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and the Ancestors: Religion and Pragmatism in a Skaw Karen Community of North Thailand (2003), and "Khuba Movements and the Karen in Northern Thailand: Negotiating Sacred Space and Identity" (2002).

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THE CASAMANCE SEPARATIST CONFLICT

From Identity to the Trap of “Identitism”

Hamadou Tidiane Sy

Two decades of deadly conflict between the government of Senegal, a West African nation on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean, and the separatist Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de la Casamance (MDFC), based in its southern region, Casamance, have singled out Casamance and some of its inhabitants as different from the rest of the Senegalese nation. Although referred to generally as “the Casamance crisis,” this separatist conflict pits the Senegalese government primarily against the Diola, one of the many ethnic groups in Casamance, which is among the most ethnically diverse regions of Senegal (Benoit 1984). Setting aside the sometimes biased generalizations of the media about the origins of the conflict, as well as the MDFC’s claim to Casamance independence, it is worth asking whether there is any historically solid basis for the existence of an identity that is held in common either among the Diola or throughout Casamance, that is alien to other ethnic groups or regions of Senegal, and that serves as proof at once of the integral nature of the rebel group and of the impossibility of Senegal’s assimilation of that group. Or, if such a historical Casamance identity does not exist, has a new Casamance or Diola identity (or identities) emerged and been framed—as I would suggest—by the conflict itself?

It is important to note that the type of identity discussed in this essay is social or group identity, and most specifically ethnic and regional identity, as opposed to civic national identity. The difference between civic national identity and social or group identity is in fact central to the Casamance conflict. Many studies in the fields of psychology, sociology, and other social sciences stress the

References for this chapter begin on page 169.
obvious link between identity and conflict (see Azzi 1998; Druckman 1994). Very often, these analyses offer as a paradigm the causal relationship between the two, considering identity and its varying manifestations to be a root cause of conflict, whether those identities are “primordial” or “constructed.” But I would like to explore another dimension of identity and the process of individual and collective identity formation in the context of an overt conflict. My question is this: What if conflict comes first? That is, what if conflict itself—whatever its economic, ethnic, political, religious, or other origins—shapes new individual and collective identities? Identity, and the feeling or obligation of loyalty inherent in it, becomes a sine qua non for every actor in the conflict area or situation, prompting individuals to ask themselves, “To which of the conflicting groups do I belong? How do I define myself in the current battle or war?” Defining one's individual and group identity then becomes an outcome of the conflict and at times a matter of life and death. When ordinary people become involved in a conflict, in short, they have to consider who they are and what common values they share with other people in the group with which they identify.

The process might begin with the individual, but the outcome is, perhaps, much more significant. When each of the conflicting groups attempts to use identity elements to prove the relevance of its cause, begins to justify its place in the conflict based upon identity, and tries to create and mobilize support to defend its identity, then conditions favorable to the emergence of new social or ethnic identities are in place. Being a member of the MPDC and fighting for the secession of Casamance from Senegal involves sharing some core values and practices with other members of the movement. It establishes new criteria in the definition of personal identity, and it may even have created an entirely new collective social identity that could only have emerged following the beginning of the conflict and may not have been possible without it. Equally, choosing to remain loyal to the Senegalese nation can also give birth to a new identity or to new criteria for defining some aspects of personal identity.

In conflict situations, moreover, we see what I refer to as “identitarianism,” which I define as the overemphasis on, ideologization of, and politicization of the identity issue. Identitarianism can be witnessed in the tremendous efforts often undertaken by leaders or parties in a conflict situation to demonstrate their uniqueness, the social “distinctness” of their group (as the Québécois advocating secession from Canada might put it), which often leads to the generation of new symbols representing new groups, regardless of the original reason for the conflict.

