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Colonisers, crises, and Carnival: criticism and opposition in colonial Guinea-Bissau, West Africa

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This paper will shed light on the role the performance of carnival and its associated rituals played in the colonial encounter – notably in times of crises – in then Portuguese Guinea, as Guinea-Bissau was officially called until 1974. Carnival emerged first in a handful of European trading posts where creole communities had arisen since the sixteenth century. In the beginning I will develop a theoretical framework that will be followed by two examples. The first case to be dealt with illustrates how creoles – serving the European colonisers as auxiliaries – lampooned colonial politics through carnival and its performances of inversion and critique in the 1880s. Basically, they were accentuating the weak position of the early, yet ground-gaining colonial state by accusing the colonisers of betraying the colony's interests to the French. The second example is based on an analysis of archive material and eye witness recollections from the late colonial period, the 1960s and early 1970s. By then, carnival – still largely restricted to the former trading posts and centres of creole culture – had turned into a platform of open and mimetic protest against ongoing colonial presence and repression by the Portuguese, confronted by rising nationalism dominated by creoles. In both cases creoles acted as if they were the actual masters of the country, highlighting their role for nation-building.

The findings result from one year's fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau, completed in May 2007, as part of my recently completed Ph.D. project "Creole Identity, Interethnic Relations and Post-Colonial Nation-Building in Guinea-Bissau".

Theory

Carnival is apparently popular because carnivalesque performances address certain human and social needs. Carnivalesque events allow for a departure from daily routines, e.g. by cross-dressing or caricaturing and critcizing politics and society. Carnivalesque rituals aim at a dialogue with everyday life, thus disclosing the discrepancy between real and carnivalesque life. By displaying abnormal behavior, aberrant costumes, and mummery, individuals can metamorphose into other characters and slip into new roles. This allows for new, unusual opportunities of communication, because the anonymity granted by costumes and masks can serve to disguise one's own origins, social status, and personality Mezger (1980: 220–223). Therefore, carnival has been described as an expression of an upside-down world. The escape from daily routines meets people's social and psychic demands, since it paves the way for expressing social grievances. Hence, it is not astonishing that throughout history, carnivalesque events have been repeatedly forbidden or restricted at different times and places (Mezger 1980: 205–211; 2000: 116, 129–131; Braun 2002: 10). As I will reveal below this was also the case in Guinea-Bissau when social and political discontentment challenged the colonial state's rule, indicating severe crises and challenges for colonial domination. Far from being limited to a remote past, however, and even after being temporarily domesticated by the state after independence, the Bissau-Guinean carnival has, in recent years, regained its critical stance toward politics and has reverted to its role of being a ritual of rebellion against political and socio-economic crises.

Carnival and Colonial Crises

Carnival has become tremendously popular throughout Portugal's former colonies, including Guinea-Bissau, where the festival has been adopted by the local population (Crowley 1989a: 143–144, 146–147).

An early account of carnival in Guinea-Bissau dates from 1888. On the one hand, the following episode that was described in a colonial document shows how carnival served as a platform to criticize the colonial policies and politics,

while on the other, it shows that carnival was closely associated with urban, creole settings.

The following carnivalesque episode was described in a confidential telegram sent by the governor to the Portuguese Overseas Ministry (Telegram dated February 20, 1888, Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (AHU), Fundo da Guiné, Livro 102). In this telegram, the author complained that a big masquerade had taken place in Bolama – the then capital of Portuguese Guinea – on Friday, February 17. The masquerade was composed of local soldiers under the leadership of a local commander—all of which were presumably Cape Verdeans. The writer accused the locals, in general, of wanting "to govern this province." The text also alludes to the Franco-Portuguese commission that had been installed to accurately delimit the Portuguese's colony's borders with French Senegal. According to the descriptions in the telegram, the crowd parodied French officials and caused general disorder. As early as Pancake Day on February 14, the report continued, a masquerade had emerged from the casern and passed in front of the government house without permission. The crowd had carried along a banner bearing Portugal's national colors and the word "commission." This was accompanied by a safe that bore the inscription "Money, a lot of Money" and a big box labeled "Cape Roxo"—a reference to the cape that marks the Senegalese–Bissau-Guinean border. A buoy labeled "Mind the Buoy" was followed by five masked figures representing members of the commission. According to the report, the falsework had reportedly been constructed by local soldiers. Finally, the telegram accused the indigenous population, in general, and the local soldiers, in particular, of being traitorous. This did not come as a big surprise, given the fact that creole government agents were already showing a nationalist stance in their protest against the Franco-Portuguese agreement, and Europeans were being repeatedly targeted by their sarcasm and insults. In response to this telegram, the trading posts's administrator was instructed not to permit any masquerade that had not been previously granted a license.

