

COMPASSION ON THE FRONT LINES

They are all fish from the same net¹ ... you say fish from the same net, you see? If I throw² Nino from power and put Kumba Yala it is the same thing, you see. If I throw Kumba Yala from power and I put Helder Vaz, it is the same thing; they are all fish from the same net.

No martyrs, no enemies

There are no martyrs in Columbia, Malcolm Deas states, as the country is caught in myriad conflicts without clear causes (1997: 380). Equally, in Guinea-Bissau the social production of martyrs or heroes, so visible in the war of liberation seems to have come to a halt in relation to the last ten years of conflict and turmoil, as conflicts within the country seem to have moved from the sacred to the profane; from wars rooted in the fight for societal change and progress to wars between power hungry politicians: politicians, whom, as Vitór - my field assistant and ex-militiaman, phrases it in the introductory quote, have all been taken from the same net and are thus all of the same kind; people characterised by *sabi boca* and *suso bariga*, a sweet mouth and a dirty belly.

In Bissau ideology is as such commonly seen as having been replaced by empty rhetoric and politics by corruption and self enrichment. People engage in politics because they want to fill their bellies and rather than ideologically motivated politics the country is seen as stuck in an endless series of factional struggles, where the only thing that differs is the name of the people in power or seeking power. Wars are fought for personal gain rather than common good producing a political landscape that is barren in relation to the production of heroes and martyrs.

¹ *Tudo e pis di memo cambua*. A *cambua* is a long, shallow net used to fence off an area of the river so as to drive the fish towards a controlled opening.

² *Tira*.

The lack of martyrs is as such an important indication of what type of conflict is being fought. Martyrs are defined by their death for a cause, and the cause must, by definition, in order to produce a recognised martyr, be collective. One does not become a martyr if seen as fighting only for personal interest as they are defined by offering their lives for the general good of the community that they are identified with and seen to represent. They fight and die for a community's place and possibilities within the world; they become iconic of the community by dying for the good of the community. Martyrs are, however, not defined by the context of the fighting but by the normative interrelationship between the combatants. They can therefore be produced from any context of conflict or warfare that is characterised by normative rather than pragmatic positions.³ In other words, the lack of Guinean martyrs suggest that the last couple of years has not seen war related deaths in which the departed could be seen as fighting for the good of Guinea-Bissau. As such, the symbolic degeneration of the honoured heroes, and the lack of martyrs since the war of independence, is not due to a lack of radicalised conflict - the structural context for their production - but rather to a perceived lack of normative difference between the fighting parties.

The lack of heroes and martyrs in Bissau is, thus, enlightening as it - in contrast to the war of independence, with its ideological orientation and action combined to take the country towards realising its place along side of the worlds other autonomous nations - indicates that the recent conflicts in the country are seen to have been political in a pragmatic sense rather than in a normative, ideological one. The lack of martyrs, and as we shall see, enemies, that we are currently witnessing in Bissau testify to the fact that recent conflict and warfare have not been tied to a popular causes articulated in ideological narratives and providing a clear sense of directionality towards a deified telos. Rather, wars without martyrs are

³ We can, in other words, produce martyrs from any radicalisation of conflict, from riots through to world wars.

wars without collective teleologies; they are fought not *against an enemy* but for a *possibility*.

Enemies and ideology

As I came to Bissau immediately after the end of the war in December 1999, I wanted to study the social reintegration of ex-militiamen. As I started researching the *Aguenta* militia,⁴ I expected to be able to uncover the Aguentas' motives for joining the militia by illuminating whom they saw themselves as fighting against; that is, by unearthing their idea of a perceived enemy and the threat that this enemy posed to their community. I equally expected that this construction of the enemy would elucidate a range of narratives that would position their activities by revealing their ideological orientations and motivations – why they were fighting, what they were fighting for and who they were fighting against. Yet no matter how I went about it I could not get detailed descriptions of the enemy, and thus no window to my informants' ideological positions. I slowly became aware that I could not extricate a defined picture of the enemy from my informants because they had no radical vision of the Other.

