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The Pen and the Plough: Balanta Young Men in Guinea-Bissau

Marina Temudo and Manuel Abrantes

ABSTRACT

Up until the late 1990s, the Balanta of Guinea-Bissau constituted what could be described as a 'deep rural society', whose central identity was linked with rice production and cattle accumulation. At the same time, it could be argued that even in the early days after Independence in 1974, the social aspirations of Balanta young men matched those of other Guinean youths in their shared desire to get away from the strictures of gerontocracy and of rural life. Surprisingly, however, this study documents the agency of many rural Balanta young men in changing oppressive social rules, and in using agriculture as a means to fund their education, to feed their families and as a route to prosperity. The authors conclude that the persistent political instability in the country (most acutely felt in the capital city) and the national and global economic crises, together with the Balanta agricultural ethos and the softening of gerontocratic power, are at the root of this revaluing of rural livelihoods. This article challenges current dominant narratives about the crisis of young men in contemporary Africa and highlights the need to study the aspirations and achievements of youth in their rural–urban nexus from a historical and holistic perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Enduring political and economic crises in Africa have resulted in the transformation of youth into a 'social moratorium' (Vigh, 2006: 96), a period of reduced opportunities, of 'waithood' (e.g., Honwana, 2012), and of 'being stuck' (Sommers, 2012). In West Africa, several authors have attributed the

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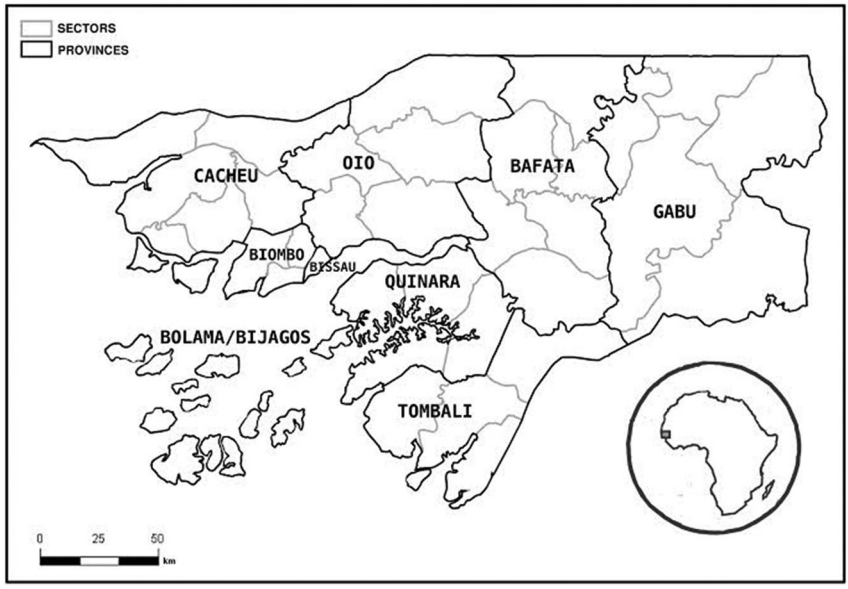
involvement of young men in urban violence and recent armed conflicts to grievances resulting from limited access to education, to jobs, land or even women (e.g., Chauveau and Richards, 2008; Foucher, 2002; Mokuwa et al., 2011; Richards, 1996; Vigh, 2006).

Since Richards' (1996) seminal work on Sierra Leone, other scholars have also devoted attention to the predicaments of young men in rural areas in Africa. Most of them portray the oppression of the young by gerontocracy and social structures that limit their access to resources, while employment opportunities in urban areas continue to decline after the liberalization of the economy (e.g., Chauveau and Richards, 2008; Richards, 1996; Masquelier, 2007; Mokuwa et al., 2011; Vigh, 2006; White, 2012). In the last fifteen years, a vast amount of literature on the so-called crisis of youth in Africa has shown that young people in twenty-first century Africa live in a situation of perpetuated liminality that, unlike the liminality of manhood or womanhood initiation rituals, does not transform them or bestow a new social status upon them. The young become, in the words of Cruise O'Brien (1996), a 'lost generation'. Just as initiates are ontologically ambivalent, youth is also portrayed as ambivalent in such literature. Young people are seen simultaneously as 'vanguard' and 'vandals' (Abbink and van Kessel, 2005), as 'makers' and 'breakers' (Honwana and de Boeck, 2005) and as incapable of making the step towards a socially defined field of adult duties and obligations.

However, it would be unfair to say that youth scholars always see this life-period as a mere passive waiting for something. Argenti (2002) held that, although youths live in a context that tends to prolong indefinitely their status as 'social cadets', they are active actors and an important resource for society. Abbink (2005: 2) argued for the need to go beyond the image of 'crisis, crime and violence' and 'do justice to the many positive exceptions'. In this same vein, Soares's research among urban young men in Mali, who were characterized as living with few employment prospects and as disillusioned with formal politics, reveals that while some men became 'idle tea drinkers', others were dynamically engaged in cultural production. Others turned to Sufism, 'building new communities and dreaming of a better future', and 'actively incorporating elements of youth culture into religious practice' (Soares, 2010: 245, 247, 254). In her recent book, Honwana (2012) speaks of 'waithood', but argues that this stage, which others have perceived negatively, in fact hides a capacity for action from which individual and social changes can germinate. In a very original article introducing the rural–urban nexus in the study of African youth, Gaibazzi (2012) describes the dynamism and productive construction of the future of the young Soninke men of the Gambia, for whom an 'agrarian ethos' is cultivated to increase the chances of success in migration trajectories.

