

**MODERNITY AS MARGINALITY: THE MAKING AND THE  
EXPERIENCE OF PERIPHERALITY IN THE BIJAGÓ ISLANDS  
(GUINEA-BISSAU)**

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## Abstract

*In this article I will trace back the feelings of peripherality and marginality expressed by a group of young men in the Bijagó Islands to the historical and political processes that marginalised the rural communities in Guinea-Bissau in the late colonial and post-independence period and excluded them from the formation of the state. These processes were supported and justified by the concomitant formation and diffusion of ideas of civilisation and development that produced and still produce ideological opposition between urban populations and rural communities. Following the seminal work of Anna Tsing, I will consider how the paradigm of the Bijagó region as an out-of-the-way place has been constructed over time through the grand narratives of civilisation and development.*

Keywords: Guinea-Bissau, Bijagó, marginality, Portuguese colonialism, youth, generation

## Resumo

*Este artigo relaciona o sentimento de marginalidade e periferia expressos por um grupo de jovens nas ilhas Bijagós com os processos históricos e políticos que marginalizaram as comunidades rurais na Guiné-Bissau no período colonial tardio e no pós-independência, excluindo-os da formação do Estado. Estes processos foram apoiados e justificados de forma concomitante pela difusão das ideias de civilização e desenvolvimento que produziram – e ainda produzem – a oposição ideológica entre as populações urbanas e as comunidades rurais. Na sequência do trabalho seminal de Anna Tsing, encaro a construção do paradigma da região Bijagó como um local fora do lugar e verifico como este foi construído ao longo do tempo através das grandes narrativas da civilização e do desenvolvimento.*

Palavras-chave: Guiné-Bissau, Bijagós, marginalidade, colonialismo português, juventude, geração

Between 2000 and 2003 I worked with a group of young men living in the small urban centre on the island of Bubaque, Praça de Bubaque. These young men, whose “will to be modern” I have described elsewhere (Bordonaro 2007, 2009a, 2009b) lamented the marginality of the region they were living in with exceptional frequency and distress. They had the constant feeling that “there wasn’t anything in Bubaque”, that they lacked everything and that they were doomed to live in an underdeveloped and forgotten region. In this article I will trace back this self-perception to the historical and political processes that marginalised the rural communities in Guinea-Bissau in the late colonial and in the post-independence period and excluded them from the formation of the state. These processes were supported and justified by the concomitant formation and diffusion of ideas of civilisation and development that produced and still produce an ideological opposition between urban populations and rural communities. Following the seminal work of Anna Tsing (1993), I will consider how the paradigm of the archipelago as an out-of-the-way place was constructed over time through the grand narratives of *civilisation* and *development*.

Placed in a strategic geographical location, the Bijagó Islands maintained a crucial position in the economic and political landscape of the Senegambian region for several centuries. Indeed the Bijagó were an emblematic example of those dynamic and *cosmopolitan* societies of the Upper Guinea coast that were active players in the *making of the Atlantic*. In the case of the Bijagó, therefore, isolation and marginality are the outcome of political and military (colonial and post-independence) interventions rather than inherent features of specific (cold) societies. As I will show in greater detail later, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Portuguese government undertook a series of military campaigns to occupy the territory of *Guiné*, which deeply transformed the economy of the Bijagó. With *pacification*, the archipelago was gradually confined to the edges of the Portuguese empire: a savage place, whose population was pictured as sticking to ancestral customs, stubbornly reluctant to undergo the process of civilisation. Post-independence economic and social policies substantially reproduced and maintained this situation, confining the Bijagó islands to the periphery of the nation state.

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## Civilising centres and backward ruralities

For centuries the Bijagó Islands enjoyed a central position in the geography of the Senegambia region (Mark, 1985, 2002; Brooks, 1993; Bowman, 1997; Forrest, 2003; Hawthorne, 2003; Henry, 1994), participating in local trade with Europeans

since the sixteenth century<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, as Walter Hawthorn underlined, “from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries Bijago were among the most important slave producers and traders in the area of Guinea-Bissau” (2003: 101). Raiding the villages of the coast, the Bijagó made captives who were brought to the islands and sold to Western slave traders. “These raids”, continues Hawthorne,

were so effective that by the seventeenth century, Bijagó had transformed their islands into major slave-trading centres frequented by Portuguese, Dutch, French, English, and Spanish merchants. On many of the islands, slave-trading ports were created to meet a growing international demand (2003: 102).

A single village generally led these incursions, which had the purpose of pillaging the villages rather than actually occupying a territory, but in some cases several villages might form an alliance putting together a fleet of up to forty canoes (Henry, 1989b: 196). The trade allowed the Bijagó to acquire iron-bars, cows, clothes and other valuable goods (Mota, 1974: 267; Henry, 1994: 42; Hawthorne, 2003).

