

2-2015

Number 1 - Resistance is Fruitful: Bijagos of Guinea-Bissau

Brandon D. Lundy

Kennesaw State University, blundy@kennesaw.edu

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Brandon Lundy. (2015). Resistance is Fruitful: Bijagos of Guinea-Bissau. Peace and Conflict Management Working Paper No. 1, pp 1-9.

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Peace and Conflict Management Working Papers



Number 1, 2015

Published by the
Center for Conflict Management

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Resistance is Fruitful: Bijagos of Guinea-Bissau

Brandon D. Lundy

About the Author

Brandon D. Lundy is Associate Professor of Anthropology and the Associate Director of the Ph.D. program in International Conflict Management at Kennesaw State University. He served as a community development U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Cape Verde, West Africa, before receiving his Ph.D. degree in anthropology from the State University of New York at Buffalo. His current research interests include ethnic identity, livelihood, globalization, and small state development. Dr. Lundy is the author, co-author, editor, and co-editor of several books and scholarly articles, most recently *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies in West Africa: Beyond Right and Wrong* co-edited with Akanmu G. Adebayo, Jesse J. Benjamin, and Joseph Kingsley Adjei (Lexington Books, 2015) and “Negotiating Development: Valuation of a Guesthouse Project in Southern Guinea-Bissau” (*Journal of International and Global Studies*, 2014).

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Resistance is Fruitful: Bijagos of Guinea-Bissau¹

Brandon D. Lundy
Kennesaw State University

Drawing on both ethnographic and historical accounts, this paper describes how ethnic identification patterns of belonging are fashioned out of localized, national, regional, and global processes of both engagement *and* protectionism. The Bijagos of Guinea-Bissau have maintained a sense of group cohesion during periods of contact, conflict, and resistance. This paper argues that the contemporary local-global interplay is fostering a new moment of rupture in time and space for the Bijagos. The Bijagos, oft footnoted in the accounts of Bissau-Guinean culture and history, are actively contributing to the social dialogue of resistance against the homogenizing effects of globalization. How do the Bijagos experience cultural, political, and economic pressures: positively as innovations leading to advances in interests, or negatively as disorienting and alienating?

Keywords: Bijagos, Guinea-Bissau, resistance, identity, ethnicity

INTRODUCTION: ENCOUNTERING HISTORY

Humans are seemingly hard-wired to live in social groupings, yet, paradoxically, the stress of human proximity is potentially alienating and divisive. Therefore, this paper addresses the broad question, how do culture-bound groups negotiate the potentially homogenizing effects of globalization while still maintaining a sense of cohesion and cultural identity? Social scientists are quick to acknowledge that the desire to belong is a powerful motivator, possibly the most powerful motivator, of human behavior (Frake, 1998). Simultaneously, adaptation and not assimilation is a normal response to incorporating novelty into human society (Foster, 2008). How, then, can social scientists recognize, explain, and promote unity among disparate groups

while acknowledging the benefits of social conflict (Coser, 1956) and “politics of difference” (Comaroff, 1996)? From where can we draw our inspiration? For the purposes of this paper, the following explanatory framework will be labeled *identity in action*.

Identity can be defined as a relationship in constant conflict, between maintaining a sense of self and cultural cohesion on the one hand, and in a state of constant flux and negotiation with the changing environment on the other. In other words, socio-cultural identity (i.e., identity in action) is a context specific, yet often fairly stable, product of socialization, history, individual thought and action, direct and indirect politics, and changing cultural and economic landscapes. Identity in action refers to both the structure of identity and to the potential

¹ An earlier version of this paper was originally presented at a 2006 symposium, “Prime Movers of the Atlantic World: Portugal and Africa,” in Buffalo, NY.

this sense of belonging has as a motivator of conscious action and potential change. In this case, the discussion of cultural identity is situated among the Bijagos of Guinea-Bissau.¹

CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

The Bijagos of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau in West Africa are a coastal, Senegambian ethnic group with an estimated population size of 15-28,000 individuals (Henry, 1994, p. 14; Scantamburlo, 1991, p. 22; Sousa, 1995, p. 1).² This makes the Bijagos one of the smallest of the more than 30 ethnic groups currently located in Guinea-Bissau, at less than two percent of the country's total population (Davidson, 2002, p. 419; 2003, p. 53; MacQueen, 2003, p. 22).³ Geographically, the Bijagos are located on the Bissagos Archipelago off the western coast in the Atlantic Ocean.⁴ The thorny nature of much of Guinea-Bissau's littoral geography includes patches of thick forest, mangrove swamps, a humid climate, and a complex river system. These physical characteristics are what ultimately encouraged an influx of refugees seeking a safe haven from the political upheavals of empire building and European contact (Green, 2012; Hawthorne, 2003).

Africanist historians such as Walter Rodney and Richard-Molard described the various coastal peoples as refugees driven from their positions in the hinterland (Rodney, 1970, p. 8). This plural society is largely a consequence of the Mali Empire's southward push beginning in the eleventh century, and, by the thirteenth century, the Islamic Fula invasions from the east.⁵ These ethnic groups are "marked by a particular identity, history, language, cultural traits, and other distinct social features" (Forrest, 2003, p. 28). Simultaneously, the overlapping history and cultural traditions such as the development of a shared Kriol language suggest complex webs of "multiethnic alliances, social linkages, and political ties" (Forrest, 2003, p. 28) continuously fashioned, sustained, and abandoned throughout the centuries.⁶

It is within this multifaceted environment that the Bijagos have maintained a sense of group cohesion even during periods of contact, conflict, and resistance. Veiled by time, historical scholarship about the Bijagos people has

concentrated on their origins,⁷ physical environment,⁸ general ethnography,⁹ seafaring prowess,¹⁰ intricate cosmology and social structure,¹¹ and political autonomy.¹² Drawing on these accounts, this paper begins to explore how the Bijagos identification patterns are reified, maintained, and altered.

This story begins around the thirteenth century when the Bijagos people are thought to have reached the Atlantic coast. According to popular belief, after fighting over a shrinking territory, the Bijagos, or their progenitors, were eventually displaced onto 19 of the 53 islands and islets outside the estuary of the Geba Channel, known today as the Bolama-Bijagos Biosphere Reserve or the Bissagos Archipelago (Coelho, 1985). Rodney attests, "The bulk of the population appears to have originated from the adjacent mainland, inhabited by the Beafadas in the sixteenth century, but still considered as 'the patrimony of the Bijagos'" (1970, p. 8).¹³ Linguistically, historically, and culturally unverified, however, several theories about the Bijagos origins still circulate in the academic literature and oral histories.¹⁴

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Portuguese ethnographer Augusto Santos Lima (1947a) argues that it is unlikely that the Bijagos originated as a single ethnic group. Instead, some inhabitants share socio-cultural affinities with contemporary Djolas, Papels, Nalus, and Coniaguís of the Upper Guinea Coast. Italian anthropologist Luigi Scantamburlo believes that the various islands can be grouped according to four distinct cultures, traditions, and origins (1978, p. 14). Lima's ethnic origins may correlate with Scantamburlo's regional divisions as well as the four Bijagos matrilineal clans, also noted by these ethnographers, although further research is necessary to support this claim.

This ethno-historical data, however, does suggest two things. First, regional variation, implying cultural flexibility, is found among the Bijagos. Second, the formation and preservation of a uniquely Bijagos ethnic identity is partially a result of their separation from the mainland. Although dispersed among the islands, the decentralized Bijagos have developed ways of remaining unified including, the use of a shared

common language known as Bidyogo,¹⁵ and through shared cosmological beliefs directly related to a common genesis tying them to their ancestral soil.¹⁶ Since the mid-fifteenth century, the Bijagos emerge from the written records as fierce raiders of mainland peoples, successful challengers to Portuguese sovereignty, and both supporters of national independence and subsequent resisters to nationalist ideals.¹⁷

For over 700 years, the Bissagos Archipelago's inhabitants have experienced long-term, disruptive challenges from Africans and Europeans alike. The rivers and islands of Guinea-Bissau were among the first areas in Africa explored by the newly developing Portuguese maritime empire. Early European policy in Africa, sometimes described as "raid-and-trade" or "raid-and-conqueror" (Thornton, 1998, p. 38), was quickly modified once opportunists realized that unlike the Canary islanders with no boats, "The West Africans had a well-developed specialized maritime culture that was fully capable of protecting its own waters" (Thornton, 1998, p. 37).

