

## **POLITICS AND RITUAL INFANTICIDE: A READING OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN GUINEA-BISSAU FROM POLITICAL THEORY**

**CLAUDIA FAVARATO**

[claudiafavarato@edu.ulisboa.pt](mailto:claudiafavarato@edu.ulisboa.pt)

She is a postdoctoral research fellow with the Humboldt Foundation, based at the University of Bayreuth (Germany). She worked as assistant lecturer at ISCSP, of the University of Lisbon; she obtained a Ph.D. in Political Science and a MS in African Studies from the latter University. In addition to a MS in International Politics and Diplomacy (University of Padua), she worked as visiting researcher at SOAS (University of London). Her main research interests are in political theory and philosophy, with special emphasis on the notions of humanness, political relations, and political community in African and communitarian political thought

### **Abstract**

This analysis takes on the ritual infanticide of the *criança-irân* as an explanatory framework for the recurrent political instability in Guinea-Bissau, using the concepts of humanness and political community. The infanticide is a ritual practice connected to the belief in the existence of spirit-children: some babies are believed to be spirits (*irân*) encased in human flesh. Thus, these beings are neither human nor spirits. This culturally embedded conceptualisation of humanness challenges liberal and communitarian notions on human nature, personhood, and individualism, along with their articulations on the structure of the political community. In my analysis, I consider how this understanding collide with the underpinning of the state – formally, a semi-presidential republic modelled upon the demo-liberal model. I emphasise how the state lacks an organised, coherent, and continued reaction to the practice and the belief. The state's inertia evades the liberal predicaments and legal provisions, which criminalise any infanticide as unlawful termination of a human life. However, politicians, rulers and academics are aware of the phenomenon, and even share the belief in the existence of these "hybrid" humans. Hence, the analysis questions which the relevance and the resilience of endogenous conceptualisation of humanness and political community underpinning the state's response, and their articulations on the strengthening of a stable political sphere.

### **Keywords**

*criança-irân*; humanness; political community; Guinea-Bissau; political instability

### **Resumo**

A presente análise aborda o ritual do infanticídio da criança-irã como quadro explicativo da instabilidade política recorrente na Guiné-Bissau, tendo por base os conceitos de humanidade e comunidade política. O infanticídio é uma prática ritual ligada à crença da existência de crianças-espírito: acredita-se que alguns bebés são espíritos (irã) envoltos em carne humana. Assim, estes seres não são nem humanos nem espíritos. Esta conceptualização culturalmente enraizada da humanidade desafia as noções liberais e comunitárias sobre a natureza humana, a personalidade e o individualismo, juntamente com as suas articulações sobre a estrutura da comunidade política.

Na análise, é considerada a forma como este entendimento colide com os fundamentos do Estado - formalmente, uma república semi-presidencial modelada segundo o sistema demo-liberal. Sublinho como o Estado carece de uma reacção organizada, coerente e continuada à prática e à crença. A inércia do Estado escapa aos predicados liberais e às disposições legais, que criminalizam qualquer infanticídio como interrupção ilegal de uma vida humana. No entanto, políticos, governantes e académicos estão conscientes do fenómeno e até partilham a crença na existência destes seres humanos "híbridos". Assim, a análise questiona qual a relevância e a resiliência da conceptualização endógena de humanidade e da comunidade



política subjacente à resposta do Estado, e as suas articulações no reforço de uma esfera política estável.

**Palavras-chave**

*criança-irã*; humanidade; comunidade política; Guiné-Bissau; instabilidade política

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### **Introduction**

*Meninu ki ka ta pedur. Kil meninu padido ku kabesa garandi. Meninu ki ka ta padidu diritu*<sup>1</sup>. Many are the paraphrases used by Bissau-Guineans to refer to the *meninu di irân*. The latter, also called *criança-irân* in the version closer to Portuguese, denotes those babies who are not regarded to be humans, because of their deviant physical appearance or mental development. Instead, these babies are believed to be spirits (*irân*) encased in human flesh. The ontological essence of the *criança-irân* – neither human nor spirit – casts them in a peculiar, liminal space of the political community, for they are excluded from it. In other words, the hybrid nature of the *meninu di irân* is taken as an exception from the normative order and from the ontology of the human constituting the polity.

