My current incursion into archives expands from a childhood curiosity about my father’s war memorabilia (Fig. 1). He fought in the last two years of the colonial war in former Portuguese Guinea (1963–1974), and during that period he collected photographs of the war. I began examining those images in my childhood and have continued to work with them as a professional artist interested in the photographic medium and as an anthropologist attempting to assess human behavior. My research, as both visual artist and anthropologist, is intimately related to that album of photographs, the individual prints, and the album as an object—even when I create works that might appear to have no relation to them.

For a considerable time, I created artworks by erasing, covering, or even destroying photographs and objects from my father’s album (Fig. 2). Some of these works were merely inspired by the images and their layered arrangements in the album (Fig. 3). Multiple technical procedures allowed me to accomplish my aims. For years, this work fit into the category of drawing as a bodily form of metabolizing images into physical mediums. The act of drawing was a process of digesting those old photographs. Unlike writing, which renders the world in linguistic and intellectualized form, drawing is an optimal tool to dismantle stagnant discourses and create new possibilities. But the wish to directly challenge linguistic narratives brought me to a doctoral research program in anthropology and several years pursuing ethnography in Portugal and Guinea-Bissau. Over the years I became increasingly interested in theories of image created at the intersection of art history and anthropology (Stoichita 2008; Belting 2014) as a gut reaction to my earlier images of the colonial war. Images of smoke, dust, erosion, and blood have frequently appeared during my ethnographic incursions into urban and rural settings, archives, and as a cinematographer in Guinea-Bissau and Portugal over the past few years. These images have appeared in strange, fleeting epiphanies, on mundane occasions, in archival materials, during storytelling, and in the body language of some of my interlocutors. I am interested in observing how they linger in people’s minds, bodies, and in the archive itself.

**Smoke**

The window blinds were closed, creating hazy shadows in the room as light seeped in between the slats. An intense smell of smoke came from small fires that had been lit early that morning somewhere near the house. The smoke spread quickly through the almost empty and dimly lit interior, growing eerily visible when illuminated by the slivers of light coming from the window. The intense aroma of wood smoke intrigued me. It was very early in the morning, and I was just waking up. Having just moved into the house, I did not immediately understand where I was. Slowly rising to my feet, I pulled the weight of my body up and ventured outside. The thin dust stirred up by the city’s daily grind added a constant veil to the atmosphere. Smoke, dust, and vultures, paradoxically heavy things, floated in the sky. All three are abundant in Bissau. As the ever-present dust seemed to dissipate from the air, it settled, leaving a thick, reddish-brown residue on everything. Smoke moving into the atmosphere covered portions of the blue sky, veiling the puffy white clouds with gray plumes, while vultures soaring between the smoke and sky knitted the two together and, despite the smoothness of their flight, added even more to the sense of unrest. Everything appeared to be harmonious—to some degree—although a constant sense of foreboding (Fig. 4) continually sent me back to testimonies about the tense moments preceding battle during the colonial war.

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During my fieldwork I spent much of my time in Guinea-Bissau’s national archive, located at the National Research Institute (INEP) in Bissau. The archivist, Sadjo Papis Mariama Turé, known as “Papis,” was a tall, strong Mandinga who had worked in the archive since 1998. Over the years he seemingly absorbed into his own being the material stored inside those dark, dusty rooms. Once I recognized this overwhelming transfiguration of matter into human being, I could no longer think of INEP’s archives as just another archivist architecture. It was a place not only interconnected but ontologically substantiated in a person who is an intrinsic part of its morphology. Without Papis, the archive would be just an assemblage of papers in a state of accelerated erosion, nothing but a potential cloud of reddish dust. In her critique of Jacques Derrida’s Archive Fever, Carolyn Steedman (2002) elaborates on the archive as a living ecology of dangerous materials holding the potential to infiltrate the human body’s microbiology. Steedman describes the archive as a disease that contaminates the body of those who handle its disintegrating materials and inhabit its architecture of composite dust. Papis personified the National Archive to the extent that he seemed to be the archive himself. For me, INEP’s archive became a person.

One day, when I called Papis to gain access to the part of the building where the materials are stored, he told me he could not go to work that day because of the unbearable dust that accumulated over everything. “My lungs are full of dust. I’m getting sick. I need to spend less time in that place.” The archive had been breathed into the archivist’s body, transforming him from within. It literally pushed him into the strange ecology of its decomposing materials, its necrobiome and humus (Henderson 2015). In an archive like that of INEP, the natural processes of aging and decay are shockingly evident. Instead of making history’s voracity unrecognizable, the deterioration of the archive makes it overwhelmingly visible. The dust that invaded the archive when soldiers destroyed its windows and doors during the civil war and that today floats with the wind, adding to processes of sedimentation throughout the city, also attacks Papis’s lungs as he breathes. The sediment appropriates his body, and he becomes an organic part of the archive. Papis is at the mercy of dust like all the other objects and materials in the archive. Perhaps not coincidentally, Papis is also a professional healer, specializing in the chronic breathing condition asthma, which he treats with a secret recipe combining plants and water intake.

