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**FULL PAPER**

**NEW MEDIA AND ETHNO-POLITICS IN THE GUINEAN DIASPORA**

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## **New Media and Ethno-Politics in the Guinean Diaspora**

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the resurgence of ethno-politics in Guinea in conjunction with the reintroduction of multiparty politics after three decades of single-party and military rule, and the trend's multilayered repercussion into the Guinean Diaspora of North America. It further examines the principal ways in which ethno-regionalist organisations populating that Diaspora use and misuse new media outlets (web sites, web radio stations, and blogs) in order to promote the political agenda of their respective ethno-political elites. The article scrutinises the deficit of professionalism that characterises the performance of most of those publishing on such web sites and broadcasting on such stations and the effects of their discourse upon Guinea's democratisation process. Additionally, the article analyses the concerted actions of concerned members of the same Diaspora aimed at mitigating the impact of ethno-politics.

**Key Words:** Democratisation; Diaspora; ethnocentricity; ethno-politics; Facebook; Internet; New media; transition; Twitter.

## Introduction

The assertion “There is no free society without free media and vice versa” has nearly become a cliché, for it underlines the crucial role that classic mass media (i.e., radio, television and the print media) play in the consolidation and sustainment of maturing democracies. At the same time, however, scholars of media and politics have yet to clearly determine what the proper place and role of new media (i.e., the World Wide Web, the Internet, and their multimedia capabilities) ought to be in plural societies transitioning from undemocratic to democratic systems of government. This is so because, though in their infancy, these media have penetrated so fast and so sinuously the multiple spheres of societal communication that media regulators have yet to catch up with them. Furthermore, the democratisation endeavour that swept the African continent in the late 80s-early 90s is still marked by uncertainties and high risks of setback, as the current situation in Mali denotes.

The present article purports to address the complex issue of new media and democratic transition in Africa by exploring the use of new media for the promotion of ethnic identity as a political platform and a tool for community empowerment among Guinean expatriates. It focuses on web sites, web radio, and blogs developed and maintained by individuals and groups most of which are in the United States and Canada. By focusing on the meeting point of new media, ethnicity, and mutipartyism in the political rhetoric and behaviour of some of the most active members of the Guinean citizenry, the study attempts to bring to light the intricacies inherent in the implementation of political pluralism in a society with profound ethnic self-consciousness.

The discussion revolves around two empirical premises, the first of which being that ethnicity is an integral part of the socio-cultural make-up of most, if not all world societies; it is definitely a fundamental component of African cultures, including the political cultures of the post-colonial nation-states. Irrespective of the effects of European colonial divide-and-conquer policies, ethnicity has been a factor in African history and worldviews. As such, ethnic identity is hardly a problem or a source of problem, except when it is manipulated by politicians or other segments of the élite for self-serving reasons. In that context, the concept of ethno-politics is to be understood in this study as the transformation of ethnic identity into a tool of political co-optation of ordinary citizens by manipulating their emotional attachment to that identity.

The second premise is that, because the environment in their host countries is substantially more favourable to freedom of assembly and expression than the one back home, Guineans living in the United States and Canada have been keen to capitalise on

the financial and technological resources available to them and develop potent networks of mass communication. In doing so, they tend to lead the charge in the ongoing struggle for ethnic supremacy that has been pitting ethnic Fulani and Mandenka, mostly, but also Soso and *Forestiers*, against one another. Nevertheless, an increasing number of expatriates are taking actions aimed at mitigating ethnocentricity and promoting a national agenda of democratic governance, sustained by a shared understanding of the dialectic interrelation of the legal and political rights of citizens and their civic duties.

Accordingly, central questions addressed in the article include the following: Is the rhetoric of the new media of the Guinean Diaspora in North America a reflection of dominant socio-political views and behaviours of the larger Guinean society or the outgrowth of realities peculiar to the Diaspora? Whatever the answer to this first question, what predisposes the new media of the Guinean Diaspora in North America to espousing an ethno-regionalist discourse in the name of promoting the self-worth of the communities that they claim to represent? What has been the impact of those media's activities upon Guinea's transition from a long tradition of single-party and military rule to a democratically elected civilian leadership? Last, what is being done in efforts to mitigate the ethnocentric undertone of the discourse in the new media of the Guinean expatriate community and how can such efforts be carried to fruition?

The literature is no longer scarce on the subject of media and democratisation in Africa. In addition to the publications of scholars such as M'Bayo et al. (2000), Hyden et al. (2002), Nyamnjoh (2005), and Nyamnjoh (2011), there are institutional works such as those of Panos Institute West Africa (PIWA), Open Society Initiative West Africa (OSIWA), the West Africa Bureau of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and the West Africa Journalists Association (WAJA). Nevertheless, as indicated earlier, the issue of new media (social media in particular) and democratic transition in Africa remains understudied for the reasons indicated, especially with regard to the politicisation of ethnic identity in plural societies like Guinea.

