Future Agricultures

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# Rice, cows and envy: agriculture and change among young rice producers in Guinea-Bissau

**Manuel Bivar[1] and Marina Padrão Temudo[2]**

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## Introduction

In Guinea-Bissau, a country on the West African coast between Senegal, the Republic of Guinea and the Atlantic, rice is the staple food. Three different rice production systems coexist in the country: mangrove swamp rice, upland slash-and-burn rice and freshwater swamp rice. The coast, deeply cut by saltwater rivers where mud and silt accumulate and in which mangrove swamps grow, has favoured the production of mangrove swamp rice. This small country with an area of 36,000km$^2$ is, out of the 16 countries that produce rice in the West African rice belt, the one which presents the biggest cultivated area of mangrove swamp rice (Écoutin et al. 1999: 211). Out of the three production systems present in the country, the mangrove swamp rice system has the greatest productivity, reaching 3,500kg per hectare without resorting to inputs (Espírito Santo 1949).

The Balanta-Nhacra[3] are considered the biggest producers of mangrove swamp rice in the country. Written sources from the beginning of the seventeenth century describe the Balanta living on the margins of the Geba River, a territory which they still inhabit today, dedicating themselves to the cultivation of rice and various other cereals and livestock (Álvares c. 1615: 40).

The beginning of an effective colonial occupation in the second half of the nineteenth century, greater population densities and difficulties in access to land, as well as intra-ethnic and intra-lineage conflicts in the territories that had been occupied for centuries by the Balanta-Nhacra, caused an enormous migration to the south of the country (Temudo 2009; Callewaert 2000; Drift 2000; Carreira 1961). The south (the current regions of Quinara and Tombali) was abundant in mangrove swamps which were barely used by the Nalus and Biafadas, the ethnic groups that owned the land, who practiced forest and savannah upland agriculture. Within a few decades the south of the country became the main area of rice production in Guinea-Bissau, and in 1963, the Balanta were responsible for 90 percent of the rice that entered commerce (Ribeiro 1988: 235). Their agricultural system was based almost exclusively on the production of rice and the accumulation of cattle.

In 1963, the population of Guinea-Bissau began a war against the Portuguese colonial domination that would come to an end in 1974, the year in which Guinea-Bissau became independent. The war would have consequences for the production of mangrove swamp rice, destroying much of its infrastructure and displacing populations. It is estimated that 70 percent of the cultivated area of Guinea was affected (Galli and Jones 1987: 112).

After independence, the prices of agricultural produce were kept artificially low and their exchange for essential goods was forced by state companies. Until 1986, the year in which the economy became a liberal one, the government maintained the monopoly of the commerce of rice and as a result there was a significant decrease in the production and exportation of rice while the quantity of rice imported increased (Kohnert 1988: 4; Galli and Jones 1987). Starting in 1989, as a result of a structural adjustment program, there was a liberalisation of the price of rice. However, the increase in the importation of low-cost rice kept the price of rice low and discouraged farmers from increasing rice production (Imbali 1992: 21; Dias 1990: 10; Fonseca 1990: 15-16). Attempting to address the issue of the rice deficit, the Guinea-Bissau government, provided with funds from international donors, invested in large projects to recover rice fields. However, most projects involved the construction of concrete dams, a method of recovery and rice field construction differing from the one which was traditionally practiced by farmers. The results were not positive, 'and instead of improving the situation they caused various problems, and in many cases the farmers asked for the destruction of the work accomplished' (Van Slobbe 1987: 1; see also Cruz 1986: 44). In the same period, centres for the improvement and diffusion of seeds were created. However, most of the varieties thus introduced were quickly rejected by farmers (Temudo 2011). The country remained with a rice deficit.

During the past three decades, agriculture in Guinea-Bissau has undergone a radical transformation. After the 1974 independence, the international prices of peanuts and palm kernels, the basis for the colonial economy, drastically decreased and a new cash crop gained importance: cashew nuts. Between 1979 and 2011, exports increased from 400t to 112,638t and Guinea-Bissau became the seventh largest world producer of cashew nuts (FAOSTAT 2013). From 2000 onwards, the exportation of cashew nuts made up an average of 99 percent of the country's total exports, making Guinea-Bissau the African country most dependent on a single export (World Bank 2010: 17). The production of cashew nuts in Guinea-Bissau is primarily by small farmers and there are practically no great owners of cashew orchards (Camará 2007: 13).

For the government, international agencies and various researchers, it is clear that farmers' investment in the mass cultivation of cashew trees has resulted in the decrease of the production of cereals and the exacerbation of the risk of alimentary insecurity (World Bank 2010: 86; Boubacar-Sid 2007: 84; MADR/FAO/PAM 2007: 7). The production of cashew, less demanding in terms of manpower, has allowed for successive waves of migration to Bissau, the country's capital. The increase in the country's population throughout the last three decades – from 766,739 inhabitants in 1979 to 1,548,159 inhabitants in 2009 – occurred mainly in Bissau, which grew by 352.5 percent within that time period (INEC 2009). In villages, the complaint that young people migrated to Bissau, leaving behind the elderly and the children, is commonly heard.

The cultivation of mangrove swamp rice, demanding in terms of labour, seemed especially affected. The lack of maintenance of existing infrastructure such as dykes and draining canals led to the abandonment of vast rice field areas and to an increase in the area occupied by mangrove forests (Lourenço et al. 2009). In 2008, the country's rice deficit was estimated at 86,243 tons (FAOSTAT 2013).

However, since 2009 we have made somewhat surprising observations that contradict this discourse. In the centre and south of the country, in the regions of Oio, Quinara and Tombali, we have witnessed the recovery of abandoned rice fields and the cutting of new areas of mangrove forest. The numbers presented by FAO for the production of rice, though unreliable and generally based on estimates, also corroborated our observations. A production that had decreased from 113,000t in 1995 to 89,000t in 2004 was now again increasing, especially from 2008 onwards, reaching 194,000t in 2011. This is a significant increase, especially taking into consideration that 2011 was a bad year in terms of rain and rice production. It is furthermore an increase which to a large extent, according to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, was due to the increase in the production of mangrove swamp rice (Lopes 2012). A fundamental change seems to have instigated the increase in production: in 2008, within a few months, the price of rice per kilogram rose from 250 CFA to 430 CFA (World Bank 2010: 100). In the previous years it had been best to produce cashew nuts to buy rice, but now the situation seemed to be inverted. From 1982 to 1992 the cashew nut had a higher price than rice; from 1992 to 1998 the price was equivalent; but from 2002 onwards the price of the cashew nut and of rice steadily diverged. Rice cultivation was once again worthwhile, and we thus observed the recovery of mangrove swamp rice fields in 2009.

But how was it possible to carry out work that is as demanding in terms of manpower as the cutting of mangrove forests and the construction of new dykes and draining canals, if young people had departed or refused to work?

In Guinea-Bissau, there is a common discourse that young people have abandoned the fields and migrated to the city. A process of 'depeasantization' has been described, which implies a decline in the time spent working in agriculture, in the income earned from agriculture and in household coherence as a labour unit, leading to rural out-migration (Bryceson 2002).

However, the ethnography of the Balanta-Nhacra rural world presented below suggests a process which is far more complex, and it reinforces Chaveau and Richard's (2008) idea that when we analyse processes of 'depeasantization' in the African context, structural factors must also be taken into account.

## Methodology

Ethnographic research on the Balanta people's agriculture was conducted in 2011, 2012 and 2013 by both authors, during eight months, under the framework of the project 'The prophetess and the rice farmer: innovations in religion, agriculture and gender', funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). The authors have personally been working in the country since 2008 (Bivar) and 1993 (Temudo).

In the first stage of research, various Balanta-Nhacra villages were observed in an attempt to understand the differences among the mangrove swamp rice systems of the centre and south of Guinea-Bissau. In the second stage, these production systems were described in greater detail in three case studies.

Between October and December 2012, with the support of a small grant from the Young People and Agri-Food theme of the Future Agricultures Consortium, the first author studied in greater detail the relationships of Balanta-Nhacra youth with the production of rice in a village (Enxalé) and attempted to understand the causes of migration to the city (Bissau). For that purpose, youths residing in Bissau who came from the villages where we had previously carried out fieldwork were accompanied and interviewed. It was especially interesting to accompany youths from these villages, as the conversations became concrete discussions on the matters of families, villages, rice fields and various problems familiar to both the interviewers and the interviewees.

