

## TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN GUINEA BISSAU POLITICAL CULTURE

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### Abstract

The present article aims to unveil the importance of the indigenous animist religious system within Guinea Bissau political culture. By analysing the contrast between the inherent legitimation of State authority and local-traditional ones it is discerned the type of political culture shared by Guinean people.

Taking into account the exacerbation of public responsiveness to symbols manipulation when levels of human security are felt lower by individuals, I discuss the importance of religious symbolic capital inherent in Guinea Bissau national leaders' politics, pinpointing the case of José Bernardino "Nino" Vieira.

These practices enable State authorities to legitimize their authority, to overcome the ethnical heterogeneity impasse and to compensate for loose relationships between the government and the citizens.

Finally, I discuss the manipulation of the religious dimension for political ends as a milestone of the process of *africanization* of power, due to religious and political syncretism typical of traditional African political systems, on the one hand. On the other hand, I question how myths worshipping the national leaders might foster the breakthrough of an authoritarian political regime.

### Keywords

Guinea Bissau; political culture; symbolic capital; African political system; African traditional religion

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### Introduction

Through this article I aim to discern the importance of traditional religion in Guinea Bissau political culture. State coups that sparked throughout the past five decades weakened the State-building process, and the strengthening of a liberal democracy based on the rule of law. For remarkable ethnical heterogeneity, traditional authorities enjoy strong legitimacy hindering the strength of formal State authorities. Moreover, religious values, mostly expressed through the indigenous animist cosmologies, persist strong among Bissau-Guinean.

First, I identify the political culture type prevalent in Guinea Bissau, based on Almond & Verba (1989 [1963]) classification, by unveiling the threefold political structure and by emphasizing patterns of contrast between State authority and traditional-local authorities.

Second, researches (Inglehart, Basañes & Moreno, 1998; Inglehart & Norris; 2011) show that among people living in low income conditions or in failed or poorer States religiosity persists strong. Therefore, public responsiveness to symbols manipulation is lightened when people are personally vulnerable to political-economic distress or when they feel unable to deal with their problems. According to the human security secularization thesis (Inglehart & Norris, 2011), it is discussed the importance of religious-grounded symbolic capital as a tool used by Guinea Bissau leaders to legitimize their authority and overcome the ethnical heterogeneity impasse.

The third part of the article focuses on importance of the religious dimension within Guinea Bissau political culture. Data outcomes are expected to verify postulated hypothesis on the ends of religious values' manipulation. On the one hand, I hypothesised that, whilst the employ of religious based symbols by national leaders is a tool to compensate for loose relationships between the government and the citizens, such practices are part of traditional African political systems. In this sense, their mingling with the State-system marks a milestone in the *africanization* of Power process. On the other hand, due to outstandingly high levels of legitimation and consent they provide, along with a sense of fright among the population, myths worshipping the person of the president endorse the breakthrough of an authoritarian political system.

The discernment outlined in this article is based on data gathered from field work (Biombo region, October to December 2016). Techniques as informal conversations with representative of the local-traditional political system, along with participant observation within rural settlement daily life and occurrences, furnished the necessary data to chart. A clear as possible account of the prevalent political culture type.



Moreover, the analysis is enriched by categorical discourse analysis of semi-structured interviews, underpinned by an inductive taxonomy. The latter were submitted to a selected, representative corpus, encompassing different age groups. The interviewees are Bissau-Guinean university students and professors who witnessed the three-decades (1980-2009) long era of José Bernardino "Nino" Vieira government. The interviews pinpoint how the President Nino engaged with symbolic capital in the exercise of his power.

### **Guinea Bissau political scenario**

Following independence (September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1974) from Portugal, Guinea Bissau has been ruled by the former liberation movement, PAIGC (Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde). After the 1980 coup, João Bernardino "Nino" Vieira took charge as president; he maintained his office till 1998. State coups, assassinations and disputes between the politicians and the army have been a hallmark of Guinean political turmoil since the formal institution of pluralistic democracy in 1994. Guinea Bissau is formally a semi-presidential representative democracy; albeit, political activities seldom are not consistent with what stated in the Constitution (1984) provisions.

