Bandits Fall from Grace
Liberation heroes and alter-politics in Bissau
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Published in:
Terrain

DOI:
10.4000/terrain.21541

Publication date:
2021

Document version
Publisher’s PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
This article looks at the rise and fall of political legitimacy in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau. Building on long-term fieldwork with impoverished city dwellers, it looks at the legitimacy and sociality surrounding political figures and movements in the country, commencing with the liberation movement (the PAIGC) and ending in the current situation of large-scale drug-trafficking. While the liberation movement was initially portrayed as consisting of noble (Marxist) bandits, the post-independence period has seen the former liberation heroes lose their positive symbolic presence. Established as an alternative to colonial power, the PAIGC fought for the emancipation of the country’s people and the realization of an Afro-Marxist political order emanating from its native population. After independence, however, the validity of the PAIGC’s claim to power started to decay and become distorted. People became disenchanted with politics, which lost its communal esteem. The imagery and discourse surrounding the PAIGC thus changed and the liberation hero’s status moved from that of a social to an anti-social and eventually asocial bandit. The figure became, as such, stripped of its “social” mollifier, leaving behind merely the bandido, to use the Creole term: a predatory figure focussed on individual gain rather than collective well-being.

Cet article analyse le développement puis la chute de la légitimité politique à Bissau (Guinée-Bissau). S’appuyant sur un terrain de longue durée au milieu de citadins pauvres, il examine la légitimité et la socialité entourant les figures et les mouvements politiques du pays, depuis le mouvement de libération (le PAIGC) jusqu'à la situation actuelle de trafic de drogue à grande échelle. Alors que le mouvement de libération a été décrit à l’origine comme composé de nobles bandits (marxistes), la période d’après l’indépendance vit les anciens héros de la libération perdre leur statut symbolique positif. S’étant établi comme une alternative au pouvoir colonial, le PAIGC s’était battu pour l’émancipation du peuple et pour la mise en place d’un ordre politique afro-marxiste émanant des citoyens guinéens. Après l’indépendance, toutefois, la prétention au pouvoir a commencé à s’affaiblir et à se déformer. Les gens deviennent désenchantés par la politique, et celle-ci perd l’estime de la communauté. L’imagerie et les discours concernant le PAIGC changèrent donc et le statut de héros de la libération passa de celui de bandit social à celui de bandit antisocial, parfois même à celui de bandit asocial. Leur image fut dépouillée de son caractère d’apaisant “social”, ne représentant plus qu’un bandido pour employer le terme créole : un prédateur ne s’intéressant qu’à ses intérêts propres et non au bien-être collectif.

Résumés

English François

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Entrées d’index

Mot-clé : légitimité politique, bandit social, classe, diaspora, crime international
Keyword : political legitimacy, sociality, class, diaspora, transnational crime

Texte intégral
Filling up the heroes’ cemetery

1 “May they all die!” Dó exclaimed. “This country will not know peace until they are all dead.” He was referring to the antigo combatantes, the PAIGC veterans of the liberation war in Guinea-Bissau – more specifically, to the people within the upper echelons of the state apparatus who had fought in the anti-colonial struggle against the Portuguese and held positions of power since independence. The statement was an unusual one for him to make. While being a forceful critic of the political situation in Guinea-Bissau, he was in general pacifically inclined and often busy trying to find ways to change the country’s politics from the predatory to the peaceful and escape the conflict and instability that had troubled it since independence (Vigh 2009: 164). In wanting a group of people dead, Dó seemed to have lost both the sentiment and nuance that commonly defined his political sensibility. Yet the desire to see the end of the political influence of this group of war veterans echoed a more widespread feeling among people in Bissau (cf. Embaló 2017). Though honoured for decades, the symbolic standing of former PAIGC militants had waned to the point where people were thinking that the country would be better off without them. The antigo combatantes had been held in high esteem as the country gained its independence. Having sacrificed their youth on the battlefield, they were celebrated as having rid the country of a political evil. Now, some 50 years later, they were spoken of as bandidos – asocial figures tied to conflict, corruption and warmongering.