From this perspective the war in Guinea-Bissau does not seem to coincide with the political nature of warfare that we have come to expect in Europe and which can be traced back to Carl Maria Von Clausewitz' *On War*. Clausewitz' dictum;⁵ that war is a continuation of politics by other means, entailing that wars should be seen and kept as an instrument of larger political goals, laid in the hands of politicians pursuing the interest of states (Clausewitz 1997: 22), has been the primary underlying perspective informing European theories and analyses of war and conflict for the last century and a half. Accordingly, we generally see war as intricately tied to the political realm of statehood or nationhood, ideally controlled

⁴ A militia of – primarily – urban youth from Bissau (see Vigh 2003; 2006).

⁵ This appears in chapter one, of book one, the only part of Clausewitz' work that is believed to have been completed at the time of his death (Beyerchen 1992:60).

by politicians and used as an instrument in the furthering of political ideals. In other words, in a European perspective, war is grounded in ideological differences between states. It evolves from the different perspectives on how a given society should be organised, resources distributed and territoriality demarcated.

The consequence of the dominance of this perspective is that we, in both Western science and folk understanding, have a tendency to understand warfare as centred on ideology and territoriality. Consequently, any war that is not fought for ideological reasons comes, in a European perspective, to border sacrilege. Being a mercenary was formerly almost the only way to be a soldier and the deterioration of the social value of the term amply describes the development in the Western mode and understanding of warfare, till the point where a mercenary is currently symbolically equated with prostitution, of making a living by using ones body in the most profane of possible manners. As the act of a prostitute is negatively valued, an act of emotion debased into an economic transaction, so too does the mercenary transgress normative boundaries as the motive for soldiering ought to be for a higher ideal: for the common good rather than personal material gain.

Ideology and enemies

In this manner modern warfare is seen as centred on conflicting systems of ideas; opposed societal visions expressed in teleological narrative constructions of the ideal order between society, resources, territory and movement through time; that is, around conflictual interpretations of the distribution and allocation of authority and resources. At the most basic level ideologies are thus about the distribution of resources and power, yet being teleological they are directed towards the future as well as the past or the present.⁶ Yet it would seem that this idea of ideological

⁶ Ideology, in this perspective, does not refer to the process of mystification, false consciousness or other shrouding of the workings of power, as the concept has been used within the Marxist and neo-Marxist tradition but rather, following Geertz, to a symbolic framework for political

warfare is difficult to maintain in a Bissauian scenario as indicated by the absence of heroes and martyrs, and not least, of enemies.

A brotherly war

The Guinean conflict scenario consisted of the *Junta Militar*, primarily made up of 'Antigo Combatentes' (liberation heroes), 'Adjuntas' (primarily young, rural Balantas) and 'MDFC troops' (Casamance rebel forces). The *Governo* side, on the other hand, consisted of a number of Guinean Officers and non-commissioned Officers, roughly two battalions of Senegalese troops, a battalion of troops from Guinea Conakry, and roughly 2000 Aguentas.

The war was obviously not characterised by amity. The deaths of *Junta* and *Governo* soldiers alike testify to the existence of hostility towards the opposed forces. Yet from my informants' point of view we see, despite the proportionally large percentage of war-related deaths amongst the Aguentas,⁷ that there does not seem to exist, or have existed, the hatred and contempt for the enemy that one would expect of such situations. In fact, there was, apart from the foreign troops who have been used symbolically to externalise the cause of the conflict, no easily defined, discursively constructed Others or motives for entering into warfare. The relationship between the fighting parties in Guinea-Bissau was not - and is not - characterised by radical stereotyping or dehumanisation that one is accustomed to find in violent conflicts, but rather by a particularly non-polarised, Guinean construction of social categories and conflictual Others.

Guineense gosta d'um utro, Guineans like each other, people say, when one asks of the future of the country, yet they will most often subsequently slip easily

organisation, which is not reducible to the narrow interest of elitist power but should instead be seen against the background of the cultural system it is generated in (cf. Geertz 1993).