A statement made by the president of the United States, George W. Bush, after the 11 September 2001 attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon suggests how identitarianism comes into play in situations of conflict. Bush said: “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” In saying this, Bush appealed to other nations to add a new value to those they already used when defining their identities as nations. New identification criteria, he suggested, are made necessary by the context of a new war. Such criteria could lead nations to adopt totally new identities on the basis of whether or not they choose to join the United States in the “war on terror.” Indeed, such a phenomenon is likely to occur in all conflicts, particularly when a conflict takes a violent turn, and it is more likely when a conflict persists, as is the case in Casamance. A vicious circle begins in which the definition, role, and defense of an individual or collective identity, whether or not the original cause of the conflict, become an integral part of the conflict itself. If we take the Bush case, those who will not join the United States become “enemies” simply because they have not signed on to the US war, although they might wish to define themselves as part of a third group or to assign themselves no category at all.

This chapter tackles the issue of identity formation and its relationship to conflict by reviewing and analyzing historical and contemporary events and discourses concerning the Casamance region, the Diola community, and the Casamance conflict from the perspective of theories about identity. My goal is to show how the Casamance crisis has helped generate totally different—and at times conflicting—identities within Casamance itself and within the wider national Senegalese society.

**Triggering Incidents**

It is generally believed that a march organized by a group of protesters on 26 December 1982 in Ziguinchor was the main triggering incident in what became the Casamance conflict. On that day in Ziguinchor, the largest city in the southern part of Senegal and at the time the capital of the administrative region of Casamance, residents woke up to find their city under siege after hundreds, maybe thousands, of secessionist protesters had attempted overnight to replace the green, yellow, and red national flag of the Senegalese with their own white flag. The response of the Senegalese security forces was firm and ferocious. Several people were killed, many others injured, and hundreds arrested.

There had certainly been earlier assertions of a separate Casamance identity. In 1980, a Senegalese priest, Augustin Diamacoune Senghor, a champion of Casamancan traditions and culture who had worked as a radio producer for a local branch of the Senegalese state radio station, sent a letter to the president, Leopold Sedar Senghor, who was preparing to hand over power to his designated successor, Abdou Diouf. In his letter to President Senghor, Father Diamacoune wrote that from now on, “Casamance intends to fly on its own” (La Casamance entend voler de ses propres ailes). Denouncing the “negative results” that “companionship” with Senegal had produced for Casamance at all levels (economic, political, social, cultural, and even moral), the priest presented the outline of a plan for the future of Casamance that included first “autonomy” and later “international sovereignty.” At an August 1980 conference in Dakar, Diamacoune openly questioned the inclusion of Casamance within the new Senegalese state (Ndiaye 1999). In another letter written in
April 1981, he stated plainly that "the colonial power had not made of him a Senegalese" (le colon n'a pas fait de moi un sénégalais), and he claimed his "Casamance-ness" (ma Casamancité). Were Diamacoune's statements the spark that set the conflict ablaze?

Analysts and commentators have generally explained the upsurge of violence in Casamance as a result of the frustrations of the Diola community, whose members accused local civil servants of not treating them fairly and humanely and of failing to respect their cultural values. Indeed, Diamacoune himself once told me that the Senegalese civil servants were at times worse than the French colonialists whom they replaced. Speaking to an assembly of Catholic priests in 2001, a former president of the Ziguinchor region, Pascual Manga, declared that "the colonial development policy of Senegal has marginalized Casamance, and the independent Senegalese state has not fundamentally corrected these discrepancies." In attempting to pinpoint when the state's unjust treatment of them became too much for the Diola in Casamance to bear, some mention the January 1980 schoolboys' strike in Ziguinchor, during which one schoolboy was killed.

Ordinary people in Casamance often speak of yet another triggering incident: a football match in 1980 between Casa-sports, a Casamance local team, and Jeanne d'Arc de Dakar, the oldest of the Senegalese soccer squads in the capital city. The match ended in violence, leading to tough disciplinary sanctions against the Casa-sports players, who were charged with bad behavior in the presence of the highest Senegalese authorities. This event, and particularly the anger and frustration it provoked in the Casamance youth (anger that probably encompassed almost all Casamançais, mindful as they were of their new identity as supporters of the team that represented their region), was later used to mobilize support for secessionist ideas. The separatist leaders argued that the Casamançais as a whole were not treated fairly by the Senegalese government in Dakar and that the sanctions against the Casa-sports players were overly tough because the state treated Casamançais as second-class citizens at best.

