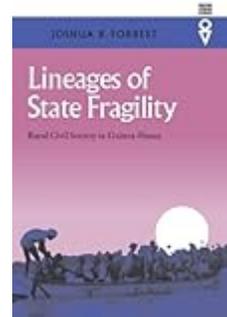




**Joshua B. Forrest.** *Lineages of State Fragility: Rural Civil Society in Guinea Bissau.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003. xii + 312 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1490-3.



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## Rewriting African History

After more than twenty years of research dedicated to Guinea-Bissau, Joshua Forrest has produced an important study that documents the resistance of African societies against pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial intervention. At first sight it appears an impossibly Herculean task to embark upon a study of this magnitude that covers a period of more than five hundred years. Indeed, it is likely that nobody ever tried their hand at it for exactly that reason. Editors, especially in areas such as African Studies, tend to be quite reticent about manuscripts of more than three hundred pages. The author was in fact obliged to reduce the original manuscript by half, an exercise very trying for those who must go through it. Forrest's ambitious enterprise provides a complete overhaul of the historiography and anthropology of a group of communities that shared a common space along the West African coast before the arrival of Europeans. Written sources from the 1450s onwards indicate that these groups largely retained their ancestral territories (tchon in Kriol, or Guinean Creole) in the area now occupied by Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Guinea. Researchers thus have a remarkably well-defined spatial-historical context to work on, marked also

by continuity in written source materials from the earliest Afro-Atlantic encounters.

Having said this, a scholar who wishes to analyze this region faces a number of hurdles. For one, knowledge of Portuguese is essential given that most of the travel accounts, archival documentation and secondary literature were produced by Lusophone authors. Secondly, the peculiarities of Guinea-Bissau's historical formation induced a dispersal of primary data over a variety of locations, including Portugal, France, Senegal, Guinea Bissau and the Cape Verde islands. Thirdly, without first-hand knowledge of the country (approximately the size of the Netherlands) it is virtually impossible to comprehend the cultural variety produced by more than twenty ethnic groups in such a small area. Otherwise one would remain unaware of the deeply rooted autonomy of communities that experienced a protracted slave trade and three wars in a comparatively short space of time. Even to those less familiar with the country, the recent battle fought in 1998-1999 between the Guinean army and foreign Senegalese troops supporting then-president Nino Vieira of Bissau will ring a bell. The anti-colonial war waged by

the PAIGC from 1963 to 1974 will probably also elicit a sign of recognition owing to its remarkable success and the internationally high profile of Amílcar Cabral, the movement's leader. Both events evoke images of the violent struggles that occurred in this small corner of Africa in rapid sequence. But beyond these historical landmarks Guinea-Bissau's colonial and pre-colonial past remains largely unknown, even to most Africanists.

Almost ten years separate this book from Forrest's first book-length incursion into the country's recent political history. For the present essay the author has again taken up the thread of his previous publications regarding the "soft" state and the tenacious resistance of the communities the latter harbors. This time, however, he extends his historical reach much further into the remote pre-colonial past. The first five chapters, about half the book, deal with the era between the fifteenth and the early-twentieth century. The five chapters that follow cover the colonial and independence periods up to the aforementioned 1998-1999 war when the sitting president was ousted and Senegalese Jambouas were defeated by the great majority of the country's armed forces. An extensive set of notes (fifty pages!) and a short bibliography complete the book.

This volume overlaps the interval covered by Renã© Pélissier and Peter Karibe Mendy in their respective studies of popular resistance to the Portuguese presence in the region.<sup>[1]</sup> While the former provides a detailed, chronological account of the skirmishes and battles leading up to "pacification" during the first decades of the 1900s, the latter takes a closer look at the run-up to the political outlines of the establishment of colonial rule and of the short-lived "Pax Lusitana" until the start of the anti-colonial war. But while these studies take a military-political view of the Afro-Portuguese conflicts, Forrest analyzes them from a politico-anthropological vantage point. This distinction is important. The combination of a detailed assessment of the capacities and motivations for resistance, on the part of a number of "ethnic" groups (as discussed here), coupled with a study of the evolution of an African state is an approach that has become well embedded in African studies over the last decades. Forrest, however, rather than looking at how colonialism shaped African societies, opts for the opposite approach, namely, how societies influenced the formation of the colonial and post-independence state. Following the independence of most African states in the 1960s, a new wave of political analysts acknowledged their primary debt to Max Weber, guided as they were by the his top-down concept of the state as an instrument of