Guinea-Bissau is a small, coastal West African country (see Figure 1), which attained independence from Portugal in 1974 after eleven years of liberation war led by the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and

Figure 1. Map of Guinea-Bissau



Cape Verde (PAIGC). Its post-colonial history has been characterized by growing political instability, and it has recently been labelled the first narco-state in Africa. Youth studies in Guinea-Bissau have tended to focus on young men's frustrated aspirations to make a living in urban areas and their lack of power and reduced access to resources (e.g., Bordonaro, 2009; Vigh, 2006). Vigh (2006) studied the enrolment of Bissauan unemployed youths (mainly of Pepel origin) into the government militia during the civil war of 1998–99; their aim was to improve their livelihoods through inclusion in patrimonial networks. The commitment of young rural Balanta (*Brasa*, bl.)[1] men, both in the liberation struggle (1963–74) and in the recent civil war (on the rebels' side) can, in part, be explained by their desire to broaden their social horizons and to have their claims recognized by elders (Temudo, 2009). Barros's study (in press) of youth urban culture and activism in Bissau illustrates the way young men use rap and hip hop to protest against enduring political instability, and the corruption and violence of the political and military elite. In the same vein, Gable (2000), in his research among the Manjaco (who are well known for their success in migration), portrays rural young men as actively criticizing the elders and changing 'customs', while protecting some 'positive' aspects of 'culture', and paying school fees for the village children — in sum, trying to make rural life more appealing for the young.

1. In this article, Balanta words are followed by 'bl.' and Kriol words by 'kr.' for clarity.

Indeed, in the study of youth in contemporary Africa, it is also important to look at those who are not in a state of helplessness and dependency, as well as at those who still have one foot in rural areas. In the latter case, particularly, the role of agricultural work as an attraction or a repellent — a push or pull factor of rural life-worlds — and as a tool for getting a better life (Gaibazzi, 2012), must be studied contextually, holistically and with a historical perspective. This article studies how young Balanta men's 'aspirations to "likeness"' (Ferguson, 2006: 20) with local standards of progress and modernity began to grow and to turn their elders' 'isolationist rationale' (Last, 1980) into a burden. Through the lens of agriculture, this study documents the agency[2] of rural Balanta young men in their struggle against what they perceive to be the despotic power of custom, witchcraft accusations, the authority of elders and a lifestyle that has traditionally banned education and trade, keeping the young men away from the lures of modern life. However, if until recently their longing for the future[3] was moving them away from rural livelihoods, at present, many of these young people no longer view agriculture as being in opposition to education and better livelihood conditions. This article thus contributes to the debate about the 'crisis of youth' in Africa as well as to the literature on the role of young men in agricultural development.

A Note on Methodology

This article draws on long-term research which focused on agricultural, environmental and social change and the impact of development and conservation interventions since 1993 (see e.g., Temudo, 2008, 2009, 2011; Temudo and Abrantes, 2012, 2014). Starting in 2008, research was conducted by both authors, using a mixed-methods approach which was largely qualitative, but which also included some quantitative data collection, transects and direct observation of fields and forests, as well as Geographical Information Systems (GIS) technologies. During the twenty-year period, the authors worked in a total of ninety-four Balanta villages, many of which were revisited several times and some of which were sites of ethnographic fieldwork. This provided a deep empirical knowledge of Balanta society and agriculture. Ethnographic research on Balanta young men was conducted over eight months in total during 2011, 2012 and 2013 by both authors.

Fieldwork methods included participant and direct observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and group discussions with a

2. Here we adopt Ortner's (2006: 139) concept of agency as including both 'intentionality and the pursuit of (culturally defined) projects' and 'power' as actions always occur 'within relations of social inequality, asymmetry, and force'.
3. As Foucher (personal communication, January 2014) reminded us, Piot's (2010) compelling phrase 'nostalgia for the future' does not apply in the case of Balanta youth. Unlike Togo, Guinea-Bissau never had a previous era in which the future looked bright for the young.

set of more than sixty young men aged approximately sixteen to thirty-five, who were living in Malafu, Enxale and Thum (in the northern province of Oio); Djabada Porto, Bissássema, Foia, Tite and Soa villages (in the southern provinces of Quinara and Tombali); and in the cities of Bissau, Gabu and Bafata. The interviews were conducted in Kriol or in Balanta (using a Balanta to Kriol translator); they were recorded only when the interviewees felt at ease with this, resulting in more than 100 taped interviews. Young men were interviewed (some more than once) alone or in groups, in their meeting places, their homes or in agricultural fields; they were asked about their collective and individual aspirations, the comparative advantages of living in a city versus the village, their perceptions of agricultural work and education and sources of funds for education. They were also asked about the positive social and cultural changes that had already taken place and those that the youth hoped would still take place.

This ethnographic case study of Balanta young men locates the actors in the social processes of long-term change without forgetting the larger structures that constrain or enable social action. By so doing, it adopts a descriptive-analytic approach that looks at the 'interaction between structure, agency and normative or reflexive discourse' (see Abbink, 2005: 10). Furthermore, the article draws attention to the existence of multiple and sometimes opposing voices and life strategies, as well as to the manifold 'modalities of agency' (Mahmood, 2005: 167), including those actions which do not resist or subvert (at least some) norms.

SETTING THE SCENE: RICE AND BALANTA MEN'S IDENTITY

A Balanta man's identity is intrinsically tied to rice farming and cattle herding. This link is depicted through material culture in several phases of a man's life, but is especially evident when a boy is born. Following an old tradition, his father usually ties a plough to a pillar of the house or places it on the wooden structure of the roof. If he belongs to a lineage of big cattle thieves, the father ties the plough with a rope, sometimes adding a miniature wooden oar to symbolize long-distance theft (for which canoes are necessary) (See Supporting Information Photo S1.)

