The study by Christoph Kohl, *A Creole Nation: National Integration in Guinea-Bissau*, is based on three main tenets. The first engages with Guinea-Bissau as a creole nation, the second attempts to understand the meaning of creole identity, and the third covers the debate on the different perspectives on nation-building. The first strand of his arguments, in favor of a creole nation, is rooted in the idea that cultural creolization amounts to a renegotiation of identity frontiers along which being *in* and *out* are confronted with tensions and diverse perspectives. The second focuses on a comprehension of the plurality, flexibility, and mobility of creole identity. In that respect, the author adopts a comprehensive approach based on dichotomies—Europeans/Africans, precolonial/colonial—from which he extracts three ideal types of “creoles,” explained below. The third strand incorporates the concept of trans-ethnicization of creoles as a key building block for nation-building. Nationality and nation-building are understood as integrative bottom-up processes linked to linguistic creolized representations in Guinean Creole or Kriol, such as *mandjuandadis* and *entrudu* (carnival).[1]

His book, therefore, illustrates the idea that a nation “makes itself.” Kohl criticizes “essentialist” approaches that reaffirm the notion that cultural entities are “socially constructed, situational, flexible, malleable, and multilayered” (p. 9). In this constructivist vein, as Marek Tamm states, “Nations are not born, they are made.”[2] Even when the Republic of Guinea-Bissau was proclaimed independent in Lugadjole, Madina de Boé, on September 24, 1973, by the then chairman of the National Popular Assembly, João Bernardo Vieira, it was already a synthesis of previous efforts by the PAIGC (Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e de Cabo Verde) militants and the population at large that directly or indirectly took part in the party’s mobilization campaigns, the war, and the political organization of the liberated areas or in the underground resistance. Indirectly, it was also a synthesis of many other unknown heroes, who preceded the war of national liberation, those who refused, in silence, to be dominated by colonialism and those who wished to live in freedom and dignity.

The nation made itself, above all, after the proclamation of independence, by all those who wished to live together in a common home, Guinea-Bissau. Without this firm intent to constantly share, in the same big *moransa* (residential compound), the Guinea-Bissauan nation would
not be able to survive. For this reason, approaching the national question from a “culturalist” point of view may lead to neglecting the idea of the nation as a result of the “civic conscience” of its citizens. This awareness developed during the protracted war of liberation when intercultural relations intensified and, in many cases, juxtaposed themselves to an “ethnic conscience.” Like most African countries, Guinea-Bissau is a nation that is still under construction in conjunction with prevalent cultural entities that went before it. The relations between them, with their own diverse historicity, largely depend on the political context and the way the state is forged. The war of national liberation in Guinea-Bissau demonstrated, in an exemplary fashion, the possibility for people from distinct sociocultural formations to coexist in an intense historical experience in order to build a utopia together, while confronting a common enemy, colonialism. This movement led to the formation of a collective conscience, which does not pertain to any particular cultural entity, even though these entities can play a most influential role. In the sense that a collective conscience is coproduced by all sociocultural formations working within the movement itself. This singular “civic” conscience takes on the force of “a moral conscience called the nation” created during the struggle for independence.

Kohl’s work seeks to renew studies on the nation and the state by means of a multiculturalist approach. These issues became topical with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the emergence of nationalisms in eastern Europe. The author adheres to hypotheses put forward by Philip Abrams, Ernest Gellner, James C. Scott, and Lowell W. Barrington, which recognize the connections and the differences between the concepts of the nation and the state. Distinct nations can accept to live under the roof of the same state. Peoples challenging the state might not question their conviviality with others as a nation. In the case of Guinea-Bissau, even during the most critical events, such as the civil war, which erupted on June 7, 1998, the nation itself was never called into question. No political or military movement decided to break away or build another political entity. To the contrary, the presence of troops from neighboring countries rekindled a “national spirit” that contributed to the victory of the Military Junta against governmental forces loyal to the sitting president, João Bernardo Vieira. Referring to the consequences of the presence of foreign troops in the June 7, 1998, conflict, Leonardo Cardoso explains that the adhesion of the “great majority of young people” to the Military Junta was due to the fact that they saw the permanence of these troops as “an authentic invasion of the country.” Cardoso considers that from that moment onward “the war took on a new character, transforming itself into a real civil war, with the Junta Military having a contingent greater than the forces loyal to President Nino Vieira.”

