

**Disintegration and Resilience of Agrarian Societies in
Africa - the Importance of Social and Genetic
Resources.**

**A Case Study on the Reception of Urban War
Refugees in the South of Guinea Bissau**

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Global Forces
and Local
Life-Worlds

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Disintegration and Resilience of Agrarian Societies in Africa – the Importance of Social and Genetic Resources: A Case Study on the Reception of Urban War Refugees in the South of Guinea-Bissau

Marina Padrão Temudo and Ulrich Schiefer

In 1974, Guinea-Bissau finally won its independence from Portugal after more than 10 years of armed warfare led by the PAIGC.¹ It was one of the last African countries to attain national sovereignty. In 1980, a military coup headed by a former guerrilla leader brought a nationalist faction to power, bringing the country into international headlines. Another attempted coup, in 1998, set off a military conflict that soon turned into a full-scale civil war, involving troops from neighbouring Senegal and Guinea-Conakry. Fighting began in the capital of Bissau, as the rival factions tried to win control over the city, but soon spread to the countryside. More than 200,000 civilians were forced to leave the town and to run for their lives. While the urban elite fled to Senegal and Europe, the population of the urban periphery could only turn to the countryside.

Such events indicate the instability of political institutions² in the face of disintegration of society. The stealthy advance of these processes of disintegration should not deter us from recognizing them as the deeper cause of the decay of social and political institutions. In Guinea-Bissau, these instabilities cannot be attributed to external political and military interventions,³ which had led to civil wars in Angola and Mozambique, two other former Portuguese colonies in Africa. In Guinea-Bissau, the most important external influence on society was development cooperation, the effects of which remain however beyond the scope of this article. In our study, we try to understand some of the mechanisms which link an African central society, which depends for its economic reproduction on the global society as represented by the dissipative economy of development cooperation, to the agrarian societies it tries to dominate politically. We try to understand furthermore how the disintegration of the central society into warring factions aggravated by international intervention of different kinds

influences the economic and social reproduction of local interethnic networks of agrarian societies and how these societies cope with the additional pressures put on them by rival factions of the central power elite who compete for control of the influx of development aid by manipulating social identities derived from the ethnic matrix.

Our case study⁴ allows us a more limited, but at the same time more focused view of the interethnic network of agrarian societies in a remote province of Guinea-Bissau, which was exposed to additional stress by the spillover effects of a disintegrating central society, torn by a civil war with regional dimensions. Even this remote area was pulled into the maelstrom of disintegrating societies. In the first phase of the crisis, the rural societies under observation could manage the extra burden placed on their already precarious subsistence by the waves of urban refugees and could save these internally displaced people from a worse fate. However, the partial loss of economic, social and political cohesion they suffered as a consequence was a very high price to pay. The consequences of this 'crisis' will only become evident in a few years' time. It will be aggravated by the manipulation of ethnic factors by rival factions of the central society, which is already visible today.

These agrarian societies are formed on the basis of ethnic distinctions, living in interethnic networks which use natural resources in both complementary and competitive ways. However, their functional principles are already being only partially respected. The explosion or collapse of the central society will not leave them unaffected and may bring internal ethnic tensions into open conflict.

Agrarian societies in Africa – i.e. societies whose reproduction rests on a mostly rural economy – are exposed to different processes of disintegration following different rhythms and different paces. Wars cause sudden destructions, which can be easily observed but often hide underlying processes of a much slower – and often stealthy – nature. However, their medium- and long-term consequences may be much more destructive. We need to distinguish, on the one hand, between processes of destruction that cause damage to the productive capacity of the societies but which do not impair their potential for reconstruction, and, on the other hand, processes which cause an irreversible decline in their capacity of social reproduction.

Sometimes, social sciences seem to ignore the fact that social reproduction encompasses the sphere of production. When the central society enters a downward spiral, the peripheral agrarian societies are also drawn downward. In countries like Guinea-Bissau, the agrarian societies are the only social organizations with a productive orientation and an autonomous production, which do not depend on the secondary dissipative economy of development aid (Schiefer, 2002). The majority of the population still gains its livelihood in rural economies and mostly from agricultural activities. To study decisive changes, therefore, requires an agronomic perspective.

In this study, we analyse the disintegration of agrarian societies in southern Guinea-Bissau from the perspective of social reproduction,

distinguishing between internal and external dimensions. By 'disintegration', we mean the loss of the internal capacity for social reproduction. This process can be observed in the dismantling of social institutions normally guaranteeing both: social reproduction and the maintenance of the economic potential. This can also be seen in the loss of the capacity to reconstitute social relationships after breakdowns. This phenomenon is accelerated by the erosion of the spiritual dimension.⁵

The reduction of the functionality of social institutions lowers the potential of a society to socialize the younger generation. This is accompanied by and shown in the rise of deviant behaviours such as alcoholism and robberies, which are often taken as indicators for early stages of processes leading to a state of anomie.⁶ Where accelerated population growth coincides with the failure of social institutions to fulfil their proper functions, social disintegration is accelerated and may lead to over-exploitation of natural resources.⁷ The loss of the external reproduction potential – which does not necessarily mean the disintegration of agrarian societies – becomes evident when observing the loss of trust in relationships between agrarian societies and the central society and between different agrarian societies. This can lead to the isolation of affected agrarian societies, which may be enforced from the outside or may result in a deliberate withdrawal. Under certain conditions, agrarian societies may even be able to stabilize their capacity of reproduction by dissociating themselves from a political, economic and social environment which is characterized by the breakdown of the central society.⁸

We hope that the analysis of strategies of resource use employed by local populations and the relationships they entertained with the internally displaced people from the urban areas, whom they welcomed and sheltered, may contribute to an understanding of the capacity for reconstitution inherent in agrarian societies, and provide some insight into the behaviour of rural societies – particularly those organized in different ethnic entities – in response to crisis situations. We used different long-term research methods which were complementary. In addition to the four largest ethnic groups, which form the majority of the population (the acephalous and mostly animistic [but also the Christianized] Balanta, the acephalous but Islamized Nalu, the Islamized Fula and Sosso), the study also included the Islamized Tanda, Dajacanca and Mandinga, as well as the mostly animistic Papel and Manjaco. The research adopted a 'social actor' perspective as developed by Norman Long (Long and Long, 1992).

