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### Conspiracy theorizing as political practice in Guinea

Susanna Fioratta

*Bryn Mawr College*, [sfioratta@brynmawr.edu](mailto:sfioratta@brynmawr.edu)

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## **Abstract**

This article examines conspiracy theory as an integral part of political practice. In 2010, following a tumultuous year that included a military takeover and a junta-led massacre of civilians, the Republic of Guinea held what was widely considered to be the country's first democratic presidential election since independence in 1958. During this time, many Guineans regularly exchanged information about secret intrigues at the highest levels of politics. These popular reports of powerful figures conspiring to fix the election influenced people's talk and actions, contributing to an environment in which abstract suspicions crystallized in real, and sometimes violent, events. These events in turn heightened suspicions of high-level conspiracy and, among people who identified as ethnic Fulbe, reinforced the widespread conviction that they were being targeted. Focusing ethnographically on two episodes in which theories of conspiracy influenced how Guineans perceived and shaped the course of the 2010 elections, this article explores conspiracy theorizing as an emergent mode of politics that may have profound effects.

## Conspiracy theorizing as political practice in Guinea

*Susanna Fioratta*

**Susanna Fioratta** is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Bryn Mawr College. She is the author of articles published in *American Ethnologist*, *Anthropology and Humanism* and *Economic Anthropology*, all exploring different aspects of migration, gender, Islam and politics in Guinea. Email: [sfioratta@brynmawr.edu](mailto:sfioratta@brynmawr.edu)

In 2010, the Republic of Guinea held democratic presidential elections for the first time since independence from France in 1958.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-four candidates competed in the first round in June. Two candidates advanced to a run-off election that was originally supposed to be held in July, but was postponed repeatedly until November. During these months of waiting and uncertainty, rumours about corruption and fraud in the electoral process circulated extensively among Guineans who identified as ethnic Fulbe. Many Fulbe became convinced that people at the highest echelons of power – including political leaders, members of the Independent National Electoral Commission, the ruling military-led regime, the United Nations, and the governments of France and the USA – were conspiring to fix the election results. These theories of conspiracy provided opportunities for much discussion and speculation as the election season wore on, contributing to an environment in which abstract, flexible suspicions occasionally crystallized into decisive, and sometimes violent, actions and events.

As an anthropologist then living in Guinea's Fouta Djallon highlands, a region where ethnic Fulbe predominate, I heard people discuss the elections nearly every day. As the weeks and months passed, popular interpretations of political events became increasingly fraught with suspicion not only of powerful individuals and entities, but also of broad segments of the Guinean population. The run-off election was finally held on 7 November. By that time, the Fulbe, generally represented as Guinea's largest ethnic group, making up around 40 per cent

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<sup>1</sup> From independence until 1984, elections were held only for offices within Guinea's single socialist political party; a multiparty system was established in 1992, but subsequent elections were controlled by the ruling party and not viewed as truly competitive (Carter Center 2011: 8).

of the population, had begun to speak of themselves as a newly solidified bloc united in mutual enmity and distrust against the rest of the country – especially the Maninka, typically estimated at 30 per cent of Guineans.<sup>2</sup> Fulbe voters levelled accusations of systemic fraud against the winning candidate and his party, despite international observers' favourable reports of the election's credibility. Episodes of violence occurred across the country. Guinea, long a relatively stable country in a notoriously unstable region, a country where national unity had been a powerful rallying cry since independence, now appeared divided.

The association between electoral politics and ethnicity was not an entirely new phenomenon in Guinea.<sup>3</sup> But the process through which people came to identify with and against particular ethnic groups and political parties could have played out differently. It was not inevitable that 'Fulbe' and 'Maninka' would become salient markers of identity in some marginal communities, nor that people who identified with neither of these large groups would vote overwhelmingly for the Maninka candidate and against the Fulbe one, yet this was what happened. How did this particular set of allegiances and animosities emerge? How did support for one candidate – a man who had spent much of his life in exile abroad after having been accused of treason – coalesce across the country and inspire targeted violence in some areas? And how did support for the other candidate – a figure formerly disliked by many members of his own ethnic constituency – become so palpable that, when he lost, his supporters were willing to act violently on his behalf, to view neighbours as enemies, and to

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<sup>2</sup> Mike McGovern deconstructs the population statistics on Guinea given by the CIA World Factbook and frequently cited by journalists, diplomats and aid agencies, showing that these 'suspiciously round' numbers – 40 per cent Fulbe, 30 per cent Maninka, 20 per cent Susu and 10 per cent Forestier – are not based on census or any demographic data, leave out a number of smaller ethnic groups, and are, at best, a guess that has gained the status of hegemonic truth. Analysing past census data, McGovern suggests that an 'educated guess ... that each ethnolinguistic bloc accounts for somewhere between about 15 and 25 per cent of the national population' would have 'as much or more basis in available facts', although these numbers 'would shock, and even anger, many Guineans' (McGovern 2017: 44, 51–5).

<sup>3</sup> International Crisis Group (2006) describes political parties and their ethnic bases during then-president Lansana Conté's administration, when a multiparty system existed in theory but Conté's party controlled elections in reality.

threaten to devastate the country's economy by leaving and taking their businesses with them?

This article explores the emergence of political actions, events and orientations through the practice of conspiracy theorizing. Paul Silverstein has defined conspiracy theorizing in the context of the Algerian civil war as a 'diverse set of communicative practices ... that prioritize agency and fetishize causality in making sense of everyday incoherence' (Silverstein 2002: 644). Conspiracy theorizing is similar to the 'paranoid style' that historian Richard Hofstadter famously identified in American politics, where what some might see as error and incompetence instead appears as treason, and where historical events are personal, 'the consequences of someone's will' (Hofstadter 1964: 81, 83). In conspiracy theorizing, agency and intention, rather than accident and coincidence, underlie every unfortunate event, and as a result the world becomes both particularly meaningful and particularly insecure.

The term 'conspiracy theory' tends to situate suspicions in the realm of the unfounded and unreasonable (Pelkmans and Machold 2011). Political and economic inequalities often shape whether a narrative appears as legitimate public discourse or conspiracy theory, thereby erasing histories of violence, neglect and injustice (Briggs 2004). In Guinea, I occasionally heard American and European expatriates lament the way in which Guineans so often circulated conspiracy theories about the political transition. In this framing, the Guinean population appeared gullible and paranoid, ignorant of political realities and likely to act (and vote) irrationally against their own best interests. This representation not only dismissed the validity of Guineans' concerns about the integrity of a new and untried electoral process, it also elided a regional history that includes the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, violent civil wars and the pillaging of natural and mineral resources. By taking these histories into account, it becomes clear that particular conspiracy theories that may not be strictly verifiable may nevertheless index larger truths (cf. White 2000; Jackson 2005).

