Rethinking Instability: Imbalances between indigenous powers and state collapse in Guinea-Bissau

Reconsiderar a instabilidade: desequilíbrios entre poderes nativos e o colapso do estado em Guiné-Bissau

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ABSTRACT:

The premise of this paper emerges from an understanding of political turmoil and recurrent instability as being due to the process of the Africanisation of power. My aim is to discern this idea in relation to Guinea-Bissau. Since 1994, the West African country has experienced continuous political instability. So far, political analysis has pinpointed the rationale of Bissau-Guinean political turmoil as dependent on the ethnicisation of power and a dysfunctional state. The first is largely due to the role played by the Balanta ethnic group. While much harm was inflicted on the Balanta in the past, the group assumed power through its domination of the military. The second phenomenon relates to a political class unprepared for office yet committed to the misappropriation of power and resources, engendering failure of the state and its institutions. Without discarding these hypotheses, I argue that the underlying rationale of Bissau-Guinean political turmoil is further related to the Africanisation of power. The latter is a bi-directional process, in which the state influences indigenous political powers and vice versa. This paper identifies how these political powers differ in their configuration of the polity and in the policies applied, leading to discrepant political behaviours in their subjects.

KEYWORDS: political instability, Africanisation of power, Guinea-Bissau, ethnicisation of politics, dysfunctional state.

RESUMO:

As premissas deste artigo surgem do entendimento de crise política e recorrente instabilidade como resultantes do processo de africanização do poder. Pretendo aqui discernir esta ideia em relação à Guiné-Bissau. Desde 1994, este estado da África Ocidental passou por contínua instabilidade política. Até à data, a análise política indica que a lógica subjacente às diversas crises políticas guineenses depende de etnicização do poder e Estado disfuncional. O primeiro deve-se, em larga parte, ao papel desempenhado pelo grupo étnico Balanta. Muitos danos foram infligidos aos Balanta no passado; contudo o grupo conseguiu apropria-se do poder através do domínio das forças militares. O segundo fenómeno prende-se na identificação duma classe política escassamente preparada para o cargo, mas empenhada na apropriação indébita de poder e recursos, constituindo as bases do falhanço do Estado e das suas instituições. Sem desconsiderar as hipóteses citadas, argumento que a lógica subjacente às crises políticas na Guiné-Bissau é adicionalmente relacionada com a africanização do poder. Este é um fenómeno

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ambivalente e bidirecional, no qual o Estado influencia os poderes políticos autóctones e vice-versa. Este artigo identifica como estes poderes políticos diferem nas suas configurações como entidade política, assim como nas políticas aplicadas, diferenciação que leva à manutenção de comportamentos políticos discrepantes nos seus sujeitos políticos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Instabilidade política, Africanização do poder, Guiné-Bissau, Etnicização da política, Estado disfuncional.

1. Introduction

The Africanisation of power is a concept with broad connotations and nuances. It might denote a process of the appropriation of instruments and resources of power versus exogenous occupation if read through anti-colonial lenses (Fanon, [1963] 2005). Likewise, it envisages a "coming Black of the world," according to Achille Mbembe. In other words, the Africanisation of power and politics denotes a peculiar characteristic of the *nomos* of modernity and necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003; [2013] 2018). On the other hand, to talk about the Africanisation of power means to discuss specific configurations, principles and understanding of political power, democracy and the state in Africa (Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Wiredu, 2001).

This paper does not intend to broaden the theoretical background of the above assumptions. Rather, it seeks to set out these postulates in the specific context of Guinea-Bissau. The small state located on the western coast of the sub-Sahara has hardly experienced any political stability since independence. Torn by coups d'état[1], a civil war and restive military forces, the Bissau-Guinean people have seen living conditions deteriorate, rather than enjoying the long-awaited development politicians promised. Even the opening up to a multiparty system in 1994 did not positively contribute to the situation but instead worsened the already poor conditions.

The scramble for power inherent to winning seats in parliament and ruling the government has led to ferocious political debates, not necessarily contained to verbal confrontations. At the time of writing, the ongoing political crisis has seen politicians in opposition parties fearing for their own lives and others kidnapped and beaten for not toeing the party line (see articles in Deutsche Welt (DW) and the Expresso (Agencia Lusa, 2020; Darame, 2020; Pereira, 2020)). The fight for power, deeply rooted in the political system, prevents parties from reaching any compromise and forming a government. The latest crisis dates back to 2015, when then-president José Mário Vaz dismissed the government of Domingos Simões Pereira, a member of the same political party (PAIGC, *Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde)*.