Historical Review

For centuries, the societies under consideration here had been under consecutive heavy attacks from external forces. Centuries of slave wars, military conquest by the Portuguese,⁹ enforced colonial export production, a comprehensive modernization drive initiated by the colonial power after

the Second World War – which ended in the anti-colonial war – the war of independence, which caused a decline in the agrarian societies, postcolonial efforts to reconstruct the economy by means of central planning, and, at last, the liberalization of the economy and the overabundance of development aid offered by governmental as well as non-governmental organizations – all these large-scale historical onslaughts damaged these societies in various ways which defy quantification. One way of substantiating this claim is a close investigation of their strategies of agricultural production. Already weakened by these assaults and two consecutive bad harvests, the agrarian societies had to put up with an onrush of urban refugees driven by war. The way they handled this additional burden allows us to understand crucial dimensions of their resilience and potential for reconstruction because only in crisis situations do societies activate their underlying survival mechanisms which are normally invisible.

Social Resources: Solidarity as a Fundamental Principle of (Inter)Ethnic Organization

The present case study investigates agrarian societies in the area of the Nalu of Cubucaré, the *regulados* (chiefdoms) of Cadique and Cabeledú. Comprising only 1142 sq. km, the peninsula of Cubucaré hosts a complex interethnic network with complementing and competing ways of using natural resources. These interethnic relationships form the basis of the hitherto largely peaceful coexistence of various agrarian societies belonging to different ethnic groups. At the same time, they interlink and separate these societies socially, economically and politically.

The Nalu were the first to settle in the peninsula, followed by consecutive waves of immigrants of different ethnic origin. The most important of these groups were the Balanta, the Fula and the Sosso. The ethnic matrix still is the fundamental principle of social organization.¹⁰ Before the successful 'pacification' by colonial conquest, there was a spatial separation of the *chão* (ethnically uniform areas of settlement). All groups still acknowledge the primacy of the ethnic group which first settled in a specific area as the basic principle of their mutual relationships. Thus, the peninsula, as well as the larger region of Tombali, continues to be called the *Chão de Nalu* – the 'area of the Nalu'. At present, everyone is allowed to move freely in the region.

Relationships of solidarity and reciprocity regulate the rights and entitlements of individuals. People operate within the most fundamental social unit of the *djorçon* (unilateral descent group). The smallest units of social organization are *morança* (compounds), which usually comprise more than one nuclear family. Schiefer and Havik (1993: 22) define *morança* as a unit of co-residence, based on family relationships, taking the 'aggregate family in a wider sense as the centre of a complex aggregate of relationships which relate economic aspects of production, distribution and transformation to

political and societal aspects (such as descent groups, clans, gender and age groups) and finally to the cosmological dimensions of a society'.

Every *morança* is founded through a ritual, which requires the consent of the lineage and contains one or more *fogão* (fireplaces), the number of which is not determined by the number of nuclear families resident in this *morança*. It is the *fogão* which represents the basic unit of the organization of production, processing, consumption and distribution. Individuals simultaneously belong to more than one group within a multidimensional network of relationships. All members of a *morança* take part in communal activities which guarantee social reproduction of the main subgroups (matrilinear or patrilinear families), basic cells (*morança* or *fogão*) and extended units (lineage and village). Furthermore, each individual performs economic activities for his or her personal goals. Depending on their prestige and negotiation skills, heads of families (*chefe de morança* or *chefe de fogão*) try to integrate common labour efforts of individuals or subgroups (Temudo, 1998).

Their authority dwindling, heads of the *morança* no longer manage to prevent seasonal or permanent migration of the young, thus allowing these subgroups to become increasingly autonomous. This autonomy covers longer and longer periods of time, as well as an increasing number of different activities. While the Balanta tradition strictly prohibited any activity other than rice production and cattle breeding (e.g. trade activities), it is quite common today that some of their children emigrate or devote themselves to trade. Thus, Balanta parents have begun to support the education of their children at schools.

In an attempt to avoid the youth's long-term emigration, the elders of the Islamized ethnic groups have begun to grant rights of individual production, autonomous marketing and even autonomous activities in the area of magic to the youth – which used to be strongly defended privileges of the older generation – allowing individual ownership over any income derived from these activities. Another strategy of elders is to lower the age when young people can marry. The elders can only do this by paying the dowry of the first and sometimes the second wife of their sons. As this strategy does not keep young men from emigrating after having founded their families, women and children are often being left behind and have to suffer a condition of economic dependence. Moreover, the *morança* lose their inner cohesion and their capacity to mobilize labour and generate income which can be invested for the benefit of the community.

Within the Islamized ethnic groups, the migration of men overburdens women as they are left with the sole responsibility for survival of families, while men, whose labour is necessary for food production, are absent. The situation of the Balanta is different. Here feeding the family with rice is the responsibility of men – concomitantly with a clear separation of tasks within the gender division of labour. If a man fails to honour these obligations, his wives have the right to leave him – which they frequently do (Temudo, 1998: Vol. 1–348).

The dwindling of the elders' authority also becomes evident in their failure to punish deviant behaviour, such as theft or robbery. This has led to a noticeable increase in the number of crimes. The rigorous traditional organization of the Balanta into age groups allowed an easy mobilization of labour within the *morança*. A grown-up male could only marry after going through certain rites of passage (*fanado*), the timing of which depended to a large degree on the economic situation of his *morança*. The independence war and emigration so damaged social norms and the authority of the elders that today there are many young men who are not initiated but who marry and set up their own *fogão*.

Decisive elements which contributed to the decrease of the working capacity of male Balanta were changes in alcohol consumption. Previously a prerogative of elders and restricted to special occasions (van der Drift, 1990: 102), there is nowadays an uncontrolled increase in the consumption of alcohol, particularly among the younger generation and fostered by the increase in the cultivation of cashew.¹¹ The forced exchange of rice for cashew nuts which was promoted by the government increased the difficulties to mobilize Balanta youths for rice production. They turn instead to the production of cashew which requires less physical effort and is not as dependent on the weather as rice production. The production of cashew offers an additional source of income to women, who take to cashew wine making. Thus, the introduction of the cashew culture reduced incentives for rice production.