Nation and State-building processes are at stake due to social, cultural and political legacies. On the one hand, there lacks an open, free-informed system of relation between governed and government. On the other hand, the process of embodying citizens within one national identity is hampered by ethnical heterogeneity (Forrest, 2003). In the country, there are almost thirty ethnicities and none of this has a high prevalence among the population. Balanta (26%), Papel (9.2%), Bijagós (2.1%), Manjaco (9.2%), Mancanha (3.5%) are the most significant animist ethnicities, representative of almost 50% of the total population, whether Fula (25%) and Mandinga are the main Muslim ethnicities (Nóbrega, 2003). There is no predominant ethnical group in the political sphere<sup>1</sup>, nor there are any records of political vote in the country. Ethnic identity is not determinative of a given community's political choice (Forrest, 2003: 187). The parcelling off of identities matches identity patterns more tightly with individuals' ethnical group than with the nation.

Ethnical identity patterns are not limited to the cultural cluster but affect the political sphere also. Most of the people refers to local authority rather than to the State (Favarato, 2017); the State is fragile and lacks legitimation among people, especially in the rural realm. Heritage of the former colonial one, current Guinean State is shaped on a European apparatus, which was not able to penetrate and rearrange social, traditional configuration of power (Forrest, 2003).

Portuguese indirect rule system, implemented during the 1800, was based on local committees, called *Comités de Tabanca* (Forrest, 2003: 142). The latter were intended to pervasively spread State power among native people. Although, the colonial ruling system was corrupted by the locals, who elected people endowed with traditional authority or weak individuals for position in the committee (Nóbrega, 2003). Strength of local, traditional political and social structure prevailed over the colonizer. The

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<sup>1</sup> Although, Álvaro Nóbrega refers to "*balantização* do Estado" process. Balanta ethnical group presence is majoritary within the armed forces, hence the increasing power Balanta are gaining in the militar and political sphere (Nóbrega, 2015).



independent State ruled by PAICG inherited such structural fragilities; State's capacity is limited to cities and community-based authorities hold power over rural society.

Contemporary structure of African political systems is ontologically composed of three elements: pre-colonial structures, colonial cultural-political legacies, and post-colonial State developments, inherently influenced by the globalization process and the modern neoliberal State model. The three parcels are not exclusive, for they work in reciprocal synergy in the inner social, cultural and political reality. Guinea Bissau political culture is *ipso facto* a heterogeneous cultural mix. The threefold structure provides a sound explanation on the State-traditional powers dialectic. PAICG reiterated attacks against traditional power depicted it as backward, indigenous, uncivilized; therefore, they engendered a backlash, expressed through the recent revitalization of traditional power revitalization (Carvalho, 2004).

Despite State's sovereignty over all Guinean territory, local and traditional authorities<sup>2</sup> strength is high throughout all ethnical groups. Local leaders' legitimacy is likely due to their political and/or religious role (Bordonaro, 2009).

Importance of ancestors and spirits, along with invention of tradition (Hobsbawm, 2002), prompted the recent revitalization of traditional power in Guinea Bissau. To confirm and through the support of blood-soul legacies with metaphysical forces and the ancestors, the newly appointed *régulo* successfully perform traditional rituals and ceremonies. The latter are a means to assert authority, broaden symbolic capital and strengthen power. Traditional legitimation practices are the hallmark of the syncretism between the secular and religious power: legitimacy, power and authority of traditional leaders (*régulos*) is tightly dependent on their religious force and their commitment with animist "*cerimonia di terra*<sup>3</sup>" (Favarato, 2017).

### **Political culture and importance of traditional religion**

Individuals' orientation toward political system and political action are determinant elements to discern local and traditional authorities' legitimacy. Those patterns of orientation are best summed in the expression political culture (Almond, 1956: 396), due to the peculiar epistemological traits the two terms refer to on their own. Together, they define a specific cluster of culture, differentiated and partially autonomous from culture at large.