Whichever of these events we consider to be the actual trigger of the Casamance conflict, it remains true that the identity issue—and identitarianism—were clearly present in the conflict from the beginning. Why this is the case is open to debate.

**Rebellious Region?**

To explain the cause of the current crisis in Casamance, many Senegalese—scholars and nonscholars alike—label the province a "rebellious" one by nature. Today, most people in Senegal generally refer to the natives of Casamance, and most particularly the Diola community, as "rebels." Any Diola is simply identified as a "rebels," regardless of whether she or he is a member or supporter of the secessionist MFDC.

The depiction of the south of Senegal as totally "ethnically and culturally" different from the rest of the country has its roots in the colonial period. Here, too, it seems that the colonial authorities' strong stress on ethnic identity—their identitarianism—was the result of conflict. The "rebellious" label is the result of the attempts of the French to understand why they could not peacefully establish their authority in the region of Casamance without being challenged. This conception of the Casamançais has carried over into the postcolonial period. In his master's thesis about the Casamance conflict, Pape Samba Ndiaye (1999) listed the "long tradition of rebelliousness of the Casamance region" (la longue tradition d'insoumission de la Casamance) as one of the causes of the conflict. Documenting his thesis with accounts and narratives written by French missionaries and colonial administrative authorities, Ndiaye illustrates the "rebellious" nature of Casamance's people by highlighting the many battles fought in Casamance against the colonial power. The French were ferociously fought in other parts of the country as well, but since independence in 1960, these parts of the country have not challenged the Senegalese authorities in their efforts to build a Senegalese nation and Senegalese civic identity. Therefore, their earlier demonstrations of a rebellious nature have been forgotten.

Other sources that reproduce the prejudices of French colonial writing portray the Diola as a group whose social structures and values—particularly their lack of centralized authority—differ totally from those of people in most of the rest of Senegal, and hence they suggest that the Diola tendency to enter into rebellion grows out of the structure of Diola society. But pointing out Diola individuality, or distinctness, as a cause of conflict makes little sense in the context of a nation formed of several different ethnic groups, where state structures and arbitrary territorial boundaries are a mere construction inherited from the colonial power. The same distinctness, or singularity, exists in all of Senegal's other ethnic groups: the Bassari in the extreme southeast, the Pulaar in the north, the Wolof in the west central part of the country, and so on. Most of these groups evolved separate political entities before merging into one Senegalese nation. Each one has, more or less, its own distinct language, its own cultural values, and its own history; if it did not, it would not be referred to as a distinct group (Diouf 1998).

In this context, the distinctness of the Diola seems insignificant. And indeed, in his study of Senegalese ethnic groups, Makhtar Diouf (1998) shows how several factors have shaped the formation of an integrated society in Senegal despite ethnic differences, which never produced violence until the Casamance conflict began. Canadian scholar Geneviève Gasser (2000) qualifies Diouf's opinion a bit, arguing that Senegalese society has been only "semiharmonious" rather than perfectly integrated. Nonetheless, the work of both scholars acts to minimize the "distinctiveness" of the Diola. Though both Diouf and Gasser question the ethnic foundations of the Casamance crisis, issues of identity continually crop up in discussions of the existence of the conflict and explorations of its dynamics. Perhaps this is simply a manifestation of identitarianism.
explaining the conflict in terms of Diola ethnic identity provides a simple way of conceptualizing a complex issue.

