Everyday Transnationalism and the Postcolony in West Africa

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West Africa is a paradoxical region when it comes to the tension between the nation-state and the transnational. It stems from fundamental continuity of state power inherited from colonizers in postcolonial situations. The discursive grid of the postcolony is more robust than most observers would expect to find in a region like West Africa. Everyday, as opposed to formal-institutional, transnationalism turns out to be a more important. In West Africa, transnationalism is a tactical matter with regard to everyday life. There are not so much efforts to alter the discursive grid of the postcolony, but to begin to erect an alternative discursive grid, such as a joking kinship. Joking kinship ignores the discursive grid of the postcolony, and lays down in identity and imagination the basis for an entirely different, more transnational framework for political belonging.

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There is no other place on the planet where political maps are so deceptive –
where in fact, they tell such lies – as in West Africa.

<div align="right">Robert Kaplan "The Coming Anarchy," 1994</div>

The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses,
drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order.

<div align="right">Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 1984</div>

Introduction

West Africa appears home to the most quintessential weak states of the
postcolonial world. Most borders reflect almost nothing more than the
caprice of colonial cartographers. States float above society. Governments can
extract only easy-to-grab resources, coerce and brutalize obvious opponents.
They are anemic when it comes to broad-based revenue generation,
providing comprehensive public services, or "capturing" peasantries. States
collapse on a seemingly annual basis, with some of the most celebrated cases
of disintegration of order and political community clustered in this small
region — Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, plus near collapses in Guinea-
Bissua and Guinea-Conakry since the early 1990s (Herbst, 2000; Hyden,
2005; Reno, 1998).

But this is a first glance, a journalist's eye view from a taxi cab racing
from airport to Hilton, the way a popularizer like Robert Kaplan (1994)
oversimplifies West Africa. There are two other important layers missed in
this superficial account. First, state and society across West Africa are woven
together in what Achille Mbembe (1992, 2001) refers to as shared epistemes
of the grotesque, of brutal, excessive displays of embodied power that
constitute the postcolony. Even when the state collapses, the discursive logic
and practices of the postcolony persist.

Even so, Mbembe tells a story that makes a fetish of state power within
the postcolony, idealizing and reifying disciplinary power in classic
Foucauldian terms. This misses the second layer of West Africa reality, the
ongoing unraveling of postcolonial polity, economy, community, and
consciousness through the weaving of new mechanisms of transnational
connection across the region. This is partly an elite project of "building
transnationalism," of sometimes fairly deliberate EU-envy, sometimes more
rooted forms of institutional creativity.

Drawing on Certeau (1984), it is also a "tactical" project, a consequence

of everyday life within the postcolony and through emergent transnational channels and symbols. Everyday life increasingly traces, in movement of bodies, in daily practice, and in quotidian imagination, webs of transnational linkage that work around, undermine, and eventually render irrelevant the postcolonial order.

As we will see with reference to regional common currency, regional organizations, and regional imaginations of pan-ethnic "joking kinship," everyday life rips open gaps and fissures in the grid-like disciplinary order of the postcolony. In part, this quotidian ripping and tearing helps constitute transnational spaces and circuits of interaction that turn the purportedly smooth and seamless order of postcolonial states in West Africa into what Certeau calls a "sieve order… everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning" (1984: 107). The sieve is punctured with holes that make possible new forms of transnational interaction, imagination, and being. At the end of the day, West Africa, a world region dismissed as among the most pathological and primitive, turns out to be a setting for remarkable institutional creativity, rich in comparative lessons for other places unraveling the postcolonial situation in part as a consequence of transnationalism.

There are three layers to the analysis in this paper. First, we set aside here and now all too familiar, simplistic characterizations of the region, àla Robert Kaplan, as the location par excellence of state disintegration, child warriors, brutal civic strife, crushing poverty, endemic disease, butchering monkeys for meat and the like. While not entirely based in fantasy, this imagery, like the imaginary beasts depicted in West African "terra incognita" on 15th century European maps, tells us less about political and social realities in the region, more about the Western imagination and the place still occupied by West Africa in the ongoing construction of Orientalisms.

Second, in the section that follows, we switch guides from Kaplan to Mbembe. He helps us understand the region in terms of the discursive web that is the postcolony. It's known elsewhere in the world, but Africa best illustrates its grandiose claims to majesty, its clumsy efforts at lifeworld colonization, its monopolization of everyday imagery of power, the way it constitutes and reproduces — even in the absence of the state itself — a set of assumptions, orientations, expectations and practices about the nature of authority and the exercise of domination. On this tour, we see some of the hidden mechanisms behind more durable and pervasive forms of political community than we might expect to find at first glance. The postcolony lives on, in spite of its institutional weakness, even given the ruptures and tears it suffers at the hands of everyday actors. Before we can make sense of the

tactics that produce a transnational sieve order (below), we need to first appreciate the postcolony as a would-be strategic order, however sundered.

