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Global Challenges and the (Re)Development of Neo-traditional Land Rights. Research in Legal Anthropology in Guinea-Bissau

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Global Challenges and the (Re)Development of Neo-traditional Land Rights. Research in Legal Anthropology in Guinea-Bissau²⁹

Georg Klute, Raul Fernandes

Abstract

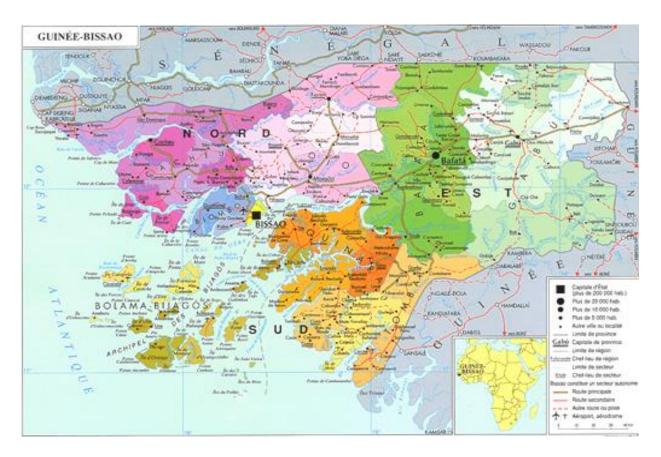
Today, global players and global legal norms are present even in seemingly remote areas. The Bijagós archipelago of Guinea-Bissau is a case in point. Besides the autochthonous islanders, there are operators of the global tourist industry, international drug dealers, fishing ships from Asia and Europe, petrol companies, as well as transnational environmental organisations on the islands who seek to obtain specific rights to access the islands' resources, be it oil, fishing grounds, beaches, biospheres, or hiding places. All newcomers, however, bring differing legal perceptions to the islands. The article argues that the confrontation of autochthonous legal allochthonous conceptions affects morally protected boundaries between various spheres of exchange, leading to crises of trust, misunderstandings and mutual accusations of immorality. On the archipelago, local groups actively cope with these global challenges by claims for the re-establishment of "neo-traditional" rights on land and fishing grounds, which are not only directed against newcomers, but are also prone to bring about changes within the age-class society of the Bijagós.

Keywords: Legal anthropology, legal pluralism, local politics, heterarchical figurations, social change

²⁹ This is the English version, slightly revised, of an article in a special issue "Globalization South" of the sociological journal Leviathan (Klute, Fernandes 2010).

1. Introduction

Today, global players, along with global legal norms, can be found even in seemingly remote areas. The scarcely-known Bijagós archipelago in the West African country of Guinea-Bissau proves this point. Alongside the autochthonous islanders there are not only fishermen from neighbouring countries, but also figures from the global tourism industry and their western customers, international drug-dealers, fishing companies from Asia and Europe, multinational oil companies as well as NGOs and environmental protection agencies. Some of these newcomers import large amounts of capital - some of it "dirty" money - yet all actors and institutions bring different legal perceptions and norms of varying origins with them.



In the present article we will argue that the confrontation of autochthonous legal norms and legal ideas with allochthonous ones touches upon the morally protected boundaries between various spheres of exchange³⁰, a phenomenon that primarily occurs between the islanders and newcomers but also amongst islanders themselves. This can lead to crises of mistrust, misunderstandings, and mutual accusations of amoral behaviour. It is quite apparent that the various actors represent differing and contradictory views that in part lead to open conflicts, especially in the areas of land and fishing rights or environmental protection. The arrival of global players to the islands has sped up the process of land commodification and increased the gap between rich and poor islanders. The multitude of conflicts, as well as the participating social players and power groups lead to various dispositions of power. This manifests itself in the form of varying power alliances formed by different parties, often based on their respective shared interests. These differing and ever changing arrangements and the general instability of the situation produce numerous forms of conflict resolution, of which some may possibly lead to a fragile balance of power, others may hint at a violent future. In the first part we will give a short sketch of the archipelago's history which, through colonial conquest and the related discourse, went from being a regional junction of global trade to a marginal position. Only recently has the archipelago begun to be re-globalised (Section 2). Following an overview of the framework in which the research was carried out (Section 3), we will detail in the next part the conflicts over land and fishing rights, which are triggered - or at least exacerbated - by the presence of regional or "global" newcomers (Section 4). Here we argue firstly that the intensified competition for land and fishing grounds, caused by the arrival of these regional and global actors, leads to a tendency

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³⁰ Here, we relate to the debate initiated by Paul Bohannan (1959) about the destructive effects of monetarization on morally protected boundaries between various spheres of exchange (see for example the concise critique by the late Georg Elwert who introduced the notion of venality into this debate; Elwert 1987). We refute, however, implicit assumptions within this debate that equate the monetarization processes with the enforced imposition of a uniform currency by the (colonial) state. We likewise refute any implicit money fetishism, as can be found in the writings of Bohannan or Elwert; it is not the newly introduced money, but the social relationships generated through processes of monetarization that perforate the boundaries between various spheres of exchange (Klute 2003).

amongst the islanders to revitalize traditional land rights. Secondly we will show that the externally induced changes directly affect inter-societal power relations, especially between the elders, the young and the women. We will conclude with a summarising perspective.

2. Bijagós: from Center to Periphery

The Bijagós archipelago is situated approximately 80km west from the capital of the West African country of Guinea-Bissau, which is located on the mainland. The archipelago lies in the extension of the mouth of the Geba River. Apart from a few specialists, primarily animal lovers, not many even know about this Atlantic archipelago. It has only been in the last few years that the 100-some islands, among which only the 20 largest are permanently inhabited, have got attention from tourism agencies. The tourist advertisements generally describe the islands as a paradise and refuge in a restless world.