Each time Papis and I handled any archived document, we contributed to its material disintegration. One time, Papis brought a box full of typographic templates from the colonial period. When I was finished looking through the templates, he just crammed them into the deteriorated box where they were previously stored like so much rubble. Every time an item came out of the storage room and went back again, I could see a little trail of remains, tiny fragments that showed the trajectory of the document to and from the table.
where I sat to do my research. Papis would just sweep away those bits of archival matter as if they were cookie crumbs. I began to request items just to observe this strange movement of things disintegrating as they came out and went back into the archive. As an assemblage formed by architecture, documents, the archivist, and the researcher, the archive was a living organism metabolizing the materials stored in its belly. At first, I could not stop myself from thinking, “What could we do to save this material?!?” But, after a while, I realized that INEP’s archive is precisely as it should be (Fig. 5). The visible erosion of its materials says much more about the history of this archive and Guinea-Bissau than a state-of-the-art facility in which documents are preserved in historical suspension.

The archive reveals that erosion—both the erosion provoked by those who interact with the archive and that caused by the 1998 civil war between President Nino Vieira and dissidents of his own army—is an essential part of the cultural process. Nino’s strategy included an alliance with the Senegalese government, which sent military assistance. The Senegalese army went into Bissau and occupied many buildings in the capital, including INEP and its archive. According to Papis, soldiers are responsible for its ruination, mostly by letting in a mind-boggling amount of dust, which covered its documents and objects: “They smashed the windows and doors and let the dust and mold get into the previously isolated rooms where we still store our materials.” The deployment of armies and the detonation of bombshells created an abundance of dust that has accumulated in the archive until today, continuously sedimenting into the archivist’s lungs: archive, dust, and war collapsed into a human body.

**CAMARADA NINO VIEIRA**

Before traveling to Guinea-Bissau, when I thought of the war for liberation the first thing that came to my mind was Amílcar Cabral and the anticolonial speeches he delivered worldwide. His words on “the legitimate aspirations of the African people to live in dignity, freedom, national independence and progress” (Cabral 1973: 16) long outlasted his assassination in 1973. His contribution to African socialism is carved in stone: whereas few scholars study such a small West African country as Guinea-Bissau, many researchers still include Cabral’s theoretical writings in their bibliographies. The first time I went into Guinea-Bissau, in 2016, I anticipated finding Cabral’s overwhelming presence in the stories my interlocutors told about their country. Surprisingly, I was mistaken. I encountered state-sponsored public art with Cabral’s effigy in Bissau, the capital, where the poet is referred to as the nation’s father, and I saw constant references to Cabral in political campaigns and institutional discourses. His words have been appropriated for private entrepreneurial jargon and painted on the facades of foreign NGO headquarters along with images of white doves, representing peace and progress. But the farther I moved from the capital into the southern forest, where I spent most of my time in the country, the more Cabral became a vague rumor.
The intensity of stories about other figures of the war increased significantly, however. The one who provoked the most passionate reactions, either of love or hate, was João Bernardo Vieira, popularly known as “Nino.”

After becoming a key actor during the liberation war as a member of Cabral’s Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde), Nino became Guinea-Bissau’s president in 1980 as part of a military coup against President Luís Cabral, Amílcar’s brother. Nino was supported by a group of militaries, mostly Balanta, who after supporting Amílcar Cabral became hostile to the predominantly Cape Verdean political elite he had created during the anti-colonial war. From 1980 to 1998, Nino assumed Cabral’s socialist rhetoric and nurtured international alliances mostly with Communist, Scandinavian, and nonaligned countries.

In casual conversation with Guinea-Bissauans about Nino, he usually comes across as the opposite of Cabral. In the vernacular versions of the national mythology, Cabral is described and depicted in ways not dissimilar to how monotheistic traditions depict their holy figures: as a visionary whose love for the cause of his people led him to sacrifice his own life. Cabral had an inhuman capacity for reasoning in the most challenging circumstances. His sense of justice was unmatched. Together these qualities describe a flawless human being who transformed society in a messianic way. In the same national mythology, Nino is quite the opposite. He comes across as the opportunist dictator who attained power through traitorous methods. He is the one who got rid of everyone in his path using nothing but violence. He could not hold to any ethical principle but clung to power no matter how, making deals with the darkest of forces and evil spirits while instrumentalizing ethnic identity, which Cabral called “tribal mentality” (1973: 28). Nino craved blood like a vampire and, accompanied by beating drums and secret rituals, left a trail of corpses in his wake.

