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## Dossiê

# Screening Gender in Bissau-Guinean Vernacular Filmmaking

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### Abstract:

Vernacular film and audiovisual production in Guinea-Bissau, a viral success among its residents, are growing exponentially. Portraying ordinary events, they are widely available in informal screenings or shared on internet channels, reaching thousands of viewers within the country, as well as their diasporas in Europe. These films and audiovisual productions constitute valuable resources to study popular perceptions, namely those on gender issues. This paper revisits the history of gender politics in Guinea-Bissau to analyse how these vernacular productions are depicting the gender transformations taking place in reaction to social and political instability, a field that lacks questioning and research. In addition to identifying common patterns in these narratives, the analysis seeks to contextualise them by exploring women's and men's participation in the labour and familiar realms, proposing a critical, attentive reading that considers the omissions in this film and audiovisual production to be, themselves, revealing as well.

Keywords: Vernacular filmmaking. Teleplay. Gender transformations. Guinea-Bissau.

### Introduction

This research aims to explore the ironies and paradoxes of filmmaking in contemporary Guinea-Bissau, where the inexistence of financial support for conventional film production coexists with vernacular forms of directing, producing, and distributing movies and other audiovisual outputs. Currently, amateur crews are directing vernacular films that achieve huge popularity when compared with major productions in the country.

Accessible and low-cost equipment made possible the production of movies with little to no budget, featuring non-professional actors. The early films came precisely from amateur theater groups and were called *Teleteatro* [Teleplays]. At first, they were printed on DVDs and sold in Guinea-Bissau's city markets, screened in informal movie theaters<sup>2</sup> and, finally, made available in African shops in Europe. Nowadays, they are mostly shared on Internet channels, such as *YouTube*. Their huge following has less to do with filming or production values than with their release and marketing strategies. Despite all this popularity, though, these works remain on the sidelines of African film studies (Diawara, 1992; Ukadike, 1994).

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<sup>2</sup> Several audiovisual products are screened at informal movie theaters, such as: vernacular films, Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood movies, soap operas, and football matches.

Therefore, the perspective from which Bissau-Guinean cinema is usually assessed might be inadequate when it comes to vernacular filmmaking because it fails to consider the conditions under which film and audiovisual production and consumption currently take place in Guinea-Bissau (Cunha, 2013; Cunha; Laranjeiro, 2016, 2020; Roque, 2021). At the same time, the binary distinctions such as elite-popular, or political-entertaining, that have served to distinguish African *auteur* cinema from vernacular filmmaking, may also prove inadequate (Diawara, 1992). Vernacular filmmaking's biggest accomplishment is reaching people, and this idea of "reach" is not only due to their innovative form of distribution, but also to the stories they depict and the way they do it. In Guinea-Bissau, the top-rated films portray the transformations currently taking place within gender roles in order to face the aftermath of political instability, which is the focus of this paper.

Guinea-Bissau lives under a permanent state of political instability and endemic economic crisis, which has brought about a series of social gender transformations. Gender issues have punctuated the Guinean political agenda since the Liberation War against Portuguese colonial rule. During the war (1963-1974), women's emancipation was a political banner of the liberation movement. Since then, they have been included in the Government's political agenda and in the goals of international development policies intervening in the territory. These films and audiovisual productions also reveal gender issues in emigration processes.

Several of these movies and audiovisual outputs are produced within the context of the diasporas. Spoken in Bissau-Guinean creole, these works have brought Guinea-Bissau and its diasporas closer together. These transnational flows spark feelings of closeness and belonging, while also disputing the cultural paradigm stating that film and audiovisual are usually "extraverted" from Europe or from the United States of America to countries on the African continent (Hountondji, 2009). Thus, they can be seen as commodities (Appadurai, 1988), whose transnational flows (Appadurai, 1996) allow them to enter an alternative circuit that functions outside any centralized control (Scott, 2008). This circuit, which establishes an unpredictable cine-geography (Eshun; Gray, 2011), might reveal audiences who are actively creating new cultural paradigms.

Another aspect of these films and audiovisual productions is that they are both funny and moralistic. On the one hand, they parody the social disruption in which their characters live; on the other, they pass judgement on the not so licit ways used to overcome its consequences. Therefore, they hold a potential for emancipation that is thwarted by conservative morals (Mbembe, 2021).

By clearing a path through the Guinean top-rated vernacular films and videos on *YouTube* channels, this paper analyses how they are depicting and parodying the social disruption in the country, remaining mindful of Roque's argument that, while the State can be described as "irrelevant", the dimension of suffering and the normalization of violence caused by the State's omission in the country's economic and social (de)structuring is not at all irrelevant (Roque, 2016a). More than being concerned with the impact of specific movies or audiovisual productions, this analysis will focus on representative patterns across multiple works, crucial for understanding gender transformations in the contemporary history of Guinea-Bissau. Subsequently, these narratives will be juxtaposed with the gender policies enacted by the legacy of the anti-colonial Liberation War, as well as with the development policies introduced by international agents and donors, which are not innocuous to the Pentecostal and Evangelical churches that lately have gathered considerable following among young people.