Culture is a collective phenomenon in which individuals bring together their own set of world outlooks, interpretation of reality, feelings and expectations. Culture is a broad term; it refers to individual (ego-tropic or psychologic traits) and societal (socio-tropic) aspects. Due to institutions, socialization, education and communication media, a culture is "the signifying system through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored" (Williams, 1983: 13). Lacking clear boundaries of definition,

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<sup>2</sup> Anthropologist Clara Carvalho (2004) distinguish between local and traditional power. The former is an independent rule structure, historically deep-rooted in customary practices and social habitus; the label of traditional is due to the source of power legitimation. Guinean *régulos* underpin their authority in the self-justifying notion of "tradition".

<sup>3</sup> "Di terra" is used to refer to tradition, both in its immanent and material aspect. Therefore it is linked to animist forces, spirits (*irân*) and ancestors.



it includes notions of diverse clusters of knowledge, as anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, religion, art.

Distinguishable from non-political attitudes, *political* culture denotes how the political system is internalized in form of cognitions, feelings and evaluations. The combination of the terms political and culture refers to people's psychological orientations toward social objects, or in other words the totality of ideas and attitudes toward authority discipline, governmental responsibilities and entitlements, and associated patterns of cultural transmission (Robertson, 2002).

Political culture can be categorized according to type, subcultures and congruence between political culture and political system. With regard to Guinea Bissau case, it is identifiable a participant type shared by the elite, whilst most of Guinean population is embedded in parochial political culture<sup>4</sup> (Almond & Verba, 1989 [1963]), insofar traditional authorities are referred to as first legitimate authority rather than the central State. A political orientation does not exclude nor replace the other; there is no homogeneity or uniformity of political culture as such, but a cultural heterogeneity or mix, founded on subcultures cleavages.

Orientation toward political action is deducible by a synthesis of cognitive, cathexis and evaluation elements (Almond, 1956: 396). In terms of affection, evaluation of the State and government present negative traits: little or nothing is expected from the political system and awareness of the government presence tends to be linked to family interests. Moreover, reforms and permanence of change (Bordonaro, 2009), yet not leading to any shifts nor improvements fostered a sense of resignation mixed with hope for the future.

According to Bissau-Guinean, the country's political structure is inefficient and unable to provide for people's need, for the State personnel is on average corrupted. Politicians are blamed of corruption and of serving of their position for the sake of personal interests. Such a selfish attitude counteracts desirable features of a political leader: traditional authorities enjoy legitimacy insofar they responsibly rule for the well-beings of the individuals (Monteiro, 2016: 163). A good leader shall use power for the common benefit of the community.

Traditional political titles are a lifelong office, conferred upon criteria of age, wisdom, courage and value. Customary law provisions (FDB & INEP, 2012) appoint a council of elders (*Omi Garandi*) and a committee of counsellors to mentor a *regulo's* governance. Individuals obey decisions and rules enacted due to their justness; it is very unlikely that violations occur. Most of local authorities' dispositions are underpinned in indigenous animist foundation, which foster the prohibition. To violate a norm would make one guilty in front of *irân*<sup>5</sup>, who has no mercy for human beings: punishments often involve death or ceaseless *mufunesa*<sup>6</sup>(Favarato, 2017).

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<sup>4</sup> According to the parochial type model, political roles are not specialized and there are not separated from religious and/or social orientation. Whether it may occur in larger-scale and differentiated polities, parochial orientation is more common in simpler, circumscribed traditional systems (Almond & Verba, 1989 [1963]: 17).

<sup>5</sup> The term *Irân* has no clear definition boundaries. It refers to a metaphysical entity, a spirit, a powerful force. Despite its otherworldliness, it is regarded part of the physical world, its presence is sensed and it is appointed as the last cause of positive and negative occurrences.

