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# **The Integrity of Women in Re-making a Nation: The Case of Guinea-Bissau**

**Brandon D. Lundy, Raul Mendes Fernandes Jr., and Kezia Lartey**

## **Abstract**

This article both acknowledges and celebrates the role of women in re-making the nation of Guinea-Bissau. A gendered perspective and historical and multi-scalar framing demonstrates that women have played integral roles in nation-building over time and space in Guinea-Bissau. How have the women of Guinea-Bissau fashioned their agency? Where are the new forms of agency for women in Guinea-Bissau? An examination of nation-building shows the foundational roles of women, unique aspects of innovative economic enterprise before, during, and after the colonial period, and contemporary political efforts by women toward the production of a successful and inclusive country. Gender has opened unique opportunities in Guinea-Bissau toward the promotion of nationhood; gender is also experiencing a restriction of socio-political opportunities for women contemporarily that needs to be checked. Theories of African feminisms and intersectionality help explain this phenomenon. No analysis of community (re)building and maintenance is complete without incorporating the integrity of women.

## **Introduction**

In her book *Fighting Two Colonialisms: Women in Guinea Bissau*, Stephanie Urdang (1979) emphasized the need for women to play equal political, economic, and social roles during the fight for independence. She reflected, “Women suffer a dual oppression in Guinea Bissau expressed as the need for women to fight against two colonialisms the one of the Portuguese and the other of men” (Urdang, 1979, p. 15). It is from this perspective that we present this article emphasizing that in the history of Guinea-Bissau’s national development, women have played and continue to play integral roles in the making and re-making of the country and its foundations. We use Trajano Filho’s (2010b) concept of nation-building as resulting from “the clash between reason and history, universalism and cultural

distinctiveness” (p. 172). In other words, if nation-building is a hegemonic exercise of empowerment to create a shared sense of belonging to a community (i.e., a process of becoming), imagined or otherwise, then there must be those who belong, those who do not, and those whose status is in flux according to associations deemed meaningful (Mayer, 2000; see also Anderson, 2006; Forrest, 2003). Further, those shared and meaningful attributes are changeable (i.e., contested) in time and space.

In this article, we show that women in Guinea-Bissau clearly exhibit unique cultural characteristics that contributed and continue to contribute to the making, un-making, and remaking of the nation as African women engage in both complementary and intersectional relationships with their male counterparts. In this article, we ask: How have the women of Guinea-Bissau fashioned their agency and, where are the new forms of agency for women in Guinea-Bissau? We find that gender in Guinea-Bissau carries an expectation of complementarity, respect, subjectification, and intersectionality with competing forms of identification. Our analysis of six gender-specific cases of nation-building supports Urdang’s earlier conclusion that gendered identification and recognition remains embattled on many fronts in Guinea-Bissau. Therefore, our endeavor of revisiting this issue almost 40 years later is critical toward opening a gendered space for re-engaging capacity-building that benefits the nation as a whole and women specifically.

This article begins with a brief overview of Guinea-Bissau followed by our explanatory framing and methodological approach. We then present six gendered cases of community- and nation-building from customary, economic, and political perspectives that showcase our argument. The conclusion revisits our findings and makes a plea to invest in gender-related social spaces and recognition while simultaneously acknowledging the complex relationships between gender and other forms of identification that are at times symbiotic and at other times, are found to be in direct competition over scarce economic and political resources.

### **Characteristics of the Bissau-Guinean Nation**

After almost two decades of armed rebellion against the Portuguese colonial regime, Guinea-Bissau achieved recognized independence on April 25, 1974. The movement suffered a tremendous loss in January 1973 when the nationalist architect Amilcar Cabral was assassinated. Guinea-Bissau was oft referenced for its original and strong fight for independence. Its struggle against Portuguese colonialism was internationally recognized by its popular mobilization, the enlightened leadership of Amilcar Cabral, its policies of non-alignment, the emphasis on both political theory and everyday realities, and women’s involvement at all levels of decision-making. For example, a mere 10 years after independence, Carmen Pereira, one of the most important women fighters for independence, became and the first woman National Assembly President (1984-1989). To date, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) remains the most influential political party in the country, although 40

years of underdevelopment, military interventions, and political instability have left the party divided.