Building on ethnographic fieldwork with impoverished urban men in Bissau, the country’s capital, and with poor Guinea-Bissauan migrants in Europe, this article details the demise of political authority in Guinea-Bissau. It shows how the liberation hero as a social bandit, an agent seen to socialize resources and power, developed into an asocial one, cultivating private interests instead. The empirical material that the article builds on is longitudinal and transnational. It stems from 20 years of ongoing research into Guinea-Bissauan politics and contains, as such, two empirical trajectories: the first moves us from the independence struggle (1963–1973) to a contemporary political one; the second, from Bissau into the diaspora. As we shall see, both historical and transnational developments explain the symbolic demise of former liberation heroes as well as of political figures and the political parties associated with them. While such a demise is not unique to the PAIGC or Guinea-Bissau, and the low standing of former independence parties has been analysed by a range of authors and linked to conflict and crises elsewhere on the African continent (cf. Werbner et al. 2002; Reno 2011), the present article adds to the debate by clarifying how this waning of authority and corrosion of political status are brought about by changes to the sociality that underlies them.

These changes may be captured analytically through the notion of banditry. Not only does banditry direct our focus to alternative political orders, it positions our analysis in the grey zone between the (il)legal and the (il)licit, which has been the primary field of enactment for politics in recent Guinea-Bissauan history. Banditry can thus be seen as a specific kind of alter-politics. It draws our attention to an intersection of politics and sociality that is other to the dominant order. In this manner, the concept of banditry has been used to analytically and/or empirically grasp political figures and formations found behind the formal façades of the state, highlighting the adaptable and negotiated practice that underlies it – an anthropological approach to the political par excellence. Yet, contrary to anthropological inclination, banditry as alter-politics may equally show that such alterity is not necessarily positive. As we shall see, “bandit politics” can, from this perspective, be seen as social, anti-social or asocial: that is, as doing service to a larger community, working against it or acting with indifference towards it. In order to illuminate this, the article positions the term in relation to political developments in Bissau; specifies its analytical capacity; and, finally, looks at the shifting evaluations of its legitimacy.

The history of the PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau provides an interesting point of departure for a discussion of the concept and the connection between alter-politics and political legitimacy. Not only are the terms “bandit” and “banditry”, bandido and bandidascos, used widely in the country to define everything from quaint misdemeanours to ruthless violations, the country’s political history furthermore highlights the negative turn of the sociality that lies within them. As seen above, the symbolic standing of the people and party that gained the country independence has deteriorated to the point where people who once venerated them now wish to be rid of them. The PAIGC initially fought under the motto of unidade, luta et progresso, “unity, struggle and progress”. Officially, its aim was to create a sovereign state defined by equality and socialist progress, as envisioned by the leader of the PAIGC, Amilcar Cabral (Cabral 1969). However, moves in this direction disintegrated in internal factionalism after independence, to the point where what materialized was not an Afro-Marxist state of equality, but a highly polarized political scenario in which power became anchored in personal positions and networks, rather than the country’s people, povo di Guiné. The politics of a common cause was replaced by alternative class formation, political-military interest groups and incessant factional conflict.

The history of the PAIGC – and politics in Guinea-Bissau in general – can thus be read as a movement from “politics to” to “politics over”: that is, from an engagement in the political as a way to achieve positive societal change, to an engagement in the political as a way to maintain privilege and control over others. While the country’s coming into being was characterized by social banditry, with fighters in the liberation war fighting for the people, povo, and an alternative political order redistributing resources and power to the masses (Rudefbeck 1972; Chabal 1983; cf. Bereketea 2017: 5), the idiom of banditry was to become equally prominent as an emic term pejoratively describing the country’s politics after liberation. Before independence, PAIGC militants were politically illegal but socially licit political agents. Since independence, they have become politically legal but socially illicit. In the process, the liberation heroes, in the upper echelon of Guinea-Bissauan society, have lost their positive status, becoming, in the eyes of my interlocutors, a privileged group of bandidos, predatory figures focussed on individual gain rather than collective well-being.
What makes a bandit?

On closer inspection, this link between the *illegal* and the *licit*, that is, the politically criminalized, yet socially valued, stands out as a decisive feature of the social bandit. As a political figure, the social bandit conveys generally held social and political principles in order to serve the good of “the people” (Hobsbawm 1959, 1969, 1974). The bandit figure is, thus, illegal, but “within the bounds of the moral order” (Blok 1972: 494). In this manner, we may define the social bandit as a *margin in the middle*, an alternative social, political and economic order incorporated into an otherwise dominant one. It is a figure that is simultaneously morally and socially central, yet politically and legally external to the order it transgresses (Vigh 2009, 2014).

