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THE STATE OF THE SUBJECT: A GUINEAN EDUCATOR'S ODYSSEY IN THE POSTCOLONIAL FOREST, 1960–2001

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ABSTRACT: Recent research on twentieth-century Africa has been marked by a surge of interest in autobiographical narrative. While this development is generally praiseworthy, the knowledge it has produced has been uneven, in temporal as well as spatial terms. This article channels the current interest in personal experience and narrative to a place and time where resonances of the 'common' voice have been rather weak: the Republic of Guinea, across the final decades of the twentieth century. Foregrounding the autobiographical reflections of a local teacher in the country's southeastern forest region, it forges new perspectives on political subjectivity in Guinea's understudied provinces.

KEY WORDS: Guinea-Conakry, identity, education, postcolonial.

INTRODUCTION

THE new century has witnessed a surge of interest in the study of African selves, autobiography and self-fashioning. This literature has expanded our grasp of how twentieth-century Africans sensed, specified and judged local and distant forces that combined to shape the course and character of their lives.[1] It has made innovative use of oral histories, life histories and an array of personal and public printed texts. These sources have been deployed to generate intimate, multilayered accounts of wide-ranging individuals' struggles to make the most of their lives under precarious, shifting circumstances. Beyond due recognition of their intrinsic empirical and literary values, the growing corpus of richly documented biographies also encourages new forms of inquiry into various domains of sociology, politics and cultural history.

This article explores how Africans' personal narratives can enrich the study of experiences and imaginings of state power across time and place. Some Africanists are preoccupied with the 'nature of subjectivity' and 'historical memory'.[2] Others are acutely concerned with the workings and

[1] Two edited volumes particularly illustrative of this wave of research are L. White, S. F. Miescher and D.W. Cohen (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington, 2001), and K. Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington, 2006). For a more bounded case study, see S. F. Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana* (Bloomington, 2005).

[2] For an insightful exploration of the difficulties of researching subjectivity and lives, see D. W. Cohen, S. F. Miescher and L. White, 'Introduction: voices, words, and African history', in White, Miescher and Cohen (eds.), *African Words*, 1–27; and C. Kratz, 'Conversations and lives', in *ibid.* 127–61. On the theme of historical memory, see D. W. Cohen, *The Combing of History* (Chicago, 1994).

malfunctioning of African states.[3] This article demonstrates that these two branches of critical concern can challenge and draw from one another more productively and fully than has been done thus far. In doing so, it uses historical subjectivity as an opportunity to produce a rich ethno-history of state/subject relations.

For all of its strengths and increasing momentum, the new wave of autobiographically oriented historiography is marked by temporal and geographical unevenness. Thus far, its proponents have tended to gravitate towards colonial rather than postcolonial subjects and narratives. The task of unveiling the complex sufferings, resiliency and resourcefulness of Africans negotiating colonial-era changes appeals to many analysts more than the task of studying subsequent enchantments, struggles and disillusionments with 'the postcolony'.[4] The advent of independence marks the point where many historians' otherwise assiduous efforts to chronicle 'the imagining of new kinds of personhood' and the 'complexities and contingency of social orientations and affiliations' around the continent suddenly wane.[5]

The geographical contours of the newly intensified explorations of African subjectivity are also bounded. Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa have been the most vibrant zones of research, leaving peoples of the rest of the continent comparatively understudied.[6] The distinctive appeals of these four countries for autobiographically oriented work are understandable. But a moment arises when the enchantment with a select set of places and persons, however compelling, may begin to yield diminishing benefits for knowledge of the countries in question and African Studies in general.

This article channels the current fascination with 'common' Africans' 'historical consciousness' and autobiography towards a place and time where such topics have received little attention: the Republic of Guinea, since its entry onto the stage of independent nation-states. [7] Drawing on the personal reflections of a Guinean educator who worked in wide-ranging capacities in remote 'forest' communities from the wake of independence into the new century, the article explores provincial experiences of state power in postcolonial Guinea. In doing so, it seeks to advance novel perspectives for inquiry into state/subject relations in comparable postcolonial settings.

GUINEAN POSTCOLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

Since the country gained independence and entered its self-designated 'revolutionary' era in 1958, Guinean nationalist politics have inspired

[3] Two of the most influential studies on the topic are J. F. Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (New York, 1993); and M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996).

[4] See A. Mbembe's oft-cited 'Provisional notes on the postcolony', *Africa*, 62 (1992), 1–37, and *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, 2001).

[5] K. Barber, 'Introduction: hidden innovators in Africa' in Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories*, 6.

[6] The four countries constitute the foci of the fifteen chapters comprising Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories*.

[7] For a penetrating study of the meaning of 'historical consciousness' and its distinction from 'historical determination', see G. Marcus, 'Past, present, and emergent identities: requirements for ethnographies of late twentieth-century modernity worldwide', in S. Lash and J. Friedman (eds.), *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford, 1992), 309–27.

vigorous commentaries by thoughtful observers inside and outside the country.[8] Many of the reasons for the resulting passionate debates lies in the career of a single, complicated and (for a great many) unforgettable man: Ahmed Sékou Touré. For five decades, the bulk of writing on post-colonial Guinean history has foregrounded the words and actions of Touré, the nation's leader from the prelude to independence until his death in 1984.[9] Leader of the militant PDG and most visible player in Guinea's rise to nationhood, Touré stepped dramatically onto the international political stage.[10] The earliest major scars in this image formed in 1961, when state forces cracked down brutally on Conakry students and teachers protesting against national education policies.[11] Touré's status as an anti-colonial hero corroded steadily over the following years. By 1965, after a coup attempt known as 'the traders' plot', the state leadership severed ties with France and implemented intense surveillance of the largely Conakry-based intelligentsia.[12]

[8] For an illuminating overview of works exemplifying polemical positions on Guinean revolutionary state and society, see M. S. Camara, *His Master's Voice: Mass Communication and Single Party Politics in Guinea under Sékou Touré* (Trenton, 2005), 1–21.