Guinea-Bissau has an estimated population of 1.7 million people separated between five major and more than 15 minor ethnic groups including the Balanta (30%), Fula (20%), Manjaca (14%), Mandinga (13%), and Papel (7%). While the official language is Portuguese, the majority speak the national lingua franca Krioulo. In the early 21st century, many adopted Islam, which is now practiced by 50% of the country's population. Approximately 10% of the country's population identifies as Christian although an estimated 40% continue to hold their indigenous beliefs concurrently with either Islam or Christianity. The Guinea-Bissau sex ratio is 0.95 males per female; women give birth to 4.8 children on average over their lifetime; males have a literacy rate of 74.8% while women's is 45.9%; and the maternal mortality rate is 790 deaths/100,000 live births, the seventh worst in the world (2014 est.; World Bank, 2016). The unemployment rate for men is 6.5% compared to women at 7.4% (2014 est.; World Bank, 2016). The primary (19.3%) and lower secondary (8.9%) school completion rates for women are abysmal and worse than their male counterparts with only 38.6% and 5.9% of girls even enrolling in primary and secondary schools respectively (2014 est.; World Bank, 2016). Further, in 2015, women held between 10-30% of the national parliament and only 31.3% of the ministerial level positions going to women (World Bank, 2016). These indicators suggest that the women of Guinea-Bissau are some of the poorest and most disempowered in the world although there have been slight improvements since 2000 (World Bank, 2016).

The development of the modern nation of Guinea-Bissau is a complex process mired by frequent political crises, coup d'états, civil war, and political instability with heavy effects and ongoing burdens on the well-being of the population, its development, and a worsening international reputation. The UN classification places Guinea-Bissau among the world's lowest in terms of their Human Development Index (HDI).<sup>1</sup> The Millennium Development Goals for the country remain out of reach.

However, there are signs of positive change noticed over recent years. The international community observed that the 2014 general elections were well-organized and demonstrated a calm atmosphere that was free of tensions. In 2015, a new political crisis with the dismissing of the Prime Minister Domingoes Simoes Pereira by the newly-elected President Jose Mario Vaz was resolved in the courts with political negotiations and the interpretation of constitutional rules instead of through military intervention. A Donor Roundtable hosted by the European Union in Brussels on March 25, 2015, pledged more than one billion euros to support Guinea-Bissau's social and economic development (Reuters, 2015), although political infighting remains (UN News Centre, 2016a, 2016b).

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<sup>1</sup> The HDI is a summary measure for assessing long-term progress in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and a decent standard of living. Guinea-Bissau's HDI – 0.396 places it 177th out of 187 countries indexed according to these indicators (UNDP Human Development Report, 2014).

This potential influx of funding and somewhat political calm makes revisiting the role of women in re-making the nation of Guinea-Bissau quite timely. Women's involvement is examined through a review of primary, secondary, and ethnographic source materials. Loosely based on African feminist theory,<sup>2</sup> we emphasize context and the integral complementarity of men and women. We define complementarity as foundational roles distinct to men and women within the context of Guinea-Bissau. This article postulates that women are formative agents within society and have the potential to effect change and/or stability. As will become clear from both the historical and contemporary contexts, women's power and agency in Guinea-Bissau is often derived from their integral social positions, not necessarily as a matter of institutional authority. We identify that women's agency in Guinea-Bissau over time can be broadly categorized into customary, economic, and political agencies, but these forms of agency are not restrictive and often overlap with one another. In presenting accounts of women's agency, we use the concepts of African feminisms and intersectionality to help frame these explanations, emphasizing the link between intersectionality and agency.

### Theoretical Perspective

African feminist theory is not a clear-cut concept that can be precisely defined and clearly delineated. It can, however, be understood in relation to liberal feminism.<sup>3</sup> Liberal feminist scholars interpret the agency of women through a single focus, that of political equality, while African feminist theory emphasizes that the agency of women in Africa are not homogenous and their experiences and needs should be not be seen through a single lens. Within the different communities of Guinea-Bissau, women's agency is viewed through multiple lenses while acknowledging their interconnectedness as well as their intersectionality with other competing forms of identification and power dynamics. From a sociological perspective, we understand agency as the power people have to think for themselves and act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories. Oyewumi (1997) continues to explain that "analyses and interpretations of Africa must start with Africa, they should reflect specific cultural and local contexts; while rooted in the lived experiences and cultural beliefs of the women, they must involve respect for women" (p. 8). She further clarifies that "more importantly, these interpretations must also acknowledge the agency and potential of African women" (Oyewumi, 1997, p. 8). Thus, relationships are fluid and social roles are situational, continuously placing individuals in context-dependent, hierarchical, and non-

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<sup>2</sup> African feminist theory captures the fluidity and dynamism of the different cultural imperatives, historical forces, and localized realities conditioning women's activism and underscores the heterogeneity of African feminist thinking and engagement as manifested in strategies and approaches that are sometimes complementary and supportive, and sometimes competing and adversarial (Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Nnaemeka, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> For how liberal feminism has achieved equal rights and political power for women, see Epure (2014).

hierarchical roles. For instance, the definition of family is not rooted in the nuclear family; the husband and wife unit is not “natural” as explained by Oyewumi (1997, p. 3). Instead, the family in many societies throughout the African context can include the extension of cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews, which go beyond the husband and wife unit, a concept often central to liberal feminist thinking.