domination and coercion. Since the 1980s the widespread introduction of multiparty elections inspired approaches that increasingly emphasized the role of civil society and the legitimacy of regimes. Taking his cue from William I. Zartman, Forrest coined the term "state inversion" to describe the process of disintegration that has affected many African states: political decision-making is restricted to a small "urban core" unable to extend itself outward into the country at large. In the case of Guinea-Bissau, the present book attempts to show that state formation was handicapped by rural society in such a way that such a process of formation never actually occurred. Neither the colonial state nor its successor consistently exercised any significant measure of power and authority over the territory's rural societies. The only alternative open to such a weak state was to achieve its ends through violence and terror.

Besides the above-mentioned anti-colonial conflict and the 1998-1999 war, the author focuses extensively on the earlier military campaigns waged by a combination of African mercenaries and Portuguese regular troops that culminated in the de facto occupation of most of the (continental) territory in 1915. Forrest skillfully sets out his case by looking at the web of multi-ethnic alliances that are crucial for an understanding of the military resistance offered by African communities; these have been underestimated by authors such as Pélissier and Mendy. The fact that rural societies were prepared to forego ethnic exclusivity in exchange for such alliances when faced with external challenges, gave rise to fluid forms of political mobilization based on a pragmatic assessment of threats to their autonomy (p. 15). The region's history indicates that these patterns of resistance were associated with the existence on what he calls a "praetorian social memory," or more specifically a memory of praetorian capability (p. 19). The latter was based upon "a long-standing set of experiences of success at warfare during pre-colonial times" that "set the historical stage for the military success of the national liberation struggle" (p. 19). Despite inter-ethnic conflict induced by the slave trade and the commerce in export crops, this flexible mode of cooperation enabled communities to retain their corporate autonomy while collectively warding off perceived threats. The strong sense of successful military feats encouraged the development of an acute sense of civil and military identity.

Consolidating and perfecting their capacity for resistance over centuries of interaction with African and Atlantic actors, these communities, by the nineteenth century, possessed powerful fighting forces well versed in

military tactics and capable of confronting European attempts at domination (p. 62). By effectively retaining territorial control, these societies held most of the cards in what proved to be an unequal contest; they repeatedly outmaneuvered and defeated Portuguese troops. In the period between the 1840s and 1912, Portuguese incursions proved fruitless, not least because of their hit and run character, the lack of preparation and motivation of armed personnel and a lack of perception of African capabilities and intentions. Then, by opting for the use of African mercenary gangs that pillaged, raped and murdered their way through the Guinean interior, the military resistance of most communities was broken. However, these efforts were eventually crowned with success only on the battlefield and did not produce victory in a political sense. Although this radical change of strategy permitted the establishment of a significant territorial colonial foothold in the region it failed to crush essential authority structures or dismember multi-ethnic alliances. After conquering the region allotted to Portugal within frontiers determined at the Berlin conference and in bilateral negotiations with France, the scramble for Africa appeared to be over.