Third, we consider the transnational dimension of the story. Yes, transnational institutions are emerging across the region's postcolonies. But we are still a long way from meaningful, EU-style regionalism, and the integrating power of neoliberal marketization is actually rather weak here. Something else is going on. At a more quotidian, mundane level, everyday practice and imagination trace out transnational linkages and spaces. Drawing on Certeau's notion of the transformative power of everyday life, of what he calls "tactical" action, I explore how would-be elites, as well as ordinary people, stitch together new pathways of interaction and myths of regional-scale kinship, history and community. These constitute a transnationalism of the everyday that eludes a political science of formal power, but is central to understanding how ordinary, mundane, lived experience rework national and cultural order in West Africa.

Postcolony as Discursive Grid

For Cameroonian social theorist Achille Mbembe (1992, 2001), the state in Africa must be understood not in the way we think of the liberal modern nation state in the European tradition. This abstracts and falsely exports individualistic social orders, legal rational bureaucracies and secular notions of citizenship, not to mention an idealized balance between an official public realm and some zone outside of the state known as "civil society." The genetic legacies of the colonial state are too compelling to equate the African state with its metropolitan counterparts.

Crawford Young (1994) makes a similar point, recognizing that colonialism built a "hypertrophic" state in Africa, overdeveloped and out of proportion to society in terms of extractive and coercive means, frail and weak in terms of social mobilization, service provision and moral legitimacy. Young evocatively labels the hypertrophic colonial state with the KiKongo term used to describe US mercenary Henry Stanley in the days of the Belgian Congo, and later to describe the colonial state itself: *Bula Matari*, the Crusher of Rocks.

While many observers expected African independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s to throw off the yoke of Bula Matari and help found a new kind of relationship between state and society, this proved utopian. The structural legacy of the colonial state was too pervasive. Control of the

machinery of state by newly independent elites meant control of the most effective and expansive means to accumulate wealth, status, and power in postcolonial settings. Opportunities in the economy (such as they were) and in "civil society" (however amorphously conceptualized) were insignificant by comparison to the resources, privilege, clients and standing one could accumulate through control of the public sector. Giving up such control through the "gracious losing" at the heart of democratic politics, was a kind of political, economic and social status suicide for oneself and one's allies. Democratic instability, coups d'etats, single party regimes, personal rule, prebendalism, neo-patrimonialism naturally followed. It turned out that the postcolonial state was as much Bula Matari as the colonial regime it supposedly replaced.

Young's hypertrophic state, Bula Matari, creates a kind of moral dilemma of community and legitimacy. As Peter Ekeh put it so clearly and succinctly in 1975, there are really two publics in postcolonial regions like West Africa. On the one hand, there is an official or what Ekeh called a "civic" public, associated with the legacy of the colonial state, a legacy of coercive power, brutal extraction of resources, arbitrary privilege, and moral illegitimacy stemming from alien origins and the ongoing abuse of power by postcolonial elites who could not but be tempted to use Bula Matari to their personal advantage. Against this illegitimate official or civic public emerges a series of informal publics that Ekeh labels "primordial" publics. The adjective is unfortunate, the concept sound. These non-official publics center around non-state forms of association which seem historic and culturally rooted (Ekeh does treat them as recent cultural concoctions (see, for example, p. 105), in no way essentialist features of a timeless past, thus the trouble with calling them "primordial"). They are invested with all the legitimacy and public morality lacking in the official or civic public. They are alternative zones of association, sometimes centered on kin, or on ethnicity, or religion, other forms of solidarity. One voluntarily makes sacrifices for these unofficial publics. When possible, one steals from or ignores the needs of the central official public for the sake of the unofficial public. The tension between the two renders the state structurally weak and increasingly illegitimate in the postcolonial situation.

Achille Mbembe builds on Young, Ekeh and others to deepen this understanding of the fundamental continuity of state power inherited from colonizers in postcolonial situations. For Mbembe this continuity is so profound that it makes sense to simply re-label the supposedly sovereign territory bequeathed by independence as "the postcolony." Riffing Mikhail

Bakhtin, Mbembe captures the brittle, totalizing, omnipresent, fragile, overbearing, state power within the postcolony as the *commandement*, a totalistic, authoritarian polity that uses spectacular, grotesque displays of extraordinary, personalized power to "constitute its majesty" (2001: 24-28).