Very recently, the actions of an individual Diola have strongly challenged common perceptions of the Diola people. To the general surprise of the Senegalese public, Sibiloumbe Diedhiou, a traditional king from Oussouye, a city in the heartland of the Diola community, began speaking out, calling for peace in the region of Casamance and clearly stating that he is doing so as a traditional leader and spokesperson for other traditional leaders. He was later invited to attend peace talks and make a statement on behalf of his peers. For twenty years while the conflict simmered, no one ever heard of a Diola king or of any Diola authority who could play such a unifying role—apart from the leaders of the MFDC. Ironically, it seems that this king saved his own throne and those of many others when peace was at a premium while simultaneously contradicting his very existence the generally admitted view that Diola society lacks central authority. And he is no fraud: scholars have proven that in each traditional Diola community there was a king whose power was religious and who was in charge of leading the community. Ndiaye (1999) acknowledges that the French were “misguided” (tromper) in their views of the Diola because of errors in a commissioned report they received in 1891. This was, according to Ndiaye, the starting point of the misunderstandings between the French colonial power and the Diola community in Casamance.

The point here is not to deny the existence of Diola identity but simply to show how thorough history and because of specific social and political conditions it has been trapped in a particular mold. The episode of the Diola king helps to emphasize the flaws and bias generated by identitism, pointing to how the symbols and history that help characterize and define collective identities—and these identities themselves—solidify in times of conflict. As a result of identitism, the notion of the “specificity” of Casamance has survived the colonial rulers and is now embraced by contemporary local leaders, analysts, politicians, Senegalese administrative authorities, and members of the MFDC. Each actor conceives of Casamance in this particular way to further personal interests and purposes.

A History of Ethnic Diversity

In the aftermath of the first scenes of violence in December 1982, an opinion piece by Boubacar Obeye Diop (1982), then a prominent member of Parliament, was published in the government-owned daily Le Soleil. Titled “Nation et spécificité régionale” (Nation and Regional Distinctness), it attempted to prove that Casamance and its inhabitants are a specific entity different from Senegal. The longer the conflict has lasted, the more that theories like Diop’s have flourished. Their task has been made easier by the physical separation that exists between Casamance and the rest of Senegal: with the exception of its most eastern part, Casamance is cut off from the rest of Senegal by Gambia, another small West African nation that slices across and nearly bisects the territory of Senegal. Gambia was formerly colonized by the British, while the French administered Senegal. The geography and weather of Casamance are distinctive as well: while most of Senegal has a dry climate, with a rainy season of only three months, Casamance prides itself on its greenness and has abundant rains for half of the year.

Yet despite the obvious physical distinctness of Casamance, others insist that Senegal and Casamance have long been united. In an article written in Le Soleil in the aftermath of the violence of December 1982, Senegalese historian Iba Der Thiam (1984) indicated that Casamance was part of Senegal before the colonial era of the nineteenth century and that its peoples had for centuries been in “communion” and interaction with the rest of the Senegalese nation and people. Some historians, Thiam says, date the union of Casamance and Senegal back to two thousand years before colonial times; others, such as Cheikh Anta Diop, assume that it took place still further in the past. A closer look at the history of Casamance and its people helps to reconcile such different views, demonstrating how Casamance came into existence as an administrative territory and why this process did not create a single Casamance identity, despite assertions to the contrary.

Part of Casamance was under Portuguese control from 1645, when the Portuguese settled and built a commercial office in Ziguinchor (Thiam 1984). The Portuguese stayed in Ziguinchor until 1850. In the meantime, the French had settled in Carabane and Sédhiou in 1836 and 1837, and these two cities were administered from Gorée, an island off Dakar where the French had a naval base. Later, the Portuguese agreed to transfer Ziguinchor to the French. While most of the Senegalese territory came under French control, the French colonial administration faced multiple forms of resistance from the Diola until 1920 (Benoist 1984), and the whole of Casamance was not totally “pacified” until the early years of the twentieth century. Because of these ongoing battles and what some refer to as the “rebellious” nature of the populations in the region, three Casamance subentities called cercles (circles)—Ziguinchor, Kambou, and Bignona—were administered by a military officer beginning in 1882 (Thiam 1984). Other sources indicate that it was not until 1886 that Ziguinchor was actually handed over from the Portuguese to the French after an agreement between the two colonial powers (Cissé 2002; Ndiaye 1999). By the end of the 1880s, in any case, the territory of modern Casamance was occupied by the French and administered as part of the larger colony of Senegal.