In the case of “Portuguese” Guinea, colonial domination over its peoples would prove to be short-lived and contested. Occasional skirmishes belied the apparent pacification of the province, as did the passive resistance that proved “the political sovereignty of Portuguese colonial state” had not been accepted (p. 140). Prompted by the infrastructural weakness of the administration, a policy of state terror was “reactivated” whenever “its sovereignty was seriously challenged” (p. 140). The main causes for acts of defiance were tax collection and forced labor. Voting with their feet, many inhabitants migrated to neighboring territories, notably Senegal. Forrest identifies three patterns characterizing political relations between state and civil society, which are: the non-acceptance of imposed chiefs in acephalous communities (e.g. among the Balanta and Bijagã<sup>3</sup>); the credibility gap of co-opted chiefs (e.g. among the Fula, Mandinga and Biafada); and the erosion of traditional political authority and subsequent leadership struggles (e.g. among the Manjaku). One of the interesting shifts occurring during the colonial period was the rise of alternative, mostly religious, age-based subcultures that attracted an increasing following and redirected resource-flows. This was particularly common among non-Islamized groups in littoral areas. In addition, commercial exchanges between the different groups and a widespread cross-border trade that escaped colonial control provided people with ac-

cess to basic necessities and sustained vibrant informal networks.

These phenomena underlined the existence of an inter-ethnic dynamic that would prove to be the mainstay of the anti-colonial struggle that began to gather force in the 1950s. Motivated by adhesion to a well-organized movement (the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde, PAIGC), by “historical revenge,” by a praetorian social memory that had survived intact, and by a reaction to violent Portuguese counterinsurgency measures, the rural populace adhered in increasing numbers to nationalist mobilization campaigns. The war that lasted from 1963 to 1974 provided opportunities for younger generations to increase their social prestige in relation to the elders. In some cases the latter, remaining undecided between two parties, played an ambivalent role which often led to their replacement by more amenable figures. Overall, communities joined the struggle in accordance with a socio-political rather than an ethnic rationale. The attitudes that marked resistance during the colonial period against the leadership claim of the PAIGC would also challenge the post-independent state. The local structures inherited from the struggle, such as village committees, would not replace community authority, while the removal of collaborationist dignitaries created a power vacuum that the one-party system was unable to fill. Despite efforts to gain control over internal trade and land distribution, the Guinea-Bissauan economy never really got off the ground. Ministries in the capital Bissau lacked any authority outside of the capital, so that policies never took root in the rural heartland. Political infighting and successive coups illustrated an intrinsic instability that undermined the post-independence state, thereby exposing the fault lines between rural society and national institutions. These developments showed that the politically isolated post-independent state could not overcome its colonial legacy.

Despite its broad purview and deep chronology, the book does reveal a number of lacunae that need to be addressed. To start with, the archival data collected do not include material from archives in Guinea Bissau (for example the INIC files used by Mendy), in the possession of the national institute for studies and research (INEP) since the mid-1980s. Although the author did extract information from the colonial archives in Lisbon, the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (AHU), they do not encompass documents from the military archives (the Arquivo Histórico Militar) in Lisbon. The archives of the Portuguese secret services (PIDE) that became accessible to the public in the 1990s would no doubt have provided im-

portant material, above all on the anti-colonial struggle. But then again, the sources from the Archives Nationales de SÃ©nÃ©gal (ANS) provide incisive comparative data that, at least in part, compensate for these omissions. As regards secondary material, certain (over)emphasis and lacunae are to be noted. The reliance on secondary studies produces biases; for example, the Manjaku have been the subject of a number of studies (especially from the early 1990s) and are therefore given preferential treatment. There are also a number of references missing from the bibliography such as Jean Mettas's study on colonial Guinea and Stephanie Urdang's study of political mobilization during the anti-colonial war.[2] The book does not include a Creole and Portuguese glossary which would certainly be a useful guide to the large majority of readers unfamiliar with Lusophone language and culture. And the many spelling errors, in the case of Creole and above all Portuguese idiom, suggest that some proper editing would have been in order.