George Marcus has described conspiracy theorizing in the wake of the Cold War – an era defined by a 'massive project of paranoid social thought and action' when superpowers regularly intervened in the internal politics of client states – as 'paranoia within reason' (Marcus 1999: 2). Guinea's own Cold War-era socialist period (1958–84), led by independence activist and first president Sékou Touré, was characterized by periodic revelations of plots allegedly devised by Western powers and a treacherous internal 'fifth column' to overthrow '*la Révolution*' (McGovern 2013; Touré 1969: 24–51). Thousands of

Guineans were tortured, executed, or perished in prison camps during this era, accused of treason in what were, effectively, state-sponsored conspiracy theories that bolstered state power (cf. Silverstein 2002). While Guineans of all ethnolinguistic groups suffered under Sékou Touré, Fulbe were at times singled out for suspicion. In 1976, Touré announced that a group of Fulbe elites was conspiring to overthrow the government; this was followed by a surge of anti-Fulbe government rhetoric – and, according to some, targeted persecution (Touré 1977; Bah 1990). But, paradoxically, while Touré’s rhetoric and policies sometimes targeted particular ethnic groups, his socialist government also instilled a powerful sense of national unity among Guineans, including Fulbe (McGovern 2017). To this day, movements to uncover the ‘truth’ – to either vindicate the actions of the state under Touré or demonstrate its abuses – have continued unresolved (Arieff and McGovern 2013).

It was against this backdrop, where an objective historical truth was perceived to exist and yet remained hidden, that many Guineans suspected conspiratorial activities on the part of powerful individuals and institutions during the 2010 elections. Conspiracy theory deals with what is hidden, with the view that power operates in the world secretly and must be approached with suspicion (West and Sanders 2003). Conspiracy theorizing thus resonates with wider beliefs in the invisible workings of power, agency and intention that prevail in many contexts of uncertainty and insecurity in Africa, apparent especially in studies of sorcery and witchcraft (Geschiere 1997; De Boeck and Plissart 2004; Ashforth 2005; West 2005). Mariane Ferme argues that, in Sierra Leone, people look beneath the surfaces of everyday life for deeper, often sinister, meanings through a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’, a practice of interpretation shaped by a violent history of slavery and warfare (Ferme 2001: 7). Within modes of thought that acknowledge the operation of invisible, often occult, forms of power and agency, conspiracy theories surrounding political events may become integral parts of developing crises, as Stephen Ellis (1999) has suggested was the case during the Liberian civil war.<sup>4</sup>

To question power and to constantly scrutinize one’s surroundings through a hermeneutic of suspicion may seem paranoid (or ‘paranoid within reason’), but it is also an intellectual way

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<sup>4</sup> Conspiracy theories, of course, are not unique to African settings. Many studies of conspiracy theory focus on the US, examining those surrounding topics such as the Kennedy assassination, alien abduction and right-wing nationalist movements (Dean 1998; Barkun 2003; Song 2011).

of engaging with the world. Studies of conspiracy theorizing have emphasized the agency with which people seek out multiple sources of information and attempt to interpret, analyse and understand them (Briggs 2004; Boyer 2006; Waters 1997). Theories of conspiracy can productively disrupt dominant narratives that are otherwise taken for granted (Boyer 2006). Like gossip, to which it bears a family resemblance, conspiracy theorizing can unite groups, providing a means of bonding for people living through difficult, complex events (Silverstein 2002; Gluckman 1963). By connecting local events with global powers, conspiracy theorizing gives meaning to misfortunes that might otherwise appear meaningless (Turner 2004). There may even be pleasure in the practice of conspiracy theorizing, of pursuing the possibility of truth in a situation that might otherwise seem overwhelmingly beyond individual control (Stewart 1999: 14). Conspiracy theory offers a tantalizing promise of connecting the dots, of fitting puzzle pieces together to reveal a clear picture. Producing compelling narratives, often with clearly defined relationships of cause and effect, conspiracy theory allows people to reconcile cynicism and disbelief and commit – perhaps temporarily – to actions and positions that they might otherwise find untenable (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2002; Wedeen 1999; Pomerantsev 2014; Yurchak 2005).

This article approaches conspiracy theorizing not as irrelevant or opposed to official political processes, but rather as meaningful political practice that may have significant effects. I suggest that conspiracy theory is an emergent form of politics. Through conspiracy theorizing, previously flexible identities and opinions crystallize in particular actions, orientations and events. In this process of emergence, people may begin to perceive grievances more acutely, become willing to take new risks, and even go so far as to commit acts of violence they would not previously have contemplated. In describing the ‘state of emergency’ inhabited by many residents of African cities who face daily uncertainty, ambiguity and crisis, AbdouMaliq Simone characterizes ‘emergency’ as both a ‘rupture in the organization of the present’ and a ‘process of things in the making, of the emergence of new thinking and practices still unstable’ (Simone 2004: 4). With this emergence comes ‘the end of a certain flexibility of interpretation’ (*ibid.*: 5). During Guinea’s 2010 elections, conspiracy theorizing led people to moments when flexible interpretations of political and ethnic repertoires hardened into particular configurations; newly fixed orientations guided decisive actions, reshaped and strengthened notions of community, reinforced convictions of injustice and betrayal, and, for some, warranted violence. I do not suggest that conspiracy theorizing caused ethnic targeting and violence, but rather that it shaped the emergence of political

sensibilities, which in turn influenced people's actions – much as Osborn (2008) has shown with regard to rumours and political violence in Kenya. Examined ethnographically, conspiracy theory narratives reveal relations in the process of emergence – affinities and antipathies that draw on ideas already in circulation, while also reconfiguring assumptions about what is taken for granted and what is possible (cf. Ellison 2006).

My analysis draws on eighteen months of ethnographic research in Guinea's Fouta Djallon highlands and in Dakar, Senegal, where many people from the Fouta Djallon live. A former Sufi Muslim theocracy ruled by Fulbe nobles and clerics until the French conquest of 1896, the Fouta Djallon today is home to a population that predominantly identifies as ethnic Fulbe. However, status differences remain salient between people descended from the theocratic elite, those whose ancestors were taken 'captive' and compelled into serfdom by Fulbe warriors, and members of artisan castes such as potters and leatherworkers (Furth 2005; Derman 1973). Ethnic identity here is relative to one's surroundings, and the latter groups are considered Fulbe in some contexts but not in others (Amselle 1998). Many Fulbe left Guinea during Sékou Touré's presidency, especially in the 1970s after Touré announced the discovery of a Fulbe counter-revolutionary plot. After Touré's death in 1984, Fulbe came to dominate Guinea's post-socialist commercial sector and gained a collective reputation for wealth relative to other Guineans. In 2010, I witnessed dramatic changes in how the people around me discussed national politics, prominent political figures and differences between ethnic groups. Theories of conspiracy became part of everyday talk, and new political orientations emerged.

### **Guinean politics in 2010: an overview**

That multiparty presidential elections were occurring at all in Guinea in 2010 was remarkable to many Guineans and international observers alike, given the turbulent series of events that had unfolded prior to that moment. Guinea's president since 1984, Lansana Conté, died in December 2008 after a long period of illness. A military junta immediately took power, and Moussa 'Dadis' Camara, a previously unknown army captain, declared himself president. Dadis initially made himself popular by promising to root out government corruption and then step down to allow a peaceful transition to civilian rule. From February to April 2009, Dadis personally conducted televised interrogations of Conté administration officials whom he accused of corruption or drug trafficking. Popularly known as 'The Dadis Show', these interrogations made a satisfying spectacle for a population that had suffered increasing

poverty and political repression for decades, all while the country's mineral wealth and natural resources were pillaged by foreign powers and members of its own government.

