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Youth, marginality and development in Guinea Bissau. A case study from the archipelago of the Bijagós.

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Guinea Bissau has recently undergone a period of economic duress and political instability. Young people throughout the country are particularly affected by this situation, socially and economically marginalized, and politically underrepresented: even educated youths are confronted with a lack of opportunities, blocked social mobility, and despair about the future. Without overlooking these social and economic constraints, however, my goal in this article is to overcome the sense of victimization and passivity prevailing in much sociological work on youth in African countries, exploring the strategies young people are putting in place to cope with their difficult situation. I will do so through the analysis of the 'will to be modern' of a group of young boys living in Bubaque, in the Bijagó Islands. Discarding the rhetoric of loss and of *tristes tropiques*, I will interpret their discourse of modernity as a cultural strategy to overcome social and political marginality: appropriating the narrative of development and taking advantage of the institutions of modernity, young people strive to find their way among (and a way out from) the predicaments of contemporary Guinea Bissau. In their case, the language of development and modernization, opens up discursive spaces of freedom and autonomy, giving agents an acknowledged voice and becoming a critical locution within local dynamics: the discourse of modernity turns into a weapon

of social demands against traditional and postcolonial authorities, an idiom to express aspirations, needs, and rights[1].

Traditionally Cosmopolitans – The historicity of change

The capacity of the communities of the Bijagó islands to adapt to and take advantage of the political and social regional changes, is historically attested. Reconstructions of the complex history of the region (see Brooks 1993, Mark 2002, Hawthorne 2003, Gallois Duquette 1983, Henry 1994) have shown that the communities of the islands and the core elements of their social organisation underwent dramatic transformations. The numerous cultural contacts and the changing economic and political situations can't leave in this sense any doubt about the dynamic character of the communities of the islands, revealing once more how the idea of static and 'traditional' societies is largely inappropriate to the African context.

The Archipelago preserved for several centuries a crucial position in the economic and political landscape of the Senegambia region (Mark 1985, 2002, Henry 1994, Brooks 1993, Bowman 1997, Forrest 2003, Hawthorne 2003), participating in the local trade with Europeans since the XVI century[2]. The Bijagós were involved in trade, cultural exchange, and 'cosmopolitanism' well before the Portuguese settled down in the islands and 'globalization' became a fashionable term. 'Cosmopolitanism-as-tradition' (as Gable 2006 puts it referring to Manjaco) is indeed a good lens to look at the Archipelago refusing linear periodizations implicit in the notion of modernity. The link between the postcolonial generation and change as well should therefore be problematized and contested, underlining instead the ambiguous and troubled relationship between youth and social and cultural change in contemporary Africa, and unsettling the apparently obvious relationship between youth and modernity in Sub-Saharan Africa.

As Walter Hawthorne underlined, 'from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries Bijagó 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 that were brought to the islands and sold to the Western slave traders. 'These raids, continues Hawthorne, were so effective that by the

[1] This article is based on research carried out for my Ph.D. dissertation (Bordonaro 2006).

[2] The population of the archipelago is not perfectly homogeneous: from one island to another, some noteworthy differences are evident 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 have a continental 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 in 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).

seventeenth century, Bijagó had transformed their islands into major slave-trading centers 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). This 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. See also Trajano 1998). Until 1900[3], 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 interventions both to settle in the Archipelago and to revenge raids lead against their ships, the situation of the region could well be described a 'micro-independence': 'The Archipelago must be considered in 1853 as *res nullius* for the Europeans' (Pélissier 1989: I, 117).

It was only after the Berlin Conference of 1885 that the Portuguese carried out military campaigns to effectively occupy the territories, facing a strong local resistance. The Archipelago was one of the last zones to be fully 'pacified'[4]. Several campaigns had to be carried out, especially when the implementation of the *imposto de palhota* (the hut tax) and of forced labor triggered several uprisings (Guerra 1994: 196). The island of Canhabaque in particular required three campaigns to be reduced to 'obedience' (1917, 1925, 1935). The process of pacification imposed dramatic limitations on the mobility of the islanders[5], whose canoes had traveled 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. Actually, colonial campaigns and policies immobilized the people of the Archipelago: destroying their canoes, limiting through national boundaries the possibility of contacts, and restricting movement from one island to the other. Pacification imposed also 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 propaganda started describing them[6].

[3] For the history of Guiné in the 19th and 20th century, see also Silveira 1998, Alexandre (ed.) 2000.

[4] On 'pacification' see among others Pélissier 1989, Mendy 1992, Henry 1994, Reis 2001, Forrest 2003.

[5] Significantly, after pacification, in order to prevent tax evasion, all Bijagó adults (16 years old or older) had to bring with them a 5 centimetres aluminium disk 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 evidence of his payment and without the *caderneta indígena*, a kind of ID card issued by the authorities (Mendy 1992: 52).

[6] The fact that isolation and marginality are the outcome of political and military (colonial) interventions rather than inherent features of specific (cold) societies has been remarked insightfully by Jonathan

The condition of youth in the Praça of Bubaque

The common sense link between contemporary youth and change in Africa should therefore be contested or at least historicized, change happening in every generation, and immobility not being for sure a feature of the Bijagos communities. However, each historical moment has its own features we have to deal with – and the contemporary situation of young people in Bubaque is embedded into the circumstances of contemporary Guinea Bissau. We have in other terms to deal with the inevitability and historical character of social change, at the same time that we deal with the specific characters of a certain epoch. Every place transforms itself in time (and always did), but in different ways. We should highlight the specific changes that are taking place today, but keeping in mind that these specific transformations, distinct and peculiar, are only the latest phase of a process of change that always happened: the idea is that of a flux of continuous change, of continuous transformation. That's why the notion of modernity, with its insistence on discontinuity, is useless here.

Postcolonial history brought about specific transformations in the country. In particular, the coup d'état of Nino Vieira (1980) and the gradual shift towards liberalism, bolstered in the whole Guinea Bissau a situation in which new imagined and possible lives (Appadurai 1996) reshaped youth identities and expectations. In the Bijagó region, it is on the island of Bubaque in particular, where I carried out my research, that these transformations have been more evident. There are several reasons for this regional differentiation.

Bubaque was the seat of the colonial regional administration, and preserved its regional centrality after independence. Except for Bolama, Bubaque is the only island regularly connected to Bissau by small and often unsafe boats and canoes. On the northern coast of the island is the only 'urban centre' of the Archipelago, simply called the Praça[7], built at the beginning of the XX century by the Portuguese. With an estimated population of 2000[8], the Praça of Bubaque is nowadays the seat of the regional administration and the main harbor of the Archipelago. The hospital, the Catholic, Anglican and Adventist missions, the court, a few hotels, and a market, all

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Friedman (1994c: 4-5. See also Kahn 2001). The case of the Bijagó and of the societies of the Upper Guinea Coast is in this sense emblematic.

[7] In Guinea Bissau, the term *praça* means nowadays '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 along the centuries, the term has in Guinea Bissau the meaning of '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 when one is outside the Archipelago.

