

**YOUTH MOBILISATION AS SOCIAL NAVIGATION.  
REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF *DUBRIAGEM***

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## Abstract

*This article sheds light on the mobilisation of young people into conflict. It argues that warfare constitutes a terrain of possibility for urban youth in Guinea-Bissau, and shows how they navigate war as an event by tactically manoeuvring within the social ties and options that arise in such situations. Building on the Guinean Creole term of dubriagem, the article proposes the concept of social navigation as an analytical optic able to shed light on praxis in unstable environments. The concept of social navigation makes it possible to focus on the way we move within changing social environments. It is processuality squared, illuminating motion within motion. The article thus advocates an analysis of praxis that takes its point of departure in a Batesonian and intermorphological understanding of action in order to further our understanding of the acts of youth in conflict.*

Keywords: youth, conflict, social navigation, flexibility, praxis

## Resumo

*Este artigo foca a mobilização para o conflito dos jovens, alegando que a guerra constitui um terreno de possibilidades para a juventude urbana na Guiné-Bissau e mostrando como estes mesmos jovens navegam através da guerra através de opções tácticas e manobrando os seus laços sociais. Baseando-se no termo crioulo guineense dubriagem, o artigo propõe o conceito de navegação social enquanto uma perspectiva de análise esclarecedora da práxis em ambientes instáveis. Este conceito foca as formas de actuação em ambientes de mudança social, enquadrando o processo de movimento. O artigo defende uma análise da práxis partindo de uma interpretação Batesoniana e intermorfológica da acção para aprofundar a compreensão dos actos dos jovens em situações de conflito.*

Palavras-chave: juventude, conflito, navegação social, flexibilidade, práxis

War in Bissau is like this. It is like the rainy season. It darkens, and then everything falls down. Then it darkens again and it falls down. Here, war is like this.

The above quote is from a conversation with Vitór, a young, urban male and former militiaman. Besides the eloquence of the simile there is nothing unique about the quote. Painting as it does a bleak picture of the (mis)dynamics of the Guinean social environment it is an all too common example of the social imaginary of urban youth in Bissau (Vigh, 2006c), of the way in which Guinea-Bissau, as a social entity, is seen as moving negatively through time. In Vitór's perspective Guinea-Bissau is caught in endless factional conflict cyclically building into warfare.

Vitór has himself been mobilised, demobilised and remobilised within the last few years. As such, he provides a good example of how this social imaginary is intricately related to praxis, as a young person in Bissau. He provides a prime example of how young men in Bissau shape their actions towards hardship and instability as a current and future *social fact* and how they navigate the event of war towards improved life chances<sup>1</sup>. This article will shed new light on the mobilisation of *urban* youth in West Africa (cf. Abdulla, 1997; Bangura, 1997; Utas, 2003; Vigh, 2003, 2006) by socially situating the conflict engagement of Vitór, and his fellow *Aguentas*, a militia of urban youth in Bissau. The research on which this article is based spans a period of eight years, during which I followed the *Aguentas* as they lived the *ruptures and fractures* of their shifting and unstable society (de Boeck and Honwana, 2000: 6).

Recruited during the summer months of the civil war in 1998, and subsequently disbanded after losing it in May 1999, the *Aguentas* were a short-lived military group. Having neither a common territory nor a mythology or set of traditions to differentiate them from the rest of Guinean society, they conform poorly to the supposedly historically deep and spatio-temporally demarcated social entities, which constitute the traditional anthropological object of study. In fact, having been disbanded after the war, the *Aguentas* cannot even be seen to constitute a defined military unit. Yet, as urban youth, they share a number of defining characteristics in relation to the rest of Guinean society and former *Aguentas* still interact on the basis of their shared social position and wartime

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I would like to thank the Danish research council for culture and communication (FKK) for its financial support.

<sup>1</sup> The concept of navigation seems to occur frequently in relation to descriptions of praxis in unstable places. As such, Honwana, 2000: 77; Johnson-Hanks, 2002: 878; Mertz, 2002: 265; all refer to navigation in relation to contexts of social change. Yet from a social scientific perspective the concept has not been theorised in depth – see Vigh (2006) as an exception and none of the above writers pay it further attention.

ordeals. They can, in other words, be seen as composing a *community of experience* (Vigh, 2006), which constitutes a relatively enduring unit of analysis.

Unlike much academic work on agents in situations of conflict and political turbulence, the article is, in other words, not about big men, influential politicians or charismatic leaders, but about the ordinary youths who constitute the bulk of the *conflict-engaged* in any war. It does not address the socio-political strategies of warlords but rather the socio-political tactics of young soldiers (cf. Certeau, 1988; Honwana, 2000). Rather than focusing macro-structurally or typologically on the phenomenon of warfare my focus, empirically and theoretically, is on praxis – on the efforts that youths put into surviving and forging a future for themselves in a context of persistent poverty, conflict and war. I address the questions of how warfare and engagement in war can come to constitute a space of possibility and through the Creole term of *dubriagem* I seek to demonstrate how youths *navigate* war as an event and the social ties and possibilities that arise in such situations, in order to improve their life-chances (cf. Dahrendorf, 1979).

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## Meaning, motive and mobilisation

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Composed of young, marginal men, inhabiting a social space of restricted possibilities, the *Aguentas* can be seen as representative of the majority of willingly mobilised youths in western Africa (Richards, 1996: 2003). Furthermore, being irregularly recruited and having committed an array of human rights abuses, their story is iconic of portrayals of African youth warfare that we have seen in western media (cf. Allen and Seaton, 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 3-5; Daniels, 1996: 7; Kleinman and Kleinman, 1997: 8). Understanding why the *Aguentas* *chose* to mobilise, without external compulsion, might thus be able to provide us with a useful perspective in understanding similar groups of soldiers engaged in the type of war that we have witnessed in many parts of the continent, as well as helping us combat some of the more fruitless and barren lines of analysis that the subject seems to inspire.

