

Introduction: Guinea-Bissau Today— The Irrelevance of the State and the Permanence of Change

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The Disposability of President Nino

As I was writing this introduction, Guinea-Bissau was rocked by yet another “political crisis.” On the night of March 1 and 2, 2009, the army chief of staff, General Batista Tagme Na Waie, and the president of Guinea-Bissau, João Bernardino “Nino” Vieira, were killed in the space of a few hours. As was to be expected, articles mushroomed in the international press in the following days, sporting headlines that we have long since become accustomed to, such as “Guinea-Bissau Collapse Deepens after Leader Killed” (Pitman 2009) or “Guinea-Bissau Threatens Return to Bad Old Days in Africa” (George 2009). An article by the *Economist* Intelligence Unit was entitled— with a literary touch reminiscent of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*— “Edge of the Abyss.” These days Guinea-Bissau, particularly since the 1998–99 civil war, seems to be the poster child for all the negativity generally attributed to African countries, an overlapping of political, economic, and humanitarian crises, in blatant confirmation of the picture of “shadowy Africa” that James Ferguson pinpoints as one of the features of international discourse on Africa today (2006:15,190).

Despite these clichéd articles (identical in tone to those that have appeared during the various crises that have characterized the last decade of Guinea-Bissau’s history) and pessimistic forecasts from international experts, these violent events have not triggered any real political or civil

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turmoil. The following morning the capital city, Bissau, was calm. The army leaders declared that they had no intention of intervening in the upcoming elections. Raimundo Pereira, the parliamentary speaker, was appointed interim president the following day, while new elections were to be held in the next sixty days (though they were postponed to June 28), with the support of the European Union. The government appointed Commander José Zamora Induta interim chief of the armed forces on March 15. The president's funeral was held rapidly and no international leaders showed up. On March 5 an article by the Associated Press writer Todd Pitman remarked on the "apathy surrounding the slaying of President Joao Bernardo 'Nino' Vieira."

This is even more surprising considering that both Nino and Tagme were two key figures in the country's postindependence history. If indeed these measures show the government's wish to avoid a power vacuum, the speed and apparent smoothness with which these high state offices were replaced nonetheless inspire some thought and reflection about recent politics in Guinea-Bissau and the nature of the state in this country. It is obviously too early to predict what, if any, consequences this event will have. We are, however, left with the feeling that the president was somehow *disposable*. A gloomy analysis put forward by Henrik Vigh (2006 and this issue [143–64])—who sees in Guinea-Bissau's recent history the tremors of a chronically unstable but fundamentally inert political system, in which political leaders can be replaced without any real political change—seems to have received further confirmation. What we should question, therefore, is not Nino and Tagme's actual assassination or the conflict of power that probably led up to these violent events but rather the lack of consequences we have observed. The apparent disposability of President Nino, the relative lack of response to an event that commentators regarded as having the potential to trigger cataclysmic consequences, is something we have to address in theory.

The deliberately provocative argument I would like to make here is that these apparently destabilizing events do not reveal a crisis of the state; neither are they symptomatic of its collapse. What this new event, and particularly its easy solution, seems to show instead is the contemporary *irrelevance* of the state in Guinea-Bissau. President Nino's disposability is the ultimate illustration of the disposability of the *state* itself. When we consider the killing of two central characters—perhaps keeping in mind Achille Mbembe's claim that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides in necropolitics, that is "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die[.]. . . to exercise control over mortality" (2003:11)—we wonder who is ruling Guinea-Bissau today. Bayart et al.'s distinction between the legal and powerless edifice of the state and the reality of politics (1999:21; see also Bayart 2000:230) easily comes to mind when we think about the quandaries of Guinea-Bissau and its recent political management.

If, indeed, the state structures in Guinea-Bissau have proved frail, dependant on external support, and increasingly detached from popular sup-

port and interests since independence in 1974 (Forrest 2002, 2003; Galli & Jones 1987), the decline that followed the 1998–98 civil war leads us to reflect further, in sociological terms, on the nature and (ir)relevance of the state of Guinea-Bissau today.

A New Political Sphere?