The political turmoil chronically affecting Guinea-Bissau – its state and citizens – has been looked at by anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists, with each discipline

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[1] From the end of the civil war in 1999, there were five coups d'état, several attempted coups and a presidential assassination carried out by the military in retaliation for the murder of the army's Chief of Staff in 2009 (Shaw & Gomes, 2020). In February 2020, the swearing-in of Umaro Sissoco Embaló as president of the republic was read by many as the latest coup d'état in the country (Dansó, 2020; Lusa, 2020).

attempting to unveil the rationale beneath the "stable instability" (Vigh, 2009) in the country's political sphere. Taking these contributions into consideration in this paper, I aim to advance an explanatory stance for the political turmoil in Guinea-Bissau, underpinned by the tenets and concepts of political theory. The postulates to be put forward and discussed do not discard the relevance of previous studies but are rather a complement to the existing debate.

The paper is structured in three sections. In the first, I begin with the literature to connect the two main phenomena largely adduced as causes of political instability in Guinea-Bissau. Scholars report the ongoing process of ethnicisation (or "*balantização*") of power – in other words, the sectorial appropriation of power by individuals belonging to a single ethnic group (Chabal, 1992). Neglected more than others during colonial administration and unappreciated during the twenty-year rule of João Bernardino (commonly known as Nino) Vieira, the Balanta group found their way to power via military force (specifically through FARP, *Forças Armadas Revolucionárias do Povo*). The army's involvement in politics became a constant feature of Bissau-Guinean politics and therefore the support of the Balanta, preponderant in the armed forces, is essential to the ruling party.

The second section looks at how recurrent political crises are linked to a dysfunctional state and political elitism. Such characterisation is often heard when talking about the state in Africa, along with concepts of corruption, clientelism, personalism, hyper-presidentialism and appropriation of power and resources. These reasons seem to have laid the groundwork for the 1998-1999 civil war, along with the extensive trafficking of cocaine, which earned Guinea-Bissau the epithet "narco-state" (Ceesay, 2016; Ferrett & Vulliamy, 2008).

In the last section of this paper, I aim to integrate the debate from the standpoint of political theory, pointing to the process of the Africanisation of power as an underlying cause of political turmoil. This is a twofold process that creates bonds of mutual yet asymmetrical reciprocity between state and indigenous power. Differences between the two powers range from configuration of the polity to decision-making practices, as well as discrepancies in political behaviours. Nevertheless, the core of the divergence lies in the foundational power relations that constitute the basis of the polity: insofar as the state is ordered based on individualistic, rationalistic and legalistic principles, indigenous power is characterised by intersubjective relations, promoting cooperation and compromise among subjects. This difference in foundational principles creates a mismatch between power institutions and processes and power relations. Hence, in the conclusion of my paper, I argue that the reciprocal interaction (or lack thereof) among political powers in Guinea-Bissau is key to any understanding of political instability.

The study is based on extensive fieldwork done in the country between 2016 and 2019. This fieldwork employed non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus group

techniques. Framed by the concepts of political theory, the epistemological basis of my analysis is in essence interpretive.

2. "Balantização" of State Power

In an article published shortly after the end of the civil war (June 1999), the Portuguese scholar Eduardo Costa Dias mentioned the process of the "*balantização*" of Guinea-Bissau for the first time (Dias, 2000). This process appeared in the aftermath of political pluralism and civil war, as the presence and influence of the populous Balanta ethnic group, which constitutes approximately 26% of the total population (Nóbrega, 2003), grew in the political sphere.

In the eyes of other ethnic groups in Guinea-Bissau, the Balanta are seen as backward and warlike—people who cling strongly to traditions and refuse to modernise (Temudo, 2009). This tendency, along with societal specificities (the Balanta are one of the few societies in the country ordered in a horizontal structure), fostered their marginalisation and isolation. Moreover, throughout history, the Balanta have been generally neglected, both during the colonial period and under the first independent governments, especially under the rule of Nino Vieira (1980-1998).

Reports attest that, during colonial administration, Balanta people were beaten harder and mistreated more than other ethnic groups; they were given jobs and tasks that were more physically demanding (Forrest, 2016; Temudo, 2009). When independence emerged, the Balanta were not rewarded for their service in the liberation army.[2] Individually, many Balanta joined the army to escape marginalisation due to their historical and cultural ties and large population (Kohl, 2016). Not only did the newly formed Bissau-Guinean and Cape Verde government fail to award young Balanta fighters compensation for their role in the fight for national independence, but they also withheld high-ranking positions within the army from them (Forrest, 1992, p. 57).

This marginalisation generated discontent among soldiers, who protested delays in the payment of wages and demanded a review of army ranking systems on three separate occasions in the 1980s (Forrest, 1992, p. 59). Moreover, the general neglect allowed by the colonial administration and perpetrated by the national government and its administration provided tinder for the explosion of the conflict in 1998-1999. According to Toby Green, the Balanta originally joined the conflict as a means of economic development, or rather a way for the numerous Balanta population to find a way out of the poverty and social, political and economic marginalisation implicit in the structured social order (Green, 2016).