[8] This figure was provided in 2002 by the local administration at my request. According to a study commissioned by the INEP on the Archipelago in 1990 (INEP 1990), Bubaque had in 1990 a population of 2936, 1662 living in the villages, and 1274 in the Praça.

these elements give to the Praça the aspect of a small town, attracting traders, students and fortune seekers from other islands of the Archipelago and from the rest of Guinea-Bissau. The Praça is a contact zone (Pratt 1992), where Europeans, Bijagó, and people coming from other regions of Guinea-Bissau or from neighboring African countries to carry out their commercial activities, cohabit side by side. Within the context of the island of Bubaque, the *Praça*, despite its distinctive features, became gradually integrated in the regional economy: the Praça and villages have become increasingly complementary and interdependent[9]. The villages are embedded in the economy of the *Praça* that, in turn, greatly benefits from the people living in the villages. On the one hand, the villagers sell some of their products in the marketplace (fish, palm wine, palm oil and nuts, wood…), on the other they buy many products in the Praça, also to sustain their ritual economy. We are really in presence of a mixed system, where the cash economy contributes greatly to the ritual economy[10]. Many people, moreover, even when they live in the villages in Bubaque, commute everyday to the *Praça*: be it students attending school, women selling their products at the market, or people working in the Praça but keeping their residence in one of the villages, the road cutting in two the island is usually crowded in the morning and in the evening.

The island of Bubaque shows as a consequence discontinuities and differences within the context of the Archipelago. Actually, though far from being culturally stagnant, due to the recent colonial history of the region, the other islands of the Archipelago have lesser access to external cultural and media contacts. The cultural environment of the Praça, on its side, is an opportunity to get in touch with different cultural elements, that rapidly transform and widen habitats of meaning and social imagination. The Praça also increasingly attracts young men from the rural areas. This is often the first step in the complex and difficult migratory paths that, in recent years, have brought

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[9] Actually, considering the constant movement of ideas, goods and people between town and village in contemporary Africa, the dichotomy has lost much of its explanatory value (Van Binsbergen 1999: 283. On the dialectic between town and village, see Ferguson 1999). Filip De Boeck has argued that in the face of changing African realities, 'our standard frames of analysis, such as the classic dichotomy between rural and urban, no longer fit an increasingly 'exotic', complex and chaotic world that seems to announce the end of social life and the societal fabric as most of us understand it' (1996: 93).

[10] The link between the ritual economy of the village and the market economy of the Praça (but not only) might well be suggested if we take a look at the history of *kana*, the rum which is one of the most appreciated forms of payment and tribute to the elders in every occasion (On the *kana* economy see Birmingham (in Alexandre 2000) and Curto 2002). In every ritual, as well as simply visiting an elder, the most valuable gift is always the *kana*. As such, this spirit is deeply associated with the world of the villages. However, at a closer look, the *kana* gives us important clues about the openness of the society of the islands, and about its involvement with trade since the 17th century. According to Hawthorne, *kana* was introduced in Guinea-Bissau and used as a form of payment by the so-called Cape Verdean *ponteiros*, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The *ponteiros* were Cape Verdean immigrants that occupied *pontas* of land in Guinea-Bissau, seeking their fortune as merchant-planters. Contracting labourers from the local populations, they grew mainly rice and sugar cane. The *ponteiros* were 'adept cane farmers and master *kana* makers' (Hawthorne 2003: 191-192). The introduction of *kana* in the Archipelago is not only relatively recent, but its appearance is linked to the growing importance of goods trade in the region. This situation seems to continue nowadays, since nobody grows sugar cane on the islands, or makes *kana*, which is in fact imported by (usually non-bijagó) traders in the Praça, where it is sold to the villagers.

some young people to Bissau, to seek their fortune, and a few to Lisbon and other European destinations (Bordonaro 2003a; Bordonaro and Pussetti 2006).

Though I will not be concerned specifically with gender construction in itself, this article is based on a gender-specific ethnography, as it focuses young Bijagó males living in the Praça. Doing a gender specific ethnography does not in any case mean doing a gender-blind analysis. The reason for my choice is that Bijagó masculinities have become a key site for the experience and negotiation of recent social and economic changes (see, for a similar conclusion among the Masaai, Hodgson 1999): in other terms, we are facing in Bubaque a gender mediation of the notion of modernity (1999: 123; see also Wardlow 2002). Gender is in Bubaque an important element in the individual perception of the ideas of modernity, progress and development. The strategies and interpretation men and women are both putting in place in the context of the Praça are different, and respond not only to a local gender differentiation, but are also a consequence of 'development', 'modernity' and 'progress' being profoundly gendered concepts – whether conveyed by media images of consumption, agendas of nation-building, or legacies of colonial discourse (Hodgson 2001) - which redraw local gender relationships and ideologies (Mendes Fernandes 1984, 1990). The very ideas of progress and modernity (both in their colonial and national versions) convey in themselves a patriarchal ideology that pictures men as the very agents of change and development (Boserup 1970, Leacock 1979, Brettel and Sargent 1993, Van Allen 1976, Lockwood 1993, Escobar 1995).

Seen through the prism of an ideology of development and progress they embodied through a series of means (modernisation agenda of post-colonial state, formal education, NGOs interventions), most young people consider the Praça a 'developed place' contrasting with the rural milieu, a site of contact with alterity and with 'development'. As Domingo, a 17 years old boy, told us during an interview, young people move to the Praça 'to see different people (*odja pikadur diferenti*), to get the rhythm of the world as it really is (*toma ritmo di kuma, mundo está asin*).'

The promises of *desenvolvimento* though, are not easy to be attained, and the situation of young people in the context of the Praça has from this point of view strong similarities to the condition of youth in other African urban contexts. The new chances and opportunities that seemed at hand after independence rapidly vanished in the 90s, when liberalization and the increased globalization brought about a wider availability of consumption goods but, at the same time, an unprecedented economical and political crisis that culminated in the 1998/9 civil conflict. Presently, despite their ambitions, young people have a thoroughly marginal position in the *Praça* - as well as in Guinea Bissau (see Lourenço-Lindell 2002, Vigh 2006) and the realization of their aspirations seems to be a near impossibility.

The increase in transnational connections and circulation of meanings brought about for the young men of Bubaque a more acute perception of marginality, a sense of forced limitation to a too local context from which it was difficult to flee. Despite its cultural contacts, from many points of

view the Praça is still a marginal and peripheral place within the context of Guinea-Bissau. It is important to underline here that my most recent fieldwork (in 2000/2001 and 2002), took place after the 1998/1999 civil war, in a critical phase in the history of Guinea-Bissau: prolonged economic and political instability had caused a total collapse of the state and of its infrastructures, while most NGOs and international institutions had abandoned the country. During my last stays in Bubaque, sporadic and unsafe means of transportation towards Bissau and rarely working telephone lines frequently left the Praça totally isolated from the continent, especially during the rainy season (from November to May) when sea conditions are bad. Despite its urban aspect and buzzing activity, the Praça – and the Archipelago - was largely disconnected from the rest of the country and from the capital city Bissau. It was a place where you could feel *really* cut off from the rest of the world, a perception I shared with most of the young men I worked with.

The opening of wider horizons and the multiplication of imagined and fascinating life possibilities also made exclusion and frustration increasingly evident, as young people suffered from a chronic lack of means. As Achille Mbembe ironically underlined, for the poor in Africa globalization only seems to mean 'licking at the shop-window' ('*lécher la vitrine*', quoted in Meyer and Geschiere 1999: 5). This dialectic between global availability and global affordability, between fascination and exclusion, triggered manifest feelings of marginality and peripheriality among the young Bijagó living in the Praça. Actually, though basing their identity and social status on the acquisition and show off of 'modern' commodities, young people have limited access to salaried jobs, most of them surviving with some help from relatives, involvement in informal trade, or by selling tourist art.