Like the Soninke studied by Gaibazzi (2012: 6), the capacity of a Balanta man 'to provide for himself and his family dependants is a foundational element of his masculinity'. In the case of Guinea-Bissau, hard work seems to be associated with the identity of coastal mangrove rice producers, such as the Diola (see Davidson, 2009), the Balanta, the Manjako and the Pepel. Of these, however, it is only some of the Balanta men who are still investing in mangrove rice surplus production. Until recently, Balanta men were forbidden by their elders to engage in trade as a major activity and were restricted from pursuing agricultural activities deemed conducive to exclusive individual gain. Permanent usufruct rights to land could only be

obtained after marriage, but prior to that a man could borrow upland fields for peanut cultivation or lowland parcels for rice production, when land was available. He could also engage in casual hired work in his own or neighbouring villages, helping other farmers to plough their fields when work for his own household had been completed. Incomes obtained from individual activities were to be given to the household head or could be used to buy cattle to increase the compound's herd.[4]

Traditionally, a Balanta man could only marry and create his own household once he had been initiated into manhood (e.g., Handem 1986), an event that seldom took place before his mid-forties. The date was decided by the head of the compound (though a matrilateral uncle could also make the decision) and was dependent upon the compound's human and economic resources. The individual consumption needs of the household members were minimal and cash requirements very low. This allowed the concentration of human and financial resources for the collective social and economic reproduction of the compound, especially for the production of rice surplus and accumulation of cattle.

During the fifteenth century, when the Balanta were located in the north of the country, they practised upland, freshwater swamp and mangrove swamp rice cultivation (Hawthorne, 2001). At the beginning of the twentieth century, many Balanta started to migrate to the south, driven by land scarcity and a desire to escape colonial forced labour. There, they concentrated exclusively on mangrove swamp rice and related technologies and became surplus rice producers for export during late colonial times (Ribeiro, 1989; Temudo, 2011; Temudo and Abrantes, 2012).

At the start of the anti-colonial war in 1963, the Balanta were quick to join the struggle and fought in the greatest numbers. This was due to a combination of factors, including their organization into age groups, some of which were specifically trained to fight (see Supporting Information Photos S2, S3). Colonial oppression, the tensions between elders and youths and the rise of new opportunities to pursue greater freedom also played their part (Temudo, 2009). During the war, young people became empowered by their role as soldiers and by the introduction of new values and social rules that destabilized traditional gerontocratic power. The main change was that young men could marry and create their own household before their initiation into manhood (getting full usufruct rights to parcels of land given by the compound's head, and full control of their individual incomes). This change was greatly facilitated by the impossibility of conducting initiations during the war, and the relative insignificance of bridewealth (which might comprise a pig, a goat and some litres of brandy) among the Balanta.

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4. The individual could never claim ownership of the cattle he acquired, which would be used in the compound's mourning ceremonies and rituals. Contributing to the increase of the descent group herd was a component of the construction of adult masculinity.

During the anti-colonial war, the dikes and dams of the mangrove rice fields were badly damaged by bombing and by lack of maintenance. After independence, farmers had no capital to rebuild them and state support was inadequate (Temudo and Abrantes, 2012). Furthermore, until the liberalization of the economy in the mid-1980s, the prices of the main agricultural products such as rice and peanuts were fixed and very low. State stores had insufficient supplies of consumer goods and agricultural tools. In sum, there were no incentives for surplus production.

In the 1990s, the combined effects of economic and political liberalization resulted in increasing individualism, a devaluing of agricultural work, new consumption needs and a new urban orientation. This led to a growing fragmentation of compounds into several households, not only in keeping with Balanta youths' desire for freedom, but also as a strategy of the elders to tackle youths' absenteeism: in the words of many farmers, 'now, it is each one for themselves' (*cada kin pa si cabesa*, kr.). Furthermore, the village aid groups that previously had provided an important share of the households' agricultural work became very expensive and less efficient.

In this context of labour shortage and land availability, the government policies to boost cashew nut production (which is non-labour intensive) for export were highly favourable to farmers. By 2009, Guinea-Bissau had become the world's second largest exporter of raw cashews with the highest yield per capita.[5] Traders come to rural areas to conduct the transactions, and cashew nuts can be paid for with imported rice. For the Balanta, who are largely non-Muslim, cashew production also has the advantage of providing an alcoholic beverage from the juice of the cashew apple, which constitutes a second source of income (frequently bigger than that from the nuts) and is an important input in hiring work groups for mangrove rice production.

A number of interviewees were of the opinion that 'cashew brought laziness' during the years of the nuts' high market price, since some people reduced their rice production and significantly increased their consumption of alcohol (see van der Drift, 2002; Temudo and Abrantes, 2014). Climate change also contributed to a reduction in food self-provisioning. The decrease in food security has been amplified by the steady fall in the exchange rate of cashew nuts to rice after 2000 and, since 2007, the rising price of imported rice. These events have precipitated a revaluing of agriculture and rice production by both Balanta elders and youths. Nonetheless, as this article will demonstrate, this return of youth to rural livelihoods would not have been possible without the occurrence of many other changes and events in Balanta society.

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5. Data from FAOSTAT; see http://faostat.fao.org/site/342/default.aspx (accessed 25 October 2012).

ELDERS, WITCHES AND GOD

Rural life is fraught with fears, particularly for such 'nightmare egalitarians' (Gable, 1997) as the Balanta. One must comply with social norms and be successful without showing off one's wealth, and even acts of solidarity (such as offering rice to a relative or a friend in need) must be conducted discreetly. For a Balanta man, the only occasion in which he can brag about his success is during his father's mourning ceremony, for which he should sacrifice as many cattle as he and his relatives (and even friends) are able to accumulate (see Supporting Information Photo S9). To be respected, a man must have 'strength' (*força*, kr.) and be able to provide rice for his household and to accumulate cattle to be sacrificed during his father's mourning ceremony — the magnitude of which will bring him 'fame' (*fama*, kr.). It is shameful to delay the mourning ceremony *sine die*, but it is equally shameful not to be able to feed the household and, as a consequence, not to be able to marry, or to lose one's wife (or wives), who run away as a result of persistent shortages of food.

