

NARRATIVES OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE WEB¹

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The aim of this paper is to analyze the narratives that are regularly presented at a Word Wide Web forum about Guinea-Bissau. These narratives will be compared and related to "rumors," a communication type that I have defined elsewhere. This content will then be linked with a self-image of pessimism, characterized by the attributes of debility and poverty, developed since the XIX century in Portugal and its African colonies and later assumed as a characteristic of national identity after Guinea-Bissau's independence.

Certain types of narratives widespread in Guinea-Bissau have fascinated me since I first visited the country in 1987. They comprise a myriad of tales about the behavior of state officials, often illicit maneuvers by leading businessmen, lustful relationships among local celebrities, acts of extreme violence that disturb the course of everyday life, and a variety of speculations on illness and misfortunes. I have called them rumors and have paid particular attention to a sub-group I have called narratives of the nation (Trajano Filho 1993a). They narrate the deeds of two kinds of mysterious and feared beings. The first are called *sapa kabesa*,² creatures that roam all over the country cutting off people's heads to sell them in neighboring countries, where they are consumed during satanic ceremonies. The second creature is an undefined and inhuman stranger that ruthlessly abducts Guinean children and locks them in ship containers piled on the docks, thus turning the children as inchoate Guineans into a kind of export commodity ready to be shipped off to unknown places.

The identity of these fierce strangers is not clearly established, though its contours can be sketched with some accuracy. The *sapa kabesa* represents a modality of the Other that is associated with the Africans who wander about in Guinea, who have, for various reasons, been expelled from neighboring national societies. The nature of the violence that appears in rumor stories against Guinean children (imprisonment) and the place in which it

¹ This is a revised version of the paper read at the conference *Mirrors of the Empire: Towards a Debate on Portuguese Colonialism and Postcolonialism* organized by the Department of Anthropology and the Centre for Social Anthropological Studies (CEAS) of the Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa (ISCTE) in Lisbon, 29-30 March 2001. I have greatly benefited from the suggestions made by the conference participants. I am especially grateful to Alcida Ramos and Mariza Peirano for their critique and the comments made on a previous version of it.

² The spelling of Creole words adopted in the present text conforms to the orthography project proposed by the Ministry of National Education of Guinea-Bissau in 1981, published as an appendix in Rougé (1988). When I make direct quotation from other authors, however, there will be many deviations from what has been proposed. The paucity of a written literature in Creole and the lack of standardization among Creole languages partially explains the deviations.

occurs (the docks) provide the raw material with which rumormongers define the contours of a second kind of faceless stranger, one made in obvious reference to the European world.

These rumors endow their conveyors with the means to forge a collective unit of identification by setting and maintaining symbolic boundaries that frame a field of sociability. This has been accomplished through the creative weaving of terror-laden plots that focus on the building blocks of social identity – a fundamental relation that opposes an Us to an Other. Decapitated heads and their ritual consumption, along with the capture and sale of human beings represent terrifying expressions of themes in Creole culture that establish and maintain differences. By making use of polysemic and culturally motivated symbols such as the environs of the docks and the decapitated heads, they create a schism among those responsible for imprisoning children and the unfortunate victims themselves; those who cut off and consume heads and the victims of such a horrid act.

The docks provide a structuring trope for Creole culture because social life in Guinea's urban settlements has been centered on these vital sites. Slaves coming from the African hinterland first encountered the Western world on their way to America at the docks; most of the kola, indigo and clothes collected and produced in Sierra Leone and the Cape Verde Islands entered Guinea through the docks; and the docks were the strategic location from which European manufactured goods were dealt. Throughout the centuries, the Creole society that emerged on the banks of the Guinean rivers has reproduced itself through the activities carried out in these sites, where a certain category of social actors, the *grumetes*, have become the most typical members of the Creole world. Associated with the toils of ocean life, the *grumetes* were Africans who adopted Christian mores and a Portuguese way of life, playing the role of middlemen in the commercial exchanges between the European and Luso-African trader minority and the rulers of the traditional African societies surrounding the Creole villages. Moreover, the docks are also part of the symbolism of nationality. It was at the Pidiguiti docks that the dockworkers of Bissau started a fateful strike to increase their salaries on August 3, 1959. The Portuguese police promptly intervened and with unusual violence shot and killed dozens of workers. This incident, widely known in Guinea-Bissau as the "Pidiguiti massacre," has been mentioned so frequently by the country's political leaders that it can be safely characterized as one of the nation's founding myths. Semantically fecund, the docks still function as a powerful symbol linking the Guineans and the Europeans, as they are dramatically evocative of the violence that underlies the interaction between them, of the brutal commodification of slaves, and of the constitutive space of Creole society and its typical members. The rumor about the imprisoned child describes a fissure that engenders an identification between those who

spread it and the main persona of the drama, a child, a socially inchoate person, someone who does not yet possess the keys needed to decode and understand the values and symbols of his community, someone who has not completely woven his own network of relationships and who runs the risk of not being able to do so. Imprisoned inside a ship container and about to embark, he is on the verge of having the bonds that socially identify him definitively severed.