The failure and diminishing role of the state in Africa has been addressed by several scholars, who have characterized it as hollow (Bayart 1989), vacuous (Chabal 1996), an empty shell (Chabal & Daloz 1999), criminal (Bayart et al. 1999), or ruled by its own shadow (Reno 1998, 2000). These judgments might well be applied to Guinea-Bissau. Borrowing Chabal and Daloz's phrase, we can claim that the state in this country is not just weak, it is essentially vacuous, an empty shell: "no more than a décor, a pseudo-Western façade masking the realities of deeply personalized political relations" (1999:16). Henrik Vigh has described the state in Guinea-Bissau as "a rusty grid, cross-cut and intertwined by patrimonial networks," claiming that "within the Weberian and Hobbesian definition of state, the state is effectively non-existent in Guinea-Bissau" (2006:111). The state in Guinea-Bissau appears as a legal and sociological fiction devoid of any sovereignty or political and moral authority that can survive beyond its empirical existence, shored up by external economic help and international regulations and agreements.¹

In addition to examining its weakness, analyses of the African state have also highlighted its underside—the cluster of informal, commercially oriented patrimonial networks growing out of the interplay between political authority and the clandestine economy that William Reno called the "shadow state" (2000:436–37). However, even if this can be accepted as an accurate description of the ways political rulers in postindependence Guinea-Bissau have channeled and manipulated state resources and structures for their own personal interests, what is going on today in the country is, I claim, profoundly different. Nino's ousting (in 1999) and subsequent assassination point rather to an erosion of the shadow state because of the decreased economic and political relevance of the visible state itself. In other words, in present-day Guinea-Bissau we are not witnessing a further informalization of state politics or the appearance of new actors taking hold of the state structures. What is taking place is an overall shift in the political sphere through the creation of new power networks and alliances that largely bypass the state arena. Even patrimonial alliances, Vigh observes, seem today in Guinea-Bissau to make up a "political space formed around the state and its residue instead of in it" (2006:111). The "real" political sphere is no longer hidden within or behind the state; it is mostly *external* to it, disputed by a wide range of different players.

The scenario I am picturing is not, however, one in which the corrupt, inefficient postcolonial African elite has finally been bypassed by a "civil

society” working, at last, for the best interests of the people.² I foresee a gloomy, potentially volatile situation in which not only national and international NGOs, state cooperation agencies, and international organizations (e.g., the IMF and the World Bank, the European Union, the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS]) but also factions of the army, tourism investors, drug traffickers, and local rural authorities negotiate and compete in a political space that is no longer layered clearly but is increasingly dispersed and horizontal, and where the state is largely irrelevant and utterly powerless. The prolonged decline of the state of Guinea-Bissau is not, therefore, merely an incident of history, a stop in the teleological process of state consolidation and democratization. It is rather, perhaps, the symptom of a new style of politics and of the redefinition of the political sphere altogether, one that largely bypasses and overshadows the state, pointing to new forms of visible and invisible governance, to new players and alliances making up a new unstable economy of power.

Paradoxically, while social and political scientists seem to agree on the increased relevance of powers and political players outside the boundaries of the state, the African state and its inefficiency are constantly identified as the deep roots of the African crisis altogether. In the aftermath of the assassination of Vieira and Tagme, political commentators were amazingly coherent in highlighting the state’s weakness and frailty as the underlying reason for the prolonged social, economic, and political crisis in Guinea-Bissau. An article in *The Guardian* (March 9) claimed that “Guinea-Bissau has been independent for 34 years and during that time it has had minimal political stability. Civil war and numerous coups have left the economy of this small west African nation in ruin and the country is listed as the fifth poorest in the world by the UN” (Sourt 2009). This kind of analysis is also put forward by scholars. In a volume published recently by the World Bank, the authors claimed, for example, that “in Guinea-Bissau, conflicts and political instability have been the main constraints for growth and poverty reduction over the past three decades” (Barry & Wodon 2007:109).

These strictly circumscribed analyses of state politics and responsibilities overlook the connections between African politics, economics, and power struggles, and a transnational backdrop characterized by what has been defined as global governmentality in which the African states are not the most relevant players by far.³ Keeping the political argument strictly within national borders and focusing exclusively on national sovereignty obscures regional connections and localizes responsibility for poverty within national borders (see Vigh, this issue). The present situation in Guinea-Bissau requires, instead, an analysis that goes beyond a limited focus on the state and local politics and explores how issues of security, democracy, and humanitarianism are forming a new style of politics and perhaps a new regime on the international scene.



Source: CIA

Contributions: The Permanence of Change

As Filip De Boeck proposed when commenting on the situation in Zaire (1996:75), it makes sense for scholars working in Guinea-Bissau to acknowledge the absence of a centralized state structure and focus instead on local strategies of survival and resilience. The articles in this special issue focus precisely on how people in Guinea-Bissau maneuver in a context characterized by rapid and dramatic transformations at the political level as well as economic, social, and environmental levels.

In the social sciences, instability, uncertainty, crisis, and rapid social change are often associated with “modernity,” a social condition in which stability and coherence are more or less a thing of the past and, in Marx and Engels’ famous phrase, “all that is solid melts into air.” Facing continuing political instability, growing economic decline, and the general withdrawal of the state in postindependence Guinea-Bissau, we have witnessed the emergence of complex cultural dynamics that often produce original, unexpected rearrangements and revisions of cultural identity. And I would say, further, that such creativity and the capacity to deal with change are equally the main focus of the articles in this issue.