⁷ If our estimation, as seen in the previous chapter, is correct, that there were approximately 1000 surviving Aguentas and between 1500 and 2100 to start with, then the death toll of the Aguentas amounts, at a minimum, to 33 per cent.

into describing and debating the imminent danger of further trouble, positioning conflict and warfare as regular occurrences on a foundation of amity. In fact the mantra of friendship continues paradoxically even in situations of actual warfare. My landlord Caetano answered my question about how long he thought the fighting would last, as we sat, seven people in his hallway seeking shelter from the shooting outside, with the sentence: 'It won't take long, Guineans like each other'. At the time I thought the answer to be absurd, yet it seems strangely true despite the recurrent bouts of fighting. The imagined community seems to rest on a discursive construction of amity and brotherhood, which not even warfare appears to be able take the out of the relationship.

Imagining oneself as Other

The relationship between Guineans fighting on opposite sides in the civil war, and later outbreaks of fighting, shows itself, upon investigation, not to be characterised by the articulated hatred and aggressiveness one could expect to dominate the relationship between combatants. Actual battles and combat apart, there was, according to my informants, frequent and amicable contact between opposed Guineans troops during the civil war, pointing towards a level of non-conflictual interaction that makes the relationship between combatants in Guinea-Bissau stand out as an exceptional one expressed in the general conceptualisation of the civil war as a *guerra di hermonia*, a brotherly war.

The fact that the war (besides having a Senegalese, Conakrian and MFDC presence) was a civil war and thus primarily a conflict between Guineans, is emphasised by soldiers and civilians alike via the idea of aggressive fraternity. *Guerra di hermonia* underlies my interlocutors' understanding of war and strife in Guinea-Bissau and clearly influenced life on the front lines as well as the following

processes of reconciliation and social reintegration.⁸ Furthermore, that the war is seen as having been between kin seems to have been acknowledged throughout the chain of command of the Government troops, and equally to have been noticed - albeit with annoyance - by the Senegalese commanders fighting on the Government side. In the following quote Olivio, an Aguenta, explains to me, how the Senegalese officers who were put in charge of the Aguentas during the middle period of the war⁹ would try to educate the Aguentas on the proper relationship between the warring factions:

What did your officers tell you about the Junta side?

The Senegalese, when they came, they said: "You, must not trust the rebels!" This is what they told us. The Senegalese chiefs they said: "You must not trust laughing with the rebels!" This was what they told us, the Senegalese chiefs [said]: "You must not laugh with the rebel, because he is against you, he is not your friend so do not laugh with him. At the frontlines do not laugh with them, not even if you go to their side for a walk, do not laugh with them. This is no good in war". But our Guinean commanders, when they gave us advice, they told that we and the *Junta* - all these words - their way of marching or doing other things are exactly the same, so when he gave commands he would say: "The war we are in is a war between brothers [*guerra entre hermons*]. This war has no reason to be. The war we are in is a foolish war because there is no reason for it to be".

This quote directs us towards the fact that there was an ongoing non-conflictual interaction between opposed Guinean troops during breaks in the fighting. In fact, nearly all of the combatants I have spoken to in Guinea-Bissau have emphasised the positive relationship between the warring parties during ceasefires. But the above

⁸ See chapter nine for a detailed discussion of the process of social reintegration and appeasement.

⁹ Initially the Aguentas and the Senegalese troops fought in different units on the front lines with Guinean and Senegalese commanders, respectively; as we shall see, this was to change during the war as the Senegalese units were singled out by the *Junta* troops and subsequently bore the brunt of the *Junta* aggression.

quote equally shows the different attitudes towards the opposed troops, exemplified by the different instructions given to Olivio by his Senegalese and Guinean commanders. What we are seeing is in this perspective an internal incongruity within the different groups fighting on the Government side as to the perceived (social) nature of the war. Thus the Guinean 'brotherly' understanding of the war had apparently gained such dominance that Olivio's Senegalese commander found it necessary to lecture his men on the proper attitudes of aggression towards 'enemy soldiers'. Yet the Senegalese Officer's apparent annoyance and surprise at the 'strange' relationship between opposed Guinean troops is directly related to the very issue of enemy and Other. In other words the relationship between the groups in conflict and the appropriate behaviour between them is understood in two very different ways. For the Senegalese commander the praxis of war between the different Guinean troops was seen as unwarlike behaviour that needed changing. From the point of view of his Guinean colleague the amicable interaction across the front lines, during pauses in the fighting, was related to the perceived nature of the conflict as a brotherly war: *a war without a larger reason*, an unfortunate conflict between kith and kin. Olivio makes this further evident a bit later in the interview.