Cabral is the martyr, Nino the beast. Cabral is good, and Nino pure evil. For the international community, Nino cultivated an image of the modern African ruler, making speeches about progress and development in the best interest of the nation: “We are not against tradition, as long as it doesn’t stand on the way of our nation’s progress” (Nô Pintcha 1983). Internally, he nurtured a reputation as a traditional ruler protected by powerful irans (spiritual beings), and, according to some scholars, he engaged with organized crime (Vernaschi 2010; Jakobsson 2015; Shaw 2015). Rulers such as Nino are relatively common in postcolonial Africa. Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, Gnassingbé Eyadéma in Togo, and Charles Taylor in Liberia are other examples. All, in one way or another, developed reputations as bloodthirsty rulers, often involved with supernatural activities, whose leadership style was a hybrid of the ruling-class protocols of the Global North and traditional forms of African leadership.

Within the Balanta community in the southern forest, nobody had ever seen Cabral in the flesh. People often spoke about him as a foreigner, and some even doubted his existence. Nino had the reputation of being an authentic local leader, someone who could speak the Balanta language and knew the practices related to the forest’s invisible forces. The Balanta are the largest ethnic community in

Guinea-Bissau, and their massive mobilization was key to the liberation of the country in the 1960s and 70s. Nino was the military leader who talked those communities into joining the liberation movement. This was quite an achievement, as Nino was from the Pepel minority and the Balanta tend to follow political leaders from within their own community. Nino is still widely known in the region for having ceremonially killed outstanding numbers of cattle to settle contracts with the spiritual entities, the *irans*, who, to a large extent, regulate the Balanta division of property and influence many other legal matters. In return, the *irans* gave Nino superhuman powers—including the ability to return to life each time he was killed in battle—or granted him immunity from enemy bullets as he fiercely led his men against overwhelming Portuguese firepower. The repertoire of the popular imagination surrounding Nino Vieira is vast, tremendously creative, and full of compelling details. It continued long after the war for liberation, into his phase as president of the republic. Nino used that reputation along with organized state violence to instill terror and thus control his country’s populace while simultaneously emulating in his official speeches the socialist jargon for which Cabral was known (Fig. 6).

After losing the civil war, Nino fled to political exile in Portugal, before returning to the presidency from 2005 until 2009. His rule was cut short when he was butchered in his house in Bissau, literally chopped to pieces with a machete after being fatally shot. Some speculate that his assassination was related to his involvement with organized crime; others claim a group of displeased militaries decided to get him out of the way. Those who describe Nino as a bloody supernatural being fighting for the independence of Guinea-Bissau also see in the gruesomeness of his assassination a deep connection to his reputation as an immortal demon. For those who believe he was not from this world, cutting his body into pieces is interpreted as a way of ensuring he could not come back from the dead, as he is believed to have done so many times in the past.

**BLOOD**

Nino led me to think about the regular sightings of blood in my research on the presence of the Bissauan colonial war in the post-colony. Most conversations I had with Bissau-Guineans about Nino included assertions about the amount of blood he spilled and how his own blood ended up washing his home’s floors in Bissau. In a land where wars have spilled so much blood, some traditional healers have become experts in religious ceremonies called “ground washing,” in which the blood soaking the ground since the war is ritually washed away. The way blood soaks the ground in Guinea-Bissau reminds me of how certain images seem to soak the minds of the people I have encountered who lived through the colonial war in that territory.
The impact of spilled blood is experienced not only in Guinea-Bissau: talking with a former nurse of the Portuguese army, I learned about the fracturing psychological effects that the daily sight of blood and mutilated corpses has had on him since his war experience so long ago. My father’s album of the colonial war included only a couple of bloody pictures. One was an image of a dead boa constrictor from whose sliced belly emerged the head of a dead calf. The other was a shocking image of a young man beaten to death, his face and body covered with blood, gore spilling into the ground around him.

Many years after the colonial war in 1974 and the assassination of Nino Vieira in 2009, I went to Guinea-Bissau as a cinematographer to work on a documentary film in a village called Unal. The village was at stage center during the war in the 1960s and early 1970s. Observing the blood of sacrificed animals soaking into the ground during religious ceremonies in Unal (Fig. 7), I realized how tightly interconnected are the images I have described throughout this article and how much they all contribute to a compelling elaboration of blood as an image.

The repeated effect of images of smoke, dust, war, erosion, and blood in my research reveals how these materials have set the pace of the experience of war in Guinea-Bissau since 1963. Like a repetitive beat, those who lived through the wars have never lost sight of these elements; their war experiences have continued to pulsate in their minds. Figures like Papis, profoundly entangled with INEP’s eroding archive, or Nino as the personification of war are new images that allow me to look at my role in the ongoing story told by my father’s album.

Notes

1. The motives behind the civil war remain unsettled. One rumor theorizes an illegal arms trade between President Vieira, his military chief of staff, Ansumane Mané, and rebels who, since 1982, have waged a guerrilla war against Senegalese armed forces for the independence of Casamance (the area of Senegal south of The Gambia). Political scientists have suggested that conflict between Nino and Mané was the seed that led to the Bissau-Guinean political and military elites’ involvement with the global narcobusiness some years later (Jakobsson 2015; Shaw 2015).

References cited