### **Multipartyism and the Resurgence of Ethno-Politics**

History demonstrates that ethnicity has been at the heart of political mobilisation ever since party politics emerged under French rule after World War Two. It is worth recalling that the first political organisations to emerge in the mid- to late 40s in then-French Guinea were entirely based on ethnic affiliation. With the re-introduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s, following 26 years of single-party rule under Sékou Touré and eight years of no-party military rule under General Lansana Conté, ethno-politics resurged. The proliferation of political parties from a handful in 1992 to 45 by the first multiparty presidential election in December 1993 epitomised that

resurgence, as did and the ethnically charged presidential campaign and the subsequent parliamentary elections in 1995.

Even though the most important of those political parties managed to project a semblance of multiethnic composition by symbolically placing in prominent posts members of ethnic groups different from the one with which each party identified implicitly, the ethnic nature of Guinean political pluralism was obvious. Thus, Alpha Condé's *Rassemblement du peuple de Guinée* (RPG or Rally of the Guinean People) has been known as the Mandenka party. Likewise, Siradiou Diallo's *Parti du Progrès et du Renouveau* (PRP or Revival and Progress Party), and Mamadou Ba's *Union pour la nouvelle république* (UNR or Union for the New Republic) were unmistakably Fulani, whereas the *Parti de l'unité et du progrès* (PUP or Unity and Progress Party), which was formed around seating President Lansana Conté, was essentially dominated by the Soso. In the case of this latter party, though, things were somewhat more nuanced, simply because it could afford to co-opt most state employees, by virtue of being the de facto ruling party even before the national elections.

This state of affairs prompted Jean Marie Doré, the head of the *Union pour le progrès de la Guinée* (UPG or Union for the Progress of Guinea) and main *Forestier* opposition leader, to argue that his party was uniquely positioned to bring about true democracy while preserving national unity. His underlying argument was that, whereas the magnitude of the ethnic bases of his opponents gives them an illusion of self-sufficiency, success for a party like his in a country so deeply divided along ethno-regionalist lines is predicated in its ability to create political alliances and rule by consensus. Theoretically speaking, Doré's argument does bear some validity, if only because the *Forestier* component of Guinea's population is in fact a conglomerate of several smaller and distinct ethnic groups, including the Guerzé, Toma, Kissi, Mano, Kono, Lélé and Mendé. Whether one agrees with Doré is ultimately of little relevance in this study. Regardless, when considering his approach against today's reality, one is best advised to keep in mind that the Guerzé (Doré's ethnic group) represent 3.1% of Guinea's 10.6 million (2011 est.), the Kissi 2.9%, the Toma 2.3%, and all the other smaller groups not named here 1.7%, whereas the Soso represent 20%, the Mandenka 30%, and the Fulani 40%.

Taking these statistics into account can help the reader understand why the brief and quite eventful rule of Captain Moussa Dadis Camara (December 2008-December 2009) generated a heightened ethno-regionalist sentiment of self-worth, solidarity and, to a certain extent, arrogance among the *Forestier* population in general. It can also provide some insight into the stakes that pitted Fulani against Mandenka during the 2010 presidential campaign. In fact, between July 1984 (date of Diarra Traoré's failed coup) and June 2010 (date of the first round of the last presidential elections), Mandenka bitterness was, arguably, largely directed against the Soso due to the Conté regime's so-called anti-Mandenka rampage. However, it was quickly redirected against

the Fulani following Cellou Dalein Diallo's big win in that first round. Ever since then, the Soso leadership has gradually retreated from the foreground that it had occupied during Conté's 24 years of rule and now projects itself as the balancing force, if not the mediating entity. Hence, upon taking office, President Alpha Condé was prompt to appoint retired Army General Facinet Touré to the post of Mediator of the Republic in replacement of his fellow Mandenka, Sékou Koureissy Condé. Incidentally, the latter was President Conté's Security minister back in the late 1990s when Alpha Condé was arrested and detained on charges of treason.

Recently, ethno-politics has become a serious threat to internal cohesion and, to a certain extent, to national and regional security and peace in that some extremist segments of the Guinean population have been contemplating armed struggle in order to restore equality. One is inclined to argue that this escalation is due, in part at least, to the merger of ethnicity and socioeconomic class in the post-presidential elections, whereby pre-election inter-ethnic political alliances among the élites fell apart, giving place to rigid ethnic posturing across the national class spectrum. This new reality of Guinean politics fits the "political interaction" paradigm that Naomi Chazan and his colleagues put forward in their analysis of the ethnicity-class-state trilogy in contemporary Africa. As the authors explain, the paradigm emphasises the complexity of group demands that the African state faces, in that it "assumes a constant engagement of rival interests in the contemporary political arena, an interaction among various groups mobilised to secure public resources from those in authority" (Chazan et al., 1999).

One is further inclined to argue that it is the dominant manifestation of the unbalanced political interaction between Alpha Condé's successful political coalition and Cellou Dalein Diallo's unsuccessful one that veteran journalist Mamadou Bowoï Barry, alias Petit Barry, depicted in our interview. Barry contended that Alpha Condé is solely to blame for the current unhealthy climate of ethnocentricity for having opted for ethno-strategy as a means to acquire and monopolise state power. He further alleged that "before, during, and after the 2010 presidential campaign, Condé clearly defined his objectives as follows: establishing a regime based upon the supremacy of the ethnic Mandenka and the isolation of the Fulani community henceforth treated as aliens." (Mamadou Bowoï Barry, independent consultant on democratic governance and decentralisation, personal communication). This interviewee accused President Condé of applying discriminatory policies by systematically purging his administration of Fulani technocrats, otherwise perfectly competent and patriotic, and replacing them with political cronies.

