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Ethnic identity in West Africa. Historical perspectives on America's discourse about ethnicity

Tertium comparationis 4 (1998) 1, S. 10-20



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Mark, Peter: Ethnic identity in West Africa. Historical perspectives on America's discourse about ethnicity
- In: *Tertium comparationis* 4 (1998) 1, S. 10-20 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-opus-28828 - DOI:
10.25656/01:2882

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-opus-28828>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:2882>

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Ethnic Identity in West Africa: Historical Perspectives on America's Discourse about Ethnicity

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Abstract

Political Correctness and Affirmative Action are core issues of America's difficult search for cultural identity. However, a policy of differential treatment of categorized ethnicities is likely to cause complex and dynamic identities to become static and one-dimensional. This in turn is a factor of social destabilization. The basic assumption of ethnicity as a fixed social or racial category is not only an oversimplification, but a policy focussing on group rights changes the character of the groups themselves and even stimulates growing isolation between them. The paper's argumentation is based on observations on the historical process of group identity-forming in Western African societies. They provide the example of how ethnic identity is a matter of dynamic constellations, of change, of interaction, of conscious and unconscious negotiation and choice, both on the group level and on the individual level.

1 Introduction

The historical and ethnographic study of West African societies offers important insights into the nature of ethnicity and of cultural identity. This knowledge can provide a perspective for analyzing contemporary social and political phenomena, particularly the manner in which American society confronts – or avoids – issues relating to ethnic identity and to minorities. Recent West African historiography and ethnography offer a perspective which suggests that much of the current discourse in America about „race relations“ is characterized by intellectual inconsistencies and oversimplifications.

American political discourse and public policy debate about ethnic minorities and cultural identity are hampered by several tendencies that are associated with „political correctness.“ Whether one chooses to speak of this discourse as „political correctness“ is, however, of little import. The following characteristics are prevalent in contemporary American political discourse and they are responsible for the intellectual impoverishment of that debate:

- 1) A hesitancy to express attitudes which might be construed as being critical towards historically disadvantaged ethnic minorities in American society. These minorities are diverse. They include African-Americans (this category includes Trinidadians, Jamaicans, and other Caribbean peoples who do not normally identify themselves as African-Americans); Hispanic-Americans (any hispanophone person from Central or South America who is not Black or American Indian; interestingly, Spanish speakers from Spain are not „Hispanic“; significantly, too, this category does not accord with the way in which many Latin Americans identify themselves); and American Indians.
- 2) Unwillingness publicly to question the efficacy of political policies whose stated purpose is to counteract inequities resulting from historical discrimination.
- 3) As a consequence of the first two attitudes, avoidance of debate or critical discourse about such fundamental public policy issues as the preferential hiring of minority group members.

Since the 1980s, much African scholarship has focused on questions relating to ethnic and cultural identity. The concept of the ethnic group, or „l’ethnie“, which was formerly fundamental to historians, art historians, and anthropologists, is now widely perceived as falsely presenting culture and identity as static (Amselle & M’Bokolo 1985; Chrétien & Prunier 1989).¹ In many instances, ethnic groups have been demonstrated to be a creation of recent (colonial and post-colonial) history.² Even where ethno-linguistic identities do have a long historical existence (the Mandé, for example) the composition of these groups has changed over time. It is also significant that the criteria which serve to define membership in a given group are themselves subject to change. Ethnic groups, far from constituting relatively fixed categories, are actually constellations of linguistic, religious, socio-economic and cultural factors³

Thus, modern African historical ethnography is based on a paradigm that is dynamic, a paradigm which, in its recognition of multiple changing factors, moves from a fixed model to one that is contextually determined and often relative.⁴ This intellectual model has, however, had no appreciable impact upon the political discourse relating to „ethnic groups“ or minorities in the United States.

That political discourse has remained impervious to, or isolated from historical ethnography is unfortunate, for African scholarship is of direct relevance to the American situation. In the following pages I shall address this point. I illustrate my discussion with references to the history of Southern Senegambia and Guinea-Bissau, the region that, for 20 years, has been the focal point of my own research.