Since the fifteenth century, travelers, chroniclers, traders, servants of the Portuguese crown, and priests all left reports on practices of cannibalism and human sacrifice among the peoples of the Upper Guinea Coast, and these stories remain meaningful even after the drastic changes brought about by colonialism and postcolonialism. These reports tell us about the existence of such practices as an institutionalized form of sociality that takes place either within a single society or between different African societies, or even between generic Africans and Europeans.³ In these accounts, Africans are both the perpetrators and victims of cannibalism. Although Europeans are primarily portrayed as victims or as third parties who intervene in the custom, there are some accounts that remind us of something curiously known but calculatedly neglected: these Europeans also played the role of man-eaters in cannibalistic relations.⁴ The real author of the *sapa kabesa* rumor is the collective consciousness (*la conscience collective*) of Creole society. Its members are of a mixed descent. As historical actors, they are concerned with ritual murder and the consumption of human body parts, thus assimilating the meanings ascribed to this culture-bound practice through the various cultural traditions that constitute their society. In colonial times, they regarded cannibalism from a European perspective. It was a powerful symbolic strategy for Creole society to conceive of its ties with African traditional societies as a relationship between two ambiguously separate entities. Regarded by the “civilized eye” as utterly strange and abhorrent, cannibalism represents a symbolic emblem of the radical differences between the indigenous peoples of Guinea-Bissau and the Christianized members of the Creole world. According to an example from the seventeenth century, cannibalism turns its practitioners into repugnant and inhuman beings insofar as it pollutes them, taking from them essentially human attributes such as cleanliness and the ability to speak (Dornelha 1977: 100). The *sapa kabesa* stories currently express the uneasiness

³ Ritual murder and the consumption of human body parts are elements of a pan-African symbolism that deals with power, thus occurring in contexts well beyond the limited sphere of Creole culture. Among the reports from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries focusing on the Upper Guinea Coast, see D’Almada (1946: 8-10, 67, 77-82), Fernandes (1951: 38, 70, 78), Coelho (1953: 40-41, 169), Dornelha (1977: 100-116), and Faro (1991: 179). Menezes (1928), Lyall (1938: 249-258), Carreira (1963: 109), and Pélissier (1989, II: 232, 234-248) refer to cannibalism and human sacrifice during the first half of the twentieth century among various traditional societies of Guinea-Bissau. For contemporary examples that do not deal with Creole culture, see Comaroff and Comaroff (1999), Brinkman (2000), and White (2000).

⁴ For historical examples, see Cadamosto (1956), and Turner (1993). For contemporary examples, see White (2000).

that characterizes Guinean relationships with foreign Africans as a consequence of the contemporary political contexts. These rumors now emphasize the troubles the members of the nation face in their dealings with non-members. Guineans thus become the target of a violent act that severs their very being – having their heads cut off by a ruthless Other. Like the imprisoned child, the *sapa kabesa* victims are portrayed as incomplete, nebulous beings: their bodies lie in the nation's territory while their heads are consumed in ceremonies carried out in another country. Just as the head must be attached to the body to form a whole human being, so the person in Creole society is conceived as a relational being whose essence lies in his/her bonds to the society as a whole. The person is always conceived of in reference to his/her own social group with a locally defined identity. Without this inextricable sense of belonging the person is nothing but a logical aberration – a foreigner in his own fatherland. The anonymity of being an individual who is simply the equal of all of his countrymen – someone without the local bonds that bridge his way to external institutions – is a terrifying prospect to most Guineans. To have one's head cut off by a foreigner means, in fact, for a member of Creole society to sever his primordial links to his own group, thus becoming a mutilated and vulnerable person at the mercy of the unpredictable violence of an alien will.

These narratives of the nation share a common structure despite surface differences. They portray the extreme violence that sets apart persons, forging units of identification, the positive attributes of which, though vague, revolve around the ideas of incompleteness and fragility. However, it is only through their negative features, that is, through the establishment of differences, that these units acquire a more precise form. The perpetrators of the mutilating acts are beings who constitute a close and unavoidable alterity; they are the others who live near us without truly belonging to our group. They are either the foreign Africans who wander about the countryside or the venturesome Europeans who are constantly arriving in Guinea “to make Africa.”

Rumor: an elusive phenomenon

In what follows I will be dealing with yet another group of narratives that I consider to also belong to the broad genre of rumors. They also deal with Guinea-Bissau as their general subject; however, unlike the other types already examined, these focus explicitly on Guinean identity. This narrative set is composed of texts written by various authors whose identity is often concealed and protected by nicknames. They are posted in the Web forum about Guinea-Bissau developed by Portugalnet, which maintains a homepage

in the World Wide Web with forums directed to lusophone countries in Africa, Asia and America.⁵

This forum receives an average of ten messages daily, the content and extent of which vary a great deal. Brief text postings of a few lines as well as multiple-page long analyses about the social and political situation of the country – along with the various reactions this writings prompt – constitute the bulk of the matters discussed at the website. Short notes announcing events (dance parties, commemorations, films, dance and music shows) involving Guineans also appear in the forum. Messages of a social nature are also common, such as Guineans attempting to contact relatives living abroad or at home; people looking for the whereabouts of friends or acquaintances; and, above all, people seeking to meet other people.

