

# “History is stubborn”: Talk about Truth, Justice, and National Reconciliation in the Republic of Guinea

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On doit bien sûr tourner la page de l’histoire de la Guinée. Mais avant de tourner cette page, il faut qu’elle soit lue à haute et intelligible voix.<sup>1</sup>

———Fodé Maréga, President of the Association of the Children of the Victims of Camp Boiro

## INTRODUCTION

This article explores the kinds of talk that surround truth and justice in Guinea today. We use an analysis of discussions of the November 1970 “Portuguese Aggression” of Guinea as a window into issues that continue to be raised concerning the country’s 1958–1984 socialist period, referred to in Guinea as “the First Republic.”<sup>2</sup> In focusing on these discussions, we analyze ongoing debates

Acknowledgments: The authors are grateful to the many friends and colleagues who provided feedback and shared their insights on previous drafts, including Susanna Fioratta, Rebecca Furth, Odile Goerg, Christopher Hayden, the late Ivan Karp, Luise White, and our anonymous *CSSH* reviewers. Any errors, of course, remain our own. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and are not presented as those of the Congressional Research Service or the Library of Congress. All interviews were conducted in French and translated by the authors, who also translated all quotes from French-language written and audio-visual sources.

<sup>1</sup> Translation: “We certainly need to turn the page of Guinea’s history, but before turning this page, we need to read it in a loud and intelligible voice.”

<sup>2</sup> Guinean socialism, in practice, was not doctrinaire; religious practice was encouraged as a significant element of socialist practice. Nor was it consistent; despite frequent criticisms of neocolonial economic relations on the African continent, Guinea’s socialist government derived most of its foreign exchange from a multinational bauxite mining partnership with American and Canadian companies. Nonetheless, the Guinean state consistently described itself as socialist and justified

among Guineans regarding the legacy of the then-president Ahmed Sékou Touré, and whether or not there is a need for truth-telling and/or justice for abuses committed under his rule. We tease apart two separate strands of the discussion: one focused on legitimate political tactics and the other on the politics of ethnicity in Guinea. The latter analysis is part of a larger exploration of how interpretations of Guinea’s recent history are contested by ethnic, generational, and ideological groups. The global human rights movement and the role of diaspora elites have increasingly displaced Cold War rivalry as the primary external forces in Guinean politics, and these changes to the international context have contributed to and amplified the dynamics we examine here.

Both “sides” in the debate over Touré’s legacy insist that heretofore-undisclosed historical documents will eventually vindicate their stance and that, because “history is stubborn,” their opponents’ arguments will be proven baseless. The phrase’s menacing tone hints at both the perceived power of truth-telling and the ethno-political stakes with which these debates have become imbued. These stakes have only heightened in the aftermath of Guinea’s first democratic election, in 2010.

This article shows talk about truth-telling to be a form of social and political action in itself. Several other works have directed a critical lens at the study of international justice and truth and reconciliation processes (Clarke 2009; Ross 2002; Shaw, Waldorf, and Hazan 2010; Wilson 2001). In what follows, we explore the discursive work that takes place as advocates for and against a truth-telling process argue the future merits and risks of a set of practices that remain hypothetical. Talk about talking about the violent past includes a great deal of testimony about who did what to whom. At the same time, it incorporates a second-order discussion about the uses and abuses of such testimony, which for some Guineans is essential to breaking past cycles of violent state repression and for others is a kind of Pandora’s box that could fuel not reconciliation but retribution. While both sides incorporate international arguments for and against truth-telling in these second-order arguments, they also engage in a third order of analysis, of the status of “imported” notions of justice, agency, and culpability in an African setting.

#### GUINEA’S RECENT PAST: AN OVERVIEW

In 1958, Guinea, alone among France’s colonies in Africa, chose immediate independence, rejecting Charles de Gaulle’s offer of continued membership in a subservient French “community.” Founding President Ahmed Sékou

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its actions in those terms. Guineans who lived through the period describe it unselfconsciously and unambiguously as “La Révolution,” unaware of or uninterested in the fact that others might perceive their political system to be inauthentic.

Touré, a charismatic trade union leader, established a one-party dictatorship founded on the ideals of socialism and African nationalism. Touré embarked on an ambitious effort to transform and modernize Guinean society, in part by brutally stamping out certain forms of cultural expression. Dissent in any form was also vigorously and often violently repressed. One instrument of repression was an extensive system of detention centers, where thousands were interned. The most famous of these, the Camp Boiro military base in Conakry, oversaw practices such as the “*diète noire*,” where political prisoners were deprived of food or water for days.<sup>3</sup> Touré’s Democratic Party of Guinea (PDG) and his administration were ostensibly multi-ethnic, but at various times one or more ethnic communities bore the brunt of such policies. Touré also provided support to liberation movements elsewhere on the continent, and vaunted periodic Western efforts to undermine his regime, claiming to be leading a global struggle against a “permanent” counter-revolutionary plot by imperialist powers and an internal “fifth column” of Guinean reactionaries (see e.g., PDG 1970; Touré 1969: 24–33). Still, Guinea remained officially “non-aligned,” and some cooperation with the West continued throughout Touré’s presidency, most notably in the mining sector and with regard to foreign aid.

On 22 November 1970, a group of several hundred Portuguese military officers, Bissau-Guinean colonial troops, Guinean exiles, and mercenaries landed on the beaches of Conakry, occupied two Guinean military camps, burned down one of the presidential residences, freed Portuguese prisoners of war, and appeared to be involved in an attempt to oust the Touré government. This incident draws our attention not only because it was a singularly dramatic moment in the history of the Guinean revolution,<sup>4</sup> but also because it marked the beginning of the most violent state repression of dissent in Guinea (1970–1977), which targeted Guineans in general and eventually ethnic Fulbe in particular. Also, in the context of more than a dozen “plots” that the Guinean state claimed to uncover, this attack was one whose reality few could deny (although

<sup>3</sup> The *diète noire* was used in two interrelated ways. First, it was the opening round of abuse meted out to most political prisoners, who were typically held for four to eight days in stiflingly hot solitary confinement cells upon arrival at Camp Boiro. Their interrogations and other forms of torture would then follow. A second use of the *diète* was to kill prisoners without spilling their blood. No full account of the number of detainees or victims has ever been published.

<sup>4</sup> The broader Cold War and decolonization contexts of the attack were preeminent at the time. The Portuguese prisoners were being held in Conakry by the African Party for the Independence of Guiné and Cape Verde (PAIGC), a nationalist liberation movement that was fighting Portuguese colonial rule in neighboring Guinea-Bissau. Sékou Touré had offered the PAIGC a base in Conakry as an expression of his anti-colonialist ideals. Portuguese authorities initially denied responsibility for the attack, despite a United Nations commission of inquiry that concluded otherwise (U.N. Security Council 1971: 9). It was not until 1976, with the publication of a memoir written by the Portuguese officer who planned the operation, that the full extent of official Portuguese participation began to be revealed. See Calvão 1976; Antunes 1988; Saraiva 1997; Dhada 1998; MacQueen 1999; Marinho 2006; and Cann 2007, among others.

some have tried to do so nonetheless).<sup>5</sup> We will describe the attack in detail below.

In March 1984, Sékou Touré died during a medical operation in the United States. Colonel (later, General) Lansana Conté came to power in a military coup carried out as members of the late president’s entourage were engaged in a power struggle over who would assume the presidency. In 1985, an alleged coup attempt by the number-two figure in the junta, Diarra Traoré, led Conté to order secret executions of much of Sékou Touré’s inner circle. Conté instituted some measures of political and economic liberalization, but his rule was eventually defined by pervasive corruption, opaque governance, and the disintegration of the state. Upon his death in 2008, a new military junta led by Captain Moussa Dadis Camara seized power. This article’s coda includes a discussion of events since then and their impact on the issues we describe.

#### VIOLENCE, TRUTH-TELLING, AND THE POLITICS OF ETHNICITY

Looking back, most Guineans agree that Sékou Touré’s government achieved some notable things, including the construction of a real sense of national identity. Most also agree that the government often exercised a high level of repressive violence over its citizens. What Guineans disagree about is the extent to which that violence was necessary and how much it was ethnically directed at one group more than others.