Formerly, village people were organized into groups according to age and sex (*mandjuandade*), which were important institutions of socialization and mutual aid. Informal mutual aid groups existed as well, usually made up of friends, who were men or women of the same age. One after the other, all the *morança* were provided with necessary labour by the *mandjuandade*, irrespective of the number of members of a *morança* who belonged to the working group. After harvest, the *mandjuandade* was paid in rice, which was used to organize a festivity for the group.

Only the Tanda have kept this form of solidarity alive. Today, all *mandjuandade* demand an improved diet, i.e. meals including either fish or meat, and, in addition, tobacco, cola nuts, alcohol (Balanta) and money. Nowadays, only advance payment of Balanta work-groups can ensure a timely start of work in the fields – which few people can afford before the harvest.

Despite fundamental changes in the organization of mutual aid for work in the fields, the principle of general reciprocity (Lévi-Strauss, 1949; Sahlin, 1974: 193) continues to define intra- and interethnic relationships. This reciprocity includes presents of food, loans of produce and money in times of crisis, offers of bed and food to travellers, a hospitable reception of friends and relatives, gifts of magic objects which protect their bearers against evil of all sorts, gifts of traditional medicine and help at work. Hospitality is unlimited in time and is never refused to relatives and friends, even if the family has not enough food for its own members. A guest is not

obliged to participate in the work of the host family, while being free to pursue economic activities for his or her own benefit. When guests leave, members of the family will offer them gifts, usually food, seed or plants.

In these rural societies, it is unthinkable to demand payment for rice a relative asks for during harvest time, even if a family's stock is insufficient to cover its own needs. For this reason, producers who sow before the others and plant a high percentage of early maturing varieties, produce more for the community than for their own family. Quite often, they find themselves in situations where they have to ask for rice themselves to bridge times of shortage between harvests.

As gifts and loans are embedded in a network of solidarity and reciprocity, it is very difficult to claim repayment of loans from family members or friends, particularly when only small amounts are concerned – even if accumulated small amounts may reach considerable proportions. There are observable trends, however, which indicate a weakening of relationships of reciprocity (Temudo, 1998: Vol. I: 401). While different strands of solidarity and reciprocity are woven into the interethnic network of relations in all directions, the lack of a comprehensive consensus between the observed societies allows for a considerable number of conflicts. The main conflicts occur between Balanta and Nalu in the management of natural resources, while in the area of livestock management conflicts may surface between the Balanta and all other ethnic groups. In Cubucaré, the Balanta are the only cattle breeders. After independence, they ceased to herd their cattle properly, which led to permanent squabbles because unsupervised cattle break into fields and damage crops. According to customary law, anyone may seize and kill cattle caught when damaging crops. Depending on the damage done, he or she may keep part or even all of the meat. Frequent attempts by Balanta to change management rules of natural resources are another source of conflict, which concentrates in two areas. According to the contracts between Balanta and Nalu, which were negotiated at the time of the Balanta immigration and sealed by spiritual entities, Balanta may use only low-lying land close to rivers for the cultivation of mangrove swamp rice according to their own techniques, which include the construction of dykes. It was with these dams that they created fields separated from rivers, and virtually opened these areas for agriculture. Today, many Balanta want fields for rain-fed crops in the forest areas, too. Quite often, they simply occupy land without performing the mandatory rituals for the opening up of land for cultivation, which were traditional prerogatives of the Nalu. A second cause of trouble is palm-wine tapping, which ultimately leads to destruction of the African fan palm forests (*Bozassus aethiopum*), the trunk of which is highly valued for the construction of the roofs of the houses. This tree has almost completely disappeared.

After the democratic multi-party elections in 1994, a political clash of interests between the mostly Islamized groups – who supported the PAIGC – and the Balanta became apparent, as the latter, almost without exception, voted for the Partido da Renovação Social (PRS), a party organized along

ethnic lines. Election results made the PRS the main opposition party against the winning PAIGC. As their presidential candidate, Nino Vieira, won the separate presidential election by only a very small margin, suspicion of election fraud was widespread and the Balanta's tempers rose against the followers of the governing party. In Cubucaré, the Balanta conducted a kind of cold war by temporarily refusing direct exchange of rural products with other ethnic groups and by increasing the price of rice. These changes in the intra- and interethnic relationships find a correlate in the increasingly risk-prone changes in cultivation strategies which can be observed over the last decades.

Genetic Resources: Diversity as a Strategy for the Reduction of Insecurity

The resilience of the agrarian societies and of the interethnic network is based on the culture of rice – which in turn depends on the availability of genetic resources – and the rights to access to and control of other natural resources. Several reasons sustain this argument. While other societies developed their instruments (machines, technology), or produced comprehensive systems of work organization that allowed for a large-scale transformation of nature (irrigation works, transport infrastructures), the real productive potential of the societies studied here is only partially dependent on the organization of work. While the Balanta's organization capacity is sufficient to build and maintain irrigation systems of several villages, their traditions set strict limits on the level of technology and the organization of work: strict customary laws prevented the Balanta from engaging in any economic activity beyond the cultivation of mangrove rice. Because of these restrictions, the only field where these societies possess a potential for an increase in production and a better adaptation to changes in their natural and social environment is to be found in the culture of rice, the most important food crop in Guinea-Bissau since colonial times. We therefore take a closer look at this produce, and especially at the selection of rice varieties, which plays a crucial role.