In the village of Enxalé, the farming work of 18 households was followed, evaluating the availability and organisation of manpower, the distribution of the rice fields among the family members, the emigrated family members and the money they sent, the quantities and varieties of rice produced, and so on. The village's mangrove rice fields were georeferenced, identifying areas in which production was ongoing as well as abandoned areas.

Research methods included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and group discussions with a set of more than 60 young men (mostly) and women. Research is still ongoing. Interviews were conducted by the authors in Kriol or in Balanta using a Balanta to Kriol translator. In the text, Balanta words are followed by bl. and Kriol words by kr.

# 1. Zinc and straw

Leaving Bissau, after 100km of paved road, one cuts to the right and follows a dirt path surrounded by *Khaya senegalensis* trees and cashew orchards. One enters Enxalé down a long street lined with zinc rooftop houses and a mosque in the centre; this is the Mandinka neighbourhood. Beyond this street, close to the rice fields, are the three Balanta-Nhacra neighbourhoods. Whoever walks the paths surrounded by the *ipa* (bl., rice fields) of the Balanta neighbourhoods will see dispersed clusters of houses that resemble small fortresses built around a patio – these are the Balanta *kpam* (bl.). Around that *fiere* (bl.), a word that simultaneously means 'central patio' and 'world', there are various *futn* (bl.) – 'doors'. An extended family lives in a Balanta *kpam*, belonging to the same *kufade* (bl.), the exogamic patrilineal lineage of the Balanta-Nhacra. A *kufade* is usually spread across various *kpam*, in villages from the north to the south of the country. Each one of the *futn* can be defined as a household where a man belonging to the *kufade* resides along with his wives and children, owning rice fields and managing its own subsistence, separately from other *futn*.

The *fa n kpam* (bl.), the eldest of the circumcised men residing in the *kpam*, is responsible for communication with ancestors and spirits and for the various ceremonies involving the cultivation of rice, illnesses, funerary rites and so on. The well-being and protection of the *kpam*'s members depends on that relationship.

Each *kpam* owns fields of mangrove swamp rice, *thambé* (bl.) or *nhote* (bl), which are distributed among the various *futn* which exist in the *kpam*. To 'take a door' means to marry, to have a house of one's own, access to a parcel of the *kpam*'s rice fields for individual use and responsibility for supporting one's wives and children. The rice fields which belong to the *kpam* are inalienable and they can only be distributed among the various *futn* chiefs or pawned to someone from another *kpam* when they are not being used.

The Balanta Nhacra are the largest population in Enxalé and they are considered 'the owners of the land', as allegedly it was Matche, a Balanta-Nhacra man, who was the first to glimpse the large lowland of herbaceous specimens and mangrove next to the Geba River and to understand that this would be a land abundant in rice. And it was he who called people, divided the terrains and established a contract with the land's true owner – A., the spirit – so that the land would provide rice. It is due to this contract, which is maintained, that the Matche lineage is to this day responsible for communication with A., which is essential to prevent illnesses, for women to bear children, for the rain to fall and for the rice to grow free of bugs. Descending into the rice fields, the differences in production systems between the two ethnic groups which are dominant in the village – Mandinka and Balanta-Nhacra – become apparent. Next to the palm bushes (*Elaeis guineensis*), the Mandinka women use hoes to dig terrains where they sow rice. Further ahead, close to the mangrove, there is an endless arrangement of parcels cut up by dykes and draining canals. These are the fields where the Balanta women plant the rice plants in the terrains tilled by the Balanta men with their *kebinde* (bl.), a sort of elongated shovel with an iron edge. The differences between the two production systems are great and clearly favour the Balanta.

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**Figure 1. Aleiá and his cousin, tilling with their *kebinde* after the first rains.**

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**Figure 2. A Balanta *kpam*: adobe houses, straw roofs and *Prosopis africana*.**

Going up to the village, the differences are emphasised. While the Balanta *kpam* are full of animals – cows, pigs, chickens – the Mandinka houses have at most a few chickens and one or two goats. To an ignorant foreigner who visits the village for the first time, a question arises: why are the Mandinka houses covered with zinc sheets, a good which is highly desired by all farmers in Guinea-Bissau, while in Balanta houses the roof is generally made out of straw?

The apparent difference in wealth between the Balanta and the Mandinka was not restricted to the question of zinc and straw. In the Mandinka neighbourhood, during the night, televisions, generators, solar panels and motorcycles could be spotted. And while the Balanta youths wanted these objects, they rarely had them.

Various possible explanations emerged for this inequality in consumer goods. The most immediate one would seem to be the cashew cash crop.

The way in which the expansion of the cultivation of the cashew tree occurred in Enxalé would seem to be generalisable to the rest of Guinea-Bissau. A few years after the country's independence (in 1974), the Mandinka in Enxalé began sowing cashew. During preceding decades, access to the forest terrain had been free. The forest had been abundant, as while in other villages the Mandinka dedicated themselves to the production of groundnuts (the cash crop of the colonial period) in savannahs and forests, in Enxalé rice had been the primary cash crop during the period.

For years, possession of and access to the forest was not an issue. Later, from the 1990s onwards, when the Balanta started planting cashew trees, for the first time there was a need to divide savannahs and forests. After the civil war in 1998/1999, the search for land by people in the city for the plantation of cashew and mango orchards would have as a consequence the successive division of forests and savannahs which are increasingly distant from the village. Currently, there are people in Enxalé who have orchards eight kilometres away from the village. While a few decades ago the selling of forest terrain was unthinkable, today it is a common practice and it is difficult for an Enxalé youth to obtain land for the planting of an orchard without having to buy it.

The fact that the Mandinka preceded the Balanta in the production of cashew meant that for years they collected superior profits. However, while the Mandinka farmers practically abandoned the production of cereals, buying rice with cashew money, the Balanta farmers kept producing enough rice for their sustenance, rarely needing to buy it.

While in the Mandinka neighbourhood there were seven *boutique* (kr.) – little stores found throughout most villages in the country in which soap, oil, flip flops, cookies, tea and other goods are sold – in the three

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**Figure 3. The Mandinka street in Enxalé.**

Balanta neighbourhoods there was only one, which was considerably less well stocked. This sole store belonged to Mutna, a 30-year-old Balanta-Nhacra man, married and with two children. Mutna's path was not conventional for a Balanta youth. When only 14 years old, he had emigrated to Dakar, approximately 800km away, where he had worked as a painter, had learnt Wolof and French and had married a Balanta-Nhacra girl who studied in the Senegalese capital (which is also rather uncommon). With the death of his father, Mutna, being the eldest brother, was pressured by his family to return and ensure the sustenance of the various wives and children his father had left behind.

In October 2012, there was a persistent rumour in the Balanta *kpam*. A new store had opened right in the centre of the Mandinka neighbourhood which, unlike the other ones, belonged to a young Balanta-Nhacra – Nhina. The topic dominated conversations, which began with boasting of the young man's bravery yet ended with doubt: 'Ah! Let's see what happens!'

## 2. Envy and witchcraft

Nhina, less than 30 years old, had lived for more than 10 years in the capital. Despite being young and not living in the village, he was a *fa n kpam*, as his father had died and there were no men older than him who could take on the role. For years in Bissau, where he studied, he had sustained his mother, his younger brothers and his father's youngest wife, who he had been forced to marry after he died, making bamboo furniture which he sold on the street. Every year, in the rainy season, he sent money to contract groups of workers to till the family's fields. If the harvesting did not go well, he would send rice bags.

Returning to Enxalé was definitely not part of his plans. The village did not 'favour' him and he had, in his own words, problems. He had decided to open the store because it was an efficient way for his mother and his sibling to earning money so that he could spend the money he earned in Bissau on a medicine course

which he planned to take. But Nhina was well aware that opening the store was an outright challenge.

The comments made in the *kpam* and the repetition of sentences such as 'we'll see how this ends' had the clear meaning that Nhina had exposed himself to others' envy and that things may end badly because he had dared to do so. That is, he could become a victim of *futisu* (kr.), witchcraft – his *lite* (bl., soul) being delivered to an *ulê* (bl., spirit) in exchange for something.[4]

Among the Balanta-Nhacra, the act of witchcraft is restricted to members of the witch's lineage; for her to attack someone in another lineage she will have to do so with the cooperation of a member from that same lineage. Witchcraft is thus present within the *kpam* itself and the witch is usually a family member. At the entrance of the *kpam* there is usually a small barrack in which there are used pieces of iron – this is the *fadn* (bl.), the protection of the souls of the *kpam*'s people, animals and rice. This is the place in which each year small ribbons of cloth are blessed, later to be placed in the rice fields so that the rice's soul is not stolen.