On the other hand, the participation of the Balanta group in state politics operated through what Patrick Chabal refers to as "tribal imperative," meaning the instrumentalisation of ethnic

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[2] According to tradition, a Balanta man takes pride in his strength and courage on the battlefield. Cattle theft and petty theft are also considered sources of pride, as they demonstrate how strong someone is (Temudo, 2009).

factors to achieve political goals (Chabal, 1996, p. 48). In this sense, the action of Kumba Yala (president of the republic from 2000 to 2003), was strategic to the introduction of the Balanta into state politics. Kumba Yala ran in the 2000 presidential election for the Social Renovation Party (*Partido para a Renovação Social*, PRS), founded by Yala himself in 1994. Throughout his campaign, Kumba Yala built a solid network of power, manoeuvring friendship and family ties and earning the support and votes of the Balanta population. Such support was rewarded in the form of ministerial and other posts. In the election, Kumba Yala and the allied army forces also obtained strategic control over the port of Bissau, thereby gaining protection for several semi-licit or illegal businesses.

By the beginning of the 2000s, the military was already dominated by the Balanta, who had used their high population to co-opt the army. Balanta presence within army ranks increased exponentially, to the point that new soldiers were not recruited in the barracks but in Balanta villages (Da Silva, 2003). Thus, before engaging directly with politics, the Balanta had created a monopoly over the armed forces. Their force was instrumental to the power of Kumba Yala, not only to augment his electoral base, but also to maintain a network of personalistic and privatised power.

Following decades of marginalisation and mistreatment, the Balanta group promptly learnt how to use identity politics to its own advantage (Temudo, 2009). Still, the "tribal imperative" remains confined to political games of power, as Bissau-Guineans hold on to a common sense of nationalistic *guineidade* beyond ethnic belonging. Anchored in the writings of the cherished father of the nation, Amílcar Cabral, daily livelihood fosters a sense of commonality beyond ethnicity and rejects factionalism grounded on ethnic ties in the name of historical events, trans-ethnicisation of cultural features and common suffering (Havik, 2016). Furthermore, an analysis of the election polls that saw Kumba Yala take office does not support a hypothesis of ethnic voting: Catholic and Balanta, the former president received over 50% of the vote, regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation (Rudebeck, 2001).

Scholars have spoken of the process of '*balantização*', or 'balantisation' of state power (Dias, 2000; Kohl, 2016) as peculiar to Kumba Yala's politics. Nevertheless, the process is, at the time of writing, far from over. The presidential election held in late December 2019 reached an impasse when the defeated candidate, Domingos Simões Pereira from the PAIGC political party, contested the results, alleging fraud in the counting. The litigation over the necessity to recount the votes then passed to the supreme court as Pereira filed a formal complaint about irregularities. As the long-awaited decision was not proffered and with the COVID-19 health crisis looming, Umaro Sissoco Embaló (from MADEM G-15[3]), declared winner of the election by the elections

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[3] MADEM G-15 is a recent political party that was formed in 2018 after the resignation of former members of the dominant PAIGC. Although the new party name is *Movimento para Alternancia Democrática*

body (the CNE, *Comissão Nacional das Eleições*), was symbolically appointed president by the vice-president of the parliament (the ANP, *Assembleia Nacional Popular*) on 27 February 2020. The following day, the vice-president of the ANP, Nuno Gomes Nabiam, was proclaimed prime minister by the newly inaugurated president, disregarding the existence of a government, led by Aristide Gomes, which had won its power in the legislative election held in March 2019. Nabiam belongs to a different party (APU-PDGB, *Assembleia do Povo Unido– Partido Democrático da Guiné-Bissau*) from Embaló, but he represented a key element for popular and electoral support as he mobilised support from the Balanta.[4] Still, the appointment of Nabiam as prime minister aggravated the political crisis. There remain, at the time of writing, two governments claiming the right to lead the executive branch.