But as the months passed, Dadis appeared to be tightening his hold on power and the prospect of democratic presidential elections seemed increasingly unlikely. 'No one is born a soldier,' he proclaimed on at least one occasion, suggesting that he could remove his uniform and present himself as a civilian presidential candidate.<sup>5</sup> Few believed that other candidates would get a fair chance at victory if Dadis ran against them. Civilian political opposition parties called for Dadis to allow the organization of fair, internationally observed elections and step down.

Then came an event that shocked and horrified the country. On 28 September 2009, the fifty-first anniversary of the day on which Guineans voted for independence from France, the leaders of several different political parties united to lead a protest rally at Conakry's 28 September Stadium, named in commemoration of the independence vote. Once the demonstration was under way, military forces arrived, barricaded the stadium entrance and began shooting into the crowds, killing and raping hundreds of civilians.<sup>6</sup> By December, a United Nations Commission of Inquiry found evidence of responsibility for the massacre among several junta officers, including Dadis and his aide-de-camp, Aboubacar 'Toumba' Diakité. On 3 December, believing that the president had betrayed him to the Commission of Inquiry, Toumba shot Dadis in the head and disappeared into hiding.<sup>7</sup> Dadis was medically

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<sup>5</sup> See 'Guinée/élection: le chef de la junte menace d'“ôter la tenue” pour être candidat', 16 April 2009, Jeune Afrique, <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/depeches/117789/politique/guineeelection-le-chef-de-la-junte-menace-doter-la-tenue-pour-etre-candidat/>>, accessed 9 October 2017. Lansana Conté himself had assumed the presidency through a military takeover after Sékou Touré's death, giving Dadis a historical precedent for remaining in power while also giving many Guineans a historical justification *not* to support Dadis's continued rule.

<sup>6</sup> At least 156 civilians were killed or disappeared in the stadium massacre, and at least 109 women were publicly raped; the actual numbers of casualties are likely much higher (UN International Commission of Inquiry on Guinea 2009).

<sup>7</sup> After seven years at large, Toumba was arrested in Senegal in December 2016 and extradited to Guinea in March 2017 ('Guinée: le militaire “Toumba” Diakité, désormais incarcéré à Conakry', RFI, 13 March 2017 <<http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170313-guinee->

evacuated to Morocco and for several weeks no one knew whether he was alive or dead.<sup>8</sup> With Dadis indisposed, the junta's second in command, General Sékouba Konaté, assumed the role of 'interim president' and agreed to appoint a civilian cabinet and oversee internationally observed elections. Against this dramatic backdrop, election preparations began in the early months of 2010. Twenty-four candidates began campaigning for the first round of elections on 27 June.

At the time of the 28 September massacre, I was living in the Fouta Djallon in a town I call Daande Caanguel, a day's drive away from Conakry. Despite the geographic distance, an air of anxiety pervaded the town for days afterwards, as people called and texted friends and family in Conakry for news. The immediate outrage at the violence was fuelled by graphic accounts of the massacre gleaned from phone conversations with survivors and circulated through town. With the junta refusing to release the bodies of those who were killed, rumours of secret mass graves flew thick and fast. The small measure of support Dadis had still enjoyed in Daande Caanguel plummeted. My interlocutors expressed their anger, shock and grief at the events, speaking of the rapes and concealed bodies with particular horror. However, as the days passed, a few people began to refer to the stadium massacre as an

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militaire-toumba-diakite-desormais-incarcere-prison-conakry-senegal-extrade>, accessed 9 October 2018). He is in prison awaiting trial at the time of writing. In a bizarre twist to the story, the incarcerated Toumba reportedly escaped an assassination attempt by poisoning in December 2017 ('Maître Paul Yomba: "Voici comment Toumba Diakité a échappé bel à un empoisonnement"', Aminata.com, 21 December 2017 <<https://aminata.com/maitre-paul-yomba-voici-toumba-diakite-a-echappe-bel-a-empoisonnement/>>, accessed 9 October 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Dadis was transported to Burkina Faso in January 2010 and remains in exile there at the time of writing. In November 2017, a panel of Guinean judges concluded a nearly eight-year-long investigation into the massacre and brought charges against 'more than 14 suspects', including Dadis, Toumba and other former and current high-level officials ('Guinea: judges conclude 2009 massacre inquiry', Human Rights Watch, 10 November 2017 <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/10/guinea-judges-conclude-2009-massacre-inquiry>>, accessed 9 October 2018). However, no progress has been made in bringing those charged to trial. The stadium massacre has been subject to a long-running 'preliminary examination' by the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (see <<https://www.icc-cpi.int/guinea>>, accessed 9 October 2018).

attack explicitly targeted against Fulbe. Although Guineans from many ethnolinguistic groups had attended the demonstration and numbered among the victims, some interlocutors insisted that Fulbe had been killed, and Fulbe women raped, in disproportionately large numbers. Furthermore, in the days after the massacre, soldiers ransacked and committed further violence in several Fulbe-majority Conakry neighbourhoods.<sup>9</sup> Linking these events with the history of anti-Fulbe persecution during the Sékou Touré era, some people concluded that Fulbe had again become the targets of the state. Others I knew treated these allegations with caution, reasoning that since Fulbe were the largest and most entrepreneurial ethnic group, owning most of the shops, merchandise and houses in the affected areas, they would naturally suffer the most damage. In October, amid continuing insecurity, the US State Department evacuated non-essential embassy personnel and suspended the Fulbright programme, which was then my main source of research funding; I was evacuated to Mali and eventually moved to Senegal, where I resumed my research among Guineans in Dakar.

I returned to Guinea in May 2010 to find the fear and anger I had witnessed in the wake of the massacre replaced by excitement over the electoral campaign. The majority of people I knew in Daande Caanguel and my new research site, a smaller town I call Hamdallaye, supported Cellou Dalein Diallo, one of several ethnic Fulbe candidates hailing from the Fouta Djallon. A former government minister under Lansana Conté, Cellou Dalein had previously been criticized, even by Fulbe, for complicity in the corruption of the Conté administration. Now, however, my interlocutors spoke hopefully of his supposedly imminent victory:

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<sup>9</sup> The Human Rights Watch investigation into the 28 September massacre found some evidence of ethnic targeting against Fulbe: ‘During the sexual assaults against girls and women of Peuhl [Fulbe] ethnicity, assailants frequently made ethnically biased comments, insulting and appearing to threaten the Peuhl in particular’ (Human Rights Watch 2009: 8). With regard to the activity of the security forces in residential neighbourhoods after the massacre, Human Rights Watch reports that, ‘in the course of the attacks, the soldiers and irregular militia killed, raped, vandalized, and stole from residents. They also repeatedly insulted and made threats against people of Peuhl ethnicity in particular’ (*ibid.*: 9). Fulbe are referred to as ‘Peuhl’ or ‘Peul’ in French and sometimes in English.