The African feminist approach stresses the significance of motherhood as an integral part of the community, tracing back to pre-colonial societal structures, but is also relevant in contemporary times in the sense that it informs the dimensions of daily African lives (Cruz, 2015). Within the African feminist concept, gender is socially constructed reflecting differing “world senses” (Oyewumi, 1997). With these senses, gender can be understood as being shaped by African contexts and experiences directly. Oyewumi (1997) maintains that “African societies are complex and recognize exceptions to general normative rules. Similarly, female ancestors can share equal status with male ancestors, while ‘third genders’ ‘agendered and trans-gendered entities’ and ‘alternative genders’ have been discovered in many parts of the non-Western world” (p. 48). Thus, women in African societies are defined and positioned to run alongside, in conjunction with, in front of, and in opposition to men. According to Oyewumi (1997), African local knowledge of women in society, by its nature, is accommodating, flexible, adaptive, and inherently tolerant. Oyewumi (1997) writes, “This local knowledge brazenly and playfully admits the Other into its frame in order to critique as well as work and rework a whole array of influences” (p. 77). Noting that pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial identities, institutions, and systems exist in contemporary Guinea-Bissau, and gaining an understanding of these, presents a framework for gender policies that is appropriate. Oyewumi (1997) asks, “Why should we assume that the pre-colonial structures could be so easily wiped out” (p. 78)? Instead, understanding the effects of pre-colonial and colonial structures on women of contemporary Guinea-Bissau through an African feminist lens shows the different roles women play foundationally, politically, and economically.

The concept of intersectionality or intersectional theory is also important for understanding gender in Guinea-Bissau and how it intersects with related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination.<sup>4</sup> Intersectionality is fundamental to understanding how gender traverses borders, social networks, informal and formal sectors. Osborn (2011) highlighted the lack of women’s political and economic agency as one of the core challenges underlying under- development. Thus, the need for discourse engaging women’s agency in African nation-building is critical. African feminist theory together with intersectional theory forms the framework within which women’s agency towards the re-making of Guinea-

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<sup>4</sup> Intersectionality here refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies, and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power (Crenshaw, 1991; see also Davis, 2008). For an exceptional example of this theory as it relates to Guinea-Bissau, see Stephanie Urdang (1979).

Bissau is explained, taking into consideration the cultural context and setting within which women make their own spaces and forms of engagement.

### **Methodology**

Based on a thorough review and analysis of existing written records as well as a reliance on years of prior experiences in the country of Guinea-Bissau by two of the authors, we selected six gendered cases purposefully centered on the most common forms of gender discourses found in the country's scholarship and society. Areas identified as significant for this review include customary agency (e.g., Bijagos and Nalú), economic agency (e.g., Nharas and Bideiras), and political agency (e.g., two colonialisms and contemporary politics). Cases are built from extant primary and secondary source materials as well as ethnographic descriptions. The intention is to make observations that are useful for engaging in further discourses about women's agency in the re-making of the nation of Guinea-Bissau and are not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive.

### **Cases**

In considering the customary roles of women in Guinea-Bissau, we stipulate that customary roles are not fixed. They evolve and express contradictions between women and men, age groups, socializations, and community institutions.

#### ***Bijagos: Gender as a Form of Customary Agency***

Female agency in traditional Bijagos society before the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade could be described as complementary, with males and females performing specific spiritual, political, and economic tasks divided along age and gender lines from populating workgroups and maintaining religious secret societies to king-making. As coastal slave raiding intensified and the Bijagos raiders acquired more female slaves, gender stratification gradually intensified as female social status diminished (Lundy, 2015a). During the isolationist colonial period, however, the Bijagos were forced to repel Portuguese incursions into the Bissagos archipelago to protect their autonomy and way of life, disrupting societal norms yet again. Contemporarily, gender roles have once again begun to "normalize" on the islands: for example, women's spiritual leadership and economic activities are garnering acknowledgement, support, and respect from their male counterparts (Bordonaro, 2010; Gallois Duquette, 1979; Lundy, 2015a; Scantamburlo, 1991).