The exploitation of the "tribal imperative" for political ends exacerbates factionalism in politics and is a more or less direct coinciding factor stimulating political instability. The rationale underlying the instrumentalisation of the ethnic factor with regard to political aims is twofold. On the one hand, restive military forces contribute to the prolonged, recurrent turmoil plaguing the country. Military forces do not act as external or impartial players but as involved political actors. Following years of governments ruled by reluctant democrats, coups d'état became a legitimate means to secure power (Forrest, 2016). Moreover, the army took upon itself the role of guardian in state politics, thus rescinding autonomy between political and military powers. On the other hand, the constant interference of the military in state power is a form of maintaining some balance of power. In the aftermath of independence, control of the country was assumed by the leaders of the liberation movement. By and large, these leaders were neither academics nor educated politicians; rather they were militants who had fought in the struggle for freedom. They transformed the national liberation movement into a political party, which grew to be synonymous with the state, particularly under the one-party rule of Nino Vieira (1980-1994). The PAIGC based its monopoly of state power on historical, cultural and nationalistic grounds. Throughout this process, the Balanta were generally ostracised from power. Therefore, they found their own way to secure power, through sectional appropriation not of political but of military power. They later became active in the political arena, securing Balanta rights and guaranteeing a balance to the one-party system created by the PAIGC. Thus, the *balantização* of power epitomises a form of reclaiming power in a state monopolised by the PAIGC, in games of allegiances within the political sphere and beyond.

(MADEM), it maintained the references to the group of PAIGC's dissidents, the "group of fifteen", the G-15.

[4] According to Shaw and Gomes, Balanta support was granted to Embaló on the condition that Nabiam would be appointed prime minister. Embaló complied with the request, notwithstanding the unconstitutionality generated by having two prime ministers coexisting (Shaw & Gomes, 2020).

3. The Collapse of the State

The games of allegiances and power characterising politics in Guinea-Bissau represent one facet of politics. However, politics and state are far more complex, driven by manifold processes of power. In this regard, scholars have linked how the state presents a peculiar configuration, due, on the one hand, to its fragility or hollowness (Bordonaro, 2009; Forrest, 2003; Nóbrega, 2015; Rudebeck, 2001) and, on the other, to coexistence with other political powers. Contingencies forced the state in Africa to adapt to context, developing subtle processes of power organisation that were at times even coterminous with a state of exception (Agamben, 2003; Minca, 2006). In distinguishing this from the western state model, Chabal and Daloz refer to the political order of states in Africa as political disorder (Chabal & Daloz, 1999, 2003).

Simple as it is, this definition is open to interpretation. The authors suggest that 'disorder' indicates a different sort of order, dictated by five primary factors: the notion of the individual; the salience of reciprocity; the importance of vertical links; the concept of success; and the imperative of a short-term view combined with micro-success (Chabal & Daloz, 2003, p. 52). On the contrary, the concept of disorder might point to a lack of compliance with the *nomos* of modernity, that is, the state governed by rule of law, under the regime of liberal, majoritarian democracy (Mbembe, 2003). Through such lenses, scholars read the recurrent political instability in Guinea-Bissau as a malfunctioning of apparatus and institutions, along with the poor performance of reluctant democrats and unprepared political actors (Ceesay, 2016; Ostheimer, 2001).

As discussed in the previous section, state politics in Guinea-Bissau is made up of intricate games of power, fostered by corruptible politicians and a restive military, thus facilitating political instability. This dysfunction of the political is understood to be due to three factors: personal idiosyncrasies, factionalism and corruptibility.

Blurring the distinction between public and private life, politicians tend to personalise their office, so that one individual ends up being endowed with more relevance than their office might normally permit. Such personalistic use of power generates idiosyncrasies between the person holding office and the position or institution represented, escalating into abuses of power. This process has been particularly evident in the case of the President of the Republic, who bent the constitutional provisions of the semi-presidential system to a condition of hyper-presidentialism (Nóbrega, 2015, p. 116; Rudebeck, 2001) by assuming powers and competencies the president was not originally entitled to.

Personalisation and privatisation of power move the political fight beyond the boundaries of politics, bringing it into the public realm. On the one hand, personal idiosyncrasies void the state as an institution of power and legitimacy (Bordonaro, 2009). On the other hand, such tendencies condone the appropriation of wealth, resources and other means of generating wealth.

In other words, the personalistic use of power goes hand in hand with the phenomenon of neopatrimonialism, in which the management of state resources is pursued in accordance with the interests of elite individuals.

This interpretation of state power and politics as a way to acquire wealth is responsible for the widespread idea that securing a post or an office in public service is a way of '*fazer a vida*' (Lourenço-Lindell, 2002; Vigh, 2009), or rather a safe way to provide for oneself and one's family. By and large, Bissau-Guinean people believe that to engage in a political career, or to be assigned a post in public administration, means a secure income in the long term. Moreover, the attribution of political and public administration offices depends on dominant political forces, hence sparking personalistic antagonism and factionalism (Forrest, 1992; Ostheimer, 2001). This factionalism is not based merely on ethnic belonging, but responds to ancestral, cultural and geographical ties and obligations (Kohl, 2016). Underpinned by this personalistic conception, the power struggle in Bissau-Guinean politics exacerbates ideological, ethnic and historical divisions as it works to guarantee the appropriation and maintenance of that power.