What we have here is a brotherly war, you should not have had this from the start, all of us should join each other in the barracks because we are brothers". This is always the advice they [our commanders] gave us every day: "We are brothers. This war has no reason to be. It is just because there is nothing to do about it, but we are brothers..."

The quote above is Olivio's response to my questions on what his officers told him about the *Junta*. As such, it reflects the general understanding of the Guinean conflict as a *guerra di hermonia*. That is, a war, which is not built around a polarised social scenario populated by allies and enemies and evident targets for destruction, but rather around a battle for social positions and trajectories.

Internal and external others

However, having said as much, I must make it clear that both the Government and Junta side of the conflict operated with a differentiation between foreign and national opposing forces. There is in Guinea-Bissau general agreement that the presence of foreign troops aggravated the conflict, yet it should be emphasised, since many seem to disregard the evident, that the war started without the presence of the foreign forces and that it did not end at the time of their departure, but rather continued with intensity afterwards.¹⁰ Rather than instigating the development of full-scale warfare, the Guinea Conakrian, Senegalese and Casamance forces made it possible to symbolically localise the aggressive parties outside of Guinean society, or the Guinean 'family', to externalise the source of hostility so that it was outside the categories of both classificatory and actual kin. This is seen, for example, in the following fragment from a talk I had with Carlos where we were discussing the composition of the *Junta* forces seen from the Government side of the conflict:

Were there different troops within the Junta?

Yes, some were artillery, some were just soldiers... some were old and some were younger like us.

Were there other differences?

There were also these rebels from Casamance.

How were they different?

They were Diolas, those people from Casamance... If you caught one... If we caught one of these we would kill him, you will kill him quickly.

What if you caught a Junta soldier?

No, we were told to bring him [with us].

The Government side of the war equally distinguished between nationals and non-nationals in their levels of violence. So, although it should once again be stated that there were indeed numerous examples of killings between Guinean troops, and

¹⁰ Despite the departure of the Senegalese and Conakrian troops, on the Government side, there are no indications that the *Junta* parted with the Casamance troops backing their war efforts.

equally many rumours of similar style executions on, and behind, the front lines, there seems nonetheless to have been a clear difference in the interpretation of - and action towards - different troops depending on their identity as Guineans or foreigners, insiders and outsiders. In other words, where the relationship towards the Guinean conflictual Other is fundamentally seen as one of amity, though set in a situation of war, the relationship towards the foreign combatants is the one closer to enmity, due to a perceived illegitimacy of foreign intrusion. What we see is, as such, a difference between the concepts of opponent and an enemy, as shown by James Aho, where he differentiates between the two somewhat dramatically: 'While *opponents* in disputes can be rationally and temporally engaged, the enemy/enema is best flushed into oblivion' (Aho 1999: 117), underlining the fact, that Guineans fighting each other were seen as opponent in a struggle for possibilities rather than enemies in a battle of ideologies.

A closer look, the concept of *guerra di hermonia* thus points our attention to the fact that not all combatants were equally related as 'brothers'; that there was a differentiation between internal and external combatants, between insiders and outsiders participating in the war. Yet the general dominance of the concept of *guerra di hermonia* equally points our attention to the fact that though the foreign troops might have been seen as kindling the fire they were not usually seen to be its cause. More exactly, the fact that the war was primarily seen as war between relatives, with the foreign forces seen as more distant than the Guineans, means that the cause of it, in my informants' points of view, must be placed somewhere within the 'brotherhood' of Guineans, as a family feud rather than a regional war. In fact the kinship term of brotherhood is exceptionally useful in maintaining the 'unity despite division' implied in family conflict.