Although Barry's characterisation may not withstand rigorous analytical scrutiny, it does cast a clear light on a crucial aspect of ethnocentricity in Africa; that is, when states fail to behave as truly national authorities groups competing for access to national resources resort to ethnic, regional, or religious pacts in "us-versus-the-other"

scenarios. Donald L. Gordon (2001) imputes such perverse dynamics to state patronage, a client-patron relationship to which, according to the author, most African governments have resorted at one time or another in efforts to build support and defuse opposition. Gordon thus summarises the perverse dynamics: “Citizens ‘tie’ themselves to patrons (from their kinship line, village, or ethnic or regional group) in government who can help them in some way.” He further explains the structural working of state patronage as follows:

Lower-level patrons invariably are clients themselves to a more important patron who may have been responsible for securing his ethnic “brother’s” job in the first place. At the upper end of patron-client networks are “middlemen” clients of the ruling elite. Using political clout, powerful positions, and access to government monetary resources made available by the rulers, these middlemen-patrons not only supply jobs in government but money for schools, health clinics, wells, storage facilities, roads, and other favours to their ethnic groups and regions. Patronage binds local constituencies not only to their network of patronage but also to support for the regime itself (Gordon, 2001).

Understanding the causes and ramifications of this dimension of state-society relationships is paramount if one is to fully understand some of the most insidious challenges to the current democratisation process in Guinea and elsewhere in Africa.

### **Ethno-Politics in the New Media of the Guinean Diaspora of North America**

Scholars of communication and social change have examined the interrelations between the contemporary global information society and the dynamics of ethnic identities. In their studies, emphasis is often placed upon the ways in which the information age influences collective self-perception and the reconstruction of identities. Nils Zurawski points out that both ethnicity and the information age are closely related to social change. He states that ethnicity, “after all, is a social construct that might evolve in one context and change in another; and the information age, through its ‘carrier’ the Internet—and other means of electronic communication technologies—already changes existing social and political structures and undoubtedly will continue doing so in the future” (Zurawski, [www.isoc.org](http://www.isoc.org)).

One of the characteristics of the new media studied in this article is that they constitute something of a hybrid phenomenon between purely new-generation social media (cell phones, Twitter, Facebook) and Internet-supported mass media (full-fledged web sites, web radio, and blogs). Another characteristic, which supports Zurawski’s observation, is that most of the web sites and web radio stations discussed herein are



the surrogates of ethnically based organisations. Because of this rather dubious profile, it is extremely difficult to hold the individuals and groups manning them to the ethical standard required and expected of professional journalists. Indeed, governments, regulatory agencies, and concerned citizens all over the world have been struggling with the extreme communicational elusiveness of the World Wide Web, the Internet, and their multimedia capabilities. A careful consideration of these factors is crucial if one is to clearly understand the perversity with which ethnocentricity permeates the socio-political discourse of the Guinean Diaspora of North America through the new media.

### *Ethno-Politics on the World Wide Web*

Over the past 15 years, the number of web sites owned and operated by Guinean individuals and groups and claiming to be devoted to information and analysis has increased from a handful to over forty. Within the Guinean Diaspora, this category of new media dates back to 1997 with the creation of GuinéeNews.com, which is defined as “a web site solely dedicated to the dissemination of news about the Republic of Guinea.” It was originally posted as Boubah.com, from the name of its Canada-based founder, Boubacar Caba Bah. It was followed by Aminata.com, whose founder, Amadou M’Bonè Diallo, explained in an interview with the media group *Les Faits d’Ici et d’Ailleurs* and the web site *Factuel de Guinée* ([www.factuguinee.com](http://www.factuguinee.com)) that he created the site in an effort to help mitigate what he termed the lack of freedom of expression that the regime of General Lansana Conté had maintained in Guinea. Diallo stated: “I got the idea after listening to Siradiou Diallo and El Hadj Bah Mamadou who declared in political meetings held in New York that the government of President Conté denied them access to the country’s public media” (Mamadou M’Bonè Diallo, [aminata.com](http://aminata.com), April 2012).

GuinéeNews.com is structured in several rubrics, including Political News, Regional News, International News, Economic News and Analysis, Miscellaneous, Communiqués, Advertisement, and Obituaries. Aminata.com has Archives, Forum, Interviews, Opinions, News, Press Digest, and Advertisement. These two web sites have largely functioned as fairly balanced media with no discernible ideological ties with any particular community. This latter observation applies only to a few newcomers such as Lejourguinée.com, which, though generally managed by persons based in the United States, is officially classified as being headquartered in Conakry. The site is comprised of a dozen rubrics: Political News and Analysis, Economic News and Analysis, Culture, Society, Sports, Interviews, Opinions, Miscellaneous, and Advertisement.

