HISTORY AND IDENTITY IN SENEGAMBIA AND ON THE UPPER GUINEA COAST

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Among the most important works about how West African cultural groupings defined themselves and were defined by others is Jean-Loup Amselle’s *Logiques métisses* (1990). Building on a rich and deep historiography examining the changing nature of African ethnic identities, Amselle argued that corporate groups’ identities have never been fixed but have been constructed and reconstructed over time. Looking to West Africa, he theorised that group identities were characterised by fluidity until nineteenth-century colonial administrators and ethnographers invented more rigid ethnic identities for administrative convenience.1 It is clear that Amselle’s work has influenced the authors of the books reviewed here. Among other things, each explores the

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1 Since well before Amselle’s writing, historians sought to problematise ‘tribal’ or ‘ethnic’ categories. Among many other works, see Iliffe (1979: 318–341), Vail (1989), Ranger (1983: 211–262). For coastal West Africa, see, for example, Philip D. Curtin’s critique (1970) of Walter Rodney’s *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*. Scholars following Amselle have generally agreed with him, using terms such as ‘fluid’, ‘malleable’ and ‘situational’ to describe the boundaries delineating a great variety of West African ethnic groupings before the onset of colonialism. See, for example, Klein (1999: 109–124).
nature of corporate group identities in the coastal reaches of Senegambia and Upper Guinea. But none of the three—Mark, Brooks or Forrest—rehashes the same old story. In new and very creative ways each refines, and at times challenges, Amselle’s model, and each crafts a study with which scholars of coastal West Africa will have to engage for much time to come.

Both Brooks and Mark focus attention on West African mixed-race communities. Brooks casts a wide net, exploring the history of the Eurafrican population across coastal Senegambia and Upper Guinea from the sixteenth through to the end of the eighteenth centuries. Mark concerns himself principally with the Luso-African segment of the Eurafrican population in the region from the Petite Côte to the Rio Géba and takes his study through to the end of the nineteenth century. The first Eurafricans were the offspring of male European immigrants and coastal African women. The earliest of these immigrants left Portugal in the sixteenth century, giving rise to a distinct population of Luso-Africans. Franco-African and Anglo-African populations began to appear in later centuries. In the written records of the day, Luso-Africans were called ‘Portuguese’.

How Luso-Africans defined themselves and were defined by others is the subject of Mark’s book. An art historian, Mark has a keen sense of the importance of architecture as a visible and lasting image of material culture. Hence, architecture and a wealth of detailed archival sources describing coastal houses and European perceptions of them comprise an important part of his evidentiary base. Referencing Amselle’s model, he argues that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ‘Portuguese’ on the Senegambian coast were defined not by a set of immutable physical features but by socioeconomic and cultural characteristics, which could be adopted by anyone. The boundaries delineating the ‘Portuguese’ identity were, then, ‘fluid’, ‘flexible’, and ‘malleable’. To be ‘Portuguese’ was to be a trader, to speak the Crioulo, a language derived from West Atlantic languages and Portuguese, to adhere to Catholic traditions, and to live in a whitened rectangular house with distinctive architectural characteristics, specifically a vestibule or veranda, which suited the climate and facilitated trade. Given this, members of local African communities could become ‘Portuguese’ after considerable interaction with members of the group. Likewise a ‘Portuguese’ could become Manding, Diola, Bijago, or part of almost any other coastal ethnic group.

It was this sort of two-way interaction between African and European societies that influenced the evolution of a unique form of ‘Portuguese’ architecture, the defining elements of which were ‘amalgams of Lusitanian and West African construction techniques’ (p. 49). Using original and revealing sources—drawings culled from archives, paintings found in museums, and descriptions left by Atlantic merchants—Mark masterfully explores the origins of many of the characteristics of maisons à la portugaise, making clear the tremendous influence of local African architectural innovations.
Just how African the ‘Portuguese’ and their architectural styles were became an issue as Dutch, French, and English trading companies became more involved in African coastal commerce in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These companies’ representatives challenged Portugal’s dominant commercial position, cutting many Luso-African trading communities off from the source of their economic livelihood. Consequently, some Luso-African communities disappeared, their inhabitants being assimilated into other African communities. Those that survived found ways to trade with newly establishing companies. As they did so, they struggled to differentiate themselves from others on the African coastline in new ways.

For Luso-Africans, differentiation became important because the Dutch, French, and English introduced a new conception of identity—one that was ‘oppositional’ and rejected the malleability of group identities. During this period, Europeans increasingly referred to ‘Portuguese’ as black, and insinuated that to be black was to be the member of an inferior African race. ‘Portuguese’ responded to this challenge to their prestige by stressing their whiteness. In sum then, ‘Portuguese’ distinctiveness no longer resided in the uniqueness of Luso-African culture. It resided in the colour of Luso-African skin and, therefore, permanently barred the possibility of black African inclusion.