The designation of the war as 'brotherly' makes it possible, in other words, to encompass the paradox of simultaneous amity and aggression; of insisting on the fact that Guineans like each other at the same time as trying to kill each other through acts of warfare. Brotherhood, in this perspective, makes the fusion of acts of

aggression and kinship possible, as fraternal social relationships are often characterised by the duality of solidarity and competition. Brotherhood, or 'siblinghood' in general comes to 'subsume rivalries and latent hostilities that are intrinsically built into the relationships' (Fortes 1969: 237) and in Guinea-Bissau, as elsewhere, brotherhood is a kinship relation in which it is possible to be in disagreement and competition (over favours, inheritance, women, status and so on) without breaking or endangering the underlying 'kinship solidarity' (Ibid.: 241). In this manner *guerra di hermonia* makes possible the coexistence of such different intersubjective modalities as violence and friendship within the context of warfare. The perceived brotherly aspect of the war relates not only to consanguine or affinal kinship. Returning to Meyer Fortes we are made aware that the model relationship of kinship is fraternity, as he makes the point using a quote from Pedersen stating that 'Wherever there is social unity, we have brotherhood' (Ibid.). Equally, the role of kinship within the *guerra di hermonia* stretches from the imagined national community (Anderson 1983) to the consanguineous relationships between soldiers as brothers, uncles, nephews and cousins. Brotherhood in this perspective connotes a generalised social proximity whether primary or secondary, as Denis and Buba's words show:

This is a war between two brothers, you see? It is a war between two brothers so you must feel a lot. No matter what you do you must feel a lot... this is my friend [*collega*],¹¹ my brother. It is all my family. (Denis)

[T]here will be war between two friends that did not [initially] have these [ill] feelings. Some are here, some are there. But when the war reaches the middle they have been reflecting for a long time. All the time they say words like: "No, we should not fight. We should not fight between us". At other times your little brother is on the other side. Your older brother is on the other side. (Buba)

¹¹ A *collega* being a member of ones *collegason*, that is of ones peer-group.

Where Denís emphasises the categorical kinship of the imagined community, that is towards Guinean nationals and relatedness in general, Buba touches upon actual kinship of consanguine relations. Yet being brotherly the war should, by logic of kinship, not have become a war at all but rather have been confined to the level of fraternal strife.

Compassion on the frontlines

We could nearly see our brothers. My big brother - he is nearly 40 - he was on the *Junta* side and I am here. He was a soldier in the *Junta Militar*, I went to the Government side. He was here (points with his finger at the table). He was at Bôr. He was on the other side and I was here (points again). All the time I told people to give him my regards. It is a brotherly war. That was the feeling towards it. But after... After they violated the ceasefire... on the 31st... We had a hard battle, hard battle, I told people to go and say hello to him and to tell him to stop shooting, because I was here. To stop firing from brother to brother, for us to talk, and for people to stop the war and talk. After the battle of the 31st passed, time passed and they [ECOMOG]¹² came and told us to disarm. (Olivio)

As can be seen in Olivio's description the brotherly aspects of the war had very real consequences creating, among other things, a strange front line scenario. Contrary to many conflicts or wars, the Other in the Guinean context is and was not easily dehumanised and excluded from the social sphere, as it typical in the social construction of hatred and thus not easily constructed as a symbolically polarised

¹² The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). Formed as a response to the civil war in Liberia the ECOMOG have performed 'peace-keeping' operations in a number of West African countries. The role of the ECOMOG has, however, been the subject of much debate as they have been accused of having hidden agendas and have become notorious for their frequent lack of discipline. Unflatteringly, a special military unit on the Government side of the war in Guinea-Bissau were nicknamed *ECOMOG*, after the ECOMOG force in Liberia, 'because they were bad' that is, particularly ruthless, as my informant Vitór phrased it.

enemy. Rather, what we see in Guinea-Bissau is a conflictual relationship that is saturated by kinship idioms.¹³ Kinship complicates warfare as it makes one hesitate, and makes one retain compassion where there for practical purposes should be none. Yet, as other civil wars will testify to, wars between people with intimate knowledge of each other's lives do not necessarily guarantee a diminished amount of bloodshed or a more humane construction of the Other as enemy. In fact looking at Burma, Rwanda and Bosnia we might be tempted to conclude the opposite. However, the important difference between the Guinean civil war and these other wars is that they were fought by parties with different ideas of the future, for radical changes in the political structures, and thus far from the *rebellious* point of departure of the Guinean civil war. In comparison the Guinean civil war is a war in which both sides fought for positions of power and accumulation of wealth within the same political system entailing that the warring parties were able to imagine the motives and rationales of the O/other. The Other as kin is related by means and motive and when combined with a lack of ideology, a lack of collectively defined societal goal in the future, and intricate knowledge of the opposed forces the emergence of an understanding of the war as one between brothers is made possible.