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## Wars old and new

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Many recent studies seek to define the distinction between previous and current modes of warfare through the conceptual dichotomy of *old* and *new* wars. As scenarios of war have changed from inter- to intra-state warfare and civil wars, combatants are no longer those who are bearing the brunt of the deaths<sup>2</sup>. Instead

<sup>2</sup> According to the UN, civilian casualties have “climbed from 5% of the war-related deaths at the turn of the century to more than 90% in the 1990s” (Human Development Report, 1998: 35)

of a war scenario in which masses of young men are being collected from the battlefields in body bags, we now see civilian casualties and losses at the hands of young men who are said to be motivated by a mixture of need, greed and the resurgence of age-old cultural and ethnic hatreds. Rather than regulated inter-state warfare, we are thus witnessing messy, untamed, chaotic wars that disregard international conventions and dismantle categorical boundaries (Lutz, 1999: 614-615) and in which the main agents of the chaos are armed irregulars (cf. Kaldor, 1999: 84).

However, since the fact that young people are the ones carrying out the killing in wars does not occasion surprise, what is highlighted as one of the decisive changes in the shift from *old* to *new* is the movement from ideologically to non-ideologically motivated warfare<sup>3</sup>. There has, in other words, been a change in what combatants are seen to be fighting for (cf. Kalyvas, 2001: 101)<sup>4</sup>, as modern wars are supposedly devoid of ideological commitment, and are being fought over political power and economic gain (Berdal and Malone, 2000; Collier, 2000; Kaldor, 1999: 8). Or, as Enzensberger would have us believe, over nothing at all.

What gives today's civil wars a new and terrifying slant is the fact that they are waged without stakes on either side, that they are wars *about nothing at all* [...] there is no longer any need to legitimise your actions. Violence has been freed from ideology (1994: 30, italics in the original).

The unfortunate analytical consequence of this supposed lack of ideology is the production of monsters<sup>5</sup>. It leads to a simplified, mono-factual analysis of wars and of conflict-engaged youth as either destructive forces uncontrolled by social constraints (*loose molecules*), or as victims who have been manipulated into warfare by greedy warlords and powerful elders (cf. Richards, 1996: xiv).

In other words, explanations of the meaning and motives behind youth engagement in conflict, when not ideologically motivated, seem to end in an analytical impasse, in which militant young men are regarded as either socially detached or mechanically mastered. Lodged somewhere between Crowd Theory (Theweleit, 1989; Canetti, 1996) and a pre-Foucauldian perspective on power it locates the acts of youth in mindless impulses, mono-factual urges and/or dominance. Thus militant young men come to be seen as *autistic in nature*, as *mobs* and

<sup>3</sup> My point is, of course, not that new wars are singularly defined by being non-ideological but that our problems in understanding them is primarily related to their apparent lack of ideology.

<sup>4</sup> See Kalyvas for a critique of the distinction between old and new wars (Kalyvas, 2001; see also Vigh, 2006: chap. 4).

<sup>5</sup> See Richards' and Marais' critique of *new barbarism* for an analysis and deconstruction of the presumed monstrosity of militant youth (Marais in Seekings, 1996 [1993]; Richards, 1996).

*marauding bands* (Enzensberger, 1994: 17, 20, 26) that do not follow societal norms, as they do not have “firm discipline imposed on them” (Tilly, 2003: 7). What is destabilising our analytical abilities and making us resort to meaninglessness and essentialism as explanatory avenues is, as such, not the fact that atrocities are committed in the course of warfare – they always have been – but rather the apparent lack of ideological orientation as motivation. We are analytically crippled by a dichotomy between reason and unreason inherent in the philosophical discourse of modernity, expecting mobilisation to be related to issues of religion, nation or ideology, whereas, as Mbembe informs us, we might in fact have to “look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile” (Mbembe, 2003: 4).

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### Socially situating action

In order to unearth the meaning behind the mobilisation of the *Aguntas* and their like, we need to pay as much attention to the socially situated nature of action as we do to ideological narrative (cf. Bayart, 1993: 270). The motive behind the conflict engagement of urban youth in Guinea-Bissau is not to be found in policies, manifestoes or political teleology. It is not *politically articulated* but *socially situated*, a fact, which is all but impossible to grasp from a western perspective dominated by the invariable pairing of war and ideology<sup>6</sup>. Thus the intellectual flaw behind Enzensberger’s idea of a new, meaningless type of war is that it fails to grasp that meaning does not necessarily only reside in discourse. Although meaning and motives might not be unequivocal or articulated, this does not mean that they are non-existent, or can be reduced to simple greed or externalised from our world as anarchic or archaic disorder. By focusing on the Guinean notion of *dubriagem* and the theoretical concept of social navigation, I hope to show that the acts of my interlocutors are meaningful and pragmatic despite not being ideologically motivated or articulated (cf. Whyte, 1997).

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### Durable decline

Bissau is falling apart, *i na dana-dana tuuuudo*, the locals say, drawing out the ‘u’ to signify the magnitude of the dilapidation, the physicality of the process being indicative of a deeper sense of regression and decline, that is, of political, institutional, economic and even identificatory deterioration.

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<sup>6</sup> It is a Clausewitzian remnant, which takes us back to the constitution of the modern state in the French revolution and in particular the *mass conscription* of the Napoleonic wars.