The *criança-irân* stands as a signifier of conceptualisations of humanness and the political community, and further sufficing principle of endogenous political thought. It speaks of a polity ordered upon communitarian tenets and underpinned in its own conceptualisation of humanness. The spirit-child phenomenon synthesises local, endogenous understanding of the political, highlighting the latter's distance and independence from the formal model underneath the state. For this reason, my analysis uses the *criança-irân* phenomenon as an explanatory framework for political instability in Guinea-Bissau.

I argue that the foundational discrepancies between state and endogenous powers are to blame for the unsuccessful establishment and strengthening of a stable and univocal political sphere in the country. To ground my critique, I analyse the state's reaction to the belief and practice (ritual infanticide) of the *criança-irân*. In agreement with the legal provisions and liberal ideas that sustain the formal political order, the phenomenon should be criminalised and denounced *tout court* while vigorous action taken for its eradication. Withal, no organised or coherent action against the phenomenon seems to be taken by the state.

An extensive study of the literature in political theory and political philosophy, especially in the subfields of comparative, African and decolonial approaches, supports my analysis. With the final purpose to understand if and how endogenous conceptualisation of humanness and political community are maintained in the state order, I examine the

<sup>1</sup> The baby who is not a human (person). The baby born with a big head. The baby who was not born right. Translation from Kriol by the author.



state's reaction to the *criança-irân* phenomenon through interviews with local informants. The interviews were conducted online (Lisbon-Bissau) between November and December 2020. The results of the qualitative and interpretive analysis are reported in the text as excerpts in the original language (Portuguese), with translation by the author available in the footnotes.

The paper contains five sections, including this introduction. Firstly, I first present a synthetic account of the Bissau-Guinean conceptualisation of humanness, emphasising its interrelatedness to the principles and boundaries of the political community. Having drawn a characterisation of the political principles the *criança-irân* stands for, I consider discrepancies and compatibilities between these and the underpinnings of the state – formally, a semi-presidential republic modelled upon the demo-liberal model. I use the state's reaction to the phenomenon of the spirit-child as element of analysis. In the fourth section, I outline how the mismatched maintenance of endogenous principles in unproper institutional frame gives rise to political instability. The fifth and last section sums up the paper's findings, in lieu of conclusion.

## 1. Spirit children, humanness, and political community

The deeper political significance of the *criança- irân* rests on the normalcy of the phenomenon as part of the endogenous polity. The indigenous political orders include, albeit in the form of the exception or *Homo Sacer* (Agamben, 1995), the non-human beings as a regular element of the polity. Such normative normalisation of the spirit-children phenomenon evades not only generally accepted conceptualisation of humanness but also exceeds the canons of political subjecthood established by main doctrines such as liberalism or communitarianism. These non-human babies question the very idea of humanness.

The *criança- irân* are beings whose humanness is completely denied because their biological body hosts a spirit rather than a soul. The depictions provided by the interviewees is quite clear on this point:

*"[n]ão é um ser natural, normal, não é, não é uma pessoa humana, porque são espíritos ancestrais que têm que voltar às suas origens. Ou porque é irân, ou porque é uma cobra"<sup>2</sup>;*

*"[a]h, tomem cuidado, porque esta criança não é normal, é irân! Portadora de mau espírito"<sup>3</sup>*

referred two NGOs workers<sup>4</sup>.

Rejected from the human community, the *meninu di irân* is not considered part of the semi-physical (Menkiti, 2004b) realm of the spirits either. Local ontology generally

<sup>2</sup> "[s]/he are not a natural being, normal, s/he is not a human person, because they are ancestral spirits who ought to go back to their origins. Or because s/he is an *irân*, or because s/he is a snake". From the online interview with Ana Muscuta Ture, on 24 December 2020.

