

## Navigating Terrains of War

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*Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau*  
By Henrik Vigh

# NAVIGATING TERRAINS OF WAR

Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau

*Henrik Vigh*



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For I.E. Vigh



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# **PART I**

## **INTRODUCTION**



# MBULI THE VICTORIOUS

## THE MICRO-HISTORY OF AN AGUENTA

*As Brigadier Asumané Mané lost his life, Mbuli regained his social status. In his uniform, leaning against the small wall surrounding Nti's house, he was aglow with pride. Almost boastful in posture, his bearing symbolised the transformation from despondent loser to astute, triumphant young man. Mbuli was answering questions about what had really happened during the last few weeks of fighting and political uncertainty: who was allied with whom, how such and such person had fared and, not least, what had happened to the ex-Brigadier.*

*When I first met Mbuli he was sitting in the yard, behind his uncle's house, drinking palm wine with friends. It had been late in the morning and yet Mbuli was already in such a state that I remember wanting to leave rather than hang around trying to extract data from the stream of drunken drivel. As the months passed things had not improved, and, after an incident involving Mbuli, too much alcohol, a gun and a taxi-driver, I had written him off as a safe, let alone useful, informant. That is, until I saw him here. Becoming victorious was a radical transformation, a complete metamorphosis of social being.*

This book is about urban youth caught in the conflict and turmoil of the small West African country of Guinea-Bissau.<sup>1</sup> Or, rather, it is about the Aguentas, a militia of young men recruited during the civil war from 1998 to 1999 and their attempt at securing a tolerable life for themselves within the difficult social and political situation in Guinea-Bissau. Contrary to most academic work on war or political

strife it is thus not about what in Creole is called *homi garandis*, big men, but rather about the 'small men' that do the actual fighting (see Bayart 1993, Peters and Richards 1998). It is about youth trying to survive and forge a future in the space of political quarrels and conflicts – a topic within which Mbuli constitutes an exceptionally good example.

Though the complex life of Mbuli cannot be reduced to type or generality, his way of creating a path through the movement of Guinean society is representative of the majority of my informants' attempts at steering their lives through the decline and conflict they found themselves part of. Thus, it is not Mbuli's complex life, which is representative of my other informants' lives but his attempts at navigating in and through Guinean society within the last couple of years of turmoil and conflict.

### **Mbuli as Aguenta**

Mbuli had left Bissau just prior to the start of war in 1998. As he got tired of hanging around waiting for opportunities that did not materialise because of economic decline and the meagreness of social possibilities, he left for Cacheu, hoping to be able to make a living through fishing.<sup>2</sup> Catching fish was, however, hard and tiresome work that generated little more than was needed to survive and so, as news of the war reached him, he packed up and went back to Bissau in June 1998, entering the city by crossing the front line of what was now a civil war between government forces and the Junta Militar. Mbuli first went home to see his family, but as the fighting flared up again he packed his things, went to the headquarters of the *Governo* forces and, preferring to fight for his *parente*, kinsman,<sup>3</sup> President Nino Vieira, he enrolled as a soldier in the government forces. In this manner Mbuli came to be an Aguenta, a militiaman on the government side of the war fighting to protect the democratically elected president.

The war went well for neither Mbuli nor the Aguentas. The misery he endured and the trauma of warfare, witnessing many of his friends and colleagues die on the battlefield and spending months on end at the front, turned out to be in vain as the *Governo* side lost the war on 7 May 1999. Mbuli, however, did not suffer the ultimate defeat personally as he was in Senegal at the time, being trained as a 'presidential escort'. Yet he returned to Bissau a loser and went and presented himself to the victorious Junta Militar, no longer as a proud combatant but as a scared Aguenta bereft of the power base that had granted him his short-lived status and prospects. Mbuli was questioned and sent home, not to hear from the Junta again, but to bear the brunt of an abun-

dance of abuse from the people in his neighbourhood, as the defeat transformed the Aguentas into legitimate targets for bantering and abuse in the aftermath of the war.