It is difficult to deal ethnographically with the issue of the dissemination and the range of rumors because they somehow resist a close inspection. It is virtually impossible to follow them up from genesis to demise. A single rumor leads to a profusion of slightly different versions along the circuit of its dissemination, each one constituting of an autonomous rumor. The narrative structure of the rumor changes as new characters come in, as old ones disappear, as new contents are introduced, as previous interpretations are abandoned, and as the narrative's plot is revised. To treat a rumor as a transaction between individuals who utilize it for the purposes of impression-management and in order to protect and further their interests – as Paine (1967) does with gossip, or to circumscribe it in the notion of individual networks, as in Epstein's approach (1969) – are surely effective ways to limit its range and to describe its mode of dissemination. However, what these analytical efforts actually accomplish is to arbitrarily demarcate the anthropologist's analytical field rather than establish the actual range of a rumor. As a manifestation of society's murmurs, rumor and gossip are so diffuse and spread out in various directions⁶ as to render their delimitation practically impossible.

On the other hand, the Web rumors with which I will be dealing treat the novelty of hypertext, a mode of written communication that differs pro-

⁵ The forum about Guinea can be reached at the following address: <<http://www.portugalnet.pt/encontro/guine>>.

⁶ Rosnow (1988: 14-15), Kapferer (1990: 15, 177-178) and Bergmann (1993: 45-70) differentiate gossip from rumor: the former recounts vicious acts by individuals associated with breaches of the moral code that circulates exclusively among primary groups, and whose efficacy is largely due to its conversational style; the latter has to do with impersonal issues that circulate through the whole society or its larger segments, that spread in all directions like sound waves or wildfire, and whose strength dwells in their sense of urgency. Unlike these authors, I make no effort to distinguish these as separate narrative genres for there is no such differentiation in the Creole culture of Guinea-Bissau. Regarding the issue of rumor dissemination, it is worth recalling Bergmann's approach based on a comparison between two German categories, *Gerücht* (rumor) and *Geruch* (smell). According to his point of view (1993: 70), the specific meaning of each category is derived from a single semantic field that points to a common mode of dissemination.

foundly in important ways from printed writing. Compared to printed forms and even to oral messages conveyed by radio and television, hypertext has a greater capacity of reproduction than other mass media texts, and at an extremely low cost. Unlike conventionally transmitted texts, hypertext can be easily handled by anyone who has access to a computer, and its dissemination tends to evade most of the mechanisms of social control. Hypertext is akin to oral communication because both privilege the conversation model. Internet chat rooms and intranet webs provide a good example of this association. Operating in real time, these virtual spaces are conceived of as conversation rooms where written messages imitate verbal exchanges. To maintain the dynamic of the oral exchanges though constrained by the limitations of textual written dialogue, visitors to these sites have developed a style of their own: short sentences written in an extremely loose code and an excessive use of *emoticons* or *smileys* – a short sequence of keyboard letters and symbols that mimic facial expressions – to express emotions, states of mind, and physical sensations.

What might be a nearly unlimited audience is constrained by factors such as the written form of Web rumors (despite their similarity to oral narratives), the technical requirements for Web use, and access to computers. For these reasons the medium is limited to literates who are familiar with computer language and who have the means to access the World Wide Web. The actual audience the Web rumors reach is composed of people who visit the forum about Guinea, a site mainly visited by Guineans living abroad. Most seem to reside in Portugal, but Guineans living in various places in the United States, France, Holland, Italy, Brazil, Sweden, Cape Verde and Australia also visit regularly. The site was conceived for discussion in the Portuguese language and, in fact, most of the posted messages are written in this idiom. However, messages in French, English and Creole can sometimes be found.

Cyberrumors were collected from June 1998 onwards, after General Ansumane Mané, the Armed Forces Chief of Staff, rose up against the government headed by President João Bernardo “Nino” Vieira. Having been dismissed as Chief of Staff amidst accusations of gun running to rebels in the southern Senegalese province of Casamance, Mané reacted by declaring himself the head of a military provisional government, demanding the removal of President Vieira, and calling for free elections. Isolated in the presidential palace, President Vieira requested the support of neighboring countries – Senegal and Guinea-Conakry – with which he had signed agreements of military cooperation. Within a few hours of Vieira’s request, Bissau was invaded by thousands of foreign soldiers.

What justification do I have to treat these messages as rumors? What is it that connects all these stories and makes it possible to classify them

under a single category? What, in fact, is a rumor?

Rumor and gossip are elusive phenomena that evade the analytical gaze of anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and psychologists. They are everywhere in society and have immense repercussions when properly transmitted. We recognize them whenever they reach us though it is very difficult to analytically circumscribe them. Their enormous variability has challenged analysts most of whom have been driven to develop an obsessive concern with issues of definition (see Peterson and Gist 1951: 159). The elusiveness of this phenomenon and the inconsistencies found in several attempts to formulate a theory of rumor that claims a universal validity have led me to privilege strictly the ethnographic dimension of it. The best answer I can offer to the question about what connects such a large number of reports and anecdotes, and what made me classify them under a single class, is therefore ethnographic in nature rather than theoretically inspired. I assembled the material in a single category because people in Guinea-Bissau think of them as belonging to the same genre of communication. I called them rumors because I believe this is the best rendering in English of the Creole categories *bokasiñu* (little mouth), *banoba*, and *banoberu*, which designate the narrative genre and those who spread them. *Banoba* and *banoberu* designate respectively the genre and its practitioner. *Banoba* is a Creole word formed by the agglutination of the Portuguese noun *nova* (news) with the inflectional prefix *ba* that marks the plural in several West African languages. *Banoberu* is a polysemic term that designates the person who spreads rumor and gossip (the rumormonger), the professional who transmits the news, the journalist, and even the medium through which written news is transmitted, that is, the newspaper. *Jornal di tabanka* (village newspaper) is another term that designates rumor and gossip, sharing with *banoba* and *banoberu* the association with the mass means of communication.⁷ There are many other words and expressions in Guinean Creole used to refer to the rumor genre and those who spread them. For instance, the tattler and the rumormonger are called *kucidur* or *kin ki ta kuci* (the one who whispers). The semantic association between *kucidur* and *bokasiñu* comes from the fact that both equate rumor to orality.