<sup>3</sup> "Be careful, because this child is not normal, s/he is *irân*. It has a bad spirit." From the semi-structured interview with Carlos Laudolino Medina, in Bissau, 20 October 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The excerpts reported do not reflect opinions or beliefs of the two workers but were part of their answer to characterize who or what a *criança-irân* is.



conceives of body-less entities, such as spirits or ancestors, as actors who can actively and rightfully partake to human affairs in the physical world<sup>5</sup>. In spite of their ontological difference, spirits and dead ancestors are welcome in the human community; their interaction is considered positively and even sought for at times. Instead, the *criança-irân* are regarded a threatening presence among humans. Their existence comes across as a jeopardy or a disruption to the human community (Einarsdóttir, 2004; Jao, 2003), causing their disappearance through ritual infanticide practices<sup>6</sup>.

The ritual infanticide is not as spread as the belief in the existence of the spirit-children, as the extensive data gathered by the Portuguese NGO Fundação Fé e Cooperação (FEC) attest. The physical disappearance of those babies regarded spirit is confined to fewer ethnical groups and geographical areas than the national total (Gonçalves, 2015). Instead, the belief in the existence of these babies finds more acceptance throughout all of Guinea-Bissau, regardless of age, education or religious differentiation (Gonçalves, 2015). The high adherence to the belief points toward grounding bases other than cosmology for the *criança-irân* phenomenon.

The existence of the non-human babies does not proceed solely from, nor is explicable merely with reference to animist grounds. The *criança-irân* is a term of reference with deeper political significance. They epitomise a political reality conceived in its own terms, according to the local conceptualisation of humanness. The latter eschew both the liberal-inspired rationalistic notion and the moral-oriented communitarian idea of the human person.

Liberal and libertarian theories underpin human nature to the inner rationality that distinguishes human beings from other forms of life. In this regard, the instance of "having and being a body" (Habermas, 2003) exemplifies the intrinsic bond existing between one's rational and one's physical side. These theories hardly conceive of entities other-than-physical, or which exit the dualistic physical-metaphysical scheme, grounding the entitlement to partake in the political community in rationalistic and individualistic criteria.

On the other hand, Afro-communitarian theories reduce the centrality of rationality, in favour of relational and moral notions of personhood. These consider relationality and reciprocity as constituting and necessary traits that makes a human being a person (Gyekye, 1997; Matolino, 2018; Menkiti, 1984, 2004a; Tschaepe, 2015). Reciprocation according to culturally defined moral standards draws the thin line that separates humans from persons: while the former represents a biological and given life condition, the second defines the humane mode of life shaping the social and the political. Therefore, persons live their existence in a relational net of mutual dependencies grounded on duties and cooperation (Ikuenobe, 2015; Masolo, 2010). However, would one fail at acquiring or developing personhood (Gyekye, 1997; Ikuenobe, 2018; Menkiti, 1984, 2004a), one

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that there is no uniformity among the several ethnical groups inhabiting the country; moreover, differences are registered also within the same ethnical group or among families. While traditionally animist people like the Pepel consider that *irâns* to take part in many aspects of daily life, including politics, others, like the Fula or the Nalú, do not allow for spirits' interference with social and political affairs.

<sup>6</sup> The primary aim of the ritual practices is to assess the human nature of the infant. The modes which the humanness-test is performed vary, ranging from enduring starvation trials to abandoning in the wilderness to taking the baby to the sea (Carreira, 1971a, 1971b; Einarsdóttir, 2004; Jao, 2003). The latter is overall considered the final and most definitive proof of the baby's nature.



remains a “plain” human: non-persons are not full members of the social and political community yet retain their human dignity. Hence, the Afro-communitarian moral-performative idea of personhood does not suffice to understand the notion of humanness underneath the Bissau-Guinean spirit-children.