Since the turn of the century, however, the colonial state extended its influence and sought to control the social and cultural life in Guinea-Bissau. Especially after the effective colonial seizure of the territory was completed in the 1930s, the New State regime attempted to restrict the people's freedom. In

the 1950s, the clandestine nationalist movements were increasingly, vehemently advocating self-rule and independence of the autocratically ruled colony. These movements were usually led by creole urban dwellers. In January 1963, the war of independence began with an attack by the leading independence movement. As early as the mid-1950s, however, the colonial state must have started to become increasingly nervous about these developments, which threatened the state's sovereign authority. From this it follows that the colonial state must have perceived carnival as a potential means to exert some control over nationalist activities and their indoctrination. According to one informant, carnival seemed to have been banished from Bissau's oldest part in about the 1950s. Further legal measures were taken in 1961, with the governor issuing a decree aimed at curtailing the *entrudo*. The decree stipulated that "carnivalesque events" had to follow a number of restrictions: Alongside uncontroversial clauses, such as the prohibition on blocking traffic or using dangerous or inflammable objects in public spaces, the regulation also issued a ban on "[…] masks and other disguises which occult or garble the bearers in a form that does not permit to identify her/him rapidly." Moreover, the "[…] usage of personal costumes of administrative authorities, the army, navy, police, customs, Portuguese Youth, and the fire brigade by individuals who do not belong to these institutions" was henceforth forbidden. Finally, the performance of any dance or entertainment event, whether in public or private spaces, needed a special license from then on (Portaria no. 1301 of January 18, 1961, in Boletim Oficial da Guiné Portuguesa, supplement [January 18, 1961] to no. 2 [January 14, 1961]; my own translation). Subsequent to these regulations, one of my informants' friends was arrested during a carnival in the 1960s because he had worn a military police uniform as a costume. It seems that the street carnival was eventually entirely banished from Bissau's centy centre, from where it moved to nearby neighborhoods (cf. Rambout Barcelos et al. 2006: 183).

Many of my informants remembered the *entrudos* – as maskers used to be known – of that time. These *entrudos* were actually individuals, usually elderly men, wearing big masks. At times, the *entrudo* was referred to as a *homem morcego* (bat man) if he was dressed in ugly, messy, black clothes. These masked figures were feared by some, especially by children, for the *entrudos*

used to scare minors by growling and beating them with *chicotes* (whips). In time, the *chicote* came to be rarely used by the *entrudos* because the instrument was popularly associated with the colonial police. A contemporary witness opined this was also because some papier-mâché masks caricatured members of the Portuguese government and their local colonial representatives. According to this informant, the Portuguese colonial authorities had already lost control over carnival by 1970. Another informant recalled that the masked figures also wavered back and forth, uttering cries that sounded like "boom-boom-boom." According to him, these carnivalists occasionally clashed with Portuguese soldiers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although some European residents used to come down to the quarter in order to take photographs of this street carnival, the majority of the Europeans remained in the city center, an informant recounted.

Conclusion

Both in the early and the late days of effective colonial control of the territory of present-day Guinea-Bissau, carnival reflected crises of colonial power and domination. Carnival of both the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century can be regarded as turning the daily social order upside-down, thus dialoging between everyday and carnivalesque life. The reversed social order was, in the first case, illustrated by the soldiers that criticized corruption by leading colonial officials under the disguise of carnival celebrations. In the second case, the upside-down order was not only illustrated by disguises in general, but by carnivalists dressed as soldiers and *entrudos* in particular. The *entrudos* illustrate very well the multilayerdness inherent in carnival for they can be associated with *kankuran* and *kumpó* initiation related maskers that are common in the northern and eastern part of Guinea-Bissau. In both these rituals, the personality of the masker remains secret while violence symbolically comes to the fore. Just like the *kankuran* and *kumpó* masked figures that hunt children in order to punish them, the *entrudo* whipped children and scared adults with impunity because the mask had adopted an identity beyond the mask wearer's personality. As in the earlier case studies, the multilayered nature of the carnival implies that the *entrudos* can be interpreted according to a variety of meanings. Hence, the *entrudo* can be also regarded as a parody of colonial

police officers, who used to whip the actual or suspected delinquents with *chicotes*. Apparently, it was the latter interpretation that led the oppressive, fascist colonial regime to suppress carnival since the 1950s. In the late 1880s the colonial authorities appeared to be quite helpless when faced with that kind of critique. Only after 1910 the colonial state managed to effectively control the population and its activities. In the 1960s and early 1970s the colonial state had already lost its credibility. Incapable of reform and openness the colonial state closed a “social relief valve” which attempted to deny the population certain socio-psychological needs. This and the inability to deal with critique finally fueled resistance and opposition, contributing to an escalation of the late colonial crisis, leading to violent decolonization in 1974.

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