As the last presidential election demonstrated, the Bissau-Guinean political realm constitutes a space of fighting for crude appropriation of power, using opposition and endless instances of prevarication. Held in late December 2019, the presidential election saw the opposition of candidates Domingos Simões Pereira, running for the PAIGC, and Umaro Sissoco Embaló, for MADEM-G15. Initially made up of a small group of PAIGC dissidents, MADEM-G15 politicians established a network of allegiance with other political parties with the aim of ousting the PAIGC from power.

The sectional appropriation of power effected by the political and military elite does not represent a mere motif to endorse this or that political party, but rather operates as an active stimulus to engage with politics. Beside the sphere of legislative and executive powers, the high profits of illicit trade entice individuals into involvement with the government. In fact, the scenario we are presented with in Guinea-Bissau is that state fragility is conducive to crime and exploitation of state institutions, thus leading to the flourishing, in both number and extent, of national and transnational crimes (Ceesay, 2016). Illicit trafficking of drugs or arms sales do not create instability per se, but rather feed from it.

Corruption and corruptibility are considered endemic to the political system of Guinea-Bissau. Fostered by personalistic power, privatisation of power and resources, along with factionalism and neopatrimonialism, national and transnational crime organisations find a convenient partner in the Bissau-Guinean elite. The socio-legal fiction that is the Bissau-Guinean state (Bordonaro, 2009) eludes depiction of state criminalisation (Bayart, Ellis, & Hibou, 1999), as state institutions and authorities lack substantial means, structure and legitimacy to convey power. Still, the generalised condition of corruptibility among the ruling elite facilitates the

flourishing of criminal activity, whether by providing impunity for the actors involved or by offering protection in key trade posts.

Besides aiding transnational criminal organisations and illicit trafficking, the endemic corruption among the ranks of the army and in political parties jeopardises the living conditions of the population as a whole. Political scientists as well as journalists, international organisations and NGOs regard smuggling and corruption as responsible for the 1998-1999 civil conflict. The conflict arose from divergences between Nino Vieira, at the time President of the Republic, and the FARP chief of staff, Ansumane Mané. Both were involved in the smuggling of weapons to rebel MFDC[5] forces in the region of Casamance (Green, 2016, p. 211), on the border between Guinea-Bissau and Senegal. Rather than facing legal action, they plunged the situation into generalised violence, starting with a coup d'état and culminating in ten months of civil war (Vigh, 2009).[6]

In a similar manner, the literature notes elite corruptibility as a decisive factor in the spreading of drug (mostly cocaine) trafficking. Between 2006 and 2008, the trade gained such large proportions that critics labelled Guinea-Bissau the first "narco-state" in sub-Saharan Africa (Ceesay, 2016; Chabal & Green, 2016; Ferrett & Vulliamy, 2008). The definition of narco-state is a controversial matter, insofar as there are no clear parameters on what determines or constitutes a narco-state (Ceesay, 2016; Shaw & Gomes, 2020). The scale, however, of cocaine traffic in Guinea-Bissau is, beyond any doubt, problematic.[7] Moreover, reports from NGOs point to the impunity traffickers enjoy, due to the protection offered to the political and military actors involved in trafficking.

Therefore, personal idiosyncrasies, factionalism and corruptibility co-occur in defining the political disorder that cause political instability. The primary driver of these processes is individual interests, such that the elite retain the ability to privatise power and resources for their own benefit at the expense of the overall political system.

Critics suggest that indigenous conceptions of power influence the performance of state actors, along with political behaviours. Personal idiosyncrasies and hyper-presidentialism of state politicians and heads of state are influenced by the office of indigenous chiefs, whose role is lifelong duty (Hyden, 2013). In turn, these processes are responsible for other malfunctions, such

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[5] Mouvement de Forces Democratiques de Casamance.

[6] The ANP launched an investigation into arms sales on the border between the two countries and the report was due on 8 June 1998. As rumour had it that the report was heavily influenced by Nino Vieira, Ansumane Mané prevented the document from reaching the parliament and, gathering a number of loyal troops around him, launched a coup d'état on the day the ANP's verdict was due (Vigh, 2009). Thus began a year of civil war opposing Mané's *Junta Militar* and Nino's internationally backed forces.

[7] Drug seizures are indicative of the scale of the operations. In 2019 alone, two major seizures of cocaine, in March and September, resulted in 789 and 1800 kilograms of confiscated product, respectively. This is a marked increase from 2007, when the Judicial Police seized a load of 635 kilograms of cocaine. Although police operations have fallen off since 2014, the extent of 2019 trafficking indicates the maintenance or intensification of illicit trade routes, rather than their dismantlement (Shaw & Gomes, 2020).

as factionalism, corruption and the fight for power, assumed as endemic to the system. In other words, the Bissau-Guinean political elite steadily learn how to make use of the "tribal imperative" under different circumstances, to better match the characteristics and principles of indigenous power to political goals, with personal advantage always in mind.