Perhaps this trickster-like quality is the reason that the concept of *bandido* is excessively popular in Bissau. In Guinean Creole, the term *bandido* is used in a range of different settings and situations conveying both the socially enduring and the ugly. On the one hand, calling someone a *bandido* will reference playful transgression. A child, when engaged in minor misbehaviour, such as a naughty testing of boundaries, will affectionately be called a bandit. In similar terms, teasingly testing the boundary between the platonic and romantic – or the time and place for sexualized engagements – may result in a person being “affectionately” termed a bandit. However, the concept equally has a darker side in which the social dimension becomes anti-social or asocial and the transgression predatory rather than playful. A person forcefully taking something that is not his/hers may designate the act of a bandit, just as people misusing a cultural, institutional or political position of power for personal gain will result in someone calling them out as *um bandido* and their deeds as *bandidesco*.

From the perspective of Guinea-Bissau, banditry is, as Blok (1972) famously made clear, thus as morally multiple and conflicted as any other political role. The history of politics in Guinea-Bissau partly exemplifies the nuance. The PAIGC was *alter-political* (Hage 2012). While it was focussed on the collapse of an oppressive colonialist and capitalist order, it equally worked with a very clear socialist imaginary of an alternative one. More precisely, as it stood in opposition to colonialism, it propounded an agenda that worked towards empowering the marginalized and disenfranchised both locally and globally. Yet politics in Bissau more generally reveals that banditry, like alter-politics, as well as being at times positive and productive, is also disposed to become negative and predatory. In either case, the figure remains symbolically potent because it defines otherness within, making it stand forth as political potentiality.

In its more romantic guise, the notion of the social bandit thus foregrounded the current debates on *alter-politics* within anthropology, focussed on political perspectives and practices that exist within, yet provide an alternative to, the dominant (capitalist, occidental, statist, etc.) order. Like the notion of social banditry, alter-politics is seen to constitute “forms of political representation inside power” that contribute “to the production of a different way of thinking and living politically” (Ciavolella & Boni 2015: 5). However, while the work on both “social banditry” and alter-politics is commonly romanticist, there is no reason for it to be normatively prefigured that way. Banditry is interesting as a kind of alter-politics as it makes clear that the latter does not necessarily “deal with people’s problems and meet their aspirations for emancipation and a better future” (ibid.: 3), nor is it necessarily an avenue to ontological self-determination (Holbraad et al. 2014) or even a positive and less oppositional version of the political (Hage 2012). Banditry as a kind of alter-politics commonly takes the form of networks, movements and multitudes, yet, as a longer look at the phenomenon confirms, such alter-politics is not automatically positive or progressive (Blok 1972); a fact which deserves mentioning in relation to the work on alter-politics in general.

Fighting the downtrodden

In its negative version, the anti-social bandit is currently embodied by the figure of the greedy politician in Guinea-Bissau. For the urban poor amongst whom I conduct my fieldwork, in the city and in the diaspora, the move itself from “social” to “anti-social” banditry is a defining feature of political developments in the country. However, the negatively valued *bandido*, and the practice of *bandidasco* and *banditismo*, have not always been associated with the country’s politics. Enjoying popular support and international recognition, the banditry associated with the PAIGC was, in its early days, generally seen in a positive light. The PAIGC that initially challenged the Portuguese state and its colonial forces, in what was then known as Guiné Portuguesa, was exactly defined by the fact of its being both outlawed and criminalized by the state and yet also central to the underlying social and moral order in the country. They were, we may say, revolutionary bandits; an ideologically charged version of the romantic figure, whose struggle was both of and for the people. Their revolution was tied to the demotic as disclosure: that is, a revelation of the true people and the natural and “proper” political order lying dormant in the colonial setting. In the words of Dominic Ramos, commander of the eastern front and the liberation movement’s first guerrilla group, their struggle “revealed everything a true son should be in relation to his people and his country” (quoted in Coutinho 2008: 177, my translation). The classifierbaid motion marking the revolutionary social bandit as fighting for a “natural” social order: that is, one that is more real, better and just.