[9] Touré can be seen as leader of the nationalist movement from 1952 when he became Secretary General of the Rassemblement Démocratique Africaine (RDA)/Parti Démocratique de Guinée (PDG). Some of the most vivid portrayals of the pan-African enthusiasm stirred up by political change in Guinea can be found in the special issue of *Présence Africaine* entitled 'Guinée Indépendante' (29 [1959]). Contributors included *Présence* founder Alioune Diop, poets Aimé Césaire and Jacques Rabemananjara, French historian Jean Suret-Canale and Guinean historian Djibril Tamsir Niane.

[10] The most detailed study of Touré's rise to political stardom is S. K. Kéita's *Ahmed Sékou Touré: L'homme et son combat anti-colonial, 1922–1958* (Conakry, 1998). See also E. Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939–1958* (Portsmouth OH, 2005). Recently Schmidt has contested portrayals of Touré's role in Guinea's move to the left; see *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946–1958* (Athens OH, 2007), and 'Cold war in Guinea: the Rassemblement Démocratique Africaine and the struggle over Communism, 1950–1958', *Journal of African History*, 48 (2007), 95–121.

[11] Teachers were accused of harboring ongoing attachments to colonialist ideologies of schooling and willfully transmitting their views to young charges, enticing them towards 'anti-national' sensibilities and actions. For local press coverage, see 'Manifestations antinationales scolaires: Le film des évènements', *Horoya*, 5–7 Dec. 1961. For more recent reflections on the so-called 'teachers' strike', see M. Diawara's documentary, *Conakry Kas* (New York, 2003).

[12] For coup plots, foreign invasions and other efforts to subvert Guinea's post-independence government, see G. Chaffard, *Les carnets secrets de la décolonisation* (2 vols.) (Paris, 1967), II: 218–19, 236–51, 259–61; C. Rivière, *Guinea: The Mobilization of a People*, trans. V. Thompson and R. Adloff (Ithaca, 1977), 121–40; R. Faligot and P. Krop, *La piscine: les services secrets français, 1944–1984* (Paris, 1985), 217, 226, 245–9, 252, 335–7; J. Foccart, *Foccart parle: entretiens avec Philippe Gaillard* (2 vols.) (Paris, 1995), I: 166, 175; II: 193–4. Concerning the post-independence crackdown on intellectuals, see Rivière, *Guinea*, 127–8; B. Ameillon, *La Guinée: bilan d'une indépendance* (2 vols.; Cahiers Libres, 58–9) (Paris, 1964), 179–81; L. Gray Cowan, 'Guinea', in G. M. Carter (ed.), *African One-Party States* (New York, 1962), 203–4; S. S. Camara, *La Guinée sans la France* (Paris, 1976), 175–6; R. W. Johnson, 'Sekou Touré and the Guinean revolution', *African Affairs*, 69 (Oct. 1970), 357–8. For Touré's relationship with intellectuals during the pre-independence period, see E. Schmidt,

Touré's 1968 declaration of a 'Socialist Cultural Revolution' (SCR) vowing intensified state-scripted transformations of national economic and cultural processes, followed by his purging of scores of Guineans suspected of involvement in a 1970 Portuguese military invasion, alienated many remaining supporters and increased the antagonism of his opponents.[13] By the early 1970s, state-controlled media casting Touré as hero bore scant resemblance to what was being said about him by most Guinean and non-Guinean intellectuals living outside the country.

In his 1972 prizewinning novel *Le cercle des tropiques*, Alioum Fantouré, writing in Europe, portrayed his homeland as a brutal dictatorship where imperious state agents ruled over a stagnant majority whose spiritual, intellectual and physical faculties had been blunted by years of propaganda, intimidation and deprivation.[14] Writing in a different vein but to similar ends, Guinean historian Lansiné Kaba, teaching in the United States, published an important article on 'The Cultural Revolution, artistic creativity, and freedom of expression in Guinea'. Kaba cast the late 1960s as a threshold separating an initial, relatively progressive chapter of national political and cultural vigor from a subsequent (open) chapter marked by Touré's voracious quest for control over all forms of symbolic and material production.[15] Like Fantouré, Kaba meant to leave little doubt of the extent of Guinea's slide into despotism, or its leader's power to bring the nation down with him. Touré's death and the abrupt dismantling of his party-state in 1984 spurred little immediate change in the evaluative categories guiding most appraisals of his leadership and overall impact on the nation.

Few who lived in the Guinean interior from the late 1950s through the early 1980s would counter prevailing criticisms of the revolutionary regime. But most would also stress the limitations of the perspectives guiding many condemnatory accounts. Some counterrevolutionary texts have characterized the prototypical revolutionary-era provincial subject as a one-dimensional figure concerned purely with material survival – a person lacking imagination, reflexivity or any kind of comparative, cosmopolitan consciousness. The localities in which this emblematic figure resided have been cast as correspondingly dormant, dependent upon external forces for dynamism or meaningful change.[16]

'Top down or bottom up? Nationalist mobilization reconsidered, with special reference to Guinea (French West Africa)', *American Historical Review*, 110 (Oct. 2005), 975–1014.

[13] A concise synopsis of Touré's own views on the importance of the Cultural Revolution can be found in the contemporary Guinean teachers' journal *L'Enseignement Révolutionnaire*, 2 (1968), 1–2. For a summary of the Portuguese invasion and its effect on Guinean state and society, see Rivière, *Guinea*, 136–7.

[14] A. Fantouré, *Le cercle des tropiques* (Paris, 1972).

[15] L. Kaba, 'The Cultural Revolution, artistic creativity, and freedom of expression in Guinea', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 14 (1976), 201–18.

[16] For a text that illustrates this desire to portray the revolutionary rural interior as a dormant zone, see C. Colle (ed.), *Guinéoscope: la Guinée à l'aube du IIIème millénaire* (Paris, 1997).

