The Kristons de Gêba of Guinea-Bissau:
Creole Contributions to Postcolonial Nation-Building

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Introduction

In the present paper I will shed light on the Kristons de Gêba, a creole ethnic group that has managed to redefine its identity following independence in 1974. This happened in accordance with Bissau-Guinean postcolonial national identity and ideology. I will attempt to show how Kriston de Gêba ethnic identity in fact co-occurs with postcolonial national identity. That way, they go beyond the compatible concept that portrays the African nation as an umbrella of different so-called “tribes” or ethnic groups. This concept has been frequently referred to as the “unity in diversity”-model. Given the lack of census data, the number of Kristons de Gêba currently living in Guinea-Bissau can only be estimated, around 3,000–4,000 at most (out of a total population of about 1.5 million).

The intention of this paper is to disclose the connection between the development of creole and national identity. Creolisation in colonial contexts is characterised by social hierarchies and involve both ethnogenesis and indigenisation. Creole identities are heterogeneous in their origins. The new common identity that emerges on the background of the latter goes along with an attachment to a specific locality and space within which indigenisation has taken place. Creole identities can be ethnicised to varying degrees; they can adopt the shape of either a manifest group or a transethnic category of identification. These integrative creole identities are based on heterogeneous ancestral origins and they can be considered microcosms of postcolonial nations. Despite the often small number of people who share creole identities, they were often dominant in politics and economy as junior partners of colonizing powers. Subsequently, creoles often figured prominently in nationalist movements that advocated independence. This paper therefore attempts to highlight creole contributions to nationhood.

First of all I would like to give a brief introduction to the setting and the historical context. For the subsequent analysis, I will present a number of emic discourses and prevalent historical narratives among the Kristons de Gêba. A conclusion will round out this paper.

The findings result from one year’s fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau, completed in May 2007, as part of the current Ph.D. project “Creole Identity, Interethnic Relations and Post-Colonial Nation-Building in Guinea-Bissau” which has been financed by the Graduate School “Society and Culture in Motion” and the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, both based in Halle (Saale), Germany.
Background

Gêba is situated in central Guinea-Bissau. The tiny West African country was a Portuguese colony before it gained independence after thirteen years of armed struggle. Gêba is located at the middle reaches of the Gêba River, close to the tidal limit. Until the mid 19th century, Gêba was one of the most important and biggest Portuguese trading posts, administrative and military centre, and a vibrant hot spot.

As early as in the 17th century, a Christian creole community emerged in Gêba. Christianity had been promoted by both Portuguese colonialists and Cape Verdean clergymen. The familial background of these Christians was diverse, given European, Cape Verdean, and Christianised African ancestors. They served as economic, political, and cultural brokers and middlemen.

The Christians lived in a predominantly Muslim socio-cultural surrounding. The descendants of these Christians are nowadays known as Christians of Gêba (or “Kristons di Gêba” in the local lingua franca). They possess their own manifest ethnic identity.

Since the late 19th century, Gêba suffered a decline causing the gradual emigration of Christians from Gêba and Muslims becoming the majority.

Under the Portuguese New State-regime (1926–74) the Kristons de Gêba finally lost their once privileged status as middlemen. After the first native statutes had been enacted in the second decade of the 20th century, these creoles were largely declared “indigenous” subjects. Their proud history and identity as Christian brokers and traders was rejected by the colonial state for they were officially registered as Beafadas or Fulas, ethnic groups that are associated with Islam.

Evidence

Current historical narratives, both among the Kristons de Gêba in Gêba itself and abroad as well as among other Bissau-Guineans, refer to the supposed preeminent economic role of the former trading post. As such, Gêba is believed and – according to historical documents – in fact once was one of Portugal’s biggest and most crucial entrepôts throughout riverine West Africa where trading routes from Africa’s hinterland met with trans-Atlantic shipping routes from Europe, the Cape Verdean islands, the West African coastline, and the Americas. Thus, Gêba accommodated a high number of local as well as European, Cape Verdean, and later Levantine trading houses over time. However, not only commodities were traded. For centuries, Gêba was an important hub for slaves. As mentioned above, Gêba’s creole inhabitants served for a long time as commercial intermediaries at this crossroads. These former economic links are mirrored by the narrative of the supposedly oldest Mango tree of the Sierra Leone subspecies, which is situated in Gêba’s former town centre. Repeatedly I was told by Kristons de Gêba that the tree’s seed or its seedling was once imported by a distinguished local creole trader from Sierra Leone. This trader was a creole traditional leader and as such offspring of one of the most prestigious families in Gêba. That merchant used to trade – like others – along the West African coastline. Apart from this, Gêba’s out-
standing commercial past is still reflected in other narratives. For instance, many Kristons de Gêba families still remember up to today that one or another female ancestor had originally been a slave in the remote past before being married to a creole, thus adopting the Christian faith.

This leads us to a further dimension of how Gêba had been affected by its important commercial role. I mean the town’s prominent role for religion. Since its founding, Gêba has been an important Christian settlement in the region. Its creole population was converted to Christianity and therefore the – at least nominal – Catholic faith became one of the creole community’s ethnic markers. As indicated above, missionaries and other clergymen did not only originate from Portugal but also from the Cape Verdean archipelago. At that time, the bishop of Cape Verde was responsible for Gêba’s parochial affairs while the archipelago also provided for secular education and church training. In conversations, even nowadays Christianity is a very important reference point for the Kristons de Gêba. Proudly, they refer to the big stone church located in Gêba’s old, abandoned centre. Aged inhabitants of Gêba proudly explained that the church was constructed in the 1930s with money collected from among the Christian community’s successful traders. Frequently, not only Kristons de Gêba but also representatives of other ethnic groups in Guinea-Bissau underlined Gêba’s crucial role as the location which had housed Guinea-Bissau’s first church.