Guinea's three presidents since independence had belonged to other ethnic groups, but with Cellou Dalein the country would finally have a Fulbe leader.<sup>10</sup>

The elections on 27 June passed peacefully, though with significant logistical problems in some areas. The results were announced on 2 July: Cellou Dalein came in first with 39.72 per cent of the vote. With 50 per cent needed for an outright win, a run-off election was set between him and the second-place finisher, Alpha Condé, who had won 20.63 per cent.<sup>11</sup> The run-off election was originally supposed to have been held within two weeks of the first round, but it was repeatedly delayed and rescheduled for September, October, and finally November – first while the Guinean Supreme Court verified the results, and then in response to accusations of sabotage and cheating from multiple parties, questions about bias within the Independent National Electoral Commission, and violent clashes between the two leading candidates' constituents. The repeated delays suspended much of everyday life in a prolonged state of waiting. Schools, which closed early for the summer to accommodate the June elections, remained closed until after the run-off, even when it was delayed past the normal start date for the new academic year. People postponed travel, business and other plans until after the elections. Some individuals I hoped to interview for my research demurred, promising to speak with me after the elections.

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<sup>10</sup> I have shown elsewhere (Fioratta 2013) that Fulbe initially supported a range of candidates from various ethnicities and expressed grave doubts about Cellou Dalein until shortly before the June 2010 elections, when support from Guinean Fulbe in both Senegal and the Fouta Djallon coalesced around Cellou Dalein's candidacy. Voters overwhelmingly justified their shift in position with the arguments that it was the Fulbe 'turn' to control the presidency, that Fulbe deserved the presidency after having suffered persecution under Sékou Touré, and that all Fulbe were now 'united' for the first time in history.

<sup>11</sup> International observers identified a number of problems with the 27 June elections, but determined that these resulted from capacity shortfalls rather than from systemic fraud. Nevertheless, fourteen of the twenty-four candidates submitted complaints of fraud to the Guinean Supreme Court, which reviewed the complaints and ultimately invalidated about 900,000 votes, or 21.4 per cent of all ballots cast. After these votes were removed from the final results, Cellou Dalein's share of the vote increased to 43.69 per cent and Alpha Condé's decreased to 18.25 per cent (Carter Center 2011: 11).

During this time of extended anticipation, people sought information in a variety of ways. Some crowded onto benches in town video clubs every evening to watch the news on Guinea's state television station, although viewers often condemned it as 'propaganda' even as they watched. Others listened for occasional mentions of Guinea on the daily Africa news programmes aired by BBC and RFI radio, which they deemed more reliable than state television. Phone calls to friends and relatives in Conakry yielded first-hand stories about what was happening in the capital. Some people asked me for news, assuming that I, as an American, must have access to better information channels than they did. (I, meanwhile, crowded into the same video clubs and listened to the same radio programmes as everyone else.) Rumours circulated quickly, their sources impossible to verify. People shared widely what news they heard and speculated about possible explanations for events that seemed suspicious or confusing. Was the election being fixed? Were the repeated delays good or bad? This was an environment where determining what was true could be extremely difficult, but as people interpreted news stories and made connections between different events, suspicion not infrequently seemed warranted.

For example, the head of the Independent National Electoral Commission, Ben Sékou Sylla, was convicted of fraud, convincing many in the Fouta Djallon that Cellou Dalein would have won an outright 50 per cent of the vote but for Sylla's alleged perfidy. On 13 September, Sylla died in France, where he had reportedly sought medical treatment for an illness. The run-off was scheduled for 19 September, less than a week away. Immediately, people around me began to speculate that Sylla had been secretly assassinated by followers of Alpha Condé, who wanted to keep past fraud hidden and create further delays in order to organize more fraud. The fact that Sylla's death occurred in France, Guinea's former colonial power and Alpha Condé's country of residence for many years, led some people to suggest that it would not be properly investigated. Then, on 15 September, an apparently accidental fire destroyed a warehouse full of election materials in a military barracks in Conakry. Interim president General Konaté announced that the run-off would be postponed. In protest, Cellou Dalein's party called for a *ville morte* (general strike), to be held on 20 September. The evening of 19 September, I watched in Hamdallaye's video club as the anchorman of the state news programme read a decree issued by the military officer then acting as governor of Conakry: the *ville morte* was absolutely forbidden. Government functionaries who failed to report to work would be considered to have resigned their posts and any businesses that kept their doors closed would be seized by the state. My fellow video club audience members

exclaimed that this last measure was explicitly targeted at Fulbe, who owned most businesses in Conakry. For some people in the Fouta Djallon, Sylla's death, the warehouse fire, the postponement of the election and the interdiction of the *ville morte* all added up to convincing evidence that the election was being rigged against Cellou Dalein and therefore against Fulbe, who were once again under threat just as they had been during Sékou Touré's presidency.

These were circumstances under which conspiracy theorizing was not an irrational reaction but something akin to Marcus's 'paranoia within reason', where the workings of power were opaque and where fear and suspicion had been justified in the past. Charles Briggs points out that the concept of paranoia itself is subjective and shaped by political-economic conditions: 'What may seem paranoid to middle-class whites is unfortunately often realistic for racialized and oppressed populations whose everyday lives are patterned by structural violence and strategies for dealing with it' (Briggs 2004: 182). In the previous two years alone, Guineans had experienced the end of a predatory authoritarian regime, a *coup d'état*, military rule and extreme military violence against civilians. In prior decades, they had experienced a repressive socialist state and, before that, colonial subjugation. In 2010, multiple parties – including the military, civilian politicians and former colonial powers – might have been vying for political control just as they had at various times throughout Guinea's history. That some Guineans engaged with national politics by theorizing conspiracies shows not the existence of a wilfully ignorant or gullible electorate, but rather a population that paid attention to the workings of powerful actors and institutions, even when these were difficult to discern, and sought to analyse their meaning and understand their implications.

This discussion of Guinea's political landscape in 2010 sets the stage for the following two episodes, each of which presents a case of conspiracy theory that arose in the months leading up to the run-off election. Each case shows how previously flexible notions of Fulbe ethnicity crystallized with the emerging conviction that a vast Maninka plot was under way to sabotage Cellou Dalein's chances of winning the presidency.

### **Episode 1: Alpha Condé's henchmen in Canada (or, who plotted the massacre?)**

In September 2010, just after Ben Sékou Sylla's death in France, I began to hear people talk about a video of Dadis, the erstwhile junta leader who had been shot in the head, circulating

around the Fouta Djallon on video CDs.<sup>12</sup> ‘It shows the truth about the stadium massacre – that Alpha Condé was behind it,’ said Amadou, the young man who first told me about the video.<sup>13</sup> I was surprised. Most people I knew, including Amadou, had previously attributed responsibility for the massacre to Dadis himself. At the time of the massacre, my interlocutors rarely mentioned Alpha Condé’s name. When they did, they acknowledged him as an old opposition figure known for criticizing Guinea’s former presidents – both of whom had accused him of treason – and for living much of his life exiled in France. But Amadou insisted that, in the video, Dadis revealed, first, that Alpha Condé had approached him with the request to kill Cellou Dalein, a request that Dadis had refused; and second, that Alpha Condé had been the true force behind the stadium massacre. ‘If it isn’t true, then why aren’t Alpha Condé’s people denying it publicly?’ demanded Amadou, seeing my scepticism.