Death and illnesses, rice plagues and contagious diseases are blamed on witches. An infection on a hand that does not allow one to hold the *kebinde* is caused by someone who is jealous of the great quantities of rice obtained. Witchcraft is present in the everyday lives of Balanta *kpam* and it is the justification for anything bad that happens.

The threat of witchcraft hovered over Nhina. By opening the store, Nhina stood out, giving the impression that he wanted to be 'more than his relatives', which caused envy and made him a potential target of witchcraft. A similar mechanism explained the fact that the majority of Balanta houses had no zinc roofs. To add a zinc roof to one's house, to buy a motorcycle, to open a store – all meant a display of individual wealth, and this was not acceptable.

The story of M. from the village of Bissássema in the south of the country is paradigmatic and we often hear similar reports in other villages. During the 1980s, before most people in the village did so, M. and his brother planted an orchard of cashew trees and with the money they made from the cashew nuts they bought cows. Later, M.'s brother sold some animals and added a zinc roof to his house. A week later he fell ill and died. 'He raised his head too high and the old men of the *kufade* didn't like it', M. told us on the porch of his straw-roofed house. Inside sat the zinc sheets that M. had also bought and that he now did not dare to use. The two brothers had not only dared to stand out by roofing the house with zinc, they had also sold cows for an individual expenditure before they carried out the appropriate mourning ceremony for their mother, who had just died at the time. They had dared to sell for individual expenditures something that was also considered the *kufade*'s property – its cattle.

## 3. Cattle and theft

In the recent past, especially after the anti-colonial struggle (1963–1974), accumulating cattle was practically the only form of accumulation allowed in the Balanta-Nhacra society. After the threshing of the new rice, the *fule* (bl.), the large clay pots in which the rice is preserved, were emptied, and whatever was left over was exchanged for calves which became part of the *kpam*'s herd.

The first of the male age classes into which uncircumcised youths are divided was responsible for taking care of cattle. Animals were the *kpam*'s wealth, but while pigs, for instance, were used to contract groups of workers to till the fields, cattle were not sold.

Cattle are wealth which is not revealed, distributed through friendship and familial networks, and few people besides the *fa ne kpam* know the number and location of the *kpam*'s cows. It is not by chance that throughout successive animal censuses and vaccination campaigns, it has been impossible to accurately determine the Balanta's quantity of cattle. On arrival at the *kpam*, the census officer may find a very large corral full of dung with only two cows in it. To display wealth is dangerous.

If each of the herd's cows has an owner, this owner cannot have the animal at their disposal without there being consensus. Ultimately, to make decisions on a cow, one is dependent on the *fa ne kpam* and sometimes on the assembly of the *kufade* elders. To sell a cow for a personal expenditure was unthinkable; to sell one of the *kufade*'s gelded bulls, especially meant for the mourning ceremony of a deceased elder, meant death.

To accumulate bovine cattle means displaying strength and prestige. To kill a large number of cattle in a mourning ceremony, flooding the ground with blood and distributing large quantities of flesh to those present, is to show that the deceased is an important person. The complexity of the *kpam* and *kufade*'s kinship relationships is demonstrated by the way the different parts of an animal are divided in a mourning ceremony, in which each piece of the animal's flesh is distributed according to very strict kinship rules.

But if cattle mean wealth, to have a large number means 'to have strength', that is to say, to have people and power. Without strength, the accumulated animals would soon disappear.

For years, Tagma Na Haie, a Balanta-Nhacra and a chief of the Guinea-Bissau armed forces, accumulated cattle. Many hundreds of cows grazed around the *kpam* where he was born, in the south of the country. When he was killed in an attack in 2009, the cattle disappeared within a few months. His inspiring, fear-inducing presence, which had ensured control over thefts and raids, was gone.

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**Figure 4. *Doquê nharê* (bl.) – literally cow keepers, the first of the age classes.**

In Guinea-Bissau, to speak of the Balanta-Nhacra with those who do not belong to this ethnic group means, in most cases, to end up talking about theft. Thus the literature of the last few centuries on this people is prolific on the topic. Álvares, describing the Balanta of the Geba River's margins in the early seventeenth century, wrote that 'they are all a bunch of thieves who mine the land to get to the corrals and attack the cattle' (c. 1615; 41). Nearly 300 years later, the story remained the same:

> The Balanta ... are a nation of thieves: stealing is a principle of education instilled by one's father ... If one of them gets adolescence without proving its value is told to him: 'So far you have not yet been able to bring anything home, you make me ashamed. At your age, I was famous in all the neighboring villages for my address. Who knows your name? Did you take an ox, a grain of rice? Go, get out of here!' ... The theft is not necessarily punished severely when the thief was caught. Indeed, if the thief is seized ... to be issued, it is obliged to inform his parents, who pay for his ransom one or two oxen. (Carrion 1891: 109)

These descriptions could as easily emerge in current conversations, and might not have been far from reality just a few years ago. A young Balanta-Nhacra who had not gone to *fo* (bl.), the circumcision ceremony, was encouraged to steal animals. He had the support of his *fa n kpam*, who carried out ceremonies to ancestors so that the ambushes went well. A stolen cow was given to friends or family and the profit from the milk and the calves was divided between the thief/owner and the keeper. The rules for stealing were, however, strict – to sell stolen cows and use the money for expenditures of one's own was abominable. When the day of the youth's *fo* arrived he would, with two cow horns on his head, confess to his thefts and from then on be forbidden from further stealing.

Balanta-Nhacra continued to accumulate cattle so they could be killed in mourning ceremonies for the elders who passed away, but now there was an increasing number of people who kept animals for their own benefit, for instance to buy zinc for their homes. This was an important change, and it meant that individual accumulation for personal expenditures was now allowed. For a profoundly egalitarian society, full of mechanisms meant to stop individual accumulation and ostentation, this was a radical change.

## 4. The pen and the plough

Each day in Enxalé, things happened which would have been unthinkable a decade ago. The straw roofs were replaced by zinc ones, Nhina opened his new store, and every morning the change went directly past our porch: dozens of children walking to school.

Before the civil war of 1998/1999, while the youths of other ethnic groups went to school en masse, there were few Balanta-Nhacra who did so. The biographies of youths who are thirty years old today and who completed middle or secondary school are stories of adversity, of fighting with those older than them to be allowed to study, of running away from home and of various forms of work to manage to pay for fees, pens and notebooks. A schooled son was synonymous with abandoning the family and leaving for the city; with being left without

arms to till the rice fields. Now, on the contrary, the youth said, 'the older people have let go of us to go to school', and it was the parents who made their children go.

On the porch of Isnába's house, on the *Borassus aethiopum* beam that supports the zinc roof, hung what seemed to be the metaphor for change. During the six day period in which a mother and a newborn child are secluded in their house, it was a custom of the Balanta-Nhacra to place on the beams of the porch where they rested a wooden plough and rope, if the child was a boy, or if the child was a girl, a small plough and a bundle of *sangalá* (bl.), a medicinal plant used to wash the uterus after birth.

The small plough, a miniature of the *kebinde* (bl.), was placed with a clear meaning – 'this child was born to be a great rice tiller'. The small plough and the *sangalá* bundle expressed the desire and prediction that the girl that had just been born would give birth to an endless number of children and would thresh endless amounts of rice. In the case of boys, the meaning of the rope is perhaps less clear to outsiders: 'a great cow thief has been born'.

But on the porch of the house where Isnába's wife had just given birth it was not a plough or a rope that was hanging. It was a paper and a pen. Isnába wanted his children to go to school and to find a good 'secretary job' far away from the village. Even though he had completed high school in Bissau, Isnába had been forced to return to the village after his father's death to ensure his family's sustenance. He did not want for his own children what had been desired for him, and what had resulted in a situation he faced as something of a fatality: a life focused on the cultivation of the family's rice fields. And Isnába did not want to even hear of the rope, as what he definitely did not want for his newborn was a successful future as a cow thief. Talking to other youths, in Enxalé and other villages, Isnába's choice was not an exception. Many placed papers and pens on their porches, asking for a future in school; others placed a plough and a pen or simply nothing, leaving the child's future open so that he or she could design it his or herself.