The transformation of the Tombali region into Guinea-Bissau's main rice-producing area was a consequence of the Balanta immigration during the 1930s, which brought mangrove swamp rice cultivation (*bolanha salgada*) into the area (de Carvalho, 1949: 312). Before this period, rice was grown in rain-fed cultivation (slash and burn) and in valleys flooded by rain-water (*bolanha doce*). Rice production systems follow an ethnic matrix. Leaving present dynamics aside, they can be described in a simplified manner: traditionally, the Balanta are cultivators of mangrove swamp rice, while the Fula and Tanda are cultivators of rain-fed rice. Employing one of these farming systems in varying proportions, the other ethnic groups can be placed between these two extremes. While mangrove rice cultivation still allows, as a whole, the production of a marketable surplus, today rain-fed

production is in a crisis. The Cubucaré region still produces surplus rice. But while some producers sell their surplus outside the region, more and more families inside the region fail to meet their yearly requirements in rice from their own production. However, the period of undersupply is limited. Food shortage is mitigated by a complicated system of interethnic exchange mechanisms, which include an exchange of work as well as of other products for rice and a system of loans compensating for the specialization.

The Balanta concentrate on rice production and cattle breeding, while Islamized groups develop a much more diversified system of production. Especially women produce and process a great number of rural products and are active in trade. Women are the most important actors on local markets and in direct exchange transactions. They gain rice with these exchanges, which is a major contribution to the self-sufficiency of most Islamized families. Exchange of goods often involves a time lag that compensates for different harvest seasons in saltwater paddy production and rain-fed production. The most important crop is the peanut, which is given to the Balanta in October. They repay with rice after threshing the following April or May.

In rain-fed cultivation, the full consumption of early maturing varieties, which ripen during the hunger period, often leads to a loss of seeds for certain varieties, which then need to be substituted by other varieties. The social rules of solidarity and reciprocity allow close relatives and friends of a producer to do harvest work for a day on his field, taking home as much rice as they can carry on their head. This is not considered a loan. Only a second request would be considered a loan, which has to be repaid. During times of harvest of the early maturing varieties, some families stay with relatives for so-called courtesy visits (*fala mantenha*) – or send their children. Everybody can 'offer' to help with the harvest, even if the owner does not really need help, and get paid for this 'service' in rice.

It is customary in mangrove rice production that whoever has more seedlings than is needed for the transplanting, offers them to producers who do not have enough. This leads to the – involuntary – introduction of new varieties and field trials. The circulation of plants within and between *morança* is frequent, because producers often try to grow more seedlings than they will need, due to their risk-reducing strategy. Moreover, the independence war contributed to the introduction of new varieties into areas where rice production had been completely abandoned. Despite heavy fighting in the Cubucaré region in the 1960s and 1970s, the diversity of the gene pool and the system of selection of varieties were not impaired. Rice production was upheld throughout 10 years of fighting; the region supplied a substantial proportion of food for the fighters. At present, many of the traditional varieties identified by Espírito Santo (1949) in the 1940s can still be found in the region.

Many of the elder producers have a detailed knowledge of the geographical distribution of different varieties in the country. The maintenance of a large genetic diversity consciously and carefully spread over time and

space is one of the bases of this crop system. Producers can adapt to changing climatic and market conditions by a different selection of varieties. Therefore, they can collectively and individually minimize their risk. Rice cultivation was a field where profound endogenous innovations took place, mostly in variety selection (Temudo, 1996).

The majority of the producers interviewed cultivates more than one variety, giving the following reasons: reduction of risk, increase of yield, a better utilization of the available labour when using varieties with different cycles, adaptation to different kinds of soil, adaptation to different irrigation conditions, diversity in characteristics and qualities of the rice produced. At present, the enthusiasm for experimentation among the Balanta seems to be diminishing. Only very few producers from this ethnic group try to estimate the productivity of the varieties they use in field trials. Even estimates of their yearly production are rare. During colonial times, the Balanta were considered to lack the capacity to look ahead, as they sold more rice than their harvest permitted and then had to buy back rice at very high prices (Ribeiro, 1988: 2, 1989: 254; van der Drift, 1990: 101). When compared to the standards reported by Espírito Santo (1949), the Balanta of today seem to have become less careful with the harvesting procedures and the storage of seed and produce. Only bigger producers still conduct intensive field trials with new varieties and maintain a greater genetic diversity. These producers still cultivate the old, long-established varieties with a long cycle and high yield, such as *atanha*.

Women of all ethnic groups boycott varieties with a red skin and small grain because they are difficult to husk manually. This led to the decline of long-established high-yielding varieties. The introduction of rice-husking machines, however, enabled some family heads to return to the cultivation of varieties such as *atanha*, *thom* and *aminha*. Formerly the only source of income to the Balanta, overall rice production fell dramatically, due to a reorientation towards other activities like the production of cashew nuts, which can be bartered for imported rice.

In rain-fed cultivation, there is still a great diversity of varieties with different qualities, and particularly with different vegetation cycles. On average, every producer grows three varieties (25 percent grow more than three, the highest observed number was seven); the majority grows two varieties (25 percent grow more than two, the highest number observed was five) in mangrove rice cultivation. In all, 27 criteria for the selection of varieties were identified, three of which farmers consider crucial for determining whether a variety will be 'rice of the family' or 'best rice': 'yield in the field' (as measured by volume), 'yield in the pot' (as measured by the increase in volume during cooking) and 'yield in the belly' (as measured by the duration of digestion). The most important reasons for the nearly complete rejection of all high-yielding varieties used in trials by DEPA (Departamento de Pesquisa Agrícola), in an attempt by the state and international donors to introduce high-yielding varieties in order to guarantee national food security, are a weak increase in volume in the pot (during

cooking) and a short digestion time. These varieties had also been rejected because their taste was too good. The selection of less tasty varieties aims at a reduction of consumption, and, therefore, helps to increase food security. Several less tasty varieties are selected by some producers for times of rice shortage.

Research in 1999, 2000 and 2001 showed, however, that the share of varieties considered tasty had increased as compared to the preceding period. This might be read as an indication for the decreasing importance of rice self-sufficiency, which may be linked to the disaggregation of the units of reproduction. An increasing proportion of producers is now in a position to buy rice for consumption with money obtained by growing fruit. Other strategies are the direct bartering of rice against cashew nuts, or the exchange of rice against products produced and processed by women.