This version of events is commonly accepted among Senegalese and French historians. But the MFDC and, namely, its clerical leader, Augustin Diamacoune Senghor, have disputed it. According to Diamacoune, Casamance has never been part of Senegal, not before nor during the colonial era. In this view, the union of Casamance and Senegal was imposed by the French. In letters written in 1980 and 1981, Diamacoune maintained that a few years before
independence, the leaders of the two "nations" of Senegal and Casamance agreed on a deal to walk together along the same path for a certain time. The Senegalese nationalists, fighting for their independence from the French colonial rulers, agreed with the Casamance leaders that Casamance would choose its own path and destiny at some point in the future. In an interview in November 2002, Diamacoune told me that he still strongly believed there has always been a separate Casamance nation. This is the historical argument upon which he and his movement rested their claim for independence and that led to the events of 26 December 1982, the spark of a conflict now more than twenty years old that has yet to be resolved.

The Senegalese authorities and the international community have been reluctant to accept Diamacoune's version of events. The scholars' outline of Casamance history given above is complicated, however, by the fact that it depicts only the history of the Diola-dominated area of Lower Casamance (Basse-Casamance), ignoring other parts of the region—namely, Upper Casamance and Mid-Casamance—that are dominated by the Peul and MANDINGUE (the "Mandinggoes," in English-speaking Africa). Of course, interactions and population movements have blurred the lines between these subregions of Casamance somewhat, but the MANDINGUE and Peul nonetheless had their own history and interactions with the colonial power. Settling mainly in the Upper Casamance region, they originally lived in a traditional kingdom called Gabu, founded in the twelfth century by MANDINGUE warriors from Mali who enslaved or assimilated people from the first indigenous inhabitants, the Bainouk. The Bainouk, or Banun, who believed in one god, were pagans governed by an elders' assembly and a designated king. They depended mainly on rice production, and some believe they practiced ritual human sacrifice. They have become an almost insignificant minority in population size in Casamance today (Sow 1989).

According to B. S. Sow (1989), the MANDINGUE were divided into two subgroups: the pagan MANDINGUE (or SONINKE) and the Muslim MANDINGUE. The SONINKE subgroup performed "bloody" rituals and believed in the holy Jalan, symbolized by a giant tree where sacrifices and ritual ceremonies were held. The SONINKE had a political system within which the king was the leader, but the "higher interests of the community" were in the hands of the elders' assembly. Both the pagan MANDINGUE and the Bainouk were eventually invaded and defeated by the Muslim MANDINGUE. The Muslim MANDINGUE also had a very stratified society, with an aristocracy, a huge class of "free men" (mostly farmers, who were neither aristocrats nor slaves), lower classes (castes), and slaves (ibid.). The MANDINGUE kingdom of Gabu was toppled by the Peul, who created their own kingdom, Fuladu (Ngaide 1998). The Bainouk, MANDINGUE, and Peul still live in Upper and Mid-Casamance, moving around within the region depending on the political and social circumstances. These ethnic groups are joined by the Balante and Mandjak, who fled Portuguese domination of Guinea-Bissau, located just to the south of Casamance, and settled near the Senegalese border. This migration phenomenon has created strong links between communities on both sides of the border.

The Diola ethnic group, which lives mainly in Lower Casamance, probably came from "the south," according to Joseph Roger de Benoist (1984), a specialist on Diola society. This community is composed of about ten subgroups scattered along the Casamance River and the shore of the Atlantic Ocean. The Diola may originally have come from Mali in the fourteenth century, fleeing the MANDINGUE warriors. They settled first in what is now Gambia before moving farther south to Casamance, where they assimilated and integrated a good part of the already weakened Bainouk group and settled in the fertile lands along the river and the coast.