### *Post-war Problems and Possibilities*

This is when I first encountered Mbuli. Being without a job and not having the possibility of getting one – employment being difficult to find for youth in general and impossible for Aguentas – being called an array of foul names whenever he ventured outside the safe confines of his uncle's house and courtyard, and constantly nervous of being persecuted by the Junta soldiers, his life was, as he euphemistically phrased it, 'not sweet'.<sup>4</sup> And it seemed only to be getting worse as Mbuli, despite not having any money or an apparent income, was more or less constantly drunk and incoherent.

However, with the first post-war election and the inauguration of the new government of Kumba Yala things began to improve for Mbuli. First of all, Kumba Yala's electoral victory over the Junta Militar's candidate Malam Bacai Sanha was a symbolic victory as it showed that the Junta did not have popular backing – which as opposing entities in war was of importance to the Aguentas. Secondly, it entailed the Junta suffering a relative loss of control over the political scene in Guinea-Bissau. And, thirdly, and even more importantly, the specific constitution of Yala's government proved a stroke of good luck for Mbuli as it meant that he, via his uncle's network, suddenly acquired a contact with a high-ranking government official.<sup>5</sup> Yala's victory thus granted Mbuli a point of entry into a patrimonial network opening a space of possibility for him in relation to improving his life chances (Dahrendorf 1979). And this space of possibility was soon to be put to good use as his training as a presidential escort during the war combined with his patrimonial connection meant that he was able to secure himself a job as a guard for a newly appointed top politician. In other words, as the Junta were pushed further and further backstage within the political scenario in the country, Mbuli seemed to be finding his feet, gaining an income and a new perspective on his life and possibilities.

However, the Junta were not about to give their political control over the state apparatus away willingly and therefore sought to maintain a central, though withdrawn, position of power. Although Kumba Yala had won the presidential election by beating Malam Bacai Sanha, Asumané Mané had put himself in place as the country's *éminence grise*. Stepping down as Chief of Staff, leaving the position to General Veríssimo Correia Seabra, he established himself as a relatively detached co-president, claiming to function merely as a watchdog for democracy but in effect controlling both the military and the state apparatus from behind the scenes.

## Mbuli Remobilised

As Mbuli's life situation was getting better, the political situation of the country was thus rapidly deteriorating. Despite the victory of Kumba Yala, the country's army continued to make it clear that they intended to play a part in the country's politics. Furthermore, the new government of Mr Yala was making no political or social advances, seemingly being more interested in consumption than in reconstruction.<sup>6</sup> Bissau was going from bad to worse, with the water supply being weekly at best, electricity all but non-existent and the price of rice constantly rising, while people had less and less money to buy it with. 'Luz ka tem, iagu ka tem, arroz sta carro' (no light, no water, and expensive rice) was the apt chorus of the popular rap song of the period.

The downward social and economic spiral entailed a general dissatisfaction with the government, who were living in luxury while the general population were becoming increasingly impoverished; and, as the state of affairs deteriorated even further, the government came under increasing pressure from the Junta Militar, who were dissatisfied with the course of events, as well as from the opposition parties who demonstrated against Yala's government, yelling that he had 'cerebral diarrhoea',<sup>7</sup> as they marched through town on 15 October 2000. As time passed, the problems and conflicts of interest between the Junta Militar and the government of President Kumba Yala were to augment in scale until, by the end of November, a full-blown conflict seemed unavoidable.