Revolutions and Rebellions

Yet the Guinean war is not singular in this manner. Many of the present 'new wars' in the sub-region seem caught in endless rebellions, changing merely figures of power but maintaining the same political systems producing inequality and marginality. They are non-teleological inasmuch as they do not envision change in the social structures or political system of the country in question but rather within the existing socio-political structures. We seem, in other words, to be looking at

¹³ The younger of my informants would not only refer to the war through the concept of brotherhood but would also refer to elders, on the *Junta* side, as their uncles.

rebellions rather than *revolutions* (Gluckman 1963). Instead of being revolutionary (that is ideologically motivated wars working to change the political structures and systems of the countries they are fought in) many of the so-called 'new wars' we have seen in the sub-region are primarily reconfigurative or redistribute. In fact, If we look at the range of civil wars in the third world it would seem that revolutions are currently limited to a few fundamentalist or secessionist wars and that conflict on the continent increasingly seems to be in the shape of rebellions rather than revolutions.¹⁴ West Africa, including Guinea-Bissau, seems to be characterised by incessant rebellions changing the internal power configurations but never the structures of inequality and marginalization that produce the social situations that are contested in the first place.

In this perspective the difference between fighting a rebellion and fighting a revolution testifies to a local or regional incapacity to change the poverty and calamity producing structures in the first place. That is, a lack of influence on ones position within the larger regional or global socio-political order. As governments in the third world occupy the weaker positions in the global capitalist relation of extraction and accumulation of resources they are unable to better the general position of the country within the global competition for resources. What they can do instead is compete for the privileged positions within political networks of resource distribution and extraction (cf. Duffield 1998, Kaldor 1999). Importantly, if we wish to gain a better understanding of these types of wars we need to be aware

¹⁴ A note on fundamentalism. Much journalistic and academic attention is given to what is seen as the immanently fundamentalist aspect of Islam located supposedly in *Sharia*. Yet if we look at the countries that have turned towards implementing *Sharia* law just prior to their 'fundamentalisation', we nearly always see states where the secular power of the government was either weakened by war or being misused to the extreme by brutal regimes (Iran, Nigeria, Afghanistan ect.). Fundamentalism, coincidentally first used to designate protestant sects, is thus a phenomenon that historically has come to the fore in relation to societies characterised by heightened secular disorder and lawlessness, and thus, historically, fundamentalism, most often, designates an impositions of (religious) order onto social and societal settings where none exists.

of the fact that rebellions generally produce different dynamics of conflict – that is, different motives for engaging in conflict and different relations between the fighting parties - than revolutions. The distinction is therefore an influential underlying parameter when looking at the construction of the enemy entailed in the two types of warfare, as one is characterised as a fight against a radical *Other*, differing in world-view and aspirations, whereas the other is characterised by the fight against a less polarised construction of the Other as an *opponent*.

As indicated at the start of this chapter, we can thus tentatively position the lack of martyrs and heroes, from the point of view of youth in Guinea-Bissau, as indicative of the demise of ideology. The lack of enemy in my informants' perspective of the war thus leads us towards some key aspects in understanding their war engagement. Firstly, we see that the war was not ideologically motivated. There was no perceived movement towards a normatively defined better future nor a teleological stake involved. Secondly, the lack of enemy substituted by the presence of opponents, leads us to see that the terrain of war is one that is being navigated with a focus on possibilities rather than hostilities. Combatants in Guinea-Bissau are currently not seen as fighting for the larger national community but for factions; not for a change in the socio-political structures or a better society, but for a better position and space of possibility within society - a fact which is consequential to the type of relationship generated by and in warfare and thus in relation to reconciliatory processes and the possible re-emergence of warfare. If we wish to help *leba Guiné pa diante*, bringing Guinea forward, we need to start by recognising the nature of the conflicts holding it back.

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