## 1. Filmmaking in Guinea-Bissau: limits, challenges, and prospects

Guinea-Bissau is a small country on the west coast of Africa, which became independent in 1973 after eleven years of armed struggle against the Portuguese colonial rule. Unfortunately, though, the end of this war did not bring peace or stability. Six years after the independence, a *coup d'état* took place, separating Guinea-Bissau from Cape Verde, a country with which it had established a strategic binational alliance during the war. In 1998/99, the country was ravished by a violent civil war, and in 2003 and 2012, new *coups d'état* took place. This political instability, along with political corruption and the connection between the army and international drug trafficking networks, led several authors to criticize the labels conferred on the Guinean state, such as a weak state (Forrest, 2003), a failed state (Gruffydd Jones, 2013), a collapsed state (Roque, 2009), or a narco-state (Chabal; Green, 2016).

In this context, very little attention has been paid to the national film production. However, during the independence war, propaganda cinema warranted particular attention. Amílcar Cabral, the leader of the Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné-Bissau e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) [African Party for Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde], invited several foreign film directors to document military and paramilitary activities (Laranjeiro, 2021). At the same time, four young Guineans were sent to Cuba to study filmmaking<sup>3</sup>. After the independence, in 1978, the Instituto Nacional do Cinema (INC) [National Institute of Cinema]<sup>4</sup> was founded, incorporating these four Guinean filmmakers, but the aforementioned unstable political context did not provide the conditions for this endeavor to thrive. Very few film productions were developed, and those that were, ended up constrained by the demands of a socialist state ruled by a single party, and were ultimately cut short by the 1980 *coup d'état* (Cunha; Laranjeiro, 2016). After this, the INC limited itself to collaborating with foreign productions and co-productions, until being reactivated in September 2003 as Instituto Nacional do Cinema e Audiovisual (INCA) [National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual]<sup>5</sup>. However meaningful, this revitalization attempt was not followed by State funding or a new wave of local film production.

As a result, Bissau-Guinean cinema is completely dependent on foreign partnerships. Some of the films, mostly directed by Flora Gomes and Sana Na N'Hada, achieved serious international acclaim. For the purposes of this study, it is relevant to mention those among them that gave particular attention to women as their main protagonists.

*Mortu Nega*<sup>6</sup> [Those whom death refused], Flora Gomes's first feature, follows the life of Diminga, responsible for transporting bullets and ammunition during the Liberation War. Her husband is wounded in combat, and they eventually lose all their children in the conflict. Also of relevance is Lebeth, a supporting character who is an older woman that witnesses her village be destroyed by the Portuguese army. Gomes's second feature, *Udju azul di Yonta*<sup>7</sup> [Yonta's blue eyes], focuses on Yonta, a woman born after the independence war who is secretly in love with a hero of the anti-colonial war. Finally, Gomes's third feature, *Nha Fala*<sup>8</sup> [My Voice], is the defiant story of Vita,

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<sup>3</sup> These four Guineans were Flora Gomes, Sana Na N'Hada, José Bolama and Josefina Crato.

<sup>4</sup> The INC was modeled on its Cuban counterpart, the *Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* (ICAIC) [Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry].

<sup>5</sup> Following the country's 1<sup>st</sup> National Film Meeting, INCA was provided with its own bylaws and an Organic Law.

<sup>6</sup> Gomes, Flora (dir) (1988). *Mortu Nega* (Guinea-Bissau), 93'.

<sup>7</sup> Gomes, Flora (dir) (1994). *Udju Azul di Yonta* (Guinea-Bissau), 95'.

<sup>8</sup> Gomes, Flora (dir) (2002). *Nha Fala* (Republic of Cabo Verde, France, Portugal), 112'.

a young girl who migrates to study in France, where she breaks with the family tradition that forbids women to sing. If the first film attempts to acknowledge the crucial role performed by women during the war, the second one warns how those who were born after it have little regard for its aftermath; and finally, the third portrays women overcoming the traditional constraints that Bissau-Guinean society imposes on them.

*Bissau d'Isabel*<sup>9</sup> [Isabel's Bissau], directed by Sana Na N'Hada, follows Isabel's daily struggles in Bissau. A former first aid worker during the war, she studied nursing in Cuba and works at the Hospital Nacional Simão Mendes [Simão Mendes National Hospital]. However, her often late salary is not enough to subsist on, so Isabel also grows rice and vegetables for retail. Her husband, an engineer with a Cuban degree as well, is unemployed. The film is the portrait of a Bissau upheld by women working tirelessly to ensure the survival of their families. As Roque points out, this movie illustrates how the physical and social reproduction of Guinea-Bissau relies on these women (Roque, 2021). Often having the Liberation War as a background, these productions attempt to praise women's role in Guinean society. Other films with less international impact also depict women's ordeals, such as Vanessa Fernandes's *Si Destinu* [Her Destiny]<sup>10</sup>, about female genital mutilation in the diaspora context, namely Portugal.

Despite their international acclaim, Flora Gomes and Sana Na N'Hada have struggled to get funding for their films from French, Portuguese, and North American production companies. Furthermore, their filmography fell far short of their expectations. For instance, N'Hada went sixteen years without filming<sup>11</sup>, eventually moving on to rice farming; and Gomes's most recent feature was ten years ago.