To underscore the differences between the Diola and other groups in Senegal, authors and experts stress that within Diola culture there are no classes, caste systems, slaves, or griots (a caste of traditional singers, storytellers, and guardians of the heroic deeds of the ruling classes). Hence, the Diola communities lacked the type of social stratification and organization that was dominant in many West African societies, including those of their neighbors. The most stable social unit in the Diola community was the family or the neighborhood, according to Benoist. In many ethnological or anthropological studies, the lack of a strong central authority among the Diola has been considered the main reason for the existence of an incompatibility between the Diola community and local authorities appointed by the Senegalese government after independence, and thus as the reason for their separatist movement. Benoist (1984) acknowledges, however, that there were "kings" (roi) in the Diola communities who acted more like traditional priests than secular rulers: they were in charge of the rituals in the sacred forests that the spirits of the community were said to inhabit. Interestingly, however, Benoist also writes that "in some communities the king has clearly defined social and political responsibilities" (dans certains groupes, il [le roi] a des responsabilités sociales et politiques bien définies).

Knowledge of the Diola society's traditional kings gained wider acceptance with the recent high-profile appearance of the king of Oussouye. But why did it take so long for this knowledge to come to light? Perhaps for scholars to assess and accept the fact that Diola society is hierarchical would have required them to deny the perceived distinctiveness of Diola society and identity. Deeper research is needed into the reasons why analysts continue to use shortcuts to highlight the "absence" of authority and hierarchy in traditional Diola society. It is possible that ignoring the hierarchical structure makes it easier to argue that the Diola are strangers and totally hostile to the culture of authority that a modern state requires its citizens to observe and accept. Here again, the danger of identityism looms large.

It was only during the final years of French colonial rule and the early years of Senegalese independence that the territories of the MANDINGUE and Peul were merged with those of the Diola to create one administrative unit called "Casamance," named after the river that runs through the region. The separatist
movement, which has never clearly defined the boundaries of its would-be territory, operates militarily in all parts of Casamance, but the fact remains that the MFDC began recruitment and its first military operations in Lower Casamance, the heartland of the Diola. As a result of the current conflict, administrative reforms in 1985 split the region in two, into Ziguinchor and Kolda. Although the name “Casamance” is still used, from a strictly administrative point of view, Casamance has ceased to exist.

### Clashing Identities and New Identities

The preceding overview makes it clear that there has never been a unified historical Casamance identity, and it suggests the complexity of the context in which modern definitions of what it means to be Casamancais are emerging. “It is widely recognized,” Peter Black (2003) writes, “that some of the most recalcitrant of deep rooted, fundamental conflicts are those between identity groups.” He continues: “Much wisdom, both folk and scholarly, is organized around this truism; such terms as ethnocentrism, outgroup, prejudice, stereotype, xenophobia, racism, othering, and scapegoating, which appear in both scholarly and ordinary discourse on this topic, suggest a rather developed descriptive apparatus for talking about the role of social identity in conflict.” Almost all of the terms Black mentions have been used to analyze the Casamance conflict and establish its root causes.

When discussing the issue of identity, there are at least three levels of social or group identity that need to be taken into account. Because the MFDC claims to fight for the independence of Casamance, the first level falls along regional and territorial lines, encompassing the region of Casamance. Because it recruits mainly, though not exclusively, within the Diola community, the second level must be defined along ethnic lines, encompassing the Diola ethnicity. Third, we must consider Senegalese civic identity as the “other,” or enemy group, being fought by the MFDC. Considering these three levels of identity allows us to question the existence of a Casamance identity—of Casamancité, as Diamacoune proudly called it in his letters. We can ask what criteria would be used to define or characterize such an identity. It also helps us to assess the idea that, in times of conflict, identities are transformed and new ones are generated through the trap of identitism.