I have presented elsewhere (Trajano Filho 2000b) the reasons why I argue that the hypertexts posted in the Web forum about Guinea can be classed together with rumors under the same narrative genre. Here, I will not go into all the details of my previous work; suffice it to say that with rumors

⁷ In the Creole context of São Tomé and Príncipe – a social formation that is historically and structurally related to the Creole society of Guinea-Bissau – there is also an association between rumor and the mass means of communication. In São Tomé, rumor and gossip are indistinctly called *rádio boca a boca* (mouth to mouth radio) or *rádio BB*. Similarly, the informal and popular talk about ordinary matters that occurs in the streets of various cities of Francophone Africa is known as *radio trottoir*. See Trajano Filho (1993b) and Seibert (1999) on the case of São Tomé.

these texts share: 1) the open-ended, performative and dramatic structure of dissemination,⁸ 2) a communication dynamics patterned after the model of a conversation with turn-taking; 3) a relative disregard for the issue of individual authorship; and 4) some orality features such as the use of verbs and phrases that are typical of rumors (“say,” “speak,” “shut your mouth,” “babbling,” “idle chatter,” “talk about,” “say in a loud voice,” among others), 5) topic instability associated with a greater dependence upon context, and 6) a speech style that favors additive coordinate clauses instead of subordinate constructions, the excessive use of epithets and conventional formulas, and the operation of rhetorical devices such as repetition and redundancy that help to keep speakers and listeners on track. Moreover, they are experienced according to a schemata of interpretation marked out of the ongoing flow of events as an autonomous and discrete genre (*banoba* as news) that is keyed from a basic frame (*banoba* as rumormongering).⁹

Web rumors

In December 1998, someone nicknamed Simões posted a message to the forum remarking on the tragic incidents in Guinea. Referring to the rulers of the various countries involved with the military rebellion, he remarked:

They are all murderers, and even Chirac ordered Senegal to plant anti-personnel mines in Guinea-Bissau.

In February 1999, Anonimato suddenly appeared in the Web forum with the following message about the President of Guinea-Bissau:

Nino has a special room for killing acts ... Nino wakes up at three am to have human flesh for breakfast.

Nino ta nheme pecdur (sic) *cru* (Nino eats raw human flesh).

Sacur balola (sic) (Help, shrine)!

In October 1998, the Web forum was filled with emotionally laden messages about some social categories used by Guineans to think about their own country. On October 29, Umaro Baldé posted a note titled *Criston Matchu – o Grande Vencedor* (Macho Christian – the Great Winner) in which he mused over the conflicts between people classified as *Lope*, *Fundinho*, and *Criston* as well as about the ease with which someone named Criston Matchu showed up in the Web forum fomenting tribalism among the visitors to the

⁸ The performative nature of rumor has also been highlighted by other authors working independently from each other. See, for example, Bhabha (1994: 200-203) and Das (1998).

⁹ It is evident that Goffman (1986) is the major source of inspiration here.

site.

In a long message in Portuguese, Fidjo de Guiné elucidated the meaning of some of these Creole words:

Christians are individuals of Papel descent who, during colonial times, were baptized as Catholics and had, perhaps, done the fourth grade of elementary school, and had taken the Holy Communion.¹⁰

These individuals have no pride in their ethnic descent and don't identify themselves as belonging to an ethnic group. These individuals are not truly Christians because... they practice religious ceremonies deep in the forest... rituals that include dog killing, and drawing circles of blood.

(...)

I urge the *Fundinhos*, the derogatory name by which Christians call people of the Islamic faith (because of the clothing): Don't worry about these Christians; if they show no respect for their own descent and have no pride in their ethnic ancestry, how could we expect them to show any consideration for other ethnic groups?

Felismina Mane Ferreira replied to Criston Matchu, calling him a stupid tribalist. She said:

I ca fundinho qui tchama senegalis pa é luta contra no povo, mas sin quil cu ta tchamadu di civilisadu (It was not a Fundinho who called the Senegalese to fight against our people, but one who is called civilized).

Pabia anos Guineensi no ista fartu de civilizadus suma presidenti cuta misti bindi no terra. Corda Criston catchur, pabia abo e catchur grandi (For we, Guineans, we are fed up with civilized people like the President, who is always trying to sell our country. Wake up you doggy Christian, because you are an absolute dog).