Mbembe instead insists that the postcolony rests on "a peculiar logic of conviviality…which inscribes dominant and the dominated in the same episteme" (1992: 10). Postcolonial subjects reproduce the same logic of lechery, consumption, domination, and sexual violence articulated by the *commandement*. And the *commandement* does not simply dictate: it is parasitic on these same logics and practices out in society. As society innovates new ways to shirk, to mock, to humiliate and brutalize within its own ranks, the *commandement* sees and learns, and makes popular practices of venality and violence its own, completing the circle of discursive mutual constitution.

Even when the *commandement* disintegrates, even in situations of state collapse, the logic of predation, prebendalism, personalistic domination, of the grotesque inscription of power on the bodies of postcolonial subjects, reproduces itself in microcosm among many warlords and in "nanocosm" in acts of violence by child soldiers on civilians, and on other child soldiers (see, for example, Reno on Liberia (1994) and Hirsch on Sierra Leone (2001)). The logic of the postcolony persists even in the collapse of the *commandement* itself. It disperses out into society, ready for reconstitution in the new locus of postcolonial state power when the center re-establishes itself.

In this sense, the West African postcolony is hardly a "weak" state or a state that cannot "penetrate" society. It's not a political form that lends itself well to phallic metaphors that separate state as phallus from society as orifice (Migdal, 2002). In spite of schizophrenic hypertrophy and incapacities for governance, it is more than anything else a discursive field, a way of thinking about relationships of power violence, control, brutality and extraction. Mbembe wants to argue that it establishes a disciplinary, normalizing grid, of course in the Foucauldian sense, because of its ability to normalize certain assumptions and patterns about the nature and use of power. Nothing demonstrates the normalization of this disciplinary grid more effectively than its replication out in society in the moments when the state itself, the commandement, ceases to exist (as in Sierra Leone, Liberia, northern Uganda, Somalia, Côte d'Ivoire, to name the most recent examples).

Transnationalism vs. the Postcolonial Grid

Mbembe's logic is impeccably Foucauldian, and thus impeccably insightful with regard to the formation, reproduction, and disappearance into the taken-for-granted of a certain disciplinary grid that constitutes the postcolony and makes the state in West Africa more durable and important than one might expect at first glance. But as we will see, because the Foucauldian logic itself misses how living within disciplinary grids is pregnant with possibilities for resistance, Mbembe's African postcolony comes out more reified and stable than it really is.

Critically, transnationalism does not necessarily help constitute an alternative, globalized disciplinary order, and in some cases can ironically emerge as an anti-disciplinary, emancipatory force. This is not always the case, and it certainly would not be true in West Africa if the global mechanisms of neo-liberal marketization and associated cultural and political standardization were more pronounced. But they are weak in this region.

We can think of transnationalism *against* the discursive grid of the postcolony because here transnationalism is a force for regionalism and a light and incipient supra-nationalism. We see this at a superficial level in terms of regional formal organizations. We see this more deeply if we venture away from Mbembe and Foucault, away from pervasive disciplinary power, toward Michel de Certeau and the interplay between grid orders and everyday action that pokes holes in grids, making sieve orders. We then can see, in the final section of this paper, everyday forms of envisioning and making transnationalism in the realm of political imagination and cultural identity.

Organizational Transnationalism: Building an Alternate Grid

Given the weakness of the nation state in West Africa, one might expect the region to be ripe for transnational reformulation. There is some evidence that this reformulation is taking place at the level of formal regional organizations. While these are not trivial, they are incomplete, partial, and like the state itself, tend to float above society. Everyday, as opposed to formal-institutional, transnationalism, turns out to be a more important, if elusive, force, as we'll see below.

Weak states of the region have long banded together to form regional organizations with varying degrees of responsibility and importance. Some of

these they inherited directly from colonialism. For example, the fourteen francophone ex-colonies in the region shared a common colonial currency since 1945, the Communauté Financière Africaine Franc (CFA franc). Largely as a result of French influence, they never decolonized their monetary policies on independence, maintaining the colonial currency to this day, even after the metropolitan franc itself ceased to exist in 2002 with the advent of the euro (Daffé, 2009). On the surface, it would seem that francophone West Africa enjoyed a Maastricht level of currency integration for decades before the realization of a common currency in Europe.

But this belies the fact that the CFA franc is and always has been a fictive currency, a kind of West African monopoly money. The currency is pegged at a fixed rate to the euro; before the euro it was pegged directly to the French franc. The currency does not trade on international markets, and its value reflects the strength or weakness of the EU economy, not the particularities of growth, inflation, investment potential and the like in West Africa. Especially given the strength of the euro in international currency markets, the high value of the CFA makes it relatively difficult for commodity exporters (such as cotton producers across the region), whose comparative advantage is otherwise considerable (Touréand Compaoré, 2003) to compete internationally. At the same time, elites who can afford imported manufactured and luxury goods retain a relatively privileged position.