Fieldwork in the Guinean interior, and a handful of discussions with local adults, allows one to see some vital limitations in such rough sketches of revolutionary times, places and lives. Revolutionary ideologies and policies changed Guinean lives and communities, quite often for the worse; they did not empty those lives or communities of sociocultural complexity, or make them unworthy subjects for rigorous sociohistorical investigation. The workings of state power hindered myriad possibilities for local and individual development. It is commonly overlooked, however, that increasingly aggressive state incursions into communal life also forged novel forms and fields of sociopolitical action and reflection. This was particularly true among young people and educators. These were the social actors who wrestled most directly with the burdens imposed by increasingly militant official projections of ideal citizenship, material production and sociocultural transformation.[17]

Also often overlooked within much of the postcolonial historiography is the fact that revolutionary power confronted the country's four major regions and ethnic traditions in different ways, creating distinctive and uneven forms of change, conflict and resentment in the process. The remote southeastern forest prefectures bordering Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire marked particularly volatile battlegrounds in the state's efforts to proclaim and enforce its authoritative power over the cultural and political development of Guinean youths.[18] Multiple factors – geographical, ecological, cultural and religious – informed the forest region's liminal status as a kind of 'fragment' of the nation, both in the general sociopolitical imagination and, more particularly, in the minds of exceptionally influential Muslim Malinké-speaking members of the revolutionary elite like Sékou Touré.[19]

The forest's liminality was both attacked and magnified by a brutally iconoclastic 'demystification campaign', waged throughout forest communities from 1959 to 1961.[20] In the course of the campaign, state-backed

[17] For a broad perspective on these dynamics, see X. Leunda, 'La réforme de l'enseignement et son incidence sur l'évolution rurale en Guinée', *Civilisations* 22, 232–62.

[18] See Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses*, 103–8, for insight into the importance of colonial-era chieftaincy conflicts in spurring and shaping this regional volatility.

[19] The notion of the postcolonial nation as a composite of asymmetrical 'fragments' is drawn from P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993). For a general picture of the forest's real and figurative marginality in most Guineans' and outsiders' imaginings of Guinée française and the nation-state, see C. Rivière, *Mutations sociales en Guinée* (Paris, 1971), 246–61; A. B. Barry, *Les violences collectives en Afrique: le cas guinéen* (Paris, 2000), 88–91; and F. L. Touré, *Une enfance africaine*, vol. II (Conakry, 1997). For a detailed examination of sociocultural relations between Malinké and *forestier* ethnic groups, see J. Fairhead and M. Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest–Savanna Mosaic* (New York, 1996).

[20] A useful study of the campaign's core events is Rivière, *Mutations*, 247–57. For broader perspectives on religious life in the forest prefectures in the decades immediately preceding the campaign, see M. H. Lelong, *N'Zérékoré: l'Evangile en forêt guinéenne* (Paris, 1949), and *Ces hommes qu'on appelle anthropages* (Paris, 1946). For a longer view of the campaign's aftermath, see M. McGovern, 'Unmasking the state: developing political

militants strove to eliminate the material and spiritual bases of longstanding Poro initiation traditions, seen as egregiously primitive and antithetical to new nationalist development objectives centered on youth.[21] Thousands of material artefacts central to the cultural and religious heritages of the region were destroyed during these first years of independence. In the midst of the movement, local elders responsible for initiation and other communal ritual regimens were publicly humiliated or officially tried for upholding 'fetishism' and defying 'demystification'. The psychosocial trauma provoked by this chain of events was heightened by the ethnic identities of the attacking 'militants', many of whom represented the region's main minority ethno-linguistic groups – Kissi, Loma, Kpelle and Kono – commonly grouped together under the ethnonym *forestier*.[22] The demystification campaign proved only the beginning of a long run of 'revolutionary' disruptions and contortions of local life. These wide-ranging incursions attempted to enfold young and adult *forestiers* in a host of political ventures that they in turn sought to evade, neutralize, endure bitterly, or appropriate selectively when seemingly consonant with personal visions of a better life.

Forestiers young and old had their life-trajectories and social relationships bent in unforeseeable, often resented ways over the 26-year course of the revolution. Some social positions fostered exceptionally acute observations of the power of revolutionary policies to reshape forest communities and subjectivities. As in other interior zones, one such position was that of the local teacher. Employed by a state intensely critical of the cultural history of the region they cherished and called home, *forestier* teachers' personal actions and reflections unfolded along and across the major fault-lines of revolutionary politics and pedagogies, and the host of local tensions and conflicts they provoked. The remainder of this article focuses on the personal struggles and reflections of veteran *forestier* educator Alphonse Béavogui, a highly perceptive, articulate and well-placed observer of complex storylines of state transformative power in the postcolonial forest.[23] Béavogui's autobiography traces the historical unfolding of Guinean nationalism in its confrontations with particular forest communities and with his own personal aspirations and anxieties. In doing so, it probes facets of contemporary provincial experience and

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subjectivities in 20th century Guinea' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Emory University, 2004).

[21] Scholarly literature on the ethnic groups comprising the Poro/Sande 'belt' of the Upper Guinean forest region, and the centrality of initiation cults to their formation and reproduction, is abundant, though mainly focused on Liberia and Sierra Leone. Some of the richest studies include W. Murphy, 'Secret knowledge as property and power in Kpelle society: elders versus youth', *Africa*, 50 (1980), 193–207; C. Bledsoe, *Women and Marriage in Kpelle Society* (Stanford, 1980); K. Little, 'The political function of the Poro', *Africa*, 4 (1964), 349–65; and W. D'Azevedo, 'Some historical problems in the delineation of a Central West Atlantic region', *Annals, New York Academy of Sciences*, 96 (1962), 512–38.

[22] For a study of these Guinean groups' sociohistorical roots and interrelationships in the colonial period, see J. Germain, *Peuples de la forêt de Guinée* (Paris, 1984).