Thus, in an important refinement of arguments made by Amselle and many other scholars, Mark demonstrates that the boundaries of one West African coastal identity became fixed and rigid before the onset of nineteenth-century European colonial rule. The ‘Portuguese’, he writes, bore the brunt of the pre-colonial European discourse on identity because ‘only the “Portuguese”, whose very existence was testimony to cultural and physical assimilation between Africans and Europeans, posed an ontological challenge to European identity which was based on the premise of a non-white, non-European “other” by the time of the Enlightenment’ (p. 29).

As the ‘Portuguese’ became black in the eyes of eighteenth-century coastal visitors, Europeans, who were ‘blind to the possibility that African architectural traditions could have had an impact on European traders or their Afro-European descendents’ (p. 57), characterised aspects of coastal African architecture seen as advanced as Iberian in origin. This trend continued through the nineteenth century, by which time the French had extended their influence into the heavily ‘Portuguese’ region of Casamance, imposing increasingly rigid identity categories on all Senegambians. As they did so, they increasingly saw dwellings as a reflection of their inhabitants’ inherent nature. Hence, for the French, the decrepit state of Ziguinchor was evidence of the ‘absence of motivation or initiative’ of the Luso-Africans who lived there. Luso-Africans’ qualities, one colonial official wrote, ‘quite naturally arose from the fact that they were black and therefore inherently inferior’ (p. 98).

Brooks’ *Eurafricans in Western Africa* covers almost the same period as Mark’s *Portuguese* Style but grapples with different questions through an equally compelling narrative. The first third of Brooks’
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book is a rewriting of ideas and recasting of arguments from his last book, *Landlords and Strangers* (1993). There Brooks delineated three important West African climatic periods: a long dry period (1110–1500), a short wet period (1500–1630), and another dry period (1630–1860). He was particularly concerned with how changes in rainfall patterns affected trade, migrations, and warfare in Senegambia and on the Upper Guinea Coast. Using published primary sources made available to scholars by P. E. H. Hair, A. Teixeira da Mota and others, he spent considerable time detailing the lives of Portuguese settlers, who began to reach the African coastline at the end of the dry and start of the wet periods, and their Luso-African offspring. As he did in *Landlords*, in *Eurafricans* Brooks explores how Portuguese settlers and Luso-Africans conformed to African notions of landlord–stranger reciprocities, managed to become very competitive along Biafada–Sapi and Banyun–Bak coastal trade routes, and found a middleman role in trade between interior African states and Atlantic merchants.

It is not until page 102 of *Eurafricans* that Brooks begins to tell a new history—that of the varied ways Eurafrican communities adapted to the onset of a new dry period and how they adjusted to new challenges presented by both African and European trading partners. From about 1630, sporadic droughts caused famine, increasing inter- and intragroup conflicts that produced captives for export into the Atlantic. At about the same time, France, England, and the Netherlands stepped up trade on the coast, placing in jeopardy Portugal’s previously dominant position. In Brooks’ convincing analysis, seventeenth-century Luso-African communities benefited from these environmental and economic shifts, applying their knowledge of African languages and coastal trade patterns to compete and cooperate with European rivals.

Drawing on a remarkable number of published primary sources and an impressive array of studies by historians writing in English, French and Portuguese, Brooks assembles an extremely detailed synthesis of Luso-African actions in section after section of Senegambia and the Upper Guinea Coast. All along he demonstrates how Luso-Africans opportunistically collaborated with traders from a variety of European countries and interacted quite differently but effectively with both state-based interior and acephalous coastal African societies.

Unlike Mark, Brooks does not pay much attention to how and why the Luso-African or ‘Portuguese’ identity changed over time. Indeed, Brooks is much more concerned with the rise and fall of Eurafrican economic conditions. Hence, his descriptions of the parameters of the Luso-African and Eurafrican identities are somewhat undeveloped. In places, he indicates that most pre-colonial group identities were flexible and fluid—based on kinship and occupational affiliations as well as language. Further, in at least one passage he states that ‘Luso-African “identity” was both contested and defined by others’, their whiteness and claims to being Christian denied by the French and English (p. 233).