Many of the protagonists disagree on issues of political tactics and their ethical import. Touré supporters tend to argue that “to make an omelet, you have to break some eggs” and further emphasize the many ways the socialist government was placed under tremendous pressure by the forces of imperialism. Touré’s critics detail the extent and the horror of torture, extra-judicial killings, and such practices as the *diète noire*, and insist that most purported plots were little more than stage-managed pretexts to purge anyone Sékou Touré considered insufficiently loyal or a potential competitor. Moreover, they point out that the crimes of the Touré period have been neither admitted nor rectified.

<sup>5</sup> These included the “Ibrahima Diallo” plot of 1960, in which Fulbe imams were accused of conspiring with businessmen to overthrow the government; the “teachers’ plot” (1961), in which the Marxist-leaning teachers’ union was accused of subversion; the “Petit Touré” plot or “traders’ plot” (1965), in which a formerly expatriate Guinean, Mamadou Touré, tried to form a pro-business political party, allegedly with the backing of Côte d’Ivoire; the “Kaman-Fodéba” or Army plot (1969), in which military officers were accused of conspiring with senior officials to carry out a coup d’état; the “Tidjane Kéita” plot (1969), an alleged attempt to assassinate Sékou Touré; the Portuguese attack of 1970, said to have been carried out with the participation of an internal “fifth column”; the 1976 “Diallo Telli” plot, often referred to as the “Fulbe plot,” an alleged attempt by the former secretary-general of the Organization of African Unity to assassinate Sékou Touré; the market women’s uprising (1977), in which vendors at Conakry’s main marketplace protested the PDG’s “economic police”; and bomb attacks at the national assembly and Conakry airport in 1980 and 1981.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, survivors of socialist state repression increasingly organized themselves under the banner of “victims.” They argued that the promise of an opening that existed at Touré’s death in 1984 had evaporated. The Conté government had turned increasingly repressive and violent toward its citizens because, they said, the country had failed to face up to the violent legacy of the socialist period. Other Guineans defended the socialist period as a glorious legacy during which Guinea, alone among Francophone countries, vigorously pursued independence. In their view, systematic attacks by France and its European and African allies had forced the Guinean state over the course of the 1960s and 1970s to defend itself by rooting out not only foreign enemies but also their “fifth column” of Guinean traitors.

This debate became particularly heated during the preparations for Guinea’s fiftieth anniversary of independence in 2008 (Goerg 2009). In the context of a dying president,<sup>6</sup> a state left nearly penniless due to looting by its own politicians and civil servants, and utterly moribund institutions, there were virtually no celebrations of Guinea’s momentous act of courage and defiance. For those who remembered the socialist period as one of nationalist, pan-African pride and a coherent social and political project, the tragedy of the anniversary was that the military government, urged on by international financial institutions, had sold out the promise and independence of the revolution for the poisoned gift of international aid and structural adjustment. For those who remembered the socialist period less fondly, the larger problem was that those who took power in 1984 had been the satraps and lackeys of the socialist dictatorship. Though the upper echelon of the Touré administration had been eliminated, those who rose in the new system were pure products of the old one, and in the absence of any systematic attempt to address past abuses, they had reverted to the former practices of repression, torture, and killing of real and perceived opponents, albeit in a less organized fashion.

Alongside this disagreement, another strand has emerged: the politics of suffering and ethnicity. A narrative emphasizing that the Touré administration disproportionately targeted ethnic Fulbe has gained momentum over the past decade, blending invocations of socialist-era bias and targeted violence with more recent claims.<sup>7</sup> An implicit argument is often made that links historical

<sup>6</sup> Conté suffered from diabetes, high blood pressure, and possibly leukemia, and was seriously ill for most of the last five years of his presidency. While both Guineans and foreign observers waited for him to die “any day,” he continued to defy predictions of his imminent demise. However, it became increasingly clear that he was unfit to rule, and he reportedly experienced diabetic comas and hardly went out in public during the last two years of his life.

<sup>7</sup> Fulbe (frequently referred to in Guinea as Peuhl) are one of Guinea’s largest ethnic groups, making up at least one-third of the population. Fulbe left Guinea in large numbers over the course of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Counts of Guineans registered as foreign nationals in neighboring Senegal, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone, Bah, Keita, and Lootvoet (1989) tallied two million expatriated Guineans at the time of Touré’s death in office in 1984. At that

suffering to a rhetoric of just political desserts, in which the Fulbe bolster their claim that “it is now our turn” to rule by citing the appalling treatment they have received at the hands of rulers from each of the other three major ethnic blocs—Maninka, Sosso, and Foresters—which gave the country its first three presidents.<sup>8</sup> Some Fulbe elites have worked to translate state-sponsored repression into political capital, and this argument was often heard during the 2010 presidential elections. Many non-Fulbe Guineans retort that the Fulbe should “stop playing the victim.” The sense that mass suffering should be borne as a collective trial and not played for political gain is particularly strongly felt by Guineans who experienced the socialist period.

#### THE PARTY OF TRUTH

On 22 November 2008, in the newly repainted hall of Conakry’s Palais du Peuple (National Assembly building), the Parti Démocratique de Guinée (PDG) held a rally to commemorate the thirty-eighth anniversary of the Portuguese “invasion” of Conakry.<sup>9</sup> The event had the feel of a historical reenactment. The audience was a sea of white cloth, a symbol of Guinea’s former ruling party, which controlled all aspects of political, cultural, and economic life during Guinea’s First Republic.<sup>10</sup> Older men in white *boubous* sported antique PDG pins, while university-age party activists wore white T-shirts picturing an elephant—another PDG symbol—or portraits of Sékou Touré, the party’s founder. Some T-shirts displayed the PDG’s current slogan: “Parti de la Vérité”—the Party of Truth.

El Hadj Ismaël Ghussein, secretary-general of the PDG, took the microphone. “People of Guinea,” he began, in an unmistakable replica of Touré’s rhetorical style. “It has been thirty-eight years since your sons and daughters were savagely slaughtered.” After describing at length the international condemnation of Portugal following the 1970 attack on Conakry, he continued with a poke at Guinea’s newly created Ministry of National Reconciliation. “It is not through the falsification of our national history that national

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time Guinea’s internal population was approximately four million, and the count did not include the many Guineans living elsewhere in Africa, Europe, and North America. Though no numbers exist to support the claim, both of the authors of this article and most Guineans we know consider ethnic Fulbe to be a significant majority of the expatriate Guineans in Senegal, Sierra Leone, New York, and elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup> The way this claim is formulated is almost identical to what Weber called “the soteriology of the underprivileged” (1978).

<sup>9</sup> The Palais du Peuple is among the most prominent civic sites in Guinea, and hosts a variety of events from presidential speeches to hip hop concerts.

<sup>10</sup> The PDG has not held significant political power since Touré’s death in 1984. Before the National Assembly was dissolved in a military coup on 23 December 2008, the party held just three out of 114 seats.

reconciliation will move forward. There will be reconciliation on the basis of real truth [*vérité réelle*], or not at all!” The crowd roared, and some shouted, “Not at all!”

This rally took place shortly after Guinea had celebrated its fiftieth anniversary (*cinquantenaire*) of independence on 2 October 2008, and the Palais was still draped in celebratory banners.<sup>11</sup> The anniversary had provoked much soul-searching among Guineans about Touré’s legacy. *Le Lynx*, a satirical weekly newspaper, had led up to the *cinquantenaire* with a series of commentaries attacking Touré and the PDG. These were often published next to press releases from the Association of the Children of the Victims of Camp Boiro, a loosely organized group of former detainees and family members of people who disappeared in detention after being accused of plotting against Touré’s government. Many of the articles questioned two of the foundational tenets of Touré’s regime: that Touré bore primary responsibility for Guinea’s independence from France, and that throughout the First Republic disloyal Guineans collaborated with France and other imperialist powers to orchestrate plots to thwart Guinea’s revolution. The articles also emphasized the regime’s brutality and the lack of “justice” for those it had imprisoned, tortured, and killed (e.g., *Le Lynx* 2008b–2008l).