Divided among four distinct matrilineages, the Bijagos people inhabit 20 of the 88 islands and islets that make up the Bissagos Archipelago. According to Robert C. Helmholz (1972, pp. 52-53), the four lineages or "soil generations" are determined through matrilineal descent, which is important because chiefs can only be selected from the founding lineage of particular areas. Lundy (2015a) writes, "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” (p. 6). In this respect, women are figuratively and literally responsible for the maintenance and propagation of Bijagos society.

Gender roles refer to the rights, responsibilities, expectations, and relationships of men and women. Within Bijagos society, gender roles shape economic, cultural, and political institutions. Bijago society has a social organization based on a hierarchical system of age classes. The institutionalization of age class is defined differently between men and women. For males, although small differences exist between islands, each is socialized into a specific age class. Age classes express psychological, biological, and sociological entities. These are socially constructed stages of life following a clear trajectory. The age class framework can be drawn according to the following stages: *nea* (children), *kanhokan* (adolescent), *kabaro* (youth), *kamabi* (mature), and *kasuka* (elder). Each stage has its defined symbols, dances, and tasks. They are also linked to the production process including rice cultivation, fishing, and palm fruit collection. The graduation implies particular rituals monitored by the elders and ancestors.

For both men and women, the main initiation ritual is known as *manrace* which allows *kabaro* to become *kamabi*. This is a long process of initiation organized as a human agency between promoting and promoted groups, called the *kusina* relationship. The former pays tribute in the form of palm oil, fish, food, or palm wine to the latter who allows them into their new status. The promotion group is constituted by men or women who have experienced *manrace*. For example, *kamabi* becomes *kasuka* under a new status allowed by the elder *kasuka*, the promoting group.

However, while biology is the base of this agency (i.e., controlled entirely by age and gender), the sociological implications (e.g., becoming marriageable), and political power (i.e., change in social status), it then implies are the determining factors for this graduating process that constitutes and renews political leadership (based on seniority). This framework is common between Bijagos men and women, but the ways that each group organizes their agency are distinct.

Women organize their social promotion not only through age groups, but also through a symbolical transformation into a spiritual entity, known as *Orebok*. These spirits are young males who die before participating in their *manrace*. Women can capture this spirit and become *Orebok* at which time they can claim a form of equality comparable to that of Bijagos men. Women accomplish this fundamental ritual, targeting a dual goal: their own status elevation and the promotion of deceased young men allowing them to join the ancestors. This ritual is necessary to calm spirits left in limbo in order to control their energy and avoid social disorder and disaster. Without women’s power, Bijagos society would be vulnerable to natural and social disorders such as disease, violence, death (particularly the death of children), and bad agricultural production.

Although women share similar rituals and performance acts with their male counterparts including dances, decorative masks, dress, and ceremonies, the meaning of women’s social promotion is distinct. This difference constitutes an

important source of female power among the Bijagos. The promoting group, made up of elder women, is known as *Okinka*. Within this group, women choose their leader, also called *okinka*. Therefore, women power institutions have two levels, one collective (through the *Orebok* ritual and *Okinka* elders) and the other representative (through the *okinka* leader).

Normally studies on Bijagos culture do not recognize the representative power of *Okinka* and postulate this power in the same way that they analyze male power, the power of *Oronho*, which is an individual power legitimized through the male's relationship to the royal lineage. *Okinka* power, however, is based on a collective community created and promoted by women. *Okinka* has different sources of power and cannot be compared with the men's power, *Oronho*. This misunderstanding shapes confused interpretations on Bijagos gender and political studies. Bijagos women also continue to negotiate their positions in society through everyday acts such as fishing, gathering crustaceans, and their processing and sale, which are essential to their sustainable ways of life and world sense (Fernandes, 1987). Simultaneously, their customary roles renew continuity with the past that verify their integrity to Bijagos nationhood (Fernandes, 1984).

### ***Nalú: Gendered Solidarity and Alternative Development***

Cooperation and consensus building through shared experiences are important markers of peaceful coexistence, thus, women promote their livelihoods and maintain social cohesion by fostering various forms of common ground. Women among the Nalú ethnic group of southern Guinea-Bissau have actively fostered positive social interactions in their daily lives as an equalizing force within their communities and as a way to cultivate alliances beyond its borders. Due to space constraints, we provide only two brief illustrations of these localized mechanisms aimed at unification between women, between women and men, and between the natural and supernatural worlds.