A travel report from the *New York Times* on November 8th, 2009 was titled: "Bijagós, a Tranquil Haven in a Troubled Land" (New York Times 2009). Above all, the archipelago is marked with the vocabulary of inviolacy: "With swaying palms, cooling breezes and powdery, white-sand beaches, the Bijagós islands exert a singular spell. Protected by swift tides and treacherous sandbanks, the island's largely matriarchal people eluded Portuguese control until the 1930s" (Lonely Planet 2009). This inviolacy relates to the nature as well as the island inhabitants who act, so to say, as "traditional protectors of nature":

"Only about 20 islands of the archipelago are inhabited by the Bijagós people, which is mainly untouched by modern civilization. On the islands, one can experience one of the last untouched natural peoples remaining in the world. In 1934 the Austrian ethnologist Hugo Bernatzik described the islanders as 'conservative, brave, reserved, completely honest, hardworking and polite people. [...]' Since then, not much has changed there because the islands and the people have always been isolated. Above all,

the animistic religion and matriarchal social structure of the islanders have guaranteed the protection of this unique natural heritage. The Bijagós are a people with matriarchal social structures who practice a natural religion, including rites of initiation and sacred places, which help protect the area's flora and fauna. One lives in harmony with the natural landscape during fishing and hunting, without disrupting or destroying the ecological balance. Arable agricultural lands are communally owned" (Oase Reisen 2009).

Before attaining independence in 1974, Guinea-Bissau was considered a relatively unimportant colony of small, peripheral Portugal, and the islands had an even less meaningful role in this marginal colony. The islands were only pacified in 1936 after three consecutive military campaigns (Forrest 2003, Hawthorne 2003). The colonial conquest, however, could by no means transform a heretofore barely-known archipelago to become part of a global colonial empire. Rather it was this colonization and the related colonial discourses which marginalized the Bijagós islands and promoted the establishment of a homogenous ethnicity amongst the Bijagós. Prior to colonization, the Bijagós had but a fluid group identity, albeit known under a common term (Scantamburlo 1991). Before the colonial conquest the islands were included into a truly global exchange of goods. Until far into the 19th century, the islanders counted among the most fearsome slave hunters and traders on the West-African coast. From the 17th century onward, Portuguese, Dutch, French, English and Spanish ships came to the islands to trade for slaves the Bijagós had kidnapped from the mainland. The descriptions from the period reflect this: "[O]n the continent they burn the houses, the villages and the churches. The worst people of this Ethiopia. They say that the sea has no king, just as they have no king, even on land." (Alvares 2003: 92). Thanks to their raids, the warlike islanders lived in a state of de facto independence, which they held onto after the end of the slave trade until their final "pacification" in the 1930s. With the defeat of the last resistance and the establishment of taxes, the islanders became Portuguese subjects. At the same time, the colonial power drastically restricted the islanders' mobility. Their war canoes were

destroyed and even travel between the islands and the continent was put under strict observation. Slave hunters and pirates, who had formerly played a role in global trade, were turned into farmers and fishermen, more or less isolated from the outer world. Their representation changed respectively. The ethnographer Mendes Moreira described the islanders in his 1946 "Short Ethnographic Study of the Bijagós" in the following way: "Condition of the Civilization: the Bijagós are one of the most primitive people in the world. [...] According to Morgan's classification, they belong to the Barbaric phase, but if one takes [the lack of, GK] literacy into consideration, it is logical that we must include them among the ranks of culture-less peoples." Or: "The Bijagós possess only the most rudimentary notion of cleanliness. Thus we could say they possess a diametrically opposed notion that consists of collecting the maximum amount of dirt upon oneself." Or: "The clothing of the Bijagós differs little from the nakedness of paradise" (Bordonaro 2006: 97-98; translation G.K.).

The colonial image of "happy" or "primitive" remoteness exists to this day. It is not only to be found in the catalogues of travel agencies. Even the most recent anthropological monograph about the islands refers to the aspect of primitive isolation: "[T]he Archipelago was largely disconnected from the rest of the country and from the capital Bissau. It was a place where you could feel really cut off from the rest of the world" (Bordonaro 2006, p. 13). Modernity existed, even if only in pictures, yet it still drove many young people to break out of isolation: "This is a study about young men and their 'will to be modern'. [...] I am concerned with their creative strategies for overcoming a subaltern condition, appropriating and using the narratives of 'development' and the institutions of 'modernity' [...]. On the other hand, I will highlight their uncertainties and frustration as they realize that the very project of modernity they strive to embrace confines them to a position of marginality and subalternity in the global geography of 'development', with few opportunities to escape" (Bordonaro 2006: 2).

Today, "modernity" is not only present in pictures of the islands, rather in recent years there are groups of newcomers whose horizons and interests are to some extent quite global. Because the circa 100 islands can hardly be

controlled and patrolled, they have become some of the first African bases for South American drug dealers. The navy of Guinea-Bissau commands just two ships, and the drug-dealers' speedboats can easily outrun them. The country's air force can exert just as little control: it has not been able to get a plane off the ground for years. Drug planes from South America (perhaps with accomplices from the Army of Guinea-Bissau) land without notice. The rich fishing grounds around the islands have not only attracted fishermen from neighbouring Senegal, Guinea and Sierra Leone, but also trawlers from China, South Korea and Spain. They fish on the edge of marine reserves and, when the opportunity presents itself, apparently within the protected areas as well. The trawlers serve as tenders for wooden boats (pirogues) with outboard motors that can enter the protected areas. Another group consists of travel companies, mostly French-owned, that already operate in southern Senegal (Casamance) and use the islands for exclusive customers as high-sea fishing destinations. Then there are oil companies based on the mainland which drill for oil around the islands. And finally there are various environmental protection agencies which look after the spawning grounds and habitats of various marine species.