Following a direct provocation and undermining of the authority of the retired Brigadier Mané by Kumba Yala and the new Chief of Staff General Verissimo Correia Seabre, the discord between the government and the Junta Militar led to renewed fighting in Bissau.<sup>8</sup> On the national holiday for the armed forces in November 2000, Kumba Yala promoted a number of, primarily Balanta,<sup>9</sup> officers while passing over the Junta Militar's supporters within the army and navy. The response from Asumané Mané was swift. Denouncing the promotions as unjust, false and non-transparent,<sup>10</sup> he relieved Verissimo Correia Seabre of his position and subsequently reinstated himself as Brigadier General, thus seeking to regain control over the armed forces. On 20 November the Junta Militar issued the following press statement:

The Supreme Commando of the Junta Militar informs the population in general and especially the inhabitants of Bissau of the events that resulted in the meeting of the Military Chiefs today and on whose resolution the decision for this social communication has been taken.

1. The problem in question will naturally be resolved purely within the military so there is no cause for alarm.



2. With the deepest serenity we guarantee the population that the situation in Bissau and in our country will maintain in perfect calm. (*Diário de Bissau* 20 November 2000 [my translation])

Of course, calm did not prevail and the following night fighting broke out between the Junta Militar and troops loyal to the government as Mané's men tried to take control of the presidency but were beaten back by the Presidential Guard. Eight days later, the conflict ended with the execution of Asumané Mané in Quinhamel, some 30 kilometres outside Bissau. Asumané Mané was clubbed to death. The tragic irony behind his extremely violent death was his *medicinhos*, that is, his magic charms, which were seen as protecting him from being killed by 'conventional' methods ranging from knives to bazookas.<sup>11</sup> The next day a picture of Asumané's corpse was on the front page of the newspaper *Diário de Bissau*, the image of his broken, disjointed body being paraded through town by the newspaper boys.

It was the day after this that I met Mbuli again, proud as can be, outside Nti's house. As I approached him I asked how he had been; his answer was: 'Good. But they should not have killed the *homi garandi* [big man], they should not, they should have let him go, so that he could go to Gambia. Like Nino they should have let him go.' Asumané Mané was the very symbol of what had brought torment to Mbuli's life. He was the head of the Junta Militar and thus emblematic of the force responsible for the initial failure of his tactics and shrinking of his social possibilities, resulting in Mbuli having to live an everyday life of utmost uncertainty and fear. Yet the remark reveals an empathy towards one's 'enemy' in war that I would come to know as typical not just of my Aguenta interlocutors, but of most of the people I was to speak to about conflict and warfare in Guinea-Bissau.

Mbuli's story directs our attention to the general social position from which my informants moved towards becoming Agentas, namely that of youth. It directs our attention to the ethnic undertones of their mobilisation and to the importance of having contacts within the patrimonial networks that have colonised the state structures, towards the rapid social and political change within Guinean society resulting in a permanent state of instability, towards the difficult inter-war period the Agentas went through, and, finally, as seen in the last quote, towards a peculiarly compassionate construction of the Other within Guinean conflict – all general aspects of the lives of the Agentas, which will be investigated further in the course of this book. But, most of all, Mbuli's history is a good example of how youth seek to navigate war as event, and the networks that open up towards them in the process of factional conflict, as they try to make the best of political turmoil in order to enhance their life chances

Yet in his success – in bettering his life situation, getting a job, an income and opening up the space of possibilities that relative financial security and wealth provide – Mbuli's history is in fact atypical of the Aguentas. In Mbuli's case the defeat of the government side of the war was a temporary tragedy; in the case of my other informants it has been a pervasive one, spoiling not only their plotted life trajectories but also the very networks they depend upon to manage in the immediate social environment and to prosper in the future. As with Mbuli, the lives of my other informants provide good examples of attempted social navigation (Vigh 2003); that is, of the way they take a bearing of the changes within their socio-political environment and seek to make the best of emergent social possibilities in order to direct their lives in an advantageous direction.<sup>12</sup> But, for most, the navigation went wrong.