The latter finds its rationale in local and culture-embedded ontology. Admittedly, ontology speaks of a broad category which complete discernment is a complex philosophical task. Aimed by the purpose to interpret the idea of humanness, my analysis considers political subjecthood and temporality. These two elements intertwine to form a threefold base, built upon the crisscross of subjects, time, and space.

As briefly mentioned above, Bissau-Guinean ontology extends political subjecthood to body-less or semi-physical entities, such as spirits and dead ancestors. This same criterium applies to define who constitutes the *djorson* (Kriol term for kindred, loosely translated): the ties of the extended family are not limited to living members but include also dead individuals who maintain capacity for agency in the physical world (Brown, 2004). Accordingly, the definition of political subject becomes an a-temporal notion, comprising the realms of the physical and of the semi-physical.

The notion of temporality complements the a-temporality of the political community, as it grants the past a central role in the temporal scale. In contrast to an almost non-existent future (Rettová, 2016) – as the uncertain time that has yet to happen – the past epitomises a constitutive and explicative moment (Nanque, 2017a, 2017b). What occurred provides the foundations for what is today, in a literal and figurative way: the present is the temporal station that grounds on what has been and preserves what was through periodical reproduction. What is more, the past also is entitled central topographical relevance. Whether one consider long gone or recent times, the past represents the epoch in which the founding fathers conquered or settled in their people’s land, in their *tchon*. The bonding of people, land and time not only originated the *djorsons* (Nanque, 2017a) but also set in motion the wheel of time, the ignition of the a-temporal community bonded in this threefold ontology.

The bond to the a-temporal community, sealed in the *djorson’s* related ideas of time and space, determines one’s political humanness. While this seems to come as a given from the argument above, the phenomenon of the *criança-irân* attests to the boundaries of the political community. The spirit-children occupy a liminal space in such configuration of the human and political order: their lack of bonds to the kindred inhibits their belonging to the a-temporal community, insofar as their metaphysical nature detach them from the spatial-temporal continuum. In turn, their liminality allows for their disposability; being outcasted from the polity, the *meninú di irân* are not endowed with the human and political dignity other individuals are.

The ontological grounds of the indigenous polity speak for a conception of the political that foresees the presence of these liminal non-human as part of its normative order. The exceptionality of the *criança-irân*, due to their hybrid nature which pulls them apart from both humans and spirits, places them outside the boundaries of the a-temporal and semi-physical political community. Therefore, according to these tenets, the death of these babies is generally accepted or tolerated, as it is no more than the disappearance of a being void of any human or political weight.



## 2. Guinea-Bissau state's reaction to the *criança-irân*

The ontology shaping indigenous political thought in Guinea-Bissau determines the normalcy of the *criança-irân* existence. That is, the a-temporal, past-centred and organicist political community can accommodate, in normative terms, entities whose political humanness is denied *in toto*. Such denial suffices the exclusion of these babies from the threefold grounds establishing the political community: *djorson*, *tchon* and past-centred temporality. The spirit-children do not justify or build the boundaries of the political community; thus, they are not a *sine qua non* element of the polity. The endogenous conceptualisation of the polity would remain virtually unchanged in its foundational characters would the phenomenon of the *criança-irân* not be present. In this sense, the spirit-children phenomenon substantiates a symbolical term of reference, one case that conveys the deeper significance of a political universe.

The understanding underpinning the indigenous configuration of humanness and power contrasts with the tenets underneath the Guinea-Bissau state. These formally adhere to the principles of the modern state and the inherent notion of humanness and individual that sustain it. Liberal (and libertarian) theories conceive humanness as an ontological status grounded on the autonomy of a rational and atomistic individual; these characters in turn grants the subject's freedom and independence (Ajei, 2016; Levinas, 1991). Therefore, the individual appears as the primary unit and the last aim of the liberal political system: as a citizen, each human carries the ultimate parcel of the nation's sovereign power (Agamben, 1996; Arendt, 1958), while their rights are object of utter protection (Ajei, 2016).