The victims association has called for, among other things, a formal apology by the Guinean state, the judicial rehabilitation of those unfairly accused of anti-government crimes, the restitution of property seized from the families of detainees, and the construction of a memorial at Camp Boiro. It has also requested a truth and reconciliation commission along the lines of South Africa’s, in which “the Truth which divides the two parties (Sékou Touré’s victims and his partisans) can bloom” (*Le Lynx* 2008a, parentheses original).<sup>12</sup>

The articles in *Le Lynx* and the activities of the victims association infuriated many former members of Touré’s government and other defenders of his legacy. In the spectrum of opinions on Touré’s revolution, association members sit at the opposite end from Touré supporters such as members of Conakry’s Club Ahmed Sékou Touré. Former victims and their families accuse Touré of fabricating the “plots” as pretexts for mass arrests during his rule, and argue that all of those arrested were innocent. The late president’s

<sup>11</sup> The 2008 commemoration event appeared to have been spurred, at least in part, by broader public discussions of the legacy of the socialist period that took place amid recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of independence. It could also be situated within a process of rehabilitation/defense of Sékou Touré that has been ongoing for at least the past decade, and which has in turn contributed to the polarization of the debates this article describes. See, for example, International Crisis Group 2008: 6.

<sup>12</sup> The statement was signed by “the children of Dr. Alfa Taran [Diallo],” a former health minister executed while in detention in 1971 (Diallo 2004: 239). Despite its self-portrayal as a “party” to the debate, the association itself is far from unified, and has undergone many iterations and internal divisions.



supporters maintain that the plots were real, that many if not all of those arrested were guilty of subversion, and that the PDG's harsh methods were justified in the face of an imperialist onslaught that sought to eradicate the revolution. Both sides claim to be seeking *la vérité*, a “scientific” and therefore unassailable telling of Guinea's tortured past. Often this truth is proclaimed on behalf of a vaguely defined “youth,” portrayed as ignorant of or deliberately misled regarding their own history.<sup>13</sup> For victims and relatives of the disappeared, former PDG officials still in power have worked to obscure the true nature of Touré's regime in order to hide their complicity in its many abuses. In the view of Touré's defenders, however, powerful figures that benefited from President Lansana Conté's economic liberalization have deliberately blackened Touré's record so as to justify their influence. Both versions rely on the concept of a cabal able to pull strings within an opaque government based largely on cronyism.

In this battle of perceptions between two poles of the Guinean elite, a frequent touchstone is the 1970 Portuguese attack, which symbolizes for some the Guinean people's ability to band together under the moral leadership of a revolutionary leader, and for others the beginning of the worst period of the PDG's bloody repression.

#### L'AGRESSION PORTUGAISE

In the early hours of 22 November 1970, Guineans were roused by the state-run *Voice of the Revolution* radio, which proclaimed that Conakry had come under Portuguese attack—*une agression portugaise*. Conakry residents formed neighborhood patrols and roadblocks to root out the imperialist sympathizers who Touré announced were hiding among them.<sup>14</sup> The party distributed guns to civilian patrols, and those without firearms were told to defend the country with machetes, wooden *pilons* (large pestles used by women to pulverize cooking ingredients), and other household tools. The attack lasted several hours, during which time it was unclear to Conakry residents what was happening or who controlled the city. By daybreak, most of the troops under Portuguese command had withdrawn to their boats and sped away. However, Guineans remained armed and mobilized for months, since Touré repeatedly warned that further attacks by the Portuguese and other imperialist forces were imminent.

<sup>13</sup> The “youth” were the ostensible target of speeches proclaiming the necessity of uncovering “the truth” at conferences organized in Conakry to commemorate the 28 September 1958 vote for independence (held on 28 September 2008) and the 22 November 1970 Portuguese Aggression (held on 29 November 2008), and also in articles such as Bâ Mamadou, “Sékou Touré, héros et tyran,” which included a section titled “Who Is Sékou Touré? The Youth Must Know the Truth” (*Le Lynx* 2008d).

<sup>14</sup> See e.g., Touré, “Premier Appel à la Nation,” and “Deuxième Appel à la Nation,” repr. in PDG 1971a: 9–13.



The *milice populaire*, a civilian, PDG-organized militia, spearheaded attempts to capture “mercenaries” who were said to have either accompanied the Portuguese attackers or plotted with them to overthrow the government from within.<sup>15</sup> International news reports estimated that several thousand people were arrested in such sweeps nationwide (e.g., *Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens* 1971a).<sup>16</sup> The single-party National Assembly transformed itself into the Supreme Revolutionary Tribunal, and in January 1971 sentenced dozens of detainees—including Guinean soldiers, foreign nationals, businessmen, and members of the clergy—to death or forced labor. Many people in the latter category died in detention, as presumably did many detainees who were not prominent enough to be cited in the Tribunal’s decision. On 25 January 1971, four accused collaborators were publicly hanged from a bridge in Conakry before massive audiences, in what was described as a “macabre carnival” (*Jeune Afrique* 1971). They were Finance Minister Ousmane Baldet, a minister of state and former nationalist rival of Touré’s named Ibrahima Barry (known as “Barry III”), senior official Magassouba Moriba, and Police Commissioner Kéita Kara Soufiana. Similar public executions were carried out in every district of the country (*Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens* 1971b). A second sweep of arrests began in April 1971 that targeted large segments of the cabinet and military hierarchy who were accused of being part of a vast “fifth column” of counter-revolutionaries (PDG 1971b). As the search for internal enemies accelerated, Touré repeatedly urged his countrymen to consider everyone a potential suspect (e.g., PDG 1971a: 12–13).

The *agression portugaise* marked a turning point in Touré’s regime. There had been previous purges in response to alleged anti-government plots, but the arrests of 1970–1971 surpassed these both in their scope and the levels of popular fervor they elicited. Recorded “confessions” of supposed fifth columnists were broadcast on the radio, printed in the national newspaper (*Horoya*), and collected in two hefty published volumes, known as the *livres blancs*, which also included chilling mug-shot photos of the accused (PDG 1971a; 1971b). Confessions generally included denunciations of new traitors and elaborate details of how they received support from Western (particularly U.S., French, Portuguese, and West German) intelligence forces. With the physical evidence it left behind—a dozen Bissau-Guinean combatants captured and foreign-made weapons seized—and the condemnation of Portugal at the United Nations, the *agression* was positioned as proof of the “permanent plot” that Touré had been warning about for years.

Memoirs written by survivors of the First Republic’s detention system form an entire genre of Guinea-focused non-fiction, which some Guineans

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with former *milice* members, Conakry, Nov. 2008–Jan. 2009.

<sup>16</sup> The total number of people arrested in connection with *l’agression portugaise* is unclear, and there is no official statistic. Diallo estimated five thousand (2004: 7).

refer to as “the literature of suffering” (e.g., Amadou Diallo 1983; Alpha-Abdoulaye Diallo 2004 [1985]; Bâ 1986; Touré 1987; Gomez 2007). In these accounts, former detainees who recorded confessions of subversive activities have described being tortured until they agreed to read pre-written depositions aloud. Those who had been government ministers and close associates of Touré remember their interrogators—and occasionally the president himself via personal letters delivered to the prison—urging them to admit the “truth” about their anti-government activities. Jean-Paul Alata, a Frenchman who had taken Guinean citizenship and become a senior Touré advisor, was imprisoned in the aftermath of the attack. He later recalled a guard urging, “You see, I’m trying not to hurt you too much. Tell us the truth.” When Alata protested that he had no role in the attack, his tormentor replied, “But it’s not *that* truth there that I need. I need the Minister’s Truth!” (Alata 1976: 166).

This *vérité du ministre* has come to embody, for ex-detainees and their relatives, the cynical espousal of the “truth” by a brutal dictatorship and its proponents. An early memoir published by a Guinean ex-detainee took the mocking insistence on the so-called “Minister’s Truth” as its title (Alpha-Abdoulaye Diallo 2004 [1985]). The idea of a false façade of “truth,” elaborately constructed by powerful PDG figures to ensnare potential rivals, is a driving force behind many victims’ attempts to establish the falseness of the *livres blancs* that many PDG supporters continue to hold up as historically accurate documents.<sup>17</sup>

#### WHERE DOES THE TRUTH RESIDE?

The military junta that took power following Sékou Touré’s death in 1984 had as its spokesman Captain Facinet Touré (no relation), who had himself spent two years in prison in Camp Boiro. Convinced that his own innocence demonstrated that “until proof of the contrary ... there were never plots inside Guinea,”<sup>18</sup> the ambitious young officer embarked on an investigation into the backgrounds of all the detainees whose confessions were published, hoping to prove their innocence once and for all.<sup>19</sup> He formed a commission that set out to interview people, collect documents, and search for mass graves. His efforts were organized in the heady days that immediately followed Sékou Touré’s death, during which the new military government opened up Camp Boiro, freed its remaining prisoners, and encouraged state radio to broadcast lengthy interviews with former prisoners who introduced ordinary Guineans to the horrors of the former regime’s detention system. By Facinet

<sup>17</sup> In his November 2008 address at the Palais du Peuple, El Hadj Ghoussein declared that the *livres blancs* contained “the truth.”

