Introduction

Identity at the Margins
A Place in Guinea

> We were the centre of regional politics and commerce; we were trading with the Sahel and with the Europeans at the coast before colonialism arrived. We were rich; our *boubous* were made of the finest cloth. Everyone was jealous of us Morianais. Then colonialism came, then the state came, and now we are marginal . . .
>
> —To Almamy Touré

Mr Touré presents his grievances about the perpetual decline of the region called Moria in southern Guinea and, more specifically, of his own family which has ruled the town of Forécariah and its surroundings since the mid-eighteenth century. He claims that the town's past connections and riches, and its prestige and political weight, have been altered by regional and subregional changes and by the outside forces that caused Moria to be marginalized. Mr Touré uses 'marginalization' synonymously with powerlessness, and thus portrays a stark contrast between the present and the history he describes for the town and his family. It is not only members of his family, however, who agree with this depiction, but other members of the local elite as well. Moria is indeed now described by many of its inhabitants as marginal. As the area is only about 100 kilometres south of the country's ever-expanding capital Conakry, this assessment cannot possibly be based on geographical location. Given the town's historic roots, with its foundation dating back at least 250 years, one could perhaps expect it to hold more weight, all the more so since the town has been the seat of regional government since French colonial rule. Yet, despite its apparent historical and, in some respects, even present-day centrality, this view of its marginality is rooted in perceptions of both the past and the present.

This work explores how local communities make use of their marginal positions, real or imagined, to integrate into larger socio-political bodies through identity work that combines histories, ethnicity and religion in addition to performances of state, citizenship and institutionalized ties to administrative bodies. Local perceptions of the political self and performances of marginality can be instrumental in both making claims on and resisting a state or a government's politics. Investigating how local elites negotiate political reform processes such as decentralization against a background of locally accepted oral tradition and questions of legitimate rule reveals negotiation processes that cross the boundaries between the local and the state. This, in turn, shows how small-town traditional elites create a public discourse that, willingly or not, ties local populations closer into larger entities such as the nation-state. Boundaries become blurred as perceptions of old political systems influence the performance of new politics and the world-making of all people concerned.

Rural political elites, like Mr Touré above, appear to maintain their privileged positions and manage to redefine the legitimacy of their rule in the local setting throughout all the changes in official ideology, governments and systems of public authority. Following the use of oral tradition provides a means of investigating this phenomenon as it serves as a resource for political power by legitimizing superior positions throughout time. The way in which certain versions of history are employed today will be examined in various contexts throughout the book, since it is through their use that individual and collective identities are being created.

Some of these topics are pertinent across West Africa and beyond. The book will investigate them in the specific context of marginality and the way in which geographical, political and economic marginalities are being employed to make claims, to protest and to resist outside powers. These powers may take the form of the state, a development initiative or administrative policy changes. As an analytical term, marginality has long exceeded its original meaning, of denominating a minority group – however that group may have been defined. Marginality has become a term used to analyse characteristics of many diverse and heterogeneous groups. They are far from homogenous. However, they 'are structurally dependent from other persons who could be described as socially and economically "adult" – a person who can make decisions about themselves and provide for themselves and their dependents' needs' (Fokwang 2016: 213). Such powers can be seen as suppressive but also as enabling, as long as they are embedded in social relationships that are to some extent reciprocal. As Abu-Lughod pointed out, such power can produce 'forms of pleasure, systems of knowledge, goods, and discourses' (Abu-Lughod 1990: 42).

These are common themes across contemporary West Africa, where advancing infrastructure and technologies bring remote and rural regions under the more direct control of ambitious centralized states. Guinea is no exception to

this. What makes the Guinean context so specific is the heritage of different political state (and societal) ideologies that have at some point in history been prominently promoted and then left alone, when the ailing state of the late 2000s withdrew from an active nation-building project. This left the citizens on their own with issues relating to identity and political and economic challenges. Their struggle to make sense of this shifting and changing context lies at the heart of this book. Their marginal situation enabled them not only to struggle but also to employ a broad repertoire of identity-related notions in creative ways to engage with and appropriate the repercussions of governmental disengagement with the nation-building process, economic decline and political unrest and centralized displays of – often oppressive forms of – power.

States at the Centre

As much as this book focuses on marginality, it also addresses the state. Much of the literature on the African state accuses it of power abuse, criminalization (Bayart, Ellis and Hibou 1999) and self-enrichment (Hibou 2004) or of abandoning the people in the countryside by not delivering state services there (van de Walle 2001). The overall picture of the continent is a negative one, with economic figures and statistics on wars and sickness underlining the 'failure' of Africa's nation-state projects in general and its governments in particular (Ferguson 2006). Clearly inspired by the dark pictures painted of the continent, an association with shadows has emerged in the anthropological research, such as in Ferguson's title *Global Shadows* or Nordstrom's *Shadows of War*, 'Out of the Shadows' or ideas of 'shadow states' (Nordstrom 2001, 2004; Reno 2000, respectively), leading to an understanding of the informal workings of African societies and states (Chabal and Daloz 2001).

As Ferguson and Gupta argue, it is not only nations that can be construed as imagined, but states as well, making them 'powerful sites of symbolic and cultural production' (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 981). Therefore, they need to be constructed and co-constructed, maintained and engaged with. Unlike Chabal and Daloz's examinations of the more informal workings of African states as opposed to an imagined ideal type, I will focus on the everyday practices of state-making by civil servants, local politicians and rural elites. They work in a reality of under-funding, under-staffing and corruption as well as a lack of public recognition. They also have ideas and ideals of statecraft, and memories of doctrines other than the contemporary developmental ideal.

Therefore, both the ideal-type state, normative state and the 'actual' state are intricately interconnected and dependent on each other (Pratt 2002). While the relationship between them may not be causal or antithetic, it is potentially both, with the actual state practice certainly being a possible image of the ideal type. People contrast and compare the actual manifestations of states with the ideal

that is presented and promoted within the context of an international moralizing development discourse. It is through this very local level of 'state hierarchy' that people encounter the state and it is precisely this encounter that shapes their perspective and knowledge of it (cf. Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014).