According to Luigi Scantamburlo (2003, p. 382), a *mandjuandadi* is a group of women or men who are approximately of the same age and who participated in their initiation together. They tend to be hierarchical across age groups as members control more resources with seniority. Christoph Kohl (2012) argued that these local associations promote a type of nation-building from the ground-level in Guinea-Bissau. He showed that the proliferation of these associations across ethnic divisions since independence is indicative of national integration, which he contrasts with the largely failed attempts at state-building in the country. Along similar lines, we argue that the *mandjuandadi* groups found among the patrilineal Nalú are a significant public unifying force for women within and even beyond the borders of their communities. These groups were observed to mentor, train, and socialize subsequent initiation groups within the community; they fundraised to support their social and economic activities; they represented their village at public events; and they helped maintain social harmony between women and men by "outing" men's misdeeds through shaming in the form of often lewd songs performed in public. This airing of "dirty laundry" publicly as a collective

unit often worked to protect the victim from retribution and forced the perpetrator to conform to expected social norms.

One warm and moonless evening during a funeral ceremony, the local *mandjuandadi* women's group stood together, dressed in matching prints waiting for darkness to fall. The dresses, matching headscarves, and drum were all purchased through fundraising efforts as recent recipients of a micro-credit program initiated in the region. At twilight, these young women began to chant and dance in a circle to the beat of the drum; many young men lurked in the darkness, listening for what might be revealed on that particular night. The dancing would go on until morning with support from other visiting groups of women also wearing matching dresses. Many songs were sexual in nature either praising or chastising lovers for their physical abilities or lack thereof. There were also warnings dispensed to would be thieves-in-the-night and what might become of them if they pushed unwanted advances. Some of the chants were also educational in nature praising the community for its solidity, dispensing advice about what makes a good spouse, reminding the men how hard their womenfolk work to maintain the home, and making reference to women's power to appease the husband and spirits.

African traditional religion among the Nalú remains quite complementary along gendered lines (Lundy 2012). Initiations and circumcisions known collectively as *fanadu* are divided by gender, age, and geography. Elders operate sacred groves that cater to the public where they can visit and make requests and offerings to its spiritual inhabitants. Scantamburlo (2003) described this division, "*Na baloba, mindjeris ta sinta na un ladu di baloba, omis ta sinta na utru ladu*" [In the baloba, women sit on one side of the baloba, men sit on the other side] (p. 102, translation ours). Each group, men and women, have special contracts with, duties to, and powers from the spirits that they then share with the community to promote pregnancy, maintain order and respect for societal norms, and dispense justice. While the nature of the interventions, spirits, and associated rituals vary between the Nalú male and female operators, at the end of the day, visitors attend to both sides and the offerings are evenly split. Further, when a plea is satisfied, the supplicant returns to *torna boka* or make an additional offering in thanks. These offerings often result in a shared meal for the community at large; the males butcher the sacrifice, often a goat or chickens, while it is the women who collect the firewood and cook the offering.

As evidenced in the preceding ethnic cases, customary roles of both Bijagos and Nalú maintain unique forms of agency and power within their communities. We now turn to economic agency among the Nharas and Bideiras to engage with the intersectionality of women traversing borders and forming social capital and networks as they operate within informal, semi-formal, and formal economic sectors.

### *Nharas: Intermediary Women of Wealth*

Two of the most influential histories written on the Guinea-Bissau region to date both engage women's centrality in establishing pre-colonial trade networks (Brooks, 2003; Havik, 2004). This heritage is crucial in understanding the evolution of women's roles in nation-building. The historical tracings begin in the 1600s, just after the tumultuous early contact period with European explorers, missionaries, emissaries, and traders. For centuries, cultural and political differences along the Upper Guinea Coast influenced landlord-stranger interactions or what Philip J. Havik (2004) referred to as "cultural brokerage."

In discussing the fate of Eurafricans or Luso-Africans, the offspring of European traders and African women, George E. Brooks (2003) summarized the outcomes of Eurafricans maturing in the stratified and patrilineal societies of Senegambia as opposed to among the decentralized and matrilineal societies just to the south in the Guinea-Bissau region. In Senegambia according to Brooks (2003) "Social outcasts, Luso-Africans lacked the rights and privileges of other members of their age sets, including the right to cultivate land" (p. xxi). He continued, "Luso-African males in these societies sought employment as sailors [grumetes], interpreters, and compradors working for Portuguese and fellow Luso-Africans, with bleak prospect that whatever wealth and possessions they acquired would be expropriated by rulers and other elites" (Brooks, 2003, p. xxi). Both Luso-African males and females fared much better further south.