Over the next couple of days, I heard many different people recount the content of the video and discuss its implications. Alpha Condé had asked Dadis to ‘eliminate’ Cellou Dalein. Alpha Condé had plotted the massacre to rid himself of future presidential rivals. At the very least, Alpha Condé had encouraged the other opposition leaders to hold the stadium demonstration even after the junta forbade it, though he himself withdrew and travelled abroad to safety.

Eventually, I saw the video myself. It was apparently recorded after the stadium massacre but before Dadis was shot two months later. In the nine-minute segment, Dadis regales two unidentified men, one of whom holds a microphone, with a long, petulant diatribe of the sort for which he became known during his brief presidency.<sup>14</sup> He rails against Alpha Condé as cunning (*rusé*) and malicious (*méchant*). He points out that all the other major opposition party leaders had attended the stadium demonstration on 28 September, but that Alpha Condé

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<sup>12</sup> Video CDs – a cheaper and more easily copied alternative to DVDs – were a popular media format in Guinea in 2010, given that the internet was not then available except in the largest cities, and even then was often too slow to accommodate video streaming. A version of the Dadis video I discuss here can be viewed online at

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfUcY1eAmDQ>> (accessed 9 October 2018).

<sup>13</sup> I refer to public figures by their real names, but use pseudonyms for individuals I encountered personally during fieldwork.

<sup>14</sup> On Dadis’s oratorical stylings as a clumsy, ultimately ineffective channelling of Sékou Touré’s charismatic persona, see McGovern (2017: 202–7).

had been suspiciously absent. Absolving himself entirely of any wrongdoing, Dadis claims that Alpha Condé planned the massacre so that the other opposition leaders would be blamed for the consequences of their illegal demonstration and thus disqualified from the elections, leaving the field open for himself. Dadis argues that Alpha Condé was accustomed (*habitué*) to treachery, citing two well-known allegations from Condé's past. First, during Sékou Touré's presidency, Condé was sentenced to death in absentia for complicity in the 'Portuguese aggression' of 1970, an ultimately unsuccessful attack on Conakry by colonial troops from neighbouring Guinea-Bissau, mercenaries and Guinean exiles.<sup>15</sup> Second, in 2000, Condé was convicted of sedition against then-president Lansana Conté's government and sentenced to two years in prison.<sup>16</sup>

People in the Fouta Djallon swiftly incorporated this video into their understandings of the massacre and its significance for the elections. Everyone I spoke with seemed to find Dadis's accusations against Alpha Condé entirely credible, despite Dadis's history of erratic behaviour and his evident interest in deflecting responsibility for the massacre. When Boubacar, a low-level government functionary in Daande Caanguel, cited the video as evidence of Condé's long-standing penchant for treachery, I challenged him. 'But is there any proof that Alpha Condé was involved in the Portuguese aggression?' I asked. 'The video is proof!' Boubacar exclaimed. 'Dadis knew it! When you become president, you gain access to a lot of secret information.' 'Even presidents who are nothing but young, drunk soldiers know secret information?' I asked, using language that many of my interlocutors, including Boubacar, had often used to describe Dadis only a short time before. 'Yes!' Boubacar responded without hesitation.

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<sup>15</sup> On the 'Portuguese aggression,' see Arieff (2009).

<sup>16</sup> Condé, who had run against President Conté in Guinea's 1998 presidential election, was arrested after the election and charged with attempting to leave the country illegally to recruit mercenaries from Côte d'Ivoire in order to overthrow the Guinean government. He was convicted in 2000, just days after President Conté announced that a recent series of cross-border attacks into Guinea by rebels from Liberia and Sierra Leone had been orchestrated by Alpha Condé in collaboration with former Liberian president and warlord Charles Taylor (McGovern 2017: 139–45).

This kind of faith in Dadis was new, but Boubacar was only one of many people I heard express it. In addition to finding Dadis's accusations believable, people in both Daande Caanguel and Hamdallaye began to draw on the video to construct new theories to explain the massacre as something they considered even more threatening than military aggression against unarmed civilians: not only had Alpha Condé planned the massacre, he had done so as part of a larger Maninka conspiracy against the Fulbe. The most popular version of this line of thinking posited that Alpha Condé had plotted the massacre in league with Sékouba Konaté, Dadis's second in command in the junta, who assumed the presidency after Dadis was shot. According to this theory, Alpha Condé and Sékouba Konaté, both ethnic Maninka, had arranged the massacre in order to eliminate Cellou Dalein and the other non-Maninka opposition leaders so that the Maninka could collectively take power in Guinea. Dadis, who had previously been reviled throughout the Fouta Djallon as the dangerously unhinged mastermind of a violent atrocity, now appeared exonerated, the hapless dupe of a vast conspiracy. The sudden death of Dadis's twenty-five-year-old son in Canada around the time that the video appeared led some people to further theorize that he had been murdered by Alpha Condé's Canada-based henchmen in retaliation for Dadis's newly publicized remarks.<sup>17</sup> According to this theory, Alpha Condé had at his command a powerful network that could carry out assassinations on other continents – Ben Sékou Sylla in France and Dadis's son in Canada. From then on, people cited the video as evidence that, as ethnic Fulbe, they were experiencing the latest iteration of a grave and long-standing collective threat that dated back to the anti-Fulbe persecution of Sékou Touré's presidency. Now more than ever, they needed to stand together – and that meant supporting Cellou Dalein Diallo, no matter how much they had previously criticized him for the eleven years he had served in Lansana Conté's corrupt administration.

And so, with the conspiracy theories that surrounded the Dadis video emerged a particular set of anxieties related to ethnic targeting. At the time of the stadium massacre, people in Daande Caanguel had frequently criticized the junta in power with statements such as: 'We need a

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<sup>17</sup> Moriba Junior Camara's body was found at the bottom of a swimming pool in Montreal under unexplained circumstances in August 2010 ('Retrouvé sans vie à Longueuil: le fils de Camara est inhumé à Conakry', Associated Press, 26 August 2010 <<http://www.lapresse.ca/international/afrique/201008/26/01-4310121-retrouve-sans-vie-a-longueuil-le-fils-de-camara-est-inhume-a-conakry.php>>, accessed 9 October 2017).

civilian government.’ With the circulation of the video of Dadis and the associated discussions of a Maninka conspiracy spearheaded by Alpha Condé, people in the Fouta Djallon began to remark that anything, even a continuing military government, would be preferable to a Condé presidency.