## Notes

1. The republic of Guinea-Bissau is one of West Africa's smaller countries, covering an area of about 36,125 square kilometres. The majority of the coastal area of the country consists of deltas and mangrove swamps, whereas the interior of the country is either cultivated or wooded savannah. There are approximately 1.2 million inhabitants in the country, of which roughly a quarter live in the capital Bissau. Over twenty different languages exist in Guinea-Bissau, with Portuguese Creole being the lingua franca and Portuguese the official language, though spoken only by 10 per cent of the population (Einarsdóttir 2000: 7). 30 per cent of the population are said to be Muslim, 5 per cent are Christian and 65 per cent are animist (Forrest 1992: 131), although there are elements of animism intertwined with the two world religions, and most non-Muslims, by counter-identification, see themselves as Christians.
2. Cacheu is the name of one of the country's major cities as well as the most northern of the country's nine administrative regions.
3. *Parente* in Creole refers to someone of the same ethnic affiliation. Preferring to fight for ones *parente* thus indicates an ethnic orientation within the process of mobilisation. However, as we shall see in Chapter 3 this does not necessarily indicate the existence of inter-ethnic fear or hatred.
4. The Creole word *sabi* has a wide breadth in meaning and connotes anything from, for example, the sweetness of honey to the efficiency of rhetoric and the sharpness of knives.
5. The government of Kumba Yala saw the reincorporation of a number of ex-Governo supporters, among whom Baciro Dabo, President Nino's chief of security, and Malai Sané, the ex-Minister of Social Communication, are the most prominent (*Diário de Bissau* 21 November 2000; *Diário de Notícias* 18 November 2001).

6. Leading to problems between the government and the IMF (International Monetary Fund), Kumba Yala's government spent one and a half million dollars on 'travel expenses' in eight months, with eighteen billion FCEA (Franc Communauté Financière d'Afrique), approximately 30 million dollars, unaccounted for by the end of the year 2000 (*Diário de Bissau* 18 October 2000; 9 November 2000).
7. *Panga barriga di cabeza*
8. Verissimo Correia Seabre was formerly a high-ranking officer within the *Junta Militar*.
9. His own ethnic group.
10. *Banobero* 29 November 2000.
11. The belief in *medicinho* cuts across cultures and religions in both Guinea-Bissau and West Africa in general, and although different rituals are used in their production they all serve the same function and are of roughly the same appearance in Bissau. One can thus have *medicinho* as protection against any type of accident, disease, bad luck, curse or other natural or supernatural act of aggression, as well as to enhance one's luck or powers. It is common for soldiers to have *medicinho* against weapons such as knives, guns, shrapnel and so on, with the cost of the magical protection being related to the destructive potential of the weapon in question.
12. I use the normally unspecific word 'socio-political' throughout the book. The reason for this is, as we shall see, that the classical political science distinction between the sphere of politics and that of civil society is directly misleading in the current context (see Chabal and Daloz 1999) – just as its dominance is, I would contend, highly exaggerated in many other parts of the world. Social ties and obligations are not detached from political ones in Bissau.

## PERSPECTIVES AND POSITIONS

I began to climb the wheel like a squirrel; but I would hardly get the boat started to port before I would see new dangers on that side, and away I would spin to the other; only to find perils accumulating starboard, and be crazy to get to port again. Then came the leadsman's sepulchral cry:

'D-e-e-p four!'

Deep four in a bottomless crossing! The terror of it took my breath away.

'M-a-r-k three! M-a-r-k three! Quarter-less-three! Half twain!'

This was frightful! I seized the bell-ropes and stopped the engines.

'Quarter twain! Quarter twain! *Mark Twain!*'

I was helpless. I did not know what in the world to do. I was quaking from my head to foot, and I could have hung my hat on my eyes, they stuck out so far.

'Quarter less twain! Nine-and-a-half!'