Uiiii sacana abo qui camufuladu, i Nino frontadu qui mandau pa cumfundi no i miti desarmonia na no metadi. Guine i di nos tudu, Civilizadu oh, Djintiu oh, Branco Guineensi oh, Fundinho oh, Lope oh (Oh, oh, you disguised ass-hole; it was the outrageous Nino who sent you to puzzle us and bring disorder to our ranks. Guinea belongs to all of us: to civilized, to indigenous, to white Guineans, to Muslims, and to *Lope*).¹¹

Another participant joined the polemics with Criston Matchu. He remarked:

Guineenses corda badja disna anti bi (sic) bu padidu. I tchiga tempu de no bari pes de Nino tchamidur, bafadur, muntrus... assassinu, kabalidu, ku manga di utrus nomis. Viva Tudu Guineensis. Abaixo Tribalistas. Bapur Kana N'Kadja (Guinean people were already awake even before you were born. It is time to dispatch Nino – the drunkard, the rapist, the monster, the killer, a person of no account and many other names. Long live all Guinean people. Down with the tribalists. It's sink or swim).

¹⁰ Papel is the name of the major ethnic group of the Bissau Island, where Guinea's capital is located.

¹¹ *Lope* is a Creole word from Banhum origin for the loincloth worn by young men. By a process of semantic extension it began to derogatorily designate the group of people who use this kind of clothing.

Fidjo de Fundinho Orgulhoso referred to the *Lope* in this way:

*Nhu lope cheio de fora. Abo i ca matchu kunu que bu tene. Fidjo de baranda alto de strada de Santa Luzia na tempo militar tuga. U mame sustentau na moca peloton intero. Criado de cabunca cumedor de fijos congo cu catchupa, sin sapato. Nhu lope cheio de fora, bindidur de carne de pecadur na fera de Bande', antropófago filho de uma puta (You shitty Lope.¹² You are not macho, a pussy is what you have. Child of a brothel at the Santa Luzia road from the days of the Portuguese military presence. Your mother nourished you by fucking a whole platoon of soldiers. You are a servant of Cabunca (derogatory for Cape Verdean), a glutton who eats beans with *catchupa* (a Cape Verdean dish), a shoeless person. You shitty Lope, seller of human flesh at the Bandim market, man-eater, son of a bitch).
... *Seu criston matchu cu lope cheio de fora. Bai fede la na matu junto cu santchu bu companher (You Criston Matchu and shitty Lope. You should go to the bush, stinking there with your fellow monkey).**

In order to conclude these disputes among these social types the likes of whom would make up the Guinean nation in the Web forum, I present an excerpt from a message written by Fundinha. She had been criticized by Sem Nome for having replied to Criston Matchu's insults with the same lack of civility that distinguished the latter's messages. She disliked Sem Nome's remarks and, on October 28, 1998, she sent him a note in which she called him "stupid, uneducated and raceless." Fundinha went on arguing with a speech full of code-switching:

For sure your great-grandparents or your grandparents were servants of the *tugas* (short for Portuguese), hence your name, you stupid idiot. You are a coward who licks Nino's stinking boots... Surely you sleep with pigs, chickens, and drink firewater and *ataia dju* (cashew wine). *Bu sussu suma porcu i bu ta fedu suma coco i hora cu bu ta tchami cana di noti bu ta missa calça riba di bu mindjer cu ta missa i cata laba si cussa... Ma anos fundinhu no tem igieni i no limpu. Bu sibi me cuma qui no ta tchama bos me? Enton si bu ca sibi, alin na conta no ta tchama bos "RAÇAS PRETUS E SUSSUS"...* (You are as dirty as a pig, and you stink like shit, and whenever you drink at night you wet your pants above your wife, who also wets herself and doesn't wash her private parts. But we, Muslims, we have hygiene. Do you know how we call you? If you don't, I tell you: we call you a race of dirty blacks).

She concludes her acidic diatribe with apologies to all her Christian friends and to all sons of Guinea who are not tribalists. Yet to those who think Guinea belongs exclusively to them, she curses because

anos tudu i guineensis i mas um bias na Guine no cunsin utru i no sibi tudu quin qui quin (we are all sons of Guinea and in Guinea we all know each other, we know who is who).

¹² The phrase *cheio de fora*, which I render as "shitty," characterizes the subject as a self-satisfied person who believes that he is worth more than he is really worth, a nasty and snobbish person.

Bai-pa-Tanaf criticizes the variety of Creole used by Fadea in a message he had addressed to Criston Matchu. This is how Bai-pa-Tanaf rebuked him:

Fadea bu criol ca bali nada. Abo i ca fundinho nao. U tene um cadencia de palavras que ta parce Senegalis na tenta papia criol. I muito certo que abo i um agente secreto de Senegal na no metade (Fadea, your Creole is not worth a damn. You are not a Muslim. Your word cadence looks as if you were a Senegalese trying to speak Creole. It is very likely that you are a Senegalese secret agent in our ranks).

This is Fadea's response:

Nha ermon e dias pior cussa cu pudi tchaman i senegalis. N'ca ten tambí nada quelis e nunca n'ca tchiga di vivi na Senegal ou utro "tchon francis." Nha criol i di Bissau... Lembra cuma criol i ca nim um lingua inda. N' misti fala cuma por enquanto i ca ten inda nim um estrutura gramatical cu ta regulal (My brother, in these days the worst thing you can do is call me Senegalese. I have no deals with them and never lived in Senegal or any other French colony. My Creole is from Bissau... I remind you that Creole is not truly a language yet. I mean that for the present it has not even a grammatical structure that sets apart what is right and what is wrong).