Young people find themselves in a condition of blocked social mobility, as the local market economy is unable to allow them a social ascension. They are in a sense constrained to remain young, as economic independence – marking adulthood – is extremely difficult to attain. The model of adult masculinity dominating the urban context, implies education and wealth, granting access to social status, political power, conspicuous consumption, household, a family. These goals are almost impossible to attain for the current generation in Guinea Bissau (Vigh 2006). All young people I talked to, acknowledged this situation, and saw emigration as the only viable path for the realization of their dreams. Migration is perceived as the only possible way to reach a condition of personal fulfillment and respected adulthood. But migration is as well a luxury for most people, requiring high economic investments from the family.

This is in no way a situation limited to Guinea Bissau, of course. If we consider the question of youth in Africa, we rapidly realise that the controversial role of youth in politics, conflicts and rebellious movements is one of the major challenges in the continent today[11]. The issue is that of

[11] There is a growing body of literature in anthropology concerned with youth in 'Third World' countries and in Africa in particular. See for e.g. Mbembe 1985; O'Brien Cruise 1996; issues 73: 3 (July 2000) and 73: 4 (October 2000) of the *Anthropological Quarterly*; issue 80 (December 2000) of *Politique Africaine* and

the problematic insertion of large numbers of young people in the socio-economic and political order of post-independence Africa. Even educated youths are confronted with a lack of opportunities, blocked social mobility, and despair about the future. African youth, while forming a numerical majority, largely feel excluded from power, are socio-economically marginalized and thwarted in their ambitions. They have little access to representative positions or political power, and are particularly aware of the incongruence between state modernism and global modernity, turning into ferocious critics of the governments (Mbembe 1985 is obviously a benchmark, but see also Collignon and Diouf 2001). This makes for a politically volatile situation in many African countries. Jean and John Comaroff recently wrote about South Africa (but this is the case for many other African contexts as well) that 'the dominant cleavage here has become generation' (1999: 284; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2005) and that youth in particular are the focus of rapid shifts in postcolonial and global economy and society.

As Donald O'Brien underlined, commenting on the situation of youth in Africa in the 80s and 90s, the common denominator is that 'the young people have finished schooling, are without employment in the formal sector, and are not in a position to set up an independent household' (1996: 57). Nicholas Argenti portrayed the young in Africa as 'liminal individuals caught between generations and between historical stages of their communities in an anarchic limbo pregnant with foreboding signs of entropy' (2002: 150).

Beyond this unquestionable datum however, young people throughout Africa have shown a stunning capacity of local agency, creating, manipulating and inventing new identities and strategies, and transforming urban and rural cultures in surprising and unexpected directions. My goal is therefore also that of exploring the local reformulation of identity and the strategies the young are putting in place to cope with their – often – difficult situation [12]. How do young people

issue 18 of the journal *Autrepart*, edited by René Collignon and Mamadou Diouf (2001); the volume recently edited by Alcinda Honwana and Filip De Boeck (2005).

[12] There is a growing body of literature concerned with the analysis of the local agency of youth in Africa, highlighting the new and creative identities and cultural products young people are creating 'à l'intersection du local et du global' (Diouf and Collignon 2001: 13). In this respect, our approach is largely indebted to a relatively recent approach to the study of youth which has been called 'anthropology of youth' (Bucholtz 2002), and that focuses the interaction between the concepts of modernity and globalisation and the ambivalent engagement of youth in local contexts (see the seminal work by Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995). The anthropology of youth is characterised by its attention to the agency of young people and its interest in how identities emerge in new cultural formations that creatively combine elements of global capitalism, transnationalism, and local culture (Wulff 1995: 10; De Boeck and Honwana 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005). It emphasises the here-and-now of young people's experience, the social and cultural practices through which they shape their worlds. Youth become cultural actors and a consistent theoretical concern emerged, in order to show how young people are active agents in the construction of the meanings and symbolic forms which make up their cultures (Wulff 1995: 1). Following this invitation, recent works tried to overcome the sense of victimisation prevailing in much sociological work on youth in African countries, exploring the local reformulation of identity and strategies the young are putting in place to cope with their – often – difficult situation (see among others Argenti 1998, Gable 1995, 2000, Weiss 2002, Honwana and De Boeck 2005, Comaroff and Comaroff 2005). This stimulating approach focuses in particular on the local modalities through which young people adopt, transform and re-invent global and 'modern' cultural traits.

cope with their situation? What ideas do they have about their condition and the causes of their marginality?

Youth against traditional authorities: Who cares for Bijagó culture anymore?

Besides the macroeconomic changes I have underlined, in many cases, the situation of young men in the Praça was also shaped by their relationship with the traditional authority of the elders, still maintaining their positions in the villages. There are obviously many different situations among young men living in the Praça: some already born in the small urban center, others run away from the villages, other still live in the villages of Bubaque, but spend their day in the Praça.

But for many of them the elders and their authority were still present – both feared and stigmatized by young men. In Bubaque, an analysis of the social organisation of the village reveals that the generational divide is one of its basic features. Social norms at the village show violent imposition of authority and symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1972). The main social distinction is that between young men (b. *iamgbá*, 'the children') and elders (b. *iakotó*) [13]: juniors are educated to respect the elders, sharing their goods with them. A complex system of age grades and age classes leads the young men through several steps towards the status of elder: the initiation ceremony (b. *manras*) is the apex of this highly hierarchical social organisation based on age that some authors have defined a gerontocracy (Silva Marques 1955: 294-295)

Anthropological researches in other contexts (Gable 2000, Rasmussen 2000, Rea 1998, Sharp 1995), however, have called into question the all too easy explanation according to which the tension between the tantalising promises of modernity and the expectations of tradition-minded adults may be thought to create resentment among the young people (Bucholtz 2002: 529). Youthful challenges to adult authority are widely documented, but the phenomenon is not always so intimately connected to modernity as this scenario might suggests, and it is unlikely that rapid social change *in itself* triggers disagreements between younger and older people. This is not to ignore the fact that economic and political change can alter important elements of the social structure, but rather that, as Leis and Hollos (1995) have argued, cultural factors, such as kinship structure, may also affect how change is negotiated between generations.

Since young men's viewpoint is best captured in their own voices, I now present three cases and interviews of boys living in the Praça.

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[13] This is not intended to be an exhaustive description of the social organisation of the inhabitants of the island of Bubaque. What I want to underline here is just the importance of the generational opposition within the village social organisation. For basic anthropological descriptions of the communities of the islands produced in post-independence period, see Scantamburlo (1991 [1978]), Gallois Duquette (1983), Mendes Fernandes (1989, 1995), Henry (1994), Sousa (1995), Pussetti (1999, 2001, 2005).

Delito the singer

I was sitting on the porch of the hotel, writing my fieldnotes, when somebody called me from the dark street: the Praça, without any working public lighting, sank into darkness at sunset. It was Delito[14], the young artist, the singer and dreamer, wearing his red baseball hat. His personal situation was common to most young men living in the Praça. Delito was a seventeen-year-old 9th grader at the *liceu*[15]. Among the 'whites' of the Praça he had a bad reputation: Dora, a Portuguese hotel owner, had warned me, informing me that he had been charged of theft several times, but had always escaped arrest as he was a minor. He was my best friend on the island: one of the boys I spent most time with. He dreamed of becoming a singer, and he was a songwriter himself, writing romantic songs for his girlfriend who lived in Bissau. He was at the same time shy and boastful, vain and naïve, with a whispered and hesitant voice.