After the trial of the Casamance separatist leader Diamacoune, who was arrested in 1982 and later sentenced to a five-year prison term for his involvement in the separatist cause, a Senegalese citizen, most likely a native of Casamance, expressed the dilemma he was facing in a way that almost certainly reflected the uncomfortable situation of many Senegalese citizens from Casamance. In a letter published by an opposition-owned Senegalese newspaper in January 1984, Poucet Mandiaby (1984) wrote that Diamacoune’s trial “was enough to raise doubts and unease in people’s minds” (Il aura fallu ce procès pour que le doute et le malaise s’installent dans les esprits). He added that he would not for a single moment have thought that Casamance could be separated from Senegal but that for him the trial of the separatists raised “many questions” (des tas de questions). As a Casamancan, Mandiaby—who clearly acknowledged in his letter that Senegal was “one and indivisible” (un et indivisible)—felt that he was an individual citizen caught between two stools: loyalty to his country, Senegal, the nation-state of which he was a citizen, and loyalty to Casamance, his native region, which was in the grip of a serious crisis. Mandiaby further wrote that Diamacoune was a hero who deserved praise equal to that bestowed on other Casamance heroes.

The double loyalty—and double identity—evident in Mandiaby’s letter was also evident in the actions of the Association des Cadres Casamancains, an elite group that brings together natives of Casamance who are opposed to the armed struggle and the idea of independence for Casamance. The members of the association emphasize their Senegalese citizenship, but only to claim the need for better representation for Casamancans among the higher ranking members of the Senegalese civil service. Lebanon and the new Iraq both appoint government members along the lines of ethnic and sectarian affiliations; it is possible that such a model could be applied also to Senegal, an African country that aspires to be a modern democracy.

Taken at both the individual and collective level, these situations illustrate the complexity of Casamance nationalism, which appears to be a nationalism without nationalists—without actors who share values and practices that would unite them in a common cause for a common goal. Indeed, for a region such as Casamance—which has long been a land of interaction and diversity, and where several different ethnic groups have settled and lived in harmony for decades—to claim the existence of any common identity would be as artificial as it is for the Senegalese to claim the existence of a civic identity; thus, Casamance identity must be constructed. This is what the MFDC is attempting to do. The lack of a common vision and shared values among all the peoples and communities that have had their history enacted within the boundaries of the territorial region of Casamance has indeed been one of the main obstacles to the success of the separatist movement.

It is obvious that the level of support for the separation of Casamance from Senegal would be totally different if the Mandingue, Diola, Peul, Mandjack, Balante, Bainouk, and so forth agreed that the space they inhabited is one region and is their “nation,” as opposed to a part of the Senegalese nation. Far from it, some ethnic groups in the region have developed the “Min-Tawaaka” concept to show their loyalty to the Senegalese state and claim Senegalese identity. “Min-Tawaaka” means “we were not there” or “we are not taking part” in the language of the Peul. As early as the beginning of the separatist movement, ethnic groups within Casamance, including the Peul, demonstrated their disagreement with the idea of a distinct Casamance nation without denying their heritage and identity as Casamancais by using the phrase “Min-Tawaaka” to
describe themselves. Denouncing state policies that neglect their region, they have simply asked for better consideration in terms of economic and social development while totally rejecting any claims to independence.

But the bias of identitism has already shaped a common "Casamance identity" in opposition to the Senegalese civic identity, making their voices less influential in the wider world. Thus, we find at least two Casamance-sites—one paying allegiance to the nation-state and accepting Senegalese citizenship, and one fighting for independence and unable to operate within the nation-state. Is a common regional identity the imagined community of the MFDC? If so, this implies the existence of a totally new Casamance, beyond the simple boundaries of the territory within which decades of interaction have been unable to frame one unique Casamance. What would be the common characteristics, the cultural and religious values, or the national symbols of this Casamance that would allow or even justify the creation of a would-be nation of Casamance?