If structures or institutions are in such dire conditions as perceived by some students of the African state, Graeber points out, they cannot and will not fulfil the Weberian requirements of a state. It therefore becomes even less clear what these political entities actually are (Graeber 2004). If the Weberian state model cannot be used as a reference, discerning the state in practice becomes a challenging notion as 'there is not a deficit of state but an excess of statehood practices: too many actors competing to perform as state' (Aretxaga 2003: 396). Faced with an apparent abundance of state practices, the research has been dealing with governance practices of non-state institutions or informal arrangements in the context of an allegedly weak or absent state, thus increasing the visibility of the diverse actors participating in statehood practices. Rather than looking into central government practices 'from the top' or the resistance strategies of ordinary citizens 'from below', the focus here lies on the 'middle', to adopt a term referenced in classic and recent publications on African bureaucrats (cf. Lawrance, Osborn and Roberts 2006; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014).

Socialist Histories?

Contemporary debates on the African state also address post-socialism, the post-colony, democratization, decentralization and economic development. It is not easy to disentangle socialism and its aftermath from all the other processes that have been going on during the same time frame. It is also difficult to delineate the specificities of the African experience in this post-colonial and post-socialist perspective.

In Guinea, the experience of socialism is irrevocably tied to the process of independence from France in 1958, with post-colonial struggles, anti-imperialist struggles and the ever increasing violence of the government under Sékou Touré (1958–1984), whose reign – and thereby the implementation of his socialist vision for Guinea as the experiment for a new independent and therefore truly free Africa – was not put on hold like in other countries with post-colonial socialist aspirations such as Ghana, Mali, Zaire or Tanzania. At the same time, Guinea shared the fate of many African countries where liberation movements turned into dictatorships in the post-independence era.

The 'socialist' debate in and about Guinea and across Africa has been intertwined with the post-colonial context as well as the quest for development through modernization. Each of these concepts carries a vast scope of ideological and historic interpretations that are intricately intertwined. Scholars grapple with this situation when, for example, trying to compare Eastern European countries with African countries, naming the former post-socialist and the latter

post-colonial (cf. Bondarenko et al. 2009). While this shorthand enables social scientists to look beyond geographical locations, such juxtapositions are challenging. Debates on (post-)colonialism usually focus on political power relations first and may regard economic relations in light of these. When discussing (post-)socialism, the focus is on an idealized economic system that, in the dominant neo-institutionalist understanding, has created path dependences. Thelen argues that as scholars of globally embedded phenomena we need to 'take otherness seriously and move beyond normative analyses primarily derived from economic perspectives' (Thelen 2011: 54). Thus, differences in ideology, institutional form and people's engagements with these result in such a heterogeneous landscape of interdependent yet also discrete processes that they can hardly be subsumed under comparative perspectives without losing much of their 'otherness'. Such simplifications undervalue multiple pasts, that is to say a colonial and socialist past that many countries or regions within countries have experienced and whose repercussions they are grappling with today. They risk blocking out specificities that shape the appropriation and interpretation of these larger ideological or political processes. They risk oversimplifying identities that are being made and remade in their shadows.

Students of West Africa have begun to call for a clearer differentiation of these political undertakings, even though according to an historical perspective they may not be separable (Højbjerg et al. 2013; McGovern 2017; Piot 2010; Schmidt 2007a). As with other countries undergoing socialist reform, Guinea adopted long-term agricultural and industrial development schemes, nationalized land and other production facilities, and centralized the administration of domestic and international trade. These were common strategies for newly independent African states entering socialist pathways. However different and diverse these paths would turn out to be, Pitcher and Askew identify five core characteristics of 'African Socialism' in its diversity: '(1) a language to promote the modernization and unification of emerging national states, (2) centralized control of economic resources, (3) consolidation and expansion of the state, (4) emphasis on revolutionary change, and (5) international bonds to the wider community of socialist/communist states' (Pitcher and Askew 2006: 7). Such a general list already reflects the difficulty faced by social sciences in grappling with the challenge of performing an in-depth case analysis and revealing comparative aspects. As for Guinea, the public services remained centralized and limited due to budgetary and personnel limitations, just as they had been under French colonial rule. The state's main income was and continues to be generated by extractive industries which had started under the French administration and continued to expand after independence in cooperation with multinational mining conglomerates. While European and Asian socialist states would have frowned upon this practice, it can be understood as a necessary move to evade French economic and political suppressive strategies against its former colony that began directly

after Guinea's declaration of independence in 1958. Throughout the rule of the first president, Sékou Touré, Guinea remained unaligned and often switched collaboration partners between socialist/communist, neutral and the Western bloc. Sometimes these moves were motivated by fear of foreign domination in one area, sometimes they were born out of the increasing paranoia of the leadership that felt threatened by internal coups and external attempts to destabilize the regime. According to Pitcher and Askew's list, Guinea did not fulfil demands 3 and 5 but held on to its economic control of major, albeit limited, industry.

On Pitcher and Askew's check-list, Guinea would have fared better on the points of modernization and unifying language as well as revolutionary change. The post-independence project of 'demystification', which ran predominantly between 1960 and 1962 and had at its core the systematic exposure and destruction of initiation societies' secret shrines, masks and other artefacts in order to bring their former adherents into the national fold, has been interpreted as a manifestation of these three concepts. The term demystification was taken from the writings of chief ideologist and new president Sékou Touré, who called people's adherence to these politico-spiritual practices 'mystification' and saw the need to liberate his people from such exploitation. On an institutional level, schools were nationalized, teachers, public servants and religious leaders charged with voicing only sanctioned opinions. This was just as much part of the modernization of the Guinean population as was its forced unification under Islam – which was deemed more civilized than other local religions not just in the French colonial heritage but also by those Muslim population majorities of ethnic Susu, Peul and Malinké origin. Minority ethnic groups which can be found throughout the whole country but have their centres in the Eastern forest region (Engeler 2016; Rivière 1978; Højbjerg 2007; McGovern 2013; Straker 2009) and the Northern coast (Lamp 1996; Sarró 2009), fulfilled the niche of the 'internal other' (Goerg 2011), with a prevalence of those 'mystic' societal elements that needed to be overcome by the revolution and a comparatively strong Christian church membership as opposed to the majority Muslim beliefs of the larger ethnic groups. These groups had already been made the object of European civilizing missions during the (pre-)colonial period. Trouillot points out that in the context of nation-building, such groups provide an inherited and inherent 'savage slot' (2002) that others could identify and unite against in order to reference their own superiority, modernity and civilization. While such processes take place on a national, continental and global level, they are also relevant to contemporary identity politics on local levels, as will be debated here.