The slave trade did not disappear in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Quite the opposite, as René Pélissier underlined,

it is likely that the influence of the traders was intensified in this period, mainly from its basis in the archipelago of the Bijagó, where some islands (Galinhas, Bolama, etc.) are real trading centres of whom the Portuguese authority, impotent or conniving, perfectly knows the existence (1989: 43).

Due to its independence and its strategic geographical position, for a long time the archipelago was a shelter for traders, allowing them to keep up their – now illegal – trade, which was still flourishing in 1849. Slave raiding therefore remained a basic aspect of Bijagó economy through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century (Hawthorne, 2003: 103. On Portugal and the abolishment of the slave trade, see Marques, 1999, 2000).

<sup>1</sup> The population of the archipelago is not perfectly homogeneous. Some noteworthy differences are evident from one island to another at a linguistic and socio-cultural level. This is probably due to the different origin of the inhabitants of each island. Recent historical works, in fact, have shown that the islanders are of mainland origin, linking the population of the archipelago to the great migrations caused by the expansion of the empire of Mali in the 13th century (Mota, 1974; Scantamburlo, 1991 [1978]; Gallois Duquette, 1983; Henry, 1994). The history of the people of the coast of Guinea is linked to the birth and expansion of the Mandingo kingdom of Kaabu (on the history of Kaabu, see Lopes, 1999) to the East of the Geba River. The foundation of Kaabu dates back to the second half of the 13th century and is attributed to one of the generals of Sundjata, Tiramang Traoré. Most of the people living on the plains of the region – like the Felupe, the Beafada, the Manjako – were pushed towards the coastal regions they occupy today (Bowman, 1997: 32-34). It seems likely that the Beafada occupied the territories of the coast that belonged to other groups, pushing them towards the islands (Mota, 1974: 244).

Until 1900, the archipelago remained independent from the political and military control of the Portuguese as well as of other European nations. Despite several French and British missions to settle in the archipelago and to avenge raids against their ships, the region's situation could well be described as *micro-independence*. "The Archipelago must be considered in 1853 as *res nullius* for the Europeans" (Pélissier, 1989: I, 117). This situation was not actually limited to the islands of the archipelago, as *Guiné Portuguesa* – which wasn't declared *provincia* until 1879, having previously been under the authority of the *governador* of Cape Verde – was not actually occupied and controlled by the Portuguese (Castro, 1978: 336). "The Portuguese dominions on the African mainland", writes Richard Hammond,

were quite limited in extent so far as direct sovereignty was concerned [...] Given their military and administrative resources, this state of affairs was inevitable. The relics of empire that were left to Portugal by this time [...] were, for the most part, fortified trading posts dependent on sea or river communication (1966: 38, 42)<sup>2</sup>.

Without real authority over the islands, the Portuguese favoured diplomatic means to acquire influence over the people of the archipelago: presents, official visits, treaties. The inhabitants of each island, for their part, took advantage of the situation, keeping up diplomatic relations with different European nations as politically and commercially independent entities. Even though the culture of the archipelago was almost unknown in this period, the Bijagó were respected for their strength and courage as warriors and for the tenacity with which they preserved their independence.

It was only after the Berlin Conference that the Portuguese waged military campaigns to effectively occupy the territories, facing strong local resistance. The first campaigns were aimed at *pacifying* the coastal and internal regions, while sparing the archipelago (Mendy, 1992: 42). Actually, this region was one of the last to be fully *pacified*, and several campaigns had to be waged, especially when the implementation of the *imposto de palhota* (hut tax) and forced labour triggered several uprisings (Guerra, 1994: 196). The island of Canhabaque in particular required three campaigns to be reduced to *obedience* (1917, 1925, 1935) (on *pacification* see among others Pélissier, 1989; Mendy, 1992; Henry, 1994; Reis, 2001; Forrest, 2003).

Significantly, after pacification, in order to prevent tax evasion, all Bijagó adults (aged 16 or over) had to carry with them a 5-centimetre aluminium disk

<sup>2</sup> For recent analysis of the weakness of Portuguese colonialism, see Trajano Filho, 2004 and Hawthorne, 2003: 177-181.

with the inscription *Guiné Portuguesa*, which had to be punched to show that the tax had been paid. Any Bijagó found without this disk was immediately arrested and obliged to pay the tax. Moreover, nobody could leave his island without showing proof of payment and without the *caderneta indígena*, a kind of ID card issued by the authorities (Mendy, 1992: 52).