The field trials and the local knowledge regarding variety selection are based on criteria which enable risk reduction and adaptation to local agro-ecological conditions. These criteria include a complex knowledge of the management of uncertainty on which all agricultural production systems in regions with limited resources are based. Field trials with new varieties are conducted where there are reasons to expect that a new variety might perform better than the ones used, according to one or more of the criteria already mentioned. If the expectations are confirmed, the new variety is adopted. Only rarely does a new variety completely replace old varieties. Usually, a new variety is introduced gradually and not exclusively.

The combination of economic liberalization and development cooperation led to a weakening of the agrarian societies, which can be shown through a detailed analysis of the changes in social organization and in the management of natural resources. Contrary to the ritual invocations of success by development ideologists, the agrarian societies have been sliding downwards on a negative spiral since the beginning of the 1960s. The inner cohesion of these societies began to slowly disintegrate, while the inter-ethnic network of exchanges – essential for the survival of these societies – was also put under increasing pressure. As demonstrated earlier, this has had negative consequences for the agro-technical aspects of agricultural production.

In this already tense situation, the agrarian societies were tested again by developments which pushed their capacity for endurance, well proven throughout the past centuries, to its limits. We show how the agrarian societies tried to cope with the heavy burden of receiving refugees from urban areas and how this changed their work organization and resource management (rice cultivation). This is to be seen against the fact that the majority of the urban population owed their survival to the agrarian societies.

War and Social Resilience

In June 1998, a political and military conflict erupted in Bissau which affected the whole country. It was triggered by a conflict between two political figures: Brigadier-General Ansumane Mané and President Nino Vieira disagreed over alleged or real deliveries of arms to rebels of the Casamance region in neighbouring Senegal. One of the main causes for the conflict was severe dissatisfaction of the veterans of the war of independence with the politics of the president. A second major cause can be found in power struggles inside the PAIGC.¹² In the beginning, the armed conflict was more or less restricted to the capital of Bissau. Called in by the president, troops from the neighbouring countries of Senegal and Guinea-Conakry spread the war over the whole country.

During the war of independence, Cubucaré had become a 'liberated area' under the rule of the PAIGC. Therefore, the Islamized ethnic groups still supported the PAIGC and the president, in stark contrast to the Balanta. While the latter immediately took sides and supported the revolt of the junta led by Ansumane Mané, the other groups remained neutral and tried to stay out of the fighting which broke out in 1998–9. At the same time, they took a critical stance to the internal conflict of the PAIGC, and did not support the attempt to replace the charismatic president – and former war hero – Nino Vieira, whom they had helped into power. However, the invasion by foreign troops called in by the president changed the situation. Henceforth, only his closest followers supported the president.

At the outbreak of the fighting, the urban elite fled abroad, mostly to Europe, while the bulk of the urban population, about 200,000 people, fled to the countryside. In Cubucaré, most of the families interviewed (70 percent) took in refugees. Many of the refugees accommodated were friends or neighbours of relatives who lived in Bissau and had fled together with them. On average, each *morança* took in seven refugees, but in some cases, the number of people accommodated exceeded the members of the *morança* by far. The behaviour of the Balanta towards displaced urban refugees differed from that of other ethnic groups. They took in fewer refugees, one of the reasons being that the Balanta from the capital fled to and found shelter in Mansoa-Nhaccra, their region of origin, which was closer to the capital than Cubucaré.¹³ While the number of refugees sheltered by Balanta *morança* was between a minimum of four and a maximum of 20, the Islamized groups each took in an average of nine and reaching a maximum of 28. The highest number of Balanta refugees were found in the *morança* of well-to-do families in the villages of Caboxanque and Calfine, well known for their lucrative rice production. Of the total 158 *morança* of the sample, only 50 did not take in any refugees, 34 of which were Balanta. This imbalance can be explained by the fact that fewer Balanta from the south had emigrated to the capital before the start of the last war.

When the refugees arrived, they possessed nothing but the clothes they were wearing – not even food. They were granted food and shelter without

any expectation of compensation: they were simply accorded guest status. A considerable proportion of refugees, many of whom were children, did not participate in the work in the field, or in the collection of edible plants in the bush, or in the processing of rural products to be sold or bartered for food. There were even reports of refugees deciding to visit other families precisely on days of communal work for their host *morança* – which did not delight their host families. The same happened on days when food was especially scarce. Refugees 'whose bodies were still used to heavy work' did participate in the collective fieldwork, and, in 1999, requested personal plots, the produce of which they took home with them, together with the food they were given by their host as farewell presents, when they finally left to resume their lives in Bissau.

The conflict lasted for almost a year, and, with a few exceptions, the refugees only left after the restoration of peace. Men were the first to return, leaving their wives and children in the care of their hosts for an additional time period. The influx of urban people fleeing the war came at the worst possible moment for the rural population: at the beginning of the first agricultural season, after a year of drought. In this situation, the refugees had to be fed on the already scarce reserves which had been earmarked for paying the workforce in the fields. Aggravating the scarcity of food, the following agricultural season, in 1998, saw yet another drought, which mostly affected the mangrove swamp cultivation, and thus the Balanta. International emergency food aid proved to be inadequate. The foreign troops allied with the president either tried to prevent the entry of food aid into the country, or appropriated supplies for themselves.¹⁴ Yet another part was embezzled in the process of distribution. Many families in Cubucaré who had accepted to take in refugees did not receive any help at all, others received only very little help and at very irregular intervals, depending on the distance between their *morança* and the distribution centres. The quantity of food distributed did not match the figures quoted in the media. The food distributed comprised rice, oil and a wheat product originally intended for the preparation of rations for children. In contrast to what has been reported for other emergency operations, this porridge – which was alien to the population's food habits – was received well and was also eaten by adults. As late as April 2000, one could find misappropriated food aid rations for sale in rural markets.

During wartime, most of the trade routes had been partially interrupted – with the exception of the Gabú–Cacine route, which continued to function well – partly due to the good conditions of the road, and partly due to the boldness of the travelling traders. While some of the traders 'rented' vehicles from the military for the transport of their merchandise, the military in turn used the traders' vehicles for the transport of soldiers and supplies.