As in many sub-Saharan African countries the persistence of decline is clearly visible in their socio-economic statistics<sup>7</sup>. Yet it is difficult to perceive the hardness of life from GDPs and columns of numbers. To understand the consequences of Bissau's disastrous decline one needs to experience the social and existential uncertainty that it brings about, the fact that most of the urban youth I spoke to in Bissau cannot afford to pay for medical consultations or medicine, the fact that most of them survive on one "shot" a day, *um tiro kada dia*, as a meal is called in a tellingly militarised idiom, and that many are unsure of where the next meal will come from. However, my interlocutors are not only caught in the existential uncertainty that abject poverty brings about. They are also caught in the social uncertainty of living in an environment characterised by continuous factional conflict and political turmoil. As the decade has seen two outbreaks of war, six alleged coup attempts (or purges), and numerous incidents of unspecified, minor outbreaks of fighting, the socio-political structures of the Bissauan environment are in constant disfiguration and reconfiguration. The hardness of life is in other words as constant as the related social instability. They pervade the most basic aspects of my interlocutors' lives, as urban youths, affecting their very existential and social security, diminishing their life chances and drastically impairing their trajectories of social becoming<sup>8</sup>.

## **Youth and social becoming**

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The process of decline and conflict, in this perspective, makes difficult not only my interlocutors' immediate survival but also obscures and blocks their path into desired and required imagined futures.

Referring to William Torry's work on social responses to famine, Mary Douglas writes that in times of crisis "the emergency system starts to give short rations to the disadvantaged, the marginal, the politically ineffectual" (Douglas, 1987: 123). In Bissau this emergency system is no longer emergent but consolidated. Crisis has become prosaic and youths are the ones who are being short rationed (cf. Richards, 1995, 1996, 2003). As such we are, in Bissau, seeing a constriction and disintegration of social support networks (Mdahavan, 2003) – ranging from socio-political structures to close family and friendship networks – which greatly

<sup>7</sup> From 1990 to 2001 there was a fall in the annual growth rate per capita of -1.3% (Human Development Report, 2003). More specifically there was a massive setback, estimated as high as 28% from 1998 (O Grupo das ONGs para a Inâfia, 2001: 5), from which the country is still trying to recover, but which was further exacerbated by an outbreak of war in 2000 followed by three years of political instability (<http://www.phrasebase.com/countries/Guinea%20Bissau.html>).

<sup>8</sup> Focusing on the social, I prefer the concept of *becoming* to that of *emergence*. Despite the fact that both refer to a process of constitution, the concept of *becoming* has the advantage of indicating a process where the entity in question is an active part of its own constitution.

reduce the social possibilities and life chances of youth, making their immediate survival problematic and their realisation of social being difficult. Focusing on how the urban poor actually go about their more immediate survival, Lourenço-Lindell (1996) has shown us that people in Bissau rely heavily on the obligation of informal networks to share their supplies of food in securing their everyday existence. They rely on what Hydén has called *the economy of affection* as “a network of support, communication and interaction among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affinities” (1983: 8)<sup>9</sup>. But the economy of affection (and obligation) also has its limits. As resources become scarce, close networks also centre on their key constituents and moral obligations and, being ideally able to fend for themselves, young men tend to be the first to have their rations reduced<sup>10</sup>.

### **Patrimonial possibilities**

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As the economy of affection is finding it hard to sustain the material needs of young people, it is generally impossible for it to sustain their social needs and offer a positive path into the future via the transfer of resources between generations. As urban youth my interlocutors are thus not only struggling to make ends meet but also to go about their social becoming. In fact, only very few are able to acquire sufficient resources from family networks to secure themselves a future. *Si bu familia ka tene...*, “if your family does not have...”, people say, not needing to complete the sentence as the resulting hardship is evident.

Where the state might formerly have provided an alternative route towards social mobility by giving youth the means of achieving independence and adulthood through, for example, education, these possibilities for social movement have effectively been abandoned by the state and colonised by patrimonial networks. “Our big people steal with open eyes” the Guineans say, indicating that there is no longer any need to hide the workings of patrimonial structures, except when trying to please donor countries in absurd displays and exchanges of buzz words and empty façades (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 16). As such, the current dominance of patrimonialism in Bissau means that there is no longer any point in talking about patrimonial networks as a *shadow* state (cf. Reno, 2000). It is not an invisible parallel system, but the visible and dominant one. Patrimonial politi-

<sup>9</sup> At a closer look, Hydén’s economy of affection ought perhaps more correctly to be termed an “economy of affection and obligation”, as it is based on relatedness rather than sentiment.

<sup>10</sup> The process of decline and the burden of superfluous youth on urban households can be seen by comparing low-ranking public workers’ salaries and the price of a 50 kg bag of rice. In the early 1980s, a bag of rice is estimated to have cost 18% of the monthly salary; in 1989 it absorbed 91% of the monthly salary, and in 1994 exceeded the minimum monthly salary (Lourenço-Lindell, 2002: 71).



cal structures are currently the only ones to have survived and prospered within the prolonged period of decline in effect, making it more evident to talk of the bureaucratic state as a mere representation or façade roughly painted to portray the West, mirroring it as it serves as a point of entry for the channelling of aid along established networks.

In other words, as youth becomes marginalised within the economy of affection, the only socio-political possibilities left to navigate, if they wish to realise their social being, are patrimonial. Yet as economic decline becomes generalised, patrimonial networks are themselves receding and concentrating their resources around key points (Richards, 1996: 35-36), a process of constriction that makes the finding of a *patron* of even minor status and importance, a petty gatekeeper to a patrimonial network, more difficult than ever.

## Impairment of social becoming

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It is, as such, the young men who have borne the brunt of the constriction of the *distributive principle*, to the point where being exploited is currently the best one can hope for as an unemployed, urban male (Hinkelammert, 1993), as it at least encompasses a possible act of reciprocity.