[23] The name is a pseudonym.

consciousness rarely addressed in existing studies of the country's post-colonial history.[24]

WANDERING INTO THE REVOLUTIONARY FRAY: ROUGH INITIATIONS, 1960–1962

Born in a small Loma-speaking village in 1940, Béavogui never dreamed of teaching for the revolutionary state, or any state at all. Like most *forestiers* of his generation, his formal education and teachers' training had been pursued completely within the institutional framework of the Catholic Church. Driven by his father, an *ancien combatant*, and a personal predilection for scholastic life, Béavogui went much further in educational progress than most of his peers.[25] Upon passing the crucial primary education exams in 1956 and being told that he was too old to attend the state *collège* in the regional capital of N'Zérékoré, Béavogui eagerly accepted a scholarship at a Catholic teachers' training college in distant Toussiana, Haute Volta. Though Sahelian living conditions proved austere compared to his native forest, Béavogui cherished the four years at Toussiana culminating in teacher's certification. After studying hard and cultivating a range of extra-curricular interests with classmates from several West African territories, Béavogui duly considered himself a cosmopolitan intellectual when he left the college, harboring a clear vision of an ideal professional future. In 1960, aged twenty, Béavogui was eager to return to Guinea to teach for the Church and to help young *forestiers* acquire the intellectual and spiritual capacities that he enjoyed.

The richness of Béavogui's *collège* experiences made the personal trials that followed exceptionally punishing. The Guinean forest to which he was returning in 1960 was not the one he left in 1956. Béavogui had not followed the struggles among and within various anti-colonial factions that drove Guinean politics increasingly to the left at the threshold of independence.[26] Neither had he witnessed the series of pitched symbolic and material confrontations erupting closer to home. Just a year into independence, the forest region literally burned with conflict with the launching of the demystification campaign and its wave of assaults on forest 'fetishism'.

Another unforeseen political development threatened Béavogui's envisioned future even more directly. As Béavogui proudly taught his first classes at the mission school where he had begun his studies a decade before, the revolutionary state was conducting a two-pronged attack on the nation's Catholic schools, the bulk of which operated in the forest.[27] The new regime began its offensive by offering mission teachers better salaries to work in state schools, whose numbers were increasing dramatically throughout the

[24] Citations of Béavogui's voice are translated transcriptions from interviews conducted in French in N'Zérékoré in spring 2001.

[25] For an overview of the multiple roles of *ancien combatants* as factors of social change in the Guinean interior, see Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses*, 37–54.

[26] These dynamics are best explained in Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses*, and 'Cold war in Guinea'.

[27] For a broader view of the generally hostile relationship between the Church and the revolutionary regime, see M. Camara, *Repères pour l'histoire de l'église Catholique en Guinée, 1890–1986* (Conakry, 1992).

interior.[28] Then in a movement starting on the forest's western edge before sweeping through all the southeastern prefectures, the government nationalized all church schools standing outside mission walls, claiming the very ground beneath them for the state.

The disruptions created by this drive for schooling's complete nationalization pushed Béavogui deeper and deeper into the forest. He was transferred three times in 16 months to plug holes left by fellow mission teachers' moving to state schools. At first, Béavogui easily sustained his loyalty to the Church, seeing himself as a kind of adventurous pilgrim, traveling lightly with 'a little mattress, a trunk holding my books and documents, a portable stove, and a rifle'. His first transfers were to large villages where he had studied in his youth and where he eagerly renewed past friendships. His devotion began to falter in the spring of 1961 when Church administrators sent him to the Guinéo-Liberian border town of Yomou, his most remote posting so far and a place where he had no kin or friends.

If Béavogui had foreseen that the Yomou school was also to be nationalized soon after his arrival, he would have transferred to a state school in one of the other more attractive posts he had already known. Instead, in just his second year of teaching, he found himself stranded in a place starkly lacking in comfort or charm. More deeply troubling was the fact that an entire social, spiritual and institutional framework structuring his vision of an optimally productive future had been uprooted by nationalist politics:

> The objective that I sketched out in Burkina [Haute Volta] was to become a very good teacher, a Christian teacher. Those trained were meant to go home and teach at the Catholic mission. We came back to Guinea to do that. But one said now it's all revolutionary teaching, a revolutionary teaching that seemed strange to us and completely disrupted our plans. What was the good of our training abroad?[29]

As Béavogui began his career, Sékou Touré was giving speech after speech claiming that colonial and early postcolonial schools transmitted social orientations fundamentally foreign, unnatural and inauthentic in relation to traditional African cultural identities.[30] Béavogui saw contemporary educational affairs very differently. For him, it was only in relation to spreading the posturing of revolutionary power that local classrooms (within or outside mission walls) could be framed as denaturing or 'de-nationing' spaces.

Béavogui's opinions of the ruling regime soon worsened when he traveled to Conakry for the first time to gain direct knowledge of his 'own' capital city and the new state authoritarianism forming there. Along with all the other members of the national teaching corps, Béavogui was convoked to a six-week training seminar in the summer of 1962. It was with characteristic enthusiasm that Béavogui traveled 1,200 miles by road and rail over four

[28] National school attendance rose from 46,616 in 1958 to 159,494 in 1962. Enrollment rates of school-aged children rose from 9.5 per cent to 29 per cent. See C. Rivière, 'Les investissements éducatifs en République de Guinée', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 5 (1965), 626–7.

[29] Interview, J. Straker with A. Béavogui, 2 Apr. 2001, N'Zérékoré.

[30] The most useful compilation of these speeches, delivered from 1959 to 1962, is S. Touré, *L'action du Parti démocratique de Guinée en faveur de l'émancipation de la jeunesse guinéenne* (Conakry, 1962).

days to Conakry. On their arrival, he and his peers were treated not as valued co-participants in nation-building, but as subordinate wards in need of state-scripted retraining. Béavogui's criticisms of the seminar's premises, modalities and outcomes were varied and abundant.

To bring all the teachers of Guinea together to train them? One must say it was a mess. There were three, maybe four thousand teachers. How to organize them and channel all of them? We were lodged in dormitories. There were several pedagogical professors who came to give us different courses … We stayed there in the heavy rain of Conakry, the food sometimes poorly prepared. There were some who fell sick. Everyone tried to get by on his own. Forty-five days went by like that. Would I say that these courses were serious? Me, I think that if they had organized it prefecture by prefecture maybe it would have been better. The content of the training itself wasn't worth anything. The seminar was held to bring us into line.[31]

Béavogui's observations in Conakry sapped any optimism he might have mustered about the budding revolution. The seminar's shortcomings conveyed how little the party-state cared about sustaining the enthusiasm of teachers, the very social actors upon whom the success of its youth-centered 'revolutionary' projects most depended.[32] Now that Sékou Touré's political entourage had risen to unquestioned dominance, its leaders could treat people callously, whenever and wherever they chose.