Scott argues that a central part of effective state interventions is 'legibility' which in turn requires visible units or categories (1998: 183). The demystification programme provided the state with such pervasive powers that these units were created. People's lives, previously organized in many different contrasting, opposing and decentralized ways, became more legible to the centralized state.

Such units might borrow from already established social formations; they might also congeal formerly fluid and flexible social entities. These units would sometimes outlast this specific time period and ensure the lasting cohesion that was built into Guinean society during this violent and oppressive period. However, the Guinean socialist state did not go to the length of identifying and then abolishing peoples and ethnic groups, as happened in the Soviet Union. Here, scientific insights and census information were used to track ethnic groups that were to merge into the new national units under socialist-evolutionist pressures (Hirsch 2005).

The demystification movement was at the same time interpreted as a post-colonial liberation from local structures that colonial powers had abused during their direct rule in the form of chieftaincy and gerontocratic relations (McGovern 2013; Sarró 2009). Both these aims were deemed necessary precursors to the socialist vision that the Guinean governing elite proposed and that linked the young country with other liberation movements across the region and the globe and to a vision of a unified and free African continent. Pan-Africanism was a cornerstone of the independence movement and remained a major component of official state ideology beyond the frustrations of Cold War battles that would follow. Guinea's national anthem reflects this aspiration to date.[1] Comparative perspectives with other socialist endeavours in Tanzania, Mozambique, Benin and Mali highlight the different extents to which governments were ready to push for a nation, for anti-imperial independence and at the same time envision an integration into a new overarching entity such as that proposed by Pan-Africanism.

Following the proposed list of Pitcher and Askew, it is really the fourth point, the revolutionary aspirations, that marked Guinea, since both the leaders and the population of the country had no illusions about the challenges on the road ahead. However, different waves and initiatives of change, revolution and mobilization ensured the perpetual popular engagement with the socialist regime. Both socialist doctrine and post-colonial anti-imperialism oriented the new citizens towards a better future that they would help to create – not only for themselves and their descendants but as model citizens for their neighbours and those peoples forced to live under imperialist exploitation. Such a vision also allowed leaders to re-shape the past and make new sense of the present in order to fit into this larger-than-life narrative of the envisioned future. Such ordering brought clarity, coherence and causality to an otherwise turbulent present that was marked by economic insecurities, socio-political changes and cultural reform. Becoming a better, modern, socialist citizen and not being deterred by the mundane hardships of everyday life became a vital part of public discourse that pervaded all aspects of rural and urban life. It became such a powerful part of Guineans' national identity that it outlasted the Touré regime and the rule of his successor President Condé, and is still vital today.

While these three elements – post-socialism, post-colonialism and the introduction of neo-liberalist ideology – need to be analysed separately, they are irrevocably intertwined in the memories of the people who lived through that period, which was so clearly marked by the reign of Sékou Touré. Institutionally, it actually carried over to the so-called Second Republic, as the period of rule of President Lansana Conté is commonly known. For Guinea, regime change cannot therefore be linked to the end of the Warsaw Pact and the crumbling of the so-called Eastern bloc. The end of Guinea's socialist experiment started earlier and ended later.

The ideology and the state practices of modernization also revealed many aspirational aspects. The future was painted in radiant colours: whether in terms of political, socio-cultural or economic development, modernization intended to improve lives and prepare the way for a great future. Mirroring Piot's ingenious title, *Nostalgia for the Future* (2010), several scholars of the Guinean socialist period discuss the relicts of this aspirational phase, when possibilities and public projects were safely enshrined in the shared project of creating a new and improved life and country for Guineans (cf. Goerg et al. 2010; Straker 2009; Engeler 2012). Aspirations and practices were certainly separate entities, but their shared goals supported the unification project for a diverse population.

The aspirations of the young country appealed to many individuals who shared them, such as Miriam Makeba, Stokely Carmichael and Kwame Nkrumah, who were amongst the more famous individuals, and also amongst those who received shelter there when their respective countries of origin or residence failed to provide it.

Guinea's Regime Changes

While the debate on socialism and post-socialism has focused on Europe and Asia, the thirty-five African countries that called themselves socialist at one time have so far elicited little academic attention. Noteworthy exceptions are studies of Tanzania, Benin, Togo, Zambia, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Angola on this topic. Given this sparse background of literature, comparisons are often drawn between European and Asian texts and specific African case studies. This in fact parallels the main axes of international socialist influences before the 1990s, when either the Soviet Union, China or the 'Non-Aligned Movement' served as ideological reference points, financial donors or military partners. In Guinea's case, all these axes were relevant at different points in time under the governments of Sékou Touré (1958–1984) and Lansana Conté (1984–2008).

> Just as during the Cold War when students of socialism either doubted
> or ignored the commitment to socialism in African countries, similarly,
> most theorists of postsocialism overlook the persistence of historical

memories, the symbolic and discursive continuities, and the institutional ruptures and restorations in those African countries that once embraced socialism and have now relinquished it in favour of neo-liberal reforms. (Pitcher and Askew 2006: 2)

Today, there are more studies on what happened after this phase, such as Katherine Verdery's *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (1996), which battle with this debate and in some cases helped to create a body of literature known as 'Transitologies'. They often described an assumed shared departure point for these Eastern European and Asian states, societies and economies and emphasized the changes that occurred, often reflecting the aspirations for a better future. Transitions were seen as temporary states in which improvisation and short-term fixes dominated, all in the expectation of a better future situation. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that many Eastern European and Central Asian countries went through violent changes, with these changes not resulting in a better future but in a constant state of improvision and short-term fixes, as Thelen points out (2011).

For Guinea, the post-socialist phase began before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain. The death of Sékou Touré in 1984 led to a palace coup and brought in a new kind of political leadership from the ranks of the mid-level military under Lansana Conté's leadership who would run the country till his death in 2008. Slowly, he opened up the country to international financial institutions, market capitalism and political liberalism. A multi-party system was launched in 1990 that saw the first presidential elections in 1993 and legislative elections in 1995 (cf. Soumah 2004, 2006).

Little has been written about the first years of Conté's rule. Following oral accounts of the period, and with contemporary hindsight, I argue that during the later years of the Conté regime a double process of thawing began: the authoritarian socialist period and the authoritarian colonial period could now be engaged with; and individual and collective memories could be rewritten under the ideological freedom (or lack of general vision for the nation's future) that characterized the Conté regime, with its lack of national-building efforts and its neo-liberal economy that quickly enabled the establishment of a national elite that removed itself more and more quickly from the reach of the average Guinean by amassing riches based on mineral exports.