The strengths of these particular web sites reside in the fact that, because of the relatively substantial trust and confidence capital that they have mustered from the

readership, they manage to follow events in Guinea, about Guinea, and in the Guinean Diaspora and report on them with a respectable degree of objectivity, distinguishing facts from opinions. Also, they manage to have access to people in power (government officials as well as party, business, and civil society leaders) and other newsmakers and to get their views on important issues and their sides of noteworthy stories. They do this by keeping a network of “correspondents” in Guinea, Europe, and North America. In the final analysis, these web sites are able to reach a large readership.

These strengths, however, ought to be weighed against an underlying weakness which these web sites have in common, albeit with differing severity, with the ones discussed later in the section. That weakness pertains to the fact that most individuals whose writings populate the sites are not professionally trained journalists. In fact, many self-proclaimed columnists and correspondents do the work as a hobby. Many Guinea-based “correspondents” are unemployed college graduates in search of income and some of the “staff writers” in the United States are self-employed taxi drivers; still others are fully employed but lack what it takes to be responsible journalists capable of understanding that freedom of the press entails responsibility towards the public.

As the reader navigates through the thickening crowd of Guinean web sites, he or she begins to descend into communitarian strata wherein sites like [Guineeactu.com](#), [Guineemoderne.com](#), [Guinéeforum.org](#), and [Guinée58.com](#) present far more mixed profiles. On these particular sites the line between facts and opinions is severely blurred, and analysis is more often than not used as intellectual acrobatics aimed at validating a given trend of opinionated thought favourable to this or that ethno-political leaning. An interesting characteristic of the *modus operandi* of these sites is that they balance their overall message by providing a forum to a variety of “apostles” of ethno-political schools of thought. Rather than focusing on an objective, fair and balanced reporting of facts and events and rational analysis of the same, the sites are largely populated by opinionated “editorials” and commentaries by self-proclaimed political analysts with no journalism training.

As biased as these sites are, their content is often less inflammatory and less divisive than that of the last category considered in this section. Due to its consistently pro-Fulani and openly anti-Mandenka rhetoric, the site [GuineePress.info](#) epitomizes extreme ethnocentricity. The ethnic bias of the site is underscored not only by the incendiary tone of the articles posted, invariably by Fulani “intellectuals,” but also by the comments that readers post in reaction to those articles.

For instance, a non-signed article was posted there on 18 December 2011, under the title “Manden Djallon: le projet ultime d’Alpha Condé et du RPG contre le Fouta!” (“Mande Jallon: Alpha Condé and RPG’s Ultimate Project against the Futa!”). The author of this blurb alleged that Alpha Condé and his party were behind the call for unity among Futanian residents of Mande descent, the purpose of which would be to divide and weaken the region.

Contrary to the writer's claim, the founder of the Manden Jallon nongovernmental organisation, Diao Kanté, is one of the numerous non-Fulani Futanians (the Fulani often refer to them as "assimilated" and "halpular" or Fulani speakers) who, according to his supporters, are no longer willing to allow the Fulani élite to manipulate them. The truth of the matter is that Kanté himself is a seasoned leader and a respected technocrat with a long and successful career in politics and state affairs. However, in the 1990s, both Siradiou Diallo and Mamadou Ba, the then-most prominent Fulani political figures, sent mixed messages about him. To be sure, they both tried to co-opt him in their political coalition while keeping a glass ceiling over his political ambitions and capabilities, simply because he is a "halpular" and not a Fulani, Kanté's supporters insist.

On 11 February 2012, another unsigned "article" titled "Guinée: un plan pour liquider des cadres et opérateurs économiques peuls!" ("Guinea: A Plan to Eliminate Fulani Intellectuals and Businesspersons!") was posted on GuineePress.info. It contained unsubstantiated allegations based on the accounts of unnamed sources and was followed by angry comments by GuineePress.info readers. One of those comments was signed "Mujahid al-Fulany" or The Fulani Jihad (contextually translatable as "Fulani holy war"), which adds religious fanaticism, an entirely new and potentially dangerous dimension, to the rhetorical confrontation. On 18 April 2012, a certain I. Sory Barry posted an article titled "Afrique du Sud: Daouda Fofana tue Ibrahima Sory Diallo!" ("South Africa: Daouda Fofana Kills Ibrahima Sory Diallo!"). The author "recalls" that another Fulani named Rahim Barry was killed earlier that month in Liège (Belgium) by an RPG supporter nicknamed FOF (short for Fofana) and that in March, a certain M. Traoré (another alleged pro-Condé) killed a Fulani by the name of Mamadou Diouldé Barry in traffic rage (Guineepress.info).

The article set the tone for a long series of comments, some of which implied that the Mandenka are launching a Holocaust against the Fulani on President Alpha Condé's urging. One of the comments reads: "Hitler tried to exterminate the Jews. He died without reaching his goal even if, in the process, he was able to kill 2,000,000 of them [sic]...The killing of Fulani is nothing new. The recent history of the country confirms it. However, just like others who committed genocide in the past, those Guineans bent on exterminating us will fail" (Guineepress.info). Another comment says: "The solution to this problem is simple: we should retaliate doubly or triply: for every Fulani killed we should kill two or three Mandenka; for every Fulani woman raped we should rape two or three Mandenka women. This rule must apply systematically and must not be limited to the place where Fulani people are victimized. Far from it! The rule must apply everywhere in Guinea and around the world" (Guineepress.info).