He did not enter into the hotel that night, as Dora, the Portuguese owner, had already rudely chased him off several times. 'Come on – he invited me – let's go and eat the world'. It was Saturday night, and 'eat the world' was the expression young people used to mean 'have fun'. I left the notebook in my room and went out. I followed Delito along the dark streets full of bumps of the Praça, towards the harbour, the electric lights powered by generators, the centre of nightlife in Bubaque. The streets around the harbour were full of life on Saturday evenings. Boys and girls walked and met their friends on the pier. All the shops and bars were open and crowded. Some boys sat and drunk on the porch of the bar Dalillan, just in from of the pier. Some of them came out staggering, drunk, while, by the light of a powerful beacon, a few women were loading a boat with fish to be transported to Bissau. Those who had some money to waste were waiting outside the entrance of the small cinema: that night Schwartzenegger's *Last Action Hero* was on the programme. A pink curtain covered the entrance to the disco (250 CFA) that opened only at 23.30, but some boys and girls were already gathering nearby.

We sat in a bar: beer for me, some juice for him as he does not drink alcohol. Delito was born in the village of Ankamona, a few kilometres from the Praça, where he moved when he was 12 against his father's will. As many young men, he had to carry the burden of education all by himself, because his father did not agree with his decision.

'What did your father want?', I asked him.

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[14] His complete name was Delito Mário Gomes.

[15] The education system in Guinea-Bissau is based on the 12 grades Portuguese model. There is basic EBE (Ensino Básico Elementar, 1st to 4th), the EBC (Ensino Básico Complementar, 5th and 6th) and the ES (Ensino Secundário, 7th to 12th). In Bubaque, one can attend up to the 9th year, than has to move necessarily to Bissau, to attend the 10th and the 11th grades. The 12th grade must be attended in Portugal.

‘He wanted me to become like him!’, he answered. Beto started a long attack against the ‘culture of the village’ – *kusa di kultura*, ‘the things of culture’ as he defined it, that he perceived as an obstacle to his *desenvolvimento* – 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 with these things that detain us, that are not useful and don’t make anybody get a damn! Who cares for Bijagó culture anymore?’

‘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 the hat in front of his eyes, ‘they don’t see!’

What they did not see, and what Delito, at the contrary, realised and pursued, was ‘how things go, how the world turns’ – *kuma ki kusa na kuri, kuma ki mundu na vira*.

Then he pointed his index finger to his temple and insisted: ‘They are delayed in their brain. Here in Bubaque, in Guinea, we have a delay of centuries by comparison with Europe. Centuries.’ The main reason for this situation was, according to Beto, the lack of education and the attachment to the ‘things of culture’. Some women and children passed by, bringing baskets to the market:

‘Those women’, Beto asked me, ‘did they go to school? Do those children go to school? Their parents don't send them to school: if you didn’t go to school, you don't even think that your children have to. We are the first generation that starts to develop itself (*kumsa desenvolvi*).’

He told me with eyes sparkling with indignation, that in some island of the Archipelago there were still persons that had never seen a car and when arriving in Bubaque for the first time ‘Here’, they had to be informed, ‘*this* is a car’.

Culture stops development

Domingo Carlos da Silva was born in 1980, in Bijante (Bubaque). He attended the ninth year at the local high school, and shared with Agostinho and with many others a difficult situation in the Praça, sharing his time among the necessity to earn money to afford a living and the will to attend school. He was brilliant, intelligent, and stubborn. He faced the difficulties he was living in, accepting them as a necessary consequence of his choice and as a sacrifice for the development of himself, of the islands, and of his country. Domingo agreed on the general *atraso* – delay – of Bijagó culture (*kultura*). The archipelago was described as the ‘less developed’ region of Guinea-Bissau, and the cause was, according to him, the excessive attachment to the values of the culture of the villages. ‘*Kusa di kultura*’, he used to say, ‘delay us and detain our development (*desenvolvimento*). We have to abandon them’. Education and formation abroad were, according to him, the only way to draw the Archipelago out of its condition of underdevelopment (*falta di desenvolvimento*).

'I was born in a very poor village, Bijante. Life at the village for young people is not very fulfilling. If you grow up in a village, like me, you follow culture (*kultura*), you work, you follow many forms of culture. Moreover, children do not attend school. Within a village, there must be *karo*, *kanhokam*, there must be different age-grades (*idades*), there must be *kadene*, *karo*, *kabido*…there are many grades. You pass from one to the other, like at school, from 1st class to the 2nd, from 2nd to 3rd, and so on. We have to undergo all these passages until the last initiation (*fanado*), and when you are over, you are already too old, you cannot do anything else except exploit the younger ones. We suffer from this situation (*no sufri realidade*), and young people have to run away and stay in town, where they have different problems. But they see different people (*odja pikadur diferenti*), they get the rhythm of the world as it really is (*i toma ritmo di kuma, mundo está asin*).'

During the last elections, Domingo had been a member of the electoral commission on the island of Caravela. He spoke of this island with irony and sadness, focusing on its deficiencies and 'backwardness':

'Caravela is a very isolated island, and when you get there you discover that other people are in a situation much worse than here in Bubaque. *I ka ten nada, i ka ten hospital, i ka ten luz, i ka ten furu, i ka ten strada...* – there isn't anything, there is no hospital, there is no electricity, there are no wells, there are no streets…you cannot communicate by radio. Villages are tiny and far one from the other, rounded by thick vegetation. Trees are huge and scaring at night. Some people never saw a car, young people can't write or read, they don't know any game, draughts or whatever. Well, they played football…but they didn't play 11 against 11, but 6 against 6. We had to explain them how you play football, we showed what are the right positions, and then, when they started to play *krekkekrekkekrekke*', Domingo laughed reproducing onomatopoeically the confusion of these 22 boys fighting disorderedly for the ball. 'At night', continued Domingo ironically 'the young meet at the disco. By the light of the moon, they turn up the volume of the radio and dance!'

'Finally, the young do everything following culture. Most of them undergo initiation. They follow culture (*e na sigi kultura*). Young people there, they don't know anything, they suffer from culture.'

'Can you see now how culture worsens young people's life? Culture worsens their life. Of course, culture has its importance to make you famous[16] (*sedu famoso*) at the village, you have a woman, you have a house, you have children, but these children don't have any stability. There is a great confusion among the children. For example, there is competition between two women. However, you see, they make competition for nothing. It has no importance at all! Your man doesn't own a car, he doesn't own anything: what are they competing for? It has no importance at all. And the children suffer from this instability. When you have a woman at the village, you have the right to work a rice-field, you have the right to collect palm fruit and palm wine, you have the right to fish, you have the right to make your own life outside school. That's what you do until you have the age to be someone old (*garandi*), and you cannot walk or do anything. So, you take your son and you put him in the same situation. So your son too has to look for a woman, has to be a famous one (*famoso*), while his father exploits him. He can work his rice-field and have many women, he has a lot of rice, he is given a famous name (*nome famoso*), he becomes a famous young man…there are a lot of them in Canhabaque. They have many children and not even one of them has a pair of shoes! Do you see how culture works?

[16] Being famous is an important aspect of the ethos associated to the *karo* age-grade.

You arrive in a village, you play drum *toc toc toc* until the sun rises. You have to play obligatorily, because people have to dance…you see, once the idea was to transmit things orally, and not through writing. Is this the life young men want?'