“Fathers want to be in control of their sons”, Seku, another of my Aguenta informants<sup>11</sup>, complained, though very much aware that challenging his father’s control would probably mean going to bed hungry. Seku made himself eligible for meals by being subservient, by doing as he was told and running errands for his father. Yet he complained bitterly at the humiliation of having to “act like a boy” when in fact “wanting to be a man”. When I asked him what he would like to do if he could, he answered:

I want to be the man of my [own] head<sup>12</sup>, I want to be a man of respect, a complete man, complete. You understand? I want to have my own house, children, a wife. I want a job. If you have this, then no one can tell you that you are young. You will have your own family, your own job. If you are a complete man, then you are the [sole] force of your head<sup>13</sup>.

Neither Seku’s situation nor his wishes are unusual. Instead of moving along a trajectory of *social becoming*, towards being a complete adult, he remains de-

<sup>11</sup> *Pape misti sedu riba di si fidjus*. Literally, “A father wants to be on top of his sons”.

<sup>12</sup> *N’ misti sedu homi di nha cabeça*, a reference to him wanting to make his own decisions and take charge of his life.

<sup>13</sup> *Si abo i homi completo abo i poder di bu cabeça*.

pendent on the goodwill of his parents and family elders. Most of my Aguenta informants are equally aggravated by their lack of opportunities and the great distance from their realisation of what they regard as their social being. They all complain of the lack of choices and opportunities that characterises the condition of young people and of the servility expected from them in their relationships with their elders.

Yet the Agentas are not alone in this. In a closer look we see that being a young, urban male is generally characterised by marginality and an inability to move along a trajectory of social becoming. It is characterised by inertia within the generational process. The social category of *youth* has consequently become a position inhabited by a constantly growing population spanning boys in their early teens to men in their forties. It is an anomic condition defined by a schism between the culturally expected and the socially possible (cf. Merton, 1965). Though many young men in Bissau yearn for the status of adulthood they are not able to gain access to the resources (symbolic and material) required to achieve it and become an *homi completo*, a complete man. The vast majority of the Agentas thus conform to what has been termed *the lost generation*, as a group of “young people [who] have finished their schooling, are without employment in the formal sector, yet are not in a position to set up an independent household” (O’Brien, 1996: 57; cf. Seekings, 1996). The prolonged period of instability and decline has halted the flow of resources between generations and crippled the state’s ability to provide alternative routes to social mobility. Urban males have become locked in the social position of youth without the possibility of achieving adulthood. They are unable to attain the momentum and progress of life that is socially and culturally desired and expected.

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### From cultural to social moratorium

Contrary to the western conceptualisation of youth as a positively valued sub-cultural entity imbued with a high level of personal freedom, youth in Bissau is a social position characterised by dependency, exploitation and a lack of options. Helena Wulff has termed the western perspective and position of young people a *cultural moratorium*, a positively valued social space that agents can explore, and where they can find an escape from adult responsibilities (cf. Wulff, 1994; Wulff, 1995: 7). Youth in Bissau, by contrast, can best be seen as a *social moratorium*<sup>14</sup>,

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<sup>14</sup> However, whereas *the lost generation* implies something irretrievable, a moratorium includes the possibility of gaining momentum, which is the underlying reason behind the continued navigational efforts of young people in Bissau.

that is as a socio-temporal space characterised by economic, social and political marginalisation. Rather than being a social category in which people seek to be included, in Bissau youth is a social space from which people try to escape.

The difference between the two is to a large degree related to levels of affluence and social possibilities. "The ultimate meaning of a relative superior status is always a wider range of possible choices", Bauman says (1992: 27) and continuing conflict, decline and scarcity has, in Bissau, had drastic effects on the status, possibilities and life chances of young, urban men. If we look at what socio-political lines of movement and strategies are available to my informants in tending to their physical – and not least – social needs, we see that rather than being a space of opportunity, youth in Bissau is a space of restriction, as continuing economic decline has made it difficult for them to set their lives along a process of social becoming. Researching youth in Bissau also shows us that rather than locating the reason for my interlocutors' conflict engagement in a crisis of youth, masculinity or class (cf. Richards, 1995; cf. Ramphele, 2000; Abdullah, 1997; Bangura, 1997), it seems more useful to focus on (an impairment of) *social becoming*, as it shows the interconnectedness of the above factors and positions voluntary mobilisation in relation, not only to immediate survival, but just as importantly to the realisation of *social being* (Vigh, 2006, 2006b).

Yet, how do young men go about surviving and realising social being when networks have contracted to a bare minimum and resources are barricaded out of reach, when stuck in a social moratorium with very few possibilities of escape? The answer is, in Bissau, given via a Creole term, which is at the same time a cultural institution, a self-identity and a praxis, namely *dubriagem*.

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## *Dubriagem*

I first encountered the word *dubriagem* when talking to Pedro and Justino about their life chances in light of Bissau's disastrous deterioration and the dismal predictability of further trouble. As they were weaving a picture of the hardships that characterised their situation a word surfaced which was immediately transmuted into a listing of acts and relationships that could help you get a job or a meal, or just get by. When I asked about the unfamiliar word, Pedro and Justino responded in unison: "*dubria, dubria*". Pedro continued: "You *dubria*... it's movement, dynamism, *dinamismo*", he said, as Justino added "(...) you *dubria* so that you can see your life"<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> *Bu ta dubria ku vida, dubria pa bu puidi odja bu vida.*

Their attempts at providing a verbal explanation were, however, less successful than the accompanying body language. As they were talking, Pedro started moving his upper body in a disjointed yet rhythmical sway. Looking somewhat as if he was shadow boxing he wove and bobbed his torso back and forth as though dodging invisible pulls and pushes. Only later did it dawn on me that what he was in fact dodging were the pulls and pushes of social forces. His metaphorical shadowboxing was an embodied description of how one moves through a social environment in motion.