These measures are extremely significant as they show the gradual confinement of the islanders to their region and the parallel creation of the trope of the closed-in-itself population<sup>3</sup>. The pacification process imposed dramatic limitations on the mobility of the islanders, whose canoes had travelled for centuries along routes that not only linked the islands to one another, but also to the coast (Henry, 1989a, 1989b, 1994; Hawthorne, 2003). The character of *isolatedness* and cultural immobility so frequently attributed to the inhabitants of the islands in colonial literature has little to do with the geographical position of the archipelago, and is openly in contradiction with historical data. Rather it must be ascribed to recent geopolitical and historical dynamics. Colonial campaigns and policies actually immobilised the people of the archipelago, destroying their canoes, limiting the possibility of contacts through national boundaries and restricting movement from one island to another. Pacification also resulted in a dramatic change in the economy of the islands (Mota, 1954: 316-317). From traders and pirates the islanders were forcefully transformed into “peaceful farmers” and “lazy fishermen”, as the colonial literature started describing them.

In the aftermath of pacification, colonial administration throughout the country mainly concentrated on towns (Bissau, but also Bafatá, Farim, Bolama, Cacheu, etc.). Colonial power came to be associated with the urban areas as opposed to the rural ones, where the impact of colonial rule was sporadic and marginal. Colonial modernity, with its ideology of civilisation and (later) of progress and development, was and was perceived as an eminently *urban* phenomenon, or at any rate as radiating from the urban centres. The colonial government considered the *postos* as civilising centres, with “civilising effects” on people who frequented them. Metaphorically, civilising the natives always meant “drawing them out of the forest”<sup>4</sup>. The urban/rural divide created by the scattered Portuguese colonial presence in Guiné, proved to be one of the main conceptual frameworks for interpreting local reality long after the end of the colonial regime. The opposition that

<sup>3</sup> The Austrian ethnologist Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, who visited the archipelago in 1930-31, left us an interesting description of the Bijagó in the years immediately after pacification (Bernatzik, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> The native policies in the colonies were based on the distinction between the *civilizado* and the *indígena*. According to legislation, an African could apply to the local administration for a certificate of *civilizado*, in order to theoretically enjoy all the rights and obligations of a white Portuguese (Oliveira Marques, 2001: 25 *et seq.*). The *indígenas* had to pass a “civilisation” test that verified their ability to read, write and speak Portuguese “correctly”, their employment; “good behaviour” and abandonment of “tribal usages and customs”.

was to play an important role in the formulation of post-independence development policies was a “moral geography” (Thomas 2002) that started to be drawn on the territory and in the people’s awareness of the discontinuous presence of colonial authority.

In the archipelago, the spatial display of colonial authority followed a similar pattern, with the government concentrating in the Praça de Bubaque (which was *sede da circumscrição* and *posto administrativo* at the same time). In practice, contact with the central government was nil and the relationship the Bijagó had with colonial administration was limited to the *chefes de posto* and its *sipaio*s (African soldiers), who sporadically collected the taxes and organised forced labour (Newitt, 1981: 162; Guerra, 1994: 198). The archipelago, even after pacification, with its fame as a primitive, rural, out-of-the-world place, was not among the preferred destinations for Europeans working and living in *Guiné*. Colonial officers were not eager to carry out their duty far from the central administration, in a remote, secluded, uncivilised and mostly abandoned region. According to the 1950 census, only 18 whites resided in the whole *circumscrição* (Carreira, 1959: 556), which had a “civilised” population of 116.

The political and economic marginalization of the archipelago in the colony of *Guiné* was coupled with a dramatic shift in the representations of its inhabitants. The islanders were no longer the noble warriors but were portrayed as an obstacle to the “civilising mission” and to the exploitation of the archipelago’s natural resources. An image of the static, isolated, stubborn and conservative primitives began to emerge. The dynamic traders and sailors became peaceful, lazy rice growers and fishermen, who rejected involvement in the colony’s economy and grew all they needed. Imposed confinement acquired an idiosyncratic and ancestral character, while *traditional* culture was acknowledged as the main obstacle to civilisation and development. The Bijagó were ready to enter the *civilisation machine*.

Galli and Jones, who explored the transformations and effects of colonial policies on peasant economy in detail (1987), claim that even the most progressive functionaries:

...began their analyses with the assumption that most Guineans lived traditional lives on a subsistence level characterized by low productivity. For them, “tradition” was the major obstacle to development rather than inappropriate administration, patent neglect of infrastructure and coercive policies. The assumption that “traditional” societies could be “modernized” by state policies fitted the Portuguese view of the relationship of *civilizado* and *indígena* (1987: 45).

Substantially, low agricultural production and lack of development had to be ascribed to the backwardness of indigenous agriculture and to the resistance to change attributable to what was called *tribal mentality* (1987: 49).