Autonomous regional organizations do exist: the Club du Sahel, the Mano River Union, the Senegal River Basin Authority, represent real efforts on the part of weak states to develop joint policies for managing shared ecosystems or tackle common development challenges (Foroutan, 1996). The most extensive and effective such organization, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) began life in 1975 as a mechanism for integration of economic policy and the promotion of trade and investment (Levitt, 1998). But its role in this realm has been largely to provide a consultative forum for national economic leaders and to offer advice.

In the last fifteen years, ECOWAS became more renowned for its Nigerian-led efforts at peacekeeping in the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone. As the regional demographic and economic powerhouse, Nigeria was able to convert ECOWAS into a forum for its assertion of regional leadership in the name of humanitarian interventions in crises in the more fragile micro-states of the neighborhood. Abuses of power, petty acts of violence and corruption, and a fair margin of incompetence and unprofessionalism by ECOWAS peacekeepers partially undermined the cause of ECOWAS-led regional integration (Møller, 2009). But the fact remains that West African

weak states did more than even the EU in the face of subnational conflict within their region. Whereas Europe had to stand by and let the US solve its mid 1990s conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Nigeria corralled its ECOWAS partners into at least attempting regional scale, transnational solutions to the collapse of state authority. The experience and lessons could lay a groundwork for better organized, better trained and better equipped efforts in the future.

More recently, the Senegalese president, Abdoulaye Wade, along with then-South African counterpart Thabo Mbeki, launched a major new public relations, aid, and investment promoting initiative to (re-)build regional transportation and economic infrastructure — the New Economic Plan for African Development (NEPAD). Wade spent a good part of his first seven years in office parlaying his not inconsiderable international legitimacy (first opposition party leader ever elected to the presidency in Senegal, the most democratic and stable country in the region) convincing European, North American and Japanese development partners and investors that the future for Africa begins with an influx of capital to reconstruct infrastructure on a regional scale. The rhetoric harkens back to the heyday of modernization theory — the development engine will be private sector investment and industrialization, but it will be primed by public sector investment in the necessary infrastructure to attract investment. The kind of projects promised could indeed jump start regional trade, new flows of labor, and new forms of economic integration that would further undermine the weak nation states of West Africa. While the rhetoric of the NEPAD has been fully transnational and regional, the reality has been that Senegal and a few other countries have been the main beneficiaries of rather limited flows of new aid and investment in infrastructural projects.

So the *idea* of formal organizational transnationalism continues to circulate in West Africa. Policymakers, business elites, even military leaders in the larger and more important countries have tried in various incomplete ways to transcend the limitations and boundaries of the region's weak juridical states. These are not so much efforts to alter the discursive grid of the postcolony, but to begin to erect an alternative discursive grid. In Certeau's terms, laid out below, formal organizational transnationalism is the building of a new "proper," a new strategic order that competes with and challenges the existing strategic order, the existing proper of the postcolony. For now, the resources, political will and organization capacity to mount a wholesale alternative strategic transnational order do not exist in the region. But as the next section suggests, this does not preclude other, less

empowered, less strategic and proper efforts at transnational reordering.

Certeau, Strategic Grids and Tactical Uses

The real action in terms of transnationalism lies below the level of formal organizational innovation or large-scale economic investment and trade. In West Africa, as in many regions, transnationalism exists in a space of everyday action: literal movement of bodies without regard for borders, the flow of cultural products, and most importantly, the ongoing ferment of new forms of political imagination, membership and identity that tear at the discursive fabric of the postcolonial order.

We'll look (in the section below) at a few empirical examples of this sort of everyday transnationalism. But first, we need to situate this notion of the everyday in Michel de Certeau's distinction between tactical action associated with use and consumption as characteristics of everyday life, as opposed to proper strategic action in the service of a discursive grid.

Certeau's (1984) paired concepts of *strategic* and *tactical* action help us understand the field of play in which to locate the three empirical processes central to this article: the discursive power of the postcolony, partial efforts to build transnational organizations described above, and the everyday modes of unauthorized transnational rupture discussed in the next section. Certeau, revealing his debt to echoing Lefebvre (1961), argues that strategic action begins from a "spatial position," a physical place of power. It establishes a sense of "proper" procedures and operations, which it seeks to expand into new social domains. Organizations (think military organizations, corporations, urban planners, ministries of agriculture) occupy strategic positions of power, from which they expand a grid to order action, thinking, and the sense of what is possible. In organizing a military encampment, for example, one establishes locations for sequenced procedures: barracks for sleeping, parade grounds for reveille and surveillance, cantina for eating, training grounds for various forms of practice, cantina as bar for relaxation in the evening, etc. This strategic power uses control over space to designate when certain actions should occur, thus arranging proper sequences, a way of achieving a "triumph of place over time."

