



Talking of Differences, Propagating Unity

Politics of Ethnicity in Urban Liberia and Guinea

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Signbord in central
Monrovia
Photo A. Kaufmann 2012

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Talking of Differences, Propagating Unity

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Introduction

“Today, the president’s ethnic group makes acts of ethnocentrism, even racism. This is not good. The president should work with everybody. We have to stand together to ease things, because one person or one ethnic group alone cannot develop the country. But if people say this specific ethnic group is in power and only members of this group benefit from it instead of the whole population... in this case, can it work? No, it cannot.” (Interview, young woman, Kankan, 02.11.2011)

The latest news from Liberia and Guinea clearly demonstrates that in both countries ethnic frictions are recurring big issues. In Kankan, situated in the Upper Guinea Region, the tensions are based on prejudices and contestation mainly between the Manding and the Fulani, the latter constituting a minority in this area. In Liberia’s capital Monrovia, where people of various social milieus live next to one another, the issue of belonging especially regarding the Manding is contested.¹ In both urban contexts,² there are many different conceptions and interpretations of ethnicity, identity and belonging. In the two settings, actors from the various realms, such as state or religious institutions as well as individuals or groups are engaged in debates that basically circulate around the question: Who is eligible to shape the nation-state? Though not always apparent in the lived realities, where peaceful interactions are common on a daily basis, it is striking how ethnic frictions surface in certain moments, such as for example, in the context of presidential or parliamentary elections. Regarding ethnic divisions, a number of local, national and international actors stress the need for reconciliation in order to attain social cohesion and an imagined better future. How this may be attained is, however, another hotly debated issue of contestation.

This paper analyses discursive formations of ethnicity, narratives of unity and reconciliation and lived realities in a comparative perspective of Kankan and Monrovia. It addresses the historical, political and social circumstances that influence the emergence and existence of ethnic tensions and the changes therein. Further, it deals with the manner in which individuals and groups on various levels approach these conflicts: What are the local and national state actors’ statements and practices regarding ethnic tensions?

1 The northern Mande languages are summarised by linguists as Manding, which comprises Bamanakan, Maninakan, Mandinka, Dyulakan and other (Fairhead 2003: 280-283). This subfamily of the Niger-Kordofanian is widespread in West Africa. Their claimed origin is in the Mali Empire (Brooks 1993: 29-33; O’Toole and Baker 2005: 139). The emic term for the Manding in Liberia is “Mandingo”, see for example Boas (2013 or 2008), Højbjerg (2010), Konneh (1996a or 1996b). In Guinea, Manding speaking people are named “Malinké” and the Guinean Fulani call themselves “Peul”, see for example Arieff and McGovern (2013), Goerg (2006) or Schmidt (2005).

2 Liberia’s capital Monrovia consists of about a million inhabitants, depending on statistics (cf. Government of Liberia 2009). The local government of Kankan, Guinea’s second largest city, estimates that 200’000 people are actually living there (personal communication, mayor’s representative, Kankan, 22.11.2011).

How do the heads of state address these issues in their speeches?³ How do ordinary people deal with ethnic frictions? And how do they respond to the state practices in this regard?

The paper will contribute to the understanding of ethnicity and lived realities in conflict-affected societies.⁴ It is based on field research in urban Liberia and Guinea, by applying the circular Emic Evaluation Approach (EEA).⁵ A number of group- and semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of several ethnic groups, whereby questions around ethnicity were not on centre stage. In fact, much information was gathered in more informal conversations. Furthermore, newspapers and radio programs as well as speeches of political leaders were documented in order to complete the images and imageries these actors were producing. The two comparative case studies give insight into the local actors' evaluation of the actual situations in Monrovia, Liberia, and Kankan, Guinea. The methodological basis of comparison is drawn from Weber's (forthcoming: 10) approach of comparison as a dynamic research process. In addition to a range of similarities, common to both settings are ethnic tensions, which are influenced by a violent past, an intricate present as well as an uncertain future.

The first part of the paper will provide a conceptual overview over the politicisation of ethnicity and reconciliation. In a second part, two case studies, the *comparta*, will give insights into the specific contexts of Monrovia and Kankan: In regards to politicised ethnicity, the point of commonality or *tertium comparationis* (ibid.: 3) of this article, both case studies highlight the respective ethnic cleavages in a historical perspective. Further, we investigate in what political contexts ethnic tensions are articulated. The case studies will also illustrate how society and state representatives address these complex social problems. In a third part, we examine the relation of the *comparata* to the *tertium comparationis*, notably how the local populations in both contexts experience ethnicity in their daily lives, and under what circumstances ethnicity comes into play. Furthermore, we will look at the governments' practices in Monrovia and Kankan in regards to ethnic tensions and comparatively analyse the populace's opinion of these practices. This comparative study will show how a seemingly similar phenomenon is deeply rooted in particular social and political contexts and situational becomes a central part of popular discourse.

- 3 When talking about the government, many people actually mean the president. This becomes visible when they refer to the government by using the personal pronoun "she" or "he". In Liberia and Guinea – like in numerous other African countries – the president's powers are abundant, compared to the legislative and judiciary power. It is reflected, for example, in the view of the broader population that the Liberian president is the highest authority in the country, standing above all institutions.
- 4 This paper is a joint output by Carole Ammann, MA African Studies, and Andrea Kaufmann, MA Social Anthropology, who are PhD Candidates at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Basel, Switzerland. They are part of the research project "The Work of State Imageries". URL: <http://www.unibas-ethno.ch/forschung>.
- 5 The research methodology of the EEA is based on three elements: a) mapping of social actors, b) discourse analysis, and c) social practice analysis (cf. Förster et al. 2011).

Ethnicity, Ethnic Politics and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation

In the same sense as nations are imagined (Anderson 2006), or traditions are invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), ethnic identities are not fixed categories, but rather “open-ended and dynamic processes of social and political creation” (Berman 2010: 3; see also Amselle and M’Bokolo 1999).⁶ Ethnicity therefore contains a fluid component and changes through time and space. Like other social categories such as age, educational background, gender or religious belonging, ethnicity is just one of multiple identities and characteristics that a person can relate and be related to. Even though every person has multiple identities, one specific dimension may bring about a stronger sense of belonging than others. Of interest for our cases are the circumstances under which social cleavages and discursive formations of ethnicity become salient.

Basically, ethnicity is commonly used in relation to the organisation and self-organisation of ethnic groups in a political context, but also contains symbolic and meaningful substance (Beer 2012: 63; Eriksen 2010: 17). Leaning on Barth (1970 [1969]) and the many debates on situationalism/premordialism or constructivism/essentialism that followed his reader since the 1970s, belonging is created and constructed through discursive formations. It can – like any other category of identity – be activated and/or instrumentalised if a need for such arises. Often, groups ascribe themselves and others shared cultural values and practices, and most commonly, a shared language. Often, they emphasise an imagined common history of origination, territory, and becoming. These histories are constructions and re-constructions of both the members and members of other groups, thus creating boundaries between “us” and “them” (Migdal 2004: 6; Young 2007: 250). In certain moments ethnicity may be highlighted – for example to legitimise political participation – or camouflaged, whereas in others, ethnicity does not play a role: Cultural events are shared and intermarriages are unspectacularly normal. Thus, ethnicity is relational and situational.

Dorman et al. (2007: 4) emphasise that especially when resources such as land or well-paying jobs are or become scarce, the definition of boundaries, meanings of and belonging to an ethnic group gain importance. Electoral competition only reshapes this competition, as it reduces democracy to access to the control of state resources (Berman 2010: 11). Politics, political participation and access to state resources are often linked to big men and the moral economy they are embedded in as it was observed in different West African countries (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 15). Personal relationships and trust within ethnic communities can provide access to as well as protection against the nation-state and/or specific groups (Berman 2010: 15; Schatzberg 2001; Utas 2012). Subsequently, the voter’s identity choice and affiliation will be the one politically and economically most promising (Posner 2005; cf. Chandra 2007).