<sup>18</sup> Remarks by Col. (Retd.) Facinet Touré, Centre Culturel Franco-Guinéen, 11 Feb. 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Col. Touré says, “I wanted to write this book to prove that the *livres blancs* did not hold up” (interview, Conakry, 19 Nov. 2008).

Touré's account, however, his military comrade President Conté put a stop to his investigation before it was completed, for reasons that remain unclear. The documents that his commission collected have not been made accessible to the public, and their current whereabouts are unconfirmed.<sup>20</sup> Facinet Touré describes the junta's subsequent decision to execute the members of Touré's inner circle as "a loss," since "these people were never made to explain themselves" in public.<sup>21</sup> Those deemed most responsible for mass crimes during the First Republic included Sékou Touré's half-brother Ismaël, who headed the feared Commission of Investigation into the *agression portugaise*; and his nephew Siaka, the director of Camp Boiro. Other high-ranking officials accused of extreme sadism and injustice include ministers Kéra Karim, Lansana Diané, and Sékou Chérif (Sékou Touré's brother-in-law), all of whom participated in the commissions of inquiry at Camp Boiro, and were executed without trial after the failed "Coup Diarra" of 1985.

Facinet Touré's comments echo those of many Guineans, who see the gradual disappearance of written and oral sources on the First Republic as an intended consequence of delays in organizing independent investigations. As fewer and fewer central actors remain in Conakry, many Guineans are convinced that the keys to uncovering the truth about the "fifth column" of internal counterrevolutionaries lie in inaccessible, classified foreign archives, or were in Guinean archives that have now been destroyed or pilfered.<sup>22</sup> They believe that foreign documents might list those who collaborated with foreign intelligence services, and, by extension, exonerate those not so listed. Conversely, it is hoped that internal documents of the PDG, which are inaccessible and may no longer exist, could show which arrests were responding to genuine proof of collaboration and which were the product of score-settling within Touré's inner circle. As a former economics professor and associate of Sékou Touré put it, "My wish is that one day, the facts of history can be sufficiently clear and shared... I often tell people that once we can access the complete archives of the PIDE [the Portuguese colonial intelligence services], of the French secret services, of the KGB, and even the CIA, then maybe there are facts about Guinea's history that will be able to be clarified."<sup>23</sup>

Many who hold this view attribute an almost mythical significance to the documents collected by Facinet Touré's commission and the archives of Camp

<sup>20</sup> Some have claimed that the documents collected by Touré and others are in the possession of specific individuals whom they accuse of refusing to release them (see e.g., Kéïta 2002: 22).

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Col. Facinet Touré, Conakry, 19 Nov. 2008. Some might make similar allegations regarding Touré himself, who has participated in each of Guinea's successive governments either as a military officer or senior government official.

<sup>22</sup> Camara contends that the PDG's archive of documents was destroyed on the orders of the military junta that took power upon Sékou Touré's death (2007: 269).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Bailo Teliwel Diallo, Conakry, 22 Nov. 2008.

Boiro, which they believe have been sequestered, to be unveiled at some future date. At a 2008 conference on the *agression portugaise* organized by the Club Ahmed Sékou Touré, opposition politician Jean Marie Doré (who went on to serve as prime minister in 2010) announced, to applause, that he would make available documents from his personal collection that would allow Guinea “to be governed without stains, in the clear light of the sun.”<sup>24</sup> Doré had earlier confided to one of the authors that, out of concern for “national unity,” he was withholding documentation of various people’s involvement in anti-government plots.<sup>25</sup> This consisted, he said, of letters written by ordinary Guinean citizens in the 1970s denouncing their acquaintances and neighbors. It is hard to imagine how one would go about vetting such “evidence” today, and what purpose it would serve.

In conversations about the First Republic one frequently encounters the idea that documentation may be both cleansing and deeply destabilizing. A prominent Guinean historian, himself a former detainee, has described the weight of Guinea’s history as a “wound,” an “abscess” that the search for historical truth must work to lance.<sup>26</sup> Descendants of the disappeared hope that a truth and reconciliation process will clear the names of former detainees and thereby reveal the “truth” about their innocence and the PDG regime’s wanton brutality. One former detainee, hearing about a foreigner’s attempt to research the *agression portugaise*, expressed hope that the Portuguese military archives would reveal concrete evidence of coordination between Touré and Portuguese authorities; this, he believed, might “prove” that Touré knew about the impending Portuguese attack and allowed it to occur so as to gain a pretext for cracking down on his rivals.<sup>27</sup>

For Touré’s defenders, the “truth” is already available in the French and Portuguese accounts of attempts to destabilize Touré’s government (esp. Calvão 1976; Messmer 1998; Faligot and Krop 1985; Verschave 1998).<sup>28</sup> Suggestions by some that Touré himself masterminded the *agression portugaise* indicate, they say, their adversaries’ willingness to disregard historical proof that “the attack

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Marie Doré, remarks at “L’Agression du 22 novembre 1970: Une réalité historique. Préparatifs, execution, et solidarité internationale envers le peuple de Guinée,” Conakry, 29 Nov. 2008. We are grateful to Allen Nyoka, who attended and recorded this conference.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Jean-Marie Doré, Conakry, 20 Nov. 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Djibril Tamsir Niane, Preface (in Gomez 2007: 9).

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Mamadou (“Petit”) Barry, conducted with Madani Dia, Conakry, 27 Oct. 2008. On the theory that Touré masterminded the Portuguese attack, see, for example, Lamine 2008. Alyou Barry, a columnist for *Le Lynx*, maintains, “The most serious plot was the *agression*—and the *agression* was organized by Sékou Touré” (Barry interview, Conakry, 29 Jan. 2009). Such theories persist in the absence of available documentation pointing to direct contact between Touré and the Portuguese military.

<sup>28</sup> Many of these sources are cited, for example, in the work of Sidiki Kobélé Kéïta (e.g., 2002), which is devoted to defending the veracity of the various PDG alleged “plots” during the First Republic.

mounted against Guinea by Portugal and Guineans was not virtual.”<sup>29</sup> The difference between a foreign, armed attack and a vast internal conspiracy is elided in these discussions, and they ignore Portuguese officers’ recollections that the operation failed, in part, due to a lack of internal support (e.g., Calvão 1976: 83–85).

Touré’s defenders often use the phrase *l’histoire est têtue*—history is stubborn—to suggest that their opponents have thrived politically only by deliberately distorting the historical record, and that, in the end, such attempts are bound to fail. These statements often carry a sense of veiled threat. In July 2008, Denis Galéma Guilavogui, a former member of the PDG’s highest coordinating body, the Political Bureau,<sup>30</sup> wrote a much-dissected essay in response to the critical articles in *Le Lynx*, in which he warned, “History always catches up. No matter how much time it may take. This is what is happening to us now. The time has come to say everything, the whole truth, not that which is convenient to certain people, but that which truly happened.”<sup>31</sup>

In conversations with Touré supporters, there is often a suggestion that even though self-described victims claim to want the truth, they are not prepared to accept the implications of the denunciations made by those who were made to “confess.” While many denunciations were no doubt prepared by the Commission of Investigation, some detainees may well have used them to settle scores. The apparent cohesion within the community of victims is in reality very weak. Many Guineans ruefully acknowledge that many victims were also killers—personally or indirectly—and many killers were victimized. In conversation, Doré insinuated that a deep investigation would reveal a blurring between the roles of victim and perpetrator, and that these contradictions were already part of Guinean rumor and lore: “Many of those who pretend to have been victims, or that their parents were victims, of Camp Boiro... you don’t know who is a victim and who is not. There are no secrets in Guinea, if you know how to stretch your ears.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Sidiki Kobélé Kéïta, opening remarks at “L’Agression du 22 novembre 1970: Une réalité historique. Préparatifs, execution, et solidarité internationale envers le peuple de Guinée,” Conakry, 29 Nov. 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Guilavogui was also Secretary General of the University Gamal Abdel Nasser in Conakry and Minister of Education in the Conté administration.