The postcolonial commandement, as well incomplete, fragmentary efforts to build transnational organizations in the region, are both efforts to build and expand strategic orders. The first has the benefit of more than a century of colonial state formation; the latter is newer and more insurgent, but no less strategic.

Certeau offers an antidote to this Foucauldian totalization: everyday "tactical" action, small acts of appropriation and unauthorized use of the grid-like strategic orders in which we live. Unlike strategic action, tactical action does not originate from a "position," a place of organized power, and so it cannot establish its own version of a "proper" to be imposed and expanded spatially. Lacking strategic position or command over spatial resources, ordinary-life tactical action relies on something more ubiquitous, available to anyone: surpluses of memory. Through tactics, everyday actors draw upon repertoires of former actions and memory to craft a new "move," a "coup," or novel way of acting or speaking which creatively "manipulates spatial organizations," combining or juxtaposing features of the established, strategic order with remembered forms to generate a sudden novel alternative. Tactical action recrafts bits of memory to form new narrative, to make a "a story jerry-built out of elements taken from common sayings, an allusive and fragmentary story whose gaps mesh with the social practices it symbolizes" (Certeau, 1984: 102). In so doing, tactics pin their hopes on the clever "utilization of time" to introduce "play" into the "foundations of power."

Tactics are characteristic of all forms of everyday action. Take cooking: we alter and improve recipes through improvisation. So no batch of homemade scones is ever twice the same. Walking in the city is just the same: despite sidewalks and well marked street crossings, we create an experience in use of the city grid by following our own personal, meandering pathways formed by the appeal of unexpected sights, smells, sounds, and encounters.

Reading is an especially salient example, given its ubiquity. A written text is a strategic grid, with words placed on a page in a particular order. A series of ideas, stories, examples and allusions are spatially arranged to create a particular sequence of "consumption," with a particular effect for the reader. But regardless of authorial intent, few people read serially from start to finish. We skim, jump to the end, look for especially interesting or relevant passages. Moreover, as we read any text, our minds wander, we are reminded of this or that experience, we look at something happening outside our window, we remember something else we once read, or some supporting evidence or countervailing example. Any given reading thus creates a distinct experience and a distinct reproduction in memory of an original text. There is creative power in every act of reading. True, no new physical book is created through this process of tactical consumption. Yet there is also no way to remove this ubiquitous power from everyday actors and everyday action.

Tactics, then, are "makeshift things." "They are composed of the world's

debris." Ephemeral as they are, they do strategic orders. Although they don't alter the spatial nature of the grid, they introduce "things *extra* and *other* into the accepted framework, the imposed order." As a result, "the surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order." (Certeau, 1984: 107)

Thus, in distinguishing tactic from strategy, Certeau paints a picture of what we might think of as the "institutional order" of the nation or transnationalism very different from conventional accounts in political science and sociology. Where institutions, in these disciplines, create order by shaping, guiding, determining action, in Certeau's world, strategic and tactical action generate, at once, a spatial and a "sieve order" — a grid torn/punctured/frayed by time and tactical coups.

Everyday Transnationalism: Tearing the Postcolonial Grid

In West Africa, transnationalism is a tactical matter, in the sense Certeau has in mind with regard to everyday life. This is true on many levels. Every day, private cars, mopeds, and horse carts smuggle thousands of pounds of cheap sugar, rice and cooking oil from Gambia (with its own low-value currency) into Senegal, in the overvalued CFA zone (Richmond, 1993). Workers illegally migrate from low wage, underdeveloped Burkina Faso, Mali or Niger to higher wage Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal or Nigeria looking for odd jobs of any kind (Adepoju, 2003). In so doing they take advantage of the ambiguous relationship between ethnicity and nation to "become" for a time Ivoirian, Senegalese, or Nigerian, adopting the language, customs and even surnames from the society they seek to enter (Ndiaye, 1992).

Informal economies and migration networks of this sort abound in the region. They enable actors with no particular "position," no capacity to build a "proper" national political order of their own to nevertheless "use" the spatial order of borders and national difference in the postcolonial grid system to their own advantage. Ordinary people distort and alter the grid in ways that produce transnational migratory and citizenship holes in the sieve order of postcolonial/national political space.

At another level, of political imagination and identity formation, we find similar tactical operations of disruption that alter the postcolonial national political identity grid as well as notions of ethnicity and culture. This can be seen with regard to many symbolic repertoires and forms of cultural identity, such as religion, especially Sufi Islam and evangelical Protestantism (Villalón,

1995; Maegher, 2009), music, especially deliberate syncretisms of griot and pop forms (Tang, 2009), and sports, especially soccer and *lutte* or "traditional wrestling" (Onishi, 2002). For our purposes here, however, I will focus on fictive familial networks associated with the region wide practice of building, deploying and reworking "joking kinships."