The anti-colonial war seems to have been the first moment of this process of change. When the war started in 1963, the younger Balanta-Nhacra quickly joined it, soon representing the majority of fighters. The decentring of Balanta society, the organisation into age groups (some of them trained to fight), the tensions between youths and elders and the fact that they were subjected to forced labour by the colonial administration are all factors which contributed to a fast and en masse adhesion by Balanta youths (Temudo 2009: 52; Chabal 1983: 69). During the struggle, not only did fighters have access to education, but also many children refugees in forest camps went to so-called 'bush classes' and some were even sent outside the country to receive training. An example of this is Sana Na N'Hada, from Enxalé: sent to Cuba during the war to study cinema, he became one of

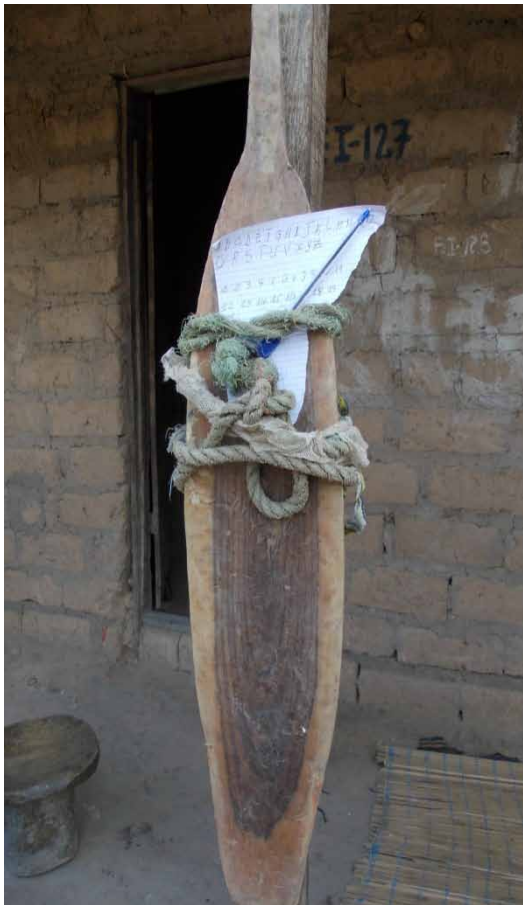

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**Figure 5. The *kebinde,* the paper and the pen.**

Guinea-Bissau's first filmmakers. However, after the end of the struggle in 1974, as they returned to the villages, the youths felt a regression in the conquests they had made, as they were still prevented from going to school.

In 1994, the year of the first 'free' elections in Guinea-Bissau, which had until then been governed in a single party regime (Amílcar Cabral's PAIGC), new signs of change emerged. Kuma Yala, a PAIGC dissident and a Balanta man (though not a Balanta-Nhacra), seemed to be responsible for a will for modernisation that emerged among the Balanta.

Voicing the Balanta population's sense of injustice at having been distanced from positions of political leadership after the struggle, Kumba Yala maintained that it was necessary to move beyond the basic factors of anti-Balanta stigma and the main way to do so would be to send children to school. However, it would only be after the civil war of 1998/1999, a time of profound change, that older Balanta people would admit the need for their children to study.

'For years we were deceived because we did not know how to read'; 'we need to abandon the darkness'. To go to school was profoundly connected to a desire to move beyond the stigma that the Balanta had suffered for decades.

## 5. Elders, youth and household defragmentation

While going to school is a massive change for Balanta-Nhacra youths, it seems that changes to the principal male ritual have had the largest impact on the relationships between elders and youths. After the *fo*, the circumcision ritual, a young man is considered an adult. Until this point, he is a child, unworthy of attention, 'without a head', someone who should not sit with the adults.

The group of youths who undergo the *fo* remain in seclusion in the woods for two months, away from the village. They are circumcised and they receive what are considered the essential lessons for an adult. After the *fo*, one is a 'big man', with a right over the children one eventually has, with a *futn* of one's own and a parcel of the *kpam*'s rice fields. The *fo* is to this day the fundamental moment in which a youth acquires the rights of an adult and comes to participate fully in the village's political life, and it would be a small change in the *fo* that would come to change the entire dynamic between elders and youths.

Before 1963, one went to the *fo* with 'white hair'. Some authors refer to 40 years old as the usual age at which one underwent *fo* before the anti-colonial struggle (Callewaert 2000). The war broke the *fo* sequence, which happened every four years (Temudo 2009: 54; Drift 1990: 103), and after the end of the struggle the young men began to be circumcised at a younger age. However in the 80s, in the south of the country, the *fo* was carried out at the age of 32–36 (de Jong 1987). Now, it is common to meet 18-year-olds who have already been circumcised.

Reducing the age of *fo* meant that adult rights were obtained earlier and the situations of conflict between youths and elders were reduced – such as the children of an uncircumcised man not being considered his own. By altering the *fo*, the entire age class system into which young men are divided was changed: the *doque nhare*, cattle keepers; the *nghaie* (bl.), prepared for fighting, dancing and singing, responsible for unwed girls (generally under 15 years old) but forbidden from having sex with them; and the *nhesse* (bl.), the age class at which men were sexually initiated with married women[5].

Now one became part of these classes earlier in life, which meant access to certain rights – such as the option of having sexual intercourse – earlier. And this wasn't just an age reduction; now one did things that would have been severely punished a few years earlier. While before the civil war of 1998/1999 it was unacceptable for a young *nghaie* to impregnate an unwed girl or his *benanga* (bl.), the married woman by whom he would later be sexually initiated,[6] it was now common for *nghaies* to be fathers and to steal women from their spouses.

The now common phenomenon of pregnancy before marriage was seen by many as a form of rebellion against traditional marriage. Among the Balanta-Nhacra, it was up to the wife of a married man to bring young girls to be raised in their home so that later they could marry her husband, or sometimes, one of her sons.

But if the reduction of the age of *fo* can be seen as a conquest of rights by the younger generation, it can also be interpreted as a strategy of the elders – a way of dealing with tensions which had become explosive, and with the progressive decrease in gerontocratic power which had begun with the liberation struggle.

For a *futn* chief with less power it became increasingly difficult to control a large household and the fact that young men were circumcised at a later age meant that there were necessarily more people in a household. Allowing young men to have their independence earlier reduced the number of people in each household and made each one responsible for their own wives and children. For elders, endowing youths with independence earlier on was a way of fighting the 'laziness' and the absenteeism which they thought had grown during the anti-colonial struggle.

But how did an agricultural system such as the mangrove swamp rice system, the success of which depended on the ability to recruit large quantities of manpower for short time-spans, react to the progressive fragmentation of the *kpam* into many households? How would structures common to all be maintained, such as dykes, draining canals and hydraulic pumps, in a period of progressive individualisation?

## 6. How to harvest rice without arms to work?

The generalised destruction of *bolanhas* (kr.), mangrove swamp rice fields, in Guinea-Bissau over the past few decades is very visible: it has left vast abandoned areas with the remainders of dykes, terrains where the mangrove grows again or on which salt pools have formed. A lack of manpower, irregular rains and changes in the tides are the causes blamed for this destruction. In conversations with older Balanta-Nhacra people, we observe that the expansion of the cultivation of cashew trees is fundamental to this abandonment. Cashew, less demanding in terms of manpower, allowed for the migration of young people to Bissau, leaving behind elders and children who sustained themselves with cashew tree orchards.

On the matter of the relationship between the production of cashew and that of mangrove swamp rice, a Guinea-Bissau researcher wondered in 1979:

> What will come to be the future relationship between the tremendous demand for cashew nut and rice production itself? Will it come to confirm Balanta autonomy ... by ensuring a viable means of exchange while not harming the production of rice, or will it disrupt that production, given how easy it will be to find rice? (Ribeiro 1988: 9)

The answer seems clear: for the last few decades, the cashew nut has allowed for the reduction of the production of rice.

In 2009, however, the situation seemed to be inverted. In many Balanta-Nhacra villages that we visited, we witnessed the recovery of abandoned rice fields or even the raising of new dykes and the cutting down of mangrove forests for the construction of new rice fields. The increase in the price of rice starting in 2008 seems to have been determining, as well as the instability of the price of cashew nuts. It was no longer possible to live exclusively off the sale of cashew nuts.

The question that arose was: how were villages which were supposedly lacking manpower increasing their rice production?

In Enxalé, it was clearly visible through Google Earth in images from 2009 that the mangrove forest was being cut down for the construction of new fields.

Enxalé had been a large centre of rice production during the colonial period, but unlike many other villages, during the anti-colonial struggle its rice fields were not bombed and the production of rice was maintained, as the village was a colonial army base. It would be later, post-independence, that vast areas of less productive and less deep *bolanha* appeared in which varieties of short cycle rice (often *Oryza glaberrima*) were cultivated.