## DeMISTification

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As the word *dubriagem* apparently does not exist in Portuguese, I initially thought the concept to be unique to Guinean Creole<sup>16</sup>. However, as I was to find out, the concept has a parallel in the French *se débrouiller*, meaning, to get by or make the most of a situation (Reed-Danahay, 1996: 63-64)<sup>17</sup>, related to the substantive *débrouillardise*, the ability to get by. Etymologically the word is related to *brouillard*, fog<sup>18</sup>, and *débrouiller* thus indicates a process of gaining clarity whilst moving in an opaque (social) environment. It is an act of demystification<sup>19</sup>.

*Dubriagem* is, in this perspective, both emplotment and actualisation; it is simultaneously an act of analysing possibilities within a social environment, drawing trajectories through it and actualising these in praxis. In a Guinean context *dubriagem* designates the act of making the most of a situation and making things work to one's advantage. It is, as Pedro said, *dynamismo*; a dynamic quality of attentiveness and ability to act in relation to the movement of the social terrain one's life is set in. Thus *dubria*, the active form of the verb, encompasses both the *immediate* assessment of the dangers and possibilities of one's present position as well as the ability to envision, plot and actualise an advantageous movement from the present into an *imagined* future. In other words, it encompasses, both immediate survival and the drawing of trajectories into the imagined future.

<sup>16</sup> A similar concept exists in the Portuguese term of *desenrascar*; that is, to disentangle or to free of difficulty. George, G. (1963), Portuguese-English Dictionary, London, Harrap & Co.

<sup>17</sup> Reed-Danahay interestingly relates the French concept to social fluidity, which further brings its meaning back to the present concept of social navigation.

<sup>18</sup> Even here there does not seem to be a link with Portuguese as "fog" translates to *nevoeiro* and "foggy" to *nevoento*.

<sup>19</sup> Ordbog, Fransk-Dansk; Hagerup, H.; København, 1964; Reed-Danahay, 1996: 64.

## The immediate and the imagined

“You *dubria* to survive”, people say in Bissau, yet though the phrase is a common explanation of the concept, indicating an act of taking care of one’s immediate needs and dealing with immediate dangers, it only illuminates a fraction of the concept. *Dubriagem* is more than an act of survival. Survival in Creole is *sobrevivi*, designating a continuum of life through the immediate. *Dubriagem*, on the contrary, has a dual temporality as it relates to movement through both the socially *immediate* (present) and the socially *imagined* (future), designating a temporally dense action complex enabling one to survive in the here and now as well as *to see one’s life*<sup>20</sup>; i.e. to gain an idea of the possible course of one’s life trajectory in an unfolding social terrain. *Dubriagem*, as such, refers to both the praxis of navigating a road through shifting or opaque socio-political circumstances and the process of plotting it.

*You said you joined the Aguentas to see your life. What is this?*

If you are born here [in Bissau] and you do not have, if your family does not have, [then] you have to look for your life<sup>21</sup>. You must *dubria*. If you do not *dubria* with life you will not see it.

*See what?*

[Annoyed] Your life! Me... If I do not *dubria*, I will not have... I will stay like this without money, a family or anything. (Carlos)

The above quote directs our attention towards the relationship between *dubriagem*, social becoming and escape from the social moratorium. To “look for one’s life” and to have to *dubria* in order to “see it” underlines the etymological point of departure of the word, as Carlos has to construe and navigate a clear passage through an opaque and changeable environment. His words illustrate how *dubriagem* is both a process of disentanglement from (present and future) confining structures and relations as well as a drawing of a line of flight into an envisioned future. *Dubriagem*, then, is to simultaneously keep oneself free of immediate social dangers and direct one’s life through a shifting and uncertain social environment towards better possible futures and improved life chances. It is social navigation<sup>22</sup>, demonstrating how urban youth, such as Carlos, seeks

<sup>20</sup> *Bu ta dubria pa bu pudi odja bu vida.*

<sup>21</sup> *Buska nha vida.*

<sup>22</sup> Navigation is thus defined as motion within motion rather than dependent on the use of maps (Ingold, 2000). Navigation as a process combines mapmaking and wayfinding as we simultaneously navigate the immediate and the imagined, i.e., the next hurdle as well as the many imagined to come, in our movement towards a distant goal.

through mobilisations to navigate the event of war in order to survive in the present and gain a better life in the future. Or as Adilson phrased it:

Because I understood that they would be able to send me my day of change [*dia di seku*]...<sup>23</sup> After... After the war, if all went well and we won, there was something (...) If you had a good level you would get money to put in your pocket, or they would find you work.

*Did they say what work, or just work?*

Just work, abroad, in a place outside.

*Okay, in other countries. Where did you want to go?*

Whatever country they would send me to.

*In Africa or Europe?*

No, in Europe.

Mobilisation offers Adilson a road out of his present stalemate. At 34, he was the oldest of my informants, yet without a job or the ability to take care of himself, let alone a family, he was bitterly trapped in the category of youth. It thus offered him the possibility of “his day of change”, that is, the decisive break from his current life position of social inertia. Through his affiliation with a patrimonial network Adilson saw a chance of changing his life and increasing his life chances. He saw a chance to reposition himself socially and embark on a process of social becoming, by gaining that which is most treasured in Bissau, absence: the empty space left by migration (Pink, 2001: 103; cf. Gable, 1995). Mobilisation is thus intricately tied to a possible realisation of social being, a fact that becomes even clearer in Paulo’s statement:

When the war started we were in Prabis... Many people went to Prabis; many people went there... Like we sat there [and] we could hear how they shot at each other, we could hear how there was war. Since we sat there we thought like<sup>24</sup>, “we are clever, we can go and join the troops. We can quickly become someone big, quickly” (*rapido-nan*).