However, for Brooks, the fact that eighteenth-century European merchants disparaged Luso-Africans is of less importance than is the
fact that Luso-African communities slowly slipped into economic and political decline at the start of the century. Though many Luso-Africans continued to prosper as middleman traders, they were forced to contend with new challenges. First, early in the century, Muslim influence in coastal African communities increased steadily while Catholics were unable to win souls due to a severe shortage of resident clergy. Second, area conflicts resulting from ecological changes and interior states’ wars devastated many Luso-African communities. Finally, toward the end of the century, Luso-Africans faced increasing competition from other Eurafricans, principally Franco- and Anglo-Africans. Following the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), the French firmly established themselves on the island of Gorée, and their Franco-African employees steadily pressed their influence south into regions that had been monopolised by Luso-African traders. At the same time, English and Anglo-African traders came to dominate commerce in Serra Leoa (Sierra Leone). Benefiting from a colonial emphasis on formal education, strong connections to French and English trading houses which were willing to advance credit, and the advent of freehold property rights on Gorée and in Saint-Louis, Eurafricans in French- and English-controlled areas had real advantages over Luso-Africans in the Guinea Bissau region who derived little from their ties to Portugal and Portuguese merchants.

Without a conclusion, Brooks ends his study in the 1790s, hinting at what he will argue in a future publication: that is, the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century was a ‘golden-age’ for Franco- and Anglo-Africans who became ‘indispensable subalterns’ in early European colonial ventures and who used their connections to the French and British to continue to compete with Luso-Africans for trade from the Cacheu-Casamance region.

Scholars will be impressed with the contributions that both ‘Portuguese’ Style and Eurafricans make to the historiography of Senegambia and the Upper Guinea Coast. Mark has greatly advanced our understanding of the shifting nature of group identities, while Brooks has written another extremely valuable and daringly broad historical overview, what the scholarly community can hope is the second of a trilogy. (Do we dare dream that he will then give us a fourth instalment?)

Africanists seeking to go beyond the paths that these authors have forged might consider some of the following questions. First, is it possible that French and British officials contested Luso-African claims to being white and Christian for economic and political reasons more than anything else? That is, did the French and British care that Luso-Africans presented ‘an ontological challenge to European identity’ as much as they feared that they stood in the way of commercial and colonial expansion? After all, Franco-Africans and Anglo-Africans also presented a challenge to European notions of identity, but there is no indication in the studies of either Brooks or Mark that Europeans disparaged these groups or contested their identities (however they were defined—something else not examined in either study). If anything, the French and British, as Brooks points out, bolstered the Franco-and Anglo-African economic and political standing by extending them
property rights in the 1760s and 1770s and created conditions under which their communities could flourish in the nineteenth century.

A second and related question is what did late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Iberian Portuguese think of Luso-Africans claims to being ‘Portuguese’? This too is left unexplored by both Brooks and Mark. It is clear from some of Brooks’s other work (1983: 295–319; 1996:135–174) that Cape Verdeans and Luso-Africans served in the highest of official colonial positions in Cacheu and Bissau and there defended Portugal’s colonial claims in the face of French incursions. Metropolitan officials promoted Luso-Africans and Cape Verdeans up the coastal chain of command and praised them for their service. Did eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Iberian Portuguese defend or contest West African coastal ‘Portuguese’ identity? Did Portuguese views of race and group identity differ from those of the French and British? Or were all European discourses on identity situational—rooted in local political and economic expediency? Each of these questions points in the direction of much broader questions about how and why different ways of conceiving of group identities emerged in different places at different points in time and to the possibility that descriptions of fixed and rigid colonial classification schemas based on colour and race miss much of the complexity of how group boundaries were defined and redefined.

Third, to what extent did Eurafricans shape broad Atlantic economic, political, and cultural trends? In a fascinating chapter showing his scholarly breadth, Mark details the characteristics of maisons à la portugaise on Cape Verde and in Brazil and concludes that the architectural style spread from West Africa eastward where it was influenced by styles introduced by Africans from other parts of the continent. Variants came back again to West Africa, reflecting complex patterns of Atlantic cultural interaction. With Luso-Africans sometimes acting as the primary investors in slave ships and making voyages to the Americas as ship passengers, crew members and captains (see Eurafricans for exciting accounts of this), we should not be surprised that they influenced New World architectural styles. But how else might they have influenced New World cultural, economic, political and agricultural history?

Finally, can a better understanding of transformations in pre-colonial economic, political and social patterns or of the shifting nature of group identities help us explain any of West Africa’s current crises? Historians are often better at detailing changes in the lives of people in distant times than they are at revealing the implications of historical transformations or our understanding of them for the world we live in today.

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2 For published primary sources on this, see Barcellos (1910). Other volumes may also be helpful.