Owing to the bad conditions of the road, only very few traders reached Cubucaré to buy fruit. Therefore, producers had no choice but to carry their produce on their heads or by boat to Cacine whenever conditions forced them to obtain cash for the purchase of food. The border markets of the

Quitafine region never ceased functioning during the war, mostly because the traders from Guinea-Conakry provided the region with merchandise, whenever they managed to escape the frontier guards. While market activities were greatly reduced by war, direct barter activities soared, if the time invested in these activities is taken as an indicator. The most important actors in this field were women of Islamized groups, who invested much time and effort in the production and processing of rural products. They had to cover great distances on foot until they found a Balanta willing to trade in their produce for rice, which they could then use to feed their families. Among the Balanta, both men and women took to trading in alcoholic beverages (mostly sugar cane brandy), which boomed during the war. As Balanta women were not quite as successful in procuring food for their families, many family heads were forced to slaughter a cow, or a pig, and to either sell the meat, or trade it in for rice directly. Many Balanta had to borrow animals from friends of other ethnic groups, since the rules of the lineage safeguard the number of livestock by forbidding the slaughter of their own animals except for clearly specified purposes. For this reason, many Balanta came out of the crisis situation with debts they might have to repay on short notice.

In order to assure food security, different strategies were applied: they can be divided into nutritional and productive strategies. Nutritional strategies – well-known from the annual period of scarcity before the harvest – aimed at saving rice through changes in the composition and timing of food preparation. Different ethnic groups employed different and rather characteristic strategies. The Balanta prepared only one meal a day, called 'one shot' (*um tiro*) which was eaten in the afternoon. Only during work peaks, were two meals served. Sometimes, the rice was cooked with beans, eaten with palm oil, or mixed with pounded raw palm fruit (*bonton*), to enrich the meals, and to prolong the time of digestion.

The eating habits of Islamized groups are based on a more diversified food pattern (Temudo, 1998: Vol. I: 311–53). They saved rice by adding other foodstuffs: bananas, manioc, yams, sweet potatoes or beans was served, either in alternate meals during a day or every other day according to the supply situation and the consent of the family. To increase the volume, rice was either cooked together with sorghum, or with a lot of liquid (*badadi*). Very poor families skipped breakfast, but continued to feed their children in the morning. Islamized groups ate more wild plants, especially yams (Tanda and Nalu), but also other plants which are normally not eaten, even in times of shortage, for example *palmitos* (Sosso and Nalu) and mangrove fruits (Nalu and even Balanta).

Productive strategies consisted in increasing the production of root crops (manioc, sweet potato, yams and others) during the dry season of 1998. In the rainy season of 1999, production of rice and drought-resistant cereals (sorghum, millet and fonio) was also stepped up. In addition, direct sowing in the mangrove fields (instead of transplanting) was applied in order to make better use of the scarce seeds.

Producers with enough seed and rice to feed the workgroups attempted – with some success – to increase the area under cultivation and to diversify cultivation. The mangrove rice producers also turned to rain-fed cultivation and to freshwater rice, while the rain-fed cultivators also turned to valley freshwater rice. Freshwater paddy cultivation was used to obtain early maturing rice. Following some natural indicators of a rainy year, many mangrove swamp rice producers also decided to plant long-cycle varieties, obtaining necessary seed from other producers.

The seed management system was not destroyed during the war. Only 12.2 percent of the mangrove rice producers consumed all of their seeds, 20 percent ate a part, while 67.8 percent did not use any of their seed for food consumption. Among the rain-fed cultivators, 56.6 percent declared that they had not eaten any seed, while 15.6 percent admitted having consumed all their stock.

Producers who had consumed all or part of their seed tried to obtain seeds by bartering for them with colanuts, rice (husked rice or food aid rice), honey (for the preparation of a kind of honey brandy which is an essential part of payment of Balanta workgroups for cultivation of mangrove rice) or work. Mangrove rice producers often received free seedlings from other producers who had a surplus in their seedbeds. Producers in all cultivation systems received small amounts of seed from friends and relatives, which led to a mix of many different varieties in the same field. Of the four varieties distributed by relief agencies,¹⁵ only one corresponded to the preferences of the producers: *banimalio* – which was not an improved variety. Using the criteria 'yield in the pot', 'yield in the belly' and 'length of the stalk', the other varieties were assessed as bad. Being varieties with short stalks, in fact, they did not withstand the high water levels caused by the heavy rainfalls of 1999 in freshwater and mangrove fields. This situation could have been avoided rather easily: all the relief varieties had been distributed for years, and a simple investigation into their levels of acceptance could have made the emergency relief effort much more efficient. Moreover, the distribution of the seed took place very late. Most producers reported that they failed to get a harvest from the seed they received. Some of them foresaw a bad harvest and decided to use the seed grain for food immediately.

Changes also occurred in the organization of cooperation. Forms of mutual aid which had been lost since the independence war were reactivated. In contrast to the Balanta, the workgroups (*mandjuandade*) in most of the Islamized villages did not ask for payment for their work. In some other cases, they accepted payment after harvest and lowered their prices considerably. Since food was scarce, each of the young men of a *mandjuandade* brought his own food for the working day from his *morança*. The owner of the field was only expected to provide a supplement to the rice staple they brought along. This was a considerable relief for owners, who often had already given up hiring workgroups, because of the high costs.

The worst supply situation occurred when the war was over, during the rainy season of 1999. The Balanta were relatively better off than other

groups because many of them had cashew plantations and could barter the cashew nuts for rice. Islamized producers, however, found themselves in a dire situation as the season for selling fruit was already over, when their only way to earn cash income both for the purchase of rice and for investment consisted in selling bananas and oranges. Lacking cash, they could not buy from the travelling traders even during the ceasefire and after the end of the war. Instead they attempted to barter palm-oil for rice, but were forced to accept extremely low quantities of rice for their palm-oil. Part of the rice they traded originated from warehouses in Bissau, which the revolting Junta had confiscated. It was sold to the countryside by travelling retail traders (*djilas*). Therefore, people often said it was the traders who profited most from the war.

