

# FROM RITUAL INFANTICIDE TO POLITICAL POWER. A FRAME FOR THE STUDY OF POLITICAL POWERS IN GUINEA BISSAU

**Cláudia Favarato**<sup>1</sup>

*Membro Associado do Observatório Político*

## **Abstract**

The present paper aims to frame political power configurations in Guinea Bissau, for pinpointing the foundational differences between the state system and the traditional powers. In order to unveil such a complex reality, a case study will be used, the *criança-irân* ritual of infanticide. The latter, underpinned in the local animist cosmological system, is a challenge to the ontology of humanness, and to the boundaries between nude and political life. The working paper presents the case study and contextualizes it in the specific political and social settings of Guinea Bissau. Also, it provides an account of political power in the African continent, and specifically of the Bissau-Guinean political system. Lastly, it exposes the necessity of including conceptual categories of African epistemology for the understanding of human life, as foundational tenets of a political order, among the main animist ethnical groups in Guinea Bissau.

## **Keywords**

Humanness, African epistemology, African political power, Guinea Bissau, *criança-irân*.

---

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD candidate in Political Science at Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas, University of Lisbon (Portugal); Master's in African Studies from Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas, Universidade de Lisboa; Master's in International Relations and Diplomacy from Università degli Studi di Padova (Italy); collaborating researcher at Centro de Estudos Africanos (CEAF) of Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas, University of Lisbon; associate member of Political Observatory [favaratoclaudia@gmail.com].

## Introduction

Throughout the present working paper, I aim to discuss traditional political powers and state configuration in Guinea Bissau. The quest on political power configurations in the West Africa country represent, also, the core of my doctoral research.

The frames for political power in Guinea Bissau are marked by power asymmetries, shaped by the ongoing interaction between the traditional forces, the rational-bureaucratic state apparatus and the influencing fluidity of modernity and globalization tenets. The three elements engender a synergic structure characterized by inner, threefold complexity (Balandier, 1972). Although characteristic of many contemporary African states, the case of Guinea Bissau emphasises inherent patterns of peculiarity for the tight bonds between sociopolitical and religious roles, as well as for the remarkable ethnical heterogeneity.

In order to unveil political power configurations, along with their inner foundations and legitimation assets, I use the reading lenses provided by the *criança-irân* ritual of infanticide. The latter is therefore a challenge to the ontology of humanness, for appointing disabled babies as spirit-children. As such, those babies are denied the recognition of their human nature, along with the human dignity corollary. They represent a case of *sacerty* (Agamben, 1995), thus intended as a sacrificable form of life. A *criança-irân* does not belong to the bare life order of any living beings (*zoe*), neither it is entitled to be included in the *bíos*, meaning the individuals' political existence in a plurality. Nevertheless, they represent an ambiguous and emblematic figure of excluded-included in the political and legal order enforced within a group.

The above referred ritual of infanticide, which rests on an animist cosmology shared by several ethnical groups in Guinea Bissau, such as Balanta, Bijagós, Pepeis, Mancanha, Manjaco, provides the bedrock for the discernment of the traditional, local political systems. The concept of humanness underpinning the ritual lays as a foundation of the political order, for it relies upon a moral system, a legal system of conventions, beliefs and values that are inherent, legitimate and forcible within the political group. The latter stays in opposition to the state-based system formally ruling over all the territory and people of Guinea Bissau. Hence, the discrepancies fostered by the interaction between the state and the informal, second-state.

In the present working paper, I expose, as clear as possible in this brief format, the main quest I aim to untangle in my research. In order to do so, I will use the selected case study, the *criança-irân* ritual of infanticide, to contextualize it in a specified political, social, cultural, and religious setting. To do so, the analysis will need to take into consideration the features of political power in the African realm, stressing similarities, differences, and discrepancies to the Western tenets. Therefore, I argue for the necessity to include native African self-understanding and epistemological conceptual-categories in the referred study to reach a clearer discernment of the ontology of human life in a political system underpinned on customs and conventions. I will conclude by stating the utter bond between theorizations on

humanness for the teleology and the structuring of a political system, as well as for the relational processes and patterns of legitimation needed to political power.

### ***Criança-irân* ritual of infanticide: framing the case study in Bissau-Guinean settings**

The value system dominant among people rests on shared beliefs interiorized by the individuals, as well as upon political power, for its inner capacity to create and to foster values. Built upon centuries-old ideas, the value system entrenched within Bissau-Guinean traditional powers firmly includes animist cosmology as part of the political life. Bedrock of this metaphysical system is the category of spirits called *irâns*.