On the other hand, because social status was determined through the mother in the matrilineal societies of the Guinean littoral, Luso-African fates were often very different. *Lançados*, "venturesome Portuguese and Luso-African inhabitants of the Cape Verde Islands, who were allowed to reside in African communities" (Brooks, 2003, p. xix-xxi), were encouraged to intermarry with the female dependents of the local coastal leadership to promote trade relations. Further, the children of these unions, both male and female, "shared the same socialization and opportunities as all other children . . . Luso-Africans could participate in their parents' commercial undertakings . . . female entrepreneurs were known as *nharas*, from the Portuguese word *senhora*, meaning a woman of property and status" (Brooks, 2003, p. xxii; see also Brooks, 1997). Havik (2004) acknowledged, the "remarkable roles played by women and the considerable scope for initiative they acquired as *intermediaries* in the context of Afro-Atlantic exchange in the region," continuing, "women in trade settlements succeeded in significantly extending their autonomy by exploiting their role as cultural brokers" (p. 13, italics ours).

Although the eventual colonial occupation of Portuguese Guinea squeezed out the *nharas* as influential matrons of position and wealth largely through racially charged and misogynistic colonial ideologies and accompanying policies, their importance was felt up through the second half of the 1800s. It was Havik (2004) who noted that these female "brokers and traders" were not only wealthy in slaves and human capital, but were also able to own and cultivate land as well as export crops extending their "cross-cultural entrepreneurship . . . far beyond

trade settlements into both rural areas as well as Atlantic markets” (p. 28). For Havik (2004), the likely long term impact of the *nhara* phenomena is due to the fact that they were able to successfully establish “themselves as land owners and planters in the 1800s” (p. 28). Something akin to the traditional economic role of the *Nharas* continues today in the informal sectors among the *Bideiras* community of merchant women throughout Guinea-Bissau.

### ***Bideiras: Contemporary Merchant Women***

*Bideiras* are contemporary merchant women that engage in the informal markets and trading places of Guinea-Bissau (Domingues, 2000). The women face several hierarchical hurdles, such as social inequality based on the homogeneity of the formal markets and political rules mainly inherited from the colonial and patriarchal norms. *Bideiras* transcend these structures by building new forms of everyday exchange by focusing on their innovation and creativity (Lundy, 2015b; Lundy, Patterson, & O’Neill, 2017). They take advantage of the decentralization and multi-dimensionality of their practices of daily entrepreneurship. Because of these efforts, *Bideiras* help create networks and relationships not only within Guinea-Bissau, but across borders traversing West Africa.

The concept of hybridity (Bhabha, 2004) helps to explain their social mobility when exploring such trans-border practices. In this concept, the formation of hybrid cultural identity is used to exploit and engender moments of ambivalence that structure social authority. Cultural identity is produced on the boundaries in between forms of difference, in the intersections and overlap across spheres of class, gender, and location, displacing structures of cultural domination and revealing a “third space” (Bhabha, 2004). It is this concept of cultural hybridity that is extended to understand the *Bideiras* as well as the historical role and status of *Nharas/Lancados*. We examine this trans-border concept and recall the history of the *Nhara*’s role in the colonial power structure. *Nharas* were able to join trans-border links with colonial settlers and high-ranking aristocrats in traditional societies to build an important female economic power base. *Bideiras* are also claiming economic space in their enacting of social capital through extensive kinship networks to improve their everyday livelihoods. While on a smaller scale, *Bideiras* become women of means in contemporary Guinea-Bissau with an ability to influence the social, economic, and political landscapes of the country.

Restrictive gender roles within the colony and contemporary poverty, however, force women back into the “silences” where they faced “dual oppression” (i.e., lack of means and gender discrimination) (Havik, 2004; Urdang, 1979).<sup>5</sup> Stuck in between these historical and contemporary moments though, the nationalist struggle emphasized gender equality; this for Urdang meant that Guinean women were at the dawn of “newfound social mobility and political responsibility” returning to them their pre-colonial “autonomy and agency,” right

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Havik’s own inspiration for his research came from Stephanie Urdang’s book.

(Havik, 2004, p. 10)? The next case explores the colonial gendered recession in Portuguese Guinea (Guinea-Bissau) and how women continued to facilitate their own social and political integrity in spite of a continued retraction of public space in which to act leading to strong support for the independence movement.