Admittedly, the brief characterisation of liberal political humanness provided above is reductive. The main purpose of this exposition is to emphasise how the grounds underneath the state-liberal and the endogenous conceptualisation of humanness, along with their related theorisations of the political community, differ. From such distinguishability the central puzzle of my analysis emerges: which and how tenets of endogenous political configurations are maintained in the state order? The antagonism or intermingling of these principles speaks for the coherence (or lack of it thereof) of a political order, in which the institutional configurations should match its underpinning principles.

The phenomenon of the *criança-irân* provides a useful analytical tool to inquire on these underpinnings, in light of the referential political significance it carries. Keeping this in mind, my analysis looks at the response from Guinea-Bissau state to the belief and ritual practice performed against the *meninú di irân*. The underlying assumption is that responses and actions undertaken by the state can shed light on the accepted idea of humanness and its forthcoming reverberation on the order of the polity.

From a legal standpoint, Guinea-Bissau condemns acts of infanticide as any other termination of human life, *ex article 110 of the Penal Code*. This condemnation applies to all felonies, regardless of who commits it or of any cultural or religious reasons. Despite this prohibition, of which any average Bissau-Guinean citizen is aware<sup>7</sup>, few cases are

<sup>7</sup> This awareness often appeared in the interviews I conducted in Guinea-Bissau in 2016 and 2019. Many respondents would answer my questions merely according to legal provisions, or they straightforwardly stated that in these days less ritual specialist would admit performing the ritual infanticide in order not to compromise the legality of their actions.





reported or ever reach legal trial. Moreover, the slow and heavy judicial machinery prevents justice from reaching a final verdict, leaving us with a scarcity of material available.

The aura of taboo surrounding the *criança-irân* prevents many people from reporting the phenomenon or the performance of the ritual to authorities. It is believed that speaking of the spirit-children phenomenon brings misfortune; hence, it is not generally publicly discussed.

*"[P]orque é mito, é tabu aqui, todo mundo acredita que é uma crença então [...] é um assunto que não é muito falado"*<sup>8</sup>

states the President of the Association for the People with Disabilities of Guinea-Bissau (FAPD-GB), Vladimir Sano.

The mystery surrounding the *criança-irân* is held responsible also for its missed recognition in public policies and for the lack of state action to confront the phenomenon.

*"[O] Estado, o Estado não reage porque não tem informações. Ou faz... faz-se de não saber. Mas eu acho que não tem informações. Não tem informações. Ou tem, não quer, não quer revelá-las. São duas as coisas. Mas para mim, eu acho que não tem informações neste sentido. Sabe que existe o fenómeno, mas não se sabe quantas pessoas são mortas, por dia, por mês, não se sabe exatamente o que se está a passar sobre este assunto"*<sup>9</sup>.

Notwithstanding the little official information available, all my interviewees (state officials, academics, and NGOs workers) are well-aware of what the two-words definition "*criança-irân*" stands for. Not once I had to clarify what the object of the interview was, indicating a general and broad awareness of what the phenomenon entails. Moreover, many interviewees associated the *criança-irân* to children born with disabilities without any prompt from my side, as the excerpt emphasise:

*"[...] se a criança nasce com deformações, as famílias matam. As famílias matam. Estes que estás a chamar que é criança-irân"*<sup>10</sup>.

State officials remark that the known yet unspoken of phenomenon is an element of "tradition", an instance that "*já vai caindo em desuso, em desatualidade*", manifesting

<sup>8</sup> [B]ecause it is a myth, it is taboo here, everybody beliefs that it is a belief, hence [...] there are not many conversations about it." From the online semi-structured interview with Vladimir Sano, 17 November 2020.

<sup>9</sup> [The] state, the state does not react because it does not have information. Or ... Or it makes out it does not know. It makes out id does not know. But I think it does not have the information. It has no information. Or it has, but it does not want to reveal it. There are two options. But, in my opinion, I believe it does not have any information on the matter. It knows the phenomenon exists, but it does not know how many [children] are killed per day, per month, it is not known exactly what is going on this matter." From the online semi-structured interview with Rui da Fonseca, 10 November 2020.