Moving force of the physical and metaphysical world in harmonious order, *irân*<sup>2</sup> is worshipped and feared. Along with the living beings, ancestors and spirits act in the local or ethnical political system, for they take an active part in the decision-making processes or in legal trials (Faculdade de Direito de Bissau & Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa, 2012). Customary law entitle accountability to otherworldly forces and nevertheless include animist principles within its provisions.

Although customary law harshly condemns murders in general, it allows the ritual of infanticide of *criança-irân*. The latter is a peculiar case for which a baby is not born with a soul, as expected from all human beings that travel in the reincarnation continuum. Contrary-wise, there are babies that are born in human features yet embodying a spirit, called *irân*. They are recognizable for their appearance, for mental retardation, physical malformations or deviant behaviour (Einarsdóttir, 2004; Carreira, 1971; Quintino, 1949; de Jong, 1988; Jao, 2003). The *crianças-irân* constitute a threat against their mother, their family and the overall community, for they have allegedly capabilities of causing adversities, harming, and killing. Therefore, they are disposed of through ritual tests, which primary aim is to verify the human or not-human nature of the baby.

Whether the ritual specialists, as *balobeiros* and *djambakus*, might run a different series of trials, the last and definitive sentence on the baby's essence is sought by taking the baby to the sea<sup>3</sup> (*leba mininu ao mar*, in local creole). After the eventual

---

<sup>2</sup> *Irân*, the main spirit in Bissau-Guinea animist cosmology, is an evil and good entity, the last cause of luck and misfortune, illness, death, richness or success. Whether it is rarely represented with anthropomorphic features, it might appear under several configurations, ranging from a wooden log, to a necklace. Believers also picture it as a physical presence in this world, one they were able to interact with. The *irâns* are different according to hierarchy (linked to spatial and familiar belonging) and to ethnical group.

<sup>3</sup> The baby is left at the river banks at low tide; if the raising waters carry him/her away, the baby was a spirit who returned its true home. If the baby remains by the river banks, the test proved his/her humanness, parents, family, and the society in general, welcome the baby into the community, regardless of the physical appearance.

disappearance of the baby, no weep, cry or mourn is allowed, for it would cause the community-jeopardizing spirit to appear again, cased in another baby's body. Furthermore, the ritual is not regarded as homicide, nor is condemned under customary law provisions, *nullum crimen sine poena, nulla poena sine lege*. There exists no murder (Silva, 1991) because it lacks a being to kill; a *criança-irân* is not a human being, but a spirit. The biological ontology of humanness is hence at stake due to the beliefs underpinning the ritual. As such, the denial to entitle the baby with human dignity and the attached protection of basic human rights, such as the right to life. The spirit-children are beings casted outside the legal and political order, whether they are, by exclusion, included in it. For being a peculiar configuration of excluded-included element in the political order, they are an exception, whose existence is regulated solely within the thin, liminal space of beings sacrificable, yet not killable (Agamben, 1995).

On the other hand, the ritual enjoys no sound justification in the formal state-based political and legal system. Guinea Bissau is formally a semi-presidential republic, which its basic order is defined by the Constitution, charted in 1996. Although, the power of the state is confined to the cities, mostly to the capital Bissau, and enjoy little legitimacy among the people. Years of political turmoil, along with several *coup d'état*, thwarted the state-building process; furthermore the administrative structure inherited the structural fragilities inherent in the previous Portuguese colonial apparatus (Forrest, 2003). Notwithstanding the transcendent historical legacies strengthening the power of traditional-ethnical institutions, during the past decades a feeling of belonging and of unity, propelled by the liberation movement lead by Amílcar Cabral, among peoples of the various ethnical groups sparked, toward the creation of a nation.

The heterogeneity present at the ethnical level, with over twenty-five groups, and at the religious one, for it exists a threefold religious system (Christianism, Islam and Animism), strongly pinpoints the state's structural fragilities on the political dimension. If on the hand governments could not implement the rule of law due to structural weakness, corruption and clientelism among the political élite (Nóbrega, 2015), on the other hand the spreading of rational-bureaucratic principles was encumbered by the strength and resilience of political structures grounded upon customs, traditions and conventions. Next to the formal state, yet within the political power frame in Guinea Bissau, there exists an informal second-state (Scheye, 2009). The latter is underpinned on customary law, as well as on traditional institutions, and it rules through traditional-local authorities. The several existing ethnical-traditional political powers operate within the informal sector, under a complex structure of norms and procedures, established under the bide of conventions. Such political systems are tightly linked to an ethnical group, its main

religious orientation<sup>4</sup>, and to populational borders<sup>5</sup> (Faculdade de Direito de Bissau & Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa, 2012).