This strong relationship between Guinea-Bissauans and their nation causes Kohl to take issue with approaches holding that the heterogeneity of Guinea-Bissau would form an obstruction to nation-building. Rather than attributing the successive political crises that have afflicted the country to a lack of “nation,” they should be ascribed to shortcomings of the state. Kohl identifies twin processes of creolization, from the bottom up and from the top down. The first emanates from urban centers, the so-called praças, and is promoted by urban elites, acting as intermediaries of the colonial state, considering themselves superior to ethnic, autochthonous societies and cultures. The second extends its boundaries beyond urban perimeters and is associated with the mandjuandadis and tranethnic cultural manifestations, such as carnival, which are associated with popular culture and nationalist vernacular. Thus, the Guinean Creole language, the mandjuandadis, and expressions of popular culture form the cement that holds national identity together, extending to all corners of the country.
For Kohl, colonialism had already laid the groundwork for the nation and for the creole elites, who provided continuity for the process by acting as intermediaries. As a result, he assumes a continuity between the notion of the Eurocentric nation and the nation as proposed by creole elites. To demonstrate this historical connection, an extensive historical description is dedicated to creole strata, from the establishment of the praças in the sixteenth century to their “indigenization” as a distinct social group of civil servants and planters.

As a starting point of this process, Kohl signals an event that illustrates the wish for autonomy, quoting George E. Brooks (Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630 [2003]), when a group of elected traders rebelled against the sitting governor of the port of Cacheu and dismissed him by force in 1684-85. This same desire for autonomy would, in Kohl’s view, cause creole elites to set up the liberation movement PAIGC, which has exercised a semi-monopoly over the country’s political governance since independence. The author characterizes the said party as a creole movement, since its leadership included members recruited from the creole elite.

Searching the population censuses from the colonial era onward, Kohl fails to find the category crioulo. Indeed, there is no group that designates itself as crioulo. The author supports his argument with currently rarely used designations, such as kriston, cabo-verdiano, or inhabitant of the praça as a proxy for this category. To overcome this difficulty, he posits creole identity as “plural, fluid and malleable” (p. 52).

By aligning the PAIGC with a creole identity, the author runs the risk of projecting a reductionist perspective that fails to consider the peasant and ethnic base of this movement. This narrow vision is currently broadly shared by the opponents of this party, who seek to associate it with a minority, which according to some constitutes is a mere 0.5 percent of the population and to others is equated to the assimilados (assimilated citizens) of the colonial period. This ideological construction appears to be linked to the pursuit of a scapegoat for the country’s misfortunes. This narrow vision continues to maintain a social division dictated by the indigenato, or Indigenous Statute, from colonial times. The division between indígenas (natives) and civilizados (citizens) thus remains a pivotal concept of the society’s social and political organization. The inequalities resulting from state-building after independence are a consequence of this key division, which lacks its proper historicity. This approach defines the nation as pertaining to indígenas and, paradoxically, to the party of “national liberation” as pertaining to the “creoles,” which should be expurgated from the “indigenous” nation. It feeds on a postcolonialist narrative that attempts to legitimate the struggle for power by de-valorizing the election results obtained by the PAIGC in the political arena, considering them fraudulent.

Political crises and military interventions have, since the multiparty elections in 1994, emerged, in most cases, as a result of contested electoral outcomes. The appropriation of the idea of democracy leads, therefore, to a reinvention of the concept of the nation. In this ideological view, the nation becomes a nation of indígenas as opposed to the nation of civilizados. The understanding of Amílcar Cabral, who led the PAIGC until his assassination in 1973, of the liberation struggle as a cultural struggle is presented by the new ideologues as a new theory against the assimilados. If it ever had any hold on power in Guinea-Bissau, this category, resulting from colonial classifications, lost it following the military coup of November 14, 1980.