'Most young people move to the town because they want to know the world. Young people must realise that we have to abandon culture a little. Because if we cling to culture we cannot cling to school. We have to focus our attention on school. Like this, we get a chance for our future.'

'What do the elders think about this?', I asked.

'Elders don't agree if you decide to move to the town. The elders want you to stay at the village, to be a *karo*…. *katababum katababum katababum* katababum', Domingo imitates the rhythm of the drum. 'When we make a ceremony, we must give them a huge quantity of palm wine. The elders want you to "dress your cloth" (*mara pano*), to put your bandanna on (*mara lenço na cabeça*)[17], to become a famous one, with women falling at your feet. At times, we pretend we do agree with all that. We don't dare to challenge them, and we say we will leave school and join them at the village. When we go to the village, "what do you do at school? What are you doing?", they ask. Bijagó elders want you to have many women. One elder gets up, he sits, like this, and he eats. Another one comes, he drinks. That's what matters to them and that's why they don't allow young people to settle in town. They want to drink and eat and that's all. At the village, if you misbehave, if you disobey to the elders, you are not well considered. If you give food and wine, they all agree! They give you many women, but women have no value at all! You have many women, you have a lot of children and that's all!'

'How do you think things can change here in Bubaque?', I asked.

'Only education might change our situation. Only the school. A young man sits at his desk, goes to school, and gets some lessons. He tries to develop his mentality (*desenvolvi si mentalidade*), but he does not develop thanks to culture (*mas i ka na desenvolvi pabia di kultura*)!'

Culture just has to be dropped

Xarifo was 22 when I met him in 2002. Despite his age, he was attending the 7th class at the *Liceu* (the high school) of 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, the Praça, where you can have a life that is transparent to other lives (*bu tene um vida mesmo transparente a otro vida*). I am attending the 7th class. If I were born in a developed country, I would be at a higher class, but here…'

'Why did you start school that late?' I asked.

'I started school later because before I stayed there at the village, I only made the 'things of culture' (*só fasiba kil kusas di kultura*). Different things…well, we live in a milieu different from others. We live in a very poor place. At that time, one could come and tell you to dress your costume up, and go play in the square of the village (*brinka na bantaba*). Sometimes you took your notebooks to go to school, and the elders told you 'no! Go dance, with your

[17] Both are distinctive garments of the *karo*.

colleagues'. And you had to dress up the costume of the dancer, and go dance in the village…I passed through all that many times. I was a great *kanhokam* dancer. I used to dance, I danced in the street as far as the village of Bruce, and women followed…'

'However, I have come to see that that life is not a good life. I've realized it is not a good life because I came to the Praça. I saw other people, boys of my age; I saw how they were dressed…sometimes in the village people stay naked in the street. I have come to see that this is bad. I came to the Praça, I saw how the other boys were dressed (*é ta bisti*), and then I went to the village and I realized that it wasn't possible to live like that for a human being. I tried to move to the Praça, I used to sell mangoes at that time. I bought my clothes, I went back to the village, I wore my clothes in front of my friends, and they stared at me in admiration. Then I saw that boys like me went to school in the Praça, and I realized that was very good. I matriculated here in the Praça, selling mangoes to make some money. I put some money together and I enrolled. It was not my father who paid; it was not my mother. They did not help me; I made that effort all by myself. If I had not made that effort, I would still be in that sealed-off life (*vida empatada*) in the village. I have come to see that it isn't possible, I just had to move to the Praça, together with my colleagues. Then I saw my friends in the Praça as they 'fell in love' (*namoraba*), had one girl, and had *amor*. And I understood that it was right. When I passed to the 4th class, I moved here in the Praça, to stay together with my school-mates. In my opinion I think I have to make all the efforts to study and get out (*sai fora*) to free the people from those things. I will free my brothers to make them live in a truly transparent environment.'

'I think that the things of culture 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 run, 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 delayed just because here there are villages, there are things. We are delayed because people at that time refused to go to school. That's why things are delayed. People refused to go to school and followed the things of culture.'

'There are people without a job, people without anything…they just go and go in the streets. Someone steals. Those things of culture just have to be dropped. We get out, we see how things run, 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 better way to 'build' (*kumpu*) the Archipelago. Here it is very poor, we live in a very poor place.'

Modern binary oppositions

All the young men I talked to gave great importance to the fact that they were living in the urban context of the Praça, which they opposed neatly to the rural environment of the villages. Moving to the Praça, getting in contact with the urbanities, was described as a kind of revelation, and, of course, of liberation. Young people had to 'run away and stay in town', where they realised that life at the village 'was not a good life'. Life in town allowed young people to 'see how things run', to 'see different people (*odja pikadur diferenti*)', to 'get the rhythm of the world as it really is (*i toma ritmo di kuma, mundo está asin*)'. As Xarife incisively said, in the Praça 'you can have a life which is transparent to other lives'. This character of transparency to alterity and to the outer world was contrasted with the closeness of the life at the village, which was 'sealed off' and 'unfulfilling'.

Young men who stayed at the village 'didn't know anything' and didn't *have* anything but women and children. They didn't even dress properly ('people stay naked in the street'), leading a life that is not suitable for a human being. Villages and town seemed to be opposite sites in the moral geography (Thomas 2002) of the inhabitants of Bubaque; the contrast between the rural and the urban contexts, was the inscription in space of the modern dichotomies that oriented the lives of the young men of the Praça. The opposition between the villages and the Praça became a spatial symbol of the contrast between closeness and openness, delay and progress, tradition and cosmopolitanism. As Philip Thomas has noted, 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 and 376. See also Ferguson 1992, 1999).

The contrast between life at the Praça and at the village was also denoted by the adjective and substantive *branko*, 'white', identifying locally 'white people' (Westerners) but also emblematically, persons who had an urban behaviour and life-style. In Kriol, the expression *bai sedu branco* – 'go become white' – was used at the village when somebody adopted a way of life associated with the urbanities and with the institutions of the modern nation state: settling in town, having a wage labour, attending school, wearing 'Western' clothes[18]. This expression was often employed by the elders at the village to comment bitterly about the life of the young men residing in the Praça.

When asked to explain why the villages tended to remain closed in themselves, the boys complained that life at the village was dominated by culture, *kultura*. In their words, *kultura* (or *kusa di kultura* – things of culture) stood for the basic elements of the social organisation of the village, as well as for the ethical principles, the way of life and vision of the world attributed to the rural world[19]. The 'things of culture' were held responsible for the *atraso* (delay) in which was considered to linger the Archipelago. Consequently, the young men in the Praça strongly opposed the authority of the elders and refused to fulfil their social obligations towards them, claiming that these restrictions and impositions hindered their individual ambitions and development. 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.

The use of the term 'culture' by the young men of the Praça deserves our attention. Terence Turner (1991), reports that in the 80s the Kayapo Indians in Brazil started to use the Portuguese term *cultura* for their traditional customs. According to Marshall Sahlins (1993), this reflects the effort of the Kayapo to keep their autonomy vis-à-vis the state and the world around them.

[18] The idea of the 'West' has been heavily criticized in the last years. Using this term, I am always referring here to a product of local imagination, not to a specific 'place' with homogeneous cultural traits and historical background.

[19] Another term with the same meaning often employed was emblematically *tradison* (tradition), often used in the phrase *tradison di Bijagó*.