Nowadays the (presumed) inviolacy and isolation of the archipelago have gone. The arrival of the aforementioned groups of newcomers triggered on the one hand varying conflicts between autochthonous and allochthonous groups, and on the other conflicts even among the islanders themselves, who in the end are considerably affected by the differing legal conceptions which have been imported to the archipelago by the newcomers.

For these reasons the Bijagós islands were a prime location for the legal anthropology research project "Local Strategies of Conflict Management in Guinea-Bissau", completed by the National Research Institute of Guinea-Bissau (INEP) and the University of Bayreuth.³¹ Before we discuss the

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³¹ The research project lasted from 2006 to 2012; it was funded by Volkswagen-Foundation within the framework of its initiative 'Knowledge for Tomorrow'.

results of our investigations until this point,³² the theoretical and methodological premises on which this project is based must be presented.

3. Overview of the Cooperative Research Project in Guinea-Bissau

The project examines local conflict resolution strategies in Guinea-Bissau and their articulation with the corresponding legal systems and conflict resolution mechanisms on a national and international level.³³

With the chosen interdisciplinary and comparative approach, not only selected regions within Guinea-Bissau are taken into consideration, but also similar phenomena in neighbouring countries. The project combines two theoretical positions: on the one side, the fragility of state structures in certain parts of Africa, which is in sharp contrast with the remarkable vitality of local political orders, and on the other side theoretical debates about the formation of informal political orders within or beyond the state in Africa. Already a short analysis of the post-colonial political history of Guinea-Bissau shows that phases of latent crises often have turned into violent conflicts (Adebayo 2002; Djaló 2000). In reality, the curbing of the military's ambitions for power, the limiting of unequal distribution of political influence and office among the larger ethnic groups and the integration of so-called "traditional authorities" of the country in the decision making processes of the modern state have been unsuccessful! (Carvalho 2000). Until now, Guinea-Bissau has not seemed to be able to apply what William Zartman called the "traditional cure" to the violence problem (Zartman 2000, 2004). In fact it seems that the institutions of the modern state in Guinea-Bissau can barely provide adequate conflict resolution mechanisms.

In the last two-and-a-half decades, Africa has undergone fundamental changes which have led to the fragmentation of state structures and to heterogeneous forms of political organization. For this reason, Africa represents the failure of state in the eyes of many writers. Significantly, political structures in Africa are almost always characterized by negative qualifiers, such as 'failing,' 'failed,' 'weak,' 'soft,' 'incomplete,'

³² Data were mostly collected by Raul Fernandes, and only occasionally by both authors.

³³ For an overview over the theoretical and methodological bases of our research, see Klute, Embaló und Embaló (2006).

'collapsed,' 'greedy,' or 'criminal' (Bayart 1990; Bayart, Ellis and Hibou 1999; Fatton 1992; Chabal and Daloz 1999). To overcome this negative characterization, thereby contrasting to some extent the common hierarchical state model, which stands over all other power groups and dominates them under its monopoly of power, we will use the term "heterarchy" (Bodarenko, Grinin and Korotayev 2004). We believe this term is more fitting than the purely-negative characterizations of the political field when it comes to grasping the diverse and competing foci of power (Chabal, Feinman and Skalník 2004: 47ff) as well as the corresponding and conflicting interlacements between state and non-state groups of power in countries like Guinea-Bissau.³⁴For a few years now, non-governmental actors have entered the complex political stage (McIntosh 1999). The rise of these forces is usually explained by referring to the "weakness" or "absence" of the African state. But it could be just as well explained in other ways, namely that this rise points to the vitality of social and political powers at the local level (Bellagamba and Klute 2008). Of course we do not know if these emerging informal, non-governmental political forms of organization are ephemeral in nature and therefore doomed to disappear as soon as the state retakes power. To last they must just as any other political order must - deal with the "problem of violence" (Klute and Embaló 2011; Hanser and Trotha 2002). Modes of conflict resolution need to be developed, especially for violent conflicts, either within state structures or parallel to the state. The central thesis of this project therefore states that the ability to solve the "problem of violence" and the ability to apply regular modes of conflict resolution is decisive in determining the durability of social organizations in general, and more specifically the future of these political organizations.

We do not investigate conflicts as such and we do not draw up any conflict typologies, but rather we inquire about specific forms of disagreement and conflict resolution. Violent and potentially violent conflicts are of special interest here.

Under the current conditions and in light of the dwindling attractiveness of the (western) state model, conflict resolution processes occurring at a local level seem to be of quite some importance (Klute and Trotha 2004). Can we identify the formation of heterarchical political orders in Africa? Which

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³⁴ Recently, we developed the concept of heterarchy in more detail (see Klute 2013).

instances of conflict resolution can we identify that can be attributed to these? Has the western nation-state lost its appeal as the sole model of political organization? Finally the question must be pursued: whether the fragmentation of state order in Africa and elsewhere could lead to a transition period, a Hobbesian "natural state" where each must fend for himself.

4. Conflicts about Land and Fishing Rights

The groups on the Bijagós islands can be described as corporate communities, whose' "forms of organizing space" resemble those described by Ruddle, Hyinding and Johannes for the case of the hunter-fishermen societies of the coral islands of the pacific: "territory held jointly by a kinship-based group and embracing a connected range of terrestrial and marine resource zones" (Ruddle, Hyinding and Johannes 1992: 150f.). The use of territory by individual groups follows varied and overlapping rules that differ according to the kind of use and the respective groups -men/women, old/young, and local/foreign.