### **Episode II: The poisoned water (or was it yoghurt?)**

On 22 October, about a hundred attendees at a Conakry meeting of Alpha Condé’s party, the RPG (Rassemblement du Peuple Guinéen/Rally of the Guinean People), experienced nausea and vomiting and were taken to hospital. RPG supporters immediately launched accusations of poisoning against Cellou Dalein’s party, the UFDG (Union des Forces Démocratiques de Guinée/Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea). Fulbe vendors – presumably all UFDG supporters – had, according to RPG supporters, sold the meeting attendees poisoned water (or, some said, yoghurt). In retaliation, RPG supporters began to attack Fulbe-owned houses and shops in several cities in the eastern savannah region of Upper Guinea, predominantly inhabited by ethnic Maninka. Over the next few days, thousands of Fulbe living in Upper Guinea left their homes and businesses and fled to the Fouta Djallon.<sup>18</sup>

Outraged by this violence against people they spoke about as their extended family, my interlocutors discussed the allegations of water poisoning over and over again. Some people

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<sup>18</sup> The Carter Center reported that a number of Fulbe were injured in these attacks, about six people died, and the number of displaced Fulbe could have been anywhere between 1,800 and 20,000 people (Carter Center 2011: 14). According to an estimate by the International Committee of the Red Cross in Conakry, 2,800 people were displaced on 29 and 30 October alone, and UFDG party representatives claimed that between 15,000 and 20,000 people in total were displaced from Upper Guinea cities (Penney 2010). International Crisis Group found that the authorities’ failure to respond effectively to the rumours and the security forces’ failure to protect victims from the violence increased Fulbe suspicions of the electoral process (ICG 2011: 7). It is unclear to what extent RPG party leaders may have encouraged the violence against Fulbe, but they at least treated the rumours of poisoning as a legitimate concern and called for an investigation (‘La méfiance reste de mise entre Cellou Dalein Diallo et Alpha Condé’, France 24, 29 October 2010 <<http://www.france24.com/fr/20101029-guinee-presidentielle-2e-tour-partisans-alpha-conde-empoisonnement-mefiance-cellou-dalein-diallo>>, accessed 9 October 2018).

simply sought to contradict the theory of poisoning espoused by Alpha Condé's constituents. Elder people tended to advance a particular natural explanation, which was that the RPG meeting's attendees had drunk water without having eaten anything, and everyone knew that drinking water on an empty stomach could cause sickness. I first heard this point of view from the elderly grandmother of the family with whom I lived in Hamdallaye. Shortly afterwards, as I walked down the street to the marketplace, I passed two elderly men just as one was explaining to the other, 'You know, if someone drinks water but they haven't eaten ...,' while the other man nodded sagely and made sounds of agreement. I soon heard their words echoed in conversations all over town. The elders appeared to be drawing on an interpretive framework of traditional knowledge about health and illness. I suspect that by classifying the illness as natural and the RPG supporters' suspicions as unfounded, they were also trying to prevent the violence from escalating further. When a son in my Hamdallaye family mentioned that some young men in the nearby city of Labé were talking about rising up against the Maninka minorities there in retaliation for the violence against Fulbe in Upper Guinea, the grandmother said sharply, 'Hey, they should stop! If it goes on like this, we'll have an ethnic war.' All that week, elder men at the mosques urged everyone to trust in God, stay calm, and not respond to provocations; violence had occurred in every other region of Guinea, but the Fouta Djallon had remained peaceful and this must continue. Many people, young and old, repeated these words and seemed to take comfort in them, and I heard of no further calls for retaliatory violence against Maninka living in the Fouta Djallon at that time.

But after another week or two, many younger people began to counter the story of alleged poisoning with a different, more complex theory of conspiracy. What had *actually* happened, several people informed me, was that Alpha Condé's operatives had poisoned their own supporters in order to rally the population to attack the Fulbe. As evidence for this theory, they pointed to the fact that no one at the meeting had died. 'If someone genuinely wanted to eliminate them, they would have chosen a substance that would kill,' one man in Hamdallaye proclaimed definitively. Some of my interlocutors chuckled over a rumour that the RPG leaders had eventually decided that they needed some of the hospitalized party members to die so that they could prove to international observers that they were the victims of a UFDG plot; when the alleged poison victims heard this news, they immediately stopped pretending to be sick and walked out of the hospital. Like the elders, the younger people were using an interpretive framework to try to understand the violent attacks against Fulbe. But whereas the elders claimed that the violence was all based on a misunderstanding, the youth located the

problem with high-level RPG party leaders manipulating their followers and inciting them to violence. No one gave much credence to my own suggestion that perhaps the water had been contaminated with a parasite, as water in Guinea sometimes was; nausea and diarrhoea did not strike me as exceptional, but rather as an unfortunate part of everyday life. ‘No, this was definitely a poison substance,’ I was told. One young man claimed that a sample of the water served at the meeting would be taken to a Western country with laboratories that could test for poison, and then the truth would be revealed. While I was satisfied with a surface explanation, younger people were deploying a hermeneutic of suspicion, carefully examining every possible part of the story for signs of nefarious activity that they were certain had occurred.<sup>19</sup>

A proposed joint tour of reconciliation – in which Alpha Condé and Cellou Dalein would travel the country together and show their supporters that there was no need for violence – never materialized. Alpha Condé’s constituents did not want him to apologize to Cellou Dalein for the violence against the Fulbe, since Cellou Dalein had not apologized for the poisoning of the water, nor had Cellou Dalein’s wife visited the poison victims in the hospital. Some of Alpha Condé’s supporters even claimed to fear for their candidate’s life if he ventured into Fulbe-dominated areas.<sup>20</sup> Whether or not Alpha Condé himself believed in the theory of poisoning, he did not fail to recognize the alleged victims. An RPG supporter I knew in Conakry later gave me a video CD containing footage of Alpha Condé visiting his ill constituents at the hospital, shaking his head in sorrow at their suffering and thanking them for their support. Hostility intensified between supporters of the RPG and the UFDG.

As reports of Fulbe displaced from their homes and businesses by the violence in Upper Guinea began to reach Hamdallaye and Daande Caanguel, people I knew became increasingly convinced of the existence of a Maninka conspiracy against the Fulbe. Those

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, the idea that a parasitic illness indicated a lack of human intention reflects a bias towards a particular understanding of the world that E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937) exposed through his work on witchcraft. A granary may fall because it is too heavy, but the fact that it falls at a particular time on a particular person demands an explanation.

<sup>20</sup> ‘La méfiance reste de mise entre Cellou Dalein Diallo et Alpha Condé’, France 24, 29 October 2010 <<http://www.france24.com/fr/20101029-guinee-presidentielle-2e-tour-partisans-alpha-conde-empoisonnement-mefiance-cellou-dalein-diallo>>, accessed 9 October 2018.

who had been displaced were registered to vote in Upper Guinea. Now, back in the Fouta Djallon, they were disenfranchised. Fulbe had dominated much of the commercial sector in Upper Guinea, as they did throughout the country. Now, their businesses had been looted by Maninka who, according to my interlocutors, resented their commercial success. The people around me worried about the effect that thousands of lost votes for Cellou Dalein would have on the outcome of the election.<sup>21</sup> They also noted with grim pleasure that Fulbe merchants in Conakry were boycotting all business with Upper Guinea cities; the looted goods were now the only merchandise available and prices were skyrocketing. Meanwhile, the plans for the run-off election moved forward, despite further delays in the wake of the violence. Through theories and counter-theories of conspiracy, more and more people in the Fouta Djallon came to see themselves as the victims of a Maninka plot to prevent a Fulbe candidate from winning the presidency. This emerging sensibility shaped the actions people took on the night when the final election results were announced.