*(Life on the Mississippi, Mark Twain 1963: 70)*

As in the above description, my informants navigate dangerous waters. Senses, memory and intellect stretched to the utmost they are trying to draw the right trajectories through the stormy waters of predicted and unpredictable societal turmoil. As shown in the case of Mbuli, they navigate an unstable political landscape where the shifts, tows and underlying dangers require strategy and tactics to be constantly tuned to the movement of the immediate socio-political environment as well as to its future unfolding. Yet unlike Mark Twain, my informants really did run aground, suffering the panic and distress of navigation gone wrong, the process so acutely communicated in the above passage.

My main analytical aim within this book is to propose a perspective of youth in war through a theory of social navigation: that is, through attentiveness to the way in which agents seek to draw and actualise their life trajectories in order to increase their social possibilities and life chances in a shifting and volatile social environment.<sup>1</sup> As shown in the case of Mbuli the general perspective is not on politics or warfare in itself, or on the Clausewitzian link between them,<sup>2</sup> but rather on the socially situated rationales that lead people in and out of warfare. My focus is thus on how and why a group of agents deliberately engage in warfare: on the social position, perspectives and praxis of a group of urban, West African youth as they seek to survive – socially and physically – in a terrain of conflict and war (Abdullah 1997; Bangura 1997; Utas 2003; Vigh 2003). It is not a 'blood and guts monograph', a retailing of suffering and the horrors of warfare. Rather, it is centred on the social predicaments and possibilities that underlie my informants' engagement with conflict. I shall thus examine the pragmatics of warfare (cf. Whyte 1997) from the perspective of a small group of urban youth that served in the Aguenta militia in Guinea-Bissau during the civil war from 1998 to 1999.

## **The Perspective**

In other words, contrary to many other ethnographies on the subject of conflict or warfare, this book is not centred on how a community, faction or other group of agents seek to impose their political will on others by engaging in political violence or on how agents resort to war in order to attain autonomy, but rather on how a group of agents seek to survive as well as possible when caught in a situation of societal and political instability (see Richards 1996; de Boeck and Honwana 2000). Its focus is not primarily on the construction and realisation of a political order but on the construction and realisation of social being. It is about the project of social becoming, set in a terrain of conflict and war.<sup>3</sup>

Theoretically the perspective takes its point of departure in the interplay between social perspectives, actions and forces, which, inspired particularly by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, has come to characterise a large part of the social sciences in the last few decades. Creating a constructive dialogue between such seemingly irreconcilable theoretical positions as phenomenology and structuralism, the Bourdieuesque perspective has allowed us to see the dialectic between individual agency and social forces (Bourdieu 1989, 1992), gaining in the process a richness of analytical insight and possibilities. Focusing on how a group of agents seek to move within a complex set of societal

structures and confinements, my work clearly owes a great deal to Bourdieu. Yet, in trying to make sense of the actions of agents within a socio-political environment that is in itself in motion, we need to go further than the concepts of 'field' and 'habitus' can take us.

## **Terrains and Environments**

As my attention is on a group of youth and their efforts to live their lives in an unstable socio-political environment characterised by a constant process of fluctuation rather than slow sedimentation, I prefer to use the concept of social 'terrain' or 'environment' rather than 'field'. To avoid mixed metaphors the two concepts will frequently be interchanged; yet, as confusing as this might be, the point is to create a picture of social forces as surrounding or uneven matter rather than stable and hardened surface and as matter in constant becoming rather than solidified being. 'For its inhabitants, journeying along their respective ways of life, the world itself *has no surface*' Ingold states (2000: 241), echoing a similar point made by Jackson explaining that we move *in* our world not *on* it (Jackson 1998: 204). Where the concept of social environment lets us analytically approach the fact that our social worlds are understood from within, the concept of terrain points our attention towards a continuously unfolding topography. Taken together, the two concepts succeed in referring to the social forces surrounding our lives as being at times a non-transparent social topography, at other times fluid and in continual movement and at yet other times volatile and explosive. The use of terrain or environment, in other words, takes on the quality of the different elements underlying the predicament of living in Guinea-Bissau, where one has to constantly assess and reinterpret the character, dangers and possibilities of the shifting social matter – having certainty only of the frailty of socio-political orders. The point, then, is to confer an image of a socio-political environment that is non-transparent and in motion rather than transparent, solid and stable.