Portuguese colonial anthropology was fundamentally allied in yielding representations consonant with the paternalism and primitivism of the regime (see Gallo, 1988; Roque, 2001)<sup>5</sup>. As Pels and Salemink wrote about the pacification processes throughout Africa, “the initial horizontal relationship evolves into a vertical one: war into policing, reconnaissance into overview” (1999: 25). The people of the archipelago, when tamed, become the subjects of investigation for anthropologists. It was in this disciplinary field – where power and knowledge are interwoven – that the Bijagó acquired a stabilised, irreducible difference. As Nicholas Thomas has underlined, anthropology often produces “a discourse of alterity that magnifies the distance between «others» and «ourselves»” (Thomas, 1991: 309). In an orientalist and exoticizing perspective, the inhabitants of the islands were portrayed in colonial anthropological literature as the different *par excellence*, the inheritors of ancestral customs. Their *anomalous* socio-political organisation, the status of women, their attitude towards death, the cruelty of initiation and the beauty of their sculpture were underlined, constructing an image of the ultimate primitive, the irreducible and odd ancestral savage. In an aura of exoticism and oddness, some Bijagó (men, women and children) were abducted from the islands and out on show in a Bijagó village reproduced at the Exhibition of the Portuguese World in Lisbon in 1940 (Matos, 2006: 213).

Arguing about the colonial origins of local distinctions between traditional and modern, Hodgson wrote, “the modern/traditional dichotomy was inscribed on the categories (such as ethnic identities) that were formed as part of the imperial project of imposing a modern order on the perceived chaos of the native” (1999: 144). As Mudimbe underlined:

Because of the colonializing structure, a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a great number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary

<sup>5</sup> In Portugal, anthropological research was undertaken rather later than in other major European colonial powers (Pina Cabral, 1991, 2001; Castelo, 1998; Schouten, 2001), and at the end of the 40s, Portuguese anthropology could well be considered a newborn discipline (Sousa, 2001: 186). Between the end of the nineteenth century and 1974, Portuguese works of anthropology were not only rare, but they did not follow the international evolution of this discipline (Schouten, 2001: 157). As Maria Johanna Schouten has underlined, during the *Estado Novo*, the cultures of the colonized were commonly considered poor and inferior, unworthy of much interest. This might explain the scarcity of anthropological works focusing on cultural aspects (Schouten, 2001: 166-167). The connivance of anthropology and colonialism is obviously not a Portuguese peculiarity. Several studies on early anthropology have shown how the newborn human science shared at least some basic assumptions with the ideology of the colonial project (Pels, 1997; Pels & Salemink, 1999; Apter, 1999; Asad, 1973; Said, 1994; Mudimbe, 1988).

communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies (1988: 4).

Referring to Madagascar, Philip Thomas claimed that “to speak of the rural and the urban, and tradition and modernity, is to refer to sedimented deposits of modernist narratives of development and progress that colonialism bequeathed to much of the postcolonial world” (Thomas 2002: 367. See also Pels 1997: 176-177, Gupta 1998: 8-9, 179-180). *Development* is indeed one of the crucial issues for understanding post-independence Africa and probably one of the heaviest legacies of the idea of *civilisation*<sup>6</sup>. In Guinea-Bissau, the notion of *development*, crucial in the nationalist ideology supporting the anti-colonial war, and later for state modernism, shared its basic assumptions with the colonial project of civilisation, reproducing the schism between *village tradition* and *urban modernity*. During mobilization, war and for a few years after independence, the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde) continued its efforts to bring development, education and health to the rural areas. Even though services were expanded, the prevailing strategy, although well intentioned, was essentially paternalistic. *Development* had to be brought to the peasants (Galli and Jones, 1987: 133). After independence in 1974, the PAIGC accepted the model of the *modern state* and imported models of development and modernisation. The governments of both Luís Cabral and Nino Vieira tended to concentrate the great majority of investments and state structures in urban areas (and mainly in Bissau), to the point that Lars Rudebeck could say in 2001 that most rural areas were, in practice, untouched by government development policies (2001: 75). The application of the Structural Adjustment Plans of the World Bank and IMF since 1987 has not changed much in this respect (Galli and Funk, 1992; Cardoso and Imbali, 1993: 52; Monteiro, 1996). Quite on the contrary, the reduction of salaries in the public sector and the lack of other forms of incentive from the central state discouraged most administrative officials and civil servants, who abandoned their positions or developed parallel activities (Galli and Funk, 1992: 243; Cardoso and Imbali, 1993: 54; Havik, 1995: 33), reducing the presence of the state outside the urban centres even more. This also led to a growing disparity in access to education for many young people, with strong rural/urban asymmetries (Monteiro and Martins, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> On cultural transformation brought about by colonial rule and on postcolonial continuities, see, among others, Mitchell, 1988; Mudimbe, 1988; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991; Comaroff, 1992; Dirks, 1992; Cole, 1998; Werbner, 1998; Thomas, 2002. Specifically on the continuities of Portuguese colonialism, see Lopes, 1999: 238 *et seq.*; Feldman-Bianco, 2001 and the whole issue 8 (4) of *Identities* 2001; Carvalho and Pina Cabral, 2004.