Notwithstanding it (partly) assumed new forms and/or functions, traces of the ancient-time-rooted political system are observable in contemporary, oral customary law. The latter enjoys forcibility next to posited law provisions, hence engendering a condition of normative pluralism (Griffiths, 1986) or *interlegality* (Santos, 2002). Whether no situation of *forum shopping* was yet detected, for Bissau-Guinean legislation does not assimilate customary, traditional law, the individuals generally first refer to traditional authorities and to customary law in times of need. The preference is a benchmark of the full threefold legitimacy<sup>6</sup> enjoyed by local-traditional leaders, the so-called *régulos*, as well as of the resurgence of local political system against the state's centralizing action.

The present study does not aim to do an institutional, normative nor judicial analysis, yet it intends to unveil power configurations through inferences on political power and the individual, or rather, by seeing power as a relational phenomenon. The analysis is grounded in the theoretical grounds of humanness and power underpinning the political, yet diachronic elements, as the legitimation process of political authorities, are deemed relevant to the aims of the present quest.

In the traditional political systems, political, social and sociopolitical roles are tightly linked, at times even overlapping, with religious ones. The temporal power is bridged with the secular one for the two spheres stay in syncretic relation with one another. The bond characterizes all the dimensions of the political, for it affects the choice and appointment of authorities, the policies enacted, and the legal principles underneath. This means, that the legitimacy of a leader depends also upon metaphysical approval, for one is accountable toward the spirits and the ancestors, not only toward the population. The legitimation rooted in the notion of tradition (Hobsbawm, 2002; Carvalho, 2004) is therefore complete in its legality, consent and beliefs aspects.

Whilst for local-traditional leaders it is easier to reach and to evince the type of cosmology-due legitimacy, the task is harder for the rational-bureaucratic state, its

---

<sup>4</sup> Although, even in groups were the majority of the individuals state themselves as Christians or Muslims, animist beliefs are, at the very least, acknowledged, or shared, coexisting in a strong religious syncretism mechanism.

<sup>5</sup> According to tenets of native, pre-colonial African political systems, the limits of political power is not determined by spatial borders, but by the people who belong to the group (Hyden, 2013). The provision is understandable under the light of nomadism and of patterns of land owning, namely of communal usage of the land. According to traditional law of Guinea Bissau main ethnical groups, the legal provisions are forcible on all the individuals belonging to the group, regardless of temporary or permanent geographical migrations, whilst foreigners are only partially included within the same rights and duties system (Faculdade de Direito de Bissau & Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Considered in its constitutive aspects of beliefs, or *Legitimitätsglaube*, legality and consent (Beetham, 1991).

institutions and its authorities. Western-based modes to create consent and foster legitimation beliefs proves little or no effective in such scenario. Moreover, the fragile Guinea Bissau state, under the pressure of structural deficiencies, has not been able to unify the traditional powers within it, in a centripetal action. Therefore, to cope with the legitimation impasse, an antithetical process engendered, thus is, the *Africanization of power* (Nóbrega, 2003). The latter is the result of a centrifugal action by which state's authorities use legitimation patterns typical of traditional authorities, mostly through the use of religion-based symbolic capital.

### **From *Africanization of power* in Guinea Bissau to the political in the African declination**

Symbolic capital provides a quite efficient *Legimitätglaube* tool for the creative power it conveys. As finely explained in Bordieuan sociological theory, symbolic capital It appeals to ideas and emotions that are linked and close to the people, hence it eases the burden of creating and maintaining a bond between governed and governors. In the Bissau-Guinean case, the symbolic capital did not romantically appeal to common historical-cultural roots, but it was pinned in religious values, for the broad share, or acknowledgement, of the animist faith. José Bernardino “Nino” Vieira, who ruled the country under an almost totalitarian regime for roughly twenty years, used plenty of religious symbols to foster its power. The President “Nino”, as he was called, was well-known for his fame of undefeatable warrior, who freed the country from the Portuguese colonization, as well as for his alleged super-human nature. The latter was due to his close connection with *irâns* and ritual specialist, the two providing him with incommensurable strength and power, along with omniscient knowledge. To maintain these skills President Vieira used to regularly perform animist ceremonies, and was supported by an informal court of counsellors – in fact, his faithful ritual specialists. Also, he used to plead the Islamicized sections of Guinean population, for he used traditional Muslim clothing at public appearances (Favarato, 2018).