A man must show his 'strength' by being able to perform the mourning ceremony of his father — in which a huge amount of rice is cooked — right at the start of the rainy season, when ploughing must begin and when the seasonal period of food shortage commences. Most of the wealth that has been accumulated is then spent in just a few days. Marriages and male initiation ceremonies are also performed during this time of the year, with the result that scarce reserves of rice are consumed and the start of agricultural work is delayed. The typical consequences are a bad harvest and hunger in the following year. But, as many young men told us, one must 'respect the elders' and act in accordance with custom, otherwise, 'they will curse you at the compound's spirits shrine and you will become ill, mad or even die from witchcraft [*no feitiço*, kr.]'. In the words of Geschiere (1997: 325), 'witchcraft is the dark side of kinship' in Africa.

When we asked young interviewees which of their customs they would like to put an end to, the most common answer was the mourning ceremonies (*toca txur*, kr.). The arguments put forward were economic, but underlying them was also the desire to end the retaliations by the elders to any display of wealth, scholarly knowledge or success. Until quite recently, accumulation had to be exclusively oriented towards ritual consumption in mourning ceremonies; economic differentiation was transient and could not be translated into different consumption patterns and welfare conditions. Many young Balanta men described how small investments in things such as tin roofing for houses, buying bicycles, radios or clothes were equated with 'going white' (*kbabn*, bl.; *brankuandade*, kr.), a label interlaced with rumours and fears about witchcraft.

Thus 'village life' (*vida de tabanca*, kr.) is also a life of fear because of envy and witchcraft. Balanta men identified three clear-cut categories of *befera*, a concept loosely translated as 'witches': the crocodile

(*lagarto*, kr.), a category almost exclusively associated with the Balanta Kuntohe sub-group; the hyena (*lubu*, kr.), almost exclusively associated with the Balanta Nhacra sub-group; and the 'simple witch' (*futesero simples*, kr.). The contrast between the 'crocodiles' and 'hyenas' is illustrative of the interlinking of notions of witchcraft and those of descent. Both are said to be able to make individuals disappear, to 'eat' people, using the common predatory metaphor. Yet, they differ on the source of their victims. As Armando (a man in his late thirties) told us, the 'crocodiles' eat beautiful or famous people who do not belong to their own descent group. Once 'eaten', crocodiles are capable of reincarnating these people in the foetuses growing in the wombs of women of their own compound. They thus eat 'out' to increase the 'wealth in people' of their own groups. In sharp contrast to this, the 'hyenas' eat those in their own compound, without any possibility of reincarnation. They are masters of annihilation. The category known in Kriol as 'simple witch' refers to someone 'with head', that is, a person who is able to see the spirits and the witches, who 'does not eat people' but 'controls the compound so that nothing [bad] can happen' and who 'does not allow hyenas to destroy the compound'.

According to interviewees, a person can also become a witch by making a contract (to get what he/she wants, such as to become wealthy or famous, to have gold, lots of children, rice or cows) with a greedy spirit that demands payment in human lives. Envy can also be dangerous because people can 'make you *djanfa*' (put the evil eye on you), which will 'cut your luck' and 'you will never get the things you want'. If a witch makes *djanfa,* this will kill you too. Witches can also eat the 'soul' (*flit*, bl.: *alma*, kr.) of rice, or bring an illness or pests to destroy the harvest of an entire village. They can, furthermore, bring an epidemic into a village that will kill people, cattle, pigs and chickens, resulting in a series of misfortunes.

Diviners, either non-Muslim (*sik*, bl.; *jambacoce*, kr.) or Muslim (*muru*, kr.), can tell whether or not a particular misfortune is caused by witchcraft and can try to help to recover the soul of an ill person. However, diviners do not fight witches directly. Traditionally, some Balanta villages have an anti-witchcraft institution called *fyere yabte*, comprising married women and led by the ones who 'have head to see the witches' and 'strength to keep the mirror' (obtained through a contract with the river spirit, who is a serpent) with which to divine. As many of its members told us, this institution does not attack witches but takes the 'tools with which witches work'.

By contrast, the age groups of non-initiated men protect their peers and exercise revenge against supposed witches through the use of violence. When a young man dies and there is the suspicion of witchcraft, the suspected witches (who can be men or women, old or young) frequently end up being murdered. The most well-known of these 'witch hunting' attacks occurred at the start of the anti-colonial war, when many young soldiers were dying due to the conflict, and came to a violent end under the PAIGC leadership (Chabal, 1983: 72, 78, 79).

During the mid-1980s, a prophetic movement, started by a woman and widely known as Kiyang-yang, emerged with the far-reaching goals of transforming Balanta society (Callewaert, 2000; Temudo, 2009: 54–7). The prophets in this movement claimed to have received commandments from God which included a whole series of social changes, such as bringing to an end the slaughter of too many heads of cattle during mourning ceremonies; ending forced marriages, theft, and sacrifices to the spirits; praying to God (instead of making contracts with the spirits); attending school; making women co-responsible for family self-provisioning in food; diversifying food production; and cleaning one's body and house. Seeing this movement as a way to express their frustrated aspirations, large numbers of young men and women adhered to it, and in many villages it turned into a 'witch hunting' crusade. In the words of a Nalu elder, 'the Balanta youth tried to carry out a coup against their elders'. Had the movement not been outlawed and almost wiped out by the one-party state regime at that time (for its alleged association with the 1986 coup blamed on Balanta politicians and military men), the Kiyang-yang mass social movement might have achieved its potential to generate structural transformations in Balanta society. Indeed, most of the commandments pronounced by the prophetess corresponded to the aspirations of the youth, some of which persist today, such as the desire to end ostentatious mourning ceremonies.