Perhaps even more telling for Béavogui were the meanings culled from social and material conditions around Conakry. During extended walks through the capital, Béavogui conducted critical readings of the place that stood in as a metonymic figure of the current state and prospects of nation-building.

I was very curious to know what Conakry was all about. I had heard many things. But when I discovered Conakry, what I saw was a dirty, dirty city. There were rotting things and stagnant water everywhere. As I had seen Bamako, I thought I would find a town as pretty, even more pretty. I was expecting to find beautiful houses, impressive buildings, but one found archaic houses with big rocks placed on roofs ready to slide off. Almost the whole town was like that. The native inhabitants and others who had been around Conakry for a while didn't give a damn about anything. They carried themselves offhandedly, like connoisseurs and braggarts. I was in a hurry to leave … the rain, the heat, the mosquitoes, all of that. I told myself: there's a lot to do to catch up with other

[31] Interview, J. Straker with A. Béavogui, 2 Apr. 2001, N'Zérékoré. The seminar was held at the same Donka scholastic complex in central Conakry where 'the teachers' strike' had erupted the previous November. Recent 'anti-national' behaviors of Conakry students and teachers partly inspired and shaped the seminar's design; the leadership felt a need to convince students and teachers throughout the country that there was no pathway to success independent of the political program of the PDG. Touré strove to make this point abundantly clear throughout the speeches recorded in *L'action du PDG*.

[32] Touré was on the threshold of some of his more intricate ruminations on the ideal mentality and social roles of teachers, particularly those called to work in the interior. Two of his most interesting texts in this regard are the poem 'L'instituteur et L'Ecole guinéenne', *Revue de L'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse, des Arts, et de la Culture*, 4 (1964), 3, and the essay 'La morale révolutionnaire et la fonction enseignante', in *L'Afrique en Marche* (4th ed.) (Conakry, 1967), 537–55.

capitals. Of course the ideology was there. One taught the ideology to the people, the love of the nation. But beside that, one needed real development. Everyone was aware of that.[33]

RETREATING INTO THE FOREST: 1963–1967

At the close of the seminar, Béavogui returned to Yomou in a fatalistic mood, demoralized by a sense that state authorities might continue toying with his life indefinitely. He felt powerless before the convoluted workings of state power, like a minor character in a story over whose development he could exert no control. Béavogui was right about his relative powerlessness to change the official narratives or surreptitious machinations of revolutionary nation-building, but he was wrong to assume that their twists and turns would always work to his disadvantage.

After another year in Yomou, Béavogui was able to transfer to N'Zo, a vibrant market town on the Ivorian border at the base of the majestic 1,700-meter Mount Nimba. He was delighted with the change. N'Zo's eclectic market and unique ecological charms drew diverse types of international travelers.[34] Béavogui's stay in N'Zo ended abruptly in 1964. The Regional Inspector of Education in N'Zérékoré told him to prepare to board the next truck passing from N'Zo northward to the remote village of Gama, where he was to serve as School Director and local Inspector of Education. Though officially a promotion, the reposting was shattering news for Béavogui. He felt like a 'passenger pigeon' sent here and there by superiors without any care for his preferences. Working in Gama was beyond even the well-traveled Béavogui's imagination.

> The [regional] Inspector said to me: 'You've just been named inspector of the *section scolaire* in Gama'. I said: 'Where? Where is that?' I left dejected.
>
> [During the journey] I met an old man who frequented Gama's weekly market. He told me: 'Monsieur Béavogui, you must go to Gama. I know Gama. People go there rarely because the road is bad. A vehicle will go there once a month, or twice a month'. I said '*What?*' He said: 'There is a proverb that says, ''When a toad comes close to the house, and one wants it to go away, one throws it a long way away. Sometimes at the end of its flight, it lands in a pond. And the toad likes the pond.'' Those people in Gama, that's how it is with them'.[35]

The co-traveler's words proved prophetic. Life in Gama, the most peripheral locality Béavogui ever inhabited, spurred new environmental and sociological discoveries. The village community and surroundings captivated the heart and mind of the newly designated 24- year-old Education Inspector.

[33] Interview, A. Béavogui, 2 Apr. 2001. Most *forestier* accounts of Conakry are rife with depictions of the capital's material and moral decay.

[34] Béavogui proudly remembered being asked by the local Commandant to deliver a speech to the wife of Patrice Lumumba and a group of Chinese women dignitaries who had come to visit the famed mountain. Other memorable pleasures in N'Zo included playing guitar and banjo in small venues during the lively nights before and after the weekly market, and witnessing the emergence of Nimba Jazz, an electric ensemble that later won nationwide fame at Conakry arts festivals.

[35] Interview, J. Straker with A. Béavogui, 1 May 2001, N'Zérékoré.

Béavogui's professional duties engendered unanticipated awe at the vastness of this unfamiliar reach of the easternmost Guinean forest, as well as the profound marginality of local communities *vis-à-vis* state administrative structures.