2 The Casamance

When I began my study of the history of the Casamance in South-western Senegal, in 1973, my task appeared relatively straightforward. By use of written records and local oral narratives, I intended to describe socio-economic change during the colonial period among the Jola (or Diola) people, the largest ethnic group in the region. The Jola, who number about 250,000 seemed to be a clearly-defined ethnic group. They all speak dialects of a common language; the villages I studied recognize a common ancestry; before the colonial period the various Jola sub-groups – who now include Muslims, Christians, and adherents of local religion – seem to have had common religious rituals and other cultural practices.

Closer familiarity with the subject of my enquiry, however, revealed a much more complicated reality. The Jola language actually comprises many dialects, not all of which are mutually comprehensible even to a native speaker. The community where I lived, Thionk-Essyl, has its own dialect, which could be classed as a separate language and whose vocabulary shows significant borrowings from another language, Bagnun.

The commonly credited origins of Northern Jola villages, whose oral traditions recount migration from Jola villages South of the Casamance River, also proved to be an oversimplification. In Thionk-Essyl, the descendents of these immigrants are mixed together with the descendents of an older, autochthonous population known as the Bagnuns. Traditions in Thionk-Essyl clearly describe Bagnun ancestry, but this information is not readily shared with strangers. Further evidence of the complex heritage is seen in the fact that many Northern Jolas have names that were originally Bagnun. In short, the ancestry of these Northern Jolas was part Jola and part Bagnun. As I later learned, there is also a significant Mandé component in Northern Jola culture; this latter influence comes both from the Manding (or Mandinka) of the Gambia, and from the empire of Kaabu to the Southeast.

In fact, the Northern Jola share a long history of extensive commercial contact, of intermarriage, and of shared cultural traditions with both the Bagnun-speakers of Casamance and the Manding inhabitants of the lower Gambia. As a result, even such distinctive Casamance cultural elements as the horned ejumba mask used in the Jola men's initiation ceremonies exist as regional phenomena, with variants found among the Mandinka (Mark 1992: 122).

Given their long history of assimilation and intermarriage, it is often impossible to differentiate clearly between who is Northern Jola and who is Gambian Mandinka. Nor is it always possible, in analyzing local art and ritual, to separate Jola from Mandinka culture. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, many Casamance people (then called Floups) were captured in slave raids and warfare and became domestic slaves of the Mandinka (Mark 1992: 124). Many descendents of these captives forgot their ancestral language, converted to Islam, and married into the local community, thereby changing their identity to Mandinka. Sometimes this transformation occurred within the span of a single generation.

Ethnic identity in Casamance and the Gambia has historically been fluid, characterized by continuous social and cultural interaction and change. Sometimes that change is gradual and unconscious, but at other moments it occurs rapidly and as the result of conscious choice

The flexible and dynamic nature of ethnic identity is highly significant, for two reasons. First, although identity is clearly most dynamic where two groups have extensive contact, the capacity for change is not limited to the borderlands between two cultures. Historically, few people have remained isolated. Individuals are mobile; traders and warriors often travelled long distances, and groups often migrated, as local traditions indicate. Furthermore, the zones of interaction between cultures are not fixed. Over the past five centuries virtually the entire Casamance has been subject to cultural interaction at one time or another, and virtually all groups have been affected by the process of cultural interaction and ethnic change⁸

Second, as the Casamance example demonstrates, ethnic change affects not only stateless societies like the Jola, but also members of the larger cultural groups, those

associated with centralized states, such as the Mande. The Mande cultural zone extends West from the Niger River, 600 miles to the mouth of the Gambia River. Here, at the Western extremity of the Mande world, ethnic identity has been, for centuries, the product of an ongoing process of interaction between intrusive Mande groups and local peoples (Wright 1985). Mande identity too is subject to change and, just as much as Jola or Bagnun identity, it is the product of both conscious and unconscious negotiation (Weil 1988).

This phenomenon of ethnic change is not limited to the periphery of the Mande zone. In the Mande heartland, too, as Bazin has demonstrated, ethnic identity is both the result of continuing interaction between groups and, in part, a question of conscious choice.⁹ Furthermore, as Amselle observes in a recent study, individuals may „become“ Bamana in large measure through a process of self-identification,¹⁰ a process that is sometimes intimately associated with the decision not to follow the Muslim religion (Amselle 1990: 85).