As the peasants were gradually marginalized in the political field, economic policies supported urban elites and tried to promote semi-industrial activities based in Bissau (Lopes, 1987: 111 *et seq.*). The fostering of policies that supported and encouraged an urban vision of the future had important social consequences, producing a neat distinction between urban dwellers and villagers. As Patrick Chabal has underlined, “at an individual level, to move forward was to move to Bissau. For the country as a whole, the future was the promise held by Bissau” (1986: 98). Urban areas, and Bissau in particular, came to be associated with the ideas of progress and development, as places of economic opportunity, while the rural areas, on the other hand, were the realm of tradition, immobility and poverty<sup>7</sup>.

Not only the village mode of production but also its cultural and social elements were stigmatised as backward. Modernisation was assumed to be an unstoppable process that would inevitably eliminate tradition<sup>8</sup>. Government policies and attitudes paralleled the analysis put forward by scholars and international organisations on this issue. Regarding *traditional* cultures, the post-independence governments always showed a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, they were important elements to be counterpoised to the Euro-Imperialistic-Colonial culture, as basic factors for the constitution of an African identity, a form of cultural resistance to the process of colonial civilisation. On the other hand, though, the preservation of *tradition* was incompatible with the new social model that the newborn state was trying to impose on its subjects. Several aspects of the culture and social organisation of the rural communities did not fit in with the ideals of equity, education, gender equality and freedom that the PAIGC was proclaiming. As Pieterse and Parekh underlined, the opposition between nationalism and nativism was a distinctive feature of the postcolonial decolonization agenda, actually “reproducing the underlying logic of the colonial project and imaginary” (1995: 9).

<sup>7</sup> This vision and its social and economic consequences are not obviously limited to Guinea-Bissau, but are one of the destabilising factors of African post-independence economies in general (see e.g. Davidson, 1992). The state’s tendency to consider the towns as its main political and economic objectives (Lopes, 1987: 113) obviously triggered internal migration towards the urban centres. In 1979, Lopes reports (1982: 84), Bissau had a population of 110,000. Though it had only 16% of the population, 50% of the investments and 80% of the budget were concentrated in the capital city, which enjoyed a kind of socio-economic autonomy (Lopes, 1982: 91). The state’s economic policies, following IMF indications, pushed many people to search for alternative and informal survival strategies in town (Padovani, 1993: 159). According to the 1991 general population and housing census, Guinea-Bissau had 979,203 inhabitants and an annual growth rate of 2.3 per cent between 1979 and 1991. In the same period, the urban population increased from 14.2 per cent to 20 per cent. The population of the capital city, Bissau, rose from 80,000 in 1975 to 400,000 (estimated) in 1998 (before the war) (reported in Scantamburlo 1999: 16).

<sup>8</sup> Ahlberg has underlined that in development discourse, African culture is often considered the main barrier to African development (1994: 228).

In the Bijagó Islands, with slight differences, the state replaced colonial functionaries in the project of transforming the islands' communities, making them fit for progress. However, despite the enthusiasm of the first years, the PAIGC structures at local level became gradually detached from the central authority and therefore weaker. The recent history of the archipelago is similar in this respect to that of many other rural areas in Guinea-Bissau. While the acknowledged centre of economic and political life was Bissau, the rural regions were targeted by short and medium term state-managed development projects.

Actually, in the Bijagó Islands the presence of the state has always been limited to the island of Bubaque and mainly to the urban centre of Praça, with practically no influence on the villages. Even before the 1998/1999 war, the state structures were so weak and deteriorating outside the limited extent of the Praça, that, working in the villages, one could easily ignore their presence. This phenomenon, which Joshua Forrest defines as "localization of rural politics", characterises the entire rural areas of the country, but is even more evident and acute in the archipelago, both because of its geographical position, which makes communication with and transportation to Bissau difficult, and because, not having participated in the liberation war, the local party structures were already weaker. As Forrest underlines, while the *comités* became increasingly detached from central state power, they were "either marginalized from rural politics or staffed by traditional village leaders who had no link with the government" (Forrest, 2002: 245. See also Forrest, 2003). The decay of the state became even more evident during the troubled years that followed the 1998/99 war, when the local structures the PAIGC had created after independence were suddenly de-legitimized, while the new administration could not in any way replace this void in authority. After the war, there was no visible representation of public administration anywhere in the countryside (Forrest, 2002: 263).