## **Social Navigation**

Despite its fluidity and volatility, the Guinean social terrain has, however, never completely dissolved. It should thus be emphasised that not all things social are adrift and fluid in Bissau. The country has not seen the type of warfare that draws whole generations of youth into war and my focus, within this book, is specifically on mobilisation and war engagement as socio-political praxis. Entering the military in Bissau is

most often a willed choice rather than a forced decision,<sup>4</sup> and choosing to navigate the terrain of war is primarily a question of evaluating the movement of the social environment, one's own possibilities for moving through it, and its effect on ones planned and actual movement. It is this evaluation and praxis I have termed 'social navigation', serving as an analytical optic able to illuminate the way agents guide their lives through troublesome social and political circumstances, that is, to illuminate 'governance and adjustment between self and other rather than the maintenance of a fixed line' (Jackson 1998: 18). Rather than navigating concrete environments or cognitive maps (see Gell 1993; Ingold 2000: Chapter 13) I am concerned with the way my interlocutors navigate networks and events as they move within fluctuating social structures.

Generally, the concept of navigation seems to occur in relation to descriptions of praxis in unstable places. As such, Honwana (2000: 77), Johnson-Hanks (2002: 878) and Mertz (2002: 265) all refer to navigation in relation to contexts of social change.<sup>5</sup> Yet social navigation is, I hold, an applicable analytical concept not only in relation to the Aguentas or situations of rapid change. It is a useful concept in relation to social praxis in general. Though it becomes increasingly noticeable in turbulent social and political circumstances, it does not stem from them. We all navigate, but the intensity of our navigational efforts depends on the speed and volatility of social change (see Evans and Furlong 1997; Virilio 2001). However, the element my informants seek to navigate is not only unstable or changing, it is dangerously so, requiring that the agent must be attentive towards both the immediate and the future social configurations and possibilities in order to secure his safety. As the initial quote from Mark Twain so hauntingly shows, in dangerous waters one navigates simultaneously around underlying perils and through oncoming waves as well as towards a distant point in or beyond the spatio-temporal horizon, whilst, importantly, at all times being also forcibly moved by the current.

The concept of navigation thereby adds to our customary understanding of social action in two main areas. First of all, it enables us to see how agents simultaneously navigate the immediate and the imagined. We concurrently plot trajectories, plan strategy and actually move towards a telos<sup>6</sup> a distant goal in or beyond the horizon, and we do so both in relation to our current position and possibilities in a given social environment and in relation to our imagined future position and possibilities of movement. Secondly, whereas we normally conceptualise agents positioning themselves and acting within relatively demarcated and stable social fields, navigation is able to describe praxis in which social change is taken into consideration. It affords an analy-

sis of praxis that is able to encompass the way in which agents act not only in relation to each other, or in relation to larger social forces, but in relation to the complex interaction between agents, terrain and events, thereby making it possible to encompass social flux and instability, and the way they influence and become ingrained in action, in our understanding of a specific praxis. In other words, when navigating we are aware that we might be repositioned by shifting terrains and circumstances. As we seek to move within a turbulent and unstable socio-political environment we are at the same time being moved by currents, shifts and tides, requiring that we constantly have to attune our action and trajectory to the movement of the environment we move through. Social navigation may thus involve detours, unwilling displacement, losing our way and, not least, redrawing trajectories and tactics. Social navigation in this perspective is the tactical movement of agents within a moving element. It is motion within motion.

### *Between Agency and Social Forces*

Though navigation emphasises movement, it must be stressed that we are not free to move entirely as we want. Anyone who has ever sailed will testify to the idiocy of trying to navigate with indifference to the forces of the environment, and the concept of social navigation is thus not another metaphor for agency,<sup>7</sup> but rather designates the interface between agency and social forces, focusing our attention on the inseparability of act and environment (Ingold 2000: Chapter 13), knowledge and praxis (Scott 1998: Chapter 9), and – not least – agency and social forces.