Other filmmakers experience similar frustrations. Suleiman Biá, a Guinean director who studied in the Santo Antonio de Los Baños' International School of Film and TV, in Cuba, has only directed one movie with no global impact, in addition to having collaborated with the film crews of Flora Gomes, Sana Na N'Hada, and Filipa César, among others. Domingos Sanca, who worked mostly on television, studied in the same school as Suleiman and directed *O Rio da Verdade* [The River of Truth]<sup>12</sup> and *Bijagós, o Tesouro Sagrado* [Bijagó, the sacred treasure]<sup>13</sup>, both funded by the CPLP Audiovisual Program. Other Bissau-Guinean filmmakers have achieved notoriety in the diaspora, namely: Filipe Henriques, Vanessa Fernandes, Adulai Jamanca, and Welket Bungué.

However, when talking about movies with people in Guinea-Bissau, very few of them know these filmmakers and their works. They might have seen some of them on national television, but these films are not their main references.

Nigerian movies, on the other hand, are extremely popular in Guinea-Bissau, even if spoken in English with no subtitles. Nollywood, as this production is popularly known, is a film movement that emerged in Nigeria in the 1990s (Haynes, 2016; Jedlowski et al., 2013; Musa, 2019), whose success is owed to its ability to make sense of the fears, dreams, and expectations of its audiences, as well as to its modes of production and distribution, accessible to the most disadvantaged social classes. It inspired the replication of the same production modes in other countries, spawning similar film

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<sup>9</sup> Na N'Hada, Sana (dir) (2005). *Bissau d'Isabel* (Guinea-Bissau, Portugal), 52'.

<sup>10</sup> Fernandes, Vanessa (dir) (2015). *Si Destinu* (Portugal), 22'.

<sup>11</sup> Sana Na N'Hada, interviewed by Catarina Laranjeiro, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau (14th February 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Sanca, Domingos (dir) (2010). *O Rio da Verdade* (Guinea-Bissau), 52'.

<sup>13</sup> Sanca, Domingos (dir) (2010). *Bijagó, o Tesouro Sagrado* (Guinea-Bissau), 52'.

phenomena, such as Wakaliwood, in Uganda (Larsen; Namatovu, 2020). As we will argue in more depth further ahead, Guinea-Bissau's vernacular film production also grew exponentially, creating a movement we propose to label Bissauwood. The explosion of video content on the web (2005-), enabling people to share their media and easily access what is being produced by others, led these films to give rise to new media (Manovich, 2008). Therefore, most of these current productions fit into what is globally called audiovisual.

In Guinea-Bissau, most of the cultural and social infrastructures work with no state support. The political and economic instability coexists with an admirable ability to keep social order with no state resources (Roque, 2016a). Believing that the most substantial social transformations happen with no government intervention, Bordonaro defends the "irrelevance" of the State, over its "collapse" (Bordonaro, 2009). In this political context, film and audiovisual production is also taking place through civil society infrastructures: youth associations, community TV<sup>14</sup>, amateur theater groups, *bankadas*<sup>15</sup>, or even an unexpected garage shop - *Maquina Motor* [Engine Machine] – that has an art and comedy department, where the workers also create new media.

Amateur theater groups are the most prolific film and audiovisual producers. That is why these works are frequently called *Teleteatro* [Teleplays], or *Teatro Comédia* [Comedy play]. However, these productions also show similarities with music videos, video games, soap operas, or television series. Depending on who creates them, as well as their target audience, they differ significantly from each other. But when shared on the internet, they all reach a surprising number of viewers, compared to movies resulting from major productions, which are also freely accessible. Additionally, they create communities of viewers who convey, through comments and sharing, their expectations for the productions yet to be made.

Due to all these aspects, I choose to designate these audiovisual works as vernacular. They could also be called "popular", "home-made", "do-it-yourself", or "non-theatrical" – all these designations come from studies that investigated similar phenomena (Salazkina; Fibla, 2021). Yet the diversity and volubility of these audiovisual products do not allow them to fit into any of these labels.

## 2. Gender issues in Guinea-Bissau

Over time, the winds of change on women's emancipation have been pumped by different political actors in Guinea-Bissau's public sphere. First, the participation of women in the country's Liberation War was one of the main political banners of the anti-colonial program, whose agenda publicly championed women's liberation. After the country's independence, women's emancipation such as access to education, the end of forced marriage, and the end of female genital mutilation were at the forefront of the intervention goals of state policies and non-governmental organizations – views which were shared by Pentecostal and Evangelical churches.

During the Liberation War, the diplomatic strategy on gender outlined by the PAIGC gathered sig-

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<sup>14</sup> There are some examples, such as TV Klelé, TV Bagabunda, and TV Massar. TV Klelé produced the film *Tapioca, fonte de nutrição e economia familiar* [Tapioca, source of nutrition and family economy] (2013), awarded at the International Agrofilm Festival, in Slovenia.