<sup>6</sup> Misfortune.



No matter of local political life is kept behind the scenes. Orality is a fundamental communication mean in a context of medium-poor literacy level; lacking printed or IT media resources, meetings under the shadow of the mango trees are the selected spot for political talks and discussions. The quick sharing of oral information (through counsellors' official transmission and mouth-to-mouth talks) and high level of societal consent can foster a leader's positive image as can quickly destroy one's reputation on the basis of tattles. Trust is of utter importance in a political world underpinned on orality.

Whether all citizens are informed on political matters, participation in the political life is casted within boundaries tightly linked to gender and performance of traditional ceremonies. Rituals, not age, define phases of one's life. Boys ought to perform *fanado* (a three-months-long test of resistance) to rightfully become active member of the political community. Who does not perform the ceremony, entirely or partially, is given the depreciating name *blufo* and is not ever eligible for marriage. Women are generally excluded from political life and they are not allowed to cover political offices<sup>7</sup>. Contrarily, no prohibition as such is recorded in the religious system.

Mirroring the family's functioning, the local political structure despises selfishness. A system of reciprocal obligation, thus creating a relational net of interactions stays as cornerstone of the social, political and familiar system. Hence, trust and identification in the local political system is high.

The transplantation of the political orientations referred above to the national system proves therefore unsuccessful. National government practices based on a bureaucratic apparatus are not consistent with patterns of legitimation and identification proper of the traditional system, thus the perceived failure of the deceiving State. As outlined in Almond and Verba analysis (1989 [1963]), political culture and political system are not inherently two overlapping structure, for the degree of their incongruence determines efficiency and participation into forms of political action.

The State apparatus results of colonial legacies, which does not mirror local reality nor African heirloom. The incongruence cause detachment feelings whilst embedding the spreading of participatory political culture. Cleavages in political orientation are shaped by urban or rural settlements' location; the political culture split broaden between the foreign educated elite and the population at large, as the awareness of the significance of the government varies sharply with the level of education (Almond & Verba, 1989[1963]).

Within urban inhabitants and educated elite, political culture leans to the participatory type. In this model, citizens are explicitly oriented toward the system (policy, administration structures and processes) as a whole and feel an active role of their "self" in the polity (Almond & Verba, 1989[1963]: 18). In Bissau and Bafata, levels of political participation are remarkably high and led to the emerge of an articulated civil society, in line with African associative tradition. It is precisely in Bissau that protests and upraises in opposition to governmental actions take place, displaying engagement with political life in positive (political debates, political parties' headquarters) and negative (protests, contestation, disagreement) terms. Moreover, urban citizens and educated élites tend to experience an identity incongruence: whilst their participatory political culture is

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<sup>7</sup> Exceptions are foreseen in the case a woman is the head of the family.



consistent with the formal political system, hardly there will be any identification with politicians' little accountability and with the authoritarian measures enacted.

The cleavages between the diverse political subcultures and the incongruence amidst the political system and the political cultures hinder national legitimacy. Furthermore, the culture-system mismatch along with the variety of subcultures harden the task for the national leader to encompass ethnical heterogeneity and attain nationally recognized legitimacy.

### **Persistence of religiosity and symbolic power**

To achieve legitimation is a tough matter in Guinea Bissau politics: independence propelled by the State and not by the people (Graça, 2005: 22) thwarted the nation-building process. Top-down construction of State apparatus and administration structure did not overcome local and traditional power structures. For the lowering of the revolutionary legitimacy<sup>8</sup> accorded to politicians, and lacking foundations for national legitimacy, it prompted the appeal to myth and symbols tightly rooted in the traditional religion to foster authority through symbolic power.

An effective alternative to bureaucratic-rational legitimation, symbolic capital provides a generally valid basis to legitimate national political power. Symbolic capital, inherent in social and cultural capital, is the leading force *par excellence* of politics (Bourdieu, 2014: 282; 1989). It is generated by the relation between socio-cultural capital and the agents whom socialization enables them to see and recognize such assets. In other words, it implies that the citizens recognize political authorities as endowed with such symbolic capital.