Launched in 1956 by the young agronomist Amilcar Cabral, the PAIGC aimed to enlighten the masses about the original cultural, social and political order of the Guinean people. This awakening of the masses would enable the PAIGC to replace the capitalist and colonialist order with an indigenous socialist one. The inspiration came, in part, from the first-generation liberation movements in the shape of Senghorian Negritude and Touréian Afro-Marxism. In Cabral’s words (1973 [1970]), the aim was a “return to the source” – a move away from an oppressive and imposed colonial order towards an earlier African socialism found in the original acephalous political systems of the continent. The aspiration was, as such, focussed on attaining a future to be found in the pre-colonial political order, a return to which would institutionalize a “black point of
While the early years of the independence party were relatively peaceful, the PAIGC started to become militant in 1959 after a Portuguese massacre of local dockworkers in the port of Bissau. The initial group of liberation fighters were drawn primarily from the Cape Verdean population group within Bissau proper. The leadership of the PAIGC was, thus, constituted by relatively privileged members of society belonging to the local “indigenous” elite. The Cape Verdean population group had traditionally constituted the core of the civil service in Portuguese Guiné and Cape Verde under colonial rule. While fighting for the creation of an egalitarian society, the core members of the PAIGC themselves constituted the petit-bourgeois margin of the colonial state apparatus and were intrinsically tied to the hierarchy that they sought to undermine. For Cabral, this meant that the petit-bourgeois elite, of which he was himself a part, had to commit, as he termed it, class suicide “in order to be reborn as revolutionary workers, completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which they belong” (Cabral 1969: 86). If not eradicated, the petite bourgeoisie ran the risk of being harnessed in the service of the neo-colonial state. The Cape Verdean core of the PAIGC was to be joined by a handful of people of mixed ethnic background from Bissau and, as the war escalated, by a large number of Balantas, the primary ethnic group in the country. The PAIGC emerged, in this respect, as a minor liberation movement focussed on redistributing resources and power within the territory of Portuguese Guiné and Cape Verde. It became an alternative political order within a dominant one, providing both opposition and an alternative to the colonial regime. The movement was an almost perfect example of social banditry.

However, rather than committing class suicide, the leadership of the PAIGC transitioned into exactly the elite members of the neo-colonial state that Cabral feared they would. The transition from local pre-independence resistance to national post-independence politics proved to be a difficult one, and instead of working for the people and the creation of a state of equality, the leader figures of the PAIGC became an elite network constituting its primary political representatives, chief military figures and civil servants. The rank and file turned into the pleading clientele seeking the patronage that this group offered. Not only did the more dominant figures within the PAIGC end up monopolizing power in post-independence Guinea-Bissau, they also succeeded in consolidating their families and networks in privileged positions within the state bureaucracy and military, creating a society with a substantial rural population, a large group of urban poor and a miniscule elite tied to political-military factions.

### The anti-social bandits

No garantis ta lebsino, “our elders disrespect us”, Joazinho told me as he was complaining about the corrupt oligarchy that the PAIGC elite and people associated with it had turned into. Bissau is currently ripe with objections to the power abuse perpetuated by the political elite and their families. Só ells kim te ne ..., “it is only they that have…”, people say, listing the amount of goods and privileges, from the minor to the major, that are enjoyed by those in power but not by ordinary folk – such as good food, electricity, water, jobs, schooling and the possibility of migration. As Nti told me, e ta sinta riba di nos, “they sit on top of us”, communicating a current feeling of betrayal as the revolutionary bandit-turned-repressive is seen to be keeping people downtrodden rather than working to improve their lot.

As the liberation war came to an end, Cabral’s warnings turned out, thus, to be relatively prophetic. Instead of committing class suicide, the PAIGC spent the first four decades of independence, commencing in 1973, cultivating a privileged position in society and a monopoly on state resources. Politics has come to service merely a handful of select networks, initially affiliated to PAIGC core members, and while resources may trickle through patronage networks, access to these resources is achieved via displays of servitude and submission. As the authoritarian one-party state changed into a democratic multi-party one, the various key networks within the PAIGC turned into political parties in their own right. Yet the democratic transition is seen, from my interlocutors’ perspectives, to have accomplished little in terms of bettering the life conditions of the country’s population, with 87% of the population in Bissau reported to commonly go hungry. Bandidos tudo, “they are all bandits”, the young men that I conduct fieldwork with exclaim. Politics has taken an anti-social turn, as politicians are no longer seen to be working for the population, but to be living off it.