Kohl borrows two concepts from John M. Lonsdale: moral ethnicity and political tribalism. [6] The first is understood as a behavioral model of the vertical moral economy that connects patrons and clients with the same ethnic base. The second refers to horizontal competition between
patron-client networks from different ethnic origins. Regarding these key concepts, the author argues that politicians in Guinea-Bissau attempt to exploit their ethnic base in power games because the clientelist networks are important factors to access sources of power. However, despite these attempts at ethnic mobilization, he concludes that politicians whom he designates as political entrepreneurs failed in their strategy of ethnic weaponization given that they proved to be unable to succeed with respect to political tribalism. This means that the rivalry between ethnic networks, in a broad and expressive manner, never managed to affirm itself in Guinea-Bissau, to the present day. As Marina Padrão Temudo, quoted by Kohl, has stated, no party ever managed to find generalized popular support for ethnically based rhetoric, while no party ever presented itself as an ethnic or religious organization (p. 34).[7]

We may assume that what is updated, persists. The definition of the nation, in accordance with Anthony Smith, and quoted by historian Marek Tamm, is: “I will use a definition of nation familiar from the works of British nationalism scholar Anthony D. Smith, according to which a nation can be construed as a named and self-defined community whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols and values, possess and disseminate a distinctive public culture, reside in and identify with a historic homeland, and create and disseminate common laws and shared customs.”[8] When this political and symbolic capital is based on sharing myths, symbols, and the belief in a common destiny, they are constantly reiterated and updated, thus turning the nation into a reality.

Tamm proposes a simplified distinction between two phases in the building of a nation. First, what he identifies as the “hot” phase is related to the process whereby a common understanding is created of the past: a culture of memory, a symbolic system, collective rituals. The second, designated as the “cold” phase, is associated with the perpetuation of the nation in everyday practices: sports and musical events, the media, national holidays, heated speeches by politicians about “us” and “we.” Tamm identifies three factors that tend to perpetuate the nation: a national narrative, performance, and visualization. A national narrative is the history and memory of a nation. The narrative is composed of various elements, but Kohl emphasizes the “victimization of the people” as the core of the narrative. He states that collective self-victimization is an important factor in the process of interethnic integration and national cohesion: the sentiment of being innocent victims of an incompetent, corrupt, and anonymous state. Guinea-Bissauans tend to create a self-image as a “solidarity community of victims” (p. 31).

However, the author does not mention the downside, the heroification of the people. Since independence to the present-day, the media, such as the Radio Nacional da Guiné-Bissau (National Radio of Guinea-Bissau, RDN), has transmitted eyewitness statements of hundreds of heroes of the liberation struggle on national holidays, most particularly on January 20, Dia dos Heróis Nacionais (National Heroes Day), and August 3, Dia dos Mártires de Pindjiguiti (the Day of the Martyrs of Pindjiguiti).[9] These statements, based on key episodes of the life histories of veterans of the struggle, were heard over the years by many with great attention and respect. They assisted in shaping public opinion, which was sensitive to the figure of the hero that the “combatants for national liberation” represented. In a country where newspapers play an insignificant role, these narratives disseminated via the radio waves, the principal source of news and information in the country, had a great impact on forging this heroic image.

The “ethos de koiçadeza” (the ethos of the victim) that Wilson Trajano Filho has described as a way to represent the nation is counterbalanced by the “ethos de valentia e heroísmo” (the ethos of courage and heroism).[10] Political discourse, voiced by governing and opposition politicians, systemat-
ically uses a key expression that synthesizes the two ethos: “sangue, suor e lágrimas” (blood, sweat, and tears).

Hence, a renewal of studies of written sources on the liberation struggle is needed. Unfortunately, the PAIGC archives were, to a large extent, destroyed following the final assault on the city of Bissau during the civil war of 1998. It signifies a great loss of unique collections that would have allowed for a reevaluation of the history of the liberation struggle based on original primary documents.[11]

Before and during the luta (struggle), historians gathered data that were used to write manuals of history, which were then taught in training courses for militants. This national history is hardly distinguishable from national memory to the extent that it privileges certain events, chronologies, and facts associated with the building of the nation-state and the attempt to reconstruct the history as a sequential unit, without ruptures, between the past and present. Currently, some historians criticize this “constructed” version of national history, opposing other “histories” that are allegedly based on “scientific facts.”[12]

Apart from historians, the work of such writers as Abdulai Sila, author of Mistida (Search) (1996) and A Última Tragédia (The Ultimate Tragedy) (1995), plays staged in several countries, and publications by the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa (The National Institute for Studies and Research, INEP) and the publisher Ku Si Mon form part of this national narrative. Among the agents of memory, we highlight the musicians and the djidius (or griots), traditional musicians in Guinea-Bissau, who play a crucial role in the construction of collective memory owing to their broad audience and acceptance. As far as musicians are concerned, the figures of José Carlos Schwarz, who symbolized the nationalist resistance against colonial rule, and Keba Galissa, who projected national reconciliation following the 1998-99 civil war, stand out, both deceased. Hence, it is by no means surprising that musicians are coveted by politicians for the electoral mise en scène.