The relief aid given to the region by some local and international NGOs was rather limited. Its components were: distribution of seeds on a credit basis, provision of rice and beans to farmers' associations (who had only to pay transport costs), supply of rice at market prices through the grain banks of some women's organizations, a food-for-work programme for road maintenance funded by the World Food Programme (targeted mainly at keeping the roads free of vegetation) and a programme to increase the rice production in freshwater fields. During and after the war, there was not a single coordinated intervention by the NGOs. The most highly valued measures were sales of rice and beans at a symbolic price by farmers' associations, run by a foreign NGO linked to the Catholic church, and the road maintenance programme of a local NGO, which, however, reached only a few villages. The supply situation improved because Mauritanian traders, arriving in Cubucaré together with refugees, sold their merchandise at prices much lower than previous market prices. Some of them decided to settle in the region after they were driven from Bissau, where they had come to dominate the retail trade since the end of the 1980s.

During wartime, the emotional climate was characterized by a general feeling of solidarity. At the same time, hostilities between supporters and the opponents of the president, and between the secret services of both warring factions, sometimes flared up. The interethnic fabric of the countryside was deeply affected by the military confrontations of armed factions of the central society fighting for political predominance. The military successes of the revolting Junta had some important psychological effects on the interethnic network of the agrarian societies. Throughout the country, it seemed to allow the Balanta to feel much stronger than before. They felt less and less obliged to respect historical interethnic agreements which used to be the basis for the management of the natural resources. This was evidenced in the rising number of violations of formerly respected rules of conduct. Some Balanta are reported to have uttered threats against people from other ethnic groups. Should the Junta win the war, they would no longer tolerate the killing of their cattle when caught in the act of destroying other people's crops: 'We will kill people who kill our cows.' These threats remain a sore point in the interethnic relationships of the region.

Perspectives

The agrarian societies provided a comparatively safe haven from the outbreak of violence for those segments of the urban population who, unlike the urban elite, were not in a position to leave the country. Acceptance of displaced urban dwellers into rural family compounds made the construction of refugee camps unnecessary – camps which have often turned into rather permanent institutions breeding further violence in a number of countries. In the studied region, refugees were distributed over a large area, and more or less integrated into stable social relationships where they were given food and shelter, where they found solace in their miserable condition, and help in caring for their children and families. They got a firsthand experience of African solidarity, which provided them with an opportunity to participate in agricultural and other economic activities, and offered them the chance to gain an income of their own, which – together with the farewell presents of their hosts – assisted them in making a new start in the town after their return. It is remarkable that the agrarian societies did not only accept their own kin, but also friends and neighbours of their relatives.

As a consequence of these events, the relationship between city dwellers and rural populations underwent some important changes. It is probable that the return of the displaced urban population will offer future rural migrants better opportunities to migrate to the city, as they will be able to rely on a network of relationships recently created. In addition, some of these new links may have an effect on economic activities of rural populations, particularly the younger generation. Studying these effects may provide important insights into rural–urban relationships in general.

The wave of refugees from the city arrived at a difficult moment for the agrarian societies, after two consecutive years of drought. The already weakened and declining agrarian societies withstood this additional blow surprisingly well. The mechanisms of seed management survived without noticeable changes, keeping its most important function intact, namely to provide all producers with adequate amounts and varieties of seed. Even under this extreme pressure, intraethnic and interethnic relationships of solidarity largely ensured the availability of seed even for those who had been forced to eat part or all of their seed. Even during the food crisis in the rainy season of 1999, social relations and the work organization did not cease to function. In this crisis, even some old and supposedly lost forms of mutual aid were reactivated. Neither the seed distribution systems nor the distribution of early maturing varieties were monetarized. However, this rather positive assessment does not apply to the Balanta, who suffered most from the consecutive years of drought and the reception of refugees. They did not manage to convince their youth to use more solidary forms of mutual aid in their field work.

Some important conclusions may also be drawn for future international emergency relief efforts. The multiplicity of criteria and the number of

decision levels involved in the selection of varieties, which could be observed at the compound level, call for some changes in the strategy for developing 'packages of technological options', which would increase the number of options for local producers, building on already existing local capacities for research in the field. Such packages might also be able to contribute to the improved food security often invoked by development experts (Temudo, 1996).

In contrast to older strategic orientations of agricultural development, local producers do not consider an increase in the yield per area unit their highest priority. The agronomists' earlier concentration on high-yielding varieties therefore needs to be reconsidered both with respect to future agricultural research and with respect to emergency aid and development cooperation. Instead, the diversity of genetic resources should receive greater attention. The erosion of genetic resources during times of war severely limits the potential for reconstruction of agrarian societies after war. Emergency relief could therefore make an important contribution to the reinforcement of local self-organization and the organization of local mutual aid. Rice is the most important staple crop in a number of West African countries, where genetic resources are kept in situ and are therefore susceptible to war and natural disasters (Richards et al., 1997). The fact that diversity of genetic resources in Cubucaré, the centre of rice cultivation in Guinea-Bissau, has not been affected by war is of the greatest importance for countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia, where wars caused an erosion of genetic resources (Richards et al., 1997).

The interethnic relationships, which are of crucial importance for peaceful cohabitation and for the survival of the population, were put under additional stress by ethnic aspects of the power struggle. These relationships also showed a remarkable resilience, particularly in the crisis situation of 1999. The long-term effects of these events remain to be studied in more detail.

We close by considering some of the effects of the fast processes of change which the Balanta experienced. The results of our research do not allow a definite conclusion concerning the question whether the processes should be seen as processes of disaggregation or rather as processes of adaptation to a changing environment. During the crisis, the Balanta suffered more than other ethnic groups because their mechanisms for food security are less elaborate and their sense of responsibility is comparatively less evident. Compared with other groups, they suffer more from growing debts owed to members of other groups. This trend could worsen, should there be further years of drought. This process of growing indebtedness does not only negatively affect their productive capacity, by contributing to a scarcity of seed and by seriously damaging their capacity to hire work-groups for cultivation, but also undermines the interethnic trust which used to be a firm base for the interethnic relationships and their material basis, namely the asynchronous exchange mechanisms.