According to Eisenberg and Kymlicka (2011: 8) it is not helpful to generally condemn identity politics: “Whether identity politics has perverse effects depends, at least in part, on whether those in charge of public institutions are aware of those potential

6 For an overview of scholarly work on this topic see Eisenberg and Kymlicka (2011: 2-4) or Eriksen (2010: 11-17).

effects and whether they have the desire and capacity to mitigate them.“ Thus, we have to look closely how the state, its institutions, laws and electoral system influence issues of identity.

In many West African states, single-party systems dominated politics until the late 1980s. At the same time, nation-states' capacities shrank as they were struggling with the impact of the ordered reforms by Structural Adjustment Programs and thus leading to an increased struggle over state resources (Berman 2010: 15-18; Young 2007: 251).⁷ In the 1990s, democratic changes and an increase of multi-party systems could be observed in many West African countries. Frequently, African political parties are founded around individuals, whereas the political agenda is of minor importance and internal democratisation poor. As a consequence, election campaigns focus on party leaders, their ability to develop the country and to provide access to state resources (Gyimah-Boadi 2007; Wimmer 1997). Thus, during electoral competition tendencies to voting according to ethnic identities intensifies; “In competitive elections, ethnicity inevitably became a factor in the political calculus” (Young 2007: 258).

As many African electoral systems do not include proportional representation, groups without access to state power fear the monopolising of the latter within another group. This may lead to ethnic conflicts (Bogaards 2007).⁸ Eifert et al. (2010) observe that ethnic identities became more salient the closer competitive elections came. Some authors argue that ethnic identity is the main cleavage African political parties draw on (e.g. Bates 1974; Eifert et al. 2010). In Guinea, this phenomenon can clearly be observed. However, as the Liberian example demonstrates, other identities such as gender, religion or youth are also usable in order to mobilise voters. Indeed, the presumption of ethnic party affiliation is highly contested. Basedau and Stroh (2009) find in their study of four francophone West African countries little proof of the presence of ethnic parties. Regional bonds between the population and the party leaders, they argue, play a much bigger part in the people's party preference.⁹ Election periods are often marked by insecurities and violent outbreaks. Even more so, if polls follow conflict or a transition period and when the electoral process and its outcome are highly contested (Laakso 2007). Naturally, economic and social grievances further contribute to the risk of electoral violence (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Mehler 2007).

Even though national citizenship may imply a number of rights, such as the right to reside and political participation on a national level, this concept may be contested on a local level, where varieties of customary law systems prevail, at times due to the absence of state authority. At a local level, other characteristics might be decisive, such as belonging, land ownership or assumed primordial membership, as the case of Ivoirité has shown (Förster, forthcoming; Lentz 2007: 38).

“Where the ethnic group in question crosses an international border, or where the self-proclaimed nationalists seek to marginalise members of a particular group, sources of dissonance and potential conflict arises between the actors in question. But there is also scope for negotiation¹⁰. Hence culture brokers of the ethnic group may seek to lend their definition of moral rectitude to the nation as a whole.”
(Dorman et al. 2007: 7)

7 For the Guinean case see Højbjerg et al. (2012: 6).

8 As the state is the most powerful actor offering jobs and contacts, patrimonialistic practices within the state can be used as means to promote ethnic favouritism (Premdas 2010).

9 Randall (2007) argues for a careful analysis of each case, in order to differentiate between ethnicity, regionalism and clientelism as major factors of party supporting.

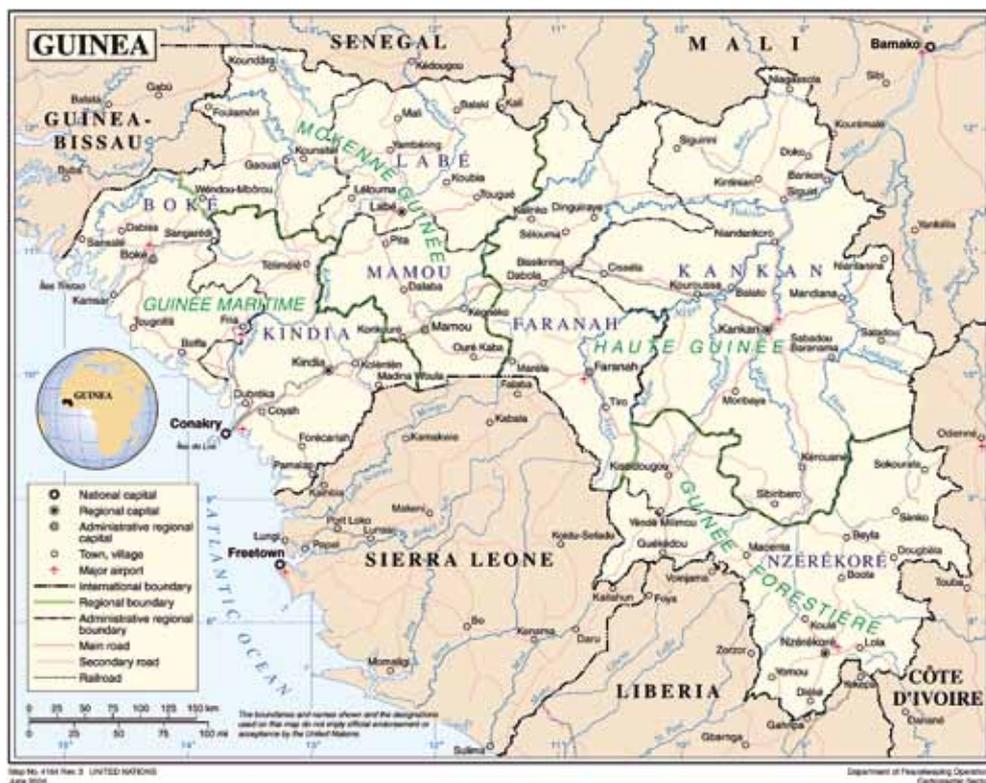
10 In our context we prefer the term ‚bargaining‘ as it does not stipulate the existence of a fixed framework.

In today's Liberia and Guinea, the presidents propagate national unity in their speeches and actions, thereby applying various metaphors and images, similar to what Schatzberg (2001) describes for many African countries. They often blame the past, and, in Liberia in particular, the practices of former leaders that lead to a division of the people and resulted in conflict. This political strategy can be interpreted as an effort to overcome existing cleavages and divisions in society, hence an effort to national reconciliation. Reconciliation becomes a notion of political relevance in both countries, as social actors from the local, national and to a vast degree from the international arenas point out to the need of social cohesion. According to Hazan's understanding (2009: 256): "Reconciliation is a process that allows a society to move from a divided past to a shared future." Yet, reconciliation may be turned into a tool for mobilising certain groups or pinpointing against others in the political arena. In both Liberia and Guinea, the issue of reconciliation is on the government's agenda; however, as the case studies will highlight, the efforts are rather inept. This is due to the complexity of the situation in the countries, interlocked with political interests and the issue of reconciliation itself, because concepts of reconciliation are full of contradictions and highly contested (Freeman 2004: 6).¹¹

The questions of interest for this paper then are under what circumstances ethnic belonging is emphasised and by whom – the local population, state leaders or other influential political, social or economic actors. And how do these actors relate to and interact with each other? In Kankan, the tensions are formed around prejudices and contestation mainly between the Manding and the Fulani minority in this area. In Monrovia, the issue of belonging especially regarding the Manding is contested. Though there exist manifold interpretative patterns of identity in both urban contexts, actors from the various realms concentrate on debates regarding the following issue: How is – as Anderson (2006) puts it – the nation-state in Liberia and Guinea imagined, and who is believed to have access to it? How is ethnicity used to articulate belonging to the nation-state?

Before presenting the two case studies and the particularities of cleavages as well as the discursive formations and practices towards reconciling them, we will briefly sketch out the configuration of ethnic groups and the historical background in both countries. Thereby, we aim at highlighting the contextually and situationally manifesting of differences, stereotypes and tensions, which for example become articulated in the context of political events such as elections.