It did not take the Portuguese long to tap into the well-developed African trade networks. Treaties of peaceful exchange were quickly established beginning in 1456, although exclusive allegiances to particular European nations were rare. The coastal Africans "resented any attempt to control their activities" (Fage, 1969, p. 72). Eventually, Portuguese traders and the Bijagos established economic linkages on the islands, based largely on the insecurities of foreign mistrust by the Bijagos and rushed expansion on the part of the Portuguese traders.

Bijagos successes as coastal raiders during the Transatlantic Slave Trade led to profound changes both within and outside their society and inspired a reputation for ferocity that permeates the written documentation of the Upper Guinea Coast (Hawthorne, 1998, pp. 142-150). For example, the collection of letters known as the *Jesuit Documents on the Guinea of Cape Verde and the Cape Verde Islands*, written between 1585 and 1617, are full of pleas to King Philip II of Portugal to send a force to conquer the unchecked Bijagos raiders. In one instance, three letters were sent from the kings of the Biafar nations of Guinala, Biguba, and Bisaga in April and May of 1607 (Hair & Mota, 1989). In a

letter dated April 20, 1607, a wealthy trader-in-residence, Sebastian Fernandes Cação (1989a), urged King Philip II,

To not fail to give support to these kings on the grounds that it is a matter of small importance, for King John III made a grant of these Bijagos Islands to the Infante [prince] D. Luis. A great fleet was formed to conquer them ... (But) when they reached these islands and formed a camp, and entered the forests in their greed to obtain captives, (the Bijagos) attacked them ... killing them all, and for this reason (these islands) were not conquered. (p. 9-10)

The Bijagos' aggressive persona encouraged foreigners to react accordingly, promoting the continued socio-political autonomy of the Bijagos. Another example of the rumors about the Bijagos' fierce nature circulated by Europeans and Africans alike can be seen in Father Baltasar Barreira's (1989) statement,

Neighbouring kings even if the captives are their own children [will sell them to the Portuguese slave traders], because they would rather see them in the power of the Portuguese than in that of the Bijagos, who eat them when there is no one to buy them. (p. 10)

By the seventeenth century, Bijagos stories of viciousness persisted alongside the lucrative slave trade with the islanders.

The coastal inlets and offshore islands offered secluded anchorage for independently owned ships trading on the Upper Guinea Coast. This led to the indigenous populations playing one European nation against another in order to take full advantage of rivalries. The increased European contact during the heyday of the slave trade between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries was certainly disruptive to societal norms and identification patterns among the Bijagos.

For example, influxes of women and children into Bijagos society due to their successes as raiders of the littoral peoples, intensified gender inequality on the islands. The sixteenth century trader André Álvares de Almada (1984) observed, "The male Bijagos do only three things: they make war, they build boats, and they draw wine from palm-trees... The women build the houses and work in the fields, and they fish and gather shell-fish, doing all that

men do elsewhere” (p. 97; see also, Hawthorne, 2003, p. 170).