Despite the brutal repression of this movement, things gradually began to change in Balanta society. This process speeded up after the end of the civil war (1998–99), when a Balanta man ascended to the presidency of the country and began to urge his ethnic group to modernize by going to school and by adopting a world religion. Slowly and gradually the elders started 'to give the youth their will' and allow them to go to school, to put tin roofs on their houses and to branch out into the non-farm economy. In many villages, elders started to give political power to educated youngsters, by nominating them for 'village committees' (Temudo, 2009). For many of the young men and women who were interviewed, forced marriage no longer exists or is coming to an end. Interviewees also claimed that many elders are increasingly accepting less ostentatious mourning ceremonies, and are even selling cattle to help their sons to start a business, to study or to put tin roofs on their houses.[6]

Surprisingly, many young men have turned away from two cultural manifestations of the Balanta youth which are much praised even by other ethnic groups: the Kussundé and the Brosca dancing competitions (see Supporting Information Photo S4). The reasons given were economic: in a rather

6. Indeed, for the past two years, elders across the country have been organizing meetings to take collective decisions which will put an end to theft, expensive mourning ceremonies, witchcraft attacks and forced marriage, among other things. This will be the topic of a future article.

'pragmatic reflexivity about culture' (Gable, 2000: 197), some argued: 'It is only [monetary] damage! It has no advantage!'.

Overall, Balanta society has recently experienced a wide range of transformations. Yet people's beliefs that others have the power to either make them die through invisible means or to destroy their luck out of envy remain strong and resilient (see Gable, 1995: 247 for the case of the Manjaco). This is countered by either migrating (choosing to resettle in the compound of a mother's brother or in a far-away village where one has no relatives) or, as is often the case elsewhere in Africa (e.g., Piot, 2010: 103–131), by converting to monotheistic creeds, especially to Pentecostal forms of Christianity and to Islam. 'God is stronger than the witches!' many converted interviewees told us. On the one hand, and despite the conversions, fear of witchcraft still constitutes an obstacle to life improvement for many young people, regardless of any urban or migratory experience or degree of literacy. On the other hand, the relatively recent positive appraisal of farming by many young male interviewees comes from a reassessment of rural livelihoods and agriculture, in a context in which elders' growing acceptance of youth aspirations makes witchcraft attacks less fearsome.

PEN VERSUS PLOUGH

While we were staying in a Mandinga compound, in a multi-ethnic village in the southern province of Tombali, one of the girls asked: 'Do you know why the Balanta are the most intelligent students at school?'. Her old father, a local member of the PAIGC since the start of the anti-colonial war, responded quickly: 'Because they study more! Don't you see that even we [Mandinga] work harder [in agriculture] when we live among them in the same village?'.

The hard-work ethic has been a characteristic of Balanta farmers both in colonial and post-colonial times. In today's Bissauan public sphere, the Balanta people are known not only for their hard work in farming, but also for their massive participation in the anti-colonial war. Despite this reputation, we have been hearing an increasing number of voices criticizing 'the Balanta' since the period of Balanta rule between 1999 and 2003, and especially since the 12 April 2012 coup conducted by the Balanta military leadership (albeit with the backing of a wide range of politicians). Critics have voiced concerns about the Balantas' incapacity to govern due to their institutionalized practice of theft, their warlike attitude and their 'fondness for the prestige of the military uniform' (*elis misti ronku di farda,* kr.). Constant Balanta witchcraft accusations — often leading to assassinations — and the growing alcohol consumption accompanying cashew nut production are also factors driving social stigma. The Balantas' consumption of alcohol has even been utilized for political ends by certain Muslim politicians, as the slogan in electoral campaigns, 'wine's mouth cannot rule over Guinea-Bissau', attests.

This exchange between the Mandinga girl and her father, as well as many statements that we subsequently heard from interviewees of the Mandinga, Fula (also known as Peul and Fulbe), Nalu and Beafada groups, helped to confirm the occurrence of rapid changes within Balanta society. These changes included, but went well beyond, the issue of school attendance. Since the end of the 1990s, we have been observing an increasing number of boys attending primary school; but it was only in 2008 that two different events clearly demonstrated that the youth were now taking education into their own hands. In Bussunha, we came across a boy of around eighteen years old giving literacy classes to a group of women and to other boys from his compound by writing on a board nailed to a tree (see Supporting Information Photo S7). In another northern village of Oio, we met a young married man who had migrated to The Gambia for a year. After spending the day doing agricultural work, he was teaching English to his friends by writing on a wall of his home, which was painted black.[7]

In 2013, in a southern village of Quinara around twilight, we were with Fasce observing some boys returning from the harvested rice fields with the cattle. Fasce is a thirty-one year-old man, still not initiated to adulthood, who finished secondary school in the capital city while living in the house of a maternal uncle. He returned to his village and now has two wives and five children. Fasce urged us to ask the name of one of the child cattle herders. 'Escola' ('School'), replied the boy. Fasce then told us:

> When I was young, most of our fathers still did not want to let us go to school. Now we all want our children to study and we pay for private teachers. But this boy, as well as my own children, ran away from school; they prefer to go herding cattle with their peers. I told my sons that I was giving them all the conditions to study, but that it was their decision to take the opportunity or not.

For a traditional Balanta father, a son should start to be a *doke nhare*, literally, a 'cattle keeper', a concept that corresponds to a given age-set that starts when the boy is four to five years old (when he wants to follow his peers instead of staying with his mother) and that can be extended until around twelve. He should then start to learn to plough the rice fields with a small *kebinde* (bl.), the plough used in the mangrove soils (see Supporting Information Photo S5). However, while ploughing is performed throughout the rainy season, usually during school summer holidays, cattle herding is very demanding during the dry season and consequently competes with school attendance. For this reason, many boys start to go to school when they are older than twelve, and find it difficult to cope later with the demands of adult life and the aspiration for higher education.