To not be outdone in the rhetorical race typically pro-Mandenka web sites also post ethnocentric comments. Pro-Mandenka web sites like Kibarou.com use somewhat

less belligerent techniques to gather and publish no less ethnocentric anti-Fulani diatribes by mostly letting readers do the proverbial dirty work of anti-Fulani incendiary attacks in the place of their staff writers. Of course, this assessment ought to be taken with precaution, given the fact that authors of such comments post their blurbs under assumed Twitter names. These techniques became increasingly prevalent since Alpha Condé came to office as Guinea's "democratically elected" president. Otherwise, during the battle for the presidency, more specifically during the period between the first round (27 June 2010), which Diallo was said to have won by 43.69% over Condé with 18.25%, and the runoff (7 November 2010), the Mandenka media had been more vehement in their attacks on Fulani. During those turbulent four months and ten days, while most Fulani supporters of Diallo were prematurely celebrating what they believed to be an irreversible victory for their candidate, Mandenka-owned web sites dragged the whole ethnic entity in the mud, referring to them as "cowards," "natural traitors," "whiners," "losers," and so forth. Futanian residents of Mande descent were constantly reminded of the servitude in which eighteenth-century Fulani proselytisers kept them until the PDG and President Sékou Touré (a Mandenka) liberated them in the late 1950s.

### *Ethno-Politics on "Community" Web Radio*

African expatriate communities adopted the concept of "community" mass media from the phenomenon of "community radio," which has been increasingly dominating the media landscape of Africa. In a study of the media-state-society nexus in West Africa in the age of political liberalisation, the author of this article addresses the emergence of "community radio" as a grassroots medium of mass communication. The study argues that the proliferation of FM radio stations that are owned and operated by grassroots communities and whose broadcasts are focused upon the realities and aspirations of those communities has a far-reaching deconstruction of the communicational hegemony that West African states had enjoyed since independence. The study further argues that the multiplication of community radio stations in West Africa democratises the historically most popular mass medium in the region by introducing "a people-centred culture of radio communication, which has the potential of shielding local communities from the disenfranchising effects of the corporatization of commercial mass media" (Camara, 2010). From a similar vantage point, Kwesi Kwaa Prah offers an insightful analysis of FM/Community radio by stressing the use of African languages in community-oriented broadcasting. Using Ghana, Mali, and Senegal as case studies, he concurs with Saidou Dia that such an approach brings radio closer to the realities and concerns of community audiences and, by the same token, fosters purposeful citizen information, consultation, and participation (Prah, [portal.unesco.org](http://portal.unesco.org)).

The analytical validity of these arguments notwithstanding, it is fair to consider the potential that the community radio phenomenon has to further fragment the

national constituency of a given country, especially when that country is already plagued by extreme ethnic self-consciousness and “tribal” politics. The research for this article included surveying web radio hosts, permanent panellists, and regular callers-in, as well as members of some of the groups that fund or support the web radio networks on a number of questions, including that of political fragmentation along ethnic lines. The statistics contained in this section stem from the input of 74 respondents.

Predictably, the majority (62%) of community organisers (that is, persons involved in creating organisations encompassing individuals and families of the same ethnic group) embrace community web radio both as a concept and a reality and stress only the positive outcome of community-centred broadcasting. Likewise, the majority of programme hosts (71%) view community radio stations as instruments of national dialogue among Guinean expatriates. Nevertheless, 58% of respondents regret the fact that these “instruments of national dialogue” are also being used to promote ethnic division, thereby “defeating the purpose for which they were established in the first place,” argues Ibrahima Sory Baldé, the president of the NGO GUINEA365, general manager of *Radio Médias d’Afrique* and host of *Guinée Talk Show* (Ibrahima Sory Baldé, Médias d’Afrique, personal communication).

It must be said that Baldé, himself an amateur broadcaster, is stretching the truth when he implies that the community radio stations were established to counter ethnic division and promote national dialogue. The fact is that, even if in their respective manifestos they all claim to be committed to advancing national dialogue beyond ethnicity, most have done just the opposite; from the profile of their regular guests to the topics that they put forward and to the actual arguments that transpire from their talk shows. Most deplorable is the fact that objectivity and constructive criticism are too often lost in the midst of the acrimonious and highly emotionalised ethnocentric exchanges that characterise the debates on such stations. Criticising a political leader and/or his or her party or the government, even with the best of intentions, is more often than not perceived as an attack on that person or entity. The question then is, as one debate panellist put it: “How can we build democratic governance when we are even incapable of agreeing to disagree on the substance of democracy and governance?”

The web radio stations that are most emblematic of this trend are the typically pro-Fulani *Radio Médias d’Afrique*, *Radio Gandal*, *Radio Guinéeview* and *Radio Soleil d’Afrique* on the one hand and the typically pro-Mandenka *Radio Mande*, *Radio Mande International*, *Tribune d’Afrique*, and *Radio Niani* on the other hand. For one thing, each of these media was founded by or receives substantial support from a “community nongovernmental organisation” (a euphemism for ethnic organisation) specifically created to advance the interests of the corresponding ethnic group in North America or, in some cases, worldwide. For instance, *Pottal fii Bhantal* (Fulani for “Unity for Betterment”) and *Immital* (Fulani for “Renaissance”)—the two most powerful Fulani

organisations in the United States—support the pro-Fulani stations, whereas the Coordination of Mande Organisations in North America supports the pro-Mandenka ones.