11 Reconciliation is an ambiguous and contested concept. For this paper, suffices to say that it is difficult to define because it draws on an end and the means to reach that end (Hazan 2009: 258); Stover and Weinstein (2004) therefore even proposed to replace it with "social reconstruction." Based on Lederach's (2002) model, Freeman (2004) identifies four pillars on which a successful process of reconciliation is based: healing, justice, truth, and reparation. Molenaar (2005) argues that these different issues cannot be approached if the government does not apply a model that includes all social actors. Lastly, many efforts hamper because of lack of political will, appropriateness of the applied tools, capacity and funding (Freeman and Hayner 2003: 137).



Map Guinea
<http://www.un.org/depts/Cartographic/map/profile/guinea.pdf>
 (last access: 23.10.2013)

Today, the presidents in Liberia and Guinea again stress national unity in new political configurations. In their speeches and actions they apply various unifying metaphors and images, similar to what Schatzberg (2001) describes for many African countries. They blame the past, and in Liberia in particular the practices of past leaders that lead to conflict and division of the people. This political strategy can be interpreted as an effort to overcome existing cleavages and divisions in society, hence an effort to national reconciliation.

Both Liberia and Guinea are home to a number of ethnic groups that have shaped the political landscape for centuries. In Liberia, the state, through population census, has created a nation-state composed of 16 “tribes”, ethnic groups clustered in three African language families: the Kru in the Southeast including the Bassa, Belle, Dei (Dey), Grebo, Krahn and Kru; the Atlantic language family composed of the Gola and Kissi in the East, and the Mande family including the Gbandi, Gio (Dan), Kpelle, Loma (Lorma), Mano (Man), Mende, Manding (Mandingo) and Vai (cf. Ellis 2007: 34; Holsoe and Lauer 1976; Moran 2006: 29; TRC 2009: 94). The census excludes the fourth language family, namely the English spoken by the Americo-Liberians, the descendants of the freed slaves returning from the USA in the 19th century and which constitute a heterogeneous ethnic group. The ethnologue.com differentiates 33 languages, including Liberian English, a Liberian variety that is different from Pidgin English or the Sierra Leonean Krio. Especially in urban contexts or when travelling, Liberian English is the most common language.

In Guinea, the government and the population see their own country as being divided in four geographical regions and four mayor ethnic groups. They are the Fulani, Manding and Susu¹², and some smaller groups like the Kpelle (Guerzé), Toma and Kissi, summarised as the people from the Forest Region (O’Toole and Baker 2005). The roots of the image of an ethnically and geographically divided country lies in its colonial

12 Susu is also spelled Sosso or Sousou (O’Toole and Baker 2005: 187).

history and is widely spread in popular, administrative and scientific discourse today (Goerg 2011). The Manding mostly live in the Upper Guinea Region with Kankan as its capital and trace their history back to Sunjata Keita and the Mali Empire (Devey 2009). Historically, trade, above all long-distance trade, was mostly controlled by Manding. But since Touré's death and the end of socialism more and more nationally and internationally well connected Fulani businessmen entered the commerce (International Crisis Group 2011). The permanent establishment of Fulani traders in Upper Guinean towns led to increased competition between Manding and Fulani merchants. Nowadays the Fulani are the biggest minority in Kankan and its surroundings (Devey 2009).

Of course, the borders of the above mentioned groups in Guinea and Liberia are fluid, as for example the Krahn ethnic group was defined as such by the indirect rule in Liberia and is in fact composed of two main varieties and a range of minor variations. In addition, many people speak more than one local language and marriages between ethnic groups are common. Most of the mentioned ethnic groups exist also in neighbouring countries; some even with different names (Holsoe and Lauer 1976). The artificial, colonial boundaries, however, are not a primary problem to the national idea of the states (Dorman et al. 2007: 6; Förster forthcoming). Even though definitions and categories of ethnic belongings vary situational and locally, there exist a number of characteristics that are formed into stereotypes (Eriksen 2010: 33-37). The very members themselves or the government uphold some of them, for example when the latter creates statistics and documents thereby using categories such as ethnicity, territorial or economic characteristics.

First Case Study: Ethnicity and the Discourse of Unity in Liberia

The Historical and Political Context of Politicisation of Ethnicity in Liberia

Of all the ethnic groups in Liberia, the Manding¹³ were the latest to arrive – before the freed slaves.¹⁴ Being latecomers and not having a homeland to point to within Liberia, the Manding are today often described as foreigners, in particular as strangers from Guinea (cf. Boas 2013: 40). Indeed, they consider themselves as descendants from the medieval empire of Mali, and family bonds lead to Guinea. However, many have been in Liberia for generations. As mentioned above, they have a long history as traders (Brooks 1993, Konneh 1996a or 1996b). By the 19th century, the Manding had established the Kondo confederation in the eastern part of Liberia (Dunn and Holsoe 1985: 29), and became politically important through their hegemony in the region. (Wealthy) Manding men enjoyed the image of attractive husbands; their wives were spared from hard farm work.¹⁵ However, they did not allow their female kin to marry non-Manding, i.e. non-Muslim (Konneh 1996a: 18). Wealth and the often asymmetric marriage practices gave way to envy and jealousy towards the Manding. In addition, the oligarchic Americo-Liberian ruling elite saw the Manding as a kind of allies, as they considered them as “agents of modernization for their active engagement in trade and a sense of ‘order’” (Munive Rincon 2010: 13). The ruling elite benefited from the traded goods, and in return, the Manding enjoyed advantages, such as tax benefits. These alliances were renewed by President Samuel K. Doe who set an end to the Americo-Liberian dominance in 1980; but he maintained connections to the Manding community and favoured them against Lebanese or Indian traders (Konneh 1996a: 126). However, ethnic tensions began to arise in the early 1980s, as Doe began to privilege his own ethnic group, the Krahn, besides the Manding. These tensions were soon to be manipulated by the rebel incursion in 1989 of Charles Taylor, a Gio.¹⁶ In the course of the war, more than 250,000 people lost their lives, and a vast majority of the population was displaced; Americo-Liberians fled mostly to the USA and Manding typically to Guinea. Some Manding founded rebellion movements and returned to Liberia for retaliation, the most prominent of which were Alhaji Kromah-lead United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO-K) and the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). The conflict ended with a victory over Charles Taylor and the formulation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2003.

13 There exists a bulk of literature on the Manding in Liberia (see footnote 1). In this paper, we consider the time of the return of the Americo-Liberian until today.

14 Also often referred to as “Americo-Liberian”, “Congoes” or “settlers” (cf. Ellis 2007: 37).

15 Interview, Manding man, Monrovia, 25.03.2010.

16 For details about the conflict, see the seminal works of Ellis (2007), Moran (2006) or Utas (2003).

In the course of the war and at the return of refugees, much property of Manding, most problematically in Ganta,¹⁷ was occupied by members of other ethnic groups who considered themselves to be the autochthonous, literally those “born from the soil” (Brooks 1993, Geschiere 2011). This was just one of the countless problems of the aftermath, however, with the potential to fuel conflict nationwide. In order to rework the violent past and to reconcile the people, the CPA included the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and an Independent Human Rights Commission. The Transitional Government enacted a TRC in 2005, which was established after the South African model of 1995. Other than previous commissions in Argentina or Chile, the South African and Liberian added the concept of reconciliation with the aim of uniting the nation and restoring social peace (Hazan 2009: 258). The proceeding of the TRC and its report are highly contested even by the commissioners, and it is therefore not surprising that the implementation of the recommendations is hampered up to now (cf. Gberie 2008; Harris and Lappin 2010; International Crisis Group 2012).¹⁸

Due to various efforts by local, national and international actors and organisations, notably local NGOs, students and other interest groups, tensions have been reduced, but they have not disappeared. A land commission and a specific committee for the Nimba land disputes were set up and are working on ways forward in regards resolving and preventing complex land conflicts.