However, in the case of the young men of the Praça, the use which is made of the term *kultura* seems exactly the opposite, and totally in accordance with the opposition between local culture and development typical of modernisation and development theories. *Kultura*, for the young men, is not a declaration of pride and autonomy facing the intrusion of the state or of development agencies: rather it is a stigmatisation of the rural and backward world of the villages as opposed to 'development', *desenvolvimento*.

The young men of the Praça pictured themselves as *desenvolvido* (developed) in contrast with the population of the villages, which was stigmatised as backward, underdeveloped, uncivilized, blocked in an ancestral past. As a matter of fact, in various conversations, cultural traits associated with the village and which were still alive, were described as though they were an element of a far past. '*Antigamente* (once) – they started - it was like that…' removing disturbing and 'non-modern' elements of the present by placing them in the 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 epoch, doomed to disappear in order to allow development. In particular, it was the process of gradual acquisition of knowledge and status implied in the ascension through the age-grade system that was discarded as useless. The authority of the elders, who detained power and at the same time dispensed it in the village, granting the acquisition of status, was openly contested.

In accordance with their rejection of *kultura*, all young people in the Praça refused to utter a single word in Bijagó, speaking instead in Kriol, a language strongly associated with the urbanities. Even though most young men had spent several years of their life in the villages, and were therefore proficient in Bijagó, I never heard a single conversation between them in this language, which was used exclusively when interacting with the elders. Those among the young men I met who were already born in the Praça, attending school since their childhood and spending their formative years in a multicultural milieu, refused drastically to even learn Bijagó, claiming that it was totally useless in the 'developed' context of the Praça and for their life[20].

[20] The opinions of the young men seem to bring us far from phenomena of 'reworking' or 'reformation' of tradition others ethnographers described in other African contexts. I will rapidly consider here two significant examples. Eric Gable, who worked in Guinea-Bissau among the Manjaco in the 80s, underlined how a group of young people in the Bassarel region, though 'willing to be modern', did not reject 'tradition' as a whole, but rather tried to promote local customs and at the same time to negotiate with the elders in order to reform 'tradition' according to new exigencies and needs. This very logic of reformulation of 'tradition', maintains Gable, is itself an internal logic of Manjaco culture and not – as it could be supposed – an effect of 'acculturation' or 'colonization of consciousness' (Gable 2000; see also Piot 1999, for a similar perspective though in a different context). The Manjaco case is only apparently different from the one I am describing in Bubaque. The reformist attitude that the young members of the 'culture club' show, is not, as we realize, spread among all Manjaco youth, but rather an ultimate and limited reaction - as Gable himself underlines – to a process of social and economic change ('the broken land') that put at risk the very survival of the Manjaco community in itself: 'in short, «the land» had «broken» as youths either abandoned the village, or as the economic inequalities generated by emigration bred envious dissention' (Gable 2000: 196). The 'culture development club', though responding to local logics, emerged to 'repair the broken land' (Gable 2000: 196) in a situation brought about exactly by growing youth migration towards urban areas, a long lasting phenomenon among the Manjaco. Gable claims later: 'almost certainly the young leaders of the Culture Club

Youth against the state

Responsibility for the lack of development of the Archipelago and of Guinea Bissau, was not however, according to my informants, limited to *kultura* and to traditional authorities. Young men in Bubaque were also highly critique towards the state of Guinea Bissau. Even in this case, the categories of development and progress were also recurring in the critical discourse young men were putting forward against the government. The 'delay' of the country, its lack of development was directly linked to the incapacity of the authorities, to their corruption and selfishness.

As I have already underlined, my fieldworks in 2000 and 2002, took place in a particularly critical situation for Guinea-Bissau, ripe of political transformations and tensions. After independence, in 1974, and for about a decade, 'progress' and 'development' seemed at hand in the euphoria which followed the struggle for political liberation. Structural adjustments and political instability, however, determined since the mid 80s a dual move in urban Guinea-Bissau, quite common in neo-liberal regimes (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 98). On the one hand, the country opened itself to commodities, ideologies and media, while simultaneously unemployment and general economic weakness started to emerge. The increasing availability of signs and goods was accompanied by the general difficulty or impossibility to have real access to them for most part of the population: the breach between the actual and the possible (in the words of Brad Weiss 2002: 100) was widening. The 1998/1999 civil war - which impoverished the country and its inhabitants, almost completely destroying existing infrastructures - was propagandised to the people in Guinea-Bissau as a sort of liberation struggle from Nino's oppressive and authoritarian regime, as a step towards democracy and, hopefully, towards a glorious and fecund period of freedom, development and change. Nino Vieira – one of the original leaders of PAIGC who took the power in 1980 with a military coup deposing Luís Cabral – was accused of genocide, mass killing, torture and violence against his political opponents. Nino escaped arrest by fleeing to Portugal, but the charges were maintained, even though a real trial was never instituted, until in 2005, he was eventually re-elected president.

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are a minority. Most of their peers would rather escape the village for the city, and are as irresponsible and feckless as human beings tend to be anywhere and everywhere' (*ibid*.: 201). The wider context described by Gable then – though he does not focus specifically on it – seems similar under several aspects to the one I found among the Bijagó in Bubaque (where I worked exactly with those 'irresponsible and feckless' young men who decided to move to the town), but probably due to the limited effect young people's defections still had, nothing really similar to the Manjaco 'culture development club' has yet appeared in the context of the villages, even though, as I have underlined, the elders in Bubaque accepted modifying some aspects of 'tradition'. It is probably a question of time, and I cannot but agree with Gable that revisions and reformulations of 'tradition' are already part of the history of the communities of the islands, and that there are certainly local modalities of coping with socio-economic change: in this sense modernity and Europe are certainly not the prime movers of social change (Gable 1995).

The war obviously brought about destruction and death, but after the war, the transition to the new government was followed with great expectations and hope. *Guiné i na lanta*, Guinea will raise, people used to say. As is well known, the elections held in November 1999 and January 2000, gave the PRS (*Partido da Renovação Social*) the relative majority of seats in the Parliament, while Koumba Yalá, head of the PRS, was elected president of the republic in a climate of hope and enthusiasm that ended abruptly in a few months as people realised the incapacity of the government to cope with the crisis of the country. Disappointment followed immediately, bringing about a feeling of delusion and a sensation of unstoppable decay.

In fact, the war and the persistent political instability of the country heavily affected its economic performance, including the flow of aid. Widespread poverty in the urban classes was not only a factor of social instability, but was also generating scepticism about the new democracy and its capacity to cope with the future. As to young people, while the opportunities for young secondary school graduates to pursue higher studies decreased, the number of unemployed young people increased at an alarming rate as the state – the principal employer of the *diplomées* – was cutting off its expenditures. In urban areas throughout the country young people seemed constrained to remain young (dependent, deficient, single etc.) with no easy access to wages, marriage, and autonomous residence.

Young men in the Praça showed a critical and disenchanted attitude towards the government that they held responsible for the miserable condition of Guinea-Bissau: the boys of Bubaque accused the politicians of being incompetent in leading the country, of making their own interests with public money while leaving the people to themselves. 'They come here by plane, parade in the streets by car only when there is an election. Then they disappear, they abandon us' – people used to tell me.