Many present-day West African ethnic groups are in part the product of the colonial period. Before the establishment of French administration, for example, the various peoples known as „Floups“ had no sense of common identity and „the Jola“ as such did not exist. Only in the present century did the Jola come into being, initially as the result of administrators and ethnologists' observations of common linguistic and cultural elements among the Floups, but subsequently due to „the Jolas“ own growing recognition of common political interests and cultural identity.¹¹

However, the dynamic process of creating and redefining one's socio-cultural identity did not begin with the colonial period. This process is as ancient as is interaction between peoples. Whether we speak of ethnic groups or of cultures, the dynamic nature of group identity is not a marginal phenomenon, but an important, broad-based, even universal characteristic of human societies.

3 Ethnicity in the United States

The understanding that ethnic identity is based on a constellation of factors: language, culture, ancestry, as well as religious and even political orientation, but not necessarily on physical characteristics, and the realization that identity is complex and dynamic, have direct implications for any society concerned with achieving the full integration of all its members. If a government or policy seeks to institute policies or laws aimed at counteracting economic, social or cultural discrimination against any component group within that society, consideration has to be given to the fact that ethnic or group identity is the product of complex factors, and that identity is subject to change over time. Any policy that conceptualizes ethnic identity as fixed is based on a misunderstanding of the history and process of social formation. Such a policy, especially one that officially recognizes the existence of certain racial categories (but not others), will have negative side effects and, ultimately, will prove counterproductive.

It is precisely in this regard that the implementation of entitlement programs, that is, the practice of reserving specific employment or government positions – or a set proportion of these positions – for members of particular minorities is ultimately a self-defeating policy. The long-term aims of such „affirmative action“ policies include lessening discrimination based on minority group membership (a matter of simple justice) and, beyond that,

reducing the role of such discrimination as a cause of centripetal tendencies in American society (a matter of pragmatic self-interest for all citizens). Yet the result is to reify, concretize and further institutionalize separate identities.

Policies that intentionally favour members of any particular ethnic group simply on the basis of their belonging to that minority have been rightly criticized for failing to address either the underlying economic inequality² or the problem of discriminatory behaviour. William J. Wilson points out that those most likely to benefit from affirmative action hiring are the minority group members who are the least economically and socially disadvantaged. As Wilson writes, affirmative action programs focus government policy on group rights; this in turn requires that people be „formally categorized or recognized on the basis of race or ethnicity“, and that preferential treatment then be based solely on their assigned group membership (Wilson 1987: 114 f.). This policy fails to address the underlying social problem of unequal economic opportunity. I and many others would also argue that such preferential treatment is itself inconsistent with democratic principles. Shelby Steele, for example, concisely observes that the way to end discrimination is not through making discrimination official policy³. Yet, there is another fundamental reason why affirmative action policies that target members of specific groups cannot ultimately help to achieve a more just society, nor a policy in which all members are more fully and equitably integrated, that is, a healthy society.

„Minority preference“ policies⁴ by their very conception, vastly oversimplify the complex factors that influence individuals to identify themselves as members of certain groups. Furthermore, these policies ignore the crucial fact that we all belong to many groups, that the parameters by which groups are defined are not fixed (as the historical example below will illustrate) and that over time, even ethnic identity changes. These policies, which treat ethnic identity as if it were concrete and unchanging, rather than a dynamic and at least partly contextually determined construct, also ignore the fact that it is precisely because identities are multiple and shifting that human societies are not necessarily composed of a congeries of warring groups, but may in fact achieve a sense of commonality or of overarching unity. Policies predicated on the assumption that ethnic identity is fixed and immutable, and which themselves function in a discriminatory manner, will never be able to bring about a society in which ethnic discrimination is no longer a scourge.

The process by which ethnic identity is continually created and reformulated constitutes a dialogue between the particular group and the outside community⁵. Thus, a government that categorizes people, thereby defining officially recognized minorities, necessarily changes the nature of those groups. Ethnic groups whose existence is officially recognized, whether or not members initially accept that definition, will tend to respond as groups⁶, especially if their members then qualify for special advantages. In similar manner, colonial administrators helped to „create“ specific ethnic groups, simplifying the complex and changing levels of group identification that characterized many African societies. Recent events in Rwanda, in the former Zaire, and in Senegal amply demonstrate the disastrous potential of this phenomenon. In Senegambia, „Jola“ identity is very much a product of the colonial period.