Joking kinships are imagined bonds of relatedness that link a variety of groups in society. They crop up between grandparents and grandchildren, married people and their in-laws, major families within ethnic groups, and between some ethnic groups. The widespread nature of the practice suggests lines of tactical innovation and transformation, as discussed below. As observed in the founding colonial anthropological works on the subject,[1] and in more recent scholarship (Stevens, 1978; Hagberg, 2002; Canut, 2002), joking kinship typically centers on regularized patterns of mutual ribbing, insulting and teasing, with primary themes of historic subordination/slavery and food insecurity.

For example, in Senegal, upon meeting a person of the Serer ethnic group, a person from the Tukolor ethnic group might include among the usual greetings a jab like "Oh, you're a Serer? Then you're my slave." To which it would be appropriate for the Serer person to retort, "No, no, all Tukolors are the slaves of the Serer." Or Serer neighbors with last name Faye and Diouf, also understood to have a joking kinship, might follow this exchange: "Diouf? Diouf, you all eat too much." "Oh, you Fayes, you can't invite a Faye over to your house, because you will never have enough food to feed him." Both parties might continue this type of mutually insulting banter for a short time, and greetings aside, move on to everyday conversation or the particular subject that brings them together.

Beyond these regularized insults, the usual practice and rhetoric of joking kinship prohibits open conflict between metaphorical cousins. Joking kin are expected, in spite of (or perhaps *because* of) the teasing, to show special willingness to support or provide material resources when their "cousins" are in need. Moreover, it is widely understood that joking kin are especially suited to intervene in the internal conflicts of the group with whom they are paired as cousins.

As an ideological or rhetorical structure, joking kinship seems to deploy metaphorical cousin bonds or vague notions of quasi-kinship alliance to

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[1] The anthropological classics on joking kinship from the era of colonial codification of culture include Radcliffe-Brown (1940), Griaule (1948), Richards (1937), Paulme (1939), Labouret (1929), and Mauss (1927).

conceal or redirect historical memories of past conflict and/or shared trauma, or to mitigate potential circumstances of conflict in the present day. Oft-repeated banter about slavery and subordination support the idea of joking kinship as ideological salve on historic subordination, or hegemonic tool for maintenance of hierarchy (Foueré, 2004; Smith, 2004).

Oral historical accounts I have gathered over two decades in rural Senegal concur, suggesting tactical innovation and reorientation of joking kinship. Practices that were once centered on relations within or between families have been scaled up to apply more regularly to inter-ethnic relations. For my informants and some outside observers, this reflects the end of overt inter-ethnic conflict with the early 20th century colonial peace. Widely recognized accounts of the deep history of the origins of inter-ethnic joking kinship are thus newly invented traditions (in the Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) sense), promulgated recently to lend historicity to new social arrangements.[2]

Where we see joking kinship, we see mutability, transformation, tactical redeployment of a resource that takes different forms in different contexts. The social dispersal of these lines of ludic fictive kinship suggests historic mutability. Joking kinships of similar form between ethnicities, families, in-laws, grandparents and grandchildren suggests a series of tactical historic redeployments of a familiar and usable trope or pattern to address a range of forms of social tension.

The deployment of joking kinship interferes with and problematizes the strictly national identity grid of the postcolony by positing an alternative imagination of culture and community that presents itself as *historically* transnational in spite of the ongoing inventive way it is reworked and deployed.

Thus, Senegalese sociologist Raphaël Ndiaye (1992) argues for a link

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[2] See, for example, the tale widely told in Senegal to explain joking kinship between Serer and Diola ethnic groups. In this story, two sisters, Aguène and Diambone, are said to have set out together in a pirogue (large dugout canoe), encountering a terrible storm that sundered the vessel. One of them floated towards the Siin-Saluum estuary and became the progenitor of the Serer people; the other towards the mouth of the Casamance River to become the founder of the Diola people (Ndiaye, 1992; Sambou, 2005a). Accounts such as Aguène and Diambone, or the founding story of the Bozo and Dogon joking kinship in Mali, suggest the diversity and tactical variability of historical origins of the practice. In the Malian story a Bozo mother, setting out on a long journey, once entrusted her children to her Dogon friend while she journeyed. When famine struck the Dogon community, the Bozo children were close to starvation. The Dogon foster parent cut off and cooked part of her leg to feed to the entrusted Bozon children, ensuring that they did not starve, and, as the story goes, forging a joking kinship alliance between the two groups.

between present day joking alliances and regional migration patterns. He suggests that over many centuries, as individuals moved across what are now national boundaries, they used existing and new joking kinships to insert themselves into local economic and political relationships. Regional correspondences between migrant and resident groups are made possible, Ndiaye suggests, by evoking the ancestral origins, alliances and movements of the various ethnicities now spread across West Africa. In this view, the major ethnic groups of West Africa descend from a small set of extended family clans historically rooted in or near the old empire of Mali. As these families gradually came into conflict, cleaved, and eventually migrated across the region, they retained memory of their homeland and heritage, even as they took up residence in new locales. In those new settings, they adopted new names.[3]