Theoretically, the idea of social navigation is inspired by praxis theory and the concept of ‘life chances’ as developed in the work of the German political sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (1979, 1988). Dahrendorf’s use of the concept of ‘life chances’ builds on the Weberian idea of ‘social options’, designating the realm of possibility open to the individual through his position within society. Or, as Dahrendorf chooses to describe Weber’s use of the concept, it is ‘the notion of chance to indicate opportunities provided by social structure’ (Dahrendorf 1979: 29). Life chances are, in Dahrendorf’s perspective, constituted by social options and ties:<sup>8</sup> that is, the relationship between social possibilities and social allegiances and bonds (1979: 28, 30).<sup>9</sup> ‘Options’ are the choices people in a given situation have available to them and ties – or ‘ligatures’ – are the social bonds or attachments in which these choices emerge and are embedded. When these are combined in an analytical perspective, they grant us a possibility to investigate situated action. Much as with the focus of this book, Dahrendorf’s concept thus both includes a focus on the social anchoring of persons and acts and on social change, perspectives and horizons. Yet, contrary to



Dahrendorf, I shall not restrict myself to the theory and typology of societies and politics but show how my informants actually seek to live their lives in relation to their social embeddedness, their social horizons and the context of instability, conflict and warfare.

## **The Empirical Setting**

The empirical foundation for the book is sixteen months of fieldwork done in Bissau, the capital of the small West African country of Guinea-Bissau, between January 2000 and November 2003.

I arrived in Guinea-Bissau just after the first parliamentary election following the civil war, and spent the first nine months of my fieldwork in the suburb (*bairro*) of Bandim. My first impression of Bissau was to inform my future work. As the flight crew announced that we would be landing shortly, I watched for the city. The landscape visible to us from above seemed anything but urban being a massive delta with finely drawn blue lines of rivers cutting their way through the green terrain. The plane landed, seemingly, in the middle of the bush. Yet, as we made our way out of the aeroplane, through customs and towards town, Bissau opened up in front of us in a pungent mix of moist heat, dilapidation, garbage and mango trees. On a first encounter, the lushness of the vegetation and warmth of the city's inhabitants, combined with the mould-ornamented decay and still visible destruction, place Bissau, absurdly, on the interface between rot and renewal, gloom and brightness.

### *Bandim*

Bandim, the place I was to live in during the first part of my fieldwork, is to a large degree characterised by the same duality. The first aspect of life that one notices in Bandim is the poverty. Yet it is a general context of poverty inhabited by mild, humorous and, not least, resilient people constantly inviting one to partake in their meal, of which they normally only have one a day. As such, one spends a great deal of time in Bissau cursing the misery and hardness of societal mis-dynamics, but an equal amount of time struck by the flexibility of these same social dynamics and the kindness of the city's inhabitants.

Guinea-Bissau is, as is much of West Africa,<sup>10</sup> an ethnically mixed country, and all of the country's ethnic groups are represented within the capital. Yet Bandim is a predominantly Papel area,<sup>11</sup> consisting of a sprawling network of mud brick houses separated by red dirt roads. It is a wonderful place: a neighbourhood that during the day is alive with roaming packs of children searching for something to play with, tease or investigate, with adolescents playing football on the bumpy,

makeshift football pitch, and adults chatting, cooking or sleeping in the shade of mango trees or verandas. During the evening, Bandim is confined to darkness but is audibly alight, with groups of youth chatting at corners at an adequate distance from the ears of parents and siblings for flirting to be possible, women gathered in peer groups, and the occasional party with people getting drunk on cashew wine and women singing in the finest high-pitched voices.