This interchange is related to another favorite topic that often appears in the Web forum and can be grasped from a complex exchange of messages about the qualities (or lack of them) of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Friend, in a message written in English, rebuked a forum participant for having said that the Minister was inept. He argued that "the actual government is young (less than a year)," that would take many years to rebuild the country, wrecked by the military rebellion; and that the government could not fulfill the goals expected by the forum participant because Guinea is a poor country that needs international funding. A third person whose nickname was Utru Friend came in the forum in support of Friend's point of view. He argued that the Minister had already earned a living before his appointment because he had applied well what "he had earned with his modest job." In another round of this message exchange, a fourth person reproached Friend for having written his message in English and had identified himself as a "100% Guinean." According to this critic, this revealed an unacceptable measure of snobbery and exhibitionism.

After saluting a forum participant who demanded more civility from those who were posting messages, Rumba made a series of derogatory remarks on the role played by the Cabral brothers in the history of Guinea and grumbled a resigned lament:

The idea of sending *cabuncas* [Cape Verdeans] to school and Guineans to the bush [during the national liberation war] created hatred and rancor between these two people and encouraged the school of syncretism; that is why we come up with the *mufunado* [accursed] Nino Vieira: a snake so poisonous that

Guinea will never get rid of its poison.

Hence we could never... have any pride in belonging to this country; what awaits us for the rest of our lives is this miserable fate of having always to face up to a group of incapable and ambitious rulers. This will be the burden we have to bear for being Guineans.

In another rumor, which attempted to undermine the prestige of a distinguished Creole family, “Conhecido de Insultado” defended the Gomes brothers from a long series of malicious accusations, asserting that “their parents taught them to live a modest and honest life.”

More directly linked to the theme of humility, though carrying some ambivalence, Apili Dju voiced a challenge in October 1998:

Senegal i ca ninguin. Se balenti, pabia di que ca pudi caba cu se guerra na Cassamansi. Oh i lebecementi oh i troça. No mostra e' catchuris di Senegal cuma no ca mama sussu. Mindjeris di Guine no ca mamanta no fidjos liti sussu (Senegal is nothing. If it were so courageous and powerful why was it unable to stop the Casamance war. It is either disrespect or derision. We are going to show these Senegalese dogs that we don't eat filth and that Guinean women don't nourish our children with dirty milk).

Si no tira Tuga na terra anta i Senegal que nin ca pudi durante 16 anos caba cu um grupo di rebeldes di se terra. Ca no seta é lebecimento, pabia terra i di nos, no ca djuntal cu Senegal. No piquinino, ma no cana seta lebecimento (If we expelled the Portuguese from our country, why couldn't we do the same with the Senegalese, who have been unable to defeat a group of rebels in their own territory for 16 years. We don't allow disrespect, for the land is ours, we don't join with Senegal. We are a tiny little country, but we don't swallow disrespect).
No tira e' djintius di no terra, es limbiduris di mon hora que na cume (We are going to expel from our land these savages who lick their hands whenever they eat).

Most messages posted on the Web forum are primarily and explicitly concerned with Guinea as a collective unit of identification. Like the rumors I have previously analyzed, these messages also represent genuine narratives of the nation, for they create and recreate the nation whenever a visitor shows up in that Web site. They display what it is to belong to such a nation and provide those who read the postings with a schemata for interpretation that frames and organizes the experience of being a member in a unit of belonging in which the boundaries are symbolically established through violent acts that create a cognitive and emotional discontinuity. The sense of absurdity that such violence evokes acts to mute the aura of verisimilitude of these narratives – that is, when the violent acts are no longer perpetrated by frightening and anonymous beings like the *sapa kabesa*, but are done by people holding legitimate authority positions, like the French and Guinean presidents. The sense of veracity is, however, rhetorically maintained with the excessive use of narrative details such as the reference to the type of mines President Chirac ordered to plant in Guinea, the way President Nino liked to eat human flesh

or the time and the place where he used to slaughter his victims.

The concrete actions through which these narratives represent the affirmation of discontinuities on which identities and differences are founded are basically the same as those reported in oral rumors. They are violent actions perpetrated by an Other who tears Guineans apart from themselves by transforming them in incomplete beings. In oral rumors this was accomplished by beheading people and separating children from their parents. In Web rumors this is accomplished in a variety of ways. It can be done by placing mines that maim bodies: a powerful, malevolent, well-defined, and named Other – the French President Jacques Chirac – has Senegal, a close but hated other, bury mines that will kill the Guinean people. It can also be done by assigning dehumanizing attributes to particular groups of individuals who represent otherness by portraying them as unusually disproportionate, monstrously grotesque, and lacking in sociability. This is exemplified by the *Lope's* mother who has an exaggerated sexuality, who sleeps with a whole platoon of Portuguese soldiers; by the *Lope* himself who practices cannibalism and trades in human flesh; by the representation of President Nino Vieira as a cannibal, monster, drunkard and rapist; by the accusation that someone nicknamed Sem Nome has no race (that is, as a person beyond the pale of membership that might provide meaning to his social being); by the Christian, who drinks too much, has no control over his basic physiological functions, and wets his pants; by the Christian's wife, who also urinates incontinently and does not wash her private parts; and also by the Senegalese, who are depicted as boorish people who lick their hands after eating filthy things. Narrative devices that equate Guineans with animals are yet other means of representing them as the Other. This process usually occurs in the stylistic mode of cursing, which imparts onto those who are cursed the attributes intrinsic to the animals used in cursing. This is done so forcefully that the former end up incorporating the qualities of the latter. Such an equation can also be established by a metonymic relation that creates a continuity between the targets and the vehicles of offence. Hence, the proximity or the actual contact between *Cristons* and pigs, chickens or cows symbolically transfers to these persons the attributes of these animals.