One of the most prominent Guinea-Bissau scholars and a Balanta himself, Dr José Lingna Nafafe, born in a southern village about fifty years ago, said that when his father allowed him to attend primary school, just after

7. Foucher (2002: 391) mentions a similar process of education diffusion among the Casamance Djola during the 1950s.

independence, he was heavily criticized by his peers. They teased him that when he became old, he would have to eat his son's school notebooks (instead of rice).[8] However, life is full of surprises and, as Txiosso (a twenty-eight year-old unmarried man) told us, some of the first boys who were allowed to study by their fathers came home during the rainy season to plough the rice fields. Furthermore, many of the boys who later acquired permanent jobs used to send money home for their relatives to hire workgroups to do the ploughing (for the Djola of Casamance, see Foucher, 2002: 389). According to Txiosso, 'The elders, then, began to see that some among them, who had educated sons, were the ones having more rice and they started to give their children freedom to study'. Txiosso is about to finish secondary school in Bissau and he plans to pursue a degree in medicine in one of the faculties that has just opened in the country. Nevertheless, he always returns to his village during the rainy season to plough the fields.

Txiosso has been living with a maternal uncle in the capital city, but pays for his school fees and supplies by carving sculptures that he sells in the Youth Art Centre, created by Catholic missionaries. Nhiina (a man of twenty-five) was also able to finish secondary school in Bissau by paying for his fees through crafting and selling bamboo shelves. He could afford the faculty fees, but Nhiina's dreams of being a medical doctor have been hampered by the responsibility of being the eldest son. With the death of his father, he must now provide sustenance and education for his 'mothers' and young brothers.

Unlike Txiosso and Nhiina, most of the youths we have been interviewing provide for their education through agricultural activities (either in their own villages or elsewhere) or animal husbandry, or both. Some combine these activities with occasional work or with trade in the cities where they study. Only a few expressed despair and stated that they had been incapable of continuing their studies due to a lack of 'support' or of 'luck' (meaning someone providing for them). Some, like Quintino, had been prevented from studying by their fathers when they were children and now feel that they are too old to start. Others, such as Mungabé who travels to Senegal during the dry season, stopped studying when they began 'to hold money'.[9] Many of the young married interviewees who were continuing their studies (sometimes together with their wives, as in the case of Venâncio) do not see any conflict between the obligations of an adult life and the pursuit of education. As

8. This refers to a saying which Balanta fathers allegedly repeated to their children who dared to go to school against their fathers' wishes: 'At night you are going to eat the notebook that you took to classes'. We heard this many times, also from younger interviewees.
9. At present, before marriage, a share of the income obtained by a young man through seasonal or permanent migration is usually given to the head of the household to help him pay the costs of hiring labour groups or to buy rice or cows. However, young men decide how much money they give. By contrast, if they are married and still live in the household of their father or elder brother, they frequently do not share the money and they can even start to buy cattle of their own.

Mansoa put it: 'if we work hard during the rainy season and we leave the family with rice, we can go out to study during the dry season!'.

Agriculture has indeed been a major resource for funding education, but given the limited opportunities for educated people to find a job and the high cost of urban living compared to the low wages of state employees, one may question whether agriculture can really help educated Balanta young men to achieve a fulfilled adulthood in the present political, social and economic conditions of Guinea-Bissau. In this context, the return to rural livelihoods is a positive choice for some, but for others it is a defensive strategy resulting from the scarcity of opportunities to improve one's life in the urban context.

'THE RICE FIELD IS WHERE OUR BELLY IS': AGRICULTURE AS ROOT AND ROUTE

Bdan was the first person to whom we asked whether or not, in his opinion, '*labur*' (a Kriol concept that means both ploughing and agricultural work) was going to come to an end in Guinea-Bissau. Bdan is almost sixty years old, a rather progressive and much respected head of compound (*fa ne kpan*, bl.) and village chief (*fa ne botxa*, bl.). He usually makes statements such as 'slowly and gradually we are abolishing tradition, because there are things which are backward, which are preventing us from moving forward'. He replied to the question without any hesitation: '*labur* is going to finish! Don't you see that the majority of people do not work anymore? One person has to work to feed the majority! Don't you see the amount of people that regularly come to ask me for rice? Youths say that the elders' work [the way they worked] kills'.

However, when we posed the same question to many young Balanta interviewees the usual answer was, 'No, it cannot end!'. Bdan was not referring to a generational problem nor to a solely Balanta problem. His statement was the answer of an 'elder' worried about the future of hard manual work, but it also contained his reflections about the burden of solidarity for those who still appreciated the value of full granaries in an era when many are no longer ashamed of living at the expense of their family members or friends.

Bdan's son, Ntsumkia, is a young primary school teacher. Ntsumkia lives in the village and acknowledges that he would not be able to feed his wife and two sons and to have a good life without engaging in agriculture and animal husbandry. Another young man called Domingos moved to the capital to finish secondary school, because 'scientific knowledge is difficult to get in the village', but he returns every rainy season to plough the rice fields. He maintained that 'in the village, if you work, you will eat, but in the city you only eat one *tiro* [literally, a shot, which means a meal per day]'. Also for Mário, a nineteen year old who has been an orphan since he was twelve, '*labur* provides food and as such is good. It cannot end! How would all the

urban people eat otherwise? I would teach my sons how to plough, because not all of them would have wisdom for studying'.

Since the end of the civil war in 1999, we have been hearing comments about the 'rediscovery of the village' and the 'value of the bush [agricultural land]' by urban migrants, but it was only after 2008 that we started to see a real change in the social and physical landscape of Balanta villages. According to official data, rice production decreased from 133,000 tons in 1995 to 89,000 in 2004, but it started to increase again (particularly after 2008, the year in which the international price of rice picked up), reaching 194,000 tons in 2011. Although most of the data reported by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) on agricultural production are at best informed guesses (since Guinea-Bissau has not been able to conduct regular sample surveys or farm censuses), and although a part of this increase in rice production can be attributed to external intervention, the data do correspond to direct observations of the expansion of the area under cultivation in dozens of villages all across the country (where no external support had been given) (See also Supporting Information Photo S6.) As Ntsunkia put it, in the case of his own village:

> Here, until 1998 [the civil war] a huge area of the rice fields was not being cultivated, but at present the area is no longer enough for us! Do you know why? Some people, who had migrated to Bissau and had stayed there, discovered [during the civil war when they were forced to take refuge in the village] that the ones who were cultivating the rice fields were better off than them. Now they are coming during the rainy season to plough and plant and afterwards they return to the city. At present people know that they cannot depend upon the state only; that they cannot sit and wait for their public servant's wages!