Agriculture is generally done by slash and burn techniques and the planting of dry rice. The sexual division of labour requires that men do the clearing and women do the planting and weeding, though the harvest work is shared equally between the sexes. It is the children's job to watch over the fields and act as scarecrows. Whereas the fields are collective property, the individual parcels belong to the elders.³⁵

The forests consist everywhere of palms; the palm tree stands in the centre of the life of the *Bijagós*. An intimate knowledge of the forest and the palm tree has allowed to the *Bijagós* centuries of sustainable use of this space. They are able to use the palm fruits as a food source and extract palm oil as well. They also make palm wine, a drink central to their social life and spirituality. The palm wood is used to thatch the roofs of their huts and to fence their fields. The remaining material is used as firewood. The palm is not just the source of physical survival, it supports spirituality as well in as

³⁵ To achieve the status of 'elder', the Bijagós have to undergo a long process of initiations; for details see Fernandes (1989).

far as the *Bijagós* use parts of the tree - especially branches and leaves - for internal communication. The related sign language, *Koratchako*, is only known to those having undergone a specific initiation process. Whereas a palm forest remains in the possession of all neighbouring and allied villages, each single tree belongs to the individual who is using its resources at that specific time.³⁶

Due to the spread of the cashew tree on the continent, there is an observable increase in the planting of cashew trees on certain islands, especially on Bubaque, Orajo and Uno. The increase in the planting of cashew trees is accompanied by a stronger promotion of private ownership in land in parts of the forests or even on fallow land, resulting in increased change in property relations.

The areas cultivated for dry rice are not very large. They exist in a fixed ration to population size, village size and the perspective of the *Bijagós* regarding nature. Villages have anywhere between a few dozen to 600 inhabitants. In light of the mobility of their slash and burn style agriculture and the length of time land stays fallow, which can last up to 10 years, the spaces put under cultivation of a village can reach considerable size. However, the spread of the cashew tree has led to a decrease in usable land, the fallow period and finally to the intensification of agricultural practices. The village of Bijante on the island of Bubaque is a characteristic example of the changes in property relations due to the cashew tree. Here there is actually a change in property rights taking place. There is a situation of legal plurality in which different rights and means of acquiring land overlap each other in changing configurations; collective ownership, family ownership, private ownership and even global, "cultural" ownership exist side by side.

Animal breeding is essentially limited to poultry, especially chickens, which play an important role in religious ceremonies. Besides that there are goats, pigs and cattle. The animals are raised in a semi-wild manner; ownership is individual. Although they remain in the bush, each owner recognizes his animals by specific signs. There are also cattle owned

³⁶ The misuse of this right can lead to corporal punishment, resulting occasionally in the death of the evildoer.

commonly by villages to be sacrificed in the occasion of important ceremonies.³⁷

The seaside and tidal zones are viewed as extensions of the fields and forests, there are extensive mangrove areas between both regions. The mangrove plays a central ecological role in that it provides a habitat and breeding ground for various fish and bird species as well as different types of crustaceans and oysters. The mangroves are the collective property of the villages and have been protected throughout the centuries by the knowledge of the *Bijagós*, especially by the one of the women who gather the mangrove's fruits and oysters, which serve as nourishment during food shortages.³⁸ Today the mangrove forests are being cleared due to the strong demand for building lumber and wood for smoking fish.

Some villages own plots of land on other islands outside of their particular village lands. Where villages are close to other islands, as is the case in the village of Ancanho, and areas on the island of Patrão, the village space extends into the waters. Yet where such island lands are located farther away, there is a break between village and island lands. Parcels of village territory separated by long distances are connected via paths known to the *Bijagós*.

The terms territory and trail that we use here are related to two different ways of using space. The first is defined based on the use of space by fishermen and hunters, while the second comes from animal husbandry systems, adapted to the use of fishermen. Gallais argues (1967) that a group's territory is not only limited to the spaces used, but rather also contains areas not submitted to the respective social order that is generally referred to as "bush."

The bush is made out of forests, savannas, valleys or waterways which together make up "land reserves" (*réserves foncières*). These are the areas where hunting, gathering and fishing take place, and thus the majority of conflicts regarding use - above all with foreign people or groups. An example of these types of conflicts on the Bijagós islands is the establishment of fishing camps of fishermen from neighbouring countries.

³⁷ Because these village cows pasture on the beaches of the islands, conflicts arise between villages and tourist companies.

³⁸ This food source is of importance for the production of rice often is not sufficient; times of shortages in food can last up to five months, depending on the harvest.

Gallais suggests the term "cultural land" (terroir foncier) which he characterizes as "a whole of surfaces which the members of the group, individually or collectively, have the right to defend, at least under certain circumstances, against any use by foreigners of the village or the community."³⁹ If one were to apply this concept to waters used by a group, one could speak of 'aquatic territories' which could be defined as spaces structured by a multitude of systems of use.

Trails are understood in terms of their relation to fishing grounds; Cormier-Salem defines them as "networks, both spatial and social, articulated around nods or strategic sites such as fishing camps or villages, the terminal, space of transformation of the caught fish (smoking, drying), the market, the fishing grounds. These mobile spaces, crystalloid [...], controlled by these fishermen, resemble the territories of pastoral nomads and this is why they can be nominated trails." (Cormier-Salem 1995: 75)⁴⁰.

The process of commercializing the coastal fisheries that began in the colonial period and accelerated considerably after Guinea-Bissau's independence, has lead to an expansion of seafood marketing, and to the intensification of catch yields through the motorization of the pirogues, the introduction of nets, and the freezing of fish while fresh. This commercialization has changed the traditional relationship of the *Bijagós* to the sea. The islanders reacted to the new agreements between the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which address fish quotas, and the increasing number of foreign fishermen from Senegal and Guinea, through a strategy that aims for the broadening of controls, even in areas, which previously were, either wholly or in part, open to foreign use as well.