The legitimation impasse which hampered the power of many African leaders, from which their need to resort to forms of less-rationale, tradition-rooted soft power such as the use or manipulation of symbolic capital and symbols (Hayward & Dumbuya, 1983), lays on incongruities between the Westphalian state model and the horizontal kinship-based African society. Cherished normative models for political system analysis, strengthened by a structuralist approach, chart the Western political power within a pyramidal frame, whether the latter is affected by native pre-colonial legacies instead. Before the importation, or the imposition, to better say, of West-engendered political systems in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, African societies were structured on a horizontal, relational model, resembling, in a broader scale, the kinship-based group and the segmentary society. In pre-colonial Africa, the king was not regarded as a source of power, an exceptional figure standing out of the world of

the human beings, but as the one in charge of guaranteeing the natural *wholist*<sup>7</sup> order (Bukor, 1989) of things against jeopardizing entropy. In other words, the sovereign represented the anthropomorphic reification of the universal order (Diop, 1987).

The recognition of an authority's legitimacy was therefore pinned in top-down approval, under the bide of the otherworldly forces and in compliance with the wider order of things, as well as to the consent of people (Diop, 1987). In traditional Africa, political leaders were entitled legitimate use of coercion, yet no monopoly of force could prevent them from being sacked under the pressure of popular rebellion or protest. Along with legality and tradition-based, *Legitimitätglaube* the element of consent makes up for a substantial item in the composition of native African *Herrschaft*, in Weberian terms.

The contemporary political realm resembles many of the deep-rooted African legacies, notwithstanding the embedment within the rational-bureaucratic state model. Such configuration of power features makes of the political a scenario of threefold complexity (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1981[1940]; Balandier, 1972), in which pre-colonial elements, colonial legacies and post-colonial developments, under the influence of the on-going globalization process and the fluidity of modernity tenets, deeply interact with each other, engendering a peculiar political sphere.

Whether officially adopted in conformity with the contemporary, international arena, the modern state is not a construction native of the African political systems, that are, generally speaking, more oriented toward collectivist models, communalism or moderate communalism forms or organization (Gyekye, 1997; Bell, 2002; Wiredu, 1980). In these group-oriented conceptions of society the emphasis is on duties rather than on rights, for the action of reciprocal duties would entitle an individual with rights. Alike, to comply with legal principles is not a matter of top-down imposition nor obligation to make others do what they otherwise would not have done for the sake of their own interest, but it fosters from ties of mutual obligation, underpinning individuals' willingness to comply with legal rules and sociopolitical norms (Hyden, 2013). In other words, power can be seen as a deeply relational phenomenon involving a system of corporate actors engaging with one another due to counter-gain in rights and advantages brought by performing duties and obligations toward the others.

In this slightly asymmetrical system of mutual dependences there are several forces of power interacting, for on the one side there is formal power, and on the other there exist informal or traditional ones. Whether the first are modelled upon the Western rationality-based type of political power, the latter are a native expression of personal

---

<sup>7</sup> Comprising the worldly and the otherworldly order of all things. The conception is typical of animist cosmologies, for it sees all beings and things in the universe interconnected and staying in a harmonious, ordered relationship with one another. Spirits and forces are the appointed guarantees for the maintenance of such order, hence reducing the risk of entropy and destruction of a society (Bukor, 1989).

idiosyncrasies and of the blurred boundaries existing between the private and the public sphere (Ekeh, 1975). For the identification of the local community as the prime *locus* of one's membership, and hallmark of one's identification, the proximity between local-traditional, informal political systems with the individuals. The informal sector, whether intended in economic<sup>8</sup> or political terms, represent a sufficiently strong and established institutions in contemporary African reality, and in Guinea Bissau for the specific case under examination, to constitute a second state, operating next to the formal one.