3 Scholars such as Ira Berlin (1998) have noted the role of ‘Atlantic Creoles’, or people who understood both African and European cultures, in building the foundations of New World societies. Mark has begun to detail the complexity of the interactions of these Creoles with people from elsewhere in the Atlantic, but there is much more work to be done.
It is this last question that Forrest, a political scientist, turns his attention to: that is, in *Lineages of State Fragility*, he explores the nature of pre-colonial and colonial coastal West African identities for a very presentist purpose. Taking a deep historical view, Forrest seeks to explain why Guinea Bissau has suffered political and economic turmoil since independence in 1974. In so doing, he convincingly argues that, for Guinea Bissau and perhaps other post-colonial states, an understanding of present-day political and economic problems cannot be derived by focusing on the influences of the international political economy. Rather, he suggests, scholars seeking to explain African state fragility should investigate adaptable, potent and enduring rural social formations that have long remained beyond the control of state institutions. Lacking legitimacy at the most local of levels, colonial and post-colonial state governments resorted to brutal terror to compel rural compliance. However, terror tactics ultimately failed in the face of determined rural resistance. This resistance did not come from isolated uprisings or ethnically based movements; rather, it came from unified and multi-ethnic fronts.

In explaining how this unity was achieved, Forrest gives surprisingly little credit to African elites. Indeed, he scarcely mentions Amilcar Cabral, who is often seen as the mastermind of the Guinean liberation struggle, or his political party, the PAIGC. Cabral and other PAIGC members were important, Forrest writes, for the ‘strategic, organizational, and international success of the nationalist movement’ (p. 19). However, a long history of interethnic cooperation—and memory of it—established the conditions necessary for the nationalist struggle to be embraced by a large cross section of Guineans.

Like Mark, Forrest sees pre-colonial ethnic identities in the Guinea Bissau region as ‘socially malleable’. Ethnic groups, he explains, had an ‘incorporative capacity’. However, unlike Mark (and Amselle), Forrest does not think that the most important determinants of ethnicity changed dramatically over time, fluid boundaries and ethnic cooperation being common during Guinea Bissau’s pre-colonial and colonial period. Further, Forrest adds a different twist to our understanding of regional identities by calling them ‘territorial specific’. In Forrest’s thinking, ethnicity was important because the members of groups had the right to rule specific land areas. Thus, Mandjack leaders exercised very strong control over a specific *chão* or territory but at the same time used spiritual societies to incorporate migrants into the broader Mandjack group. This claim may seem unlikely to scholars of parts of the continent where shifting agriculture is the norm. However, land use patterns are very different in Guinea Bissau, where families cultivate the same rice paddies for generations, never leaving their homesteads.

Moving chronologically from the pre-colonial through the post-colonial periods, Forrest demonstrates how in case after case localised communities rooted in particular territories banded together, often across ethnic lines, to face a common enemy. Hence, when Portuguese settlers and Luso-Africans violated what coastal Africans saw as normal
landlord–stranger relations, they more often than not met staunch resistance from a variety of groups with previous claims to territory.

Though Forrest stresses the normality of inter-ethnic cooperation, he does not paint an idyllic picture. Indeed, he recognises that pre-colonial conflicts among Africans were common, but he goes to great lengths to demonstrate that their causes were not rooted in ethnic differences. For example, in a fascinating chapter exploring military and political relations between the states of Gabu and Fuladu, he argues that the cause of a lasting schism was not ethnically based but was rooted in the politics of pragmatic alliances.

The nature of inter-ethnic cooperation did not change in the period of Portuguese colonial rule. Toward the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth century, Portugal recruited African auxiliaries with promises of booty and used new weapons technology to attempt to carve out a colony and establish effective control of it. In a break with much of the scholarship on Guinea Bissau, Forrest convincingly argues that ‘the majority of Portuguese campaigns ended in disaster for the colonialists’ (p. 86). Rural communities obtained modern weaponry through informal trade and banded together in region after region to put up staunch resistance. In stark contrast to René Péliisser’s thinking (1999: 400), Forrest does not see this resistance as characterised by ‘rear-guard battles for fleeting micro-independences’. Rather, he argues that Guineans aimed ‘to remove Portuguese officialdom from entire regions, and they often linked up various rural communities to do so’ (p. 104). It was only with the unbridled application of state terror in the form of the systematic killings of unarmed civilians and massive destruction and theft of property that the Portuguese and their mercenary army were able to achieve, after great effort, success on the battlefield.