<sup>31</sup> Denis Galéma Guilavogui, “Seule la Vérité Peut Nous Réconcilier,” *GuinéeActu.com*, 1 July 2008. The commentary was reprinted in *Le Lynx* on 7 July, along with two responses.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Jean-Marie Doré, Conakry, 20 Nov. 2008. Sidiki Kobélé Kéïta has frequently made similar points. Ironically, Doré himself was involved in exiled opposition movements before publicly reconciling with then-President Touré in the 1970s, as he acknowledged in this interview. Some Guineans accuse Doré of infiltrating the exile movement as a double agent on behalf of the Touré regime. In the 2008 interview, Doré denied this and portrayed his decision to join dissident groups as motivated by dissatisfaction with the PDG. Still, after Doré spoke at a 2008 conference organized by the Club Ahmed Sékou Touré in Conakry, a participant who identified himself as a former intelligence director congratulated him as someone who “worked intimately with our services”; audience members applauded, and Doré accepted the congratulations (Doré remarks at “L’Agression du 22 novembre 1970: Une réalité historique. Préparatifs, execution, et solidarité internationale envers le peuple de Guinée,” Conakry, 29 Nov. 2008).

Similarly, the acting director of the National Archives in 2008 justified denying people meaningful access to whatever government records have survived from the late 1960s through 1984. He argued, “We cannot allow the public to go leafing through these documents. Can you imagine the kinds of social disruption this would cause? For the sake of peace in Guinea, those documents must not be consulted.”<sup>33</sup> Such a discourse grants authorities leave to censor information on the grounds that they know what is best for the general public. We should read such moves skeptically, since they may well be self-serving. At the same time, many Guineans genuinely hesitate to give further ammunition to those claiming the victim’s position.

Domestic and international attempts to draw wider attention to the cause of Guinea’s disappeared have been complicated by the fact that many of those who died in Touré’s prisons were not overt opponents of the government.<sup>34</sup> Many senior-level bureaucrats participated in (or at least were aware of) repressive policies before they themselves succumbed to them. Other, lower-profile detainees were caught up in the state’s extra-wide net without any political cause, such as the peasants accused of passing messages to the Portuguese simply because their fields were near the Guinea-Bissau border. Most of those who perished do not easily fit the mold of “prisoners of conscience.”

#### TRUTH AND JUSTICE

Was there really a fifth column? Were all detainees truly innocent? The back-and-forth about what “really” happened during the *agression portugaise* indexes Touré’s own rhetorical use of “*la vérité*.” A master orator, Touré painted his sweeping revolution as a search for an authentic truth too long obscured by colonialist manipulations. In this vision, Touré himself was the embodiment of truth, as a former civil servant recalled: “What the president said was the truth—we didn’t seek to verify it. There was no reasoning, no critical mindset, or else it was internalized.”<sup>35</sup> A former journalist for *The Voice of the Revolution* radio, who was also jailed in connection with the Portuguese attack, remembers: “It was a socialist-type regime with a single party, a single thought. So we were there to say, there was only one truth, it was the truth of the Party and of the state. And especially when Sékou Touré became the ‘supreme leader of the revolution,’ he had become the supreme reference.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with M. Coulibaly, Acting Director of Guinean National Archives, Conakry, 26 Jan. 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Key international actors have included Amnesty International, which focused a series of reports on detentions and disappearances under Sékou Touré (e.g., Amnesty International 1982). Members of the victims’ association frequently reference Amnesty’s work as proof that outside observers who are perceived to be objective share their views of the socialist regime.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Tolo Béavogui, a former Education Ministry official during the First Republic (and later, an ambassador under Conté), Conakry, 26 Mar. 2009.

That was our work.”<sup>36</sup> In the aftermath of the 1970 attack on Conakry, Touré put forward his version of events—that forces of European imperialism had tried to re-colonize Guinea—as a revelation recognized and embraced by like-minded nations: “The revolution, just like the truth she incarnates, is never isolated” (PDG 1971a: 248).

Guineans who grew up during the revolution often express nostalgia for this type of Manichaean moral clarity. Touré’s “permanent plot” was based on the idea that the West’s attempts to destabilize Guinea would last as long as the Guinean people stood for “progress, democracy, liberty, and independence” (Touré 1969: 24). Guinea’s valiant embodiment of Africa’s universal aspirations for dignity and self-sufficiency was intertwined with paranoia; constant surveillance and “vigilance” were needed to guard against infiltration by Guinea’s enemies (McGovern 2002). However, believing that you were on the right side of the divide was undoubtedly an empowering feeling. A former economics professor who in 1970 was a member of the university students’ *milice* recalls a sense of glee in the massive mobilization following the 22 November attack: “For several days, there was a hunt for mercenaries.... And so all night—everyone had been given something to shoot with—all night, everywhere, everyone was shooting ‘boom-boom-boom-boom-boom’ in the air, supposedly in order to show the people in the boats that if they tried to come closer, we were there.” He continued, “I was afraid, I’ll admit. ... But also, it was exalting. We had the feeling of participating in something important, of great value—that we were truly defending the revolution.”<sup>37</sup>

A former performing artist echoed this sense of wonder: “I have never seen a popular mobilization that was so powerful—women, men, children, learning to shoot a gun, ready to die, facing the attackers.”<sup>38</sup> This self-assuredness, grounded in a sense of being on the right side of history, was particularly missed in the waning years of President Conté’s non-ideological administration, when patronage networks and self-interest obscured any sense of collective purpose. The Supreme Revolutionary Tribunal of 1971 was a farce—it never called witnesses or even heard from the accused in person, and it adopted every recommendation of the Party’s Commission of Investigation—but at least it pretended to embody the will of the Guinean people.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Mamadou (“Petit”) Barry, interview in *L’Independent* newspaper, 11 Dec. 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Bailo Teliwel Diallo, Conakry, 22 Nov. 2008. *Défendre la révolution* (Defending the Revolution) was the title of one of Sékou Touré’s books, published in 1969.

<sup>38</sup> Audience member comment, “L’Agression du 22 novembre 1970: Une réalité historique. Préparatifs, execution, et solidarité internationale envers le peuple de Guinée,” Conakry, 29 Nov. 2008.

<sup>39</sup> See PDG 1971a: 401–46 for the report of the Commission of Investigation, and pages 601–13 for the decision of the Supreme Revolutionary Tribunal. The Guinean historian Lansiné Kaba has commented on the similarity between the justifications for the 1971 Supreme Revolutionary Tribunal in Guinea and the French revolutionary “Terror” regime (1977).



Some of the arguments over Touré’s handling of the *agresion portugaise* boil down to competing definitions of justice, with one side defending the aptness of popular justice and others espousing the importance of upholding human rights and due process. While the focus of the victims association is on the First Republic, it officially espouses bringing justice to all victims of government repression, a line that seems designed to please international human rights advocates who worry that too much emphasis on the past may draw attention from the need to prosecute perpetrators of more recent abuses. The head of the association, Fodé Marega, has linked the state’s refusal to accept responsibility for past crimes to Guinea’s persistent culture of impunity. He has notably cited human rights abuses by the Guinean military in 1985, 2007, and 2008 to argue that a truth and reconciliation conference is necessary because “a nation that does not know its history has a tendency to repeat the errors of the past.”<sup>40</sup> *Lynx* columnist Alyou Barry has drawn a more direct line connecting members of the establishments under Touré and Conté: “We can’t remake history, but if we know what happened, people can arm themselves, harden themselves, in order to defend themselves a bit more. This is what allows today for people in the *ancien régime*, who were in Conté’s regime, to play a role.... We haven’t said the truth about this past, and that is why the Army continues to play the role that it plays. The Army was Touré’s armed wing, which he used to carry out all those crimes. And it is the Army that has stayed in power from 1984 until Conté’s death.”<sup>41</sup>