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³⁹ In original "un ensemble de surfaces, dans lesquelles, à titre individuel, familier ou lignager, les membres du groupe disposent d'un droit de défense, au moins dans certaines circonstances, concernant leur utilisation externe au village ou à la communauté".

⁴⁰ In original "des réseaux tout à la fois spatiaux et sociaux, articulés autour de nœuds ou sites stratégiques, tel le campement de pêche ou le village, le débarcadère, l'aire de transformation des captures (fumage, séchage), le marché, les lieux de pêche. Ces espaces errants, réticulaires [...], contrôlés par ces marins-pêcheurs s'apparentent aux territoires des pasteurs nomades et c'est pourquoi ils peuvent être désignés comme des parcours."

4.1 Migration and Fish Camps

The first fish camps of the *Nyominka* from Sine Saloum (Senegal) were accepted by the *Bijagós* without a problem. The camps were set up 50 years ago on the islands of Formosa and Rubane, areas unoccupied by the *Bijagós*. Reciprocal relationships developed between the autochthonous and allochthonous communities, in which the *Nyominka* gave the *Bijagós* fish in exchange for transport between the islands and even to their main markets (Bubaque, Bissau). While the *Bijagós* gave their permission to the *Nyominka* to use the fishing grounds, they also allowed young *Bijagós* to apprentice on the motorized pirogues of the *Nyominka* (Fernandes 1987).

The intensified fishing of the last 20 years, which among other factors has to do with the droughts in Senegal, was followed by an increase in numbers of fishermen immigrating ever further from home. Most of these fishermen specialize in catching species with a high market value, for example sharks, whose fins are in high demand among Asian customers."⁴¹

This migratory movement goes from North to South, ever since *Lebou* and *Nyominka* fishermen have moved to the coastal waters of the Casamance in the 1960s, or, in recent times, *Nyominka* and *Djola* fishermen to the waters in front of Cacheu and to the Bijagós islands from Guinea-Bissau. Most of these fishermen do not settle down in camps, but move quickly thus evading completely the control of the navy; they also fish with great speed in the protected zones of the AMDs (*Aire Maritime Protégé*). Their great mobility and level of organization turns these fishing processions into operations resembling razzias.

Alongside this North-South movement there is also a South-North movement, mainly consisting of *Fulbe* and *Soussou* fishermen from Guinea-Conakry heading to Cacine and the Bijagós islands. These fishermen fish for sharks as well, and in addition barracuda and above all the *Djafal* (*Ethmalosa fimbriata*). This is a fish prized by the poor population of Guinea due to its affordability.

The fish are processed in fish camps on the various islands; here they are dried by the wives of fishermen, then salted and finally smoked with wood from the mangrove tree. While the form of these camps was at first

⁴¹ Shark-fin soup is much looked for in the Asian kitchen because of its supposed aphrodisiatic effects.

ephemeral, they are taking on a more permanent character. This has brought government agencies and environmental protection agencies to call for assistance from the maritime police to expel the foreign fishermen *manu militari* – apparently without great success until now.

We could observe that the relationships between the camps and neighbouring villages have been characterized by friendliness and reciprocity. Small shops have been established in the camps offering every day goods and even some medicines. This is also beneficial for the villages in which there are neither stores nor health centres present. The young *Bijagós* have been able to learn the fishing trade as apprentices while the older ones receive gifts from the fishermen on a regular basis; these gifts serve to strengthen the respective alliances established between them. The fishermen from the villages can stock up on fuel, spare parts as well as tobacco in the camps. A way of life has developed here resembling the "villages de liberté" (Bouche 1968); in addition to this, a form of self-administration came into being.

4.2 Global Players and International Law

There are four further immigration movements to be observed on the islands parallel to the intensification of the activities around the fishing industry that have a rather global character. They involve environmental protection agencies, European tourism companies, industrial fishing fleets from Asia and Europe and drug dealers. Due to the incomplete nature of our study, we will not discuss the last two groups here.⁴²

The legal form that covers the activities of those "legally" operating *global players* is international law. The sudden appearance of these *global players* has resulted in a situation of complex negotiations for the elders. These negotiations regard the most varying, sometimes opposing goals and strategies, which are, for the most part, not very transparent.

⁴² Apparently, the Bijagós-archipelago is one of the places where cocaine from South-America is landed. From there it is brought first to the African continent and then to Europe. Because of its geographical location and because of the great number of islands, the archipelago is difficult to control. Besides geography, Guinea-Bissau has also become an important transfer site for drugs from South America because of the poor means at the disposal of the country's navy and widespread corruption in public administration. In an interview to Radio Galaxia de Pindjiguiti former commander in chief of the country's navy, Bubo Na Tchutcho, declared with regard to the Bijagós-islands as follows: "They are all occupied by foreign outlaws. They say we live in a lawless land, where everybody does whatever he likes. There is no authority. But we must protect our population. One day, the islanders will be massacred, and we won't be able to do anything about it" (BBC 2009).

The first of these movements is that of the NGOs and environmental protection agencies, among which the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature)43 and the national NGO Tiniguena are worth mentioning. Since the 1990s they have started the apportionment and implementation of the Biosphere Reserve, the ecological house and the marine reserve (AMP). We can differentiate two different models of AMP. The first is administered by the state-run IBAP (Institute for Biodiversity), is located south of the island of Canhabaque and includes the AMP João Vieira e Poilão and the AMP of the island of Orango Grande. The second is administered by the NGO Tiniguena and is situated in the north of the archipelago, the AMP of the Urok islands, including the islands of Formosa, Nago and Chedeã. The international environmental protection agencies and NGOs appeared on the stage in the 1990s when the islands were declared protection areas for threatened species, especially turtles and hippos, and the AMPs were set up. After the establishment of the AMPs these organizations have taken measures to outlaw fishing and even tourism on certain islands.