Facing the inability of Yalá to restore a situation of political stability, young people were among the most ferocious critics of the State. They were all competent political commentators, informed about the parties and their candidates, as well as about the latest political news. They were also pessimistic about a real political change and disappointed by the general and continuing inefficiency of the state, and by the rumours of corruption. 'Things won't change, anyway' everybody kept telling me, '*Guiné I ka na lanta mas*'.

In this vein, Xarifo told me:

> You always hear 'I will be president to free the people', 'I will be president to free the land of the Bijagó'. But when you get there you just eat money. You don't remember about the people you left behind. This is how the politicians do in Guiné. I think this is not a good thing. When you say that you are going to free the people, I think you have to keep your promise. You have to do what you told to the people, what you promised to the people. It is just during the campaign that they come. They say 'in front of you all, if I will be elected I will support you, I will put a water pump in the land of the Bijagó, I will do this, I will do that…' But until now, until now there is not even one water pump. 'I will give you electric light', they say, but there is not even one street lamp here in Bubaque.

Beto, as many other young men of the Praça, voted for Yalá, but he was totally disappointed, and claimed that he would not vote for him in the next elections: 'He had four years to change the things and he did not do anything!'. He frequently remarked bitterly during our conversations that besides the culture of the village, what truly prevented development in Guinea was the government: 'They all steal and nobody thinks about the development of Guiné'. According to several young men in the Praça in fact, there could be money for everybody, but the corruption of the men in charge created an unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities: if on the one hand elders' authority and culture prevented local development, on the other the government, who could promote progress, did not do anything at all.

The young men in Bubaque found themselves in a difficult in-between situation: as they wanted to abandon 'tradition', they discovered that the structures of the state, which might give them a way-out, a chance, representing the 'modern form of power', were corrupted, inefficient, eventually antagonistic to their strategies. Nicholas Argenti (2002), describing the exclusion of the young men from the state in contemporary Africa, has rightly underlined the reproduction from the latter of those very logics of gerontocracy the young wanted to overcome through 'modernity'. Despite its nationalist rhetoric – with its keywords of progress and development – the state was unable to provide not only material help to young people, but also a different, 'national', Guinea-Bissauan identity alternative to the ethnic one they were trying to quit. The collapse of the state was in this sense the political evidence of the breakdown of the grand narrative of national progress and development, something young men had ceased believing in. The national alternative to the ethnic identities the postcolonial regimes tried to create *ex-nihilo*, seemed to have dramatically broke down: young men did not even *hope* in Guinea-Bissau. This should be acknowledged as an evidence of the failure of the postcolonial state in Guinea-Bissau not only to integrate young people in its project, but also to create a working national identity[21].

Appropriation, strategy, resistance

These recurring dichotomies young people used in their critical remarks, perfectly suited to that 'aesthetics of nice oppositions' proper of the ideological trope of modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993a: xii). How can we cope with this reproduction of the modernist and developmentist stereotypes? If modernity is an inappropriate theoretical tool, how do we cope with the fact that these notions still re-emerge in local contexts as interpretative tools for our interlocutors? Actually, discarding modernity as an appropriate analytical tool for understanding social and cultural change does not mean overlooking the powerful hold that this *idea* has in many popular fields of discourse. Several authors have underlined how we are often left with the local persistence of this category as

[21] On the disintegration of the nation state in Africa and the perverse effects of democratisation, see Naerman 2000, Nyamnjoh 2000. See also for a general criticism of the state, Escobar 2004: 226

an ethnographic datum to be explained in a specific local context (see for e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, Rofel 1992, Pigg 1996, Ferguson 1999, Schein 1999): notions of being and becoming modern, aspirations to become modern, confirms Knauft (2002: 4), are a palpable and potent ideology in many if not most world areas. James Ferguson, writing about urban workers of the Copperbelt region, observes on this topic that

> their conceptions of town and country [...] were not simply compatible with the modernist metanarratives of social science; they were a local version of them. Modernization had become a local tongue, and sociological terminology and folk classification had become disconcertingly intermingled in informants' intimate personal narratives. [...] Listening to informants discuss the contrast between 'the village' and 'the town', or 'African' tradition versus 'European' modernity, I often had the unsettling sense that I was listening to an out-of-date sociology textbook. It became clear that even if modernization theory had had its day at the level of social theory, it would still require to be attended to as ethnographic datum. […] that which once presented itself as *explicans* was beginning to make itself visible as *explicandum* (1999: 84).

In this vein, several scholars (see for e.g. Rofel 1992, Pigg 1996, Ferguson 1999, Schein 1999) recently proposed to consider modernity as a dichotomic social narrative that operates like a diacritical marker, which *produces* a real bipolar social milieu. According to Lisa Rofel (1992), 'we need to retain the sense of modernity as an ideological trope – both in Europe and elsewhere. More than a specific set of practices, modernity is a story that people tell themselves about themselves in relation to Others' (1992: 96). Modernity appears then to be primarily an interpretative device for social self-reflection. A similar interpretation has been elaborated by Stacy Pigg (1996), who claims that modernity is something like a worldview, 'a way of imagining both space and people through temporal idioms of progress and backwardness' (Pigg 1996: 163), a geography of imagination that creates progress through the projection and management of alterity (Knauft 2002: 18).

We cannot obviously ignore that commitment to a model produces real social facts. Modernity, as an inspirational idea, has social effects through the production of social identities. As Louisa Schein (1999: 363) has underlined, 'in producing such social identities in the name of the modern, modernist dichotomies become stabilized, superimposed on the messier social terrain in which persons are not easily sorted into binary categories'. As such, the idea of modernity provides clear orientation for social actors by giving easily understandable meaning to complex processes of social change.

Coming back to the young men of Bubaque, It is however difficult to avoid the dichotomy between passivity and resistance, structure and agency: either they are victims of our ideology of modernity, or they are victims of our modernity (as a real social process). Discarding the idea of modernization, the big issue we have to face here is to find a way to theorize the relationship between young people and the idea of modernity, overcoming the rigid and heavy notion of 'ideology' in its Marxian meaning.

The idea I would like to put forward is that we have to think about 'modernity' as an imported discourse tactically used by actors to maintain or subvert power relations; as an orientating notion in a fluid social world far more complex and intractable[22]. The opposition between rural and urban culture, as well as the associated perceptions of marginality and centrality the young men manifested in Bubaque, should therefore be thought of less as the reflection of a world split between tradition and modernity, but rather as a problem of tactical self-representation in a power saturated arena.

When young men are claiming to be 'developed' by contrast with the elders, they are making a strategic distinction within a world that is everything but split, a world that always changed, a context that is topologically and chronologically one context: Bubaque (and Guinea Bissau) in its contemporaneity. The idea of modernity works here for young men as a social shifter, a strategy of distinction, a 'cultural style' to use a term employed by Ferguson (1999). Without adopting an evolutionary approach assuming modernity as a step in social evolution, we should think about urban culture, the culture of modernity and development, as *an option* for young men. A resource to overcome the marginality they had to stand at the village and in the wider postcolonial context, a way to get rid of the constraints of the elders' authority and to criticize the government. This mirage of freedom and autonomy was probably one of the greatest appeal that the urban context had for young people that grew up in the village, and that decided to move to the Praça. Since opposition between generations is a structural element of village social organisation, youth/elder opposition, emerging as a salient element in the words of the young of the Praça, must be thought of as an articulation between the dualities implied in the idea of modernity and the village social stratification based on age[23]. In other terms, the contrast between youth and elders was not induced by the 'external' penetration of the myth of modernity: rather young people in Bubaque, in order to overcome their political, economic and cultural marginality, adhere to the narrative framework and to the symbols of modernity to attempt to build a contrastive and effective identity in the urban context, defying the authority of the elders and of the men in power and aspiring to attain new forms of power and social status.