Not surprisingly, those who defend Touré’s legacy argue that the system of the time was appropriate and capable of dispensing justice; those who argue for due process, they say, are imposing foreign and anachronistic ideals. According to Sidiki Kobélé Kéïta, a Guinean writer who continues to defend Touré’s conception of the “permanent plot”: “Every government has its judicial system—the problem in Guinea is external interference. You can’t judge a system by standards imposed from outside.”<sup>42</sup> A former PDG member echoed the official justification for the Supreme Revolutionary Tribunal: “[Touré] didn’t want a judicial judgment—he addressed the people: what should we do with [those accused of collaborating with the Portuguese]? It’s the people who expressed themselves. ... It was the people’s right—the entire people was under threat.”<sup>43</sup>

Many Guineans to this day retain a fondness for populist justice, as was recently displayed by the enthusiastic reactions to then-junta leader President Moussa Dadis Camara’s personal interrogations of suspected drug traffickers on national television in 2009. In an echo of the recorded confessions following

<sup>40</sup> Remarks at the Centre Culturel Franco-Guinéen, Conakry, 11 Feb. 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, Conakry, 29 Jan. 2009. It is debatable whether the Army really was Touré’s “armed wing”; Barry’s point elides Touré’s attempts to weaken Guinea’s armed forces in favor of the civilian militias, apparently out of fear of a coup d’état.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, Conakry, 27 Sept. 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Ibrahima Chérif Dioubaté, Conakry, 9 Jan. 2009.

the *agression portugaise*, the accused were made to recount, in elaborate detail and without being formally charged with a crime, their participation in drug trafficking networks, and were encouraged to publicly denounce their accomplices (e.g., Agence de Presse Panafricaine News 2009; Aminata.com 2009).

In the last government appointed by Conté before his death in December 2008, the ailing president created a Ministry of National Reconciliation, and appointed a member of the opposition, Amadou Oury Bah, as its head. Bah, an ethnic Fulbe, was sympathetic to the victims association's aims, and provoked a kerfuffle when he attended one of its commemorative gatherings to mark the anniversary of a mass execution of detainees on 18 October 1971. When Bah read a statement in which he appeared to apologize on behalf of the Guinean state, other members of the government rushed to specify that he was speaking solely for himself.<sup>44</sup>

The victims association scored a more certain public victory in March 2009 when its leaders met with then-President Dadis Camara at his offices on Conakry's largest military base. The meeting was broadcast on national television. Looking solemn, Camara said that his own father spent four months in Camp Boiro. "We cannot pretend to construct this nation without asking forgiveness from the widows, victims, widowers, and children," he said. "No one has the power to render a judgment—such a judgment has no value, this is simply a recognition, a request for forgiveness that I address to the Guinean people, as only God will render judgment." One association member phoned one of this article's authors after the event to express his disappointment that an association spokesman had enthusiastically accepted Camara's apology instead of pressing him for a "judicial rehabilitation" of all former detainees.

#### A PLEA FOR AMBIGUITY

It would be naive to suggest that Guineans downgrade the importance of establishing absolute historical truth in favor of constructing a shared vision for the future. The subject of past abuses has pointed political significance for some, and still-raw emotional significance for others, including those family members who still do not know the final resting place of their disappeared relatives. Few public figures have argued, as the history professor Souleymane Baldé (2008) has done in response to Guilavogui's essay, for an understanding of history as,

inseparable from one's "understanding," from interpretation through explanation. [Guilavogui] must understand that to require, as he wishes, "a reading of our shared history that is at the same time precise and disengaged" is simply to place the bar so high that neither he, nor any other Guinean can reach it.... This is why, at this stage of their history, and in order to approach truth and reconciliation, Guineans would be well

<sup>44</sup> Interviews with Amadou Oury Bah and individuals who attended the association of victims event at Conakry, Nov. 2008. See also *Le Lynx* 2008k, an interview with Bah.

advised to place more of an emphasis on the second term, in order to formulate a reconciliatory truth, a truth that must be sought in the interstices of external and internal factors of which this history is woven.

Still, there is a strong current of measured interpretation of the violence accompanying the Touré years. Many Guineans reject the maximalist claims that suggest either that all plots were fabricated to justify a totalitarian state’s sadistic whims or that all the plots were real and that everyone who died in Camp Boiro and the many other sites of torture and extra-judicial killings in Touré-era Guinea were guilty by definition. Over time, a third narrative of “settling of scores” (*règlements de comptes*) has gained traction. This version offers Guineans the ability to acknowledge the ambiguities of Cold War politics in Africa. Their country, like others that wished to steer an independent course in the 1960s and 1970s, had indeed been subject to meddling. This interference resulted in part from the Touré government’s foreign and domestic policies, and the example they set for other non-aligned states. While acknowledging this reality, those who espouse the “settling of scores” narrative insist that while self-defense was justified, the Touré government committed serious abuses against innocent citizens, and often due to personal motivations and political calculations that reached beyond the exigencies of political necessity.

In a sense, this is a sensible compromise position between the two extreme ones, and thus it is neither surprising nor innovative. The more interesting aspect of the narrative may be its emphasis on “scores” and their “settling.” This goes to the heart of the issue noted above, namely that the most exaggerated portrayals of the Touré years give a fundamentally distorted view of the role played by the majority of Guineans in the unfolding of a twenty-six-year period of postcolonial governance. The maximal versions of each narrative absolve all Guineans of responsibility for the period’s violence. Either Sékou Touré was a kind of monomaniacal and self-serving demon who bears all responsibility for wrongly persecuting innocent Guineans, or we must blame the imperialist and neo-colonial powers and their local collaborators (most of whom are now dead). Either way, most of those Guineans who survived the period until today are free of any blame.<sup>45</sup>

The settling of scores narrative underscores a dynamic that some Guineans today describe when they say, “We are experts at creating tyrants.” This acknowledgment of mitigated forms of agency, complicity, and thus responsibility became prevalent in the late Conté years (2000–2008) as Guineans sought to explain to themselves how their country sank so low. One common version that persisted until the death of Conté suggested that he was a rather simple man, not very interested in power, though overly influenced by money. As this version would have it, he was manipulated by those around

<sup>45</sup> A corollary of these maximal positions is that, on each side, the purveyors often imply that their rhetorical adversaries may be the only ones left who were responsible for these abuses.

him, who benefited from their degree of closeness to him.<sup>46</sup> Their self-serving ambitions led Conté to make decisions at the highest level of the state that systematically sabotaged the interests of the nation, a pattern that accelerated as his health deteriorated over the last three to four years of his rule. So great was the popular disgust with Conté's entourage that when Captain Moussa Dadis Camara, a previously unknown junior officer, first took power upon Conté's death, Guineans preferred him to anyone perceived to have been associated with the prior government, including the constitutionally mandated interim leader, the president of the National Assembly.

The disastrous *fin de règne* pillage of the national patrimony during the Conté years led some Guineans to begin talking in new ways: about the complicity of low- and mid-level bureaucrats in the edifice of the Touré-era state, about how even peasants availed themselves of possibilities of doing away with those who had opposed them in land disputes or betrayed them in business or love, and about local officials who lorded their power over fellow citizens. From an early period, people acknowledged betrayals small and large, often describing children turning in their parents to the authorities, or vice versa, or spouses sending their mates to an unknown fate.<sup>47</sup>

#### ELECTIONS, ETHNICITY, AND THE POLITICS OF TRUTH

The issue of truth-telling and the legacy of past administrations has become even more pointed since the period of the research that grounds this article (2008–2009). In September 2009, the Dadis Camara junta quashed a pro-democracy demonstration with a vicious premeditated massacre and series of public gang rapes in the country's main football stadium. During these massacres and rapes, as well as on several other occasions, the junta signaled that it considered ethnic Fulbe to be their particular enemies.<sup>48</sup> This hearkened back to the Touré-era tactics of the 1970s.

The junta later allowed a U.N. Commission of Inquiry to investigate the alleged crimes against humanity. The report of the previous U.N. Commission of Inquiry, dispatched to investigate the 1970 Portuguese attack, was imbued with the Cold War politics of the time.<sup>49</sup> But many Guineans and outside observers viewed the 2009 commission's findings—that the Guinean government

<sup>46</sup> This exonerating rhetoric is also used by those sympathetic to Touré's political project, who often blame the worst excesses of the Touré years on his half-brothers Ismael and Siaka. A similar language of exonerating was also sometimes applied to Moussa Dadis Camara's disastrous 2008–2009 rule.