The marginalization of rural areas in the post-independence period and the state's urban-based developmentalist vision contributed to the permanence of colonial representations. The Bijagó continued to be considered the "traditional culture" *par excellence*. Building also on the history of resistance to Portuguese pacification, the islands' communities were portrayed in nationalist rhetoric as the *original* African societies, left largely unspoiled by contact with Europeans. On the other hand, from the point of view of the urban-based elite, the people of the islands represented all they had tried to leave behind, and persisted as icons of the primitive, the savage, and the past.

## “There is nothing here”: expressing marginality

As I pointed out earlier, the island of Bubaque, where I carried out my research, was the seat of the colonial administration and preserved its regional centrality after independence. On the northern coast of the island is the only urban centre of the archipelago, initially built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Portuguese, simply called Praça<sup>9</sup>. With an estimated population of 2,000<sup>10</sup>, Praça de Bubaque is the seat of the regional administration and the islands’ main port. The hospital, the Catholic, Anglican and Adventist missions, the court, a few hotels and a market all give Praça the appearance of a small town, attracting traders, students and fortune seekers from other islands in the archipelago and from the rest of Guinea-Bissau. Even though Praça has gradually integrated with the regional economy, the island of Bubaque shows discontinuities and differences within the context of the archipelago. Actually, though far from being culturally stagnant, the other islands of the archipelago had less access to external cultural and media contacts after independence.

Praça is what Mary Louise Pratt would call a “contact zone” (Pratt 1992), where Europeans, Bijagó and people coming from other regions of Guinea-Bissau or from neighbouring African countries to trade, cohabit side by side. However, Praça can easily be portrayed as a marginal, peripheral place within the context of Guinea-Bissau. During my last stays in Bubaque, sporadic, unsafe means of transportation to Bissau and rarely working telephone lines frequently left Praça totally isolated from the mainland, especially during the rainy season (from November to May) when sea conditions are bad. Despite its urban aspect and buzzing activity, Praça and the archipelago are largely disconnected from the rest of the country and from the capital city Bissau. It is a place where you can feel *really* cut off from the rest of the world.

It was in this context that I worked with a group of young boys who had moved to Praça from their villages, searching for their *development* in an urban setting. Without intending these young people to be taken as representative of the whole of Bijagó youth, I suggest that they can be considered as emblematic of the social and identity processes that characterise young males in Guinea-Bissau and in Africa at large (Vigh, 2006). As I have described elsewhere (Bordonaro,

<sup>9</sup> In Guinea-Bissau, the term *praça* nowadays means “urban centre”. In Portuguese, this word has several meanings: square, marketplace, but also garrison, fortress and stronghold. It is probably with this latter meaning that the Portuguese called their first garrisons along the coasts of Africa *praças*, and since it is mainly around these outposts that the urban centres grew over the centuries, in Guinea-Bissau the term means “town”. In the archipelago, the term is locally used to identify the urban centre of Bubaque as opposed to the villages (*tabanka*). The complete denomination should be therefore *Praça de Bubaque*, but this name is only used outside the archipelago.

2007, 2009a, 2009b), their aspirations to *development* led them to partially or totally reject the social hierarchies of the villages, moving to town to enrol in formal secondary education, make some money in the market economy and fulfil their dream of becoming *modern*.

Their perception of the Bijagó region was profoundly marked by feelings of marginality and exclusion. The archipelago appeared to them as an unfortunate place without hope. The sea, separating the islands from the mainland, had become a powerful symbol of the islands' disconnection from modernity, from a future of progress. Some boys referred to the "misfortune of being born and having to live in this sea". Delito, one of the boys I worked with, complaining about the fate of being born in the archipelago, used the term *castigo* – punishment<sup>10</sup>.

With few possibilities of getting away from the island physically, and even establishing a dialogue with the "outer world", most young men felt absolutely cut off from a world they could only see grasp in fragments on radio and TV programs, commodities and tales of tourists and travellers, and in which they felt they could only participate as spectators. The opening of wider horizons and the multiplication of imagined life possibilities brought about painful feelings of exclusion and frustration in the young people of Bubaque. Young men had the constant feeling that "there wasn't anything" in Bubaque. "There isn't anything here, there is no way, there are no chances..." Complaints about their condition were often expressed in these negative terms during our conversations. "What is good in Guiné? Nothing. There isn't anything. You just get enough, and if you have money you leave", Joaquim told me. Domingo commented:

People in Bubaque suffer. They don't have any good drinkable water. They don't have good transportation. Here in Bubaque we need electricity. We need a bus connecting the villages. We need a market, boats, water, a bus, electricity ...we need almost everything.