<sup>10</sup> [...] if the baby is born with malformations, the families would kill [him/her]. Would kill [him/her]. These that you are mentioning that are the *criança-irân*." From the online semi-structured interview with Rui da Fonseca, 10 November 2020.





itself merely as a problem “*reconduzido a zonas recônditas do país*”<sup>11</sup>. Thus, the depiction places in stark contrast the state and the idea of “modernity” it stands for with the native-traditional traits ordering the cultural and political spheres. In this light, the limits to state sovereignty – which do not extend over the totality of the geographical extension of the country – enable the continuation of the spirit-children phenomenon in those areas where the state is little or not at all present.

The PAIGC’s (*Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde*) centripetal move that led to state’s centralisation in the first years after independences is responsible for today’s gap between the rural and urban areas of the country (see Forrest, 2003, 2016). This structure deprives the state of any efficiency and resourcefulness in its peripheral executive branches, such as the *comités de tabanca*. In turn, the lack of state’s effective power translates to failure in policies implementation and sluggish response to the reported instances of *criança-irân*. It often occurs that the state is not aware of the existence of those babies who are accused of being spirit and then disappear:

“[how the state] *pode saber se existe uma criança aqui nesta casa. Passam dois meses, já não existe, não vai encontrar esta criança lá, não existe lá, ninguém pode dar explicação, ninguém procura saber, ninguém faz... nada. Já foi levado na floresta, ou deixado no mar, e ninguém responsabiliza por isso. Estado? Deve assumir, deve criar mecanismos fortes para a condenação destes infratores, deste tipo de atos*”<sup>12</sup>.

The slowness of state institution to respond to reported cases of spirit-children is not the only factor hampering an efficient response to the phenomenon. On the one hand, the Guinea-Bissau state does not possess the means to implement regulation on children rights nor to protect children who are considered non-human.

“[É] *um posicionamento no papel, volto a dizer, não é que o Estado não tenha tomado já medidas etc., há diplomas aprovados a nível da Assembleia [Nacional Popular], mas o mecanismo de controle da sua implementação na prática, da sua execução na prática, nas zonas de risco, e porque são zonas recônditas, esse mecanismo de controle é que não existe. A lei existe. Agora, a aplicação da lei, quem é que vai controlar isto?*”<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> “is already disuse, it is behind time”, manifesting itself merely as a problem “circumscribed to remote areas”. From the online semi-structured interview with Olívio Pereira, 23 November 2020.

<sup>12</sup> “[How the state] can know that a baby [*criança-irân*] is born here, in this house. Two months go by, s/he does not exist anymore, you will not find that baby there, s/he does not exist, nobody can explain. Nobody wants to know, nobody does anything. S/he was already taken to the forest, or abandoned to the sea, and nobody takes responsibility for this. The state? It should take responsibility and create strong mechanisms to condemn those who commit this sort of acts.” From the online semi-structured interview with Vladimir Sano, 17 November 2020.

<sup>13</sup> “[I]t is a posture on paper, I repeat, it is not that the state has not adopted any measures, etc., there are decrees approved by the [National Popular] Assembly, but the control mechanism of its implementation in practice, in the high-risk areas, and as they are remote areas, this control mechanism does not exist. The laws exist. But the application of the law, who has control over it?”. From the online semi-structured interview with Olívio Pereira, 17 November 2020.



On the other hand, there is no clear or open condemnation of the *criança-irân* phenomenon. Mirroring the posture adopted by the average citizen, the state refrains from publicly speaking about the *criança-irân*.

*"[P]elo menos publicamente, mas é um assunto que, que mesmo nas discussões sobre as práticas nefastas, criança-irân... é... é pouco, é pouco discutido, que está pouco, espécie de tabu, que... que quase não surge nas discussões"*<sup>14</sup>.

This omission impacts a *de facto* condemnation of the phenomenon or of the ritual infanticide practice.