Throughout, the Bijagos remained autonomous as attested by Jesuit Father Manuel Álvares writing around 1615 in the last early Portuguese text on Guinea. He wrote,

What has been said [in popular opinion] is this: ‘Upset the Bijagos and Guinea is finished!’ ... Whatever they come upon at sea they grab, even if it belongs to their own people; and so, once they get into their canoes, they plunder the Biafares, the Falupos, the Papels or Burames, the Balantas and the Nalus. To sum up, those not aboard the Bijagos fleet cannot escape their claws. (1990, chap. 9, pp. 1-2)

Organized matrilineally, the Bijagos resented centralized authority. They made their living from what the islands and coastal mainland provided.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the foreign demand for slaves dried up. In conjunction, the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 signaled a shift in European policy toward Africa. Portuguese attempts at effective occupation and colonial rule in Portuguese Guinea led to direct efforts at administering the Bijagos region. Scantamburlo paraphrased the elders of Bubaque Island when he wrote, “The coming of the Europeans to the island, the British and German settlers first, and the Portuguese rule later, was a disaster for the Bijagós people... They were not able to accept the kind of work imposed by the Europeans” (1978, p. 17).

The Bijagos rebelled against the Portuguese colonizers on no less than seven separate occasions until 1936, when the Portuguese finally acquiesced control of the Bissagos Archipelago (Bowman, 1997; Olson, 1996 p. 96). The final stand-off, which occurred on the island of Canhabac, assured the Bijagos of their autonomy from Portuguese rule. The Portuguese were no longer able to recruit enough local allies willing to support another invasion of the Bijagos’ island fortress (Chilcote, 1967; Forrest, 2003, pp. 130-135). Political scientist Joshua Forrest discovered a communiqué from a 1946 colonial meeting of the Portuguese Guinea bureaucracy attesting to as much:

By the time of the December 1946 conference of administrators in Bissau, it was decided that the Bijagós islands would be exempted from the hut tax and would be accorded a “special” type of head tax –

apparently one whose collection would be loosely enforced, if at all. By that point, for the central state, it was simply not worth the political and economic cost to perpetually reenact military campaigns. This represented a virtual admission of the relative autonomy of the Bijagós people, essentially won by way of their tenacious resistance through the wars of 1925 and 1936-37. (2003, p. 135)

Here again is an example of the Bijagos maintaining their ethnic autonomy through resistance, even during direct attempts at subjugation by force. They continued their longstanding tradition of self-rule even after Guinea-Bissau’s national liberation.

Upon independence from Portugal in 1974, Guinea-Bissau declared a policy of equality among all the citizens and the right of all to live according to their own culture.¹⁸ The independence political party, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), and the Bijagos, shared an antagonism against the Portuguese during the thirteen year war (Einarsdóttir, 2004, p. 15). However, due to their geographic isolation and proximity to the capital of Bissau, the islands were never actually considered liberated until national sovereignty was achieved in 1974 (Chabal, 2003). It was only later, when Luís Cabral’s newly independent government attempted to impose their nationalist ideology through policies of mandatory education removing Bijagos youth from the potential labor force, and the promotion of economic development through taxation, tourism, and restrictions on land use, that the Bijagos elders reconsidered their support of PAIGC (Scantamburlo, 1991, pp. 91-94).

BECOMING AND BELONGING

Evidence of residual resistance and isolationist practices persist in Bijagos society. For example, female status, once a priority among the Bijagos, is rebounding due to a return of socio-religious practices, which can only be performed by women (Gallois Duquette, 1979; Scantamburlo, 1991). There is also a continued focus on communal Bijagos values over nationalist sentiments. Scantamburlo states in his 1991 ethnography, “Any new political developments must gain the loyalty of the elders. The new laws must respect the norms and the structure of the community; anything else

will be resisted by the Bijagos” (p. 96). More work needs to be done, however, to examine contemporary trends such as nationalized education efforts, international tourism especially to the picturesque and environmentally unique archipelago, and the spread of a homogenizing global culture infiltrating their longstanding autonomy.