As a creative, world-making power, symbolic capital provides a base to create legitimacy among people. Many are the forms in which it displays: a language is for instance a structured, normative institution, itself constitutive of reality and a form of symbolic capital.

Symbolic power is not necessarily grounded on proved occurrences nor factual truths. It preferably relies on manipulation of reality, or rather on a manipulation of reality accordingly with one's vision and opinion. Politics is not made by truth, but by opinion, which ultimately identifies with illusion. *Et est*, opinion is one of the indispensable bases of power (Arendt, 1995: 17).

The importance of myths, symbols, values and beliefs does not lay merely in themselves, but in what they evoke, in the meaning they are given. Myths, symbols and rituals are an essential feature of all societies; periodical ceremonies are required to state societal existential needs and moral values with ideological meaning (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1981[1940]: 52-56; Hobsbawm, 2002). Their manipulation to serve political aims play a key-function since they are a useful tool to enhance legitimization of the political élite and of the national leadership.

As already noted by Fortes & Evans-Pritchard (1981[1940]: 52), "cohesion and persistence of African [traditional and national] societies depend largely on ability of all

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<sup>8</sup> Recognition of one's right to be part of the government due to participation in the fighting struggle for independence.



members to feel their unity and perceive their common interest in myths and symbols". Religion views, and henceforth the related values and beliefs, play a major role in people political outlook.

Moreover, public responsiveness to symbols manipulation is heightened when people are vulnerable to political-economic distress or when they feel unable to deal with their problems (Hayward & Dumbuya, 1983). Inglehart and Norris (2011) human security (secularization) thesis bridges the degree of religiosity with the level of existential security perceived by the members of a given society. Essential to well-being, human security designates the state of living free from various risks, dangers and vulnerabilities. Religiosity refers, in this sense, to the need of an ultimate source to face life-threatening risks one has to cope with on a daily basis. To believe in a metaphysical being has a functional role for those living in vulnerable condition, since it helps reducing anxiety for survival.

The central claim of the modernization thesis is that economic, politic and cultural changes go together in coherent patterns. There exists a broad range of cultural values closely linked to a given society's level of economic development (Inglehart, Basañez & Moreno, 1998), whilst other factors, such as formal education, mass communication and the structure of work force, are simply influential on cultural changes patterns.

Nevertheless, religiosity is sensible to other societal elements, as religious culture and socio-economic development (Inglehart, Basañez & Moreno, 1998). Furthermore, patterns of cultural changes are highly dependent on a country's economic stage; in other words, the political dimension of culture changes along with the economic system. Political and social expectations of populations living in poorer nations and failed States are primary bonded to claims for security, rather than on pretences for inclusive, participative citizenship, or for rights<sup>9</sup> of the individual. Among these populations, religiosity persists more strongly, while a systematic erosion of religious practices, values and beliefs has occurred among the most prosperous strata in rich nations (Inglehart & Norris, 2011).

### **Religion, beliefs, myths and symbols within Guinean politics**

Hallmark of Guinea Bissau political culture is the syncretism between the political and the religious spheres. The latter relies the traditional system of beliefs, a heterogeneity of cosmologies falling under the name of animism. Despite identification with one of the revealed religions (Christianism, Muslims) present in the country's threefold religious system, animist beliefs persist as a cultural substratum for all individuals. *Irân* is the main deity; it designates a spirit who can be malign or benevolent. In the traditional system, *Irân* agreement<sup>10</sup> is fundamental to legitimize a political role. Moreover, the approval of the elders and of the dead ancestors is fundamental to legitimize one's political function.

At the national level, politicians' symbolic capital rests upon traditional animist values, myths and beliefs. Their manipulation is likely to provide the leader with broad legitimacy,

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<sup>9</sup> In this sense, rights refer to first and second generations rights, respectively civic and political, and economic, social and cultural rights.