I wish to emphasize, however, that such responses to the current situation in Guinea-Bissau do not necessarily confirm the radical discontinuities suggested by the conventional periodization of colonial and postcolonial modernity. The upper Guinea coast has been the subject of outstanding historical research in the last twenty years.⁴ This corpus has provided a picture of a stunningly socially and culturally dynamic area that has participated actively in the making of the Atlantic world for a long time. Two recent international conferences organized by Ramon Sarró and Jaqueline Knörr have shown further how a diachronic analysis of the upper Guinea coast societies leads us to critically reassess ascribed marginalities and to carefully reconsider the social transformations in the region and its societies.⁵ Recent ethnographic work in the region has also highlighted the continuities rather than the ruptures in this cultural area, an approach emblematically condensed in Eric Gable’s thought-provoking phrase “cosmopolitanism-as-tradition” (2006:387).

This historical perspective compels us to dislodge the time stream of history from the periodization embedded in the notion of modernity and to rethink the discontinuities of recent transformations not as anomalies in the alleged linearity of local histories, but rather as current manifestations of the permanence of change. In other words, the upper Guinea coast, and Guinea-Bissau within it, is a perfect standpoint for identifying the illusionary nature of “modernity,” except perhaps as a claim-making concept (Cooper 2005:134) or an ideology of aspiration (Knauff 2002).

The case addressed by Marina Temudo in this issue (47–67) is a perfect illustration of this approach. In her contribution Temudo succeeds in producing a fascinating reconstruction of processes of change among the Balanta over the last few centuries and offers evidence of how the Balanta, in dealing creatively with dramatic transformations in the region, have produced their own history.

Drawing on the groundbreaking work of Walter Hawthorne (2003), Temudo shows how key aspects of Balanta livelihood can be ascribed to the need to cope with and survive the advent of the slave trade. By devoting themselves to mangrove-swamp rice farming, the Balanta found refuge in the mangrove forests and adopted a strategy (in the words of Murray Last) of “conservative change” (49) that equipped them to resist first Islamization,

and later Westernization when the Portuguese occupied Guinea-Bissau. In the case of the Balanta, marginality turned out to be a form of tactical resistance rather than an inherent feature of their society, a cunning manipulation and reformulation of social features and economic circumstances in order to preserve their independence and political autonomy.

The liberation war and the early years after independence, however, undermined the very “isolationist rationale” that had guaranteed the preservation of Balanta identity. Temudo shows how the war and independence, along with the education and political teaching included in the developmentalist measures of the PAIGC, while empowering young Balanta men, also resulted in gender and generational divisions that “eroded social organization” (53). Yet Temudo shows compellingly that notions of progress and backwardness were not simply imported into Balanta society; instead, they were vernacularized. She illustrates this process in an analysis of the *Kiyang-yang* prophetic movement, a creative reworking of borrowed elements from the two dominant religions, Christianity and Islam, which she interprets as a vernacular form of progress, a way for the Balanta to domesticate modernity. Temudo also analyzes postcolonial politics in Guinea-Bissau and the changing role that the Balanta have played in it. Examining their rise to political power in the aftermath of the 1998–99 civil war, she argues that if they have been mostly marginalized on the political scene since Nino Vieira’s coup in 1980, they are nevertheless learning “the logic of the modern state and using the idioms of identity politics to their own advantage” (59).

The appropriation of notions of development and progress in a local context is also the focus of my article in this issue (69–92). In my contribution I acknowledge the relevance of the idea of development in the rhetoric of nation-building in Guinea-Bissau and in the postindependence political arena, and I also trace the genealogy of this concept back to ideas of civilization and modernization. Nonetheless, I reject the victimization arguments of critical scholars, according to which the spread of the notion of development and the development industry spoiled the authenticity of passive “third world” societies, whose local orders and cultures were disrupted and dismantled. Analyzing the situation of a group of young men living in the small port of Bubaque in the Bijagó region, I illustrate how the notion of development can be reworked and engaged, becoming a rhetorical tool for young people to intervene tactically in local social dynamics. The idea I put forward is that we should think about development as an imported discourse that can be appropriated and employed by players to legitimize or subvert power relations. What could easily be interpreted as a “colonization of consciousness”—young men replicating the dualistic categories of progress and backwardness implicit in the notion of development—turns out instead to be a stunning example of local manipulation of these categories that testifies to cultural creativity and tactical agency.

Michelle Johnson (93–117) explores the debates on the melding of Mandinga customs with Islam orthodoxy among the Mandinga in Guinea-

Bissau and in Portugal. Johnson analyzes how this internal debate emerges remarkably in funeral customs, in the ritual of shaking with the left hand before traveling, and in the practice of consulting healers. In these practices, the contradiction between the Muslim belief that fate is entirely in God's hands and must be accepted as God's will and the Mandinga habit of influencing or protesting against fate and destiny through ritual practices and public expressions of sorrow and regret emerges mostly along a gendered divide.