<sup>47</sup> One of us heard such accounts from the late 1980s in Guinea's forest region.

<sup>48</sup> The march had culminated in the stadium. It protested Dadis's increasingly clear intention to run for president, thus breaking his promise to prepare the way for civilian elections and not to run for office. On premeditation and ethnic selectivity, see Human Rights Watch 2009.

<sup>49</sup> For example, one U.S. commentator opined that the 1970 U.N. commission was untrustworthy since its membership indicated a pro-Soviet, and therefore anti-Portuguese/NATO bias (Kilpatrick 1970).

was potentially responsible for crimes against humanity—as neutral. The Commission’s findings had a dramatic, if indirect, impact on the course of Guinean politics. When he realized that he was being set up to take the blame for the massacre, Aboubacar “Toumba” Diakité, Dadis Camara’s Aide de Camp, ambushed his boss and shot him in the head, almost killing him. Dadis was medically evacuated to Morocco in early December 2009, and the junta effectively split. Those who wanted to cling to power lost the advantage and were forced to cede control to a group headed by Dadis’s number two in the junta, Sékouba Konaté, who decided to relinquish power to civilians.<sup>50</sup>

The first half of 2010 saw a semi-civilian government put in place headed by longstanding opposition figure Jean Marie Doré (quoted above), whose main task was to organize credible presidential elections. Doré and Konaté were aided and counterbalanced by the Transitional National Council, an appointed quasi-legislative body with representatives from a range of social classes, professions, and elements of civil society. Mobilized by the recent tragedies, Guineans worked hard and organized first-round presidential elections in June 2010 that were widely judged to have been flawed but credible. The two candidates who made the second round, former Prime Minister Cellou Dalein Diallo and historic opposition figure Alpha Condé, then entered into a period of heated and often acrimonious competition.

During the campaign for the second round, the issues of patterns of violence, culpability, and history returned to the fore. Diallo, from the Fulbe ethnic group, and Condé, from the Maninka, represented the two biggest ethnic groups in the country, and their constituents responded to the slogans “It’s our [ethnic Fulbe’s] turn,” from Diallo’s camp, and “Anyone but a Fulbe,” from Condé’s. There were several interethnic clashes, and by the time of the much-delayed second round elections in late October the situation was deeply polarized. Fulbe talked of “another genocide” or of “all the Fulbe leaving Guinea” (an implied threat to the national economy) if Condé were elected.

Condé was declared the winner, though Diallo initially contested the result. By the end of the election cycle several towns in each candidate’s home region had chased out members of the other group, with anti-Fulbe mobilization being particularly coordinated in the northeast, a Condé stronghold. At the time of his inauguration, Condé promised an inclusive government and proposed a truth, reconciliation, and justice commission. One might argue that he was in a unique position to lead such an effort: a member of Touré’s Maninka ethnic group, he had nonetheless been targeted by both the Touré and Conté regimes, and sentenced in absentia for supposed complicity in the Portuguese attack (PDG 1971a: 605). However, over two years into his

<sup>50</sup> On this period, see, for example, International Crisis Group 2009a and 2009b; and Arieff 2010.

administration no such commission has been organized, and Condé has begun talking of consultations with elders rather than a public forum.

This leaves the victims' groups, some people in civil society, and international human rights organizations calling for a commission. In this context, much of the discussion is grounded in two implicit, opposed views of truth-telling: from an African nationalist viewpoint it is an import of the "white" imagination and thus inappropriate in African settings; for others it is authentically African (as with South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission) and African-owned. These positions are imbued with Guinea's particularities, but at the same time they are characteristic of many contemporary debates surrounding transitional justice in Africa (Wilson 2001; Shaw 2005; Allen 2006; Englund 2006; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Clarke 2009). Significantly, although those espousing both the pro-commission and the Afro-skeptical positions have cited international proponents and precedents to support their positions, their public statements have tended to frame the issue in strictly national terms. In this regard, it seems those who have defended the legacy of the socialist period have had more success in portraying their position as authentically Guinean, especially since their defiant defense of the Touré legacy echoes Guinea's own defiance over fifty years ago.

Nearly all Guineans accept that Charles de Gaulle's 1958 offer of a Franco-African partnership was based on the hypocritical premise that the exploitative system of colonization could be salutary for the colonized.<sup>51</sup> Opponents of transitional justice argue (at least by implication) that the twenty-first-century cure-all of truth-telling and human rights might be equally hypocritical, parts of a complex of Euro-American exigencies whose net effect has been to undermine African sovereignty and open African nations to foreign capitalist penetration. In Guinea, as elsewhere in Africa, the challenge for those who promote a human rights agenda is to dissociate their advocacy from the larger "package" of reforms that includes structural adjustment, opening of national markets, and international justice regimes that abrogate the sovereignty of weaker nations. Efforts to render the agenda legitimate have been further complicated by diaspora elites having adopted a human rights-focused discourse, since many Guineans at home perceive them to be avoiding the tough trade-offs of living in a post-authoritarian state.

All of this is a problem for proponents of a truth-telling and/or transitional justice process inasmuch as it allows their opponents to characterize such a process as a foreign import. The title of a 2011 Human Rights Watch report — "We Have Lived in Darkness": A Human Rights Agenda for Guinea's New

<sup>51</sup> Among the Afro-skeptics, many of whom were former officials in the Touré government, the works of François-Xavier Verschave (1998; 2000) on *Françafrique*, the network of reciprocal corruption and neocolonial political interference that linked France to its former colonies, were widely read and discussed.

Government,”—says much about this cultural-political chasm. The quote is from a Guinean arguing for the necessity of ending impunity for rights violations, including those committed during the First Republic. Many of those who lived through the Touré years are sure to respond that Guineans were *not* living in darkness, despite the violence and difficulties of that period, and that, to the contrary, they were defending a fragile independence against predatory Western interests. Many also say that this sense of just cause has since been lost. Fulbe elites have grasped the discourse of international human rights as one useful tool in a complex political environment, and they understand the argument that accountability for past abuses is a necessary component of peace and prosperity. Yet this tactic may play into their political opponents’ hands since it has served, intentionally or not, to further ethnicize the stakes of politics, and has allowed non-Fulbe to portray the Fulbe as tools of a diaspora disconnected from Guinea’s independent traditions.

In this context, it is important to recognize that the nationalist reflexes of the Guinean people continue to run deep, especially amongst those older than thirty or thirty-five. When in 1998 President Conté arrested Alpha Condé, then his most prominent political opponent, he accused him of trying to violently destabilize Guinea. Guineans were divided in their estimation of this claim. However, when the European Union sent a delegation to Conakry to speak with the Conté government about releasing Condé, President Conté refused them entry and forced them to re-board their plane and return to Europe. Many Guineans applauded that move, not because all of them thought Alpha Condé was guilty, but because the decision hearkened back to a proud history of nationalist defiance. This objection to foreign intervention was inextricably tied to the concept of opposition that was so powerful during the First Republic. The long afterlife of this attitude may explain why so few Guinean elites, including those imprisoned by Touré, have retroactively claimed a role as heroic, covert opponents of a repressive regime.<sup>52</sup>

This reaction was driven not by the question of whether Condé had been justly imprisoned, but rather by a shared rejection of interference that had been successfully framed as neocolonial.<sup>53</sup> That politics in Guinea, or anywhere else,

<sup>52</sup> Conté’s self-serving (and menacing) rejection of humanitarian intervention also had a precedent from 1985. When his former number two, Diarra Traoré, was arrested after the failed coup attempt, Conté announced, “Those who want to defend him in the name of human rights had better do it quickly, because tomorrow it will be too late” (Andriamirado 1985). Traoré was executed soon after.