Soso and *Forestier* organisations in the United States are widely viewed as having espoused a less bellicose posture ever since their kinsmen left power: General Lansana Conté in December 2008, in the case of the Soso, and Captain Moussa Dadis Camara in December 2010, in the case of the *Forestiers*. The most important of those organisations are *Coordination Basse Guinée Amérique* (CBGA), *Association des ressortissants de la Guinée Forestière en Amérique* (ARGUIFA or Association of Forest Guinea Natives in America) and *Conseil supérieur de la diaspora forestière* (CSDF or High Council of the *Forestier* Diaspora). Whether these minority communities are truly committed to facilitating national reconciliation, as they claim, remains to be seen. What is certain is that a growing number of NGOs from the Fulani and Mandenka majorities seem to treat them as potential peace makers.

While surveying members of the Guinean Diaspora in the United States on the power and responsibility of the individuals and groups running the media studied here, the author of this article posed these questions: “In your view, do the new media operated by members of the Guinean Diaspora promote national unity or contribute to the exacerbation of ethnic conflicts? Either way, what should the people running those media do to help mitigate ethnic hostilities among Guineans everywhere?”

The respondents nearly unanimously stressed what one of them termed “the deplorable prevalence of amateurism among the men and women who write for the Guinean-owned web sites and/or broadcast on the web radio stations of the Guinean Diaspora” (Alpha “Paps” Diallo, INRI Radio, personal communication). In the opinion of Alpha “Paps” Diallo, because these self-proclaimed journalists lack both the formal training and the experience which would, otherwise, have imbued them of the ethical obligations and social responsibilities inherent in the profession, they can hardly escape the propensity to write and say utterly irresponsible things. “Given the ease with which anyone can acquire a web site, a blog or a radio station (web-based or otherwise), so many people create such media for the purpose of slandering or libelling others and inciting ethnic hatred” (Alpha “Paps” Diallo, INRI Radio, personal communication). Diallo goes on to denounce web articles and radio broadcasts in which Guineans go as far as to call for the creation of funds to purchase weapons for the purpose of so-called self-defence. He warns against the potential danger of such irresponsible messages, recalling the role that similar messages aired on *Radio Mille Collines* played in the outbreak of genocide in Rwanda. To the second part of the question Diallo answers as follows:

These people should be aware of the fact that the media are a double-edged sword in that they can be instruments for good or for evil

depending essentially upon how responsibly or irresponsibly they are used. The men and women running these media should be responsible by helping the Guinean public to become informed and patriotic citizens prepared to vote for a candidate based on his or her political program rather than common ethnicity. They should promote what unites us as a nation rather than emphasise what divides us. They should refuse to publish or broadcast ethnocentric propaganda and denounce any politician bent on manipulating the ethnic sensitivities of the Guinean people for self-serving reasons. In short, these media should strive to become the guarantors of our freedom of expression and our nascent democracy (Alpha "Paps" Diallo, INRI Radio, personal communication).

Chérif Haïdara concurs with Diallo and insists that, due to their lack of professional training and clear understanding of the power of words and images, most talk show hosts and bloggers operating the existing web radio stations and web sites, to whom some refer as journalists, act as though they were in an ivory tower where their message is immune to intellectual scrutiny and ethical oversight. In most cases, indicates Haïdara, there is little or no organisational discipline, nor are there ethical and professional parameters to guide those self-proclaimed journalists in their activities. Many are enamoured with antagonistic polemic through which they hope to attract a faithful audience using ethnocentric rhetoric (Chérif Haïdara, Guineview Radio, personal communication).

In the view of social activist Boubacar Diop, Guinean web radio broadcasters deserve credit for reporting on the important events affecting the Guinean community at home and abroad. However, he promptly deplores the fact that most of them comment on and analyse those important events from a chiefly ethnic perspective. "Too often," Diop further deplores, "the broadcasters are influenced in their analyses by highly tendentious questions and comments from the audience" (Boubacar Diop, New York, personal communication).

The question has been raised whether the extreme polarisation of American politics since the election of President Barack Obama and its manifestation in American media and popular culture have something to do with the ideological construct of the socio-political discourse of the Guinean Diaspora (and that of other expatriate communities) in North America. As legitimate as this question may be, and there is no reason to rule out such legitimacy, it must be weighed against the fact that some of the most strident intra-Guinean diatribes found on the World Wide Web originate from within the Guinean Diaspora in Europe.

In the opinion of Lamine Sununu Kaba, the issue can be best addressed by disaggregating the new media and realigning them in accordance with the different ways in which web sites and web radio stations impact the Guinean Diaspora of North

America. He points out that intellectuals and fairly well educated people are the ones who most frequently surf the Web and read articles and blogs, while the non-lettered or barely schooled, for which the Internet is an inaccessible luxury, radio is the medium of choice. This preference for radio connects the latter category of expatriates more closely to Guineans at home where radio remains the most popular medium as well. Stressing the primordial role of oral communication in African cultures, Kaba infers that any meaningful change in the behaviour of the new media ought to begin with radio (Lamine Sununu Kaba, RPG, Ohio, personal communication).