### **Violence, crystallization, and the aftermath of conspiracy theory**

Despite the tempestuous months leading up to the run-off, when it was finally held on 7 November, the voting process passed smoothly in both Daande Caanguel and Hamdallaye. The residents of both towns spoke positively, anticipating that Cellou Dalein's presidency was imminent. But their tones changed in the following days, when partial preliminary results began to be released on the nightly news. No one expected Cellou Dalein to win many votes in Maninka-dominated regions, but it gradually became clear that he had not won as many votes as expected in coastal Lower Guinea, a region inhabited by ethnic Susu and other groups whose support the UFDG had been counting on.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> From what I heard and witnessed, people who had been displaced and resettled in both Hamdallaye and Daande Caanguel were allowed to vote in the end, although no one seemed sure whether they would be able to do so until election day arrived. The Carter Center confirms that some Fouta Djallon districts allowed displaced persons to vote, but notes that there was no consistent policy on the issue, and some Fouta Djallon polling stations had their results disqualified for exceeding the ten-vote limit for ballots cast by voters registered elsewhere (Carter Center 2011: 42, 114).

<sup>22</sup> Assumptions about support for Cellou Dalein from coastal Lower Guinea were largely based on the fact that Sidya Touré, a popular former prime minister who had won 13 per cent

The days passed with increasing tension until 15 November, when the electoral commission had promised to release the complete results. Early that day, neighbours and friends in Daande Caanguel told me that youth in Conakry and Labé were marching in the streets to protest against what they called electoral ‘fraud’. According to some, the protests were becoming violent. I made several phone calls to friends in Conakry and Labé, who confirmed that young people had been protesting all morning, setting up blockades in the streets that the police and military had broken up. ‘Things are bad,’ one young man summarized bleakly. Monsieur Bah, a regular interlocutor who worked near my house, stopped by to greet me and referred cryptically to a possible ‘imminent crisis’. ‘You should not move around much today,’ he advised. ‘If you get scared, call me and I will come and take you to stay at my family’s house.’ I thanked him and asked what exactly he thought might happen. ‘No, no, nothing will happen,’ he hastened to reassure me. ‘But just in case you get scared.’

I took a midday stroll around Daande Caanguel and stopped to visit Souleymane, a shopkeeper who sold buckets, brooms and other domestic goods. The normally cheerful Souleymane was in a dreary mood, sighing that business was slow and problems were everywhere. He segued into a lament that ‘they’ were trying to steal the elections, mentioning the recent clashes in Conakry and Labé as evidence that people were so upset about the ‘fraud’ that they were even willing to fight. ‘Eh! They should stop [*yo be accu*],’ I said, using the exact Pular phrase that the grandmother of my Hamdallaye family had used when she heard that the youth in Labé wanted violent revenge against the Maninka. Souleymane and his neighbour in the next shop, a hardware dealer, both chuckled. The hardware vendor called over, ‘Hey, Susanna, you’re not a Maninka, are you?’ and held up two machetes from his shop as he spoke. I called back, ‘Even if I am a Maninka, so what?’ He smiled and brandished the two machetes, saying, ‘This is what!’

I gasped in horror. I had never heard such a straightforward threat of physical violence, even an apparently playful one, levelled directly against any group of people in Guinea, especially by Fulbe, who thus far had prided themselves in exacting only economic revenge on the Maninka who had attacked Fulbe in other regions. Now, something about the social order had changed; statements that would never have been uttered in casual conversation only a short

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of the first-round votes, had allied with the UFDG for the second round. Much of Lower Guinea had voted for Sidya Touré in the first round and many assumed that Touré would be able to deliver this support to Cellou Dalein.

time before had become acceptable. This change was confirmed a few minutes later when I saw Madiou, a university student who enjoyed practising his English with me. Madiou had just been to a meeting where, he said, local UFDG representatives had told the youth that if the electoral commission announced that Cellou Dalein had not won, they were to go out and kill all the Maninka in town.<sup>23</sup> ‘There will be blood,’ Madiou said in English, with a calmness that sent a chill down my spine. ‘The only way they can avoid problems now is to declare the true results.’ ‘How will you know they are the true results?’ I asked. ‘Because they will be in favour of Cellou! That is the truth,’ he responded firmly.

That evening, the complete election results were read on national television. As soon as Alpha Condé was pronounced the winner, with 52.5 per cent of the vote, a man sitting near me in Daande Caanguel’s video club called out, ‘It’s a lie!’ In a matter of seconds, everyone got up from the benches and disappeared into the darkness outside. Making my way out of the video club, I saw a large mass of people gathering on the town’s main street. I returned to my house and listened for hours to the sounds of rocks landing on metal roofs, gunshots, and a rising chorus of voices that sounded like a crowd cheering at a football match, punctuated by individual cries of ‘Cellou *Président!*’

The next day, I walked through town and saw that four houses had been ransacked and partially burned, their contents strewn across the streets. Two burnt-out shells of cars remained parked nearby. No one had been hurt or killed; the Maninka residents of these houses – all presumed to be Alpha Condé supporters – had left town before the election results were announced. I soon heard reports of similar violence against Maninka and RPG supporters in other Fouta Djallon towns. Government security forces responded violently to Fulbe protests in Fouta Djallon cities, reportedly causing up to a dozen deaths and hundreds of injuries, and raping several women (Carter Center 2011: 15; ICG 2011: 7). President

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<sup>23</sup> Over the next few days, I heard contradictory reports about this meeting. Some said that the UFDG representatives had told everyone to stay calm and peaceful, regardless of the outcome of the election. Others said that these same representatives had incited them to attack the Maninka.

Konaté declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew to contain the unrest, and an uneasy calm soon prevailed.<sup>24</sup>

Over the next few days, many people in Daande Caanguel expressed regret that the violence against the Maninka households had occurred, although no one I knew admitted to having participated in it.<sup>25</sup> However, many were infuriated at what they referred to as a greater ‘injustice’: the security forces were responding with what seemed like disproportionate and targeted violence against Fulbe protesters when they had done nothing to stem the violence and forced displacements of Fulbe in Upper Guinea.<sup>26</sup> Everyone appeared to accept as fact that the Maninka had stolen the election and that Alpha Condé’s victory would never have been possible without fraud. Many vowed that they would leave the country as soon as possible, and then the Maninka would regret that they had made enemies of the Fulbe, whose commerce they all relied on.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Despite the rumours that UFDG leaders had instructed their constituents to kill all the Maninka, this violence seemed calculated more to express anger than to kill: protesters destroyed property, but the only reported deaths were those caused by government security forces. Similarly, Maninka violence against Fulbe in October seemed focused on destruction of property rather than human life (ICG 2011: 7).