On one hand, the contemporary African political scenario is composed by a threefold complexity, and by current ongoing interactions between the formal and the informal political system. On the other hand, the characters of the political, of its institutions and authorities, are deducible from native understanding of humanness. The inclusion of spiritual forces in the traditional political realm stands for a metaphysical inclusion: human beings are not the solely beings entitled to political action. Hence, an ontology of Man as a dual being divided into body and mind, connected to the canons of Western political and existentialist thought, is not representative nor explicative of African conceptions, in which the rational and the irrational elements co-occur to the creation of *episteme*. Therefore, it is not possible to conceive humanness and the political, as the expression of life in plurality, if excluding the magical, the creative and spiritual items within theoretical considerations.

The epistemological bias grounded on the idea of humanness spreads toward several spheres, ranging from cultural and moral universalism, to political power. The misreading is not therefore in the concept themselves, but in the need for a native self-understanding, and for the inclusion of non-Western *gnosis* within the canon of the observing models (Moreira, 1993) used in normative and empirical reflections. The need is hence not to neglect cherished notions of political theory but to provide the discipline with a more broad-gauging viewpoint, aiming to be more inclusive in a cross-culturalist perspective, to avoid *parti pris* theoretical conceptualizations.

"Africans might be excused for being 'confused' democrats as they reveal contradictory interpretations of the concepts when answering survey questions using standard West categories" (anonymous, 2004, as reported in Hyden, 2013: 248). Well expressed in this anonymous statement, the alleged universalization sought by political theorists does not match with the reality under examination, not for being wrong, but for lacking comprehensiveness. The need for the inclusion of African thought within the canons of political theory in order to conduct political research in Africa is clear. The need to *decolonise* political theory in Africa in order to gain normative tools of analysis proper to the reality under examination. This means to free theory from external and internal bias, to rehabilitate it as autonomous source of knowledge, freestanding in its own expression, to restore its power, and to make it surges next to the canon tenets.

---

<sup>8</sup> See the economy of affection, as defined by Hyden, G. (2013: 240-244).

The path to independence of the epistemological resources bridges the use of language and its inherent conceptual patterns for the understanding of reality perceived through cognition, to the discernment of foundational categories of thought. With regard to political theory, the theoretical tenets shall abide a narrow, mere inference of rationality and rational capabilities to include the irrational within the elements of humanness ontology and episteme for the study of the political in the African realm.

### ***Bíos*, in organicist-oriented political power**

Western epistemology grounds its cornerstones on the certainties provided by rationality and the mathematical knowledge of the world. Through the use and the development of science and technology, underpinned on the rationalization of reality, the Western men created the belief in its capabilities to understand and control the surrounding world. Facing the decay of religiosity in the modern era, the rational knowledge stood as a new “deity”, capable to satisfy the faith and needs of even the more sceptical for its reliability and feasibility. Notwithstanding the current epistemological nihilism and the climate of uncertainties featuring post- or sur-modernity, the world of fluidity, intensively-connected in a hyper-flow of space and time (Augé, 1995), persists the belief in the power of Science. Such epistemological standing, departing from a rationalistic stance, shapes the idea of the world, the perception of reality, moral and ethical stances, as well as conceptions of humanness.

According to Western tradition, departing from ancient Greek philosophers, through Cartesian assumptions, to modern thinkers, human beings are thinkable of in terms of body and mind duality. In other words, they are conceived as *being* and *having* a body, the former meaning the capability of assuming an objectivated attitude toward the prior fact of having a body, whilst the latter refers to the primary mode of experience by which the subjectivity of one’s human life lives (Habermas, 2003: 50). The two elements constitute an indivisible category occurring in the formation of the psycho-biological essence of human beings, subjected to the natural laws of birth, decay and death, and of one’s own rational consciousness.

To own reason and self-consciousness is therefore of utter importance for the development of basic human-characterizing features, such as Rousseauian moral instincts, Lockean self-recognition, and Kantian moral principles, all of which enable an individual to live in plurality, and to live a life in freedom. Nevertheless, the capability of reasoning is appointed as the most peculiar trait of the humankind, for entitlement of human dignity, whatever the form of deontological protection furtherly attached to it, are underpinned on the presence of (self)consciousness (Singer, 1994).