Kohl well understands the importance of popular music for the organization of the mandjuandadis. The poet and musician from Bolama, Ernesto Dabó, and many other artists (Bidinte, Dupla di Forombal, Nelson Bomba, Maio Copé, Dulce Neves, Karina Gomes) have translated the mandjuandadi repertoire in a “modern” register.[13] The messages emanating from them are highly critical of social injustice and the dysfunctional state.

Kohl argues that there is a link between the formation of the “creoles” and the praças. These constitute the spaces where the indigenization of the “creoles” took place, or rather, where the growing sentiment of ownership and autonomy results in political action in favor of nation-building. The author considers the emergence of new identitary frontiers derived from the more ancient and original ones, by means of trans-ethnicization, via the twin processes of ethnicization and indigenization. According to Kohl, cultural creolization distinguishes itself from pidginization by joining the two processes whereas the second only presents the first.

Urban centers were subject to profound transformations in Guinea-Bissau since independence. Among the oldest praças, which emerged during the period of the transatlantic slave trade, Geba and Cacheu transformed into big tabancas or villages. The city of Bolama, erected as the former colony’s administrative capital in the 1870s, declined as a result of the transfer of the capital to Bissau in 1941, to the point of being the subject of nostalgia, sung by mandjuandadis as follows: “Bolama ka muri, Bolama dismaia” (Bolama did not die, Bolama fainted). The Apelo de Bolama (Bolama Appeal) proclaimed: “Bolama caiu no esquecimento” (Bolama was forgotten).[14]

The city of Bissau grew from 80,000 inhabitants at the time of independence to more than
631,937 inhabitants by 2014. Once, the limits of the city were formed by the Chapa de Bissau, a neighborhood of the old center. But nowadays, they have reached the town of Safim, fifteen kilometers from the city center. It is common to hear the “new urbanites,” who were born in the new urban space and raised after independence, express their indigenization in the following manner: “ami n ka salta corda” (I did not jump the rope). This expression serves to underline their belonging to the new city, remade after independence, and at the same time, distinguish themselves from those who live on the other side of the Safim barrier.

Based on Kohl’s classification of three ideal types of “creoles,” one could identify the third type, with a weak sense of collective belonging and a low level of ethnicization, as the “new urbanites” who forged a new space after 1974, their place of recontextualization and dislocation of cultural representations, a site of differentiation. As a result, analyzing the building of the Guinea-Bissauan nation through the prism of trans-ethnicization becomes an increasingly complex phenomenon.

Notes

[1]. Mandjuandadis are “predominantly female associations that provide for sociability, mutual assistance, and solidarity within the community, mainly by playing music and participating in feasts and other celebrations” (p. 5).


[9]. On August 3, 1959, workers at the Pindjiguiti pier in the port of the capital Bissau went on strike to demand a wage increase. This movement was brutally repressed by the colonial troops who murdered a considerable number of sailors; the exact number could not be determined at the time as the bodies of many of them had disappeared into the waters of the Geba River. The PAIGC claimed that fifty stevedores had died and that this tragic event was the main cause of the shift in its political strategy, focusing the armed struggle on the countryside rather than urban areas.


[12]. An alternative version of the national liberation narrative is regularly broadcast by Radio Africa FM.


[14]. The Apelo de Bolama is a document signed by resident ministers for the eastern, northern, and southern provinces, during the VI Encontro de Concertação, January 14-15, 1989; Actas do Colóquio Internacional Bolama Caminho Longe (Bissau: INEP, 1996), 1.

[15]. “I did not jump the rope” is a reference to the rope barrier in Safim introduced by the police and other state services, such as customs, forestry, and health (epidemiological surveillance), to control people’s movements in and out of Bissau. To demonstrate their willingness to enact reforms, many politicians have attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to suppress this barrier.

Editor’s Note: Review Editor Philip Havik translated this review from Portuguese.

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