However, many other causes and sources of the conflict are still not resolved, and events such as the 2011 presidential and parliamentary elections were anticipated with a certain level of insecurity and anxiety. Numerous actors, ranging from the University to the Peace Building Fund or ordinary people,¹⁹ stated that they were uneasy with the upcoming elections, and “election violence” became a widely used notion. This pre-elections time gave new room for debating the nation, citizenship and ethnic stigmata and tensions, especially about the Manding as an ethnic group. The fact that some Manding are wealthy, well connected and (formerly) attractive partners²⁰ still causes resentment today, and adds an emotional dimension to the discursive formations of ethnicity. A number of arguments were used to attempt to exclude the Manding from the nation, especially that they have no “homeland” in Liberia. Legally, however, according to the Liberian Aliens and Nationality Law, chapter 20, citizenship is restricted by birth to

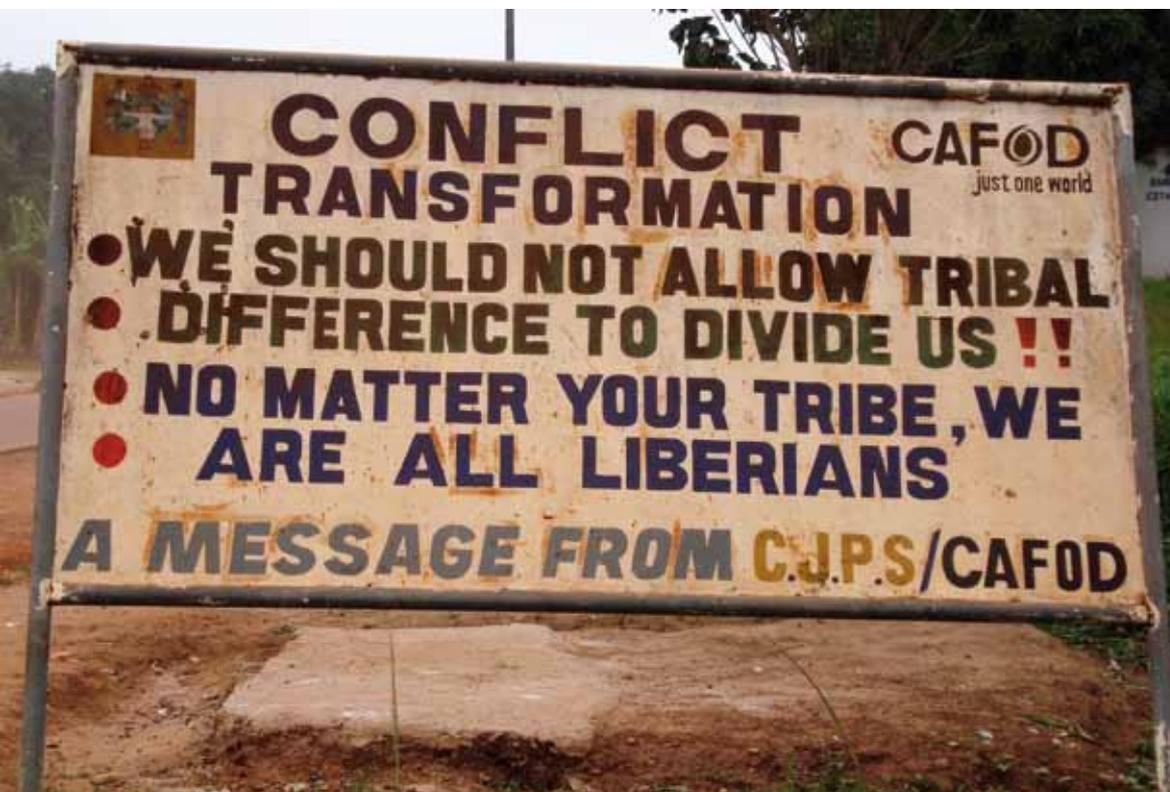
“[a] person who is a Negro, or of Negro descent, born in Liberia and subject to the jurisdiction thereof” or “[a] person born outside Liberia whose father (i) was born a citizen of Liberia; (ii) was a citizen of Liberia at the time of the birth of such child, and (iii) had resided in Liberia prior to the birth of such child.”

17 Ganta, the capital of Nimba County, is densely populated. It is also the stronghold of Prince Y. Johnson, a former rebel leader. He is supported by a majority of Mano and Gio people, who consider themselves to be the “sons of the soil” of Nimba. Johnson is seen as their big man who stands for their interests in Monrovia. He was a presidential candidate in 2011 and came third after Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Winston Tubman.

18 This was also stated by a Liberian expert in the field of reconciliation (interview, Monrovia, 11.07.2012). It should not be neglected that there are various opinions and that taking perpetrators of the war to court is not seen as a solution by all: “But people reconciled ever since!” and “Leave them [perpetrators] with their conscience” (informal discussion, two women, Monrovia, 21.07.2012).

19 Cf. Interviews, NEC, 07.04.2010; Peacebuilding Office, 31.05.2010.

20 This argument is contested nowadays, as most of the Liberians are Christians or Muslims; and Muslims are allowed to marry to people of a “book religion.” Still, young people often complain that their parents are rigid; hence norms, values and the actual practices of youth forging relationships beyond boundaries diverge.



NGO signboard with peace messages at the entry of Ganta
Photo A. Kaufmann 2010

Here, citizenship is defined by *jus solis* (citizenship by birthright) as well as *jus sanguinis* (citizenship by ancestry). But the debates show that this definition has rather weak legitimacy at a local level; there, citizenship has a different meaning, one that is closely linked to ancestry. In fact, Liberia operates with a dual legal system of what is referred to as the statutory law and the customary law. However, in practice, the customary laws are composed of a variety of legal systems under the auspices of local chiefs or elders (cf. American Bar Association 2009: 13; Richards 2005). Land tenure, citizenship and political participation are interlocked, and become contested when cutting across the realm of the localised to the regional or the national realm. This plurality of legal systems is subject to interpretation, and hence manipulation.

What are the means of the government to overcome these social cleavages? In the following, we intend to highlight some selected speeches and practices of the government.

The Government's Imaginary of Unity

*“Our challenge, therefore, is to transform adversity into opportunity, to renew the promises upon which our nation was founded: freedom, equality, unity and individual progress (...).”*²¹

In her inauguration address (2006), from which the above quote stems, President Johnson Sirleaf utters what the TRC identified in its 2009 consolidated report as “iden-

21 Inauguration address, 2006. URL: http://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/inaugural_add_1.pdf (11.09.2012).

tity conflicts” which constitute one of the four realms of causes and sources of conflict in Liberia:

“Generally negative discourse encompasses ‘ethnic’, ‘tribal’, ‘religious’, ‘cultural’ conflicts, and the invariable distinctions between ‘the natives’, or those deemed to ‘belong to Liberia’, and ‘those who do not belong’, typically ‘Americo-Liberians’ and ‘the Mandingos’; b. These categorizations are a diversion from the underlying problem; the formation of the Liberian state preceded any meaningful development of a Liberian nation, or sense of nationhood; (...). The effects continue to be felt today; public discourse is characterized by focus on what separates Liberians, as opposed to what unifies them.” (TRC 2009: 212)

This statement points at a long history of inequalities and tensions. In virtually all of her speeches addressing the nation, Johnson Sirleaf continues to emphasise the need for unity in Liberia – in line with international peace building agendas (cf. Chetail 2009: 1). In many of her speeches, which are generally short and very clear in expression, she provides an update on what she and the government have done, and what problems still persist. She often does so by building on both positive and negative images and practices of the past and its leaders. She highlights the historical sources of conflicts and problems, such as the inequalities of the past and the atrocities of the conflict. Against this backdrop, she emphasises present-day reconstruction, unity and a vision of a better future:

“Fellow Liberians: A very happy holiday season to you! To Christians throughout our glorious land, I say Merry Christmas; and to all the people of Liberia, I say a very Happy New Year. (...) So the problems this country faces do not stem from any one group or person or from this government; it’s an accumulated problem of dishonesty, corruption and indiscipline that has been passed on from successive governments.”²²

A year later, in the eve of the presidential elections, national unity was emphasised even more:

“As we enter a New Year, I want to appeal to everyone, in a spirit of upholding all that we have worked for, that this be a year of true patriotism and reconciliation; that we accentuate the positive things that unite us as a people, rather than focus on what divides us. 2011 will be a defining year for us Liberians, as we go into another round of the democratic process of holding free and fair elections. In the lead-up to October, every Liberian has an important role to play.”²³

The Unification Day, a holiday created by President Tubman, was re-declared a national holiday in 2009 through an act by President Johnson Sirleaf. In 2011, she held a speech with the title “There is more that unites us than divides us”, delivered on the island the first freed slaves had landed.