Moving further, the dualistic body-mind notion of Man as being shapes the modes of human beings' perception and life the world, for one's own individualization (recognising itself as a thinking subject, entitled with reason, personality and identity) is the first step toward the relation with others. For one's own dichotomy it follows an individualistic premise on humanness. This meaning, man is an individualistic being that interacts with others on the base of his/her self-recognition, possible through the use of reason, natural capability human beings are endowed with, hence peculiar trait of humanness. It is then language, making the bridge from a life of sore interactions with other beings, to life in a plurality, conveying relationships to harmonious patterns, headed toward the achievement of morally higher goals. To put it in other words, the development of articulated forms of language to communicate with any subject beyond oneself (Levinas, 1991) is what raises human existence from the life with and for oneself, to life *communis*, hallmarked by political engagement, freedom and action within the plural community. Human beings are capable of moving from bare life, *zoe*, to *humanly*-qualified life, *bíos*, or rather, living on life standard according to the kind of life a human being is entitled to.

The above referred, West-engendered conceptions of humanness and of human life in plurality, for this briefly outlined, stands as a cornerstone for broader political, moral and legal powers to be instituted to order the coexistence among the individuals. Primarily, they represent the basis for conventions, meaning oral, not written rules or norms of behaviour established among people (Davies, 2006; Moore, 1978; and 2014). For their close relation and dependence to moral principles, they are prior or independent from political power itself; nevertheless, they prove resilient in any kind of system for the grounding function they are called to perform. They mostly respond to inner needs of the sociopolitical group, hence their superiority on other legal systems or political norms and institutions.

Whereas they might or might not be incorporated within the posited law system of a given political system, conventions stay as a foundational item of the latter, along with the moral system, its underpinning fundamental values, legality and legitimation patterns. Therefore, those deep-rooted ideas, soundly grounded on the ontology of humanness, define who are the subjects living within the circle of the political existence.

Throughout the centuries, Western theory has charted different boundaries for the definition of belonging patterns to humanness, and furtherly to dignified forms of human life. On the one hand, religious, political and anthropological tenets set the separation between categories of "homo", "*semi-homo*", "*ferre-homo*", therefore leaving categories of individuals of Homo Sapiens species to condition of bare life for their disposability and reification. On the other hand, the boundaries to life in plurality, thus is, the tenets to the constitution of a political power among individuals whose primary drive is self-interest are blurred between the binomial spheres of *zoe* and *bíos*.

If it is agreed on the assumption that *zoe* is inherently constitutive of political life, *bíos*, not only in the modern and post-modern states ruled through Foucauldian biopolitical practices, yet it has been an inherent, constitutive part of political existence since the begging of its theorization, for the bridging tool provided by language (Agamben, 1995), hence what does *zoe* constitute in Western political theory? What is the meaning of political existence? What, who are its boundaries?

Recalling the reason-based postulation, canon tenets of Western theory sought the foundation of its boundaries in an immunological logic (Han, 2014), for the distinction between self and the other, the *alter*, represents the *condition per quam* of political unity. The grounding idea thus is the differentiation and the inevitably short of outcomes attempts to annihilate who and what is different, for sociocentric allegations of power. It seems, then, that the opposition of two or more poles is *condition sine qua non* of the political realm, fundamental categorial-concept defining Western political thought. The belonging, and the creation, of political power depends upon the opposition *ego-alter*, *Fiend-Freund* (Schmitt, 2009[1932]), dissociation and association. Political life does not aim solely to the attainment of Aristotelian goals of morally higher life and well-being of the individuals, yet it is also directed to the affirmation of the self, in its singular or plural expressions.

Departing from Western tenets on boundaries of humanness and political life, underpinned on the rational self-identification of the individual, and hence of the epistemology then constructed, it is hard to state its universality with regard to epistemological systems which includes irrationality (“the inexplicable”) within the sources of *gnosis* production, and within political theory. Not only, also the self-identification process has little or no sense at all in societal group founded on relational ties. Tenets of South-African Ubuntu theory, as well as broader *wholist* conceptions, emphasise the need of the other not for one to recognize oneself, yet to *become* oneself. An individual becomes a person, meaning a human being living a life according to standard of human existence, through the other persons. For one relies on one’s own skills and capabilities, as well as on those of the others and of the group as a whole. Hence, any immunological *ego versus alter* ideology makes little sense, this considered.

Moreover, the human duality between mind and body is less meaningful under the light of the inclusion of spirit and (dead) ancestors within boundaries of *bíos*, hence the political existence of the individual. How does the inclusion of elements of the irrational in political power stand toward political theory canons? Clearly even the broadest normative theorizations do not reach a generalizing level enabling universal assumption.

Therefore, the need for a candid African epistemology in order to unveil which the basic binomial concepts and the fundamental political categorial-concepts of the African political thoughts. The latter are the essential means to shed some lights on the sphere of political life and political power, *versus* bare and *sacer* life, the liminal

category engendered by discrepancies of power and exception within the political power.