<sup>15</sup> Informal groups, often mixed, but predominantly masculine, through which activities are organised, from parties or picnics to the provision of surveillance services, as was the case for years in the Bairro Militar, when there was no police station in the neighborhood. Cf. (Roque, 2016b).

nificant international acclaim (Gomes, 2013a). Women's participation in warfare was designed to challenge traditional structures (Cabral, s/d; Urdang, 1979), and concrete steps were taken to achieve this goal: gender quotas in the village's committees; education for girls; end of forced marriages<sup>16</sup>; military training for women; and lastly, having women as members of the PAIGC's several committees (Galvão; Laranjeiro, 2019; Godinho Gomes, 2015; Urdang, 1979). The latter group participated in international conferences, at first with the support of the União Democrática das Mulheres da Guiné-Bissau e de Cabo Verde (UDEMU) [Democratic Union of Women of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde]. However, UDEMU underwent irreversible conflicts, with several PAIGC members disagreeing with its goals. It was discontinued five years after it started, and reconvened after the independence, in the mid-1980s (Ly, 2015). These conflicts might hint to how the PAIGC agenda was decided primarily by a male leadership (Ly, 2015). In fact, no woman is identified in the group behind PAIGC's foundation, nor are women significantly represented in the first generation of political leaders (Galvão; Laranjeiro, 2019). Nevertheless, three groups of women, some of them escaping forced marriages, went to Kiev to study nursing. Back in Guinea-Bissau, they performed important political roles, such as political commissars in the liberated areas.

It is also important to notice that, at the beginning of the armed struggle, women's participation in the warfare triggered insurmountable divergences, when some peasant women who went (not necessarily on a voluntary basis) to guerrilla barracks were sexually assaulted by military commanders. Elderly men who advocated the traditional control over young girls used this as an argument to illustrate the inadequacy of the PAIGC's gender policies concerning the end of forced marriage - a topic that became an important political battleground between the party leaders and the population of the liberated areas, triggering the recurrence of sexist behaviors, but also some unexpected female resistance (Galvão; Laranjeiro, 2019). Yet, taking into account the *avant-garde* PAIGC political project, from which some women did benefit, it is crucial to recognise that the women emancipation project during the war fell short of its goals (Galvão; Laranjeiro, 2019; Gomes, 2015; Ly, 2015). Furthermore, among the party members, a "good marriage" was recurrently affirmed as a valuable steppingstone for a woman's upward mobility (Galvão; Laranjeiro, 2019; Urdang, 1979).

The newly independent state was not able to reverse these shortcomings. Legal equality was formally decreed, but unequal gender relations were just as quickly reproduced (Urdang, 1979). The two state-run women bodies - Comissão Feminina do PAIGC [PAIGC Female Commission] and UDEMU<sup>17</sup> - had their initiatives antagonised, becoming limited to simply responding to the demands of a one-party state (Gomes, 2013b).

The end of the one-party rule, in 1991, reinforced civil society initiatives, some of which launched by women<sup>18</sup>. At that same time, development projects aimed at improving women's status and their productivity were implemented, but they tended to consider men as heads of families, excluding women from access to technology, credit, and services (Galli; Funk, 1992). Laws regarding reproductive health, family planning, and female genital mutilation were passed in the Parliament

<sup>16</sup> Traditionally, among many ethnolinguistic groups in Guinea-Bissau, marriages were arranged by the parents when the woman was still a child. This practice is still common, and the marriage is only considered forced when the woman refuses it. (Roque; Mane; Silá, Djau; Peti, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> The first National Women's Congress, in 1982, relaunched the UDEMU.

<sup>18</sup> It is a difficult endeavor to map all women's organizations' initiatives, but in 2018, there was the Plataforma Política das Mulheres [Women's Political Platform], the Rede Nacional de Luta Contra a Violência Baseada no Género e Criança [National Network to Fight Gender and Child-Based Violence], and the Movimento Mindjeris Nô Lanta [Women Rise up Movement]. Cf. (Assunção, 2018).

(Gomes, 2013b). Yet the inequality in the domestic space keeps constraining women. In addition, they still face risks such as domestic violence, female genital mutilation and forced and early marriage (Assunção, 2018), issues currently under the attention of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches (Formenti, 2017).

During the war, fighting against women's subjugation was conceived as a profound transformation of the economy and its system of values, so that a woman could become financially independent, fully in control of her procreative energies and labour (Urdang, 1979). Ironically, the endemic economic crisis in Guinea-Bissau is transforming women's role, albeit replicating subalternity trends. Currently, the livelihood of many families relies upon women's daily work. Acknowledging that their survival depends on them, their children and relatives often consider them heroes (Roque, 2021).

Yet they see themselves as victims, not as heroes. Social resilience can be seen as positive by others, but it is always experienced as a burden (Kohl, 2010). The same burden can be felt in the aforementioned *bankadas*, a kind of "parliament of the poor", through which those who cannot achieve better living conditions raise their voice in the hopes of overcoming social hindrances. For instance, ensuring neighborhood safety or setting up water supply are perceived as hardships by those who cannot rely on the state. Because of that, their voices are the target of not only political action, but also of routine irony about their own marginalization (Vigh, 2006). This irony is creatively crafted by rappers, whose protest songs are huge hits, and amateur film and audiovisual crews, whose works have gone viral.

### 3. Devising "Bissauwood": groundbreaking modes of production and distribution

It is impossible to determine the exact beginning of vernacular filmmaking in Guinea-Bissau. Nonetheless, the first film to become widely known was *Barafunda*<sup>19</sup> [cr. Turmoil], which debuted in Bissau in 2006 and turned out to be an unexpected success. It was written and directed by Mário de Oliveira, produced by BETA-TV<sup>20</sup>, and all its actors belonged to the amateur theater group *Blifi* (m. shadow). The movie was shot in video and printed on DVDs that were distributed in the city markets of Guinea-Bissau and in African shops in France and Portugal, reaching emigrant audiences.