The creole language Kriol which is at present Guinea-Bissau’s lingua franca originally spread from trading posts like Gêba where the creole vernacular was spoken by the creole population. Even nowadays, the Kristons de Gêba emphasise their special variety of Kriol, which is allegedly known among Gêba’s population, although no major differences to Kriol spoken elsewhere can be detected today.

These economic, religious and linguistic features allow – in the eyes of the Kristons de Gêba and many other Bissau-Guineans – to proudly refer to Gêba as the “first capital of Guinea-Bissau”.

The reportedly prevailing tradition of resistance and rebelliousness among the Kristons de Gêba forms yet another narrative pillar.

The tradition of resistance is mirrored in present historical narratives that allude to the late 19th century when the area around Gêba became a focal point in the so-called Fula wars. For decades, the region was involved in these long lasting political turbulences. As respects Gêba, it was this turmoil that finally caused Gêba’s descent into political and economic insignificance. Beforehand, however, it became the staging ground for resistance among the creole community against the Portuguese presence. The colonial traditional leader of the Kristons, who was known as “people’s judge” (or juiz do povo in Portuguese), had aligned with the leader of the Fula uprising, Musa Môlô, after the creoles had been besieged by Fula warriors. This alliance was directed against the Portuguese who were under pressure after they had lost influence and control in Gêba and its hinterland. The people’s judge thus co-operated with Môlô. Finally, however, the Portuguese managed to recapture Gêba and made peace with its inhabitants.
This narrative of resistance in the 19th century is connected to the more recent war of independence, which started in 1961. The elder generation among Gêba’s inhabitants, who was born in the 1930s and 1940s, was affected by this war of independence from Portugal. As in other villages throughout Guinea-Bissau, the liberation movement had established clandestine structures in Gêba. Even more important is the fact that the charismatic leader of this movement, Amílcar Cabral, was born in Bafatá, which is only 20 kilometres from Gêba. Cabral himself developed a powerful integrationist state ideology that conceived the nation as an umbrella for different ethnic groups. Previously, Cabral’s father had been a teacher at Gêba’s school. Therefore, the elderly inhabitants were familiar with the family. Many Kriston elders knew Amílcar Cabral personally, as they proudly expressed on a number of occasions. Nostalgically, the elders told me about clandestine meetings, the concealment of a popular independence movement member and arms smuggling on behalf of the liberation movement. Some of the elders, among them the clandestine local representative of the independence movement, were even arrested by the Portuguese and held in a concentration camp in Cape Verde. I learnt that a number of well-known freedom fighters and post-war politicians originated from Gêba or had ancestral ties to the former trading post – among them long-time state president “Nino” Vieira.

Resistance against colonialism thus constitutes a central characteristic in the postcolonial self-image of the Kristons de Gêba. Within this context, 19th century occurrences seamlessly resemble comparatively recent incidents that date from the late colonial period.

**Conclusion**

The pride of the Kristons de Gêba in the village of Gêba makes it clear how this creole ethnic group is able to transcend the ethnic-national dichotomy. As it becomes apparent, the Kristons de Gêba did not only develop their collective identity against a heterogeneous ancestral background. Within this formative process they started to regard themselves not only as firstcomers in the trading post of Gêba, but also as actual founders of Bissau-Guinean nationhood. They were, so to say, the first Bissau-Guineans, long before independence was achieved. This becomes implicitly clear in the frequently met opinion of Gêba as Guinea-Bissau’s first capital. As I showed above, this reference is made to Gêba’s formerly prominent role as commercial hot spot, early beacon of Christianity, and founding place of the creole language. This language, which was formerly limited to a very restricted number of trading posts, has transformed into Guinea-Bissau’s lingua franca for the past forty or fifty years. Thus, the Kristons left their mark on the nation, which was founded with independence. In a certain way, the Kristons de Gêba are far away from any kind of “tribalism”, which characterises other ethnic groups. In other words, at a remote time, when other ethnic groups were concerned with their own, individual state or group formation processes (e.g. Fula or Mandingo empires), the Kristons revealed an integrative appeal and laid the foundation for a nation – both from their own and an analytical point of view. Instead of stressing their former role as brokers for European traders that made them natural allies of the Portu-
gue for a long period of time, they are now tending to emphasise their image as opponents of colonialism. In favour of this narrative construction, they span the entire time from the late 19th century to the war of independence.

To conclude, the postcolonial identitarian redefinition practiced by the Kristons de Gêba was founded on the historical narratives that represent current discourses on past occurrences and events. The identitarian redefinition does not go at the expense of their identification with the Bissau-Guinean nation. This process is supported by Guinea-Bissau’s efficient state ideology, which appeals to national integration and unity in the face of ethnic diversity. Furthermore, the Kristons de Gêba regard themselves as the founding fathers of modern nationhood. This is facilitated by the fact that this creole ethnic group can be regarded as a nation ‘in small’ of its own for it unites a plurality of ancestral ethnic identities. Therefore, the Kristons de Gêba provide a good example of how creole ethnic identity serves as a precursor for Bissau-Guinean postcolonial national identity and ideology.