From a hasty interpretation of the arguments that Kaba and other interviewees put forward one could infer that with web sites disseminating ethno-politics among educated Guineans and radio doing the same among both educated and non-educated participants, Guineans of all walks of life are both producers and consumers of media-generated ethno-politics. Even though such inference would bear a good deal of accuracy on one level of the analysis, on another level it would be misleading in that, beneath the dominant ethno-political discourse, there is something sociologically determinant and, therefore, dialectically more consequential. That something may be summed up as follows: the public which congregates around the radio programs under consideration seek to build/rebuild in the long term a far more substantive and productive collective identity than ethnic exclusivity.

Moreover, not only a large number of non-lettered Guineans may not necessarily adhere to what is disseminated through web sites, but also there is no evidence that most reasonable educated Guineans do. In fact, this author's research demonstrates that non-adherence to ethno-politics is high among the youth of the Diaspora. The 55 young (18 to 30 years of age) respondents to the author's survey questionnaire did not equivocate at all on the matter: 81% of them think that the older generation is wasting time in ethnic politics; 45% are outright angry that "the generations of our parents and grandparents are jeopardising our future by focusing separately on trivial things rather than concentrating together on the real economic challenges facing the country," as Santou Dabo put it (Santou Dabo, Hope of Guinea, personal communication). Additionally, there are indications that most of the Guinean youth in Guinea reject the tactic of political manipulation of ethnicity. Long before the outbreak of the "Arab Spring" in North Africa, youth discontent was manifesting itself in Guinean cities, fuelled by the ever increasing rates of youth unemployment, especially among college graduates. Considering that 62.8% of the country's population (2010 est.) is 24 years of age or under, according to United Nations data, ("U.N. Country Profiles), one can understand why it is fair to suggest that media-generated ethno-politics may not be as prevalent in the medium to long term as it is today.

Let us for a moment examine this viewpoint in light of mainstream-minority press relationship in a multicultural democratic society: the United States of America. We will do so using a compelling case study co-authored by Stanford University



Communication professor Theodore L. Glasser. Glasser and his colleagues investigated the ways in which the *San Jose Mercury News*, the local mainstream daily; *Nuevo Mundo*, a Spanish-language weekly owned and operated by the Mercury News; and two locally owned Spanish-language weeklies, *La Oferta* and *El Observador*, covered plans by the city of San Jose, California, to redevelop a strip mall in an area of the city with a predominantly Latino population. Glasser explained in a 2009 interview with New America Media editor Andrew Lam that, although all four publications took the issue seriously and provided ample coverage of it, they took the issue seriously in very different ways. Basically, “the *Mercury News* and *Nuevo Mundo* framed the issue as a conflict between city planners and the mall’s shopkeepers and neighbours while *La Oferta* and *El Observador* presented the issue as yet another example of the discrimination and injustice that San Jose’s Latino/a community has endured over the years,” explained Glasser (Lam, news.newamericamedia.org).

In addition to highlighting the sometimes complicated relationship between mainstream and minority media in a pluralistic democracy, the study by Glasser et al. addresses the interdependence among free media, plural society and the state, and concludes that diversity of journalism matters more than diversity in journalism. In other words, the existence of ethnic media outlets is not in itself prejudicial to multiculturalism and democracy. The study further suggests that for plural media to be a potent catalyst for healthy multiculturalism and democracy, the state must behave as a responsible authority with which all ethno-cultural components of society relate equally.

As one can note from the preceding sections, the points that Glasser et al. make are at the core of the present study of multiculturalism in conjunction with media and political liberalisation in Guinea. A case in point would be the pattern of victimisation which the Fulani have exhibited throughout the postcolonial history of Guinea. This particular case demonstrates that even substantially sizeable ethnic groups are prone to represent themselves as minorities and behave as such once they are convinced that they are victims of neglect and marginalisation on the part of the state. Hence, the concepts of majority and minority ought not to be invariably taken in a statistical sense. They often mean different things under different circumstances.

### **Concluding Remarks: Putting New Media Ethno-Politics in Perspective**

As alluded earlier, states and other powerful stakeholders around the world have been struggling with the fluidity of the new media (i.e., primarily the World Wide Web and the Internet). Communication scholars have been exploring the notion of global media ethics, arguing that no state, no corporation, no international organisation is adequately equipped to properly “police” the new media by itself. Clifford et al. (2008), Quéau (2000) and Spitéri (2004) are among such scholars who tackle the issue from an

essentialist and universalist perspective, whereas others like Omojola (2008) and Camara (2008) attempt to apply the debate to the African context from a consequentialist vantage point.

What transpires from the works of these authors is that either way one considers the interrelation of media and democracy in Africa, one becomes easily aware of the need for optimum professionalism in African-operated new media, and proper ethical adaptation of those media to the socio-political, cultural, and economic transformation which Africa is undergoing. For one thing, a balance must be established between freedom of expression and social responsibility so that the exercise of the rights of media actors and the wider society to freely express themselves does not conflict with the inescapable need for social harmony, moral decency, and human safety.