As I got close enough to the day-to-day life of my Aguenta interlocutors to experience the constant bantering and ridicule they received for having chosen the wrong side of the conflict, I learnt that *stupid*<sup>25</sup> must have been the adjective

<sup>23</sup> They, refers both to the “big men” on the Government side, as well as to Government recruitment officers who were sent to Papel *bairros* and other areas to convince able-bodied males to join the Aguentas.

<sup>24</sup> *Suma*.

<sup>25</sup> *Buro*.

that Paulo had heard most often in connection with his name since the end of the war in 1999. In this perspective, his constant references to his intellectual ability seemed like sad attempts at convincing people that he was not as stupid as his failed tactics would lead people to believe. Yet his words also emphasised how joining the army in a situation of warfare could be an act of *dubriagem*, pointing our attention towards my informants' tactical evaluation of their possibilities in relation to the onset of war. Entering the army in order to "see one's life", i.e. to gain clarity on possible movements and trajectories, was a commonly expressed motivating factor behind joining the Aguentas. My informants, exemplified by Paulo's quote, thus tactically navigated the space opened by others' strategy of warfare.

*No kai na dubria*, "we fell trying to *dubria*", Paulo said when I revisited him in autumn 2003. They literally did. Half of the youths recruited into the Aguentas fell on the battlefield. Yet despite the fact that Paulo's tactics failed so ungracefully, his story offers a good description of how he and his friend Julio sought to navigate war as an event. It shows us that for urban youth war is a possible vital conjuncture (cf. Johnston-Hanks, 2002) and their mobilisation directed towards escaping the social moratorium, increasing their life chances and gaining the momentum of their process of social becoming.

*Dubriagem* is, I hold, social navigation, and as such it directs our attention towards the way in which the Aguentas seek to steer their lives across a shifting and volatile terrain (cf. Jackson, 1998). As they shape their acts towards the movement of the social terrain and shape the movement of the terrain through their acts our attention is directed towards an aspect of their conflict engagement, which holds the key to understanding their mobilisation, namely the cybernetic and inter-morphological aspect of praxis.

## **Instability and social navigation**

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I began to climb the wheel like a squirrel; but I would hardly get the boat started to port before I would see new dangers on that side, and away I would spin to the other; only to find perils accumulating starboard, and be crazy to get to port again. Then came the leadsmen's sepulchral cry:

"D-e-e-p four!"

Deep four in a bottomless crossing! The terror of it took my breath away.

"M-a-r-k three! M-a-r-k three! Quarter-less-three! Half twain!"

This was frightful! I seized the bell-ropes and stopped the engines.

“Quarter twain! Quarter twain! Mark Twain!”

I was helpless. I did not know what in the world to do. I was quaking from my head to foot, and I could have hung my hat on my eyes, they stuck out so far.

“Quarter less twain” Nine-and-a-half!”

*Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain, 1963 [1896]: 70

Like Mark Twain, my interlocutors navigate dangerous waters. With their capacities stretched to the utmost, they seek to strike the right trajectories through the murky waters of both predictable and unpredictable social turmoil. Yet having to navigate a shifting and volatile terrain is not an isolated instance for urban youth in Bissau. *War is like the rainy season* Vítór says in the introductory quote to this article, indicating a common perception of the Bissauan social environment as in constant motion and imbued with the constant possibility of warfare. The quote not only points our attention towards “a disintegration of social institutions” but equally towards an experience of being “condemned to passivity and temporarily deprived of the possibility of being a subject in full possession of his powers” (Habermas, 1992: 1-3). It points our attention towards crisis as experiential and social “stagnation, decline, and decay [signifying] the opposite of correct and desirable progress” (Lindquist, 1996: 58). Yet crisis is, by definition, a demarcated state of affairs (Whyte, 1994). It is, as Habermas states above, a *temporal deprivation* (of agency, stability etc.)<sup>26</sup>, and in this respect the term seems of little use in making sense of the acts and understandings of agents in a context where decline and conflict have become prosaic.

Situations of prolonged decline and conflict entail the emergence of a radically different everydayness, from what is seen in *stable* societies, by substituting the order of social, political and societal formations with that of disorder. Persistent decline and conflict have, in Bissau, established a radical state of what Taussig, following Brecht, has called *ordered disorder* (Taussig, 1992). In Guinea-Bissau the societal constants are currently conflict and turmoil rather than law and order and the outcome is the paradox of having instability become stable social fact. Researching youth in Bissau is, as such, not a question of looking at agents caught in a state of crisis but at agents caught in a state of enduring instability.

Accepting that, in many areas of Africa, we are looking at societies and social circumstances that can no longer be seen through the lenses of the prolonged liminality of crisis is, as such, a fundamental prerequisite for a proper understanding of the socio-political processes in the continent and not least for a proper understanding of the acts and understandings of its inhabitants. Yet making

<sup>26</sup> Conversation with Susan R. Whyte (2003).



conflict and instability the foundation of analysis is not unproblematic as it spurs a number of important analytical and theoretical problems, which require us to reassess our analytical apparatus. "Ethnography of political instability forces us along with our subjects to rethink many key ideas", Elizabeth Mertz says in her concluding remarks to *An Anthropology of Unstable Places* (2002). One of the concepts most in need of being reconsidered is that of praxis.

## The praxis of unstable places

Few social scientific works have dealt specifically with the issue of praxis in situations of instability, conflict and turmoil. Trond Waage's description of how youth *se débrouille* in Ngaoundéré, Cameroon explains in detail how, through improvisation, they seek to survive and gain the foundations for their existence in an opaque and uncertain context (Waage, 2002). Equally, both the concepts of *du-briagem* and *se débrouille* bear resemblance to the Brazilian praxis of *jeitinho* as "a way of accomplishing a goal (...) by using (...) one's informal social and personal resources" (Barbosa, 1995: 36). Common to all three terms is an emphasis on *flexibility* and *tactics*. That is, rather than denoting demarcative and constitutive strategic action all three concepts direct our attention towards the tactical praxis of navigating social ties and events within a social environment in motion.