As Arieff and McGovern show (2013), the absence of a national project did not mean that in times of crisis the government could not tap into the authoritarian legacies of its predecessors. When skirmishes along the Sierra Leonean and Liberian borders of Guinea turned into fully-fledged attacks during the regional civil wars (mainly 2000–2001), Conté mobilized the population for self-defence in much the same way as Touré mobilized the masses against (supposed or actual) foreign invasions. In the absence of a new, all-encompassing political

ideology, Guineans could fall back on those they had known, experienced and suffered under in previous decades.

Added to this contemporary thawing of public space to address the colonial and socialist past, another level of slow socio-political change is happening, which is the challenge of authoritarianism. While both French colonialism and Touré's socialist regime were characterized by top-down authoritarian rule, the rule of Conté and that of President Condé (elected in 2010) have brought about qualitative changes in the way in which state and society engage with each other. These are not easily covered by the analytical debates that post-socialism or post-colonialism engender. This third process is more complex and cannot be lumped under neo-liberal economic reform or participatory democratization. Since these ideas have been put into practice in Guinea, people have become aware of the violence and injustice that they engender. Hence, I argue that another wave of demystification (a process of post-independence religious and social campaigns to lead rural populations into socialist modernity) is happening: the demystification of democracy and its violent dividend in the forms of corruption, nepotism, arbitrary political and administrative choices, suppression of opposition forces are commonly referred to in Guinea as 'libertinage' (Faye 2007; Soumah 2006). While libertinage covers the abuse of public funds by government, elected officials and powerful private individuals, the term does not cover all abuses. As stated by Le Meur, elders and government officials were entitled to 'their share' of profits as long as this share remained proportional and could be controlled by the 'moral community' in which these individuals were embedded (Le Meur 2006). Ferguson referred to such phenomena as 'demoralised economy' under the guise of a neo-liberal economic vocabulary (1990). The over-extension of the accepted share, however, is a delicate issue. Locally, people would refer to this practice as 'eating with both hands'. From the late 1990s onwards, this practice came to characterize the Conté regime, during which the moral community crumbled.

In Guinea, the reckoning with the colonialism, socialism and authoritarianism of the past has only just begun – and has even been complexified by the destabilising effect of the lack of a national project. The post-independence socialism had brought about a clear-cut national project, collective identity and economy. This governing system remained in existence during the ensuing Conté era which did not provide an alternative but did not capitalize on the existing national project either. Guineans in many difficult and dangerous situations, that shall be explored in the following chapters, had recourse to these models that they invoked from collective memories. While creating a sense of national cohesion for a certain period, it appears to have weakened over time. Since the early 2000s, political mobilization along ethnic lines has become more virulent, and public conflicts amongst beleaguered elites, systemic clientelism and the absence of a new national project have weakened the collective Guinean narrative.

Since the 2000s, there has been a dilemma amongst the students of Guinea with regard to how to describe appropriately a country that so often seemed on the verge of implosion due to military chaos and potential violent ethnic conflict or that has been destabilized by the whirlwind of neighbouring wars and waves of refugees. Attempts to explain the surprising stability of the Guinean state beneath the crumbling government facade have been particularly pressing in light of the Ebola outbreak and the response to it, which unfolded in a different way in Guinea compared to its neighbours (McGovern 2017; Schroven 2014). Unrest and stability appear to be continually created and challenged – and sometimes even simultaneously. This phenomenon reveals the diversity of the country but also the heterogeneity of the powers that be.

Collective Challenges

While Guinea ranks low on indices like the UNDP's Human Development Index (ranked 183 in 2016), its GDP is growing due to extractive industries, especially iron ore and bauxite – which the population does not really benefit from. In recent decades, Guinea has been repeatedly identified as an unstable country, slipping down a dangerous slope towards civil war, as some of its neighbours have done in the 1990s. Remarkably, this has not happened, despite repeated threats through mass refugee influxes in the 1990s, a coup d'état in 2008, re-occurring national strikes that are often violently suppressed, and a government that despite formal changes has not improved how it rules the country or the living standards of the majority of the population.

Guinea is a multi-ethnic country, with three predominant ethnic groups – Malinké, Peul and Susu[2] – which are the most numerous in each of three so-called 'natural regions', respectively: Haute-Guinée, Moyenne-Guinée or Futa Jalon (central highlands), and Guinée Maritime or Basse Côte (Lower Coast). In addition to these groups, many smaller ethnic groups exist, some of which (Guerzé, Kissi, Toma, amongst others) are commonly grouped together as 'Forestières', referring to the fourth of the country's 'natural regions': Guinée Forestière, also called 'Forêt' in Guinea. In Guinea, the awareness of potential ethnic tensions is high. The vocabulary of 'natural regions' circumvents highly controversial issues such as assigning home territories to ethnic groups or implementing a policy of ethnic parity in public service. According to official numbers, twenty-five ethnic groups and around the same number of languages exist in Guinea, some of which are communities that cross borders into neighbouring countries. It is, however, important to note that the Malinké, Susu and Peul comprise about 80 per cent of the population. The numbers in population statistics vary and are particularly contested in Guinea with the expectation that political power should or could be partitioned according to ethnic proportions. The comparatively young 'Ministry of Human Rights and Public Liberties' reflects the political awareness of these tensions.

Figure 0.1 Sticker at the Ministry of Human Rights and Public Liberties, Conakry (photo: A. Schroven).

The ministry, which has been renamed a couple of times during the course of its brief existence, tries to promote civil-military discourse, peaceful conflict resolution as well as an overarching national identity.

Despite the fact that the three most numerous ethnic groups dominate these three regions, Haute Guinée, Basse Côte and Moyenne Guinée, all of the regions are ethnically heterogeneous due to long-term and recent migration processes. Over the centuries, conquest and trade relations have propelled diverse migration movements, such as movements towards the coast for trade with Europeans or for plantation labour in colonial times. Urbanization is a growing phenomenon in Guinea, sweeping large amounts of youth towards larger cities. The aspiration for a better future leads many to Conakry, the sprawling capital that started at the tip of the Kaloum Peninsula and is now encroaching on the mainland coastline. Just as in many other countries of the region, the countryside is emptying out and the roads of the capital city have become filled with petty traders and hopeful youth from all regions and ethnic groups, trying to make a better life. So Conakry has become a rapidly growing city of 2–4 million inhabitants in a country of 12–14 million people, depending on the sources used. Just above 60 per cent of Guinean citizens are estimated to be under the age of twenty-five. In the wider West African context, this figure is not remarkable. It must be kept in mind though that many of these young people will grow up to be older than twenty-five but remain in what is called the 'social youth' category. They will not be able to live independently from 'social

adults' but will remain heavily reliant on extended family resources and friends to make ends meet.