<sup>10</sup> *Irân's* agreement is asked through a traditional ceremony performed by a traditional religious authority, called *baloubeiro* or *djambakus*.



for overcoming the ethnical heterogeneity impasse, yet enhancing the instauration of an authoritarian regime.

To discern the religious dimension in the Guinean political sphere it was applied discourse content analysis on semi-structured interviews submitted to a selected corpus. The analysis is categorical, underpinned by an inductive taxonomy. Units of analysis, then chartered within indexes and categories, are single words, or couplets of words when both needed as concept-referent. Concept resembling a peculiar trait of the Guinean universe will be presented using the original, native word (e.g., *irân*, *djambakus*). The cast follow the presence or absence rule.

The interviews focus on a specific time-frame, ranging from 1980 to 2009. During the three decades, José Bernardino “Nino” Vieira was ruling or tightly engaged with the government. Thereupon the analysis aims to pinpoint use and misuse of religious-related symbolic capital by “Nino” Vieira.

The first cluster (State) includes those elements needed to verify hypothesis on legitimation. The indexes focus on ethnical heterogeneity, national versus local-traditional power structures legitimacy, authoritarian practices and feeling toward the State.

The second cluster (responsiveness to symbolic capital) aims to discern sensitiveness to the religious-related facets of political practices. Indexes aim to ascertain presence of myths, symbols and beliefs within politics and their foundation. Furtherly, the following indexes ascertain which kind of foundations lay underneath the worship of the national leader.

Finally, the third cluster (*africanization* of power) registers the presence of items concerning symbols, belief and religion in the political sphere.

### State

The first category deals with the perception of the State among Guinean population. In the specific, patterns of national leader’s authority legitimization and the presence of authoritarianism markers are pinpointed.

Table 1

<i>State</i>					
<i>Category: Traditional legacies</i>					
<i>Indicators</i>	Political-religious syncretism	Tribalism	Ethnicity	Traditional specialists - counsellors	Informal court



Source: drafted by the author

The State dimension mingles with the non-State one for including traditional legacies. Narratives and talks on the State recurrently includes references to ethnicities, customary law, traditional authorities in the national political system characterization. Ethnicity is no source of conflict among Guinean people, for it rather is source of pride. The harmonious ethnic integration among Guinean groups is peculiar. Religious difference is also respected. Traditional religion specialists (*régulos, djambakus, balobeiros, mouros*) are given utter importance also in the political sphere: they form an informal court of ministers and counsellors of the president. "Nino" Vieira was said to have a real court living at his residence, the "Palácio", in Bissau. He used to consult with them on a daily basis. Each of the specialists had competence over a specific matter, as in a government asset.

Table 2

Category: "Rogue" State						State
<i>Indicators</i>	Fragility	Democratization	Nacional unity	Clientelism	Corruption	Civil society

Source: drafted by the author

At large, the State is characterized by hallmarks of structural fragility. On the one hand, the interviewees characterized it negatively: a system run by clientelism and corruption thus engendering general feelings of mistrust. The State and the government authorities are regarded faraway/distant entities, and on average perceived as ineffective and helpless, not capable of effective action. The general orientation toward the government shows it lacks authority and power, as well as it is given little legitimacy. Furthermore, expectations about the State, democracy, the government and politician in general are low or not existing. There is no or little sense of identification with the apparatus of the bureaucratic modern State. On the other hand, there exist a strong sense of national belonging, to a Bissau-Guinean unity.

Table 3

Category: Legitimation and authoritarianism					State
<i>Indicators</i>	Revolutionary legitimation	Head of army profile	Super-natural power and knowledge	Control	Tyrannical

Source: drafted by the author



The characterization of the president “Nino” presents otherwise different traits. Notwithstanding the over-a-decade long semi-authoritarian regime, “Nino” Vieira is depicted as a hero. He enjoyed a broad legitimacy among the population; primarily due to his fame of brave warrior fighting the Portuguese. He was said to be undefeatable, because he faced several life-threatening situations, but was never harmed, nor were his soldiers beaten. Military fame provided the ground for the revolutionary legitimacy he needed to acquire consent. Therefore, his military gestures were coloured with super-natural features, and myths worshipping him as an immortal man, who enjoyed the personal support of one of the most powerful *irân*. He was said to have super natural powers and knowledge.