The people I conduct my fieldwork amongst still have, and often hold dear, an idea of the Guinea-Bissauan people as a natural, organic and unified entity. While the notion of o povo, cultivated during the war of liberation, thus still holds affective and symbolic value, it currently and increasingly refers to the vast majority of the population who have been cut off from the distribution of resources and power and who struggle to survive in a barren socio-economic landscape. The social category has come to refer to the downtrodden. Where the pre-liberation attempts to dispossess the colonial powers and redistribute the spoils to the people were seen as socially respectable, the post-liberation patronial distribution of spoils into relatively closed networks is perceived as a sign of self-interest and anti-social disregard for the common good. The sociality underlying politics becomes narrowed down and defined by class interiority. However, in some regards, politics in Bissau has moved beyond the merely anti-social. Politics in the country is seen to work no longer merely against the interests of the people, but with indifference to them.
"Bissau is a shithole," John, an expatriate working for an NGO in Bissau, told me as we were walking through one of the more affluent neighbourhoods in the city. "It's a shithole," he repeated, "it doesn't even have an upper class." I objected to the callous description of a place I hold dear, yet, in relation to the missing socio-economic stratum, the upper class, which John saw as a sign of the dire state of the place, he was both slightly right and very wrong. Bissau does not currently have a large and visible elite, but rather, as discussed, a small tightly knit one. As a result, widespread areas and signs of wealth are generally missing. The area we were walking through was one of the city's finer, but while the houses are bigger and further apart, it is truly not lavish in regional comparative terms. For an outsider, it is not a residential area that necessarily conveys privilege. In other words, the neighbourhood's relatively sorry state, despite being seen locally as a privileged residential area, could very well be seen as an indication that Bissau does not have much of an upper class. However, John was equally very wrong. The point is not that the country does not have an upper class, but rather that its upper class increasingly does not live in Bissau. When people have money in the city, they tend to move elsewhere in order to escape the poverty that defines the place: that is, in order to acquire proximity to electricity, running water, proper sanitation, hospitals, schools, and so on. For some, this means moving to Dakar or Banjul further up the coast. For others, it entails moving to Europe or North or South America.

While the elite few have become cosmopolitan, the impoverished majority moves and lives in a very different manner (Vigh 2018). "If God helps us, then someday we will all move to Europe," Yvette told me simultaneously indicating that Europe provides a possibility for acquiring a better life as well as her perceived inability to get there without divine intervention. Work is generally seen to be found elsewhere, and large parts of Bissau's population are, as such, dependent either on migrating in order to gain decent lives or on the remittances sent home by people who have already migrated for their everyday survival. Yet, while migration has traditionally been recognized as a struggle, in terms of both the migratory trajectory and the life led in Europe, it has become increasingly brutal for the poorer parts of the population. The disparity between modes of movement and life chances once abroad has accentuated an awareness of social inequality in the diaspora.

Little has been written about class dynamics within the various African diasporas (Grillo 2007). In fact, migration from the continent to Europe has been described as a 'leveler', the shared migrant position being seen to erase prior class distinctions (Akyeampong 2000: 186). Similarly, 'class' does not figure in the contemporary academic work on Guinea-Bissau as the country is viewed as a space of generalized poverty. However, it is clear that class distinctions do exist in Guinea-Bissau, that they are being socially reproduced, and that such distinctions are furthermore rapidly emerging within the migrant community, separating the documented from the undocumented and the connected from the unconnected.

For some migrants this is addressed by differentiating those who have n'kunho and those who do not. N'kunho refers to "connections" in the nepotistic or illicit meaning of the word. The concept is akin to an illicit version of social capital (Bourdieu 1985), designating underhand access to people who can assist with, for example, migration, getting a job or securing opportunities more broadly. While migrants who are connected can travel legally (or irregularly via fakes or "clean fakes" [Reeves 2013]) in a relatively safe manner, those without connections are forced to take the "via di bas," the "road below", travelling in undocumented ways and facing the dangers this holds. N'kunho is needed in order to facilitate movement. It grants one access to the state, making it possible to acquire educational possibilities, visas, passports, jobs, and so on.