Unlike oral rumors, in which the violence that forges the image of Guineans as partial beings is perpetrated exclusively by a monstrous, merciless and foreign Other with no sense of sociability, rumors posted on the Web do not confer as much importance to the origins of those who cause the suffering – as they may be either from Guinea itself or from other countries. The French and the Senegalese are the favorite foreigners to take on the role

¹³ The narratives frequently assign this role to Cape Verdeans as well, on account of the rivalry that exists between Guinea and Cape Verde. For this discussion, however, I treat the tensions between these peoples as a form of internal opposition.

of this violent other.¹³ This is particularly meaningful when one takes into account the fact that these messages were posted at a time when Guinea-Bissau was invaded by thousands of foreign troops.

However, most of the violence that creates the discontinuity on the basis of which social identities and differences are founded is perpetrated by an internal Other. Web rumors evoke the nation by displaying such internal differences as manifested in social categories like *Fundinho*, *Lope*, *Criston*, *Burmeju*, *Civilizado*, among others. The basic message they convey could be stated as follows: these categories are not fruitful units of identification because they present serious deficiencies in their ability to define collective identity. Notice that they are always portrayed in negative terms. In other words, Web rumors acknowledge internal differences only to point out that they are deficient in creating meaningful units of identification – especially to those who live abroad, as is the case of most of the forums visitors. This lack of viability can be phrased either positively or negatively. Such exhortations as “we are all Guineans,” “in Guinea we all know each other, we know who is who,” and “Guinea belongs to all of us...” illustrate the positive pole. Perhaps an even better example could be taken from the heading of a long message exchange: *Criston Matchu – Ami i fidju di Guine (Sim Atributo b= burmedju, c= criston, f= fundinho ou qualquer utro), Ponto Basta [Criston Matchu – I am a son of Guinea (without any attribute: M= Mestizo, C= Christian, Mu= Muslim or any other) Final Stop]*. Negative examples can be found in the emotionally laden descriptions of the disparaging features of each of these categories, in the defamation and insults levied at President Nino Vieira who was simultaneously cast in the roles of *Criston*, *Lope*, and *Civilizado*, and, above all, through the exhortation of the conventional slogan (usually written in capital letters): *ABAIXO O TRIBALISMO (DOWN WITH TRIBALISM)!*

A nation of *koitadis*

Guinea-Bissau is a curious case. Here the peril of tribalism is not materialized by the identification of individuals with any ethnic or tribal units. In the examples given above, there is not a single reference to the word “tribe” or the phrase “ethnic group,” except for the message posted by Fidjo de Guiné written in Portuguese, with evident didactic purposes. The kind of tribalism that seems to threaten the visitors at the Web forum has as its central linguistic reference categories associated with dress and religion. Thus *Lope* refers primarily to the loincloth worn by people of different ethnic descent. *Fundinho* himself calls attention to clothing – the large pantaloons worn by Muslim men. *Criston* is a native category that points to a religious differentiation and, secondarily, to a social differentiation, without any ethnic content whatsoever: it refers to individuals who live in Creole urban settlements, exposed to Por-

tuguese practices and morality to a greater or lesser extent.

I suggest that this kind of tribalism without a tribe as its primary reference reveals to a certain degree the success of the Portuguese colonial project that was conceived as a civilizing mission. In Guinea-Bissau this colonial project gave birth to a specific social type: a voracious Creole society that, like a black hole, sucks up everything that lies around it. I have recently dealt with colonialism, Portuguese style (Trajano Filho 2000a), noting that it was founded on a late nineteenth-century representation of Portugal as a weak and humble colonial Empire. I claim that such a style of colonization represents a remarkable manifestation of the power of the weak, for it has been successful in inculcating in colonial subjects the attributes of humility and debility as expressions of a social identity marked by a high degree of what historian Philip Curtin (1972: 243) has called relative deprivation – a situation in which the incongruity between the people’s legitimate expectations and the hard facts of life produces ubiquitous sentiments of suffering and disappointment. This is part of the ethos of Creole culture as revealed by conventional expressions such as *N’sufri!* (I suffer!) and *jitu ka tene* (there is no way out) – moaning expressions of resignation and deprivation which, when used in excess, become a way of life.