We heard many testimonies about the relative advantages of farming and rural livelihoods; the following serve as examples.

> Here [in the village] you have a free life and you eat what you produce. (Júlio, twenty-one)

> I prefer to live here [in the village], because here, even if you do not have family, you can always find someone willing to help you, but in the city nobody will help you! In the city, life is better only if you have a high paying job, because there are better conditions. But [otherwise] here [in the village] if you truly engage with work you are going to get more money. (Bitan, eighteen)

> Life in the village is good during the rains: you plough what you have to plough, you plant [the rice seedlings] and then you can go to look for money. The rice field is where our belly is. We cannot all go to *prasa* [city, kr.]. Now it is *kau kinti* [literally, a 'hot place', meaning that it is difficult to live there], because we do not have a good president. Rice is very expensive, and the rice you farm can be sold in the *prasa* and then you can tin-roof your house or buy a cell phone, as I did. (Nelson, twenty-two)

As discussed above, during the years of high cashew prices, many farmers invested the rent from cashew production in assets such as tin roofs, bicycles and solar panels, but the income also caused a reduction in cereal production by some farmers. More broadly, the cashew rent also made it possible for Balanta elders to free youths to engage in education and non-agricultural activities, as their labour became less vital to achieve rice self-sufficiency. At

present, many farmers mention that the money, the wine and the rice obtained from cashew production are now used to reinvest by hiring workgroups to increase rice production (Temudo and Abrantes, 2014: 226–7). As one farmer said, 'The cashew [orchard] feeds the mangrove rice field and the mangrove rice field feeds the cashew orchard'. This observed reinvestment in food production (predominantly since 2008) is happening at the same time as less cash-intensive forms of labour mobilization are being re-adopted by some compounds. The use of rotational, unpaid work between households of the same compound or those belonging to groups of friends (and in which the members bring their own food) is now increasing.

Balanta society is undergoing rapid changes, changes to which both the youth and the elders are contributing. But these changes — which express the 'will to be modern' and put an end to being the 'Other' of the post-colony — no longer appear to be perceived by many as standing in opposition to the pursuit of agriculture or a rural life. Agricultural activities and animal husbandry (frequently complemented with trade) are used by many young men, and even by children, not only to pay for their school fees, books and clothes, but also to buy mobile phones, solar panels and motorbikes, and to build new houses. It is true that an increasing number of young Balanta men are migrating to Senegal, The Gambia or even Cape Verde, following in the footsteps of other youths of Guinea-Bissau. It is also true that many of those who are studying in urban areas or have gone abroad will not return, 'forgetting' those who are left behind in the village, who 'will have the expenses of their mourning ceremonies if they die abroad'. Yet there are others who have returned to the village and who are now primary school teachers, hired by their peers and elders because the state education system has failed the village. Some of those who left for good were seriously ill, allegedly due to witchcraft attacks, or had been accused of witchcraft themselves (as in the case of Col, who ran away to a town in the east of the country where the majority of the population is Muslim). Others simply wanted to get away from the burden of hard manual agricultural work and village life, preferring to live off casual work, eating on some days and going hungry on others, but with the freedom to hang around with their peers whenever they wanted to, going to discotheques, having casual girlfriends, drinking beer or green tea (*uarga*, kr.) on city corners — a kind of waithood of their own choosing.

For others, though, migration can be a way of improving one's well-being in the village after return, like Samna who went for four years to Cape Verde, or Mungabe, who has been travelling every dry season for the past five years to Dakar to 'water onions'.[10] Living standards can also be improved by migrating to another region of the country (where land can

10. Sharecropping arrangements for onion production between young men (mainly Fula and Mandinga) and farmer entrepreneurs in Senegal and The Gambia have been increasing in the last decade.

be either leased or bought), far from family obligations, far from witchcraft attacks or accusations, and with the freedom to show off (*ronca*, kr.) one's success. Augusto, for example, was born in the north of the country, bought land near Bafatá city in the east where he planted cashew trees, and migrates to the south every year to a village where a friend lends him mangrove swamp fields which he uses to produce rice during the rainy season.

Others opt for a shifting urban–rural livelihood, like Man (thirty-two years old, married, a successful builder and house owner in Bissau) who decided to ask some rural friends to lend him mangrove swamp fields, and who now comes during every rainy season to plough. Man learnt this skill when he was a boy living in his northern village of origin. In the words of Júlio (a twenty-one year-old unmarried man who is studying), 'In the village, we cannot show off because of enemies; but here you can easily make more money than in the city if you work hard in the rice fields, in the cashew orchard and in animal husbandry'.

Many of the young men who had their dreams of pursuing higher studies curtailed by the death, illness or old age of their fathers (and who accepted the social norm that they must take responsibility for the household or the compound), by the pregnancy of their girlfriends, by prolonged illness, or by having too many women and children to feed, are proactively preparing a better future for their children. In this respect, Musna is a particularly interesting case; he had to stop studying following the death of his father and went to Dakar, forced to 'migrate to learn a profession', when he was just twelve years old. Now he is twenty-six years old, has one wife and two children and has returned to the village, because in Dakar 'all the money he earned was spent on the house rent and on food'. However, he wants his daughter to go to Dakar to study French and his son to go to Bissau to learn Portuguese: a cosmopolitan dream financed through agriculture and trade.