### **Fighting Two Colonialisms: A Struggle for Equality**

“Our revolution will never be victorious if we do not achieve the full participation of women” (Cabral, 1972).

“In the context of armed struggle, the liberation movement appealed to the rights of women, to their *integrity* and their respect” (Gomes, 2013, p. 283, italics ours).

Commenting on Stephanie Urdang’s (1979) groundbreaking book, Lars Rudebeck applauded her on the book’s dust jacket for capturing not only the “changing role of women,” but also “the general transformation of Guinean society.” It is this “revolution within the revolution” that must be continually enacted to ensure the equitable participation of women in modern Guinea-Bissau. There is much that can be learned from Urdang’s portrayal of actual situations of women in the country that were shaped by Amilcar Cabral’s revolutionary thoughts regarding the integrity of women. Urdang (1979) writes, “PAIGC showed a consciousness of the fact that women’s liberation had to be fought on two fronts—from above and below. Party pronouncements in themselves were insufficient: it was essential that women themselves take up the issue so that liberation would be truly theirs” (p. 17). In other words, women’s rights had to be taken.

Customary practices such as polygyny, forced marriage, bridewealth, religious sanctions and segregation, sexual divisions of labor, female circumcision, prohibitions on divorce, and domestic abuse could not be changed by decree. Of course, these practices varied by cultural group. For example, among the matrilineal and matrilocal Bijagos discussed above, the husband moved in with the wife’s family. If she was dissatisfied with the arrangement, she could end it by forcing the man to return to his kin, while any children remained with her and her family (Urdang, 1979, p. 154). On the other hand, among the patrilineal-patrilocal Nalú, women’s rights within the household were restricted since they remained outsiders to their husband’s kin.

Working within this web of cultural traditions, some beneficial and some detrimental to the nationalist cause, PAIGC political mobilization encouraged a process of self and community evaluation and in some instances, incremental social transformation. Party messages clearly reflected concerns for social and political justice in tandem with cultural sensitivities and the expectation that the populace’s collective consciousness would be raised one person at a time. This approach was reflected in the common phrase, *puku, puku*, or “a little at a time” referring to incremental advances. Urdang (1979) presented these recognized gender disparities when she cited a PAIGC document: “In spite of the importance

of women in the life of African peoples, it is only rarely that they take an active part in political affairs. In our country, women have almost always been kept out of political affairs, of decisions concerning the life which they nonetheless support, thanks to their anonymous daily work” (p. 107). Recognizing these challenges, PAIGC called for change.

Women “supported PAIGC because they saw in it the potential for their own liberation” (Urdang, 1979, p. 123). At first, women grew and cooked food for the movement. Later, they began to transport supplies for the fighters or worked as nurses in the liberated zones. Others eventually took up arms as part of the regular army or local militias. Gjerstad and Sarrazin (1978) write, “Many proved extremely capable in mobilizing the population and were made political commissars or elected to village committees and the People’s Tribunals . . . without the participation of women the liberation of the country could not be achieved” (pp. 45-46). At the party level, women were quickly integrated into leadership positions. Urdang (2013) writes, “A quota system was in place for the [PAIGC] tribunals and councils, in an effort to ensure that at least two of the five elected members were women” (p. 275). In a 1966 speech, Cabral stated,

Comrades, we are going to place women in high-ranking posts, and we want them at every level from the village committees up to the party leadership. What for? To administer our schools and clinics, to take an equal share in production, and to go into combat against the Portuguese when necessary . . . We want the women of our country to have guns in their hands . . . The women must hold their heads high and know that our party is also their party. (cited in Urdang, 1979, p. 125)

Female children within the liberated zones were soon sent off to party schools; women served as PAIGC mobilizers; and they fought alongside men in armed conflict against the Portuguese. In an interview with Urdang, Bwetna Ndubi stated, “Today I work together with men, having more responsibility than many men . . . But we have to fight twice—once to convince women and the second time to convince men that women have to have the same rights as men” (2013, p. 276). Kumba Kolubali of PAIGC said, “We know that everybody is from Guinea-Bissau . . . A boy can be a girl and a girl can be a boy. In other words, each can do what the other can do” (Urdang, 2013, p. 277).