<sup>25</sup> Madiou told me later that he had wanted join his friends on the street that night but his mother had told him that, if he did, she would go with him. He did not want to go out accompanied by his mother, so he stayed at home instead – likely the result that his mother had intended.

<sup>26</sup> Human Rights Watch reported that security forces ‘used excessive force and displayed a lack of political neutrality when responding to election-related violence’ and committed abuses against ethnic Fulbe in particular (‘Guinea: witnesses describe security force excesses’, Human Rights Watch, 29 November 2010 <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/11/29/guinea-witnesses-describe-security-force-excesses>>, accessed 9 October 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Migration to other countries was already a common practice in the Fouta Djallon (Fioratta 2015) and it is unclear whether there was any significant increase in the numbers of people who left after 2010. However, the sentiment stood out in stark relief against the statements of the many Fulbe I met in Dakar earlier that year who promised to ‘come home’ to the Fouta Djallon after the elections.

During the months leading up to the November elections, political sensibilities in the Fouta Djallon shifted. Praise for Dadis and the military – and then anger against them – gradually became overshadowed by the growing conviction that a vast Maninka plot was under way to steal the election and prevent the Fulbe from gaining power in Guinea. This conviction emerged over time – building on perceptions of anti-Fulbe targeting during the Sékou Touré era and supported by conspiracy theorizing that purported to reveal the malevolent intentions of Maninka leaders – and crystallized in moments of action including the attacks on Maninka houses in Daande Caanguel.<sup>28</sup> This emergence was a dialectical process between conspiracy theories on the one hand and events and actions on the other. Explanatory narratives that developed around the stadium massacre shifted over time, first with the apparent revelations made by Dadis on video and then with the episode of alleged poisoning and the violence that followed. These narratives helped create an environment in which suspicion hardened into certainty, the formerly disliked Cellou Dalein became the unifying candidate for Fulbe everywhere, and violent attacks on neighbours' property not only became possible but also, to some, seemed justified.

### **Conclusion: emergent politics**

The Americans and Europeans I knew in Guinea – some there as diplomats and others with international or non-governmental organizations – sometimes mocked the conspiracy theories that circulated in popular discourse. They criticized as paranoid the allegations of poisoned water at the political meeting, the notion that Alpha Condé had orchestrated the stadium massacre as part of a vast ethnic Maninka plot, or that Alpha Condé had followers in Canada ready to commit murder on his behalf. One American friend in Conakry characterized the October 2010 violence against Fulbe in Upper Guinea as ‘not political, only ethnic’.

My analysis leads me to somewhat different conclusions. First, as I have discussed, the theories of conspiracy I have described here were not necessarily irrational. Many Fulbe became convinced that they were the victims of targeted ethnic violence and that Cellou Dalein had been cheated of victory by ethnicity-based electoral fraud. These conclusions, to

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<sup>28</sup> Ironically, the Maninka houses were owned by Fulbe landlords; this may explain why the structures themselves were not totally destroyed, but their contents generally were. Some people in Daande Caanguel objected to the destruction for this reason, although one young man told me that the damaged houses were the Fulbe landlords' ‘sacrifice’ to a greater cause.

outsiders, may seem like paranoid exaggeration, but, in living memory, former president Sékou Touré had accused Fulbe of conspiracy against the state, and many Fulbe lived in fear during his presidency. Beyond suspicions of ethnic targeting, many people I knew in the Fouta Djallon were convinced that France supported Alpha Condé's candidacy and the US backed Cellou Dalein's – a notion that the Americans and Europeans I knew declared absurd. But to Guineans, this suspicion might seem reasonably consistent with past Western domination and exploitation in West Africa.<sup>29</sup> Linking powerful international interests to conspiracy in local affairs, people claimed broader significance for their fears – and not without justification.

Second, the conspiracy theories that circulated in the Fouta Djallon in 2010 revealed the emergence of particular political sensibilities at the same time as they shaped emergent political realities. In a context where the new political institution of electoral democracy held great promise yet remained surrounded by uncertainty, people interpreted what was visible and theorized hidden truths. In the process, political orientations shifted. With the circulation of the Dadis video, people in the Fouta Djallon constructed new theories about responsibility for the stadium massacre and began to view continued military rule as a lesser threat compared with the prospect of Alpha Condé's presidency. With the accusations that Fulbe vendors had poisoned Alpha Condé's supporters and the subsequent violence against Fulbe in Upper Guinea, Fouta Djallon residents theorized the existence of a Maninka plot to fraudulently deprive Cellou Dalein of an otherwise assured electoral victory. As suspicions mounted over time, people in the Fouta Djallon declared with increasing conviction that they, as ethnic Fulbe, were under attack.

Kathleen Stewart writes that one of the characteristics of conspiracy theory is that it 'combines radical doubt with the sense that the truth is out there' (1999: 17). Guineans who

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<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the French foreign affairs minister at the time, Bernard Kouchner, and Alpha Condé were long-time friends (Camara et al. 2014), and former US ambassador to Guinea Jackson McDonald lobbied for Cellou Dalein in Washington, DC. McDonald's signature appears on a retainer agreement made between JWI, a consulting firm where McDonald worked after retiring from the Foreign Service, and Dalein's UFDG party. The document is filed with the US Department of Justice registry of US-based lobbyists for foreign clients and can be viewed at <<https://www.fara.gov/docs/4990-Exhibit-AB-20141216-25.pdf>> (accessed 9 October 2018).

interrogated political events in 2010 through a hermeneutic of suspicion nevertheless expressed certainty about the existence of an objective truth that could be uncovered.<sup>30</sup> This is evident, for example, in my interlocutors' assertions that Dadis knew the truth of Alpha Condé's involvement in the Portuguese aggression, that a laboratory test in a Western country would identify poison in the water, and that the true election results would favour Cellou Dalein. Over time, conspiracy theorizing among Fouta Djallon residents served to establish a truth that Cellou Dalein would win the presidential election. Anything that differed from that 'truth' was fraudulent, the product of a conspiracy against the Fulbe.

In a complex and often troubling political situation, conspiracy theorizing yielded simple, urgent narratives that people recognized as truth: Maninka were cheating, Fulbe were under attack. Some people drew on these narratives of conspiracy to call for Fulbe unification against other ethnic groups and even to justify acts of violence. Although the discord that occurred in the wake of the election was not as extreme as some predicted – Fulbe did not leave the country en masse and ruin the economy, and Fulbe violence against Maninka involved destruction of property but not of human life – relations within and between groups shifted. In theorizing conspiracies, people engaged with the election in emergent ways that reshaped Guinea's political landscape, possibly for years to come.

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<sup>30</sup> Arieff and McGovern (2013) show how Guineans remembering events of the Sékou Touré era share similar convictions about the existence of an objective, discoverable historical truth.

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