Such analysis, I argue, is grounded in generalisations. While the analysis is valid insofar as the negligence of politicians toward their people and the collapse and poor performance of state institutions are matters of objective evaluation, it lacks in comprehensiveness as African 'political disorder' (Chabal & Daloz, 1999, 2003) constitutes a distinctive political order transcending canonical modes of analysis. In other words, to understand power in Guinea-Bissau and to account for epistemological differences, pretences to conceptual and theoretical generalisation must be abandoned. I do not wish to extol the benefits of parochialism, but simply to demonstrate that people, cultures and philosophies show a broad conceptual range with regard to matters such as human nature and political power.

This understanding should be taken into consideration to untangle the complexity inherent to the subtle political processes of post-colonial African states. These are not the result of a mere digestion (Chabal, 1992) of exogenous conceptions, institutions and modus operandi, but are in fact the result of a process of the Africanisation of power. From the process of Africanisation emerges the peculiar configuration of the African state, wherein the state and indigenous powers cooperate, conflate and, in short, coexist organically or separately.

In order to analyse the impact indigenous powers have on the state, it is first and foremost necessary to discern the foundational principles of such powers. To this end, my analysis follows an inductive-deductive methodology. The basic premise for my postulates rests on notions and theories about non-western political power in the field of comparative political theory and African (political) philosophy. These are bridged with what I observed during my fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau to produce a context-specific, detailed and defined framework of political power.

The analysis focuses on grassroots elements, that is, the foundations of power relations underpinning the political order. Insofar as it is common knowledge that African societies are oriented toward communitarianism, while western ones are individualistic overall, it is my opinion that these concepts lack clear insight into the impact this difference has on configurations of political power and therefore on the behaviours of political actors and institutions.

To unravel the apparent insolvability of instability in the country, the analysis should consider the differences – if there are any – between principles of indigenous power and those of the state in order to understand how these might conflict with the democratically defined state.

4. Africanisation of Power

Like many other African states, having achieved independence from former colonial powers, Guinea-Bissau sought to determine its political system. Focus fell, quite naturally, upon the liberal, majoritarian model of the modern state. Inasmuch as the state is a political institution inherent to and inseparable from the paradigm of modernity (El Amine, 2016), international governments give clear preference to this political configuration. With the first dictates of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Schmitt, [1950] 2006), the state appears de facto as the *nomos* of modernity, while people, territories and societies ordered under other political configurations are denied both rights and privileges – such as the right to declare war or to sign peace treaties – of sovereign states (Mbembe, 2003; [2016] 2019).

The adoption of the state as a political configuration presupposes the implementation of an apparatus of institutions and administration guided by a pre-established set of motives and norms. The state brings with it its own set of foundational principles that cannot be easily dismissed or replaced. Co-emergent with the processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and mass education that characterised nineteenth-century western countries, these are deemed constitutive elements of modernity and the modern state.

The post-independence political orientation in Guinea-Bissau privileged modernisation and development over local, endogenous roots. This preference was partially due to a reading of the thoughts of Amílcar Cabral. Cabral was, in fact, the real architect of the ideals, theory and practice of the anti-colonial Guinean and Cape Verdean movement. However, his texts (Cabral, n.d., 1967, 1973) and speeches, abounding in rhetoric about the mobilisation of fellow nationals in support of self-determination claims, lack clear references to the organisation and ruling of the autonomous Bissau-Guinean state. The ideas of development and progress Cabral advanced were read by his compatriots as antithetical to elements of tradition.

Particularly during the government of Nino Vieira, in the immediate aftermath of independence, traditional authorities were brutally repressed or silenced (Jao, 1996). Their annihilation was justified on the basis of their support for or allegiance to Portuguese authorities during the liberation struggle rather than with the PAIGC movement (Forrest, 1992; Jao, 1996). Nevertheless, Nino himself never rejected the relevance of tradition *in toto* and it is said that he often sought advice from indigenous authorities (also representative of the religious powers) rather than from his ministers. On an official level, indigenous powers were neither recognised nor acknowledged, which led to a vast void in dialogue between the state political elite and indigenous authorities, whether exponents of the political, the religious or both powers.

The official revitalisation of indigenous powers had to await the advent of the multiparty system in 1991, when political parties conceived of traditional authorities as middlemen to obtain political purposes (Jao, 1996; Rudebeck, 2001). The existence of several political parties opened

up the scramble for votes and portions of the electoral base. To gain the latter, politicians were quick to resort to the authority of highly legitimated traditional powers. As one of my acquaintances told me, "people know the laws, but what has power, real power, is tradition."[8] The relevance of tradition in the eyes of the people was always clear to state authorities, yet it became evident only when it could be instrumentalised to further power games in state politics.