This equally influences people's life chances when in Europe, just as people who have the possibility of relocating abroad, in this more privileged manner, can often bring their close relatives with them, leaving more distant family in a caretaker role in Bissau to look after their interests in the city. In other words, the class divisions in Bissau become mirrored in the diaspora, as the elite network protection that defines much of the state practice equally facilitates the more comfortable and secure versions of transnational movement (cf. Shaw 2015). While the elite travel by air, send their children to university in Europe and enjoy the benefits of its health care services, the impoverished majority move in a clandestine manner and work without proper papers or security once there. Barriga colla costa, "his belly is glued to his back", N'ti said of a migrant in Lisbon, as the malnourished young man was struggling to feed himself. N'kunho ka ten, "he has no connections", he continued, trying to exemplify to me the class divisions that exist in the diaspora and the hardship that comes from being poorly connected.

There seems to be little banditry to report in such a development, yet in fact the specific business currently generating riches in the country brings us back to the core theme of this special issue and article. Independence came at an unfortunate time for Guinea-Bissau and the PAIGC. It materialized a month before the onset of the oil crisis in October 1973, meaning that the country came into being at a time of brutal economic downturn globally (see Wilson 1975). One of the consequences of this global crisis was described by commentators as an "economic assassination" of the developing African economies (Johnson & Wilson 1982: 211; see also Davidiev 1981) leaving the small state increasingly unable to support its population and its basic institutions. In order to survive, the PAIGC first sought to align the country with the Soviet bloc. Yet, as Soviet influence crumbled through the 1980s, the economic difficulties persisted and rather than becoming self-sufficient the state grew increasingly dependent on international development aid. Guinea-Bissau became in this manner exactly the pawn within the neo-colonial order that Cabral had warned against, yet it became a bandit version of it. Leading figures within the PAIGC, spearheaded by the country's President, Nino Vieira, amassed enormous personal fortunes by misappropriating aid, controlling the national cashew market, illicitly selling off fishing rights to Russian and Chinese actors and illegally selling timber from the country's forest region (see also Só et al. 2018). From the 1980s onwards, the primary engagement with global flows was thus, in the shape of embezzlement of development funds, the selling off of natural resources to foreign interests, and transnational crime. In fact, as the millennium came to an end, the PAIGC had created a political system, under Vieira's command, that by some measurements ranked as the world's most corrupt state from 1990 to
1997 (Dreher et al. 2007). Neither Vieira nor his accomplices, however, put their fortune to work in Guinea-Bissau, but placed vast parts of it abroad in property, business ventures and further illegal engagements (Gebremichael et al. 2019). The local bandits were turning into transnational ones, but in the process little was directed towards the country’s population at large. National politics changed from social banditry to asocial elite protection networks (Shaw 2015), and from a focus on regional concerns to illegal and illicit transnational means of enrichment.

These dynamics have become more apparent during the last two decades as leading veterans of the liberation war and figures within the PAIGC have used Guinea-Bissau’s marginal geo-political status to turn the country into a hub for the international cocaine trade (Vigh 2012). From 2005 to 2009, they managed to connect the country’s state institutions to the large-scale movement of cocaine from South and Central America into Europe. President Vieira established Guinea-Bissau as a primary node in the international drugs trade and secured a steady movement of drugs through the country, making the cocaine trade its prime economy and a major source of livelihood. “People do not think anything [of the trade]. But it is just that … if [only] they [would] do like in Cape Verde. There is a lot of cocaine but their government uses it in a good way so that others can have something as well,” Aliu told me in an interview. His lament was directed not at the illegal nature of the trade, but at the illicit distribution of the revenue. In other words, crime, corruption or embezzlement is seen as acceptable if the bandits involved are prepared to honour social obligations and redistribute.