Repeated migration created identifiable patterns of name transformation, so that an ethnically Bamana person from Mali named Traoréwould, on moving to Senegal, take up the ethnically Wolof name of Diop. Traorés and Diops are interchangeable names for migrants going from Mali to Senegal or vice versa (Ndiaye, 1992). Traorés are joking kin with Coulibalys in Mali; Diops with Falls in Senegal. When our hypothetical Traorémigrant sets up residence in Dakar and becomes a Diop, she immediately inserts herself in supportive and instrumentally useful joking relations with people of surname Fall in the new locale. In contexts of ongoing migration and fluidity of identity (accelerated in colonial and postcolonial times) joking kinship becomes a tactical, everyday means to evoke bonds of solidarity with erstwhile allies or with communities "descended" in the same family tree.

Ndiaye himself plays transformatively with joking kinship. He makes a kind of tactical use of it that destabilizes national/postcolony discursive orders by envisioning joking kinship as part of the social webbing for an alternative, more West African conceptualization of political community (Ndiaye, 1992: 98-102, 125-127). In this view, the fluid, recombinant alliances of joking kinship are particularly visible manifestations of the region's history of long-distance trade and the free flow of peoples, goods, and ideas across recently concocted colonial political boundaries. This suggests the basis for an alternative, transnational, pan-West African experience of political community.

In this vein, some recent observers trace the origins of regionally paired

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[3] The migration of the Gelwaar royal matrilineage from Mali to the Siin in Senegal is illustrative. See Kersaint-Gilly (1920).

joking kinship (Traoré-Coulibaly corresponding to Diop-Fall) to the epic tale of political and cultural formation for West Africa, the Sunjata epic (comparable to the Iliad or Ramayana). Quasi-mythic founder Sunjata, according to recent interpretation, laid out the main patterns of joking kinship correspondence for the entire region in his 14th century Charter of Kouroukan Fouga, a founding document of the empire (Leach, 2000). Equated by some with the Magna Carta in its proto-constitutional significance, the Charter of Kouroukan Fougan provides, according to this relatively recent view, an alternative basis for political community which predates and transcends colonial boundaries and offers, through joking kinship, a distinctly non-liberal, yet inclusive basis for political belonging.

For many, this webbing of new cultural history and everyday practice has resonance in terms of regional conflict management. In contrast to Western media accounts of the disintegration of postcolonial states into Hobbesian political anarchy (Kaplan, 1994), some West African intellectuals have picked up the logic of Ndiaye's argument to suggest that joking kinship rooted in long-distance regional migration represents part of a real foundation for building regional economic and other organizations that could supercede the nation-state inherited from colonialism (Fall, 2005; Barry, 2005; Camara, 2005). For some, this might depend also on ceding nation-state autonomy to sub-national units of the scale of pre-colonial micro-kingdoms (such as, in Senegal, Walo, Kayor, Siin, Saluum, etc.). Such a move, which parallels the discourse on sub-regionalization in a newly federated European Union (Haas, 1986), appears both as a cure for regional autonomy/secessionist movements and as a "return" to a more "indigenous" and transnational political geography. Thus, the imaginative, tactical everyday experience of shared identity becomes the "software" that will animate and make useful and meaningful the "hardware" of transnational organizations discussed above.

Indeed, some political actors and intellectuals in West Africa go further to use the existence of joking kinship in the region as the explanation for why the 1990s tragedies of state disintegration were limited to "forest zone" countries. The leading Senegalese promoter of joking kinship as the basis for conflict resolution, Saliou Sambou, a former governor of several regions (including Dakar, the capital city) suggests "if only the people of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire … Rwanda had these kinds of relations like we (Senegalese) have, they would not have experienced these horrors [of genocide]" (Sambou, 2005b).

Governor Sambou tells a personal story of how this joking kinship can

work to mitigate conflict. In Njafaj in the late 1980s, a local conflict was brewing over succession to a Rural Community presidency in a village where I happen to have conducted field research since 1988. The incumbent wished to run for another term in office and had well mobilized clients and supporters who wished to install him. He also faced repeated charges of malfeasance and corruption, which had enraged a great many of his constituents during his previous terms in office. Both sides saw electoral processes as untenable, certain the other would rig the voting. Rumor had it that arms were being collected in anticipation of a violent confrontation at the time of the ballot.