The infanticide of the *criança-irân* is not commonly listed among the harmful and prejudicial practices occurring in the country, denounced by human rights activists and NGOs. Therefore, state's condemnation of the ritual infanticide appears as a mere implicit addendum to the broad condemnation of all practices that harm human dignity or endanger the individual's physical integrity or safety. Many of the interviewees read the absence of a clear position as a symptom of weakness, due to the

*"falta [é] vontade políticas, o que falta é, digamos, um plano de Estado"*<sup>15</sup>.

The state lacks any open or strong stand on the *criança-irân* phenomenon. Combined with scarcity of information, sluggish and ineffective action, the Guinea-Bissau state appears inert and silent on the spirit-children phenomenon.

### **3. A young and hybrid political configuration**

The silence and inertia characterising the Guinea-Bissau state response to the *criança-irân* speaks of a political order that regards the phenomenon a taboo, a topic that "*está fora da mesa*"<sup>16</sup> in most political talks. On this regard, the state's posture conflates with that showcased from indigenous powers. Both political orders look at the *criança-irân* as a phenomenon which existence is undeniable, yet it is not confirmed, accepted nor condemned. However, while the outcome of their response does not diverge, their underpinning motives do.

Indigenous political powers react with tolerance toward the infanticide of the non-human babies. A variety of equally valid reasons underlies their position. Often indigenous powers cannot do anything more than facing a done deed, as the decision over the fate of the spirit-child belongs primarily to the baby's family.

<sup>14</sup> [A]t least publicly, but it is a matter that, that even in discussions about harmful practices, *criança-irân* eh... Eh... it is hardly discussed, it is a little, kind of a taboo, that... that almost never comes up in conversations". From the online semi-structured interview with Mamadou Jao, 16 December 2020.

<sup>15</sup> "lack of political will, lack of, let's say, a state plan". From the online semi-structured interview with João Có, 10 November 2020.

<sup>16</sup> "is not on the table". The interviewee, Alsana Negado (online semi-structured interview conducted on 23 November 2020), at the time Chief Executive of Local Powers at the Ministry for Territorial Administration and Local Power, referred to the exclusion of the spirit-children issue from the talks on indigenous authorities' formal recognition by the state.



*“Normalmente, a família desfaz-se da criança mesmo ao nascimento. Matam-no, abandonam-no... e pronto. Mas, portanto, não pode ser, o regulo pode não estar de acordo, mas também não tem muita coisa a dizer”<sup>17</sup>.*

Whether the indigenous chief agrees with the performance of the ritual or not, they might choose to allow it as a means to foster their legitimacy:

*“estas crianças, [they] acreditam que são irâns! Então devem ser afastados senão vão fazer mal a sociedade. Quando é assim, o poder tradicional [...] querem ter o apoio da população para que se diga que eles é que defendem a população. Porque esta posição do poder tradicional depende sempre da legitimidade que tem”<sup>18</sup>.*

In some cases, the authorities are said to partake themselves in the practice, as

*“são eles que são chamados para tratar daqueles rituais. Então eles também são cúmplices. Participam. Concorrem com o infanticídio”<sup>19</sup>.*

The diversity in reactions from the indigenous powers points to one common trait, that being tolerance toward the occurrence of the ritual infanticide. Their tolerance conveys a twofold message: on the hand, it signals the hindrance to publicly approve or support the practice because of legal prohibition; on the other hand, it affirms the inclusion of the non-human babies in the normal order of the polity, which inhibits indigenous authorities from banning or condemning the infanticide. While the belief in the existence of non-human babies does not consequently imply their infanticide, the *criança-irân* are regarded as a liminal case of normality in the indigenous political thought. Hence, indigenous powers’ stand corroborates and is coherent with the underpinning tenets of the polity over which they hold sway.