### Concluding notes

The selected case study of *criança-irân*, yet geographically limited accorded to sharing patterns of the religious and cultural beliefs, stands as the exemplification of the theoretical stance untangled above. Rejecting uniformity and universality on the concept of humanness, it challenges Western tenets on belonging to the humankind. Moreover, for relying upon an epistemological system which combines irrational and rational elements in the creation of knowledge, the engendered idea of the political differs.

The discernment of the roots of African political, as well as epistemological and ontological, thought is of utter importance to unveil the foundations of political power. Nevertheless there are technical and theoretical obstacles to this aim, for the African branch of the discipline was born shortly ago, in the late second half of the past century. Besides being affected by claims of legitimacy and exclusivity from the Africanist scholars, political theory is, so to say, yet under the effect of *colonizing* practices. This is due to two main orders of factors: the relevance of the canon, which disregard not-Western epistemology, and the language employed to explain the political matter, with its inherent categories of thought. On the one hand, Western thought is an essential cornerstone of political theory as a whole. On the other hand, it cannot be denied the relevance of native, not-Western understanding as benchmark for broad-gauging studies.

This working paper aims to emphasise the discrepancies between different conceptions of humanness, one underpinned on human beings' dual essence, of body and mind, the other embedded within an irrational items comprising epistemology. Depart from different epistemological grounds, they engender different ideas on human life, as singles and as a plurality – as a political group. A political power grounded in organicist, communalist ideologies, bonding the individual more closely to his/her relational ties than to own self-individualization for one's own realization as a person living a humanly dignified, political life, can hardly rely upon individualistic premises as bedrocks for power, institutions and legitimacy.

In my forthcoming studies, I aim to deepen the discernment on the grounding categorial-concepts of African political thoughts, as to determine which are the boundaries of the political sphere, and of political life. This is a necessary step towards the goal of unveiling the patterns for peculiar categories of beings, such as the Bissau-Guinean spirit children.