Young men seemed to have a negative identity. What they did *not* have constituted their actual world, defining their local specificity. Most conversations about the condition of young people in the Bijagó Islands focused on what they lacked, what they needed. This attitude of despair and victimization that most young men showed cannot but recall Mbembe's comment that the "cult of victimiza-

<sup>10</sup> The lack of means of transportation is commonly held as another sign of the state's disinterest in the people of the archipelago. At the same time, improvement of means of communication with the mainland is always one of the main points during electoral campaign speeches. These promises are always forgotten after the elections, but remembered by the people in Bubaque, who bitterly and ironically joke about the *grandeur* of the projects. Koumba Yalá, for example, promised the construction of a bridge linking Bubaque to the nearby island of Rubane during one of his speeches. To what purpose, neither I nor my interlocutors could figure out, but this gigantic undertaking always seemed to me as an amazing example of the grotesqueness of postcolonial power.

tion” and the “narratives of loss” are common features of African conceptions of African self and history (2002). In Bubaque, the cluster of sentiments triggered by this self-perception is forcefully expressed by the Kriol term *koitadesa*, denoting the perception of being wretched and hopeless, the surrender to the difficulties of life and adverse fate. As Wilson Trajano Filho (2002: 155) pointed out, the term is crucial for self-perception in the Guinea-Bissau Creole world, just like other similar phrases such as *djitu ka ten* (that could be translated as “accept things as they are because there is no way to change them”), or *n’ sufri* (literally “I suffer”, but meaning rather “I bear, I bear the suffering”).

### **The culture/development antithesis**

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If their perception of marginality indeed pointed to the real exclusion and subordination of the Bijagó region within the national and international contexts, the analysis that young men made of this situation reproduced the blueprint of colonial and developmentalist theories that acknowledged *traditional cultures* as an obstacle to progress and modernization.

Domingo Carlos da Silva was born in 1980 in Bijante, one of the largest villages on the island of Bubaque, with around 400 inhabitants. It is the closest one to Praça, with only a one-kilometre trail through cashew plantations separating them. Domingo grew up in the village, but decided to move to *town* when he was seventeen. He attended the ninth grade at the local high school and shared a difficult situation in Praça with many others, dividing his time between the need to earn enough money to make a living and the will to attend school. He was brilliant, intelligent, and stubborn. He faced the difficulties, accepting them as a necessary consequence of his choice and as a sacrifice for the development of himself, the islands and his country. Domingo agreed on the general *atraso* – backwardness – of Bijagó culture (*kultura*). He described the archipelago as the “least developed” region of Guinea-Bissau and, according to him, the cause was excessive attachment to the values of village culture. “*Kusa di kultura*” (culture things), he used to say, “Delay us and hold back our development. We have to abandon them”. Education and training abroad were the only way to draw the archipelago out of its condition of lack of development (*falta di desenvolvimento*).

Like Domingo, the young men I interviewed considered Praça a “developed place” contrasting with the rural milieu. The villages and the town seemed to be opposite sites of their moral geography (Thomas, 2002) and had become spatial symbols of the binomials that made up the social myth of development: closeness and openness, backwardness and progress, tradition and cosmopolitanism.

As Philip Thomas claims, the rural/urban contrast contributes a crucial spatial element to the geography of postcolonial modernity, and the terms town and country “are tropes by means of which people formulate their understanding of time and place as having been transformed by processes that have fragmented the very landscape of people’s lived world” (Thomas, 2002: 368, 376).

The young men of Praça pictured themselves as *desenvolvido* (developed) in contrast with the village population, which was stigmatized as backward, underdeveloped, uncivilized and locked in an ancestral past. In this vision, age-grades, initiation ceremonies, payment to the elders and almost every other aspect of village life were despised as survivals, fragments of another age, doomed to disappear in order to allow development.

When asked to explain why the villages tended to remain closed in on themselves, the boys complained that life in the village was dominated by culture, *kultura*. In their words, *kultura* (or *kusa di kultura* – culture things) stood for the basic elements of the village’s social organization, as well as for the ethical principles, the way of life and vision of the world attributed to the rural world. “Culture things” were held responsible for the backwardness in which the archipelago was considered to linger. According to the boys, *kultura* and its guardians, the elders, limited young people’s chance to develop themselves (*desenvolvi*), also blocking the “evolution” of the entire archipelago. For most of them *kultura* and *desenvolvimento* were necessarily at odds with each other.

Delito was born in the village of Ankamona, a few kilometers from Praça, where he moved when he was twelve, against his father’s will. Like many young men, he had to bear the burden of education all by himself, because his father did not agree with his decision.