Ethnic identity continues to serve as a group marker and also as a means of interacting with other groups of people. References to historic intermarriages may rhetorically alleviate tensions between members of different ethnic groups, tensions that mirror nationwide stereotypes that these groups have of each other. Other well-known ways of bridging these tensions are joking relationships, referred to in the greater Mande complex as *sanakouya*. These standardized discourses on ethnic stereotypes channel tensions caused by class differences or family obligations that are linked to the regional phenomenon of landlord-stranger relations, which ties together so-called founding families of particular localities with more recent migrants. In the following chapters, different group identities will be discussed which facilitate integration processes between ethnic groups and which enable both differentiation and the channelling of conflict.

In some regions, ethnic identity is strongly interlinked with religion. Guinea is predominantly Muslim, with a minority of about 10 per cent practising Christianity or other faiths. While estimates vary on the monotheistic religions, practitioners often combine them with so-called 'traditional beliefs' that appear only marginally in the official statistics. The introduction of Islam and its different manifestations is closely tied to particular migration movements and to the prevalent foundation myths of many contemporary cities and towns in the wider region. Over time, this led to the creation of a new collective identity known as *Morianais*, the people of the region of Moria, in which the main fieldsite for this empirical study lies. This category of identification remains vital today and can be seen as competing, overarching or mediating among the different ethnic, national and religious identities at play at any given moment.

It is in the self-proclaimed and ever-maintained margins of a state that such a regional level of identification can survive and thrive despite the efforts of ethnic entrepreneurs and state policies who push for the national integration of all citizens. As Ferguson (1990, 2006) and others (Bierschenk 1999; Boone 2003; Glenzer 2005; Lund 2006) have argued, the relations between centre and margin have never been clearly hierarchical, as power is invested differently in different places, and actors continuously transgress supposed hierarchies, resulting in a horizontal rather than vertical arrangement of power, which undermines the supposed centre-periphery paradigm. The term centre does not thus imply a geographical node but one that is imbued with certain types of power. As a consequence, the centre's counterpart, whether it is referred to as peripheral or marginal, cannot be an absolute reference to a geographical location or permanent dependency in a fixed hierarchical system, but signifies a changing relationship vis-à-vis the centre. Various processes of marginalization, in the sense of exclusion or denial of access to rights or resources, may indeed be taking place, as the centre, or the state in Ferguson's argument, can make reference to spatial

claims and supposedly superior and therefore more legitimate sources of power. Nevertheless, neither the geographical locality nor the political influences of, for example, the established local elite deserve to be strictly labelled as marginal. Centre-margin perspectives are vital in terms of positioning oneself in relationship to another. These positions can then be used as the basis for negotiating future power relations. In the process of these negotiations perceptions of marginality may be re-evaluated or reaffirmed. The local discourse is partly founded on the local Morianais political identity, constructed on the basis of a historical foundation myth and historical notions of landscape. It is complemented by a situational perception of this local identity as marginal. This perspective allows for a strategically chosen self-marginalization, motivated by memories of and discourses on the past and the contemporary experiences that form the discursive prism. History and socially inscribed landscapes are central resources used in the creation of both local identity and its representation as marginal.

Oral Tradition and Power

Oral tradition is particularly effective in smoothing out and 'correcting' diverging memories of the past, just as it reflects the intentions and efforts invested in the process of forging divergent memories into continuity. Oral tradition enables claims to be made regarding the present and future on the basis of a seemingly consistent and continuous history that grants justification and authority. This perspective reflects a very constructivist approach while being restricted to a functional attitude towards the motivations and effects of the phenomenon of oral tradition. I argue that there is more to it than that: referencing history reveals the efforts made toward linking today's people to the wider context of ideological, religious, economic and political processes in the region and the wider world while also allowing for the creative construction of identities over time, and firmly rooting these identities in the locale.

As local history is presented in terms of a greater scope of continuity, questions of agency and hegemony have to be posed: 'The language of continuity . . . assumes that all changes can be seen, discussed and analyzed as aspects of deeper continuities. In other words, the language assumes that every change, however enormous, is only a special case of continuity' (Nandy 1987: 118). Nandy links historic representation to questions of hegemony, of who can intervene and potentially redirect the ways in which past events are discussed and situated in the previously established, wider historical discourse.

As communication is based on the interplay between speaker and addressee, the agencies of all actors should be emphasized just as structural restrictions are introduced: while all of the actors do know 'the game', they cannot easily break out of it to resist the dominant scheme. Oral traditions and oratory culture in Guinea have been examined in various contexts (see Camara 1992; Osborn 2011; Sarró 2000). These studies focused on local meanings of history and identity

without necessarily including larger issues of governance. Other studies have concentrated on the official and public discourses of government documents or presidential speeches and their reception and appreciation by the population at large (see Barry 2002; Camara 1996; Camara 2004).

This perspective is vital to the investigation of how people integrate supra-local events into different local discourses. The way in which local boundaries are drawn vis-à-vis local minorities and the external world, the national capital and neighbouring countries, and the way in which local relations are presented and lived in everyday life will therefore be investigated against the background of this oral tradition.

The establishment and maintenance of boundaries between oneself and the outside world or a local 'other' through oral tradition is highly relevant in the establishment of a group's identity and the self-legitimation of its political position (Barth 2000), as will be explored with regard to the perpetuation of the rural elite's political privileges.