Nevertheless, “Nino” was a loved and feared leader, for the tyrannical means of control he used. When his authority was questioned, “Nino” exercised brutally repressive measures over his opponents. People feared him due merits on the battlefield, and even more because of the atrocities he was acting.

### Responsiveness to symbolic capital

People’s reactivity to symbols manipulation become manifest through the analysis of the figure of the President “Nino” Vieira. His power was grounded on military braveness and on indigenous animist values. Descriptions of “Nino”, almost resembling a myth-form, contain recurrent references to supernatural powers and above-human nature, as well as to extraordinary skills of warrior. For the latter merit, he was/is also referred to as the “father” of the nation.

“Nino” was worshipped as a heroic, undefeatable general, whom acts in the battlefield during the independence struggle were super-human. He was also given a warrior Balanta name, *Kabina Fanchamna*. He was said to be immortal, because there existed no weapon that could harm him. This belief was spread within the civil and the military segments of the society, and explain the vivid circumstances of his death. Moreover, he was thought to have the support of a special, personal *irân*, whom favours would accord him protection and power.

Table 4

Categories	<i>Responsiveness to symbolic capital</i>						
	<i>Super-natural myth</i>				<i>War related myths</i>		
<i>Indicators</i>	Super-natural power and Knowledge	Undefeatable	Above-human or divine nature	Nino’s death	<i>Kabina Fanchamna</i>	Legendary heroic warrior	Independence fighter social status

Source: drafted by the author



According to popular talks, “Nino” was entitled with super-natural powers that enabled him to know all he wanted. This legend served as deterrent against his opponents, to prevent they organize a coupe, a revolt or a rebellion. Furtherly, it discouraged any form of opposition to his power. The latter are features of authoritarianism rather than resembling symbolic capital patterns toward legitimation. His government was very efficiently organized upon information provided by secret services; with the support of loayl urban and local-rural authorities, he was notified in advance about any subversive movements blossoming in the country. Whether control of information and deterrence were mentioned, narratives on “Nino” Vieira power were ready to make the government controlling capacities look like the outcome of the President capabilities, due to *irân’s* influence.

For the high share of traditional animist religion, the utter majority of the people is sensitive to values and beliefs belonging to the indigenous cosmologies. Along with those who plainly have faith in *irân*, most people acknowledge the spirits existence and some even regard themselves as *pouteiro/a* (able to see *irâns*). Therefore, the authoritarian regime ruled by “Nino” Vieira rested on a system of control underpinned on manipulation of religious beliefs and on rational-bureaucratic organized services of information.

Table 5

Categories	Responsiveness to symbolic capital					
	Control and deterrence			Beliefs		
indicators	Irân’s protection	To be or to have djambakus	Intelligence service	To have faith in <i>irâns</i>	General beliefs in <i>irâns</i>	<i>Pauteiro/a</i>

Source: drafted by the author

### Africanization of power

In traditional African political systems, the use of religion-related myths and symbols is an ordinary feature. Syncretism between religiosity and politic is the norm: roles frequently overlap, the spirits’ and the ancestors’ approval is fundamental for a leader’s approval or to sort out any major political decision of the community.

Table 6

Africanization of Power					
Category: Symbols					
Indicators	<i>Régulo’s</i> blessing	Axe	Sacred hand	Chicken’s hoof	Muslim dress

Source: drafted by the author

The government of “Nino” Vieira is pictured rich in symbols recalling the animist dimension. Among the most common, there appears the blessing of traditional *régulos*, the sacred hand, the chicken hoof and the Muslim clothing. Nevertheless, the last category of the content analysis considers indicators referring to religiosity. It was applied



broadly to all the data set. Analysis outcome shows that the political realm is always depicted with religious or religious-related features. The latter applies both to local-traditional authorities and to national leaders, hence the State political system.