I was in charge of seven schools. I needed to understand the situation of each of them. There were schools that were completely lost, where there wasn't even a road for vehicles. One had to go on foot through the grasses. One day I made my first visit to an outlying school. A local child came with me. We walked until I didn't know where we were. The grasses were so interlaced that we had to pull them apart with our hands to continue. I asked my companion: 'Does this path even lead to a village?' Rain started pounding down. We finally arrived at the school, completely soaked. I said: 'Call the teacher!' I saw someone coming, with ruffled hair, totally dirty. No one would have ever guessed him a teacher. Someone told him: 'Your boss is here'. He said: 'What boss?' [laughter]. Someone said: 'The one who commands the schools'. He asked me: 'Where did you come from?' I said: 'Gama'. We went to visit the school. It was a hangar that stood there. There were children sitting on stools, others on chairs, others any which way. There was an old door painted black and attached to the wall that functioned as a blackboard. If only I had a camera to photograph these schools! These schools were just created with independence with one classroom in a hangar with one teacher, and maybe twenty pupils. One couldn't ask the people to carry cement to construct a school when you had to cleave grasses just to arrive in their village. They refused all the same to send their children to study in another village out of fear that they would be mistreated.[36]

Béavogui stayed in Gama until 1967, marrying a local woman and becoming a father. He enjoyed his authority as head of educational affairs, the comfortable if rustic living conditions, and valued the increasingly warm relations with families in Gama and outlying villages. Working in such a remote place, he was rarely subject to outside administrative pressure or surveillance. During these initial years in Gama, he engaged in the type of social development he had envisioned as a trainee teacher. He was able to work amidst youth and parents who genuinely needed him, valued his modern learning and welcomed the contributions he could make to their lives. With little external interference, he guided a small pocket of forest dwellers towards what had once seemed inaccessible forms of knowledge and he was rewarded in material and symbolic ways for his commitment.

CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND CLOSING HORIZONS, 1968–1984

After a one-year posting as a primary school director in N'Zérékoré, Béavogui enthusiastically returned to Gama in late 1968 to open and direct the community's first *collège*. Developments within nationalist politics and pedagogies dictated that his second local tour would be marred by disappointments and disillusionment. Frustrated by what he saw as the piecemeal nature and pace of social reform during his first decade in power, Sékou Touré declared the advent of the SCR in August 1968. The President

[36] *Ibid.*

insisted that a stringent overhauling of schooling's forms and functions should 'emblematize' and 'energize' the new revolutionary order:

> When we talk of teaching, of conceptualization and realization, we mean not just natural sciences with their method of dominating nature, but also the social sciences with their applications for Revolution in social relations. And this is why the CER [Centres d'Etudes Révolutionnaires] constitute above all seeds for total Revolution, cultural, political and economic, which is all a single whole.

Of the practical curricular reforms entailed by the CER, Touré optimistically stated that:

> All of the centers of revolutionary studies purvey the same general education, at the same level as that currently given through general teaching at *collèges*, and that constitute the common base conferring to all students, in regard to scientific knowledge … This common base occupies 40% of [course] time … In all CER, 60% of [course] time is consecrated to professional teaching and productive work.[37]

Not even students and educators in a village as distant and secluded as Gama were able to elude the unwelcome disruptions accompanying injunctions that were part of the new educational paradigm.

During Béavogui's second sojourn in Gama, his role as mediator within an increasingly aggressive state apparatus espousing ambitious 'productionist' pedagogies strained his public image and he struggled to regain his former standing and pride. Other state agents, from the President to regional cadres in N'Zérékoré, seemed bent on subverting the very conditions of possibility for amicable relations between local educators and the rural communities where they worked.[38] The trust that had formed between Béavogui and the people of Gama gradually dissolved. SCR policies demanding amplified agricultural production in all rural localities altered the roles of educators within and beyond school grounds. Because enrollment rates were relatively high, and the gap between the region's potential agricultural yields and actual harvests was so vast, at least from the vantage of revolutionary leaders in Conakry, forest students felt the impact of the new production-emphatic educational schemes acutely, perhaps more than their provincial peers.[39]

[37] With the proclamation of the Socialist Cultural Revolution, Touré declared that all schools would henceforth be CER. See *L'Enseignement Révolutionnaire*, 2 (Oct. 1968), 5–6. Teachers, students and parents throughout the country accurately foresaw how devastating the new 'productionist' reforms might be for rural youths' general educational prospects. For an overview of contemporary official and unofficial meanings attributed to the advent of the CER, see Leunda, 'La réforme'.

[38] A useful synopsis of teachers' reflections upon this state of affairs is République de Guinée, *Actes de la Conférence de l'Education Nationale* (Conakry, 1984).

[39] Evidence for 1964 supports the view that *forestiers* were exceptionally hungry for education. At that time, school enrollment in the coastal region (outside Conakry), the Fouta Djallon and Upper Guinea ranged from 13.9 to 21.7 per cent; in the forest prefectures of N'Zérékoré-Yomou and Kissidougou 36.1 per cent and 69.1 per cent (respectively) of local youths attended school. See Rivière, 'Les investissements', 632–3. The notion that heightened stress on material production would yield exceptionally impressive results in and around forest schools emerged in the early years of revolutionary pedagogical reform. Verbal and visual representations of the forest as an underexploited region ripe for vigorous agricultural transformation via teacher and student training punctuate official teachers' journals of 1964 and 1965. See the *Revue du Travailleur de l'Education Nationale*, 5–6.

With the SCR reforms of 1968, an experienced local educational professional like Béavogui was not just encouraged to initiate and monitor notable transformations of rural life, but very much compelled to do so, under the weight of a range of broader administrative pressures. After 1968, Béavogui felt obliged to push students and their parents to extend and intensify exploitation of local rice fields and palm groves. The state's increasing establishment and enforcement of production quotas – a form of tax-in-kind – for all rural localities made it possible to assess local administrators' commitment to revolutionary policies in definitive, quantitative terms.[40] In this context, it became more and more difficult for Béavogui to ignore injunctions from central administrative authorities.

The anguish Béavogui felt as mediator between an aggressive political regime and the local community intensified at instances where state officials themselves failed to honor their side of school production 'agreements'. He bitterly recalled instances when rice and other goods painstakingly grown by students and parents to meet imposed quotas rotted in local storehouses as state trucks failed to arrive anywhere near the appointed time to transport the yields to N'Zérékoré.[41] The stench from the local storehouses told students and the rest of the community that the season's collective field labor had symbolic significance rather than practical value for their nation.