During the interviews with younger filmmakers, all of them state remembering this film very well. After watching it, Noel Djassi asked his father, who had emigrated to Portugal, for a smartphone, and shot a similar film with his friends<sup>21</sup>. Nelca Lopez remembers watching *Barafunda* countless times, knowing its dialogue by heart<sup>22</sup>. The movie impacted Axy Demba to such an extent that he argues it should be remade with better equipment and a well-trained crew<sup>23</sup>. This was in 2006.

In that same year, a World Bank report stated that the living conditions for the majority of Guinea-Bissau's population had deteriorated after the civil war, emphasizing that its economic consequences were worse than those of Rwanda in 1994 (World Bank, 2006). Bissau was going from bad

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<sup>19</sup> Oliveira, Mário (dir) (2006). *Barafunda* (Bissau, Guinea-Bissau), 118'.

<sup>20</sup> An advertising spot is dedicated to BETA-TV post-credits. Over the image of two editors working in a studio, we can read: "We promote culture in the UEMOA space; Music videos in DVD-Video; TV news stories; TV documentaries; Movies; Seminars; Workshops; Tele and Radioplays; etc.". Later, Mário de Oliveira cut relations with BETA-TV, believing he was not properly compensated, considering the money made from the sales of the film.

<sup>21</sup> Noel Djassi, interviewed by Catarina Laranjeiro, Queluz, Portugal (8th December 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Nelca Lopez, interviewed by Catarina Laranjeiro, Barreiro, Portugal (12th February 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Axy Demba, interviewed by Catarina Laranjeiro, Cacém, Portugal (15th May 2022).

to worse, with the water supply being weekly at best, electricity all but non-existent, and the price of rice constantly rising, while people had less and less money to buy it.

Concurrently, the local politics could make for a Hollywood movie. Nino Viera had just won the latest presidential election. He was one of the most important army commanders in the anti-colonial war. In 1980, he led the first *coup d'état*, taking over the presidency of Guinea-Bissau. His remaining in power was secured by rumors about suspected *coups d'état* to justify the elimination of political or military opponents (Forrest, 2003; Roque, 2016a). Upon the end of the one-party rule, he used all state power and capital to win the first “democratic” election, validating his presidency until the civil war (Rudebeck, 2004). After that, Vieira was exiled in Portugal until 2004, when he returned to Guinea-Bissau unauthorised, on a helicopter provided by the Republic of Guinea. His return was shrouded by controversies and suspicions, but he ended up legitimised by winning the 2005 presidential election. Personal acts of revenge dominated his term, bringing with them the specter of war (Roque, 2016a).

State violence can be perceived as an inheritance from the Liberation War. Amílcar Cabral, the PAIGC leader, was murdered by party members, although other moral perpetrators were also involved (Castanheira, 1995). In the years after the independence, several political murders and persecutions took place. The main targets were those who had been a part of the colonial troops, considered enemies of the newly independent state (Laranjeiro, 2018). Although it is not the intention here to summarise all following episodes of political violence, the brutality of the civil war in 1998 should still be highlighted – since then, no elected president has ended their term, and almost every Chief of the armed forces has been assassinated (Kohl, 2016; Roque, 2016a).

Assessing these violent political dynamics through a gender approach, Moreira states that the dispute for state power is in tandem with a masculine control of the distribution of resources, a role traditionally played by the male figure. At the same time, many men became unemployed due to the permanent economic crisis caused by the political instability. In a situation of dependency and poverty, they have shifted from the so-called “respectable masculinities” to the so-called “subordinate and failed masculinities” (Moreira, 2020, p. 71) This transformation is precisely *Barafunda*'s main subject.

*Barafunda*'s protagonist is Barudju, a former fighter in the Liberation War who sees the ideals of the independence being betrayed and is overcome by a feeling of hopelessness that drives him to madness. He enters a spiral of debts and collections, and other misfortunes befall him. His house is robbed, and he is not able to fight the criminals. His daughter gets sick and has no means of paying for the treatment. He must respond in court for an old debt and is forced to bribe the judge in order to exonerate himself. His daughter fails at school because she pays the tuition with her work, which leaves her no time for studying. Desperate, he seeks a *djambakus* [cr. fortune teller], who tells him he will manage to emigrate to Europe, but also that he will die soon. Finally, he is caught in the act by his lover's husband and pretends to be even crazier than he actually is in order to flee the situation. In short, the world slips through his fingers.

In a context of multiple political persecutions and murders, a trivial story of a lower-middle-class family from Bissau became a huge success. Without showing the visible violence circumscribing the persecutions and murders among politicians and the military, the film depicts the invisible one that takes place in everyday life and establishes with the former a thought-provoking dialogue.