Fieldwork in Times of Upheaval

My interest in self-ascribed marginality came about in a very different way when I accompanied the older girls of my Forécariah hosts to the market and thought to stop and drink something on the way. My companions quickly rushed me on to the market and hinted that it was the 'lazy and unemployed' who were sitting around. No respectable person would sit down with those people; they lacked
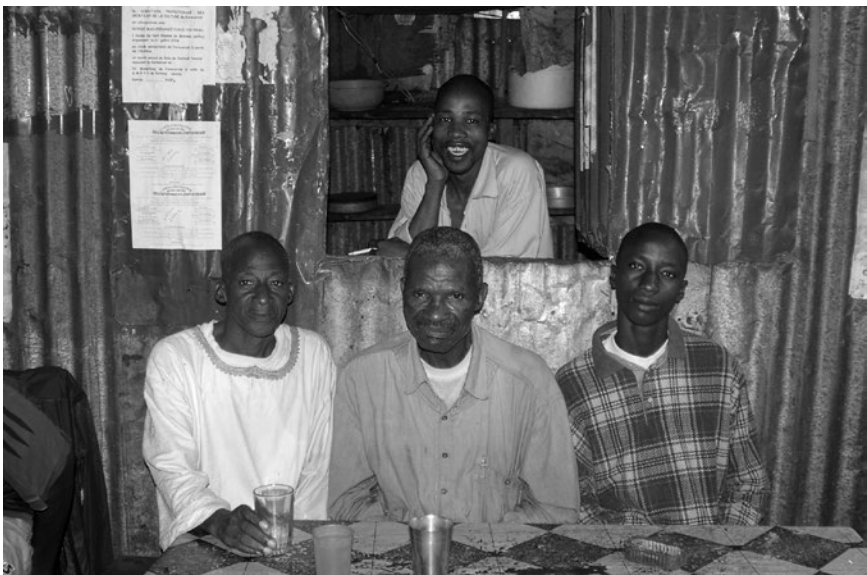

Figure 0.2 Tea parlour in the early morning (photo: A. Schroven).

self-respect and propriety. After getting to know the town better, I could see that there was more to the comment than merely cautious remarks by parents who were trying to keep their daughters away from these tea bars.

As one might have expected, these supposedly sidelined people were not members of the town's founding family. They mostly worked in public services or small businesses and spent their time sipping *attaya*, strong green tea with a lot of sugar. I started to frequent one of these bars.

My presence would be quietly acknowledged by the fact that only French and Susu, the two dominant languages in town, were spoken by the usual clients, and in some instances newcomers were asked to speak either Peul or Malinké instead, which many of the men understood as well. Aside from being a rare *foté fixe* ['white stranger', in Susu] in town at that time, I was the only female patron of the tea bar. After weeks of sipping dizziness-inducing sugary tea, I gained the impression that my presence was not only accepted but sometimes expected to discuss daily events and have specific arguments which I was to be a witness to. My presence was sometimes used to expand and expound debates so as to teach the newcomer the ways of the locality, the political dynamics and the grievances that these brought about. Such situations created challenges for my research and some aspects of its methodology. Participant observation is a key element of ethnographic fieldwork. However, researching politically charged issues in a semi-public environment like a café, a family gathering or indeed public encounters in administrative meetings or court proceedings posed challenges. How free were we to discuss particular issues, how much was spoken aloud for my benefit, how much omitted due to my presence? While I used follow-up interviews to sound out the latter aspects, it was the former that presented me with most ethical concerns. The evolution of specific situations – some of which will be presented in later chapters – was not in my hands, nor could I openly intervene when I felt someone was exposing their views too blatantly in a public setting, explaining details or backgrounds for my benefit. In an authoritarian setting, such as Guinea had been for decades after independence, interlocutors needed to be careful with their wording when in public, but at the same time they could draw upon their rhetorical mastery to use my presence to express 'various opinions'. Anyone familiar with West African small towns and conversations will know that nearly all activity in such a place is at least semi-public. People pass by, listen in and sometimes intervene. These somewhat precarious situations can only proceed in a context of shared responsibility and respect for each other.

With regard to more intimate matters such as illicit activities, violence, love, sexuality or personal power negotiations in a household or family, I decided to use more caution and anonymity to protect those individuals who shared such sensitive subjects with me. When I introduce an individual's experiences I shall therefore refrain from using real names.

However much anthropologists try to insert themselves into the field, become part of the local setting, observe local lore, respect customs and become reliable interlocutors, differences remain. The general economic privilege of originating from Northern Atlantic societies is ever-present. In my context, it needed to be repeatedly negotiated as part of the perpetual effort of becoming – albeit mostly temporarily – part of local life, of family, of a circle of friends. Whether it was to assist a person in a medical emergency, or balancing out household economics at moments of spiking inflation, financial responsibilities came with social contacts. These countered my status as a 'young woman'. While my hosts afforded some social contexts about me to my local counterparts, my status as a researcher was translated to being a student. This resonated especially with older people who experienced the yearly influx of social science students from Conakry university in the 1970s, who came to conduct research for their theses. Their collective socialist-inspired mission was to write an imperialistically uninhibited historic and sociological account of the young country. As a young, tall woman, I gained access to certain social circles; as a student I could gain access to others. Generally speaking, as a young female I appeared unobtrusive and non-provocative – which helped to open a lot of doors.

Such perpetual negotiations are also reflected in the contextualized power struggles that occurred during fieldwork. While certain privileges were mine, socially speaking I was a minor and had to learn the language, local idioms, how to conduct myself correctly. My hosts, interview partners, generally my interlocutors held the answers to my queries and sometimes came up with more relevant questions in their interactions with me. These situations highlight the relational context of empirical research and render the 'field' into a complex web of relationships that span across place and with some luck also across time. Thanks to advancements in communication technologies I could message and call, with increasingly high quality, my main interlocutors over the years, following their families, their joys and their struggles from a distance. This eased the re-entrance into the physical field years later.

One of my main interlocutors explained: 'When people are fighting with you, then you know you have really arrived'. Controversial debates were an important step towards breaking up the rather homogenous and harmonious picture of the past and present that the landlords were painting in their recitals of history and family relations. These debates proved useful as a counter-point and provided opportunities to see this elite's practices of marginalizing the tea-bar clientele as well as their strategies of self-marginalization towards the outside – an entity that was often left vague or totally undefined. Thus, marginality as a phenomenon of ordering social relationships and establishing hierarchies quickly became a central question of this book, which inevitably links to questions of integration and conflict. These were and are perpetual dynamics between different social groups in the region that are sometimes bounded by

religious, sometimes by family or ethnic, and sometimes by regional or national identities.