During a meeting in Ziguinchor in April 2003, Nouha Cissé, a history professor and analyst of the Casamance conflict, stated that the separatist fighters, in killing children and women, had "de-sacralized the sacred" (désacralisé le sacré). His point was that Diola traditions proscribed the killings of children and women, but members of the MFDC military wing had performed such normally outlawed acts. A thorough reading of this statement suggests that in the context of conflict, collective identities are transformed and new ones are generated. Diola loyalties are torn between traditional identifying values on the one hand and the need for the MFDC to demonstrate its strength by targeting men and women alike on the other. Can Diola who kill women and children still be identified as Diola? If they belonged to a religious order, they might be excommunicated or sanctioned for their actions. But being members of the MFDC affords them a new identity that does not proscribe these acts and so might exempt them from punishment, providing them with protection and support. The fighters need to show loyalty and commitment to their commanders and to the movement when they take up arms. But by doing so, they contradict the foundations, the shared values, and the beliefs of the community and culture they purport to defend. From the perspective of the other Senegalese citizens, the violent actions of the separatist movement reinforce the idea that the Diola are rebellious by nature.

Conclusion

Twenty years of conflict in Casamance have clearly generated new identities. The emergence of the MFDC as a guerrilla movement has displaced loyalties in the Diola community from family and village to a totally new structure with new values and new goals. The Casamance regional identity has also been reshaped because of the conflict, with at least two new groups emerging: those who are willing to superimpose or merge their ethnic and regional identity with their Senegalese identity and citizenship, and those who, like Diamacoune, believe that for historical reasons they are not and cannot be Senegalese citizens.

More worrisome than the conflict with the Senegalese authorities is the risk of interethnic or intergroup clashes between civilians from these two sides. What if some local political entrepreneurs use the split that has emerged during the last twenty years to mobilize support for, or to engage a war against, the MFDC? So far, the violence, which has mainly opposed the Senegalese Army and the MFDC guerrilla fighters, has been restrained to a relatively low level. A senior Senegalese officer explained once why the army never launches severe strikes against the guerrilla fighters: "If we kill them, we're killing our own brothers; therefore, we try to avoid as much violence as we can, although we know where all their bases are." This officer may see the guerrilla fighters as his brothers, but it is doubtful that Senegalese citizenship and identity can be imposed on people who have willingly said that they do not want it.

Will the stereotypes generated or reinforced by the conflict be removed from the collective memory? Will most Senegalese's impressions of the Diola as rebellious or most Diola's perceptions of the Senegalese as arrogant occupiers vanish as quickly as those working for peace would wish? Such questions help us to reconceptualize the discussion of the issue of identity in times of conflict. Avoiding what I have termed "identitism," which oversimplifies complex and intricate issues, might be one way to provide opportunities for peace and reconciliation to come more quickly.

Note

1. Father Diamacoune showed copies of these letters to me. I do not know whether Senghor received them.

References


MANUFACTURING SECTARIAN DIVIDES
The Chinese State, Identities, and Collective Violence

Patricia M. Thornton

In the predawn hours of 24 April 1999, an unusual group slowly began assembling before Zhongnanhai, the highly guarded and gated compound that houses the elite national leaders of the Chinese party-state. Appearing to arrive nearly simultaneously in small bands from all corners of Beijing, they silently congregated before the compound gates and formed a neat grid only a few blocks from famed Tiananmen Square, the site of the massive student demonstrations that had been brutally suppressed almost exactly ten years earlier. By noon, the crowd had swelled to over ten thousand and occupied at least three streets surrounding the perimeter of the compound, with most participants silently standing in meditation or reading the written works of Li Hongzhi, the venerated founder and leader of the quasi-Buddhist movement commonly known as Falun Gong (Practitioners or Cultivators of the Wheel of Law). Many of the participants had packed food and water to sustain them during their long vigil, and some even vowed to spend the night.

Despite a week of unrest orchestrated by Falun Gong practitioners in nearby Tianjin, the Beijing police were caught off guard by the demonstration. After stationing uniformed police officers every six meters around the perimeter of the protesters’ grid, police authorities took well over twelve hours to disperse the group. Most left voluntarily around 8:30 PM after police threatened to herd them all onto eighty buses waiting behind the nearby Great Hall of the People. Opting instead for public transportation, they disappeared peacefully into the crowds on Beijing’s streets.¹

¹ Notes for this chapter are located on page 187.