In Figure 6, we can see the area of abandoned *bolanha* next to the village. During the 1990s, unlike other ethnic groups that almost completely abandoned the production of cereal, Balanta farmers were able in years of favourable rain to cultivate the rice needed for their sustenance. However, few continued producing surplus rice quantities and most of them dedicated themselves to the cultivation of cashew orchards.

Now, in 2009, many of the shallower *bolanh*a were being cultivated again and some farmers were cutting down mangroves and building new dykes (see Figure7). The silting of the Geba River and the increase in the mangrove area which are clearly visible in Figure 7 allowed farmers such as Gueléte and Bedan Wali to expand their rice fields by cutting down mangrove.

Knowing Gueléte and Bedan Wali's *kpam* in greater detail, there was nothing that set them apart from any other *kpam*. They did not have a greater capacity of manpower recruitment, nor a lack of rice fields. The decision to build new rice fields was an individual decision motivated by the desire to produce surplus rice.

Cashew, which for years allowed farmers to reduce rice farming, now seemed to be fundamental for the increase in production. Until the 1980s, Balanta farmers depended almost exclusively on the production of rice. In years with low production levels, whether the result of little rain or of expenditures in big ceremonies such as the *fo* or funerals, farmers had no choice but to resort to forest produce to feed themselves. The *foia* (bl.) fruit (*Icacina oliviformis*), ripe in the period before the rice harvest, was especially important.

The investment in the cultivation of cashew, the farming of which is done between March and June, gave farmers a source of income and a means of obtaining food in a period of the year which used to be especially critical.

Unlike other ethnic groups which progressively abandoned a polyculture to dedicate themselves to the cashew monoculture, the Balanta-Nhacra diversified their productive system by abandoning the rice monoculture and investing in the cultivation of cashew trees.

Success in the production of mangrove swamp rice depends on the ability to mobilise large quantities of manpower within a short period of time. The halomorphic soils of the *bolanha* are as hard as iron before the first rains and they do not allow for a progressive tillage, paced in a larger timeframe. After the first rains it is necessary to quickly till the fields, as the rainy season can be short and the rice must be planted as soon as possible. During this period, the *kpam* resort to the hiring of work groups that exist in all villages, usually divided by neighbourhoods and age groups. A farmer depends on the hiring of one of these groups for the rapid tilling of his rice fields, for which he will usually have to pay a pig or the equivalent in money, along with food, drink and tobacco. According to some farmers, during the last few decades the price of work groups has become increasingly high, especially due to the increase in demands other than pay. The mutual aid system normally practiced between two or three *kpam* had also been, in many cases, abandoned, as well as the collective rotary tilling practice by all of the *futn* in a *kpam*. Now, some reports indicate a decrease in the demands made by work groups and a reactivation of the practices of aid among *kpam*.

The existence of income from cashew seems to be enabling the availability of resources for the hiring of manpower.

In the case of Enxalé, the strategy has been to extend and introduce new rice production techniques which are less demanding in terms of manpower. If some years ago most rice fields were planted, now the direct seeding of pre-germinated seeds was used, a technique called *biula* which was supposedly invented by a man with no wife or children – an indication of what it means in terms of manpower reduction.

Furthermore, the *ipa* (bl., ponds) in which the rice is seeded to be later transplanted, which used to be dug close to the houses, were now systematically being

placed in drier parts of the rice fields, meaning less people were needed to carry the plants.

While the growing individualisation which is the dominant tendency in Balanta villages (a tendency which cashew has enabled) seems to be working relatively well in terms of the individual tilling of each *futn*, the management of *bolanha* infrastructures common to everyone, which is necessarily a collective effort, seems to have been negatively affected. The main dyke that keeps saltwater out and the draining canals are the most problematic cases (see Figure 7). In many of the *bolonha* that we visited, the causes of abandonment were related to the entrance of saltwater due to ruptures in the main dyke. Maintenance had not been kept up with the necessary frequency, and a rupture could mean many rice fields were destroyed. Without the participation of all those affected by a dyke's rupture in its repair, some refuse to do it because they don't want to invest in work which will benefit those who have not worked, thus creating a vicious cycle in which the dyke ends up failing. In Enxalé, however, the main dyke is not a problem. During the season of higher tides, which usually carry risk for dykes, the water of the river that bathes Enxalé (a saltwater river which is fresh after the rain) is fresh and its entrance brings no problems to the rice. In Enxalé, the main problem has been the collective management of the draining canals. At the centre of the Enxalé *bolanha* there is a depression where pools form during the rainy season. In Figure 6, we can clearly see what the silting of the draining canals has meant: vast abandoned areas in the centre of the *bolanha* due to excess water during the rainy season.

Perhaps the erosion of gerontocratic power and consecutive issues in the mobilisation of manpower for the maintenance of the *bolanha*'s collective infrastructures is a problem that will worsen. However, in Enxalé the canals are not silted because there are unused and available rice fields. In the neighbouring village of Malafo, when the rice fields were no longer enough, a group of youths silted a canal that did not drain for more than 30 years and which prevented a vast area of rice fields from being used. Here, things don't look that bad.

## 7. Agriculture is not the problem, but here we have to share everything!

Between October and September 2012, we systematically asked young Balanta-Nhacra what had changed in their villages and what they would like to see change. The homogeneity of the replies, which were repeated from person to person and from village to village almost without variation, surprised us. In most cases, what the youths wanted to see change was the effective materialisation of changes which were already occurring. In their replies, it was clear that we were in a period of total transformation, a quickly changing present in which changes which had timidly begun in villages here and there were now becoming general.

Those we refer to as youths here and to whom we asked questions are not only those who are considered youths within the Balanta-Nhacra society, that is, those that have not yet undergone the *fo*. Most of the interviews were done to uncircumcised youths in the *nghaie, nhesse* and *thom* age classes (between 16 and 25 years old, approximately), but also to recently circumcised youths who, despite already having adult rights, still considered themselves youths and socialised with people their own age.

The great changes that these youths said they have witnessed within their lifetime were the now generalised access to school for much younger children (both boys and girls); the reduction of the age of *fo*; less grandiose mourning ceremonies with fewer animals killed; the end of forced marriage; and the diminution of the hunger that preceded the rice harvest. These changes had been progressing with greater intensity since the civil war of 1998/1999 and were now general to all villages.

The changes they desired were the end of the obligation to kill animals for mourning ceremonies, of forced marriage and of the theft and attacking of cattle as an institution. All of these were, in fact, underway. In each village which we visited, we heard stories of girls who had escaped marriage, of ceremonies in shrines to prevent thefts, of the increase in the sanctions applied to thieves and of elders who died without indicating the number of animals that should be killed at their funeral.

These changes were desired not only by the young, who fought the elders to impose them, but rather by everyone: elders and youths, women and men. These changes were seen as fundamental for the Balanta to effectively enter modernity and finally leave the 'dark'.

Not only was the number of animals killed for mourning ceremonies reduced, but the date on which they were carried out was changed as well. While ceremonies previously happened in June, in the season of the rice's tillage, necessarily harming production, now they happened in April, a period in which there was little work. *Fo*, which necessarily demand enormous investments by all involved and which also had occurred in May and June, had now shifted to March, April and May.

The measures and alterations seemed to go in the one direction: to allow for accumulation and the acknowledgement of individual effort. In other words, to end the Balanta logic of intensive work and of collective accumulation destined to be spent in a single moment of the year.

But despite these measures, despite everyone's desire for change, it was still 'heavy' to stand out. To add a zinc roof to one's house without having carried out one's father's mourning ceremony was still a display of courage; to refuse arranged marriage often brought girls severe problems; and for Nhina and Mutna, it had not been easy to open their stores.

