REVISITING THE POLITICS OF ELITE CULTURE
This essay proposes to outline the major contemporary projects for the nation in Guinea-Bissau and the dilemmas and contradictions their proponents experience in trying to implement them. It claims that the idea of nation has been constructed by Guinean Creole society since the mid 1950s as a way to overcome its subordinate position within the colonial political structure. However, after independence, the incapacity of Creole institutions to incorporate a mass of people from rural communities, the centrifugal forces of patrimonial politics and ideology as well as the contingencies of international political economy created a gap between the actual experience of nation building and the collective narratives that frame and organize social practices. That being so, Creole society is challenged by the predicament of having no conceptual repertoire to frame the experience of building the imagined community that is the nation.

The purpose of this essay is to present an outline of what constitutes the major projects for the nation in Guinea-Bissau and the predicaments that come out of them. I claim that the idea of nation in Guinea-Bissau has been above all a Creole project or aspiration that works as a means to preserve the privileged social position of the Creole group. Unlike other cases of nationalism in West Africa, the national project in Guinea-Bissau was not part of an integration package which would include an incipient process of urbanization and industrialization and the (formal) adoption of citizenship as a universal value. Ruled by a weak and authoritarian colonial regime, public life in colonial Guinea was for most of its history left in the hands of an intermediary group, the Creole elite, unable to reproduce itself solely on the basis of its inner social relations. Hence it had to develop mechanisms of creolization in order to incorporate foreign people, values, and social practices, thus transforming them into something that was perceived as truly its own.