<sup>53</sup> Ironically, Condé, now president, echoed this dynamic in a public appearance on 1 August 2011, in Washington, D.C., at which he objected to a Guinean audience member’s support for an international investigation into an apparent attempt to kill him several weeks earlier. In his response, he angrily referred to those who would support an outside inquiry as “apatriote,” or anti-patriotic/stateless. Beyond Condé’s apparent decision to situate himself among the “Afro-skeptics” in the justice debate, some Fulbe audience members viewed his formulation as an ethnically colored echo of Sékou Touré’s speeches of 1976, in which he accused the Fulbe population of cozying up to white colonizers while viewing other Guinean ethnic groups as “foreigners.” “L’étranger, c’était le Soussou, le Malinké, le Forestier, les camarades des autres régions de la



is often driven by such dynamics gives the lie to claims on both sides of the debate over the November 1970 attack and the other moments of alleged destabilization glossed as the “permanent plot.” Despite assertions by advocates on both sides that “history is stubborn” and that “the real truth” will eventually come out, Guinea was in fact like many other socialist authoritarian countries in which individuals used the language of socialist ideals to pursue their personal agendas,<sup>54</sup> and states pursued ostensibly principled policies that generated unintended and often disastrous consequences.

It is notable that notions of linking “truth” with “reconciliation” or “transition” (as in “transitional justice”) have made very limited inroads in post-socialist countries. This is not only because the implicit scheme of the transitional justice package is based on individualistic notions of personhood, responsibility, and absolution. Another reason is that the particular combination of strong, self-justifying, political rhetoric and the desire to “root out” internal enemies of the revolution gave significant cover to individuals and groups to pursue violent projects that were sometimes driven by resentment, envy, or competitiveness.

Roger Petersen has detailed how, during the early Soviet period, Lithuanian Christians’ resentments of what they considered unfair advantages of Lithuanian and Russian Jews led them to embrace a noxious common ideological cause with the Nazis during the German occupation and participate in their pogroms. We find a parallel case in the targeting of ethnic Fulbe during the socialist period, when the barely encoded language of “economic sabotage” and “nepotism” pointed directly to the overrepresentation of Fulbe in higher education and business networks. Even today, ethnicity remains the underlying yet unspeakable<sup>55</sup> issue in many discussions about past violence and contemporary truth-telling.

This fact recently came into Guinean public consciousness in an unusual but telling way. In 2011, Alpha Condé named as the “Mediator of the Republic” Facinet Touré, the retired officer who had been a Camp Boiro detainee, had led the truth commission in 1984–1985, and was part of several Conté-era governments. Tasked with facilitating the process of reconciliation and possibly with convening some form of truth and reconciliation commission, Touré (an ethnic Sosso) subsequently stated: “They [the Fulbe] have all the economic power,

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Guinée, cependant que l’on faisait très bon ménage avec le colonisateur; l’on s’acquinait avec le colon blanc et l’on se prostituait avec lui” (Sékou Touré, quoted in *Horoya* 1976).

<sup>54</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick (2005) is particularly enlightening in her analysis of Stalin-era denunciations in the USSR. Among other things, women used them to try to discipline unfaithful husbands.

<sup>55</sup> It is unspeakable in the sense that some Guineans either avoid it or talk about it in encoded terms. On the other hand, some Guineans will speak openly about the ethnic dimension of violence, politics, and truth in Guinea while often noting the topic’s unspeakability. Thanks to Susanna Fioratta for pushing us to clarify this point.

they sought it, they deserve it, and I congratulate them! But for the sake of social peace, peace in the city, they should be content with that. They should let us divide, let the other ethnic groups divide what is left. If they have the economic power, and we divide the political power, there will be stability in the country. There will be equilibrium. But, if we take everything and put it in the hands of my uncles [the Fulbe], well, there will be peace for two days, the third we are going to fight.”<sup>56</sup>

This reproduced almost verbatim the discourse of many non-Fulbe Guineans at the time of the 2010 elections, as they justified voting for Alpha Condé, a candidate that many of them had not held in high esteem before those elections. At the same time, this discourse was intolerable and insulting to most ethnic Fulbe; they interpreted it as calling for a perverse punishment of them for their evident success in other sectors of the society and economy, and an attempt to continue excluding them from national political power.<sup>57</sup> Coming from the man designated as the national mediator, who claimed for himself a role as a seeker of the truth of socialist-period abuses, it was impolitic.

One frequently hears the accusation from defenders of the Touré regime, and even from non-Fulbe (like Facinet Touré) who spent time in detention, that ethnic Fulbe have tried to monopolize the issue of Touré-era abuses. As one then-PDG member of the National Assembly said, “Who is a victim? Who is guilty? ... There is a community that thinks it alone was victimized—the Fulbe. They blame Sékou Touré. But that is not the true problem. If you look impartially at the victims of the revolution, they are Malinké and Forestiers ... because Sékou Touré fought a class conflict. He fought against the commercial elite, the military elite. They were Malinké! Maybe at the start of independence, the intelligentsia included certain brilliant professionals who were Fulbe, but even then, it wasn’t them alone—it was everyone.”<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> *Guineenews* 2011.

<sup>57</sup> Fulbe have also developed a strong sense that they are the ethnic majority in Guinea, with the corollary expectation that their majority position is a further reason why they should rule, and also why electoral math should inexorably favor ethnic Fulbe candidates. However, the only figures on ethnic proportions in Guinea appear to be pure guesses. No Guinean census since the colonial period has asked respondents to identify their ethnicity. During the Touré period, state publications indicated that ethnic Fulbe and ethnic Maninka each made up about one-third of the national population. The CIA *World Factbook*, ([https://www.cia.gov/search?q=guinea&x=0&y=0&site=CIA&output=xml\\_no\\_dtd&client=CIA&myAction%2Fsearch&proxystylesheet=CIA&submitMethod=get](https://www.cia.gov/search?q=guinea&x=0&y=0&site=CIA&output=xml_no_dtd&client=CIA&myAction%2Fsearch&proxystylesheet=CIA&submitMethod=get)) estimates the ethnic breakdown to be a suspiciously round 40 percent Fulbe, 30 percent Maninka, 20 percent Sosso, and 10 percent “other.” Because there are no actual figures available, and the *Factbook* (frequently used by journalists and others in search of quotable “facts”) neither qualifies their estimates nor gives any information about their origin, these figures have been reproduced in most journalistic reporting, and have become accepted as received truths. When placed in the context of ethnicized electoral arithmetic undertaken by Guineans, they become potentially explosive.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Lanciné Ousmane Cissé, Conakry, 6 Jan. 2009.

Many other Guineans are quick to emphasize that while nearly every Guinean family was touched by the socialist administration's imprisonments, tortures, and disappearances, only the Fulbe have since attempted to make collective political capital of it. During the late Conté era and the short-lived junta that followed, Fulbe youth in Conakry's grim outlying suburbs became key instigators of anti-government protests and suffered high casualties when state security forces retaliated. This fact has combined with narratives of past victimization to produce a discourse of Fulbe "deserving" political power as the flag-bearer group of political opposition over time. This, too, is contested by others.

Here we return to the instrumental uses of the search for the "real truth." The stakes are high in contemporary Guinea, with its multiple crises and challenges. Affixing blame and claiming material or political reparations for past suffering become the real stakes of identifying "stubborn history," but the way forward is strewn with obstacles. Because there remains no neutral space for debating the past, claims on truth's imminent ability to make itself known, or on unassailable facts still to be mined in foreign archives, offer little reassurance. Even a process of truth-telling that emphasized the ambivalences, choiceless decisions, and the small betrayals that face most citizens living under repressive governments could not solve these contemporary issues. Whether their ambiguities would be more salutary than divisive is a question only Guineans can answer.

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Abstract: This article uses an analysis of discussions of the November 1970 Portuguese attack on Guinea as a window into issues that continue to be raised concerning the country's first post-independence regime (1958–1984). We analyze ongoing debates among Guineans regarding the legacy of the former president, Sékou Touré, and whether or not there is a need for truth-telling and/or justice for abuses committed under his rule. One strand of this discussion focuses on legitimate political tactics and another on the politics of ethnicity in contemporary Guinea. The frequent assertion by Guinean interlocutors that “history is stubborn” points to both the perceived power of truth-telling and the ethno-political stakes with which these debates have become imbued. Debates among Guineans often focus on the uses and abuses of “truth and reconciliation” testimony, which for some Guineans is essential to breaking past cycles of violent state repression and for others is a kind of Pandora's box that could fuel not reconciliation but retribution. We show that Guineans are also engaged in a third order of analysis, of the status of “imported” notions of justice, agency, and culpability in an African setting.