Koitadesa is the cultural value that best depicts this mode of life. It is the creolized and contemporary version of experiencing the world as if it is inhabited by fragile, poor, modest, but well-mannered and astute persons. Its meaning is derived, on the one hand, from the Portuguese representation of the nation and its overseas colonies as inhabited by weak peoples; on the other, from the symbolic idiom, ubiquitous in West African cultures, that positively values shrewdness and subtlety. These are the qualities that empower their holders to defeat the brute force of presumptuous individuals, as narrated in tales about how the sagacious hare defeats and chastises the stupid and greedy hyena. Focusing on *koitadesa* provides Creole culture with an effective way to reflect upon the country and its people. *Koitadis* are dramatis personae who populate various genres of Creole narratives that always contemplate the possibility that the weak will triumph over the powerful. They feature traditional fables, comic books, requests to governmental authorities, and pamphlets that contain accusations and political intrigue. However, the prototypical *koitadi* is, perhaps, Guinea-Bissau itself. The expression “Guinea is poor” belongs to a repertoire of general expressions used by the country’s leaders to mobilize people in support of development policies, to dissuade opponents who aspire to rule, to rebuke their critics, to ask for international assistance, and even to justify the misuse of such aid.

Koitadesa can be regarded as operating in several fragments of Web rumors. For example, it is manifested when Friend emphasizes the fragility and poverty of the nation which needs international funding and the debility

of the less than one year old government; when Fadea ponders on the nature of his mother tongue, stressing the inchoate status of Creole “which is not truly a language yet.”¹⁴ *Koitadesa* is manifested in the weakness and suffering of Guinean people who “bear the heavy burden of having incompetent, corrupt and greedy rulers,” and bravely put up with a cannibal president and thousands of invading Senegalese soldiers. The integrity and humility of young members of leading Creole families who were educated “to live a modest and honest life,” and the critical comment on snobbery and exhibitionism, are other ways in which this cultural value is manifested. But, above all, this value appears in the image of a tiny nation, defiant and proud that cannot accept disrespect – *koitadesa* of being notwithstanding.

Creole culture rises above a pessimistic colonial situation where the distant presence of Portuguese colonial authority no longer has the power to impose itself directly upon the native population. In ruling the colony, the Portuguese authorities had to constantly appeal to a special group of social actors to mediate between European and African cultural worlds. They found these actors in the fortified settlements built on Guinea’s swampy riverbanks. While playing this intermediary role, Creole society was never able to reproduce itself autonomously; it had, therefore, to incorporate peoples, practices and values from the colonial contexts that engendered it. Thus, most Guinean identity discourses crafted within the nation’s borders make obligatory reference to something outside of it. Relationships between Guineans and strangers are the basic components of the sentiment of relative deprivation and of the *koitadesa* ethos. Foreigners – whether European or African – have been the preferred actors to be cast in the role of brutal others who roam the countryside producing suffering, cutting heads to be sold in Senegal and imprisoning children to be exported as commodities in a grotesque repetition of a tragic past. The oral rumors I have previously analyzed represent the internal efforts to think about the totality of the nation indirectly and implicitly by establishing discontinuities that focus on the violence done by these fierce and foreign Others against inchoate and weak Guineans. In turn, the Web transvestite rumors represent the efforts made by Guineans living abroad to conceive of the nation through an emphasis on internal differences. In these rumors, the perpetrators of the violence that makes Guineans incomplete, fragile, modest and poor people are the internal others who are materialized as *Lope*, *Fundinho*, *Criston*, *Burmeju*. With an enormous evocative and sentimental force, both kinds of rumors create and recreate the unit of identification as an imagined community, and they do this *qua* rumors, a communicative genre framed in the orality mode. Both corroborate the analytical

¹⁴ As I struggled to learn the Creole language during the early stages of fieldwork, my Guinean friends encouraged me by saying that I would learn it quickly since it is a kind of poorly spoken Portuguese.

fruitfulness of Benedict Anderson's conception of the nation (1983), but they also highlight the extreme Eurocentrism that grounds his proposition. After all, national communities can also be imagined by the shared orality of rumors; they can be imagined without the mediation of print capitalism.

I conclude with a final and paradigmatic example. In an exhortation characteristic of the *koitadesa* ethos, someone nicknamed Ntori Palam proclaimed in February 1999: *Basta de Hipocrisia* (Enough of Hypocrisy)!¹⁵ He sorrowfully argued that the evils that were then afflicting Guinea were to be blamed on all Guineans rather than on the country's rulers only. He left the forum without hope, offering a scholarly salutation: *Desta minha Guiné-Bissau imaginária criada no exterior, vai um abraço* (From this imaginary Guinea-Bissau of mine, created abroad, I give you all a hug).

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¹⁵ The choice of this nickname has enormous evocative power. In the 1980s Manuel Julio published a few issues of a comic book that became very popular among the young people of Guinea's urban centers. Its main character is an anti-hero named Ntori Palan who plays the role of an astute, wicked and unscrupulous rogue always involved in misdemeanors of deception and money extortion from gullible and poor people (*koitadis*). Ntori's popularity suggests a strong, albeit sarcastic, identification with the group of young and educated Guineans. In this way Ntori fits with the role of this class of people quite well.

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Este trabalho visa analisar um tipo de narrativa que é regularmente veiculado em um fórum da Web sobre a Guiné-Bissau. Estas narrativas serão associadas e comparadas com rumores, um gênero comunicativo que abordei em outras ocasiões. O conteúdo da análise será então referido a uma auto-imagem pessimista, caracterizada pelos atributos da debilidade e pobreza, desenvolvida desde o século XIX em Portugal e suas colônias africanas e posteriormente assumida como marcadora da identidade nacional da Guiné-Bissau.