However, military victory did not translate into colonial administrative effectiveness. Despite the continued application of state terror, the core of rural power structures remained intact and continued to shape the nature of rural economic, social, political and religious life and to resist colonial initiatives. Hence, in the 1960s, as a liberation movement gained strength under the PAIGC, many rural communities were ready and willing to join. Who joined, who sat on the sidelines, and who sided with the Portuguese was determined at the most local of levels, through very independent political institutions and, sometimes, after struggles over local concerns. Fighters from across the spectrum of Guinea Bissau’s ethnic groups banded together, as they long had, to achieve military success. But, in independence, no party could manage or has managed to create an effective institutional and policy link between state and village. In villages, local and very independent institutions continue to exercise considerable influence. At the level of the state, political and economic instability has been the result.

Space does not permit a detailed account of the intricacies of Forrest’s complex study. Drawing on a wealth of published secondary work, unpublished dissertations and, most importantly, little-used but extremely rich archival materials from Lisbon and especially Dakar,
he boldly refines and often counters the claims of many notable scholars—both of Guinea Bissau and other parts of Africa. No longer can we accept the arguments of Peter Mendy (1994: 423) and René Pelissier (1999: 401, 411) that Guineans failed to achieve inter-ethnic alliances when resisting pre-colonial and colonial oppression. Further, given Guinea Bissau’s history of inter-ethnic cooperation, we must question the applicability of Mahmood Mamdani’s theories (1996: 183–217) of local–migrant conflicts during nationalist movements. And, as others have also demonstrated, Forrest shows that we cannot hope to understand why Africa’s colonial and post-colonial states were so fragile by focusing solely on the actions of elites or the nature of global power relations.  

Localised African processes shaped broad forces. Finally, Forrest forces us to question whether colonial administrators and ethnographers in all parts of West Africa were successful in inventing rigid ethnic identities for their own administrative convenience. In Guinea Bissau, where the colonial state was weak, local African institutions appear to have continued to allow for the incorporation of outsiders into communities and ethnic groups.

This is not to imply that Forrest has left no stone unturned. Indeed, scholars of colonial Guinea Bissau should now seek to differentiate more thoroughly the actions of Luso-African and Cape Verdean administrative personnel from those of Portuguese governors and military commanders. After all, Mark and Brooks have detailed the important role that Eurasians filled at the interstice of European and African cultures and economies in the pre-colonial period, Brooks making clear that this group facilitated coastal trade and hinting at their indispensability in nineteenth-century European colonial ventures. However, Forrest scarcely mentions how the Luso-African role changed in the colonial or post-colonial periods and does not delve deeply into their actions or those of Cape Verdeans as administrators in the colonial government.  

Scholars of Guinea Bissau should, then, follow a recent historiographical trend to avoid painting a stark divide between coloniser and colonised by investigating those Emily Osborn (2003) has dubbed ‘African middle figures’—African-born interpreters, clerks and administrative personnel who shaped colonial relationships and affected local political and social hierarchies. Given that during some periods ‘half the high officials and the great majority of functionaries’ (Lyall 1938: 170–171) were Luso-Africans and Cape Verdians, that they had long-standing ties to coastal communities and that they had their local families’ well-being to consider, historians should ask how the goals of these middle figures both complemented and conflicted with those of Portuguese governors and metropolitan officials. Focusing more closely on Luso-Africans and Cape Verdians as problematic nineteenth- and

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4 See, for example, Roberts (1996).
5 For the best study exploring the nature of Luso-African and Portuguese interactions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Filho (1998).
6 Lyall was a visitor to Guinea Bissau.
twentieth-century middle figures might help us further refine how we think about resistance and domination, state power, and the nature of group identities in the Guinea Bissau region.

As a concluding note, I should mention that each of these authors presents his arguments in very clear and jargon-free language and that each of these books is very carefully edited and beautifully assembled. Available in paperback, Mark’s reasonably priced and relatively short study should be considered for graduate and undergraduate courses. Professional historians and art historians of Africa and the broader Atlantic will find his challenge to models of identity construction to be refreshingly original and students will appreciate his ability to make those models easily understandable. Unfortunately, there is no paperback version of Forrest’s book, so the cost will make it prohibitively expensive for adoption in university courses. However, scholars and political science graduate students will be drawn to it as much for its concise and thoughtful critiques of a number of important scholarly works as for its forceful challenge to much of what has been accepted about Guinea Bissau’s past. Finally, Brooks’s work would be too long and detailed to be of use in any of my undergraduate classes. However, scholars and graduate students specialising in the history of Senegambia and the Upper Guinea Coast will find themselves revisiting this wonderful synthesis to dig deeper into its complex arguments and to be guided by its thorough bibliography for decades to come.

REFERENCES


