of our research, we now have extremely high-resolution imagery we can analyze to detect land degradation, agroforestry interventions, and other environmental phenomena. More importantly, we also have knowledge of the processes and protocols for getting drone permission again so we can repeat this fieldwork. Most importantly, we have allowed some rural residents in a few remote villages the opportunity to view their community from above and gain a new perspective on their relationship to the land. We hope that this will help them gain a new vision of what their landscape could be in the future.

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