Despite acknowledging that these conflictual dynamics have recently intensified due to Mandinga transnationalism, Johnson does not identify their origins in a "crisis of modernity" (95). The Mandinga have been dealing with the uncertainties of travel and change for a long time, and they recognize these as inherent features of their life. Johnson achieves the compelling result of focusing on the distinctive features of contemporaneity—a present day characterized by dramatic ruptures in place and identity—without falling back on the periodization of modernity and postmodernity. At the same time she avoids stereotyped notions of holistic societies that preserve themselves by resisting change, assessing the permanence of change among the Mandinga as a reality that is at the very core of their identity. In her nuanced ethnography, she presents a picture of the way in which the Mandinga deal with the uncertain nature of life as revealed in their experience of death, illness, and travel, which are all events that constantly force them to question the notion of a divine order, and of their tragic attempts to predict, avoid, and lend meaning to what appears essentially meaningless and overwhelmingly painful.

The challenges posed by change to cultural identity are also at the center of Joanna Davidson's picture of the Diola (119–42). Among the Diola, wet rice cultivation is an all-encompassing social phenomenon, involving the household structure, conceptions of personhood, religious activities, and their very cultural identity. Work in the rice paddies—"hard work," as Diola define it—is a cultural value in its own right and is central to Diola's ethics and social organization. In recent decades, however, this production system has been challenged by climate change, youth migration, national political instability, and the increasing demands of the cash economy. Climate change in particular has dramatically affected the people of the upper Guinea coast and has made it impossible nowadays for the Diola to grow enough rice for the whole year.

Although they are perfectly aware of the impact of these transformations on the efficiency of their production system, Diola stick strictly to the ethic and practice of hard work; they preserve this activity as a key element of their ethnic identity, while scorning and discouraging other forms of economic activity. What Davidson, quoting David Parkin, calls a "paradox of custom" (132) among the Diola is not devoid of consequences. The maintenance, for purely social and cultural reasons, of a production system that has become inefficient is producing internal ambivalence and fissures,

pushing the Diola to reconsider their notion of hard work and triggering further change.

Henrik Vigh brings us into the midst of Guinea-Bissau political quandaries and the life of urban youth in Bissau, the capital city. Borrowing a phrase from Michael Taussig, Vigh presents a gloomy analysis of the political history of the country as characterized by “stable instability” (145), a prolonged period of factional conflicts that have not led to any significant political or social change. His analysis of the 1998–99 civil war gives us a picture of a conflict in which we find no clear sign of social or ideological polarization, and that produces changes merely in the “*positions* of power rather than the *structurations* of power” (157). In this postideological scenario, young men mobilize because of the difficult economic and social conditions in the country and in the capital city. As Vigh shows here and elsewhere (see Vigh 2006, 2008), mobilization, promising access to patrimonial networks, becomes a life chance for young men lingering in a condition of social immobility. This situation, in which the war is fought not “against an enemy but for a possibility” (161), results in a conflict that is acknowledged by its very participants as a “brotherly war,” one that is not “*ideologically articulated* but *socially situated*” (156), with no “defined Other” (155).

In assessing a situation in which recurring and frequent rebellions do not produce any real political change, Vigh refuses to blame the political culture of the country, preferring to broaden the terms of the debate and focusing on the wider international political and economic context. The reason for the country’s persistent political instability lies not in some alleged negative features of African politics, claims Vigh, but rather in local powerlessness and inability to alter the wider geopolitical scenario that lies at the core of the Guinea-Bissau crisis in the first place.

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Notes

1. I am not bringing my argument to the point of contesting the assumption that the state constitutes a better way of fulfilling economic and social aspirations (even though this assumption of international politics should be critically assessed). My argument is analytical, not prescriptive or normative. My point of view is that of the field-researcher who accounts for the diminishing role of the state and focuses on the societal response to this situation.
2. For a critical overview of the idea of "civil society" in Africa, see Chabal and Daloz (1999:17–30); Comaroff and Comaroff (1999); Ferguson (2006:89–112).
3. See Ferguson (2006); Ferguson and Gupta (2002); Sharma and Gupta (2006:5).
4. See Bowman (1997); Brooks (1993); Hawthorne (2003); Mark (1985, 2002); Sarró (2008).
5. "The Powerful Presence of the Past: Historical Dimensions of Integration and Conflict in the Upper Guinea Coast/West Africa," Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, October 19–21, 2006; "Margins, Networks and Alliances: the Upper Guinea Coast and the Making of the Atlantic," Institute of Social Sciences, Lisbon, December 18–20, 2008.