### *Praça*

I enjoyed living in Bandim; however, after my wife and children moved back north, luckily just before the outbreak of fighting in November 2000, the place became a constant reminder of their absence. With the house too big and the social relations somehow missing their foundation I decided to move into a friend's house in town.

Praça, which is the Portuguese-derived name for the inner part of Bissau city, consists, unlike Bandim, of Portuguese-style brick houses and (what used to be) asphalt roads. The oldest part, called Bissau Veillo, is located around the harbour and is a pretty but decaying colonial Portuguese neighbourhood, with pastel-coloured houses, narrow streets and alluring, shady balconies. Around Bissau Veillo, government institutions, foreign companies and 'indigenous' Portuguese or Lebanese grocery stores occupy a primarily commercial area of two-storey town houses, and around this area stands an inner city residential area formerly populated by the Portuguese or Cape Verdean elite but redistributed to the privileged within the liberation party after independence.

One of these houses belonged to Facho's family, and was the place I was to spend the rest of my time in Bissau. Within this two-storey building on a small side street in the inner part of Bissau city lived the family of five, along with some tenants. As luck would have it there was a spare room, next to Facho's, which I was able to rent. Not that I moved far from a physical point of view, there being only a couple of kilometres between my new room and my old house, but there are notable differences between Bandim and Praça, and on a social scale the two areas are far more than only a couple of kilometres apart.

Despite looking as if it has not been repaired or renovated since colonial days, the inner city is seen as smart. Regardless of the broken water pipes and eternal mud puddles, the rubbish dumps and the multitude of vultures and mangy dogs, it is a trendy place to live, with a handful of cafes, bars, shops and restaurants nearby. However, the commercial area apart, inner city Bissau does not, despite its 'trendy' character, differ greatly from Bandim in its people or their activities. They constitute, in general, a more varied group than the Bandim residents, and are better off. Yet their daily routines and praxis are all but

identical, and Praça seems to house as many *Aguentas*, my primary group of informants, as Bandim does.

### Networks Rather than Locations

As it would turn out, my exact location was to be of minor importance in relation to my research focus on the *Aguentas*. Similar for both Bandim and Praça is the way people go about their day. As urban spaces, the neighbourhoods are continuously traversed by a myriad of outsiders, insiders, visitors, intruders and wanderers. Equally, my informants would traverse through the many urban demarcations, as they would move in and out of different areas, groups and communities, following social relations and networks based on kin, friendship, politics or business.

One of the primary characteristics of the Bissauian urban landscape (besides the dilapidation and poverty) are the groups of young people that dot the city. The vast majority of young people in Bissau are unemployed and economically marginal and thus dependent on the goodwill of a parent, aunt or uncle to feed and shelter them.<sup>12</sup> Being dependants in this manner equally means that they are not able to establish their own household and acquire their own space. So, it is common for groups of peers, no matter what generational category they belong to, to organise themselves in informal social institutions called *mandjuandades* or *collegasons* (cf. Gable 2000).<sup>13</sup> Most young people, not having a place of their own, organise themselves socially in these *collegasons* by appropriating bits of public space and transforming them into meeting-places. In this manner all young people seem to have a *collegason*, a peer group consisting of local friends of roughly the same age, which meets at the same place every day, where they often spend most of their day. These *collegasons* of youth – of boys and girls, men and women – form an important part of the urban landscape and young people walk between *collegasons* as they move through the streets visiting friends, romantic acquaintances and relatives from other areas.

Although sexually mixed, men and women will often sit a bit apart within their *collegasons*. Thus, women sit in groups braiding hair, chatting or doing chores, while groups of men hang out, not tending to have any activities but just chatting, discussing the people passing by, sports, women and politics. While this book is squarely centred on the lives of young men, as I have not met any women *Aguentas*,<sup>14</sup> the presence of women within *collegasons* has nonetheless made a significant contribution to my understanding of Guinean society and the lives of youth in Bissau in general. Despite their absence within my