The second of these movements is the one of tourism companies which have been *buying islands* for more than 20 years to set up tourist camps, most of all for high sea fishermen, such as on the islands of Rubane, Bubaque, Keré, Oranjo and João Vieira.

These tourist camps were set up in a series of negotiations and conflicts resulting from varying legal principles without any recognizable hierarchy among the legal systems. In this regard, the case of *Ponta Antchaka* is especially illustrative: it is one of the most successful tourist camps on the archipelago and is located on the island of Rubane. It came to conflicts between the owner of the camp and the *Associação dos Filhos e Amigos de Bijante*,⁴⁴ led by a former coxswain of a tourist camp boat. The conflicts affected the village community greatly and were covered quite extensively in local radio shows. They also led to disputes between two neighbouring villages, Bijante and Enu, which each had claims on the land that was sold by a family head from Enu to the owner of the tourist camp.

 $^{^{43}}$ A global network of more than 1.000 environmental organisations and governments from about 160 countries (UICN 2010).

⁴⁴ The "Association of Bijante's Friends and Sons" was officially acknowledged on March, 4, 2007. One of the goals of the association is the "defense of the environment and the defense of the territory of the village".

The proceeds of the sale, zinc roofs for the houses⁴⁵ in the village of Enu, which held the harvest rights to the sold land, caused the village of Bijante, the "mistress of the earth," to demand a revision in the sales contract so as to benefit from the proceeds as well. This request was rejected by the owner of the tourism company; then the village received support from the Association, which called on the courts and brought the case to the media so as to lend force to the demands of Bijante. 46 This conflict did not only occupy the courts, various ministers, the local administration and the "traditional authorities," but also changed the power relationships between the elders and the youth in the village. Since then the interests of the tourism company and the Association of Bijante have become so interwoven that the Association no longer seems to be developing its own strategy, but has rather become a mediator between the company and the village. Since 2008 the heated conflict that seriously threatened the position of the company seems to be leading to one of the conflicting parties backing out. The Association of Bijante has dropped its demands and the Association's president has left the islands.47 It is however questionable whether this represents a final truce or a strategic retreat until a more favourable political climate presents itself.

The competition among the various tourism companies has led to an unrestrained search for fitting stretches of coastline for new tourist camps. At the end of 2007 a Franco-Guinean company started negotiations with "traditional authorities" about the *purchase* of several islands. The corresponding "letter of intent" offers the affected villages certain goods and gives promises in exchange for the "permanent use" of the islands and beaches.⁴⁸ After complex negotiations with various politicians, all

⁴⁵ In general, roofs are covered with reed. It is, however, quite difficult to get reed, because it has become rare and one has to pay for it to the villages which own the reed plots. Harvesting and transporting of reed is women's work.

⁴⁶ The case was brought to the court of Buba; the president of the association was interviewed about the case by the local radio of Bubaque, Radio Djan Djan. In reaction to the interview, other young people made use of the right to a counterstatement, in order to present their point of view and to support the tourist company. Despite several meetings between "traditional authorities" and representatives of the local administration, and even a minister, no solution to the case has been found so far. Since the end of 2008, however, hardly anybody speaks about that case any longer as if the association had given all claims fully or temporarily.

⁴⁷ Today, the association's president lives on the mainland in the country's capital Bissau. No other member of the association has taken any action and nobody talks any longer about the case. The money that had been raised to bring the case to the court, has been withdrawn from the elder's control; the young people arguing that the elders were anachronistic and ignorant about the 'rules of the game'. The association and in particular its president have completely lost face because of the loss of the money and the juridical fiasco.

⁴⁸ All these letters of intent are very similar in terms of content: "By the present letter, the company MOKATO Bijagós takes the obligation, as payment for the license for perpetual use of the Island of Patrao and the frontal beach, belonging to the village of Ancanho (Canhabaque), to deliver the following to the village community.". Attached is a list of goods and promises: the sum of 150.000 FCFA (= 230,-€) for the village; after the signing of

subsequent incumbents of the position of Minister of Fisheries, this company was able to become the owner of the ice-making works "Pescarte," which used to be a public enterprise for the promotion of the fishery.

There are also numerous conflicts in the marine reserves, especially between the park wardens and fishermen of sharks and other fish species with a high market value. The park wardens can barely contend with the growing pressure of the fishermen and their razzia-like fishing expeditions into the protected areas. This leads to dissatisfaction among those groups who own the protected islands. The village inhabitants are of the opinion that the limits to which they are subjected to by means of protective measures redound exclusively to the advantage of the fishermen. This is because they are able to use their large technical means and mobility to avoid the control of the park wardens and reap maximum benefit from the protected areas. This is where they make their largest catches. The more the villagers follow the rules of the protected areas, the more successful the razzia by the fishermen. This contradiction is about to destroy the logic of the AMPs unless the negotiations with the villagers are successful in finding a solution to the problem. In this context it is worth mentioning that the villagers, perhaps in anticipation of future negotiations, repeat again and again that they do not see themselves as part of the AMPs. It is telling that in February of 2009, the young people of the village Inhoda, on the island of Canhabaque, went to the island of Meio, in the middle of a marine reserve, to plant rice. By this act the village is preparing itself to bargain for concessions to the island of Meio with a tourism company that has already expressed interest in the island. Such a concession and the current agricultural cultivation would of course call into question the existing protectionist logic.