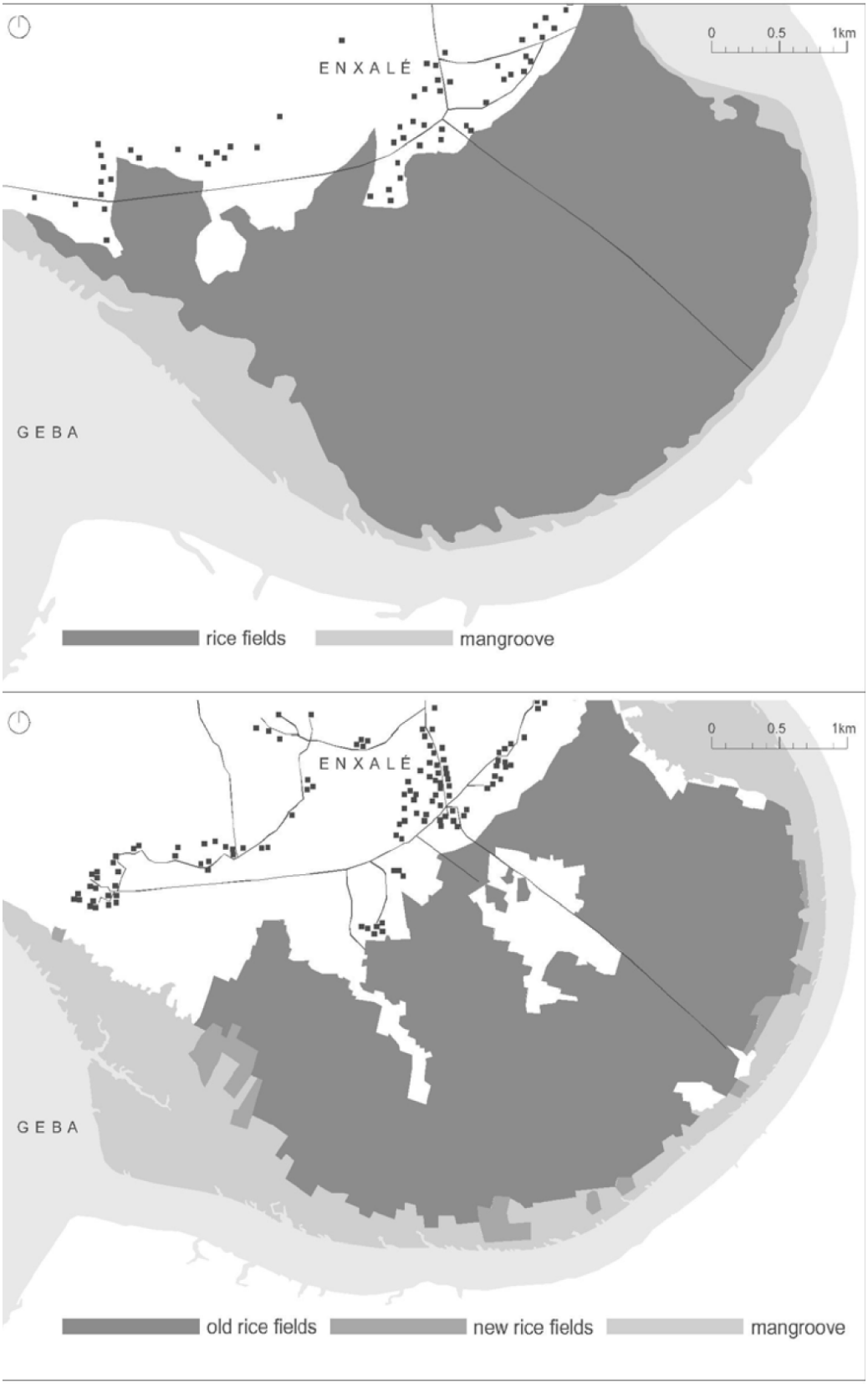


**Figure 6. Area occupied by rice fields in 1955 (based on a Military Charter made through aerial photographs from 1955) and in 2009 (based on a 2009 Google Earth satellite image and a GPS georeference from 2012).**

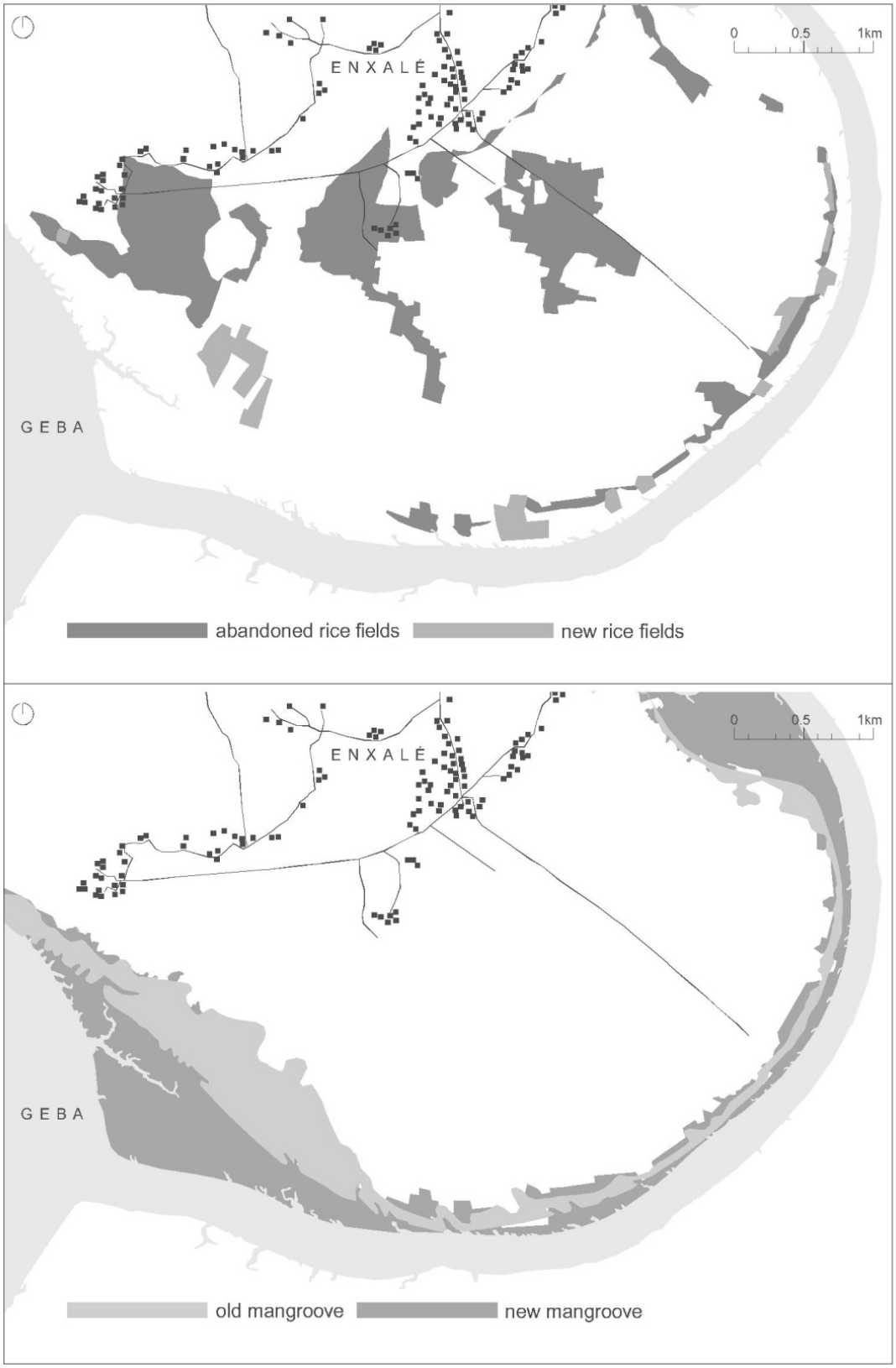


**Figure 7. Rice fields which were abandoned between 1950 and 2009 and rice fields being constructed in 2009 (the comparison of the area occupied by rice fields between 1950 and 2009 is reductive, as during these decades there were advances and declines in production. However, though there are aerial photographs of Guinea-Bissau in 1978, it has not yet been possible to analyzyse these images). The sources are the same as those for figure Figure 6.**

In Enxalé, Sufri, a young 18-year-old *nhesse*, spoke with anger: 'I want to get out of here'. Sufri's discourse was the discourse that we repeatedly heard among Enxalé youths, a wish repeated to the point of exhaustion.

Not that Sufri and the other youths didn't know how hard life was in Bissau, the primary destination of migration for most youths who left the villages, and in their eyes the first stop before departure to 'the white people's land' – or, since news of the European crisis had begun arriving, to Angola, where there was said to be oil money and people spoke Portuguese.

After the coup on the 12th of April 2012, the situation in Bissau seemed even more difficult. Civil construction had practically stopped and investors were fearful, which meant the end of the odd jobs in construction that many youths who migrated from the countryside depended on for survival. It was said of Bissau that one only ate once a day there, while in the village the food was abundant and no-one starved. In the countryside rice was plentiful, fish was cheap and fruit was available – a sentiment expressed as often as the wish to 'get out of here', and a sort of mantra repeated as self-consolation by those who saw themselves confined to the village.