In other words, where strategic action can be seen as producing a localised *domain* by anchoring demarcations and configuration through the construction of enclosures and boundaries (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 2002: 381), the moving space of tactics operates between and across these, manipulating the pathways between them, penetrating their fissures and taking advantage of their destruction and reconstruction. Tactic "remains dependent on the possibilities offered by circumstance" (de Certeau, 1984: 29), yet agents turn events into possibilities by tactically manipulating rules, systems or structures (cf. *ibid.*: xix). Tactics are, as such, the praxis characterising the migrant, the seaman and the nomad (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 2002) as their space is a trail of constant movement cutting through and between the space of others and moving between uncertain but imagined points in the environment (*ibid.*: 380).

Yet, it is also within the issue of power that the differentiation between tactics and strategy has its greatest limitation. Seeing strategy as acts of the powerful and tactics as acts of the weak disregards the fact that a social environment is an intrinsically layered phenomenon containing a multitude of negotiations of power and instead leads us into the traditional social scientific mistake of defining people or groups as consistently either powerful or powerless. We thus blind

ourselves to the fact that what we define, from the outside, as the strategic acts of a powerful majority may in fact be the tactical acts of a self defined minority. In other words, in praxis, the alignment of the concepts of strategy and tactics along a variable of power becomes diffuse and unclear, and instead of working through the dichotomy of powerful and powerless we would do better to regard social navigation as a process of “governance and adjustment between self and other [...] in which persons vie and strategise in order to avoid nullification as well as to achieve some sense of governing their own fate” (Jackson, 1998: 18).

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## On flexibility

Applying the concept of social navigation to the mobilisation of the *Aguntas* thus serves to illuminate how agents in situations of prolonged conflict and decline seek to draw and actualise their life trajectories by manoeuvring within networks and events. Moving in relation to the movement of the social environment, they navigate the interface between conflicting factions, social instability and life chances.

Social navigation thus emphasises intermorphology and flexibility as key aspects of praxis (cf. Waage, 2002: 388), and this ability to elucidate the relationship between the way we move and the movement of social environments is exactly what sets it apart from our normal conceptualisations of praxis and what distinguishes it as an analytical optic. Social navigation designates praxis imbued with the “flexibility and «preadaptation» necessary for unpredictable change” (Bateson, 1972: 495), the praxis of moving across an environment in movement that, due to the multitude of factors influencing it, is always unfolding and hence relatively unpredictable.

Making sense of the acts of agents in situations of enduring instability thus forces us to tune our social-scientific gaze to praxis as motion within motion, meaning that we need to be aware that tactics, emplotment and act are constructed, actualised and constantly attuned to a shifting terrain and its imagined configurations. In this perspective, social navigation resembles the Certeauian *walk* centred on both the near and the far, a here and a there (Certeau, 1988: 99). Or, to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari, we may say that navigating means discovering, imagining and actualising a *smooth space* through dangerous waters (cf. 2002), simultaneously navigating the next obstacle or wave and negotiating the many to follow one’s way along an envisioned course.

Other perspectives on praxis have also emphasised this orientation towards the yet to come. Schutz’ idea of *horizon* refers, among other things, to a future

province of action (Schutz and Luckmann, 1995), and the idea of project and prospect as *protention* (Husserl 1964: 76) is similar to what I have termed the social imaginary, that is, a logical induction building on experience (cf. Bourdieu, 1997: 157). Bourdieu's own notion of *illusio* as "a feel for the game" is furthermore related to a *future in the making* as it means that "one positions oneself not where the ball is but where it will be [and that] one invests oneself not where the profit is, but where it will be" (*ibid.*).

All of the above are obviously combined in social navigation, yet what is specific to the concept, as an analytical optic, is that it illuminates action on shifting ground. It is not yet another metaphor for agency but a theoretical lens that enables us to focus on the intersection between agency and structure, while acknowledging that our lives are set in changing social environments rather than stable social surfaces. Social navigation thus makes it possible to see how praxis is constantly shaped in relation to changes in the conditions surrounding our acts and emplotment. It distances us from the faulty image of plot and action as being different sequences along a line of movement, making it impossible to maintain the picture of agents plotting and actualising their movement on stable ground, and substituting it with a focus that emphasises a more cybernetic and processual aspects of praxis.

## **The synchronic and diachronic**

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When focussing on social movement we have traditionally looked synchronically at the way in which agents move within solid social coordinates or structures, or diachronically at the way in which social coordinates and structures move and change over time. Concerning the former we implicitly or explicitly considered the *surfaces*, be they fields, frames, maps, structures or stages, in which agents act as imbued with a stable and solid quality. Bourdieu's idea of a field, for example, is built on the idea of relatively enduring class structures characterised by *objective relations* and allocations of capital<sup>27</sup>, in which agents seek to move towards and compete for better positions within the force field in question (Bourdieu, 1994 [1991])<sup>28</sup>. There is, as such, a foundational stability implied in the idea of *field*, and

<sup>27</sup> This presumed (relative) stability characterises the earlier work of Bourdieu in particular.