This chosen field had seemed bounded at first sight by the town of Forécariah and its network of formerly dependent villages as well as close ties to the country capital. It quickly became clear that the field was not geographically limited by the fact that national and international discourses penetrated or were drawn into it, just as Forécariah and its inhabitants participated in and were drawn into events beyond the locality itself. The rhetorical field also integrated debates on national politics, global economics and questions of justice and equity. There was a high level of awareness of West African, European and American politics based on radio programmes that were perpetually discussed, sometimes as tropes for local events, sometimes with reference to a global citizenship that some interlocutors claimed for themselves – an aspect that will be explored in later chapters.

During my initial fieldwork in 2006–2007, four national strikes of different intensity, death tolls and relevance took place. The atmosphere in Guinea in general changed throughout this time from extreme anxiety, to shock, to enthusiastic hope for changes in political and economic living conditions. Discussions and some formal interviews took place in less than private settings. Particularly after the violent suppression of the February 2007 strikes and the ensuing negotiations about potential changes in the country's government, people discussed what kind of change they envisioned. Statements like 'Il n'y a pas de retour!' [There is no return!] could be widely heard. Some of my interlocutors, however, remained cautious and insinuated that this phase might not last long, hinting at moments in the recent past when change in general and liberalization in particular had been promised without rendering people's lives freer or more prosperous.

Important events in the following years proved them right – to some extent. With the death of Lansana Conté in December 2008 and the ensuing palace coup, the military character of Guinea's government came to light more clearly (Handy and Souare 2009; Picard and Moudoud 2010). While the international public watched President Dadis Camara's televised humiliation of former Condé family members and associates, my commentators in Forécariah briefly voiced hopes that the new government would fight corruption and hold long-overdue legislative and presidential elections. In the course of the last decade, Forécariah briefly made international news due to a military camp for President Dadis Camara's militias just outside Kaliah. The rumoured presence of the so-called 'ethnic militias' made up of ethnic Kpelle – Camara's ethnic group – recruits from Guinea's Forest Region sparked fears amongst the local population who recalled the attacks in 2000 from Sierra Leone that had targetted both the refugee camps and the local population and resulted in a long-term militarization of the country's border area.

The violent crushing of an opposition demonstration on 28 September 2009 came to be known as 'Bloody Monday' and put an end to those hopes. Political

Figure 0.3 Freshly painted mural on the walls of the military barrack *Camp Almamy Samoury Touré* in Conakry (photo: A. Schroven).

turmoil continued even after President Camara was shot in December 2009. The following Interim President General Konaté and a transitional government organized presidential elections in late 2010. This transition from President Conté's twenty-four years' rule to that of the current President Condé was not a smooth one (Bangoura 2015), just as the previous transition from Touré to Conté had not been (Soumah 2004). However, these transitions are already being re-imagined in popular images, just as Nandy suggested, to create a somewhat smoother transition.

This mural depicts (left to right) presidents Conté, Konaté and Condé, omitting Dadis Camara from the line of succession. While Konaté, also known under his battle name *el tigre*, is described as a visionary, Condé received the attribute of fighter, referencing his long-term opposition work under previous presidents, one of whom – Lansana Conté – even incarcerated him for years.

The long-time opposition leader and newly-elected President Alpha Condé managed to consolidate Guinea's economy for a couple of years, gaining international respect for newly regulating the mining sector in order to increase the country's revenues. He also served as a successful negotiator in regional standoffs within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which earned him more international acclaim. Domestically, however, his star has been sinking. The promised economic gains from the mining reform did not stabilize and little trickled down to the general population. The repeated delaying of legislative elections until September 2013 and local elections until February 2018

has already disillusioned many Guineans' timid hopes for a so-called democracy dividend of socio-political stability and economic development.

The outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in the wider region in 2013–2016 economically devastated the fledgling middle class and brought the national economy to a standstill due to the downscaling of mining activities that are the backbone of the country's economy and had also become a significant part of Moria's economy since 2010. During my 2017 stay there, the economic downturn was locally visible, with a whole neighbourhood of half-constructed, empty residential buildings crumbling under the onslaught of the rainy seasons and suffering from the lack of new investments. In 2015, Forécariah again made headlines due to the so-called 'resistance' of its population to epidemiological interventions against the local outbreak of Ebola. This continued the outbreak experience in this prefecture, where in 2012–2013 an unusually aggressive strain of the cholera virus killed more inhabitants than usually suffer from the annual 'cholera season' in the wider region (Rebaudet et al. 2014; Reliefweb 2012). Both nationally and internationally, the supposedly backward and reticent character of the local population seemed to be affirmed by the lack of cooperation with the epidemiological and hygiene measures deemed necessary by global health authorities in Geneva and New York. These health emergencies also underlined the negative reputation of Moria within Guinea. National news outlets reported on the army's intervention to extract suspected Ebola victims from their families' care and move them to treatment units in more central locations. The army was again called in when an Ebola vaccine trial began in 2016, which targetted the families and communities of confirmed Ebola victims. News items on the 'unreasonable reticence' of the Morianais who do not want to bow to authority or reason turned them again into a domestic 'other' and a threat to national security. Force was seen as a legitimate instrument to curb the infection and serve the greater good. This ignored the longstanding experiences with the army, the central government and the meaning of border-dwelling that these communities share (Faye 2015; Fribault 2015; Migliani et al. 2016).

The following chapters provide an insight into how the area's reputation could develop and how sometimes it is in the interest of these populations to uphold such stereotypes of backwardness or reticence by manifesting notions of marginality themselves. What they gain from this are aspects of autonomy, control and certain forms of liberties that will be explored in the text.

The Book

Many theoretical debates that have only been alluded to thus far will be deliberated in the following chapters. The historical background of the region under study will first be introduced in preparation for the exploration of identity games. These games may be based on very different understandings of identity,

such as historical context, ethnicity and profession. Despite such varied bases, they nevertheless encounter each other and intertwine and thereby contribute to a creative political game that holds different forms of incorporation into and distancing from the state (Feyissa 2011).

The next chapter will investigate oral tradition, using notions of landscape to highlight the relevance of history to contemporary perceptions of the self, identity and relationships with the outside, i.e. processes of integration into a wider and ever-shifting regional and national setting. How such ties have been manipulated in various ways, to bring Forécariah closer to and to distance it from its surroundings, is linked to people foregrounding one particular aspect of group identification over another. How they are referenced in local historical discourses and discussed throughout the local landscape will be discussed using examples of social space making.