“My Fellow Liberians: ‘In union strong success is sure, we cannot fail..., we will over all prevail.’ We utter these words every time we sing our National Anthem –

22 New Years’ Message, 2009, http://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/ejs_holiday_Message_2009.pdf (11.09.2012).

23 New Years’ Address, 2010, http://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/20101231_new_year_message_2011.pdf (11.09.2012).

The Boundary Delimitation Process

CLAN...
A group of towns makes up a clan.
Clans will be delimited based on the boundary Harmonization law.

Chiefdom...
The Chiefdom is a rural community that comprises of people with similar cultural and social interest. A group of clans make up a chiefdom.

BOUNDARY DELIMITATION IS MAINLY FOR

- Knowing your voting area, electoral units
- Knowing your constituency

REMEMBER!
The process is not to divide Citizens, but to Place citizens in Communities for representation.

METHODS TO DELIMIT CONSTITUENCIES:

- A technical Committee on delimitation is set up
- The process of delimitation starts with massive awareness and sensitization campaign
- Technicians will do desk mapping
- Number of constituencies in each county is determined and delimited.
- Constituency representation is determined mainly by the number of people in a particular geographical location

There is a different between a constituency or an electoral district and an administrative district.

- * Because the establishment of a constituency takes population into consideration each constituency will include one or more administrative districts
- * Also, some administrative districts will be divided between or among constituencies

NEC IS RESPONSIBLE TO DELIMIT CONSTITUENCIES

A CIVIC AND VOTER EDUCATION MESSAGE
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REMEMBER!
The process is not to divide Citizens, but to Place citizens in Communities for representation.

METHODS TO DELIMIT CONSTITUENCIES:

- A technical Committee on delimitation is set up
- The process of delimitation starts with massive awareness and sensitization campaign
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Voting Instructions
Photo A. Kaufmann 2010

*a song that proclaims our allegiance to this Land of Liberty, this Liberia. In it, we profess of that we are a people united, regardless of tribe, clan, religion, gender or economic status. We bear witness that, as a people, we shall not stand for divisions and hatred.*²⁴

May 2011 was shortly before the presidential elections, and her speech resonated a warning by drawing strong parallels to the well-memorised “dark past” of violence. Interestingly, President Johnson Sirleaf never explicitly speaks of ethnic tensions, nor does she use the word “Mandingo”, but rather – in line with the ideology of national unity – addresses the issue on a broader level, namely, the religious.²⁵ In fact, the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL), founded in 1990, had been a driving force of peace negotiations from the beginning of the conflict.

By participating in Muslim festivities, the president recognises their inclusion in the Liberian state and nation. For example, she addresses Muslims during their religious events, such as the Ramadan.

*“On the national level, Ramadan is a reminder that Islam has always been a part of Liberia and that Liberian Muslims have made extraordinary contributions to our country. The contribution of our Muslim brothers and sisters in advancing peace, tolerance and progress is essential for Liberia’s national renewal.”*²⁶

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
at Tabaski
Photo: TCL Africa 2009



The Liberian
President dines with
Muslims
Photo: Executive Mansion
2010.09.04



These symbolic practices go in line with the aim of strengthening the image of a brighter future and vision of a nation united regardless of religious, ethnic or class issues. The president appointed members of various ethnic groups in her government and thereby aims at integrating various regions, religions and social groups into the government. Political allies are created and upheld, such as Amara Konneh, a Manding, who has been appointed as Planning Minister, and was subsequently reappointed as Minister of Finance, hence, holding a central position within the government. Nevertheless, there exist contradictory practices. For example, the government declared the disputed market land in Ganta eminent domain, even though Manding have title deeds to parts of it.²⁷ This act was interpreted by the Manding community as a pre-election strategic act of the President in order not to lose valuable Nimbadian constituency against presidential candidate Prince Y. Johnson.

24 Marking the Observance of National Unification Day, 2011, <http://www.emansion.gov.lr/> (24.05.2011).

25 The Muslims in Liberia are not only composed of Manding, however many people strongly associate Muslim and Manding and hence, religion becomes a central aspect of ethnic articulation.

26 <http://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/President-Message-to-Muslims-at%20the-end-of-Ramadan.pdf> (11.09.2012).

27 The Analyst, 30.08.2010; Independence Day Speech, 2010, http://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/20100726Independence_Day_Remarks.pdf (11.09.2012).

These practices of the state create an impression that rather than addressing the discourse of reconciliation launched by the TRC, the government constructs images of unity through practices shown above, such as the emphasis of unity in public speeches, or the president's participation at religious events. Two points have to be considered here: Firstly, as depicted above, the TRC seems impracticable regarding implementation as it is widely contested, and secondly, it is doubted whether it would enhance its aim of social cohesion. Rather, the social reality of interwoven and at times ambiguous social and political relations has to be understood, and President Johnson Sirleaf considers these for example in the composition of an inclusive government. Other political and social actors, however, take up the international – hence powerful – aspects of the reconciliation discourse to criticise political decisions and practices. Yet a range of social actors considers itself excluded and point at discriminatory practices.

The next section looks at how the social reality for the ordinary people looks like, or, rather, to what degree these practices of government and the state are convincing.

Ordinary Liberians and Their Discursive Articulation

In urban everyday life, ethnicity or even ethnic tensions do not seem apparent at first sight; they are neither emphasised by practices or symbols,²⁸ nor is ethnic belonging found in everyday talk, as for example nobody asks about the other persons' ethnicity or uses greetings in a certain language. The exception is the Manding ethnic group, who ascribe themselves certain visible traits and who are also ascribed such by others. For example, they did not adopt American names in the past.²⁹ They claim to be treated unfairly and excluded from certain realms. Indeed, when looking closer at the debates after the "Lofa incident"³⁰ a range of stereotypes and prejudices along ethnic lines emerged. The "Lofa incident" created a space of mutual construction of ethnicity, such as the debate among three men in their 50ies.³¹ They had a heated discussion about the role the Muslims were playing in the world, issues of dominance, for example; the wide spread argument was shaped, as mentioned above, that the Manding, as Muslims and without a homeland, were not true Liberians, but rather Guineans who had only been declared Liberians by President Doe in 1985. The men further debated that the Manding were living amongst themselves in various neighbourhoods and were not interacting with other Liberians, and even their women were kept covered.³² Whereas the Manding men would marry local women, they would not let the other men marry their daughters. In such conversations, regional issues, religion, ethnicity and the understanding of citi-

28 Religious symbols are shown, and those who belong to Poro or Sande have according marks on their bodies. However, they are not visible, as they are normally covered by clothing.

29 E.g. informal discussion, Kakata, 17.02.2011.

30 An outburst of violence occurred in Lofa County, after a young girl was found dead allegedly showing signs of ritual killings. The suspected killer was found praying in a Mosque. In the course of events, there was an outburst of violence, whereby four people were killed, many injured, a mosque and two churches burnt and various shops looted (The New Democrat, 01.03.2010).

31 Informal discussion, Monrovia, 26.02.2010. The same day, the international news agencies published that Gaddafi had declared Jihad on Switzerland as a result of the "Minaret-Initiative" that had been accepted by the Swiss populace. This information fitted well into the discourse on Muslim Manding as contributors to the spreading/imposing of Islam in Liberia.

32 This was meant in a double sense: that they were not allowed to marry non-Manding, and that they were wearing veils. Generally, the women beneath the black veils are the wives of Fulani traders that in fact are from Guinea. Most of them do not have Liberian citizenship.

zenship become blended and heated up with emotional arguments that fit the popular image. The image of the Manding, as well as the one of the “true Liberian” is reconstructed and reshaped.