Governor Sambou, when alerted to the situation, came out to the region and convened a meeting of the antagonists. They came with large numbers of their supporters, many armed. Sambou acted tactically. By his own account, he decided to downplay his role as a regional governor, and spontaneously improvise, using joking kinship. He divided the crowds and insisted that if they wanted to harm someone, they should first harm him, their Diola cousin. He mocked and insulted them as Serer (hot-headed, impulsive, stupid, drunk; insults characteristic for a joking cousin). He reminded them that as a joking cousin, if they spilled each others' blood, he would have to drink it: "did they really want him to have drink that much blood?" He convinced the competing groups to accept his mediation, and worked out an arrangement whereby the incumbent Rural Council President stood down, in favor of a candidate whom the incumbent saw as a potential ally and the opposition could tolerate (Sambou, 2005a). Numerous respondents in the villages affected, when recounting this now famous local saga, insist that it was only because Sambou is Diola and evoked joking kinship (and certainly not because he was a Governor) that the conflict was resolved peacefully.

This was the beginning for Sambou, it is worth noting, of his public promotion of joking kinship as a tool to foster ethnic cooperation, national unification and resolution of a long standing secessionist rebellion in the largely Diola southern region of the country, the Casamance. Since his success in Njafaj, Sambou has sponsored plays, television skits and other public re-enactments of the historic *Aguène et Diambone* origin story of Serer-Diola joking kinship. He has gone so far as to publish of a full-color, illustrated, large-print children's book retelling the tale. He sees this as an effort to teach "a new generation of young Senegalese" about their culture and its "virtues" (Sambou, 2005b).

In other countries in the region, similar state actors, as well as civil society forces, subaltern groups, and media outlets deploy certain images of

national political culture and versions of historical memory in the process of recrafting joking kinship in ways they find useful. Hagberg (2006) outlines this in some detail for the editors of the satirical *Journal du Jeudi*, a major public promoter of certain versions of joking kinship in Burkina Faso. Douyon suggests similar mutable deployments of joking kinship depending on who controls and seeks to use which cultural resources and memories in Mali (2006).

In the hands of cultural entrepreneurs like Sambou and his counterparts across the region, we thus see an effort to re-appropriate joking kinship — long an everyday tactical form of reworking identity — in the service of what could be a new "proper," a new strategic order in then making, a new "indigenization" of the nation that might even supercede national frontiers and discourses of the postcolony. Joking kinship as means to national integration and conflict resolution becomes key to the political careers of people like Sambou, as well as the basis for an alternative formulation of what citizenship and political community might mean in West Africa.

Conclusion

West Africa is a paradoxical region when it comes to the tension between the nation-state and the transnational. At first, one sees weakest and artificial polities, ready to disintegrate if one breathes too hard. This of course turns out to be an exaggeration that ignores the nature of Bula Matari, the postcolony and its commandement, which even if they cannot provide services and can barely maintain order in some cases, do constitute meaningful discursive grids. The discursive grid of the postcolony is more robust than most observers would expect to find in a region like West Africa.

This discursive grid is conceptual and empirically important. But like all discursive grids, it depends on strategic power to establish and enforce a proper. To the extent that there are still living human beings within that grid, they use, consume, tweak, alter, and perturb the grid order through the tactics of everyday life. Migration and smuggling show this in material terms. But people in West Africa also practice a tactical distortion of nation-state grid categories in everyday experience by transforming relations of greeting and mocking in ways that establish fluid new lines of kinship, membership and belonging. Joking kinship ignores the discursive grid of the postcolony, and lays down in identity and imagination the basis for an entirely different, more transnational framework for political belonging. Some elites notice this,

and have tried to make political hay of it.

At another level, the analytic shift inspired by Certeau — from discursive strategies to the tactics and perturbations associated with everyday life — reveals mostly ignored and critical dimensions of identity formation, nationalism and transnationalism. All of these structural formations should be understood as sieve orders, ongoing social, political, dialogic processes of making and tearing discursive, strategic grids.

It is not enough, as in the European Union, to build formal institutions from above and strategically call for and clumsily try to establish a "proper" of Europeanness or pan-European culture and identity that mostly means nothing to people (consider the rather abstract and socially sterile debate about Europe as a Christian region, mostly a means to deflect Turkish membership claims; see Foret, 2009). In that case, strategic action finds no resonance, no meaningful correspondence with tactics, and so the project of transnational Europe seems remote, alien, imposed by bureaucrats in Brussels. Europe is a strategic order with few sieve holes in it, insufficient nodes of access for human beings who by their existence poke holes.

Ironically, in West Africa, quite the inverse is true: everyday tactical action produces meaningful experiential forms of transnationalism, making the order of the postcolony a rather porous sieve. But when it comes to the building of a new, alternative transnational order of some sort, there are mostly holes, and a relative lack of metal structure to hold them together as a workable sieve structure.

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