From that standpoint, the forgoing critical description of the behaviour of the Guinean-owned new media and its effects on the social and political outlook of members of the Guinean Diaspora in North America in no way implies an underestimation of these media's contribution to the advancement of freedom of expression and national dialogue. Far from it; for beyond their polarising approach to that badly-needed national dialogue, they tremendously increase the plurality factor in the media landscape without which freedom of the media is easily curtailed. Furthermore, over the past ten to fifteen years, the Guinean Diaspora of North America has become a powerful economic and socio-political force to contend with thanks, in large measure, to the mobilising effects of communal media. Particularly worth noting is the fact that the Guinean youth of the Diaspora relate closely with the polycentric public sphere that the new media discussed here engender and, as indicated in the introduction, the environment in their host countries is substantially more favourable to freedom of assembly and expression than the one back home.

The congruence of the thus-explained factors enables the Guinean Diaspora of North America to influence in no small ways crucial events in Guinea. Hence, contrary to the opinions of some Guineans, stifling the Diaspora's communal media and the social networks sustaining them would be counterproductive and, to a large extent, anti-democratic. What needs to take place is a conscientious and sustained construction of a synergic plural community through, among other things, the improvement of the professional performance and ethical behaviour of the Diaspora's communal media agents.

The encouraging news is that efforts are being made in that direction and results are being generated, albeit in slow pace. Thus, in October 2009, Leadership Initiative Guinea (LIG), a U.S.-based NGO, organised a seminar in Washington, D.C., on the topic "Online Media Ethics." In collaboration with Togolese-born retired Voice of America journalist Roger Guy Folly, the author of this study led the day-long training seminar with the participation of over two dozen journalists representing some fifteen web sites and web radio stations. Focusing on the opportunities and challenges facing the

Guinean media, both in Guinea and abroad, during the political transition from military rule to a democratically elected civilian leadership, the author endeavoured to educate the participants in the symbiotic nature of international and national media laws and codes of ethics. To that end, the presentation covered key aspects of the Munich Charter or Code of Ethics of the International Federation of Journalists; the African Charter of Human and People's Rights; the New Information and Communication Policy of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); and Guinea's media laws and regulations. Keeping the focus on Guinea's situation, the seminar discussed in depth the dialectic interdependence between the rights and responsibilities of the media in a transitioning plural society.

Regrettably, professional training opportunities of this kind are rarely made available to the growing number of amateurs whose writings and broadcasts inundate the new media of the Guinean Diaspora. This state of affairs, in turn, tends to compound the challenges facing Guinea in her quest for a constructive national dialogue toward sustainable unity and democracy. On the one hand, members of the Diaspora fail to acquire the professionalism that would help them fully take advantage of the technological advances and greater freedom of expression and economic independence available in their host countries. On the other, Guinean journalists who receive professional training from international organisations such as PIWA, WAJA, IFJ and OSIWA often lack the necessary technological tools and the level of freedom of expression and financial independence that would shield them from the prevailing culture of corruption and political cronyism.

It was, in large measure, in response to this situation that the Organisation of the North American Symposium on Guinea (OSNAG), another U.S.-based NGO, held a symposium in Silver Spring, Maryland, in March 2011, on the telling theme "Citizen Participation, National Dialogue, Democratic Governance, and Sustainable Development in Guinea."<sup>1</sup> Through presentations on topics like "Citizen Education and Democratisation in Guinea;" "Youth, Gender, National Dialogue and Democratisation;" "Education, Investment and Sustainable Development;" and an NGO roundtable, the symposium laid the foundation for a continued dialogue among members of the Diaspora across ethnic boundaries. In the same vein, citizens based in the United States, France, and Guinea formed an organisation called Movement of Guinean Patriots for Change in December 2011. The group issued a declaration in which the signatories denounced the exacerbation of ethnocentricity among Guineans, called for the resumption of constructive dialogue between the government and the opposition, and expressed their "resolve to participate in the promotion of peace, unity, and democracy in the Republic of Guinea" (Kibarou.net). Last, in July 2012, OSNAG held the first Symposium of the Guinean Youth of North America in Chicago on the theme "Youth

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<sup>1</sup> The author of this article is the founding leader of OSNAG.

and National Development in Guinea.” Several other NGOs, including the Canada-based *Ligue des démocrates réformistes de Guinée* (LDRG) or League of Democratic Reformers of Guinea, convened conventions and colloquia throughout most of the summer of 2012 in the United States and Canada, during which the issue of ethnocentricity was debated along with that of media and national dialogue.

As one can note, there is growing awareness toward the problems discussed in this article and a determination to free the debate from “tribalistic” animosity. It remains to be seen if the Guinean Diaspora of North America is truly ready and willing to shake the yoke of ethnocentricity among its members, further empower itself, and help bring about lasting change in Guinea. In the meantime, it is safe to conclude the present study by arguing that the aforementioned growing awareness and the initiatives stemming from it raise one’s hopes with regard to the future of pluralism and democracy in Guinea, including the role that the new media are likely to play in favour of sustainable stability. For that hope to materialise, however, professional training and ethical behaviour must be promoted in earnest for, as a respected Guinean journalist used to say: “a pen in irresponsible hands can do more harm than a loaded gun in the hands of a drunken soldier.”

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