Other groups and actors countered these images by attempting to emphasise the need of unity. The president of the Liberia National Student Union (LINSU), for example, explained that LINSU tries to diminish such prejudices and cleavages with workshops for youth (interview, Monrovia, 07.03.2011). Likewise, a range of women’s groups also address these tensions. The Manding have identified problems, and individuals as well as groups, for example the Concerned Mandingo Association of Liberia (COMASL), create awareness and mediate conflicts on a local level. COMASL members emphasised the inevitability of Manding to attend training programs, schools and universities in order to have similar capacities and opportunities for political participation.

In the course of the 2011 elections, this proclaimed unity became contested anew by many social actors. During the registration process for the 2011 presidential and parliamentary elections, for example, there were cases reported where a number of Liberians, including prominent personalities, faced questioning and annoyance by staff of the National Election Commission (NEC) who considered the Manding to be foreigners from Guinea and hence not eligible to register.³³ Though there were also capacity and procedural problems within the NEC, it shows in fact that the central problem was that members of the Manding ethnic group were not recognised – by members of a governmental institution – as belonging to the nation. This had already been the case in the 2005 elections (Söderström 2011: 214); the arguments were thus recycled in 2011. Stories of problems and tensions circulate fast and can quickly lead to rumours and emotional acts by individuals and groups. Ordinary people reproduce fears and prejudices that are not typical to West Africa only: Anguish of “Muslim hegemony”, the imposition of sharia, and other images of Islam circulate in many social milieus of Europe, the USA and beyond as well.

In his keynote speech on cultural legacy in Liberia at the Independence Day celebration on July 26, 2012, Prof. Elwood Dunn clearly stressed that the nation is inheritor of three national heritages: The traditional African heritage, the heritage of Islamic civilisation, and the Western heritage. This speech underlined the aspect of national unity, enforcing the national interest of unity that recognises the historicity that shaped the nation-state.³⁴

33 The Analyst, 27.01.2011; GNN Liberia, 03.02.2011; interview, Manding NEC employee, Monrovia, 17.02.2011; group discussion, COMASL leadership, 25.02.2011.

34 For his speech, Dr. Dunn received the highest award of the Most Venerable Order of the Knighthood of the Pioneers. He refused the honour because of its “discriminative nature.” However, he accepted the honours by the Traditional Chiefs (Liberian Observer, 06.08.2012).

Second Case Study: Ethnicity and Reconciliation Efforts in Guinea

The Historical and Political Context of Politicisation of Ethnicity in Guinea

Ethnic and regional competitions also have a long history in Guinea. When political parties were authorised in 1946, the affiliation along ethnic lines started and has played a significant role ever since. Ahmed Sekou Touré, Guinea's first president, was of Manding origin. After independence, ethnic based parties were abolished in order to foster national unity, one of Touré's main goals (Ladipo 1976; Schmidt 2007; Sorry 2000: 139-147). Contrary to official statements, many Manding obtained posts in the administration and the military. As Touré's leadership became more and more autocratic – especially after the Portuguese invasion of Conakry in 1970 – prominent Fulani, but also members of other ethnic groups, suffered persecution and fled the country (Arieff and McGovern 2013; Smith 2006).³⁵

When military ruler Lansana Conté came to power, important positions in the administration and the army changed into the hands of his Susu ethnic group.³⁶ Since the 1990s, the political landscape in Guinea has slowly opened up. In 1992, a multi-party system was introduced (Devey 2009). One year later, presidential elections took place, during which ethnic affiliations played a major role, particularly for the Fulani and Manding (Groelsema 1998; Smith 2006). After Conté's death in 2008, a military coup occurred under Captain Moussa Dadis Camara, who stems from the Forest Region (Engeler 2008).³⁷

Premdas (2010: 319-320) argues that in times of democratisation ethnic tensions may rise due to the increase of political competition. In Guinea, during the first democratic presidential elections in June and November 2010, this was definitely the case. The closer the polls, the tenser the atmosphere in the country became. After more than 50 years of dictatorship, the (ethnic) competition of who will preside over the country was fierce. Already during the first round all candidates were primarily supported in their places of origin (UE 2011).³⁸ The Fulani Cellou Dalein Diallo (Union des Forces Démocratiques de Guinée (UFDG) with 39,7%) and the Manding Alpha Condé (Rassemblement du Peuple de Guinée (RPG) with 20,7%) qualified for the second round.

During the four months in between the two polls both camps tried to change the rules of the on-going electoral process. Issues of historic culpability, patrimonialism and

35 No less than two million Guineans – up to a third of the population – left their country just until the seventies. Estimated 230'000 of them went to Liberia (Bah et al. 1998).

36 Charles (2010: 147-150) shows to what ethnic group the ministers, governors and prefects belonged between 1958 and 2008. He affirms the above-mentioned ethnic favouritism under Touré and Conté.

37 It has to be noted, however, that for example the general strikes of 2006/07 were lead by the trade unions and had no ethnic component (McGovern 2007).

38 While Diallo gained more than 80% of the votes in the Fouta Djallon, where the majority of his Fulani-fellow lives, Condé had more than 72% in the region of Kankan (UE 2011).

rumours started circulating on a daily basis.³⁹ Demonstrations of (young) party supporters, damaging of Fulani's shops, and other forms of violent outbreaks and human right abuses further destabilised the situation (Arieff and McGovern 2013: 217; IRIN 2010). According to the International Crisis Group (2011: 5) neither the political leaders nor the security forces reacted in an appropriate way to appease the tensions. Thus, the popular perception of politics as "the battle between ethnic groups" increased. Condé's surprising victory in the second round – considering the results of the first poll – with 52,5% of the votes gave way to conspiracy theories that show up in popular discourse to this day.⁴⁰ These elections thus showed that in Guinea, ethnicity is actually the main cleavage at work (cf. Eifert et al. 2010). Political competition about who has access to the state power has led to violent tensions between ethnic groups. At the same time, religious, political and social actors from local, national and international levels helped appeasing the tense situation.⁴¹



Writing on a facade
in Timbi Madina,
Fouta Djalon.
Photo: C. Ammann 2011

39 After an incident in Conakry it was said people of Fulani ethnicity had poisoned water (International Crisis Group 2011; interview, Manding man, Kankan, 14.10.2011). Similar rumours pop up throughout history, for instance against the Jews during the epidemic plagues in the Middle Ages (Rohrbacher and Schmidt 1991).

40 Interviews and informal discussions, Kankan, August 2011 – March 2012.

41 International Crisis Group 2011; IRIN 2010; interviews and informal discussions, Kankan, August 2011 – March 2012.



Flag supporting the national soccer team Kankan
Photo: C. Ammann 2012

National and Local Reconciliation Efforts

Once elected, Alpha Condé immediately tried to overcome the divisions within Guinea that were displayed so openly during the election period, as extracts of his inauguration speech in December 2010 show (Guinée Info 22.12.2010):

“The change that we praise is not directed against a political party or ethnical group, nor against any social category. (...) I will try, at my modest level, to become Nelson Mandela of Guinea who will unify the sons of his country.”

On the one hand, Condé wanted to show that everybody was welcome in his country, regardless of political, ethnic or any other social background. He was aware that governing a divided population would be a very difficult task, especially as he had to plan and conduct legislative elections. On the other hand, he put himself on a level with one of the most respected African political personalities and presented himself as the “saviour of the nation”. In a written interview with *Radio France International* (RFI 06.12.2010), Condé further stressed the need of all people to work together:

“I say that Guinea belongs to all Guineans. I like to say that Guinea is like a car. A car has four wheels. If you take one wheel away, the car cannot drive any more. Guinea has its four regions and these four regions have to go hand in hand. At the moment, the population is instrumentalised by businessmen who know that they are more bootleggers than businessmen.”

With this imagery the president emphasised national unity. Interestingly, this image of Guinea as a car, whereby every wheel represents one region, came up during fieldwork over and over again. Condé thus used an approved proverb every Guinean citizen is familiar with. At the same time he accused a specific group, namely the businessmen, of diffusing chaos and enhancing delinquency in the country. Even though Condé did not specifically mention the Fulani, to them it is very clear whom he identified as the bootleggers. During the first anniversary speech of his inauguration, Alpha Condé named two of his political goals: unifying the nation but at the same time changing it.