Pondering on the bitter and contemptuous descriptions young men gave me of life in the village and of their aspirations to 'development', it could be even too easy at first to regard them as *tristes tropiques*, just another symptom of the advance of a global cultural imperialism that is destroying local orders. However, while acknowledging the historical legacies and the permanence of contemporary national and international discourses of development and modernity, as well as the

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[22] Obviously, the adoption of the conceptual dichotomy modern/tradition *produced* in Bubaque a sort of social dichotomization: the narrative of modernity, ideological and false though it can be, produces real social differences as those who adopt it claim their difference not only in discourse, but also in symbolic social acts like dressing or drinking, proclaiming different expectations and moral values, taking real decisions about their life.

[23] This is also the case in many other African contexts, see for e.g. Argenti 2002, Bayart 1984, 1989, Gable 1995, 2000

all too real marginal spaces global economy produces, we should reject the idea of overwhelming hegemonic forces as well as any kind of social and historical determinism, paying rather closer attention to the evidence of local interpretations, individual strategies and personal motivations hidden under the apparently familiar modernist project. While acknowledging the structural violence young men suffered daily on their skin (the endogenous and exogenous economic, political and cultural forms of domination which draw the geographies of contemporaneity in Africa), effectively limiting their agency, we should also recognise an in-between space, a space of partial self-determination and creative reformulation, revealing the resilience of individuality and a less rigid articulation between structures and subjects.

Our goal as social scientists is to provide an insight into how young people adopt, interpret, and express the idea of modernity, 'shifting attention from the *content* of social representations to their *use* in historically specific contexts' (Pigg 1996: 164), highlighting how - at the local and individual level - a web of meaning can be reformulated, adapted and used (Mills 1999: 98-99). As Lisa Rofel has underlined:

> For us to counter textualist readings of modernity that inadvertently privileges Western voices requires tracing how subjects absorb representations and what they do with them. Or in de Certeau's (1984) terms, we must pay attention not just to the production of discourses, but to their consumption and to how consumption, unexpectedly and in small ways, subverts the dominant order (1992: 107).

Though I am less optimistic than Lisa Rofel about the actual possibility of subverting dominant orders through creative consumption of discourses, I do agree that local social forces might have expressed and might express themselves *through* the idea of modernity – sometimes even *in spite of it*. Despite the powerful presence of the discourse of modernity and development in the local context of Bubaque, young people's individual agency always emerged clearly during my fieldwork, but not *against* the discourse, rather *through* it. In this sense, their agency must be thought less in terms of 'resistance to' than in terms of 'use of' discourses for individual or class purposes. There is no simple colonization of consciousness, but rather variations, appropriations of values/power for individual motivations.

The appropriation of the discourse of modernity is not a new phenomenon in any case, and its apparently homogeneous global mask hides a multiplicity of powers, forces, and conflicts. Even if the origin of the value of this social narrative can be ascribed to European expansion, international institutions, post-independence states, strata of local population, and government elites nowadays express their aspirations through the idiom of modernity, appropriating and domesticating the power of the ideological spell, using it as a global currency on the international market. A deeper look at recent history and at the uses of the idea of modernity in many contexts reveals a battlefield where contrasting forces re-draw lines of power according to their specific agenda and interests. If modernity retains a marginalizing and discriminating aspect, it also has an empowering aspect for those who seize its power in local dynamics, as the young men are attempting to do in Bubaque.

The discriminating language of modernisation seems here to open up discursive spaces of freedom and autonomy for the young men, giving them a 'voice' and becoming a critical locution inside local and national dynamics. The reinterpretation of some elements of the discourse of modernity by certain strata of the population and their use as weapons of social demands against traditional and postcolonial authorities is a phenomenon that has been described also in other contexts (Mills 1997; Kelsky 1999). Louisa Schein (1999), addressing the question of the 'particular location the modernizing project within a transnationally purveyed modernity' in post-Mao China, observes that 'people not only position themselves vis-à-vis modernity through multifarious practices but also struggle to *reposition* themselves, sometimes through deploying the very codes of the modern that have framed them as its others' (1999: 363). Others authors as well have discussed the way in which subalterns may effectively, and for their own benefit, draw on some of the latent oppositional categories and ideologies of Western culture (Nandy 1983; Comaroff 1985). Traits of colonial and modern ideology – originally discriminating whole cultural worlds – can be taken up, reconsidered and reinterpreted by specific social groups pertaining to those very cultural words, and used as anti-authoritarian tools and for individual social promotion.

In a seminal article, Sherry Ortner has pointed out that

> [T]he politics of external domination and the politics within a subordinate group may link up with, as well as repel, one another; the cultures of dominant groups and of subalterns may speak to, even while speaking against, one another; and - as Nandy (1983) so eloquently argues – subordinated selves may retain oppositional authenticity and agency by drawing on aspects of the dominant culture to criticize their *own* world as well as the situation of domination […] Resistance can be more than opposition (1996: 299).

Mary Beth Mills (1997) – writing on migrating Thai women – has rightly drawn attention to the use of dominant categories (like 'modern' and 'traditional') to counter local discrimination (on gender or age basis). Drawing attention to the same phenomenon, Karen Kelsky noted:

> The traditional/modern binary that was once a central mobilizing trope of anthropology, in which modernity is viewed as a 'robust and noxious weed whose spread chokes the delicate life' out of 'authentic' local and traditional meanings, has been revealed as inadequate to explain ways that discourses of the modern may be deployed oppositionally, for example, by those who seek access to modernity's language of rights against an oppressive state (1999: 229)

Despite its primary and fundamental link with Euro-American political dominion, the categories of modernity can be – and continually are - appropriated outside the West as political and social tools to sustain new forms of power. As Gilles Deleuze wrote, commenting on Nietzsche, 'in general, the history of one thing is the succession of the forces striving to seize it' (Deleuze 2002: 6). The narrative of modernity is continually appropriated by different social forces in local contexts, employing its promoting value in local power strategies. Modernity is also a language through which new powers (independentist leaders, postcolonial elites, competing political parties or urban youth) can express themselves and emerge.

Accordingly to this logic, the idea of modernity has been appropriated in Bubaque by the young as an emerging social force, reworked and used as a discourse of criticism (of the elders as well as of the state). The social changes which have been introduced and imposed under the name of 'development' (school, mission, money and wage labour, mass media…) by various agents (colonial and post-independence state, investors, NGOs, international institutions) have offered to some sectors of village communities – mainly young men, but not only - opportunities to contest (and subvert) power relations and status distribution, not only at the village level, but also at the national one. In this sense, I claim that the dualities of modernity must *also* be considered as a strategic resource in the hands of young men striving to attain new status and positions of power. According to this perspective, young men are not *made* modern by the 'discourse' of modernity: there is no total passivity or utter colonization of consciousness. Rather young men adopt some traits of local modernity because – given their subordinate social position – this is a powerful social strategy, a symbolic capital in Bourdieu's terms. Young men's modernist choices (local and specific as they are) are not therefore the direct – and unconscious - outcome of a hegemony: they are, locally, a tactic and a way of competing for power, an alternative chance of life[24].

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[24] See Vigh 2006 for a similar perspective on youth and soldiering in Bissau

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