At a conceptual level the analysis of relations between civil society and the state does present the reader with a problem, namely the absence of anything reminiscent of a state before military occupation in the early-twentieth century. Therefore when the author refers to the "vanquished state" for the period 1890-1909 in chapter 4, this is an overstatement. The embryonic administration centered on the insular capital Bolama from 1879 and a few dispersed garrison towns cannot in any sense be regarded as a state. One wonders when, in fact, "Portuguese" Guinea actually did become a state. One wonders why the author did not give more attention to the process of state building. In chapters 6, 7 and 8 which cover the period from the 1920s to the 1960s, he devotes his analysis almost entirely to the various aspects Guinea's vibrant civil society. Few pages are devoted to state formation; yet occasional punitive campaigns, the appointment of chiefs, forced labor, the capture of crops for export and taxation are, at first sight, indeed attributes pertaining to a colonial state. To be sure, however, colonial intervention was offset by the failure to quell resistance, the erosion of the authority of many appointed chiefs, the problems associated with organizing labor teams, migration and informal (cross-border) trade circuits and large scale tax evasion. The author gives various examples of measures that, when proven unworkable, were cancelled or abolished. The meetings of administrators and *chefes de posto*, held from the mid-thirties (which are not quoted in the text), are quite revealing in this respect.

The question then arises what kind of apparatus ex-

isted during crucial periods such as the interval from 1920 to the 1950s. Assuming *a priori* that there was a sovereign colonial state that effectively controlled its territory and its inhabitants is a rather doubtful vantage point. Is the idea of a "weak" state compatible with our notion of a modern state? Although the colonial administration in Portuguese Guinea attempted to build a territorial organization and basic political infrastructure, it retained all the hallmarks of a political mirage. Moments of apparent strength such as the subjugation by military means of the peoples living within the frontiers agreed to with France in 1915, or the imposition of the Estado Novo regime from the 1930s revealed endemic infrastructural faults. The hypothesis that a weak state would, by implication, be able to terrorize its populations is incompatible with its intrinsic weakness on the ground. If there was no effective apparatus to carry out the most basic policies, then neither would there be any to force people into complying. After all, the recourse to terror supposedly showed that the administration lacked the power to rule. That leaves us with "Portuguese Guinea" during the anti-colonial war: what kind of state was that? Are we dealing with a different political entity here? Did a "weak state" turn strong momentarily? Did the (re-)militarization of its apparatus and strategies alter its intrinsic characteristics and status?

The fact that post-independence regimes also failed to build effective and lasting institutions (see chapters 10 and 11) can be taken as a clear indication that these faults (that were and continue to be structural) prevented actual state formation. Seen in this light (and using the author's terminology), should the apparent success of the anti-colonial mobilization campaigns and the anti-colonial war that reactivated the praetorian social memory of its composite groups rather be interpreted as expressing the will of "civil society" not to have a state (under any circumstances and of any kind, "weak" or "strong"), which as a consequence never materialized? Unfortunately (possibly as a result of editorial pressure?), the study deals rather too succinctly with the post-independence period and particularly the 1998-1999 war to provide any conclusive answers.

Despite these lacunae and loose ends the book is unique in its scope and depth. By putting an otherwise much neglected country and its chequered history on the map Forrest has done Guinea Bissau justice. Above all, Forrest has correctly focused upon the remarkable feats of the country's different communities and the way in which they challenged, and still challenge, outside intervention (by incorporating some outsiders and related

phenomena), while retaining their autonomy in the process. Forrest's study exemplifies how productive the combination of primary and secondary sources and the creative use of modern political theory can be for a comparative analysis of the resilience of African societies. His approach provides much food for thought in regard to political change, a subject that has (again) been placed high on the African agenda since multiparty elections became a major issue. We hope that the author's effort may serve as an inspiration to scholars who are prepared to retrieve forgotten or neglected corners of Africa, and to reassess historical and political premises by delving deep into its distant and more recent past in a comparative perspective.

## Notes

[1]. René Pélissier, *História da Guiné: Portugueses e Africanos na Senegâmbia (1841-1936)* (Lisboa: Editorial Estampa, 1989-2001); and Peter Karibe Mendy, *Colonialismo português em África: a tradição da resistência na Guiné-Bissau (1879-1959)* (Bissau: Republica da Guiné-Bissau, Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa, 1994).

[2]. Jean Mattas, *La Guinée Portugaise au XXe Siècle* (Paris: Académie des Sciences d'outre-mer, 1989); and Stephanie Urdang, *Fighting Two Colonialisms: Women in Guinea-Bissau* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).

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