Advertisement
for the reconciliation-
event
Photo: C. Ammann 2012

According to his observations national reconciliation was already on the way. He did not, however, address what reconciliation meant for him and how it should be achieved (Aujourd'hui en Guinée, 20.12.2011). Others, such as International Crisis Group (2011) or Yabi (2011), question the president's determination for reconciliation.

Condé made one of his reconciliation efforts in the first months of 2012, when he urged the local governments to take action. In Kankan for example, the mayor called various meetings with the *chefs de quartier* amongst others. The latter then had to identify different groups within their neighbourhoods, which would be able to communicate the issue of ethnic division and reconciliation to the local population. The responses to these efforts were mostly positive.⁴² Besides that, the local government organised so-called reconciliation-events: a reconciliation-soccer-tournament and a reconciliation-race. At the national level, the national soccer team that played at the African Cup of Nations (CAN) had to represent the image of a unified and changed Guinea with a promising future.⁴³

In January and February 2012, a reconciliation-tour of different national artists took place throughout the country. In Kankan, the stronghold of the president's party RPG, different activities such as workshops and forums were held over an entire week. They were of a minor scale, though, and mostly took place in the RPG's main office in Kankan. As could be noticed, people outside the RPG were not informed about these events.

42 Interviews and informal discussions, 45 years old *chef de quartier*, Kankan, 21.01.2012, 24.01.2012, 20.02.2012; interview, young male leader of a local youth group, Kankan, 25.01.2012; interview, leader of a local women group, Kankan, 29.02.2012; observations, meetings of local male youth group, Kankan, August 2011 – March 2012.

43 The minister of sports stressed that the Syli National (the Guinean national team) symbolises national unity: "You know, if you love your country, if it is for a common cause, it is the Syli National, it is red, yellow and green. It is not one political party or one ethnic group (...)" (Guinée News, 15.01.2012) A man working for the municipality in Kankan said (interview, 31.01.2012): "The Syli National will be a determinant issue of reconciliation."

In speeches on the local radio stations the moderators and invited personalities talked about the urge to forgive, reconcile and look ahead so that a Guinea where all ethnic groups may peacefully cohabit would become possible. By the means of interactive broadcasts, the population could express their own idea of reconciliation as well. In coffee shops, markets and elsewhere the discussions along different lines continued. Many examples of peaceful coexistence and collaboration between Manding and Fulani could be heard,⁴⁴ but there were also utterances of prejudices: People for example claimed that Fulani are dishonest, violent and egoistic. As we have seen at the beginning, constructing cultural differences and diffusing prejudices of the “other” are typical attributes of ethnicity (cf. Eriksen 2010: 35).

On the last day, a huge concert took place. With its enormous stage, the floodlights and amplifiers it attracted especially the city’s youth. The event, however, was politically not neutral. It was organised by the governing party, posters of which hung all over the city. The organisers talked about unity, reconciliation, and forgiveness, but did not approach the issue of what exactly had caused the ethnic tensions during the election period. Further, no propositions of how to overcome existing cleavages were made. In summary, the whole event could not convince people who were not affiliated to the RPG. “All intellectuals⁴⁵ are aware that this is just propaganda, nothing else” an elderly man said quietly to his neighbour in a coffee shop opposite the stage.⁴⁶ At this time, political campaign was officially forbidden. For this reason, a gathering of an opposition party in Kankan more than a month earlier had been dissolved with teargas.⁴⁷ Masked by speeches about reconciliation and forgiveness, this event was able to draw attention to the governing party. Above all, young people of all ethnic backgrounds and with various political interests enjoyed the offered distraction. Political tensions, however, were fostered because of the obvious political goal of the organisers.

In a nutshell, due to its reconciliation attempts, the local government was able to make the population think and talk about these issues. Especially the efforts at the local level by the *chefs de quartier* and different associations were evaluated positively. Many groups – NGOs, age-sets and religious groups, but also very small groups of young people within neighbourhoods – stressed that they affiliated members of all ethnic background without any problems. At the same time, people were angry with the RPG for misusing the reconciliation-event as a platform for campaigning. Further, in coffee shops and during interviews people talked more negatively and aggressively about the other ethnic group. For example after an incident of vigilante justice at Conakry’s main market, a Manding man said (interview, Kankan, 03.02.2012): “It is for sure that was a Fulani. They do things like that.”

This example shows that the Fulani are often accused of violent acts. They, then again, often portray themselves as being the victims of the state power, as will be illustrated in the next section.

44 Time and again people stated: “We have to make a step towards each other” or “Everybody enters and leaves the world through the same door”.

45 In the Guinean context, people who enjoyed twelve years and more of formal education are called intellectuals.

46 Kankan, 28.01.12. Two days later, a woman selling on Sogbe-market said: “The instruments are expensive. Why do they not build fabrics? The young need employment, that’s what is needed.”

47 Les Nouvelles de Guinée (December 2011); personal communication, Kankan, 15.12.2011.

(Difficulties of) Living Together

Different groups in society often feel systematically disregarded (Wimmer 1997: 637). The construction of a historical past in which one's group has suffered oppression and inequality is very much at work in Guinea. The International Crisis Group (2011: 4) puts it as follows:

“Ethnicity’s role in Guinean political history is itself a strategic issue. In every community, you can find people who will tell you they have been discriminated against and who look for and find evidence of this throughout their country’s history.”⁴⁸

This is the core of the Fulani’s position in the discursive formation of ethnicity, which could to this day never provide a head of state. Before the 2010 presidential elections, Fulani claimed that it was now their turn to provide a president as the Manding, the Susu and the people from the Forest Region already had taken command of the country (Arieff and McGovern 2013: 203).⁴⁹ Even though the image of economic power accompanies the Fulani, they have a feeling of being politically and sometimes also socially marginalised and of being the scapegoat of the country (Højbjerg et al. 2012: 6).⁵⁰ Since the presidential elections of 2010, they, along with other oppositional groups, critically observe the government’s decisions, as can be detected in comments in blogs⁵¹ and in popular debates.

Two examples may further elaborate the point. One of Condé’s main concerns during his first months in office was the security sector reform. Aware of the role the military had played in his country during the military rule of Conté and then of Dadis, it is no surprise that this was an urgent issue to tackle. Condé was forced to strengthen both his position in and influence on the army. He thus improved the living conditions of the military, replaced some high officials, pensioned off more than 4’000 men and eliminated so called “ghost” soldiers (International Crisis Group 2010). This security sector reform was highly contested. People claim that the president did not only promote Manding, but did also retire more Fulani than members of any other ethnicity. This argument further aggravated the already tense relationship between the Fulani and the security forces (International Crisis Group 2011).⁵²

The other example relates to the markets. Whenever important persons from the government arrive in Kankan, the administration closes the town’s markets, schools and sometimes even the small shops under the pretext of a spontaneously declared public holiday. An elderly woman working for the local authorities explained that the closing

47 Les Nouvelles de Guinée (December 2011); personal communication, Kankan, 15.12.2011.

48 Especially the past surrounding Sékou Touré is still very much contested (Arieff and McGovern 2013; Pauthier 2013).

49 According to Charles (2010: 148-149) Fulani were the ones being politically underrepresented between 1958 and 2008.

50 The self-perception is similar. Typical for this self-image is the following statement of a Fulani woman of around 30 years who was, along with other Fulani and Manding women, preparing food for a funeral (Kankan, 21.02.2012): “Without us Fulani nothing works in this country.” Fulani women are said to be attractive wedding partners due to their light skin color (and because of economic reasons).

51 Fierce comments in online newspapers and blogs used mostly by the Guinean diaspora are frequent, cf. <http://www.guineelibre.com/>; <http://guineaoye.wordpress.com/>.