As Okali and Sumberg (2012) have shown, youth cannot be analysed as if it were a homogeneous, undifferentiated and decontextualized group. Among Balanta young men, perceptions and attitudes may vary between individuals depending upon a number of factors, such as their relationship with their elders, the degree of social cohesion (including the prevalence of witchcraft attacks) in their village, agro-ecological conditions, land availability, agricultural skills, whether agriculture is a full-time or a complementary activity, experience of migration, and so forth. A longitudinal survey would be needed to reveal the relations among these factors and their relative importance.[11] Furthermore, economic differentiation is still incipient and volatile;

11. Van de Grijspaarde et al. (2013) offer an innovative model through the use of a survey to quantify the prevalence of witchcraft concerns, conflicts and detection and the correlation with the presence or absence of 'normative ambiguity'. While admiring the model, we think that Balanta society is different from the Mende-speaking community of Gola in Sierra Leone, and it seemed to us that a more complex array of factors and interrelationships was at play in the present case study.

we have been unable to find a link between wealth and youth aspirations, expectations and achievements. However, translating the polyphony of voices that we have heard, it is clear that some 'customs' (*uso*, kr.) are changing, for example that of hanging a plough or a pestle when a child is born. Whereas Fasce did not hang anything when his five boys were born ('because this was a custom of the ancestors and I have no elders in the compound anymore'), Ntsunkia hung a plough out of respect for his father, but he would have preferred to hang a pen and a notebook. Sumbike hung a plough, a pen and a sheet of paper where he wrote the alphabet and some numbers (see Supporting Information Photo S8), but Paulino, although he only hung a pen, wants his ten-year-old son to learn two skills. In his own words, his son 'cannot become a doctor only; he must know how to plough! A man must work, in order to be able to feed his family. A man must sweat!'.

To summarize, the engagement in agriculture — whether total or partial, as a 'career', a complementary activity or as a tool to achieve higher goals later in their lives — is now an option for many Balanta young men tired of waithood. This is probably because their 'opportunity space' to take advantage of the agri-food sector (Sumberg et al., 2012) was expanded by the increase in the price of rice since 2008 and the money provided by cashew nut production. Those who take advantage of education in urban areas are still relatively few in number, and Guinea-Bissau's constant political instability makes urban life less attractive and more risky. This phenomenon 'opens a window of opportunity for innovative policies' aimed at increasing the country's food sovereignty (Temudo and Abrantes, 2012: 15–17). These policies include the training of primary school teachers, the creation of village libraries and study rooms, and the establishment of vocational schools in rural areas (mentioned by many interviewees). Such measures have the potential to increase the prestige and the profitability of agriculture, improving the life-worlds of those who opt to stay in the countryside.

CONCLUSIONS

The upsurge in studies on youth in Africa of the 1990s and 2000s has opened very important avenues for exploring the agency of young people who are up against structures that attempt to define and limit them and which tend to indefinitely prolong their youth status. However, the main limitation of studies on 'African youth' lies in their almost exclusive focus on young men in urban contexts, in which the ambivalent status of being young is particularly acute, and ways out of this ambivalence are perhaps especially difficult to find. The ethnography of rural Balanta men, discussed in this article, suggests new avenues for research by showing that the agency of some young people — the same agency that in other contexts has led to a migratory 'adventure' or violence — has resulted in a renegotiation of their status, a redefinition of rurality and an investment in education and

agriculture. Youth are often described as unpredictable; perhaps this is what makes them such a difficult and fascinating subject of study. Honwana's assertion (2012) that waithood can be a creative moment for young people is apposite here, and seems to be supported by the evidence of our case study. The current environment of state failure and food crisis in Guinea-Bissau is giving rise to a rural context in which Balanta young men, tired of waiting, become agents of creativity and hope: they see that the world in which they grew up is changing, under the influence of their own and their elders' agency. This study shows that, whether they stay in the countryside or migrate to urban areas, most Balanta young men are not paralysed under the heavy burden of gerontocracy, political instability and the wider neoliberal world. Rather, they are actively constructing a place for themselves where they can strive to make a living as adults and respected citizens.

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Marina Padrão Temudo (marinatemudo@gmail.com) is a research fellow at the Tropical Research Institute (IICT) in Lisbon. She has conducted extensive ethnographic research on rural development and conservation in Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Mozambique, S. Tomé and Príncipe and Angola. Her most recent articles have been published in *Politique Africaine*, *Human Ecology*, the *Journal of Agrarian Change* and *Conservation & Society*.

Manuel Bivar Abrantes is a PhD student at UNICAMP, Brazil, focusing on ethnic transformation in Guinea-Bissau. Since 2008, he has been doing ethnographic fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau, co-authoring articles with Marina Temudo. His book on oral history and territory will be published by UFF, Rio de Janeiro, in 2015.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site:

Photo S1 A plough, a miniature oar and a rope used in rituals; these are placed on the roof of a house to show that a boy has been born in the household (Photo by M. P. Temudo)

Photo S2 Boys of the N'hai age-set using their traditional paraphernalia and covered with mud (Photo by M. P. Temudo)

Photo S3 Wrestling competition between boys of different villages (Photo by M. P. Temudo)

Photo S4 Kussundé dancing competition between boys of two different age-sets of the same village (Photo by M. P. Temudo)

Photo S5 View of a Balanta household showing two ploughs (Photo by M. P. Temudo)

Photo S6 Young men building a new dike with a plough in a rice field during the dry season (Photo by M. P. Temudo)

Photo S7 Boy giving literacy classes to a group of people from his compound by writing on a board nailed to a tree (Photo by M. P. Temudo)

Photo S8 Sumbike showing the plough, the pen and a written paper that he placed in his house when his son was born (Photo by M. P. Temudo)

Photo S9 Mourning ceremony where more than twenty head of cattle were slaughtered (Photo by M. P. Temudo)