The inability of environmental protection agencies to devise effective development measures, intended to compensate for the limitations on use, is interpreted by the villagers as inobservance of the agreements struck at the establishment of the AMPs. This is not only expressed as a strong

the contract tin-roofs for all houses in the village, a village well; finally a promise is given (without any further detail) to generate employment possibilities for the villagers. As soon as tourism has started, the company promises further employment possibilities specifically for young people, the building of a ward, the delivery of a motor-boat for the village, as well as a radio transmitter. By way of such letters of intent and promises, all in all nine islands plus six beaches on yet further islands were sold.

dissatisfaction with the participating organizations, but rather has also led in some villages to a complete rejection of the concept of environmental protection. Whereas in the 1980s state representatives, NGOs and "traditional" chiefs led negotiations and made deals, today a whole new situation has arisen. The former youth of the villages have risen to leadership roles in the villages via various initiation processes. It is however very apparent that they do not share the same perspectives as the elders who negotiated previously, many of whom having since passed away.

The group of "new elders" wants to change, or at least modify, the old contracts. The environment protection agencies, however, do now recognize this desire. They do not recognize (or do not want to recognize) that they are dealing with an age-class society, constituted by a sequence of initiations (Bernardi 1985), in which all decisions are taken by the class of the elders. The environmental protection agencies behave much more as if they were dealing with a hierarchically structured order of institutions, and as if the new demands present a breaking of the old agreements, or are at best the expression of the ignorance of the villagers. This attitude threatens to marginalize the mediators in the villages when they represent the interests of environmental protection in that they thereby lose face to the elders or to the members of their respective age classes.

In the face of this strong and sudden demand for territory, a progressive territorialisation⁴⁹ on behalf of the autochthonous islanders has been triggered; caused either through the extension of migratory movements of foreign fishermen into the waters around the Bijagós islands, the increasing cultivation of cashews, the search for usable islands and coastlines for touristic purposes, or, on the other hand, through companies with opposing logics, namely through (government and non-government) environmental protection agencies. In reality the *Bijagós* - especially the young people - are demanding ever more insistently the possession and control of their territory.

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⁴⁹ We can observe a similar tendency towards territorialization in neighbouring Senegal as becomes apparent in an article by the Senegalese newspaper Walf Fadjiri from December, 4, in the year 2008: "La tension est devenue vive entre les pêcheurs de Goudomp et les populations du Balmadou dans l'arrondissement de Djirédji. Les deux parties qui se sont déjà affrontées, lundi dernier, se promettent l'enfer. Pour apaiser la tension, l'autorité administrative, qui s'est saisie du dossier, menace désormais de sévir contre les fauteurs de trouble. C'était à l'occasion d'une rencontre tenue, hier mercredi, à l'hôtel de ville de Sédhiou" (Walf Groupe 2008).

However, the young people are not simply asking for a return to a status quo ante, a return to the "good old pre-colonial times," but rather their demands apply to their own society as well. Here, they are part of the protest against the principle of seniority, which gives nearly exclusive decision power to initiated elders. They are equally part of the protest against the dominant legal principle of collective hereditary property, which once again gives only the elders the right to grant access to land and water, excluding women and young people.⁵⁰ Such demands can be also imposed with the help of the state legal system, like what happened with the lawsuit of the young people of Bijante before the court of Buba. They can also be claimed, though, within the framework of the "traditional law", in cases the collective property of the lineage, which is the "mistress of the earth" and holds the clearing right, is set against the claims for private ownership by tourism companies. And they can finally relate to international legal perceptions of environmental protection, in cases the islanders aim at repelling razzias of foreign fishermen in the archipelago's fishing grounds.

This ability to move between the different legal systems and principles seems initially to hint at a plural legal situation in which "forum shopping" (Benda-Beckmann 1985) is especially pronounced. However, in contrast to what the concept of forum shopping implies, the choice of a specific dispute settlement institution is not optional, determined only by the interests of those seeking legal help. On the contrary, there is a recognizable reference to "traditional" legal perceptions, meaning that one can speak of "neo-traditional law" in this case. This revitalization of traditional legal concepts can be interpreted as attempts to refute increasing claims by allochthones. Beyond this functional explanation, however, it may be an attempt to protect (and reinforce) a *Bijagós* identity, which has been triggered by the massive arrival of allochthones, including global players. Moreover, we can observe the formation of alliances in different configurations, apparently aligned according to which constellation and in which alliance the greatest amount of social capital can be maximized to confront the respective dispute settlement instances.

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⁵⁰ Only adult and fully initiated men have the right to possess land. Women get access to land through marriage only.

Such authorities could be the state court, an ally inside the state apparatus,⁵¹ the president of a cooperative, the cosmopolitan advisor of a development agency, the *oronho*, the *okinka*, the *okanden* or the *ué*. ⁵² The various conflicting parties often turn to national or local radio stations so as to influence public opinion in their favour. Interestingly, they use "modern" media, organizing themselves according to the rules of modern "civil society," in NGOs or unions, in order to enforce their claims for the revival of "traditional" land rights. The example of the Associação dos Filhos e Amigos de Bijante from the island of Bubaque has since then been copied: the young people of Canhabaque island organized themselves into an association with the goal of defending traditional land rights. In addition to that, the association aims to play the role of mediator in all negotiations with tourist companies about concessions of coastlines. They intend on discussing the articles of the association from December 2008 with the "traditional authorities" in all the villages on the island of Canhabaque in order to get the consensual agreement from all villages affected by the granting of land rights. The general consensus will then be turned into a sample contract signed by all "traditional authorities," providing the association with a kind of power of attorney to be used in subsequent negotiations.