Béavogui left Gama for the newly designated prefectural capital of Lola in 1979, reaching the apex of his professional career as Primary Education Inspector for the entire prefecture, and automatic holder of several minor political titles. In 1980 he received a letter from a classmate with whom he had studied at Toussiana two decades earlier. The old friend, now residing in the Ivorian regional capital of Man, only 150 kilometers from Lola, wrote to congratulate Béavogui on his professional achievements – which he had learned from a third party – and invited him to vacation with his family, even offering a personal car to facilitate the journey. Fearing possible repercussions for traveling to what was perceived as a rival state to which many Guineans had fled, Béavogui tactfully declined the invitation.[42]

The fleeting exchange abounded in ironies. A friend whom he had not seen in twenty years had written Béavogui a congratulatory letter at a moment when his personal assessments of his local social value had plummeted to distressing lows. At forty, he was locked into a professional and political scenario that both soured his feelings of 'home' and corroded his youthful vocational dreams. In 1956, as a 16-year-old just out of primary school, Béavogui had traveled through Man, bound for Haute Volta,

[40] For a synopsis of a similar case of quantitative measurement as a form of state power in a contemporary African socialist state, see the discussions of Tanzanian villagization in J. Scott, *Seeing Like a State : How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 1998), 226–56.

[41] Many N'Zérékoré residents told me that harvests cultivated by local town and rural students rotted in storehouses there also, again waiting for hypothetical transport.

[42] For an understanding of the political roots of antagonistic relations between the two countries, see Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses*, 157–60, 189–90; for roughly contemporary figures on Guinean migration to Côte d'Ivoire and other neighboring countries, see J. P. Atala, 'Problèmes culturels guinéens depuis l'indépendance, *L'Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer* 36 (1976), 585–601.

positively intoxicated by the wealth of experiences and discoveries his future promised.

SEKOU IS DEAD! A NEW DISPENSATION

On the morning of 26 March 1984, coming out of the shower in the midst of his daily pre-work routine, Béavogui apprehended news that he, like most Guineans of his generation, never thought he would hear. He could barely grasp the words uttered by his eldest daughter.

> Papa, Sékou is dead!
> Who told you that?
> Listen to what the Prime Minister is saying!
> No! That is not possible.[43]

At first, his administrative rank obliged Béavogui to join other party-state cadres in mourning rituals for the 'supreme guide of the revolution', which included nightly readings and deliberations upon passages from Touré's voluminous 'tomes'.[44] Once it became certain that the PDG regime had been deposed and what he called 'theatrical' dissimulations of loyalty could be dropped, Béavogui became once again an impassioned citizen and attentive observer of local society. He studied and participated in the guarded optimism that quickly emerged as communiqués emitted by the transitional Comité Militaire de Redressement National (CMRN) announced the suppression of some of the most despised policies of the SCR.[45] Like many in Lola, he listened compulsively for news from Conakry, waiting for the announcement of a new president. The juncture was a rare instance where Béavogui regretted the immense distance between the capital and local life. While mass celebrations and 'cathartic effervescence' erupted in Conakry, people throughout the remote forest huddled excitedly but anxiously, pondering the next political dispensation.[46] When Lansana Conté was announced as the new leader via national radio, his name triggered no meaningful associations or sentiments.

Conté made his inaugural visit to Lola six weeks later. Béavogui was among those who thronged the town's *place publique* straining for a glimpse of the nation's second President and, like the rest of the crowd, he was stunned by the event's brevity and Conté's silence. Instead of holding forth for hours as Sékou Touré would have done in such an electric atmosphere,

[43] Interview, J. Straker with A. Béavogui, 24 May 2001, N'Zérékoré.

[44] Touré's book-length works have long been referred to by this term, partly out of reverence for their uniqueness and partly in mockery of the exaggerated self-importance of their author.

[45] Foremost among these policies was the establishment and enforcement of agricultural production quotas.

[46] The notion of 'cathartic effervescence' is drawn from F. Eboussi Boulaga, *Les conférences nationales en Afrique noire : une affaire à suivre* (Paris, 1993), 171; its significance for Francophone Africa is elaborated upon in D. Thomas, *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa* (Bloomington, 2002), 154–65. For reportage on the forms 'effervescence' took in Conakry during the first days of transition, see R. G. Zomou, 'Les familles des martyrs réhabilités apportent leur soutien au CMRN', *Horoya*, 12 Apr. 1984.

Conté chose to communicate via a *porte-parole* who simply restated principal policy reforms already announced over the radio. When Conté took center stage, it was only to wave and smile briefly at the appreciative crowd, thanking them humbly without any prepared speech.

Béavogui judged Conté's initial political contact with Lola's citizenry extremely effective. In his surprising silence and humility, Conté had presented himself as a fundamentally different kind of person from Touré. The anti-theatricality that Conté embodied suggested to Béavogui and fellow *forestiers* that his regime might be an engine of concrete, pragmatic action rather than utopian illusions and misguided passions. Though shrouded in layers of mystery, Conté, unlike Touré and Malinkés more broadly, appeared to espouse values consonant with *forestier* standards of proper moral, social and political conduct. His taciturn composure and desire to observe rather than pontificate marked Conté as a leader who might truly acknowledge and appreciate *forestier* conceptions of ideal personhood and public comportment, and thus deserve forest communities' support.

POSTREVOLUTIONARY ENTHUSIASM, DISILLUSIONMENT AND RE-ENACTMENT, 1984–2001

Béavogui remained in Lola for five more years, 'winning his bread as before'. They were comparatively good years, marked by an appreciation of greatly increased individual freedoms, and a general faith in better times to come. For the first time since independence, *forestier* communities saw the central government as a possible ally rather than an antagonist. If the new state failed to catalyze provincial development at the pace it promised, it at least managed, unlike the revolutionary regime, to stay out of the way of localized designs for piecemeal change.