One such ethnographer of the Bijagos, looking beyond the accounts of history and traditional cultural survivals,¹⁹ is Lorenzo Ibrahim Bordonaro (2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005, 2006). His Ph.D. dissertation, titled “Living at the Margins: Youth and the Global in Bubaque,” explores how the urban youth of the city center of Bubaque island, employ the “discourse of modernity” as a “strategic appropriation of global flows in the local generational conflict” (2006, p. 4). Bordonaro sees the budding ideology of modernity among the urban youth as being rooted in several factors. First, Bubaquean youth are being exposed to alternate worldviews, economic systems, and real and imagined opportunities from outside Bijagos society through mass media, migration, and tourism. For example, during the six-year leadership of Luís Cabral (1974-1980), he invested heavily in projects aimed at “attracting international tourism in the Archipelago, and in Bubaque in particular: electricity was provided for every village of the island, while a hotel, an airport, the presidential summer residence and a road were built in Bubaque” (Bordonaro, 2006, p. 4). Second, according to Bordonaro, education, the cash economy, and migration are starting to challenge “the politics of knowledge upon which the whole age-class system is based” (2006, p. 5). These initiatives, therefore, go unsupported by local elders who continue to maintain the status quo. “Education in fact is an effort, a sacrifice that generally boys and girls of Bubaque have to face alone, without counting on the help of the family, which considers them [students] unproductive adults” (Bordonaro, 2006, p. 5). Therefore, once again, the partial re-integration of the Bijagos into the international system is a direct challenge to their identification patterns.

CONCLUSION (RE)RESISTING

The people of Guinea-Bissau including the Bijagos reflect the country’s precarious complexity. National developments such as recurrent civil servant strikes, cholera epidemics, food insecurity, continued flare ups of violence in the Casamance, narcotics trafficking, and political instability all attest to how far Guinea-Bissau has yet to go before a semblance of national security can be attained and sustained. One would expect, then, that the citizens of this country would have to look to their local communities for a continued sense of stability, belonging, and security. Guinea-Bissau, however, with its arbitrarily constructed national and ethnic boundaries, serves as both a refuge and a prison for its inhabitants’ bouts of identity crises.

Although Guinea-Bissau has a potentially explosive socio-political environment due to its extreme heterogeneity, it is what lies beneath, a politically conscious population remaining calm in the face of rupture, which baffles the social theorists (Davidson, 2002). For the Bijagos and other Bissau-Guineans, intra- and interethnic cooperation appears to be a way of life; their survival depends on it (Lundy 2012a, 2012b). The study of identity in action becomes more than simply thinking about the world and one’s place in it; it also helps reveal everyday strategies of survival and belonging, as well as where these strategies may be breaking down.

ENDNOTES

¹ Alternative spellings for Bijagos: Bijogo, Bidyago, Bidyogo, Bidyugo, Bidjougo, Bijago, Bijagó, Bijuga, Bijugo, Bisago, Bissago, Bojago, and Bujago.

² Hutchinson & Smith define ethnicity as a “sense of kinship, group solidarity, and common culture” (1996, p. 1). An ethnic group may share: (1) a common proper name, (2) a myth of common ancestry, (3) shared historical memories, (4) one or more elements of common culture such as religion, custom, or language, (5) a symbolic attachment to homeland, or (6) a sense of solidarity (1996, p. 6-7).

³ GeoHive: Global statistics projects the population at 27,959 (2004 est., <http://www.geohive.com/>). This is about 1.9% of Guinea Bissau’s total population. The five largest ethnic groups are the Balanta (27%), Fula (23%), Mandinga (12%), Manjaco (11%), and Papel (10%) (Davidson, 2002, p. 419; 2003, p. 53; MacQueen, 2003, p. 22).

⁴ The Bissagos Islands are a group of about 88 islands and islets located in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Guinea-Bissau. The archipelago spans an area of 1,184 square miles. Only some 20 islands are populated year-round, namely Bubaque, which is where the Bissagos administrative capital is situated and is the most populated island, Bolama, Carache, Caravela, Enu, Formosa, Galinhas, João Vieira, Maio, Meneque, Orango, Orangozinho, Ponta, Roxa, Rubane, Soga, Unhacomo, Uno, and Uracane. The Bissagos Islands are part of the Bolama administrative region. Its capital is Bolama, on the island of the same name. Bolama is divided into three administrative sectors: Bolama, Bubaque (Bubaque, Orangozinho, Meneque, Orango, Soga, Rubane, Roxa and João Viera), and Caravela (Caravela, Carache, Uno, Unhacomo, Uracane, Enu, Formosa, Ponta and Maio).