The efforts of the Association went in a similar direction in 2008 when the association wanted not only the cultural, gathering and fishing grounds to be handled according to "traditional" law, but put into question also the legality of private ownership of land in the principal town of the island, which hasn't been contested since colonial times. This demand has not been rectified since the aforementioned legal collapse of the association.

Interestingly, some of the newly arrived global players have adopted forms of local organization. First and foremost, tourism agencies are installing altars for local deities claiming to do this as an anti-witchcraft measure. It is quite obvious that they do not trust in the assurance of the state legal system alone, but rather want to anchor their "right to land" in the cosmology of the *Bijagós*. With this they not only establish themselves as

⁵¹ The networks within the state apparatus may have different ranges, from a super-national level - through alliances with global players - to alliances between state and non-state groups such as kin-groups, members of the same age-class, members of the same ethnic group, patron-client networks, and the like.

⁵² For the Bijagós, oronho, okinka, okanden, and ué represent power. In the colonial nomenclature, they correspond to the figure of régulo (administrative chief), to that of the reine (queen, female chief), to that of the chief's counsellor and to the player of the bombolon (holy drum).

more local in the eyes of the islanders, but they also address the circle of potential customers, as in the case of the advertising website of a French tourism agency. The agency claims that the location of its tourist camp is "favourable" because the area is owned by the local god *Orebok*. The protection of deities of the other world is said to be related to the pristine nature of the archipelago and is marketed in a similar way.

Outlook

The Bijagós islands are neither places of paradisiacal inviolability as depicted in the travel brochures. Nor do they present a largely isolated and marginalized region on the periphery of a West African country, as they are described even in scientific works. They are on the contrary a hot spot of globalization where, in recent times, actors not only from Guinea-Bissau's neighbouring countries can be found, but also global players from America, Europe and Asia. These newcomers import their own differing legal conceptions to the islands, which has led to a process of revival and reinvention of neo-traditional land rights, in particular by the hands of the young people of the *Bijagós* age class society.

Among the conflicts resulting from the presence of these newcomers, we have dealt with those concerning fishing rights, the protection of aquatic life and tourism. These are the domains in which the (externally induced) efforts to "modernize" are becoming increasingly visible. The two attempts to modernize, however, follow different logics. One is the logic of development, aiming at change, and the other is a logic of protecting nature, which hopes to prevent change or at least limit it to a great extent.

In the resulting field of conflicts, it is not only the varying legal systems and concepts which overlap. What is more is that here new forms of social orientation emerge among the islanders, which are marked by great fluidity and can change very quickly. The rapid reorientations apparently follow changing configurations of conflicting parties and the ability of these conflicting parties to mobilize resources. Here, we observed two types of strategy: strategies of anticipation and strategies of retreat. We observed as well the emergence of dispositions determined and shaped by conflicts.

On the one hand, this leads to a certain level of unpredictability of the behaviour of actor groups, but on the other hand, to a great deal of creativity in finding and inventing new forms of conflict resolution. Our data reveals not only the breaking of legal and moral boundaries between the different spheres of social transactions, but also tendencies toward territorialisation, accompanied as well by symbolic violence⁵³ as by threats of real, state violence.

State representatives, often in alliance with one or several of the conflicting parties, but always "in the name of the law," intervene in individual conflicts, often arbitrarily and with violence, whereby they justify and legitimize the employment of the "violence resource" in different ways, at times with the control the drug trade ⁵⁴, or at times with other practices defined as "illegal" by themselves. We do not consider it inconceivable that the islanders not only clamour the return to "traditional" law in light of this configuration, but that they could also resort to violence in the tradition of the pirates and warriors of the first globalization of the archipelago.

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⁵³ Here, we think of the threats of punishment at the hands of the spirits Orebok and Eramindê. Such "transcendental" sanctions do also occur in other West African countries, as can be read in a report by the Senegalese newspaper Walf Fadjiri (October 14, 2008): "La haute autorité de la collectivité Léboue de Yoff n'entend pas faire passer par pertes et profits leur récente garde à vue par le colonel Moussa Fall, dans le cadre d'un litige foncier qui a secoué ce village traditionnel. Hier dimanche, ces dignitaires, avec à leur tête, le Djaraf Mbaye Nguirane Mbengue, ont annoncé qu'ils vont mystiquement laver cet affront.[...] Et pour cause, les notables de ce village traditionnel, amenés par le président de la République de Yoff, qui assimilent, leur récente garde à vue par le colonel Moussa Fall, à ,une humiliation et une insulte à leur personne et à toute la collectivité Léboue', ont décidé de laver cet ,affront' par un retour au legs des anciens, au Coxaan" [The high authorities of the community of Léboue de Yoff do not have the intention to leave unnoticed the threats expressed by Colonel Moussa Fall, in a case of land rights conflict that has shaked the traditional village. Yesterday, on Sunday, these notables, led by the Djaraf Mbaye Nguirane Mbengue, announced that they will counter this affront by magical means. [...] And because the notables of this traditional village, led by the president of the Republic of Yoff consider the recent threats made by Colonel Mousss Fall as humiliation and insult to themselves and to the whole community of Léboue, they have decided that they will counter this 'affront' by returning to the laws of their ancestors, to the Coxaan] (Walf Groupe 2008).

⁵⁴ In August 2007, the army conducted a huge anti-drug campaign on the island of Bubaque. While no drugs were found, a lot of kerosene, allegedly to be used for drug-planes, was confiscated and some persons arrested. In April 2009, the army conducted a similar operation; again, no drugs were found, but a boat was confiscated and some persons were arrested.

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