Marginality, as To Almamy represents above, is often perceived as a negative term in that it is usually constructed in contrast to a centre, whether this involves geographical, economic, social or other qualities that the centre is imbued with and which 'the marginal' does not share in. Thus, connotations of periphery, borders, limited access to resources and other kinds of indigence are interlinked in the self-portrayal of marginality. How and in what light marginality is perceived and constructed in Forécariah as part of the local political identity is the second subject of this chapter. If being Morianais cannot be regarded as an ethnic identity, it is a local political identity constructed through concepts of history, landscape and marginality.

Many analysts use the term periphery, following models of core and periphery put forth by Wallerstein (1974), among others. It is strongly linked to the Marxist economic perspectives that inspired investigations into global systems and economic dependency models of development theory. In the present context, I use the term marginal as it permits greater conceptual flexibility, encompassing a wider scale of the qualities and processes in question.

The simultaneous phenomena of marginality and integration into the state are explored from various perspectives in six ethnographic chapters. These chapters introduce different protagonists from within the local arena and focus on various moments of conflict and integration in Forécariah and Guinea. Two chapters on 'identifications' introduce the history of the town's founding families. Rooted in eighteenth-century migration and conquest, the Touré family history has figured in the foreground of the development of the prominent version of oral tradition that guides a large part of everyday life in the area. Ethnicity and religion are intricately intertwined in the formation of a regional identity based on the pre-colonial principality of Moria.

Institutional changes are discussed with regard to their identitarian relations, with state reforms carried out in the local arena in the form of a democratic decentralization programme. While these pose threats to established actors, they

present opportunities to descendants of (pre-)colonial chiefs, questioning the practical implications of participatory democracy in Guinea's decentralization project. Elders who become councillors and experts in workshop terminology have questioned the meaning of participation. The chapter on 'Mixing and Mingling: New Politics, Old Structures?' explores these various actors' nego-tiations of old and new notions of legitimate rule. Differing interpretations of legitimate decision-making processes lead to shifts in the local arena and enlarge the definition of what it means to be a politician, thereby blurring previously established boundaries between elders, government representatives and NGO staff. The use of oral tradition in debates on legitimacy issues shows how actors strive to construct historical continuities in the context of the state's attempt to further integrate the countryside and expand its presence.

This theme continues into the next sections of the book. 'Bargaining with an Ailing State' focuses on local activities during national strikes in 2006 and 2007, when the central government under the leadership of a dying president became selectively unresponsive and at the same time more and more violent towards the general population. These desperately optimistic events set the stage for new versions of performances of politics that challenged local ideas of the state that had been inspired by the post-independence socialist regime. The chapter focuses on public servants' negotiations about whether or not they are part of the Guinean state apparatus, or form part of the nation that is demanding changes in the way the state is run. The following chapter, 'Citizenship at the Margins' discusses the people's performance of a future idealized state through aspects of citizenship, using the examples of taxation or meetings addressing young people as political actors. These events, moving beyond national strikes, reveal these different groups' histories within the Guinean state and their desire for change. They also show how different historic references can be used to negate the claims of the current state and make demands – as citizens of a better, an idealized future state.

Most of the events described in these two chapters took place as people expected substantial change at the national level and reflected on the history of the country and state. Performances of state and of citizenship are therefore part of a broader process of the people's integration into the larger state project in Guinea, leaving behind their previous self-positioning as marginal. The stages in which these performances take place, moreover, indicate their firm rootedness in the social landscape of Forácariah and their basis in oral tradition. The events reported in this chapter highlight how people can use citizenship against the state, mirroring back the state-sanctioned discourses of rights and responsibilities as well as historical rootedness to demand fundamental change – a demand that comes from the margins but targets the centre of power.

Some topics cut across the different chapters. They include debates on local, bottom-up development as opposed to central decision-making, taxation as

the responsibility of citizens, and the authority of actors in their particular institutional and normative settings. These topics reappear in different sections, highlighting how pertinent they are for the people of Guinea.

Taken together, these elements highlight the multifaceted nature of the overarching theme of marginality, both as a self-chosen reference for a regional identity and as a means of integration into larger political bodies. Local elites negotiate the boundaries of collective identities, of the state and local arenas, and ultimately how they employ notions of marginality in the face of perpetual processes of state integration, at a location that at first sight does not seem at all to be an 'out-of-the-way place' (Lowenhaupt Tsing 1993).

Most of the topics presented here are not exclusive to the Basse Côte of Guinea. There are topoi shared with the wider West African region. There are challenges of the post-independence statehood that has been crumbling across Africa for the last decades. There are debates of socialism, developmentalism, geo-political dependencies and the meaning of the past that used to hold a better future, that are shared in many places across the globe. Memories of a more optimistic and more painful past may bring people in Guinea and beyond to make sense of their daily lives and manage contemporary perturbations, emergencies and an outlook into the future that currently appears less than hopeful than those times that are now described as the past.

Throughout the book, some descriptions of empirical details enliven the complexities of people's realities between the forces of economic perturbations, political insecurity, authoritarianism or military interventions. They hint at the force of everyday life and sociability that make communities and enable families to survive challenging times. They also hint at the complexities of each individual life that is shaped by, but not limited to, the grand events that are usually called history. Such complex intersections deserve attention, since life worlds are being made and perpetually re-made exactly there.

Notes

1. The original Guinean hymn in French: 'Peuple d'Afrique, Le Passé historique! / Que chante l'hymne de la Guinée fière et jeune / Illustre épopée de nos frères / Morts au champ d'honneur en libérant l'Afrique! / Le peuple de Guinée prêchant l'unité / Appelle l'Afrique. / Liberté! C'est la voix d'un peuple / Qui appelle tous ses frères de la grande Afrique. / Liberté! C'est la voix d'un peuple / Qui appelle tous ses frères à se retrouver. / Bâtissons l'unité africaine dans l'indépendance retrouvée.' An English translation: 'People of Africa! The historic past! / Sing the hymn of a Guinea proud and young / Illustrious epic of our brothers / Who died on the field of honour while liberating Africa! / The people of Guinea, preaching Unity / Call to Africa. / Liberty! The voice of a people / Who call all her brothers of a great Africa. / Liberty! The voice of a people / Who call all her brothers to find their way again. / Let us build African Unity in a newly found independence.'
2. Peul is the regional name for the group that in English is often called Fulbe or Fullah. As members of this Guinean ethnic group refer to themselves as Peul, I will do so as well.