## References

- AGAMBEN, Giorgio (1995). *Homo Sacer*. Torino: Einaudi Editore.
- AUGÉ, Marc (1995). *Non-places. An introduction to anthropology of supermodernity*. London: Verso. Original title: *Non-Lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*. 1992.
- BALANDIER, George (1972). *Political Anthropology*. Bungay, Suffolk (UK): The Penguin Press. Original title *Anthropologie Politique* (1967).
- BEETHAM, David (1991). *The Legitimation of Power*. Houdmills: Palgrave.
- BELL, Richard H. (2002). *Understanding African philosophy. A cross-cultural approach to classic and contemporary issues*. New York: Routledge.
- BUKOR, Mduabu (1989). African cosmology and Ontology. *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* vol16 n4 pp367-392.
- CARREIRA, António (1971). O infanticídio ritual em África – parte I e II. *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa* n101 pp 148-216; parte III Superstições que envolvem a gravidez, o parto e as crianças na primeira infância em toda a África. *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa* n102 pp 321-376.
- CARVALHO, Clara (2004). Local authorities or local power? The ambiguity of traditional authorities from the colonial to the post colonial period in Guinea-Bissau. *Lusophone Africa: Intersection between the Social Sciences*. Institute of African Studies, Cornwall University.
- DAVIES, Margaret (2006). Pluralism and legal philosophy. *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*, vol57 n4 pp 577-596.
- DIOP, Cheikh Anta (1987). *Precolonial Black Africa. A comparative study of the political and social system of Europe and Black Africa, from Antiquity to the formation of the modern state*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, Chicago Review Press.
- EINARSDÓTTIR, Jónína (2004). *Tired of weeping: Mother love, Child death and Poverty in Guinea Bissau*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- EKEH, Peter P (1975). Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: a theoretical statement. *Comparative studies in society and history*, vol17 n1 pp. 91-112.
- FACULDADE DE DIREITO DE BISSAU & INTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS E PESQUISA (2012). *Direito costumeiro vigente na República da Guiné-Bissau: Balantas, Fulas, Mancanhas, Manjaco, Mandingas, Papeis*. Bissau: FDB, INEP, Cooperação EU, PNUD.
- FAVARATO, Claudia (2018). Traditional religion in Guinea Bissau political culture. *JANUS.NET, e-journal of international relations*. Forthcoming 2018.
- FORREST, Joshua B. (2003). *Lineages of State fragility, rural civil society in Guinea Bissau*. Ohio: James Currey editor.
- FORTES, Meyer & EVANS-PRITCHARD, E.E. (1981). *Sistemas Políticos Africanos*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbekian. Original title: *African Political Systems*. 1940. Oxford University Press in behalf of International African Institute.
- GRIFFITHS, John (1986). What is legal pluralism. *Journal of legal pluralism*, n24 pp 1-55.
- GYEKYE, Kwame (1997). *Tradition and modernity: philosophical reflections on the African experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HABERMAS, Jürgen (2003). *The future of Human Nature*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- HAN, Byung-Chul (2014). *Psicopolítica. Neoliberalismo y nuevas técnicas de poder*. Barcelona: Herder Editorial.
- HAYWARD, Fred M. & DUMBUYA, Ahmed R. (1983). Political Legitimacy, Political Symbols and National Leadership in West Africa. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. Vol. 21, n. 4, pp. 645-671.
- HOBBSAWM, Eric (2002). *L'invenzione della tradizione*. Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore. 1st edition: 1983.
- HYDEN, Goran (2013). *African politics in comparative perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press. First edition 2006.
- JAO, Mamadou (2003). Código Penal, Infanticídio Ritual e Rejeição: a prova do rio. *Soronda – Nova Série* n7 pp 45-60.
- JONG, Joop TVM de (1988). O Irã, o Fulano, a doença. *Soronda* n5 pp 3-27.
- LEVINAS, Emanuel (1991). *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*. Dordrecht (The Netherlands): Kluwer Academic Publisher.
- MOORE, Sally Falk (1978). *Law as process: na anthropological approach*. London: Routledge & Kegal Paul.
- MOORE, Sally Falk (2014). Legal pluralism as Omnium Gatherum. *FIU Law Revision*, vol 10:5.
- MOREIRA, Adriano (1993). *Ciência Política*. Coimbra: Livraria Almedina.
- NÓBREGA, ÁLVARO (2003). *A luta pelo poder na Guiné-Bissau*. Lisboa: Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas.
- NÓBREGA, Álvaro (2015). *Guiné-Bissau: um caso de democratização difícil (1998-2008)*. Lisboa: Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas.
- QUINTINO, Rogado Fernando (1949). No segredo das crenças, das instituições religiosas da Guiné-Bissau. *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa* n15 pp 419-488 e n16 pp 687-721.
- SANTOS, Boaventura de Sousa (2002), *Towards a New Legal Common Sense*. London: Butterwords.
- SCHEYE, E (2009). State provided services, contracting out, and non-state networks: justice and security as private and public goods and services. *International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF)*. OECD.
- SCHMITT, Carl (2009). *O conceito de político*. Lisboa: Edições 70. Original title: *Der Begriff des Politischen. Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien* (1963). Berlin: Duncker & Humblot GmbH.
- SILVA, Augusto Dias (1991). O chamado infanticídio ritual na Guiné-Bissau. O problema do direito penal numa sociedade multicultural. *Revista Portuguesa de Ciência Criminal* ano6 fasciculo 2 pp 209-232.
- SINGER, Peter (1994). *Rethinking life and death*. New York: St. Martin Press.
- WIREDU, Kwasi (1980). *Philosophy and an African culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## **OBSERVATÓRIO POLÍTICO**

Rua Almerindo Lessa  
Pólo Universitário do Alto da Ajuda,  
1349-055 Lisboa  
Tel. (00351) 21 361 94 30  
geral@observatoriopolitico.pt

Para citar este trabalho/ To quote this paper:

FAVARATO, Cláudia. «From Ritual Infanticide to Political Power. A frame for the study of political powers in Guinea Bissau», Working Paper #83, Observatório Político, publicado em 21/11/2018, URL: [www.observatoriopolitico.pt](http://www.observatoriopolitico.pt)

### **Aviso:**

Os working papers publicados no sítio do Observatório Político podem ser consultados e reproduzidos em formato de papel ou digital, desde que sejam estritamente para uso pessoal, científico ou académico, excluindo qualquer exploração comercial, publicação ou alteração sem a autorização por escrito do respectivo autor. A reprodução deve incluir necessariamente o editor, o nome do autor e a referência do documento. Qualquer outra reprodução é estritamente proibida sem a permissão do autor e editor, salvo o disposto em lei em vigor em Portugal.