⁵ See, Bowman (1997); Brooks (1993, 1998, 2003); Forrest (1992, 2003); Galli & Jones (1987); Hawthorne (2003); Murdock (1959); Rodney (1970).

⁶ Alternate names: Kiryol, Portuguese Creole, Kriulo, Guinea-Bissau Creole. Dialects: Bissau-Bolama Creole, Bafatá Creole, Cacheu-Ziguinchor Creole. Classification: Creole, Portuguese based. Language use: Trade language. 600,000 or more first- or second-language users worldwide (Gordon, 2005). "The development and spread of Crioulo, the language combining elements of Portuguese, West Atlantic, and Mande languages that rapidly became established as a lingua franca for coastwise and riverine traders in Senegambia and along the Upper Guinea Coast and served as the principal language of the inhabitants of the Cabo Verde archipelago" (Hawthorne, 2003, p. 53; see also, Scantamburlo, 1991, pp. 19-32; Wilson, 1962).

⁷ See, Segerer (2000).

⁸ See, Barrière et al. (1995); Beaver (1970); Hernández (2002); Stallibrass (1889).

⁹ See, Almada (1984, pp. 96-101); Bernatzik (1950, 1967); Christie (1997); Coutouly (1921); Gonçalves (1958-59); Mendes Moreira (1946); Santos Lima (1947a); Scantamburlo (1978, 1991); Sousa (1995).

¹⁰ See, Fernandes (1987); Henry (1989); Mota (1974).

¹¹ See, Barbosa (1965); Fernandes (1984); Gallois Duquette (1975, 1979, 1983); Gordst (1976); Helmholtz (1972); Henry (1993, 1994); Marques (1955); Santos Lima (1947b, 1948); Silva (1989).

¹² See, Cação (1989b); Fernandes (1989); Mendy (1992).

¹³ See also, Álvares (1990).

¹⁴ See, Forrest (2003, p. 38); Henry (1994); Mota (1981, pp. 243-244); Scantamburlo (1978, pp. 9-10; 1991, p. 18); Segerer (2000, pp. 185-186).

¹⁵ Classification: Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Atlantic, Bijago. Dialects: Anhaki spoken on Canhabaque, Kagbaaga spoken on Bubaque, Kamona spoken on Caravela and Caraxe, and Kajoko spoken on Orango and Uno. Other dialects may be spoken on Galinhas and Formosa islands (Gordon, 2005).

¹⁶ Robert C. Helmholtz (1972, pp. 52-53) describes the Bijogo as descendants of the four original families. These "soil generations" or lineages are labeled: Oracuma, Oraga, Ogubané, and Ominca. Membership in a particular lineage is determined through matrilineal descent. Lineal membership

influences the succession of chiefs because the chief can only be selected from the founding "soil generation" of a particular area. Political and religious sanctions come from an established link between the living and the dead of the founding generation in a particular area through the protection and ownership of a statue-repository of the souls of the ancestors (i.e., *Ira* or *Iran*).

¹⁷ The earliest written reference to the Bijagos appears to be in the log of the Venetian Navigator, Alvise di Cadamosto, who, in 1457, was employed by the Portuguese (Santos Lima, 1947a, pp. 5-7; Scantamburlo, 1978, p. 8; 1991, p. 17).

¹⁸ According to the CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF GUINEA-BISSAU, adopted in 1984, and amended in 1991, 1993, and 1996:

Article 24 – All persons are equal before the law, enjoy the same rights and are subjected to the same duties, without distinction as to race, social status, intellectual or cultural level, religious belief or philosophical conviction.

Article 25 – Men and women are equal before the law in all aspects of political, economic, social and cultural life.

¹⁹ For example, Gallois Duquette (1979, 1983), Henry (1989, 1993, 1994), Pussetti (1999, 2001), Pussetti & Bordonaro (1999), and Scantamburlo (1978, 1991).

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