After days sitting on Sufri's porch, it was possible to more clearly understand his desire to disappear at any cost. Sufri was well aware that maybe it was easier to get food and even some money in the village, but for Sufri, staying meant he could never get anywhere. In his home, with his family, in his *kpam*, close to his *kufade*, no matter how much he worked and collected, he would never have anything.

Later, from November 2012 onwards, we established contact with youths from Enxalé or other Balanta-Nhacra villages who had migrated to Bissau. Some had gone to study and had stayed, residing in houses that belonged to their families or in rented rooms. Most of them lived off of odd jobs, or were unemployed. During the rainy season, some returned to the village to help in the rice tillage and some sent money to help hire workers, while others simply went to the village to collect a bag of rice. But one thing was truly common to all of these youths: they all wanted to find good work in the city or abroad and they did not at all wish to return to the villages of their birth.

Confronting these youths with the fact that it was almost impossible for them to find good work in Bissau and asking them what strategy they had conceived for their lives, seeing as they had no intention of returning to their villages, the answer was at first surprising. Surprising, because it involved agriculture. The way these youths intended to solve their problems involved finding land (given or bought, but in most cases bought) to plant cashew trees or other fruit trees such as lime, banana or mango, along with peanuts, potatoes, beans and cassava. These youths' distaste wasn't with agricultural work itself, though it was seen as a last resort; their problem was with returning to the village, to their *kpam*, to the impossibility of accumulating or standing out without inciting envy. After hearing these youths' replies, it made sense to us that the roads that head south were full of small properties – *pontas* (kr.) – belonging to youths who had recently migrated there.

Outside of the village, away from the *kufade*, one was a guest and a guest was cherished by everyone. There, no-one knew 'one's secrets', which meant it was difficult for them to hurt a person. This was also Sufri's point. The problem was not agriculture, but rather the compulsive obligation of complete sharing and the impossibility of doing so without inciting envy.

Familial conflict, envy and witchcraft are not at all new causes for Balanta migration. Ingrid Callewaert points out that beyond the classical explanations for Balanta-Nhacra migration towards the south during the twentieth century – colonial occupation, imposition of taxes and demographic pressure – one cannot ignore intra-familial conflicts expressed through witchcraft (Callewaert 2000: 32). Roy van der Drift also claims that the massive Balanta migration after 1890, usually interpreted as a rejection of submission to an external authority and a desire for the protection of their autonomy, should be interpreted as the result of internal conflicts within the Balanta society itself, especially in the form of rebellion by youths who felt exploited by elders (van der Drift 2000: 151). In interviews we carried out in *kpam* in the south, besides the scarcity of rice fields, wars and forced labour, 'persistent illnesses' are also indicated as a motivation for migration. There are also veiled references to internal conflicts within the *kpam* and possible witchcraft attacks. In Guinea-Conacri, among the Balanta who, having migrated from Tombali, till rice along with the Baga, the matter of 'illness' was also a frequent reply to our inquiries (Temudo 2009).

Conflicts among youths and elders, witchcraft, escape and migration did not seem to be new phenomena. In June 1983, Ntombikte, a Balanta-Nhacra woman, about 35 years old, fell ill in the south of Guinea-Bissau. A year later, her only son died. Soon after, she was contacted in her dreams by Nghala, the supreme Balanta god, who led her to discover medicinal herbs and various forms of cure and who transmitted to her commandments which she was to communicate to her people. The commandments completely questioned the traditional Balanta-Nhacra society. About 40 young women and some young men began having dreams, were summoned by Nghala and joined Ntombikte. By 1985 the movement, which came to be called Kyang Yang, had spread throughout the entire country. In January 1986 about a thousand people declared themselves as Kyang Yang, and in certain villages in the south of the country, 16 percent of women had converted. The Balanta-Nhacra population was ebullient, but the government soon repressed the movement. Joop de Jong, a psychiatrist who had accompanied the Kyang Yang movement from the start, described it as 'a complete social phenomenon' (de Jong 1987).

The commandments that Nghala sent his followers through dreams or possessions stood for radical changes: the destruction of ancestors' shrines; the abandonment of witchcraft practices; interdiction against killing all of

a deceased person's animals during their mourning ceremony; an end to cattle stealing; the need for each person to gain their wealth through their own work; that all children should be sent to school (including girls); that each Balanta should be free to choose their own husband or wife; that agricultural production should be diversified; and that one should not depend exclusively on rice.

The commandments that Nghala sent his Kyang Yang followers went against the traditional gerontocratic principles which structured the Balanta-Nhacra society. Tearing down the ancestors' shrines and beginning direct communication with god meant the power of elders was negated, based as it was on monopoly over that communication, which is essential for the well-being of all of a *kpam*'s members. According to the Kyang Yang, the Balanta were the first to be summoned by god because of their delay when compared to other ethnic groups.

According to de Jong, the conditions in which Ntombike, the prophetess, grew up were determining for the creation of a movement with these features. During the liberation war period (1963–1974), Ntombikte witnessed abrupt social changes in a time of tension between youths and elders and between men and women. During the liberation struggle, Balanta youths joined the PAIGC en masse and became a large share of the anti-colonial fighters. This mass adhesion by youths has been interpreted in various ways, but to a large extent it is understood as a form of rebellion against the gerontocratic power. To join the struggle meant leaving the elders' protection and surveillance. At the beginning of the struggle, there was successive news of Balanta youths who became allies to an institution in the Balanta society: the f*iereyabte* (bl.), groups of women who developed anti-witchcraft activities, killing dozens of people they accused of being witches. The Balanta youths were completely out of control until 1964, when the PAIGC organised a congress and decided to execute some of them (Chabal 1983: 72).

The Kyang Yang has been interpreted as a form of struggle against the power of the elders but was mostly, as Ingrid Callewaert made clear in the years that she lived with Ntombikte and various members of the movement, a means of fighting witchcraft (Callewaert, 2000). It is significant that many of those who received messages from Nghala became healers, often specialising in rescuing stolen souls from witches. For Callewaert, Ntombikte wanted to end a society in which well-being was ensured through the relationship with ancestors and elders and through gifts and sacrifices made in their name; she wanted to end the vicious cycle of divination, spirit demands and envy within the family expressed in the form of witchcraft, turning to a belief exclusively focused on Nghala (Callewaert 2000: 16). The movement radically questioned the worship of spirits and ancestors as the basis of the gerontocratic power and it became an anti-witchcraft movement, based on the idea that 'kinship engenders witchcraft'. The Kyang Yang was a fight against witchcraft, attempting to abolish ancestor worship.

The Kyang Yang movement would have a short lifespan. Scared by the scale of the phenomenon, in May 1985 the government of Guinea-Bissau began systematically pursuing the movement's members. The then-Vice President of the republic, Paulo Correia, a Balanta-Nhacra himself, attempted to intervene. However, the repression was intensified and members of the movement were arrested. In November 1985, several Balanta, among them Paulo Correia and other famous figures, were accused of preparations for a coup. Many were executed, a moment which is still very present in the minds of the Balanta as a direct attack on their ethnic group. The movement ended, but many of its members continued their activities as healers who treat victims of witchcraft.

Tense relationships between youths and elders have been a constant in Balanta society, relationships of both danger and protection. The power that the *fa ne kpam* holds as an intermediary between the living and the spirits works for both good and evil and is the source of quarrels over its possession and of constant accusations of witchcraft within the family. However, the youths also have power. Youths in the *nghaie* age stage, for instance, are well-treated by everyone and receive food in all the *kpam* that they visit. No-one dares deny them food, as to do so is to expose oneself to being badmouthed as one characteristically is by the *nghaie*; it is to be the potential topic of a song and, in extreme cases, to be accused of witchcraft. Being accused of being a witch by a group of youths is usually fatal and an elder can do nothing against it, having no alternative but to flee. At best, the youths will refuse to till one's rice fields; at worst, one can be beaten to death.

When the Kyang Yang appeared, the elders, who would seem to lose most from the changes put forth, watched the group tear down shrines without acting. The changes might be convenient to everyone – youths and elders, men and women – after all.

As de Jong wrote, 'the Kyang Yang was not only a movement of cultural renovation but also a process of socio-economic renovation'. After its early end, the Kyang Yang continues to be identified as a fundamental moment for the decrease in witchcraft accusations, and the commandments that Nghala transmitted to the Balanta in the 1980s have today practically come to fruition.