52 Many Fulani informants stressed the same point.

was implemented in order to have many people welcoming the important guests (interview, Kankan, 19.01.2012). Market-women are hugely affected by such closings as they buy ingredients for supper with the money they earn during the day. Therefore, they all complain about such orders. There are, though, always means to bypass the administrative directives.⁵³ The next day, one can hear heated debates all over the markets. Women of Fulani ethnicity claim that the market officials systematically turn their eyes if they see Manding women selling merchandise. If it were for Fulani women, they would confiscate their commodities, they say.⁵⁴

These two examples illustrate how governmental, but also individual actions may be interpreted as an act of ethnic clientelism respectively discrimination. Such stories and rumours spread rapidly and add to the increased mistrust between the Fulani and the rest of the population.

Asked what they understand by the term reconciliation, many interlocutors said again and again that it will come naturally because of interethnic marriages that are common in Kankan and elsewhere. Some were very much aware of the manipulating role politicians and their party play in the whole matter and therefore were not interested in their speeches and practices of reconciliation.⁵⁵ In Kankan, uncountable associations exist, such as youth-, community- or faith based groups, age-sets, NGOs or female organisations. With the exception of groups who form on the basis of origin that are popular among students, none of them is founded on ethnical or regional criteria. Lived realities thus demonstrate that political manipulations of ethnicity do not bear fruit all the time and everywhere. Nevertheless, since the 2010 presidential elections, ethnic belonging figures centrally for the population in Kankan. People actively take part in and shape ethnic division at one moment and of reconciliation the next. They often also blame the “other” of being a hindrance to reconciliation, transformation and construction of their country. This ambivalent stance can also be observed with politicians, as the extracts of the president’s speech above has demonstrated. Finally, the launch of reconciliation and unity efforts by the government was not a coincidence. As legislative elections were scheduled for December 2011, then delayed until June 2012,⁵⁶ the president tried to rally the population behind him. At this time, it was politically not wise to stress ethnic difference; as for example the party of the Manding Lansana Kouyaté had left Condé’s coalition and joined the opposition (OSIWA 2012). We have thus seen that Alpha Condé uses both, ethnicity division and reconciliation in order to achieve his political goals.

53 Some women sell their goods as street vendors, moving from place to place in order to escape the local police. Others just go to the market for a few hours. As there are not many vendors but still quite a high number of clients, they may even profit from the prohibition (informal discussions, women of Fulani and Manding ethnicity, Kankan, August 2011 – March 2012).

54 Personal communications and informal group discussions, Kankan, August 2011 – March 2012.

55 A male Fulani who had recently retired from the military claimed (Kankan, 22.02.2012): “Reconciliation is only between the leaders, not between us (...). We among people from the military, we are fine, there is nothing between us.”

56 They did not take place until today. After being postponed again and again, at the time of writing they are scheduled to take place in September 2013.

Comparative and Concluding Reflections

Western media often portray conflicts in Africa in an ethnic light. This, however, is a shallow approach which does not enable the understanding of the problem in its complexity. This article has shown that discursive formations of ethnic cleavages are situational and contextual. The comparative study aimed at highlighting the temporal and contextual practices of politicisation of ethnicity and the discursive formations of reconciliation and unity in Guinea's second city Kankan and Liberia's capital Monrovia. We looked at when ethnicity, just like any other aspect of individual or social identity, is activated or instrumentalised. It becomes clear from both cases that in fact, in most instances of everyday life, ethnic identity does not play a pivotal role, as social actors interact habitually with one another. However, empirical evidence revealed ethnicity as an interpretative pattern that is widely made use of. On the one hand it forms part of the interaction between political leaders and the population, and on the other hand it is an issue between different groups within society. Both of these levels refer to and influence each other. In Liberia as well as Guinea, ethnicity is emphasised at certain moments, especially in times of parliamentary or presidential elections where much is at stake. These events can serve as triggers, especially if political leaders make use of ethnicity in their speeches and practices. Likewise, situationally and contextually the leaders may draw on an approach of NOT addressing ethnicity and rather emphasising an image of national unity. Obviously, this is not unique to Guinea and Liberia. In most countries, election campaigns are accompanied by an increase of tensions between different groups within a society, as we have shown in the conceptual introduction. In countries which are marked by recent conflicts and turmoil, as Liberia and Guinea are, elections go hand in hand with the fear of emotions that might turn into violence with an unknown outcome, especially so when identified conflicts such as those along ethnic lines are prevailing.

Despite the similarities in both countries, there is a range of differences that became evident in the case studies. In Liberia, President Johnson Sirleaf, who won her second term in 2011, did not address ethnic issues in her speeches. Though the government is aware of the Manding's contested eligibility to vote, as they are ascribed to being foreigners from Guinea and Muslims in what some emphasise to be a "Christian nation". These are issues of public debate. The president officially rejects such arguments: In her speeches, she stresses national unity and includes the Muslim into the national project. This can also be observed in symbolic actions, for example in visiting the Imam at the beginning of Ramadan.

In Guinea on the other hand, where both analysed ethnic groups are Muslims, religion is not an issue of contestation. President Alpha Condé did stress national unity just as Johnson Sirleaf did in Liberia. However, in contrast to Johnson Sirleaf, Condé made explicit use of ethnic cleavages by hinting at a nationally known scapegoat, the Fulani businessmen. While the Manding are politically quite powerful, on the economic level they are very much challenged by the Fulani who claim more representation and participation within the government and the public administration. Every decision by

the government – be it politically, socially or economically – is seen by the Fulani to go against their ethnic group. This feeling of being treated unfairly is also widespread among the Manding in Liberia. In both countries, rumours circulate fast and may contribute to increased tensions between different groups. These discursive formations can be reflected in political parties and become particularly interesting in the course of elections: Whereas in Liberia there exist differences between the Manding grassroots and elites, in Guinea's second round of presidential elections, both political candidates drew on ethnicity as a source rather than on a different political agenda.⁵⁷ A further difference exists in regards of first and late comer statuses: In Liberia, the first- and late comers' paradigm comes into play in regards to the Manding, which were the last to settle before the Americo-Liberians came. Interestingly, the issue of autochthony is not politicised in Guinea, where the means of production at stake are emphasised on business.

Evidently, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Alpha Condé are aware of the need for reconciliation among their people, and approach it in various ways. The notions of unity and reconciliation are raised in their speeches, as shown above. In Liberia, reconciliation is on the national table since the end of the civil war. However, it is highly contested and so far not implemented by the government. The issue figures somewhat differently in Guinea, where reconciliation was never really defined. Apparently, especially intellectuals are rather irritated by the government's actions and ask themselves who should be reconciled. Unlike in Liberia, the past was not reworked neither in a TRC nor any other official form. Nevertheless reconciliation constitutes central part of the president's rhetoric and action on the ground.

However, presidential speeches and practices in both countries seem not really convincing to many ordinary people who are suspicious of the hidden agendas of their political leaders. They shape the image of the respective "other" mutually and ascribe one another certain (negative) characteristics. Whatever presidents do and say, so goes the common opinion of the opposition in both countries, is mainly related to political and economic interests and gaining votes. This opinion is shaped and reshaped by lived experiences, such as constructed history and developments on the ground, as for example the declaration of the disputed Ganta market as eminent domain, or political events where reconciliation is used for political purposes. This construction of images is intensified because the "other" is sought to be economically powerful and interesting for marriage, and hence foster emotions such as envy or jealousy.

It should not be neglected that there exist numerous efforts by individuals and organisations, including international ones, towards creating awareness and mediating of local disputes and cleavages. For example, the women's peace movement during the Liberian conflict emphasised that women from all social milieus came together for a joint aim (Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace; cf. Kaufmann 2011). In Guinea, the same was the case for the so-called Female Leaders, who engaged in reducing ethnic tensions during the election period. Even if the state is not efficient or convincing in its practices, bottom-up efforts, thereby drawing on constitutional regulations, religious norms or human rights, contribute strongly to social cohesion or peaceful coexistence.

57 Additional, the different life trajectories of Alpha Condé and Cellou Dallein Diallo respectively, especially their bonds to the Conté regime, were issues of contestation. It would be interesting to further look for similarities and differences in the life histories of Liberia's and Guinea's political leaders. Subsequently, the electoral strategies of the political parties in both countries could be explored.

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