'Debts do not grow old' was one of the comments offered by a producer

with respect to the Balanta's difficulties to repay their debts incurred in 1997, 1998 and 1999. In the long run, however, these debts can only be borne and cushioned by the system of general reciprocity, if producers who granted loans do not need these payments to guarantee their own subsistence. There are no indications that agrarian societies will ever receive adequate compensation for their solidarity from the urban society – apart from scant and individual acts of assistance from people whom they helped during the crisis.

Overall, the 'city' has given little to the 'countryside', while many of its inhabitants received substantial help from the rural areas. To the extent that it even exists in an explicit form, the rural development policy is very unlikely to change as a result of recent events. Therefore, expectations that the rural population might entertain will remain unfulfilled, and the previous trend of a widening gap between urban and rural areas will probably continue. The relationship between agrarian societies and the central society is of crucial importance for the interethnic networks. War and the following victory of an ethnically based party (Balanta) in the elections have already changed the interethnic balance of power. First rifts between the Balanta and other ethnic groups have already become visible. So far, the urban-based political elite in power has not yet played the ethnic card to the full and has not yet openly applied strategies of ethnic division in the countryside. But our research shows clearly that the potential for interethnic conflicts exists – and that its destructive effects may surpass anything experienced so far.

The Balanta, notwithstanding the fact that they are the largest ethnic group, representing about 40 percent of the total population, and that they fielded the highest number of fighters, both in the independence war and in the last war, had been discriminated against and had been excluded from political power ever since independence. President Nino Vieira removed some of their most important representatives from powerful positions, some lost their life during and after a trial. The ethnic party PRS won the parliamentary and presidential elections because of the large number of Balanta they could mobilize, and because of the widespread dissatisfaction of the urban population of the capital with the PAIGC. The fact that large numbers of young Balanta warriors joined the troops of the revolting Junta in the last war and in its aftermath can only partly be explained by the lust for adventure which incited them to escape from the authority of their village elders for some time. This move can also be seen as an attempt to increase the Balanta's military potential through integration into modern fighting units and access to modern weapons. Predominance of Balanta in the present urban power elite is already provoking other ethnic groups to rally together – and they are likely to use Islam as the smallest common denominator for their anti-Balanta alliance.

While the relationships between acephalous ethnic groups and the political power elite require a proper study, the first effects of the Balanta power takeover can already be felt in the countryside. One of the most

important research problems is to adequately take into account the time lag of these effects. It can be expected that effects of the influx of urban refugees will only be felt after some years. In a first reaction, agrarian societies seem to absorb strong impacts and try to restore their previous state of affairs resorting to a wide range of traditional mechanisms. However, this attempt can only be successful if their potential for reconstruction has not suffered irreparable damage, if they still have the strength and the resources required for self-repair. Mechanisms used to regulate the interethnic relations of power are of crucial importance. Unless the elders succeed in re-establishing a balance of power between different ethnic groups, a destructive potential may be unleashed which could devastate the whole country. Already, the election victory of the PRS changed the balance of power in the region observed. The Balanta have started to challenge some of the basic tenets of interethnic cohabitation. The other ethnic groups still play a waiting game: 'We are still listening, we want to see, if this is going to be a state for the cows [of the Balanta and a main cause of crop destruction] or for the people.'

Notes

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- 1 Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde.
- 2 See Rudebeck (2001) for the best analyses of state and political institutions.
- 3 There were a few conflicts with neighbouring Senegal about off-shore oil and alleged or real support for independence movements from the Casamance which used the border area as hinterland. This led to some military clashes at the border.
- 4 The results of the case study were produced in a long-term research context starting in 1986 with the research project 'Agrargesellschaften und Ländliche Entwicklungspolitik' in Guinea-Bissau at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Münster, headed by Christian Sigrist and funded by the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk. Our research followed developments which invalidated the development paradigm and led to the research project 'Disintegration of Agrarian Societies in Africa and their Potential for Reconstruction' at the Centro de Estudos Africanos, Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa (ISCITE), Lisbon, funded by the Fundação para Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT), Lisbon. More recently, the problem of traumatized African societies comes to the fore. In the period between 1993 and 1996, Marina Temudo studied livelihood systems and processes of disaggregation of multi-ethnic societies on the Cubucaré peninsula in the south of Guinea-Bissau and interfaces of knowledge systems between agrarian societies and external institutions (Temudo, 1998: Vols I and II). In 1999, 2000 and 2002, she investigated the consequences of the 1998–9 war for the disaggregation processes of the agrarian societies and their survival strategies.
- 5 See Desjeux (1987: 102) and Atteslander (1995: 12).
- 6 Atteslander (1995: 13): 'Anomie as a classical term means normlessness, lawlessness, no sense of social identity, being "socially lost"'. Schiefer (2002: 34) describes a concept of social collapse: 'Anomie is understood, in the notion derived from Durkheim, as a process that can be self-reinforcing. This "positive feedback" can lead to a situation where anomic processes further other anomic processes and the societies in question can be drawn into a downward spiral of social disintegration.'

- 7 See Bakema (1994: 9), for a discussion of the 'tragedy of the commons' of Hardin (1968).
- 8 See the case of the Kuvale in Angola (Duarte de Carvalho, 1999).
- 9 See Pélissier (1989).
- 10 For a non-essentialist definition of ethnic groups, see Sigrist (1994b: 47).
- 11 Even before the liberalization of the economy, trade organizations in the countryside were obliged to barter rice against cashew nuts, which for a short time received a high price on the world market.
- 12 For the underlying causes of this war, see Rudebeck (2001), Schiefer (2002) and the special edition of *Soronda* (INEP, 2000).
- 13 For factors influencing the selection of the refuge area, see the case study of Bolama/Bijago by Biai (2000).
- 14 Van der Drift (2000: 47): 'The Senegalese borders – vital to Guinea-Bissau's trade and humanitarian aid – were closed, starvation was used as an additional weapon to fight the Junta'.
- 15 A FAO (n.d.) report about the seed deliveries of the emergency relief only mentions three varieties: IR 15-29 (mangrove rice), *banimaito* (mangrove and freshwater rice) and Sahel 108 (rain-fed cultivation). Volunteers of the Cafale project, which received seed from Caritas, reported that their organization distributed two mangrove rice varieties, IR 15-29 and WAR 77. This explains why two local designations were used.

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