

IDENTITY, CONFLICT AND SOLIDARITY IN CONAKRY

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The history of the urbanization of Conakry

The colonial period

- According to Georg, in 1885 Conakry was a village of 300 people, mostly inhabited by Baga fishers and farmers. Because of its strategic position, the colonial administration chose the peninsula of Kaloum as the new capital of the colony. Besides the local people, many construction workers coming from Senegal and Sierra Leone were hired in order to build the new headquarters of the colonial administration.
- In the following years, the Soussou coming from the areas outside Conakry and from all the coastal region started to move to the capital, where they worked as construction workers for SIG (Société Immobilière de Guinée) or civil servants for the colonial administration. They settled in the eastern areas of the town, where, even nowadays, most of the inhabitants are soussou craftsmen or workers.

The first Republic (1958-1984)

- During Sekou Toure's socialist regime, the State appropriates big plots of land in order to build military camps and the airport. Besides, ministers and high officers start building very elegant houses in the Western part of Conakry.
- As a result of these processes and of the Soussou first immigration, Baga farmers and fishers are pushed towards the seaside. Even though they are the original landowners of Conakry, they are unable to understand that their villages are transforming into towns. They sell their plots of land for very small amounts of money or just give them away according to the traditional rules of hospitality.

The Second Republic (1984-2008)

- During the second Republic, the liberalization of the market increases social inequalities. While Conakry expands towards the inland, high officers and big traders buy plots of land in the western areas, in order either to build beautiful houses to rent or to make speculations. Plots of lands are bought and then sold some years later, when their price is much higher.
- Fulani communities start moving to Conakry. They occupy the area located in the middle of the town, on a plateau far from the coast. They are mostly cattle breeders who decide to become traders in the urban context. They accept to be shoe-shine boys or peddlers, in order to earn the money that will allow them to become shop owners or big traders in charge of exports.

Conakry today: ethnicity

- Every person moving to Conakry wants to join relatives, members of the village or rural areas in order to benefit from their help and protection in the process of urban integration. Thus, Conakry reproduces the ethnical map of Guinea: there are many areas occupied by members of the same community, speaking the same language and trying to transmit their peculiar values to the new generations.
- This is especially true for the Fulani. In some of the areas where they live there is neither electricity nor drinkable water. They have a strong feeling of having been abandoned and forgotten. They stick to their ethnical identity and strongly identify with the leader of the opposition. A lot of them perceive themselves as victims. The inhabitants of these area are often involved in riots and conflicts an they are in permanent mobilization. They are also very permeable to religious initiatives encouraging a radical vision of Islam.

Social inequalities...

- Social polarization is extreme. In the Western part of the town, there is a social group made of big traders, members of the diaspora, high officers. Even though these people do not have a class identity with a political expression, they constitute a privileged group with some features of the social classes. They share the same living and working conditions and the same distinctive practices. (Children education in expensive private schools, journeys abroad etc.)
- On the other hand, the indigenous population, but also many of the first soussou inhabitants, faces increasing pauperization and unemployment. The baga fishers and farmers try to reinvent themselves as little traders or craftsmen, but are rarely successful and experience social marginalization. The zones where they live are near garbage tips that threaten their health.

...but unexpected solidarities!

- Most areas in Conakry, especially those resulting from the quick expansion of the town towards the inland, lack basic commodities like water and electricity. In this areas, wealthier people try to organize themselves, through private initiatives and collections, in order to solve these problems. However, also the other inhabitants benefit from their actions. The abundance of private initiatives is visible by the large amount of private clinics and private schools. The State is absent.
- Thus, in these urban areas, these people become notables, reference points, or are included in relationships between «grands» and «petits» regardless of their biological age. In the new urban neighborhoods there is the formation of new social hierarchies and solidarity ties that are often independent from ethnical identities.

Towards a civil society?

- Women and young people associations develop in order to cope with problems and to improve their daily life, for instance through collections and information on available work.
- However, the risk is that urban areas, cut themselves from the rest of the town and only defend their interests. The inhabitants struggle together to improve their living conditions, but are completely uninterested in the situation of other urban areas. The collective expression of needs and demands often produces nimby movements, but the lack of concertation with other areas and, in some cases, the importance of ethnical identities and vertical solidarity, prevents the constitution of a civil society.

Ebola in town

- Ebola has enlightened some characteristics and problems of Conakry.
- Resistances and retices are stronger in areas where there is a resentment against the State.
- The associations of women and young people are very important in shaping the public opinion, in spreading news and rumors.
- The self-isolation of some urban areas results in the idea that «Ebola does not exist in our neighbourhood, if it exists it has been brought by «strangers» living in other areas. Some urban areas perceive themselves as fortresses and stigmatize other areas where there are Ebola cases.