By and large, indigenous authorities never ceased to exert power over or to be legitimised by the people. On the one hand, ethnic and religious heterogeneity in the small western African state is such that no overarching generalisation is possible, each case deserving to be analysed according to local specificities. On the other, the resilience of indigenous power is directly dependent on the endogenous nature of conceptions of authority, power and polity. In other words, indigenous powers persist in light of their genuine conformity to the power relations established among the people constituting the political community.

As mentioned, African cultures and philosophies generally rest upon organicist and communitarian conceptions of the individual and of life in the (political) community. Indeed, the Bissau-Guinean conception of individual life is tightly linked to ontological notions of time, kinship (*djorson*, in local Creole) and land (*tchon*).[9] These elements come together to create the boundaries of the political space within which subjects interact. This space is not determined by individual abilities, such as the ability to reason, paramount in western political thought, but rather it is constructed upon an essentially relational level.

Relationships between subjects depend on patterns of intersubjectivity. The individual does not stand in atomic, monadic solitude, posed in opposition to all other subjects in the world. Instead, people relate to others as subjects complementary and equal to themselves, that is, according to a power relation of cooperation. In this sense, the relational realm constitutes the quintessence of power relations among individuals and of the polity. Discarding the paradigm of power relations as a simplistic imposition of A's will over B, intersubjectivity promotes relations underpinned by cooperation and compromise (Han, [2005] 2019).

Power relations rooted in intersubjectivity galvanise the relational sphere of one's existence as foundational to oneself, inasmuch as they foster the relevance, uniqueness and radical difference of the individual (Bongmba, 2001). As an individual, one is committed to others and the community, yet not guided by blind acceptance or annihilation of one's own interests or unicity. The preservation of people's subjectivity in the relational sphere brings forward the

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[8] "*As pessoas sabem, conhecem as leis, o que tem mais força é a tradição.*" From the informal conversation with Bacar Bassi Djassi in Buba, on 22 February 2019. Translation by C. Favarato.

[9] The three ontological notions express a concept of the political that transcends contractual formulations. Embedded in a past-centric temporality, the notions of *djorson* and *tchon* operate as a threshold between a *bíos politikon* and a hypothetical apolitical "state of nature," where human life is not conceivable. The importance of this concept is mirrored in the powers indigenous authorities are endowed with.

leitmotif of power relations: people tend to cooperate to achieve goals relevant to the whole community, yet they are also inclined to compromise to safeguard their own interests.

These power relations operate among individuals in light of their endogenous character, that is, they are part of local epistemology. The ancient roots of this framing of human and power relations provide for their institutionalisation in customary provisions that embody these principles of power. The indigenous polity foresees the existence of a higher authority (the *regulo*) next to community councils. Besides ethnic specificities, the *regulo* represents a symbolic authority, bearer of the significant linkage between the people, land and time.[10] However, their office is empty of effective political power, for the *regulos* work as spokespeople for the council of elders. Thereby, the councils are the *locus* of power in the indigenous polity.

The councils are the rightful expression of intersubjective power relations. There exist different sorts of councils, from the *djumbai* (larger meetings open to all) to the *baraca,* more selective assemblies, usually restricted to the *omi garandi* (the elders). Ethnic heterogeneity prevents the possibility of framing a clear or univocal chart of the councils and their competencies, as the differences among groups vary to a great extent.[11] However, *djumbai* and *baraca* are political practices common to all ethnic groups, regardless of ethnic belonging or religious orientation. Furthermore, in light of contemporary migration fluxes and urbanisation, these meetings transcend historical, ethnic and territorial borders.

The councils are the most suitable expression of indigenous political practices, consistent with expected political behaviour and decision-making. Political practices operative in the councils function on the basis that "what comes from the consensus will be a consensus of peace,"[12] since it is a "*justiça di irmandade.*"[13] The outcome of the political process is expected to be the harmonious compromise of discording and individual interests. Therefore, the political process of consensus presupposes the maintenance of people's subjectivity, so that they can defend their own interests and, more importantly, so that they are capable of having their own understanding, without necessarily taking into account the relevance of the community. Still, they

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[10] The chief represents the connection to the founding father, who first conquered the land by fighting other people already settled there, or the spirits (*irâns*) of the wilderness. For these reasons, the *regulo* is chosen from selected families within each ethnic group – the alleged descendants of the mythological fathers. Their office embodies the past-centric ontology, the connection to kinship (*djorson*) and the centrality of land (*tchon*) in the political sphere.

[11] Broadly speaking, councils are held more often in the animist-oriented groups, which do not present a strongly hierarchised society. Among the Balanta, for example, the councils of the elders have absolute power, as there are no chiefs ruling in the horizontal society. On the other hand, the societies of Muslim communities and Islamised ethnic groups are ordered according to a highly structured hierarchy, at the top of which sits the religious-political authority of the imam (Sarró & Barros, 2016).