<sup>28</sup> For Bourdieu, a given field is defined by competition, as it is demarcated by the relationship between capital, position and movement between positions. The field is a space of competition and struggle defined by its configuration of objective relations between different positions, that is, by being a specific constellation of agents holding and competing for different positions defined by different forms of power (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001: 84-5).

most other concepts for the *space of enactment*<sup>29</sup>. People may move and act vertically in the social topography of a field in competing for position and capital and thus act strategically in relation to each other as competitors<sup>30</sup>, but they are usually understood as doing so without having to worry about (or being unaware of) the movement of the field itself and how this movement in turn moves them<sup>31</sup>. In relation to my current concern, the notion of a field, as an example of a common idea of a space of enactment, thus indicates a stability of social structure that does not correspond to the social terrain that my interlocutors' lives are embedded in, consequently fostering an unfortunate perspective on praxis.

Social navigation, in contrast, provides us with a more cybernetic perspective on praxis (cf. Bateson 1991: 261), which allows us to see the way in which our actions are constantly shaped and reshaped in relation to the immediate and imagined movement of the social environment. It grants us a view of praxis that takes into consideration the fact that we plot and live our lives in changing socio-political environments and thus enables us to focus on the relationship between what is happening with and *within* structures (Beck, Bonns and Lau, 2003: 3). It allows us, in other words, to gain a better understanding of the complexity of praxis: an understanding that is needed if we are to make sense of the mobilisation and conflict engagement of the *Aguntas* without falling into the analytical ease of seeing youth warfare merely as evidence of anarchic and archaic disorder or to view militant youth as either *mechanically mastered* or *loose molecules*.

## **Steering a course or drifting astray**

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In an enlightening book Michael Jackson quotes George Bernard Shaw saying: "to be in hell is to drift...to be in heaven is to steer" (Jackson, 1998: 19). The quote echoes a similar distinction drawn by Hastrup, between merely staying afloat and steering a course (1990: 49), as well as Habermas' description of identity crises as being related to *steering problems* (1992: 4). Yet with the concept of navigation we become aware that we are all simultaneously moving expediently along a course as well as being moved involuntarily by the course of events. The simultaneity of being afloat, adrift and in control defines a social being as we seek

<sup>29</sup> This stability is in fact what makes the concept of field an expedient metaphor for the *terrain of action*. In Bourdieu's perspective, the field gains an extra air of solidity from its underlying habitus as "history turned into nature" (Bourdieu, 1992: 78-9), i.e. a process of sedimentation. Stability, I suggest, underlies all our metaphors for the terrain of action and is no less present in concepts such as stage, structure or matrix, as is evident in the fact that they require a qualifier in order to be conveyed as in motion.

<sup>30</sup> Vertical competition is seen here as a struggle over capital and positions of capital involving strategies, subjugation and domination, as, for example, via symbolic violence.

<sup>31</sup> Whereas these configurations might change as people compete for capital, the positions or the structural grid are invested with a foundational status and hardness, which constitutes the very stability of the model.

to navigate our lives through social environments that have been set in motion by myriad individual and collective acts and forces beyond our control.

We simultaneously act and react in relation to our current position within a social terrain, in response to current constraints, possibilities and configurations of power, as well as in relation to our perception of the future terrain and its unfolding. This dense temporal orientation implies that, in order to move towards where we wish to go, we sometimes take detours, sometimes refrain from acting, and sometimes engage in apparently illogical acts, shaped in anticipation of what is to come. What may seem like illogical acts, such as volunteering to be cannon fodder, might in other words be directed both towards immediate constrictions and confinements as well as towards perceived changes in the social terrain and future social possibilities.

What we have seen in the case of the *Aguentas* is a group of agents whose possibilities and life chances are limited in the extreme, and who, through the event of war, navigate the social ties and networks that constitute their primary routes out of the social moratorium of youth. What happens in situations of conflict and war is, as said, that patrimonial networks start to mobilise young people to defend their interests. The networks that were formerly retrenched and inaccessible to most youth begin, in other words, to offer patronage in return for defence. Mobilisation thus becomes both a way of surviving the immediate as well as gaining membership of a socio-political network, needed in order to be able to realise one's social being and draw one's life trajectory meaningfully into the future.

Hence, mobilisation must be understood in relation to both the immediate and the imagined as it provides urban youth in Bissau with an opportunity to survive a troubled and insecure present as well as opening up a possibility of future patronage and social becoming. As such, the case of the *Aguentas* makes the perception of peace, conflict and warfare as structurally distinct social processes impossible to maintain (cf. Nordstrom, 1997), as their engagement in war is directly related to their envisioned positions and possibilities in the period of peace that is imagined to follow in its wake. Wars do not start with the first shot or end with the last and the lesson learned by looking at the *Aguentas* is that they navigate the social terrain as it oscillates between calm, conflict and (at times) warfare, with hardness of life, social instability and decline as its stable elements.

In analysing the mobilisation of the *Aguentas* we must, in other words, be aware that they regard the social fabric of their society as changeable and unstable. The speed and constancy of change and socio-political configurations and reconfigurations in Bissau has meant that decline and conflict become reflexively

routinised rather than sedimented into the unconscious (cf. Virilio, 2001 [1977]; Beck, Bonns and Lau, 2003). Taking socio-political configurations for granted is, in Bissau, a luxury that cannot be afforded as one might be caught off guard by the movements of the social environment. What we see when focussing on the Aguntas, through the lens of social navigation, is that rather than acting as if their social environment and everyday life is fundamentally a constant, they act in relation to a reading and interpretation of its fluidity. The magnitude and multitude of change has meant that those aspects of the social foundation that are usually taken for granted have been called into question and been replaced by a reflexivity of social interpretation and evaluations.

In this perspective social navigation is not only a useful analytical optic in situations of conflict or volatile societal flux. It becomes evident in situations of instability, but does not stem from it. Navigation is, rather, related to the speed of change (Virilio, *ibid.*) and is evident in all situations where the multitude and magnitude of social and societal transformations are such that changes within the social environment become reflexively routinised rather than sedimented and habituated into the unconscious.

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