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Review of 'Playing the marginality game: identity politics in West Africa'

Susanna Fioratta
Bryn Mawr College, sfioratta@brynmawr.edu

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Playing the Marginality Game: Identity Politics in West Africa
Anita Schroven

2006-2007 was an eventful time in the Republic of Guinea. A series of national strikes united much of the population in protest against government corruption and neglect. The state responded violently, deploying soldiers to fire into crowds of unarmed protesters. During this period of national drama, Anita Schroven conducted ethnographic research in Forécariah, one of the only Guinean prefectures where no strike-related violence occurred. In *Playing the Marginality Game*, Schroven presents Forécariah as a place whose inhabitants viewed themselves as marginal, but also sought to "make use of their marginal positions, real or imagined" (p. 2). Forécariah's avoidance of upheaval during the strikes was no accident according to Schroven's interlocutors, who credited local elders with intervening through prayer, negotiations with political and military leaders, and possibly mystical sacrifices to protectively "'cut off' the town from the rest of the country" (p. 52-53). In this and other instances, Schroven argues, Forécariah residents strategically situated themselves as marginal to the state.

But this is not solely a story about people distancing themselves from a threatening state. Forécariah inhabitants also experienced what Schroven calls "integration," with an improved road linking Forécariah ever more closely to the capital city of Conakry, a flurry of NGO workshops increasing regional involvement in decentralized governance, and memories of the past socialist era lingering in feelings of identity with the contemporary state. People in Forécariah "oscillated" (p. 51, 188) between marginality and state integration.

Playing the Marginality Game is densely written, with heavily detailed histories of population movements and the lineages of the town's elite families, in addition to sections of literature review. And yet, though anthropological literatures on marginality receive extensive treatment, Schroven anchors her use of the concept in an interview with a man from the town's ruling family. Quoted at the start of the introduction and again in the conclusion, the man laments that his family and home region diminished in importance with the advent of colonialism and the state, and "now we are marginal" (p. 1, 190). Schroven writes that other inhabitants also described their town as marginal. When I read this, my interest was piqued: how did marginality come up in everyday conversations around Forécariah? How might concepts in Susu or other local languages inform an emic category of marginality? But to my disappointment, Schroven does not pose these questions.

Schroven does not write about herself much in her ethnographic material, and it is sometimes not clear whether she witnessed the episodes she recounts or heard about them second- or third-hand. Even so, the book's most illuminating moments are its more ethnographic ones. Like many other anthropologists working in West Africa, Schroven spent much of her fieldwork sipping rounds of strong, sweet tea and listening to the conversation among her fellow (largely male) tea drinkers. In the wake of the strikes, low- and middle-ranking civil servants at the tea bar debated their own role in a conflict that pitted the Guinean people against state power. These men admired the protests against state corruption, even as they recognized their own complicity in it. They identified alternately with "the people" and "the power" (p. 163-169). In another memorable episode, town residents angrily mistook Schroven for a tax collector when she tried to map their neighborhood. In this case, an ethnographic methodology gone wrong led to discussions in

which interlocutors characterized taxes as an unwelcome intrusion and admitted they tried to avoid paying them—even as they recognized the link between paying taxes and valuing citizenship (p. 177-181).

I will raise one final point: I wish that Schroven had included in her book a discussion of the cover photograph, which depicts a Guinean soldier standing next to a framed image of then-president Lansana Conté, a crowd of spectators in the background, the Guinean flag and an Islamic star and crescent above. The soldier appears to be looking directly into the camera, though the photo represents its subjects' skin tones as so dark that their features are obscured (deliberately? Or a result of photography's implicit bias in favor of light skin?) so it is difficult to tell for certain. According to the caption on the back cover, Schroven took this photograph in Forécariah in 2007, a year when the Guinean military responded with lethal violence to national protests. But here, on the margins, a crowd hangs back while a soldier poses for the camera.

Susanna Fioratta, Bryn Mawr College
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