“My father wanted me to become like him!” complained Delito in an interview, starting a pitiless attack against the *kusa di kultura* that he perceived as an obstacle to his development. “Look at my mother. What did she have from life but children? Look at my father. He doesn’t own anything. How was Bijagó culture useful to him? Enough of these things that hold us back, that are not useful and don’t help anybody get a damn thing! Who cares for Bijagó culture any more? My father”, he continued, “wanted me to stay in the village. In the village people live like animals. My father lives like an animal. Yes, people live like animals. They live like this”, and he eloquently put his hat in front of his eyes. “They don’t see!”

What they did not see, and what Delito, on the contrary, realized was “how things go, how the world turns” – *kuma ki kusa na kuri, kuma ki mundu na vira*. Then he put his index finger to his temple and insisted, “They are backward in

their brain. Here in Bubaque, in Guinea-Bissau, we have a delay of centuries by comparison with Europe. Centuries." According to Delito, the main reason for this situation was, again, the lack of education and the attachment to "culture things".

Xarifo was twenty-two when I met him in 2002. Like Domingo he was born in the village of Bijante. Despite his age, he was attending the 7th grade at the Liceu (high school) in Bubaque.

I was born in a very poor village, the village of Bijante. There isn't anything there. I was born in a village different from other places, like for example Bissau, or here, Praça, where you can have a life that is transparent to other lives (*bu tene un vida mesmu transparenti a utru vida*). We live in a milieu different from others. We live in a very poor place ... I think that the culture things just have to be dropped. We have to work hard at school, for our education, we have to get out (*sai fora*). We have to see how things work, because, you see, this is a very poor country, a very poor country, Guinea-Bissau. And here, on the islands, it is even poorer. Here we are backward just because here there are villages, there are things ... Those culture things just have to be dropped. We get out; we see how things work and how people live. And we bring everything back here. If I get out I will take advantage of those things. I'll come back here ... I think it is the best way to "build" (*kumpu*) the archipelago. Here it is very poor. We live in a very poor place.

## Conclusion

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Despite the evident weakness of the colonial government and the post-independence state in local administration, both these powers marketed mighty ideologies that created in Guinea-Bissau an image of the rural communities as antithetic to ideas of social change. As Anna Tsing (1993, 1994) showed, the way in which a specific place is defined as marginal has to do very much with how that place *was* and *is* defined as marginal, and by whom. The development of cultural marginality – underlined Rob Shields – occurs only through a complex process of social activity and cultural work. Marginal places have been placed on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other (1992: 3, 4).

From this point of view *marginal* is a sort of deictic – a notion whose meaning is dependent on the context in which it is used. It is on the map drawn by the colonial and post-independence projects of modernity that marginality turns into a relevant and significant notion. Actually, young men *realised* their marginality and wretched condition because they claimed citizenship of the space of national

and global modernity. In the same way, in this very space, the only way to claim citizenship in national modernity for Bijagó youth seems to be to reject and deny those aspects of their culture (at least publicly) that are acknowledged as antithetical to *development*.

But if indeed marginality – like underdevelopment – is a strongly ideological concept, a relative and ethnocentric context – a myth in a sense (which is true only if you believe in it), we should not overlook the all-too-real historical and contemporary social, political, and economic processes that have been dramatically transforming African societies. The feelings of marginality, powerlessness, and peripherality expressed by young people in the archipelago are indeed discursive legacies of the ideologies of civilisation and modernity; but are also categories that point to concrete forms of political and economic violence.

For the young men in Bubaque, lamenting their marginality was something more than simply replicating or adopting *colonial* categories. Modernity and tradition, development and progress are:

more than simple afterimages of colonialism, for the meanings of such terms are invariably reconfigured by the complexities of postcolonial contexts, their semantic field and valences shifting in response to newly emergent differences, hierarchies, and exclusion (Thomas, 2002: 368).

The experience of modernity as marginality, Mudimbe (1988: 4) noted, has its roots in the categories of colonialism, but also in the inequalities they underwrote and continue to underwrite (see also Dussel, 2000). As Benoît de L'Estoile recently wrote underlining the permanence of colonial relations after the end of colonisation in a restricted sense:

...whereas colonisation as a political form may belong to the past, this does not mean that all forms of "colonial relations" become extinct at the same time. This suggests that colonial legacies loom large in our world (2008: 269).

Dual categories like developed/underdeveloped, centre/periphery, which may be traceable to the period of colonial rule, continue to have relevance and are locally used because they express something fundamental about a world order that exhibits marked continuities with the asymmetries of the colonial era, capturing the complexities of contemporary experience and the social, cultural, political and economic process that have shaped people's lives over the years of colonial and postcolonial history, and retaining, as Philip Thomas wrote, "interpretive power as signs that capture something about continuities in people's political impotence and economic marginality" (Thomas, 2002: 367, 373).

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