Aliu’s perspective leads us back to the ideal of an honourable and noble social bandit. Much like social banditry, engagement in contemporary global criminal flows, like the cocaine trade that runs through Guinea-Bissau, may thus be seen as an opportunity for those robbed of better options, and as potentially reasonable if only it were done right: that is, by maintaining the balance between the illegal and the licit. The smaller fish caught up in the cocaine trade work hard to send money to family and friends, and some talk about their engagement in it almost in terms of a care ethic (Vigh 2017). The more senior figures involved, however, are positioned differently. When seen from the city’s impoverished majority, the country’s drug lords live in all but total disregard for the local population. No longer social or anti-social, they are seen as asocial. Cocaine is tied to politics through the figures who control the trade in Guinea-Bissau, but this kind of politics is increasingly spoken about as tied no longer to sociality, but to social indifference. As Manél explained to me when talking about the outlook of the Guinea-Bissuaian elite living abroad, “They do not care about us. If they come, they come [back home] only to show off (ronka). They have their lives there. … Eat sweetly, dress sweetly, live sweetly (kumé sabi, bisti sabi, vida sabi).”

The cocaine trade has, as such, accentuated emerging class distinctions. While the poor and unconnected become caught up in the trade as small-scale traffickers and dealers, the connected and protected harvest the profit of the illegalised enterprise. Rather than moving towards a state of equality, the distance between the haves and the have-nots in Bissau has become extreme. Much has been written about drug traffickers as social bandits, countering local and global inequalities by working the shadowlands of (global) capitalism (Cohen 1986; Edberg 2001; Lane 2005; Sullivan 2012). From one perspective, the PAIGC and its leading figures can, thus, be seen to have continued the social banditry that initially tinted their militancy and mobilization. The drugs business can be viewed as an alternative economy and act of resistance, through which the marginal and abject can partake in global trade. This picture of the drug lord as a social bandit brings us back to the start of the article, however, looking more closely, it becomes clear that the contemporary drug lord in Bissau redistributes very little, and, rather than balancing the illegal and the licit, appears to be detached from it (Shaw 2015). As the bandit figure in Guinea-Bissau moved from the local to the national and global, the PAIGC strongmen and local political elite that initially embodied it have in some respects become the oppressors that they set out to topple some 60 years ago.

Conclusion

This article has looked at the distortion and demise of the revolutionary bandit in Guinea-Bissau. In so doing, it has commented on the emergence and reproduction of elites in the country and probed their failure to maintain support and symbolic high standing. The Guinea-Bissuaian case highlights a loss of political legitimacy that can be traced through the changing sociality connected to the idea of banditry. As the article has shown, banditry may be seen as moving from social to anti-social or asocial. In the current context, this movement coincides with the local, national and global engagement of political figures in the country. While Guinea-Bissau is obviously a special case, contemplating developments in the country with a focus on banditry and alter-politics may allow us to make sense not only of the allure of the liberation movement and “the uncertain reproduction of elites” (Weber 1998: 1–2), but also of the specific kind of post-independence politics that has characterized the country since independence. What we are looking at are the power dynamics of a brutally impoverished decentralized system. What this is indicative of is not necessarily a failed state, but a system where political groups realign – locally and globally – depending on the challenges or prospects faced. The ideological vision of the PAIGC clearly never materialized. The country did not become a strong, independent state. It never acquired a bureaucratic order that services the general public; is not ruled as a single entity; does not have firm control of its political space; and does not possess a monopoly on the use of force. Academics and commentators alike have commonly sought to grasp this “lack” via a focus on a weak or failed state. The result has been an intellectually anaemic approach that sees little more than what it has already predefined as pathological. However, while this “negative definition” of the African state has yielded little in terms of insights into how the Guinea-Bissauan state might then actually work (Vigh 2006: 112), looking ethnographically at political changes in the country may provide us with more of an answer. Instead of emerging as a unified independent political entity, the Guinea-Bissauan state developed in a heterarchical
manner. It became a structure of “differentiated distributions of power-foci” (Klute et al. 2006: 256). As the article has illuminated, these foci have not only changed the sociality that substantiates political legitimacy in the country, but also moved its politics into the bandit country of the global drugs trade.

The research for this article is supported by the ERC’s Horizon 2020 programme, grant agreement # 725794.

Bibliographie


Bandits’ fall from grace

1 Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde.
2 Verbal communication, Matthew H. Carey.

Notes

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Référence électronique
Henrik Erdman Vigh, « Bandits' fall from grace », Terrain [En ligne], 74 | mars 2021, mis en ligne le 02 avril 2021, consulté le 13 juin 2022. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/terrain/21541 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/terrain.21541

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