## 8. Monotheisms – another way of escape

When M.'s brother died, according to M. due to having added a zinc roof to his house before he carried out his mother's mourning ceremony and thus inciting the rage of the elders in the *kufade*, M. escaped to the home of a maternal uncle in the neighbouring village. M. himself had felt the beginning of illness in his body. M.'s escape to his maternal uncle's home was not accidental. The mother's *kpam* is the place where one can find protection from witchcraft attacks, the place that protects one against the people in one's own *kufade*. The relationship with the mother's brothers is one of play, while the relationship with the elders in the *kufade* is of fear and respect. And it is because the mother's *kpam* is a place of protection against attack that in many, if not most, Balanta-Nhacra *kpam* there are nephews who ended up staying there, getting married, building a house and receiving a part of the *kpam*'s rice fields to till. Asking what the reason was for them abandoning their *kpam*, the answer is, almost without exception, illness. Either one's own, or one's mother's. But not only did M. stay in his uncle's house until he was cured, he also converted to Pentecostalism – in his uncle's village there had been, for several years, a Dutch evangelical mission. M. returned to his village, where he began preaching this new religion: 'If someone was ill, I would show them the way, tell them that I had been cured, that after conversion they no longer had strength, that their power accomplished nothing, because God has more strength.' Religion figured here as a protection against witchcraft attacks. Within a few years, there were many evangelicals in Bissássema. A church and a school were built and missionaries came from outside to support the campaign.

Today, those who seek to convert the Balanta to a monotheistic religion are well aware that an offer of protection is an efficient argument in gathering believers.

Maulana Kumba, a Balanta-Nhacra, converted to Islam in Morocco. After a turbulent life, he returned home with the purpose of converting his fellow townsmen en masse. As a Balanta, Maulana knew exactly what most weighed down and tormented his relatives. This is why entire villages had so successfully been converted over the last few years. He also offered water pumps and constructed schools. It wasn't only those who hadn't converted to one of the religions of the book that Maulana had gathered, but also those who had already converted to Catholicism decades ago. According to Maulana, the Catholic Church had made a mistake. It had been too tolerant regarding Balanta traditions and in doing so it had offered no protection against that from which people wanted to free themselves. Maulana supported the end of mourning ceremonies and strongly claimed that no animals should be killed for them. Maulana destroyed the *bombolons* (bl.), instruments made out of carved-out trunks which are played at funerals and which represent the relationship with the ancestors, and declared the end of offerings to ancestors and spirits. He offered complete reassurance of divine protection against anyone who might wish one harm, as long as one showed enough strength in their beliefs. When we spoke to Maulana in 2012, plenty of people had already converted and the news of mass conversions of over 5000 per day kept appearing.

Both Maulana and the evangelical missionaries knew exactly what upset people. This is why, in missionaries' speeches, the word *futiceru* (kr., witch) was used as a synonym for Satan as well as for those who had not yet converted, the worst accusation that can fall on someone.

As a Balanta, Maulana had not gone so far as to defend the end of the *fo*. Youths who had converted to Pentecostalism went further and systematically refused to do it. The elders saw this as abominable, unthinkable and terrible, but they crossed their arms and simply said 'it's his choice, he'll see what happens to him'. There were also many cases of Pentecostal girls who refused to marry according to the rules and took shelter in missions.

Conversion to Pentecostalism or to Islam, along with migration, were possible means of escape. By migrating or converting, it was more difficult to be a victim of witchcraft and it was easier to accumulate freely.

## Conclusion

Between January and March 2012, the political situation in Guinea-Bissau was strained. The reason for this was the campaign for the presidential elections. After the necessary absolute majority was not attained in the first round of the elections, two candidates ran against each other: Carlo Gomes Junior, seen in the villages as representing the city's Creole elite, and Kumba Yala, supported by most Balanta.

Each day, rumours about the imminence of a coup circulated. When the results of the second round gave the win to Carlos Gomes Junior, there was indeed a coup, on the 12th of April 2012. The military took power and designated a new government which was in practice commanded by the military and Kumba Yala.

On the porches of the *kpam* people celebrated Carlos Gomes's expulsion from the country and the end of his government, which was accused of the death of various Balanta people, and on the radio and people's iPhones the songs of Domingos de Broska, the most famous Balanta singer, were played:

> They ran and they're gone
> That liar
> When the rain already sparkled
> They got on their way and left
>
> That man fell in the water, boom!
> Fell ass-first in the water
> He said he fooled the Balanta
> He saw us sitting
> Suspicious of each other and
> He took advantage

That bastard is too daring
He made us lose our minds
Now he fell in the water, boom!
Leave! Leave! Leave! Leave! Leave!

Domingos's lyrics, sung in the Balanta language and full of metaphors, were not comprehensible to most non-Balanta people. Throughout the decade his songs reveal a feeling of deep discrimination common to the entire Balanta population, and they speak of current everyday discussions: the injustice of the situation to which the Balanta had been subjected after the end of the anti-colonial war, and the successive estrangement (and even killing) of Balanta politicians. It was said that other ethnic groups saw the Balanta as dirty, uncivilised and barbaric.

The desire to overcome the stigma imparted on them for decades seems to be one of the main reasons for the changes underway in Balanta society. When we talked about school, the end of thefts and mourning ceremonies, the justification provided for this much change was the affirmation that the Balanta could no longer be seen as dumb, rough and without the ability to manage, as if they were only good for war.

Increases in production also seem to be part of this change. Agriculture was seen as a means of obtaining the desired modernity, of paying for children's education, of buying clothes and roofing houses in zinc. This was true for youths who couldn't or didn't want to leave their villages as well as for those who had emigrated to the city. For this purpose, for agriculture to have that role, it was necessary to end the customs which had left the Balanta 'in the dark' and which had prevented what was obtained through agriculture from being part of an individual project.

In June 2013, the time at which we finished this article, the situation in Guinea-Bissau is still uncertain. New elections have not yet occurred, rumours circulate of further coups, the military and political leaders have been systematically accused of drug trafficking and the country has been branded as a narco-state and one of the main storage points for cocaine coming from South America. In the countryside, the situation is not good. The campaign for the commercialisation of cashew, the main source of income, has so far been disastrous.

The mechanisms that prevented individual accumulation and the existence of compulsive sharing were, for a long time, efficient ways of confronting times of crisis. How will the rural Balanta-Nhacra society react to these situations in the future? Some of the changes underway cause some doubt. For years, the forest was abundant and available to all. Now, it begins to be scarce. For years, the *kpam*'s rice fields, their inalienable property, allowed the entire family to survive. Now, we hear of people who are selling their *bolanha*...

However, after decades of abandonment of rice production and of state and NGO projects to support the reconstruction of rice fields which proved to be failures, farmers have increased production again. They accomplished this by themselves and with their own resources. Agriculture now seems to be more appealing to young people, decreasing the factors of conflict between youths and elders, as well as changing rules and customs that prevented accumulation and individual management of the resources produced.

The process was full of struggles, contradictions, rebellions and escapes. Certainly the dream of every youth we spoke to was not to live off of agriculture; this was rather their last resort. However, both for those staying in the village tilling the rice fields and for those who decided to find livelihood elsewhere, agriculture is currently a last resort which is enabling their desired modernisation.

## End Notes

1 University of Campinas (UNICAMP), São Paulo, Brazil

2 Tropical Research Institute (IICT), Lisbon, Portugal

3 The Balanta ethnic group, which constitutes about a third of the population of Guinea-Bissau (500,000 people), is divided into different ethnic and linguistic groups, among which the Balanta-Nhacra are the largest sub-group. On this subject, see for instance Cammilleri 2010; Hawthorne 2001; Callewaert 2000; Drift 2000; Handem 1986.

4 The concept which we here translate as 'witchcraft' does not correspond to Evans Pritchard's classic definition of witchcraft – 'a mystical and innate power, which can be used by its possessor to harm other people' – nor to that of sorcery – 'one who is thought to practice evil magic against others ... usually of such a nature that they can be performed by anyone by producing a powder or "medicine"' (Middleton and Winter 2004: 3).

5 The age classes vary from the north to the south of the country and even from village to village. However, these three classes, *doque nhare, nghaie* and *nhesse*, exist in practically all villages, though their names vary.

6 The word *benanga* has the double meaning of a married woman with whom one has a sexual relationship, and the act of intercourse with a married women itself. The *benanga* is an institution among the Balanta and one of the most common ways of finding a wife. A *benanga* can run away from her husband's house and come live with her lover and become his wife, a perfectly common occurrence. The young men were allowed to have intercourse after their sexual initiation with the *benanga* during the *nhese* age stage. Young *nghaie* had their own *benanga*, but were forbidden from having intercourse.

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