Differently, state’s silence and inertia does not conform with its putative principles, grounded in liberal theories, and its correlate notion of rationalistic individualism. This sort of response does not suffice assumptions on the acceptance of the spirit-children existence as normal political entity as it occurs in the indigenous polity. Nonetheless, it emphasises the syncretism between formal-liberal and indigenous conceptualisation of humanness existing in the political order of the state. Thus, the state appears as a polity in which diverse principles coexist and intermingle, merging the formal and, to a certain extent, exogenous with the informal and endogenous.

<sup>17</sup> Normally, the family gets rid of the child right after birth. {They} kill him/her ... and that is it. But, then, it is not right. The *regulo* can be not in agreement, but there is not much he can say. There is not much he can say.” From the online semi-structured interview with Olívio Pereira, 17 November 2020.

<sup>18</sup> “this *criança-irân*, [they] believe they are *irâns*! They, they must be removed, otherwise they will harm the society. When it is so, the traditional powers [...] they want to hold support in the population so that it will be said that they do, they defend the population. Because this position in the traditional power always depends on the legitimacy it is endowed with.” From the online semi-structured interview with Fode Mane, 28 November 2020.

<sup>19</sup> “they are called to perform the rituals. Hence, they are all accomplices. They are accomplices. They participate. They partake in the ritual of infanticide.” From the online semi-structured interview with Vladimir Sano, 17 November 2020.



Considered through such lenses, the *criança-irân* epitomises a phenomenon that sheds light on the Africanisation occurring in the young state of Guinea-Bissau. In this perspective, the term Africanisation denotes a bi-directional process of reciprocal influence between the endogenous and the exogenous, the formal and the informal, the state and indigenous powers, paving the way toward the establishing of an own normative political order (Chabal, 1992). In this process, different elements are constantly negotiated and reviewed among the polity's members. These include conceptualisations of humanness, but also those on power relations and legitimate authority, among others. The philosophical system a person recognises oneself with is likely to affect their ontological and epistemological understandings; hence, it shapes grounding political conceptions accordingly, regardless of institutional configurations in place.

The distance existing between the principles undergirding indigenous political power and the state are responsible for engendering the hybridism that characterise the Guinea-Bissau state to date. As the analysis through the lenses of the *criança-irân* demonstrate, state and indigenous powers relate to diametrically different ideas of humanness and political community yet their response to the spirit-children phenomenon culminate in alike outcomes. The latter coincidence strengthens the syncretic character bonding the two political orders, which are united in a continuity of power relations notwithstanding institutional differentiation.

The syncretism in the principles creates hybridism in the practice. The state appears as a political order governed under unclear rules, for the inconformity between legal and executive prescriptions with their actual realisation. Moreover, the coexistence of diverse grounding political principles – such as the notion of humanness – causes evident mismatches between political expectations and political actions. These mismatches are not circumscribed to the response to the *criança-irân* phenomenon; they are pervasive of all spheres because they signal the inconformity between principles and political configurations.

The formal state exerting sovereignty in Guinea-Bissau today is not apt to accommodate the principles underpinning the indigenous polity, nor it is constructed to satisfy the latter's demands of a political configuration. It is in this hybrid distortion that instability arises. In the void that the mismatch between principles and configurations create, political opportunism flourish, granting the opportunity for economic and social extraversion through political and extra-political means, as well as misappropriation of power or abuses of the majoritarian democratic system to serve one-sided interests.

## Conclusions

My analysis argues for an understanding of political instability in Guinea-Bissau as the result of a flagrant lack of coherence between principles and political configurations. I demonstrated how the syncretic presence of principles underpinning the indigenous polity in the space of the state becomes an element that engenders hybridism and can cause or cooccurs with instability. To ground my theoretical analysis, I used the phenomenon of the *criança-irân* to emphasise the coexistence of diverging notions of humanness and political community in the political order of the state. The phenomenon was employed instrumentally as a term of reference for a broader political understanding. The state's



silent and inert reaction to the ritual infanticide practice emphasises that it embraces indigenous political notions while not giving those any representation in its configurations. This mismatch is partly responsible and conducive to situations of political instability.

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