Guinean syncretic configuration of power challenges the modern, bureaucratic State system established after independence, inherited from the Portuguese colonization and influenced by the worldwide globalization process.

Table 7

Indicator	Africanization of Power							
	<i>Irân</i>	traditional	animism	syncretism	(traditional) ceremony	Traditional specialist ( <i>djambakos</i> , <i>mouro</i> , <i>régulo</i> , <i>balobeiro</i> )	Catholicism	Islamism

Source: drafted by the author

To Western political science, the manipulation of religious myths and symbols within the political sphere is an abusive means to attain power, legitimation and authority. Albeit, it is needed to consider the specificities of African systems and its politics legacies. Presence of mystique markers is common to all African countries, more intensively in West Africa ones. Hence, presence of symbols of power, religious elements and traditional specialists in the inner paths of national politics might be the hallmark of a peculiar configuration of State, for pinpointing the process of *africanization* of power.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper I aimed to unveil the importance of traditional religion within Guinea Bissau political culture.

The threefold political structure inherent in Guinea Bissau society plays a major role in shaping boundaries of the religious dimension. The strength of local and traditional authorities embeds the power of national ones; prevalence of the parochial political culture type enhances primacy of the former over the latter. Norms enacted are underpinned in both socio-political and metaphysical foundations. The level of people's identification and trust in the local or traditional authorities is high, and their legitimacy is unquestioned.

When tools of the rational-bureaucratic national structure are not consistent with the desired purposes – legitimacy, power, consent - authorities resort to symbolic capital of power. Religious capital provides a solid base for strong symbolic power, since: 1) metaphysic's beliefs are an utter parcel of symbols, myths and values. As with traditional chiefs, widely accepted beliefs serve as a foundation for authority and legitimation of the president authority; 2) although human security is a determinant, though not deterministic, element to define one's religiosity, perceptivity to religiosity is higher in those societies where individuals are more vulnerable to life-threatening risks.

With regard to the postulated hypothesis, the analysis proves that the pervasiveness of religion-related values, myths and symbols in Guinean politics serves more purposes.



On the one hand, myths worshipping the president “Nino” Vieira supplied him with outstandingly high levels of legitimation and consent. First, they were a means to overcome the ethnic traditional legitimation *impasse*. Second, “Nino” power was underpinned in a mixture of legitimation based upon mythological fame and fright. Myths and narratives endowed him with a *Übermensch* identity, which efficiently provided deterrence against opposition and rebellion upon the established government. “Nino” is both known as the heroic general who freed the country from the Portuguese colonizer, and as the sanguinary president, whom police would pitilessly murder any opponents. The mystique surrounding the figure of the president hence represents the prompt of an authoritarian political system’s breakthrough.

On the other hand, the employ of religious based symbols by “Nino” Vieira is a tool to compensate for loose relationships between the government and the citizens. Nevertheless, such practices are part of traditional African political systems, where the religious and the political sphere are interdependent. The use of religion-related values by national leader frames within the political-religious syncretism. The latter is a defining feature of African political systems.

According to Western tradition, life in plurality takes form of politics, an art underpinned in human beings’ faculties, whose underneath of power rest upon human beings’ societal organization. Contrarily, African politics tightly grounds the ultimate foundation of government on a metaphysical, somehow higher entity. In Guinea Bissau, it is called *irân*. *Irâns* are the real owners of power, whilst traditional, local and – we might affirm – national authorities are means of its will. In this sense, the religious dimension is indivisible from the political one, for they inherently imply one another. Transposition of the use of myths, symbols and religious values into the national political sphere epitomizes the cornerstone for the *africanization* of power process, or rather the construction of a complex State, not underpinned exclusively in the western nation-State model.

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