Two years later, in 2008, Mário de Oliveira released the movie *Kal Kolidad*<sup>24</sup> [cr. What Quality], which shares a similar plot. It begins with an argument between a couple, Mado and Iota, caused by his inability to provide for their family, which embarrasses her. Meanwhile, their daughter, Fiana, on her mother's orders, borrows money from Bialo, owner of the local taberna [cr. container on the street that doubles as a grocery store]. He lends her 10,000 CFA [about 15 euros], asking if she wants to meet him that evening, implying that she will reciprocate sexually. However, Iota wants Fiana to marry another man, and Mado a different one. Both suitors would be able to provide Fiana with a better life than the one Mado gives them.

Mado is a night guard. One morning, he tells his boss about a dream in which he suffered an accident. The boss fires him, arguing that he does not need a guard who sleeps on the job. Mado apologises, and the boss reconsiders. However, the protagonist falls asleep again, and is robbed. The robbery, though, was a trap set up by his boss to find out if Mado would be awake. Fired and with no money, Mado pretends to have been mugged to buy rice on credit from Bialo who, arguing that he had already lent money to Fiana, refuses it. Before that, Bialo had been caught with Fiana by a woman (Adia) who insults him for taking advantage of a girl. The film ends with Adia telling about it to Mado and Iota, who throw Fiana out of the house, since she is now dishonored and no longer fit for marriage.

All these characters struggle to find ways to deal with or overcome the obstacles resulting from the social and economic disruption in which they live, but nobody succeeds. Mado, with no job deemed "dignified and profitable", sees his role of breadwinner compromised – a role that Iota must take on, sharing the *leitmotiv* with *Barafunda*. However, they are not able to move up socially, as the economic activities performed by women tend to be undervalued. Furthermore, they experience this transformation as a burden, once the accumulation of the roles of breadwinner and caregiver becomes overwhelming (Roque; Vasconcelos, 2012). The best outcome would be a "good marriage", a dream that Mado and Iota nurture for Fiana. However, Fiana is the archetype of a young girl who found in relationships with older men a way to bankroll her livelihood, compromising the future planned, but not guaranteed, by her parents. Despite the humor that runs through the film, there is no happy ending.

*Casamento Caten Rassa*<sup>25</sup> [cr. Marriage Has No Race], Mario de Oliveira's third film, also plays up marriage as a potential tool for upward social mobility. Its main characters are university students, illustrating how this phenomenon extends to higher social classes. The plot revolves around a love triangle between Kevin, Baby and Ricardina, with the latter two trying to conquer the first. With this intention, Baby gets pregnant on purpose, and Ricardina performs a *futis* [cr. spell]. Although the film delves into the issue of marriage between different religions (Kevin is Christian, and Baby is a Muslim), the entire narrative is structured around the strategies of the two women to win over the same man. In contrast, Kevin's adultery is never criticised, and he seems to have a quite passive role in the love triangle.

*Casamento di Interesse*<sup>26</sup> [Marriage of Convenience] also approaches marriage as a solution to a problem, but this time a man will make use of it. Djedjé is an illegal immigrant in France who tries to marry a woman (Pérula) with a regularised immigration status in order to get the papers he

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<sup>24</sup> Oliveira, Mário (dir.) (2006). *Kal Kolidad* (Bissau, Guinea-Bissau), 32'.

<sup>25</sup> Oliveira, Mário de (dir.) (2008). *Casamenti Caten Rassa* (Guinea-Bissau), 54'.

<sup>26</sup> Record G-B (prod.) (2014). *Casamenti di Interessi* (França), 49'.

needs to get a job. Portraying (and even denouncing) the endemic difficulties that African immigrants experience while trying to enter the European job market, the film's narrative mainly warns that young girls should never let themselves be deceived, placing on them the responsibility to avoid the abuse they are subjected to. Strangely, it does not delve into the brutal screening processes of European borders, and the suffering of those who do not pass the ambiguous and violent strain of immigration laws (Mbembe, 2021).

The same pattern of addressing migration issues intertwined with love relationships can be found in several audiovisual works made by the Bissau diaspora in Portugal. For instance, *Falsas promessas dos homens/ e di botadur de sorti* [cr. Men and clairvoyant's false promises]<sup>27</sup>, by Nelca Lopez, also portrays a love triangle that shows how lighter skin colour is a sign of social status. A man considers leaving his wife for a lighter-coloured mistress. The mistress strong-arms him by going out with white-skinned suitors to make him jealous. In turn, the wife resorts to a spell to end the affair and get her husband back. Another work by Nelca Lopez, *Fera di Bamdé* [cr. Bandim Market]<sup>28</sup>, tells the story of a woman who goes shopping in Bissau's city market. Pretending to be fancy and privileged, as she has recently come back from living in Europe, the salespeople eventually find out that she was actually deported for criminal reasons<sup>29</sup>. All these works are spoken in creole, pretending to take place in Bissau in order to make use of the country's archetypal characters. However, all of them were shot in the outskirts of Lisbon, which creates a strange feeling: what is depicted is not what we see, but what we are invited to imagine. This way, these works manage to visually merge Guinea-Bissau with its Guinean diasporas in Portugal.

Finally, another work by Nelca Lopez also deserves attention. *Damas Guineenses Juventude* [cr. Guinean Ladies Youth]<sup>30</sup> depicts a casual conversation between three young girls about the advantages of relationships with older men. Facetiously, they talk about how studying will not benefit them in the future, since there are no well-paid jobs in Bissau, and how hard it is to be a married woman, working and raising children. On the other hand, by having relationships with *sugar daddies*, they can afford partying, shopping, vacations and, at the same time, have no obligations to these men, whom they can easily deceive.