[12] "*Consenso di paz,*" in local Creole. As reported by the participants in the *djumbai* in Jemberem on 16 February 2019. Translation by C. Favarato.

[13] "*Justiça di irmandade, di fassi concertason di djenti. E bin sinta e fassi acerto*" ("Justice of brotherhood, of people's agreement. We come sitting and find adjustment," translation by C. Favarato). From a semi-structured interview with Mamadou Djakhra Camará. Buba, 22 February 2019.

descend to compromise for the relevance of the plurality in their power relations: as one conceives of others as equals and equally subject to the demands of pluralism, one relates to them as simply *others*, not as *alter-egos*. The commitment to compromise is driven by a shared feeling of brotherhood, along with a commitment to enhancing peaceful and harmonic relations in the community.

Thus, according to indigenous principles of power relations, political processes and institutions lean toward participatory political practices and the political debate aims at compromise and consensus. This understanding also rejects the notion of political authorities as despotic rulers, despite the overarching power they hold. Even though traditional chiefs assume office as a lifelong title and they are esteemed on the basis of their own personal characteristics, not just for the position occupied, endogenous notions of power reject the idea of personalistic power, privatisation of power and factionalism as inherent characteristics of politics. Factionalism emerged from the melange of the post-colonial state, a by-product of the Africanisation process generated by repeated, ongoing interactions between the state and indigenous powers.

The two rely on diametrically opposite notions of power relations. Inasmuch as indigenous power relations operate according to intersubjectivity, cooperation and compromise among equal and alike subjects, the underpinning principles of the state rest on tenets of individualism and adversarial politics. In the atomised system of self-reliant individuals, highly bureaucratised and institutionalised political processes operate according to a scheme of opposition and prevarication intent on the acquisition of as much power as possible. To this end, games of power and factionalism characteristic of the Guinea-Bissau political and military scenario offer an exemplary model in its crudest form. In short, Bissau-Guinean politics has lost its connection to ideologies, both right and left wing, collapsing into a scramble for the acquisition of power by and for itself.

The deep-rooted divergence in the foundational principles – power relations – sustaining the two orders of power is in part responsible for the dysfunctional state and political instability. Underpinned by individualistic premises, power institutions of the state do not stand up to the conception of power rooted in endogenous epistemology. Endogenous conceptions of power are directly derived from how power relations operate. As the apparatus of the modern state does not account for intersubjective relations, consensus or compromise in the political arena, not only does it widen the gap existing between citizens, civil society and the state (Forrest, 2003), but it also impacts heavily on the performance of the system and of the political elite. Neither of the two are matched to operate efficiently in a context of intersubjective power relations, thereby engendering structural incompatibility among foundational principles and political processes, institutions and behaviours, ultimately resulting in chronic instability.

5. Concluding notes

In this paper, I have discussed a possible explanation for the recurrent instability afflicting politics in Guinea-Bissau. Having considered the impact of the "*balantização*" of power as a means for marginalised groups to reclaim and secure power against hegemony, the analysis turned to characters of the state. These are generally deemed to provoke instability as the working principle of the modern state fails to operate in the "African" digestion of "liberal and democratic" tenets of power. Instead, I have argued that the genuine political "disorder" in Guinea-Bissau is due to a mismatching of the underpinning principles of power. These separate indigenous powers and the state also, controversially, affect political behaviour and political processes. Political institutions of the modern state are instruments of the administration of power that can be perfected, yet they cannot operate autonomously. The human factor is a necessary, discriminatory factor in the political system: where political configuration does not mirror local expectations or understanding of power and power relations, it is bound to be perennially dysfunctional.

Guinea-Bissau does not offer any official recognition of indigenous powers, let alone incorporate any underpinning principles in attempts to salvage the collapsing state, although theoretical proposals on this matter abound. One of many, Kwasi Wiredu suggests solving the limits of adversarial politics through a more genuinely African democracy by consensus, void of political parties (Wiredu, 2001, 2007). Yet, so far, no flawless political system has been devised that would incorporate indigenous political principles into the state system.

The case of Guinea-Bissau is a compelling one through which to reflect on the process of Africanisation of power, its roots and consequences, as well as the future of political power in Africa. The missing bridge between indigenous and state power in Guinea-Bissau only adds to the structural fragilities of the state and paves the way to political turmoil as state institutions and actors operate as far as possible from endogenous conceptions of power. In this sense, the process of the Africanisation of power offers a partial explanation for the political instability afflicting Guinea-Bissau. Might the bridging of state and indigenous power, along with a radical restructuring of power institutions, be the way toward stability?

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Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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