PAIGC under Cabral’s leadership and foresight was able to make great strides toward women’s emancipation, education, and equality (Lundy, 2013). For example, “The percentage of women with middle level training and university education increased from 6 in 1964 to 132 in 1972” (Gomes, 2013, p. 287; see also Lundy, 2013). As one woman told Urdang, “‘There was no alternative [to marriage].’ Except through education: ‘in this way I could defend myself. I realized that the more ignorant a woman was, the more she was dominated’” (1979, p. 205). In fact, by 1974, the year of independence, more than one-third of those continuing with their studies outside of Guinea-Bissau were women (Urdang, 1979, p. 222). Another woman of the revolution stated,

By a liberated woman I mean a woman who has a clear consciousness about her responsibility in the society and who is economically independent. By a liberated woman I mean one who is able to do all the jobs in the society without being discriminated against, a woman who can go to school to learn, who can become a leader . . . Without equality of all people, without equal opportunity to go to school, to get medical care, without equality to work, it is not possible for a woman to be free. (Urdang, 1979, p. 258)

The independence movement in Guinea-Bissau acknowledged the needs for gender-based reforms throughout the country. Many conversations were initiated around equal rights, social justice, and the cessation of structural violence aimed at keeping women in support roles to their male counterparts. Reforms were introduced, debated, and initiated over time. It seems, however, that the germination of gender-based institutions in Guinea-Bissau has remained underdeveloped alongside many of the other state sectors in need of reform due to ongoing political instability, social divisions, and economic stunting since achieving independence. It is the case of women's political agency contemporarily that we turn to next.

### **Contemporary Political Agency: Towards Re-making a Nation**

Today, Guinea-Bissau has scant evidence of women's participation in state-building within public sectors although there is a glimmer that this may be changing (Cardoso & Sjöberg, 2011). For example, in September 2015, Prime Minister Carlos Correia appointed two female ministers to key positions, Adiato Djalo Nandigna, a previous advisor to President Jose Mario "Jomav" Vaz, as Minister of Defense, and Aida Injai Fernandes as Minister of Justice (Agence France Presse, 2015). Although institutional policies aim to encourage women's advancement and participation within formal public spheres, little is being done on the ground to ensure the continued progress of women's rights and equality in Guinea-Bissau.

Today, women in Guinea Bissau are fighting against political instability and poverty. A new feminist movement, created on August 24, 2015, called "Mindjeres di Guine No Lanta" (Women of Guinea-Bissau let us Rise Up), was established by a group of women of Guinea-Bissau as a movement for peace, stability, and legality, asserting "enough" to political instability and poverty. This movement, created by 29 women and supported by 80 others from several professions, publicizes a Manifesto that expresses their weariness of persistent political waste of the potentials of women and youth and puts forward some goals for "a new political discourse," and "the engagement of women into high levels of political action" (Lusa Report, 2015). This feminist movement is an indictment of the overall contraction of women's rights since independence and looks to combat their weakened position in civil society as an autonomous political force. The movement intends to serve as a government watchdog and to "bring the national debate back to issues such as good governance, democracy, human rights, and gender" (Lusa Report, 2015). These types of initiatives must be acknowledged,

lauded, nurtured, and expanded if Guinea-Bissau is to achieve real social, economic, and political development in the near future.

## Conclusion

“Each of us has to live our own times with all our *integrity* and sincerity”  
(Henriques & Barros, 2013, p. 213, italics ours).

African feminisms demonstrate both the importance of complementary gender relations in society and the significance of cultural context. It also emphasizes greater advocacy toward gender equality, particularly when it comes to rights, protections, and security even when in direct opposition to other forms of identification and power structures. This article has argued that women have been integral in the re-making of nationhood in Guinea-Bissau through six gendered cases: Bijagos women’s power, Nalú women’s solidarity, women as pre-colonial and contemporary economic intermediaries, the dual struggle for independence and equality among women in Guinea-Bissau, and the autonomy of women’s political movements. What we found is that women are integral to the development of contemporary Guinea-Bissau while this legacy remains partially obscured in the face of general political and economic obstacles.

What is clear is that societal gender roles vary within a diverse country such as Guinea-Bissau. What is equally as clear is that women’s advocacy is essential to the further development of broad nationhood and state reform. Gender complementarity and female equality are not exclusionary as we hope was demonstrated in this article. One implication of framing this article through the African feminist perspective is the promotion of dialogue where social positioning and identity hybridity continue to be derived through a complex and dynamic web of social relations, or intersectionalities, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in conflict, but always in need of further elaboration and clarity. Identifying mechanisms for promoting and supporting the integrity of women’s voices as leaders in society is advanced through a better understanding of historical processes of change and stability (positive and negative) and by acting in solidarity through the advancement of gender inclusion.

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