One of the merits of vernacular filmmaking is the way it has brought women into the broader picture, both as producers and consumers. While women were almost absent from the first and second generations of Bissau-Guinean *auteur* filmmaking, they do play roles in vernacular film productions. And their participation may reveal different points of view about their choices. However, it is important to remember that these audiovisual products were made in Portugal, where young girls are likely to be more immune to the social censorship prevailing in their home country. In Guinea-Bissau, women who are financially bankrolled by *sugar daddies* are often criticised, although sometimes their family or boyfriends, beneficiaries of their sex work, are abettors (Pais, 2016) – a situation depicted in the film *Clara di Sabura*<sup>31</sup> [Party Clara].

Different from the movies mentioned above, the makers of *Clara di Sabura* originally intended it to be a professional production. It had a well-structured film crew, a previously determined screenplay, an original soundtrack, and an actual production company. However, its distribution

<sup>27</sup> Lopez, Nelca (dir.) (2018). *Falsas promessas dos homens/ e di botadur de sorti* (Portugal).

<sup>28</sup> Lopez, Nelca (dir.) (2018). *Fera di Bamdé* (Portugal).

<sup>29</sup> Lopez, Nelca (dir.) (2018). *Fera di Bamdé* (Portugal).

<sup>30</sup> Lopez, Nelca (dir.) (2018). *Damas Guineenses Juventude* (Portugal).

<sup>31</sup> Lopes, José (dir.) (2011). *Clara di Sabura*. Grapo Audiovisual (Guinea-Bissau).

was mostly vernacular: it was mainly exhibited in informal screenings, and widely shared on the internet.

Clara, the main character, has an affair with a teacher in exchange for good grades. Later, she starts another relationship, with a state minister. Both men are never criticised by having a relationship with a teenager. Moralistic and pedagogical, the narrative criticises women who find in relationships with sugar daddies a path to social ascension, while women who study, get a good job, get married and have children are praised. According to Joana Vasconcelos, these are the two current competing patterns of young women in Bissau. The first are promiscuous women, with multiple boyfriends who, instead of acquiring skills at school or in the job market, seek a marriage or relationships that ensure the improvement of their living conditions. The second are women who contribute financially to the household, refuse to be dependent and are professionally fulfilled. If this film echoes the widespread criticism of the first model of Guinean woman described by Vasconcelos, it omits the context of endemic poverty that makes the prospects for young women tumultuous and not very encouraging (Vasconcelos, 2016). Even with secondary education, young women (and young men) are faced with a growing lack of opportunities in the labour market, with their social mobility remaining unattainable. Additionally, all responsibility for unworthy behavior is usually placed on women, never mentioning, for example, how they are sexually harassed by teachers, facing reprisals if they refuse to reciprocate (Vasconcelos, 2016). Furthermore, the family dynamics that encourage or even pressure young women to find a materially advantageous relationship that relieves or even contributes to their parents' household are never discussed (Vasconcelos, 2016). These women can be, at the same time, encouraged and criticised for being self-interested, especially when they get pregnant on purpose (Pais, 2016; Vasconcelos, 2016), as in *Casamento Caten Rassa*. On the other hand, men with an adverse financial situation - such as Barudju in *Barafunda* and Mado in *Kal Kolidad* - are excluded as potential suitors, while men with good jobs or a wealthy family are highly coveted (Roque, 2016b).

Such situations lead to tension and jealousy, as well as spells against the husband's lovers or the lovers' wives, as displayed by *Casamento Caten Rassa* and *Falsas promessas dos homens/ e di botadur de sorti*. Witchcraft has already been studied as a "weapon of the weak" to overcome structural inequalities (Geschiere, 1997; Scott, 2013). If, traditionally, men would seek women for marriage, and not the other way around (Roque; Vasconcelos, 2012), it is likely that women could interfere or even jeopardise the relationships of potential suitors through witchcraft. And if, currently, men are the ones meant to be "chosen", harassment and adultery may be perceived as ways to boost their self-esteem (Moreira, 2020) *Performance e Violência Política na Guiné-Bissau* /title></titles><dates><year>2020</year></dates><pub-location>Lisboa</pub-location><publisher>Sistema Solar</publisher><urls></urls></record></Cite></EndNote>. Unable to assert themselves as breadwinners, the unseemly parading around their sexuality may be read as an attempt to recover an allegedly lost male power.

Finally, these films portray the idea of a "good marriage" as a mechanism for social empowerment or solving financial problems, maintaining some of the patterns associated with arranged/forced marriage, whose purpose was ensuring social cohesion. Since during the Liberation War, seeing a "good marriage" as a social springboard did not contradict women's emancipation and the study of the transformations of gender roles may lead us to understand the reason why several of these purposes have not changed.

## Conclusion: beyond the screen

Bissauwood's films are intended for popular home viewing on small screens, converging lately on the rising global preference for non-linear consumption. For this reason, television may be the point of comparison, not cinema. At the same time, they also borrow from a form of popular theatre in the way they use songs to link scenes and to introduce their credits. However, while being mainly produced by individual artistic entrepreneurs, these films manage to establish a largely informal web of connections that, ultimately, constitute alternative networks running counter to, and under the radar of, dominant global structures.