In 1989, Béavogui was transferred to the regional inspection of education bureau in the forest administrative capital of N'Zérékoré. The move exposed Béavogui to a host of troubling internal and international dynamics that manifested with particular intensity in the larger town. Life in N'Zérékoré at the end of the century once again provoked dramatic changes in Béavogui's feelings about the Guinean nation-state, and the role he and *forestier* peers should play within – or outside – it. Béavogui was quickly disgruntled by patterns in major regional political appointments, including that of the head of his own inspectorate, which favored Lansana Conté's Soussou-speaking kin over *forestiers* with superior credentials and local knowledge. By the mid-nineties, it could be taken largely for granted that any newly arriving official assuming a post of any significance would be Soussou. At the century's end, again like most local *forestiers*, Béavogui saw the state as a machine directly serving Soussou interests, in much the same way that Sékou Touré's state had served and enforced Malinké designs.[47]

The effects of emergent ethnocentric politics were, however, subtle compared to the sociological maelstrom provoked by foreign 'outsiders'. In the early weeks of 1990, with stunning abruptness, tens of thousands of Liberian refugees began flowing into N'Zérékoré. The ensuing 'refugee

[47] For a broader overview of the bases for such comparisons, see Barry, *Les violences*, 127–44, 151–62.

crisis' transformed N'Zérékoré from a typical provincial center into a boomtown, at least by Guinean standards. Despite all of the ethno-historical traditions and languages they shared with the host population, Liberians were generally more cosmopolitan, entrepreneurial and socially assertive than Guineans, who had been largely isolated from competitive capitalism and Western cultural commodities since the mid-1960s. Alongside the energizing effect of the refugees themselves, the 'experts' who came to help them also had a profound impact on local society. The number of Westerners living in and around N'Zérékoré, working in various aid occupations, grew perhaps fifty-fold in the early nineties. The high incomes and novel tastes of this expert set triggered a rapid growth in hotels, grocery stores, restaurants, bars and discos, not to mention the number of *pajeros* cruising along the town's unpaved roads. Intentionally and unintentionally, these predominantly Western experts – like the Liberians, though in different ways – introduced the N'Zérékoré population, particularly its youth, to a whole range of unfamiliar material goods and cultural practices, broadening the *forestier* community's grasp of the effects of socioeconomic development in other parts of the world.[48]

Like a great many other *forestiers*, Béavogui was distressed by the ways in which N'Zérékoré's internationalization affected local youth behaviors and sensibilities, particularly those of young women.

> Now there is this liberalism. This is why one finds a lot of delinquent girls – in their dress and carriage. Especially in the forest now, since the war in Liberia, there is the influx of women, of girls, of young men who have come with a clothing style, a style of social interaction, that is altogether new. And since it is said that Guinea stayed in isolation a long time, a little opening of the door sufficed for the people to try to copy anything imported. This is why the young Guinean woman feels so free that she permits herself a little bit of everything. She concedes her dignity rather than staying true to herself.[49]

Béavogui was so distraught by signs of what he saw as youth moral decay that he expressed a certain nostalgia for the intensive pedagogical surveillances of the otherwise despised Touré regime: 'During the revolution, beyond the school, the pioneer movement was there, theater was there. There were wrongdoings, but one sensed all the same who was responsible for what'.[50] Béavogui had far too sharp a memory and political imagination to covet resuscitation of revolutionary pedagogies. But, by 2000, when he turned sixty and retired (obligatorily) from forty years of national educational service, he had given up on the postrevolutionary state's capacity to serve as a genuine advocate and driver of forest communities' moral and material well-being. The fate of *forestier* social integrity in towns like N'Zérékoré and villages scattered throughout the bush had never seemed more imperiled. *Forestiers* lived in the unstable margins of an increasingly

[48] For a more detailed portrayal of contemporary local sociological dynamics, see J. Straker, 'Youth, globalization, and millennial reflection in a Guinean forest town', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 45 (2007), 299–319.

[49] Interview, J. Straker with A. Béavogui, 2 June 2001, N'Zérékoré. For insight into contemporary anti-refugee sentiments in the forest, see M. McGovern, 'Conflit régional et rhétorique de la contre-insurrection: guinéens et réfugiés en septembre 2000', *Politique Africaine*, 88 (2002), 84–102.

[50] Interview, A. Béavogui, 4 June 2001.

malfunctioning Guinean nation-state, and suffered the effects of military and humanitarian crises in Liberia.

Béavogui needed characteristically little time to rebound from the malaise he felt at the century's end. In 2001, he became Director of one of the many privately run primary schools opening along the expanding outskirts of N'Zérékoré. Launched by a Kpelle businesswoman who had emigrated to the United States, the venture appealed to Béavogui. The new post sheltered him from the corruption and unfairness increasingly attributed to the post-revolutionary regime. Serving a student body that was 95 per cent *forestier*, and bordering a stretch of fairly well-preserved forest several kilometers from the bustle of town, the new school may have triggered recollections of the best years of his life, supervising teachers and students in and around the secluded village of Gama.[51] Entering the fifth decade of his career in the postcolonial forest, Béavogui still felt like a character caught up in a storyline scripted by political and (increasingly) economic forces beyond his control. Yet there was some solace in the fact that his tortuous odyssey had brought him to another spell of potentially gratifying work – a posting worthy of his knowledge and talents, and compatible with his enduring visions of a constructive life.

CONCLUSION

Recently reinvigorated interest in personal narrative as a form of knowledge production has yielded notable gains in understandings of African experiences of colonial-era change. In the last decade, historians have produced finely textured portrayals of emergent sensibilities and subjectivities forged over the first half of the twentieth century. This article has sought to extend the temporal as well as geographical boundaries of the current boom in studies of 'common' Africans' biographies. Inspired by vigorous interdisciplinary interest in the workings and malfunctions of postcolonial states, and the eventful biography and critical meditations of a veteran educator serving over forty years in the Guinean forest, it attempts to generate a duly complex, multilayered picture of political subjectivity and state/subject relations in the rural margins of postcolonial Guinea. It challenges some of the perspectives that have shaped writing on Guinea's recent past and points to the need for finer-grained oral-historical research in the provinces which remain underrepresented in national power arrangements.

[51] In contrast to the multi-ethnic constituency of student bodies and teaching corps at local public schools, the new private institutions tended to recruit and employ students and staff on ethnic (and religious) lines.