All the directors, producers, actors, and actresses interviewed - Mário de Oliveira, En Man, Rainel dos Santos, Noel Djassi, Nelca Lopez – currently live in Portugal, dedicating very little of their time to filmmaking. Yet, they moved out of Guinea-Bissau in the hopes of pursuing their artistic careers. Some of them even left their computers and cameras in Bissau, believing that in Portugal it would be easier to find a good job, earn money and buy new equipment. Others planned to study film, but were thwarted by bureaucratic issues with their residence permits. For most of them, immigration did not work out as expected.

They work at construction sites, restaurants, or in private security companies, and almost all of them plan to emigrate to other European countries, where they can make more money. All of them expressed frustration for not being able to work in the arts, which is what they were invested in professionally.

They intended for their movies to enter a commercial circuit, either through the Guinean public television, or the printing and selling of DVDs. The huge and quick popularity achieved by these works means that, not infrequently, they are victims of their own success. Pirated and shared through Internet channels, their creators lose control of their distribution and, as a consequence, the possibility of financial return<sup>32</sup>. On the one hand, they shared the same fate as many characters in their films, whose social mobility is often denied. On the other, the number of views reached by their work, as well as the huge popularity they enjoy, either in Guinea-Bissau or in Guinean communities in Europe, attest to how they are imperative players in the study of Guinean film production. The analysis of their films, as well as of their life stories, may explain how the visible violence begets the invisible daily violence and the social mechanisms that enable it (Roque, 2016a).

Guinea-Bissau is known for extraordinary events, such as *coups d'état* or political assassinations, that could inspire Hollywood movies, yet these films depict the infraordinary (Perec, 2015) - the commonplace which is never represented - that, for a considerable part of the Guinean population, means the normalised structural violence they have to deal with on a daily basis. In this context, preliminary inferences about the transformations in women's roles may be outlined: they are particularly vulnerable to structural violence, but they are also the ones who have come up with better strategies to face it (Roque et al., 2011). However, they are different from the women starring in Flora Gomes's and Sana Na N'Hada's movies. The latter were the women hardened by the Liberation War, by collaborating in the war and in building the nation while caring for their husbands and raising their children, with a subjectivity shaped by hope and a sense of achievement. Vernacular filmmaking brought women into the broader picture, showing how exhausted

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<sup>32</sup> In Guinea-Bissau, unauthorised distribution is not seen as much of a criminal activity, and there is little public shame in purchasing or selling "pirated" products, especially as this may be the only way to access a title.

and overworked they are. Exhausted that, despite how much has changed in gender politics, so little has changed. They are still made to choose between a conventional husband or a sugar daddy, in an ambiguous and cramped space from which, sometimes, not even emigration provides an escape. Real autonomy and emancipation remain far from their horizon. These films portray women trying to survive and forge a future in a space of political quarrels and conflicts.

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## Projetando Questões de Género no Cinema Vernacular Guineense

### Abstract:

A produção cinematográfica e audiovisual vernacular na Guiné-Bissau, viral entre os seus habitantes, está a crescer exponencialmente. Retratando eventos quotidianos, são habitualmente exibidos em sessões informais de cinema ou partilhados em canais de internet, atingindo milhares de telespectadores dentro do país, e nas suas diásporas na Europa. Estes filmes e produções audiovisuais constituem recursos valiosos para estudar as percepções populares, relativamente às questões de género. Este artigo revisita a história das políticas de género na Guiné-Bissau para analisar como essa produção vernacular está a representar as transformações de género em reação à instabilidade social e política, um campo que carece de questionamento e pesquisa. Além de identificar padrões comuns nessas narrativas, esta análise procura contextualizá-las, explorando a participação de mulheres e homens no mundo laboral e familiar, propondo uma leitura crítica que considera as omissões dessa produção cinematográfica e audiovisual, elas mesmas, reveladoras.

**Palavras-chave:** Cinema vernacular. Teleteatro. Transformações de género. Guiné-Bissau.

## Proyectando cuestiones de género en el cine vernáculo guineano

### Resumen:

La producción cinematográfica y audiovisual vernácula en Guinea-Bissau, viral entre sus habitantes, crece exponencialmente. Retratando hechos cotidianos, suelen mostrarse en sesiones de cine informales o se comparten en canales de Internet, llegando a miles de espectadores dentro del país y en sus diásporas en Europa. Estas películas y producciones audiovisuales constituyen recursos valiosos para estudiar las percepciones populares sobre temas de género. Este artículo revisa la historia de las políticas de género en Guinea-Bissau para analizar cómo esta producción vernácula está representando las transformaciones de género en reacción a la inestabilidad social y política, un campo que carece de cuestionamiento e investigación. Además de identificar patrones comunes en estas narrativas, este análisis busca contextualizarlas, explorando la participación de mujeres y hombres en el mundo laboral y familiar, proponiendo una lectura crítica que considere las omisiones de esta producción cinematográfica y audiovisual, en sí mismas, reveladoras.

**Palabras clave:** Cine vernáculo. Teleteatro. Transformaciones de género. Guinea-Bissau.

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