Though ethnic identity in the Casamance has historically been fluid, today Jola identity plays a role in the civil conflict that pits the Casamance against Northern Senegal. Between 1990 and 1992 an estimated 2.000 people were killed as a result of confrontations between

the Senegalese army and suspected members of the MFDC, the Casamance independence movement. When official categories become the basis for differential treatment by the government, peoples' formerly complex identities can indeed become static and one-dimensional. The possibility for different groups to negotiate their identity based on perceived common interests is diminished. The common ground so crucial for the survival of civil society is also reduced.

4 Changing Identity in Pre-colonial Senegal

Here, too, the history of Senegambia offers a relevant perspective on contemporary ethnic group relations in America. This history clearly illustrates the fact that ethnic and cultural identities are the result of complex factors and that the parameters by which a given group defines itself are themselves subject to change over time. The example of the Luso-African communities in sixteenth and seventeenth century Senegambia and Guinea⁸ parenthetically demonstrates – although here I do not mean to imply direct relevance to the American situation – that the physical appearance of group members came to play a subordinate role, or ultimately no part at all, in the definition of their identity⁸.

In the mid-fifteenth century, the Senegambia-Bissau region was the site of the first extensive contact between Europeans and West Africans. By 1500, communities of Portuguese and Luso-African traders were established in Senegambia and Guinea. Luso-Africans, the descendents of Portuguese 'lancados' and Cape Verde Islanders who had settled among and married into the local African populations, served as commercial middlemen for the overseas trade along this part of the coast.⁹ Luso-African communities flourished at trading centers established by the Portuguese in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (e.g. Cacheu, Ziguinchor) as well as at smaller 'escales' that grew up along the waterways that served as trading routes (Brooks 1993: 79–113, 260 ff.). These communities constitute the earliest example of extensive intercultural contact between West Africans and Europeans in Africa. Out of this contact there developed, during the 1500s and 1600s, a distinctive Luso-African identity that combined elements of Portuguese culture within an essentially West African cultural model.

Luso-African trading communities thrived from the 'Petite Côte', just South of modern-day Dakar, to the Geba River in Guinea-Bissau. As middlemen the Luso-Africans maintained contact with Portuguese and Cape Verdeans at major 'entrepôts' such as Cacheu. But even there, only a small minority of the inhabitants were Europeans.²⁰ In the interior the Luso-Africans had only sporadic contact with Europeans.

By the last decades of the seventeenth century, members of the Luso-African community were physically indistinguishable from the local African populations. They, however, clearly identified themselves as a group indeed, to the evident consternation of some European visitors who were struck by their dark complexion, they referred to themselves as „Portuguese“²¹

Membership in the „Portuguese“ – or Luso-African²² – community was based not upon skin colour, but rather on four socio-economic and cultural criteria. In Senegambia and Bissau ethnic identities were often associated with a particular social and economic role or profession. For example, long distance traders who spoke Mande were known as „Jula“ (Dyula). In similar manner, the „Portuguese“ were professional traders. They were further distinguished by their language; members of the „Portuguese“ community all spoke Creole

(Crioulo). The third defining characteristic of these „Portuguese“ was their religion. By the seventeenth century, they all considered themselves to be Christians, although many of the original settlers from Portugal were actually Jews.

Local societies in this part of West Africa exhibited a wide range of religious orientations – there were Juula and Mandinka Muslims, as well as Floups and Baguns who followed their own religious rituals. In this cultural context it followed that the Luso-Africans also had their own religion, Christianity.

The fourth and final criterion on which „Portuguese“ identity was based was their material culture, particularly the distinctive style of house in which they lived. These „maisons à la portugaise,“ as they were described in seventeenth century narratives, were rectangular buildings constructed of dried mud or adobe bricks covered with a layer of white lime, with a vestibule or semi-enclosed porch before the entrance. In form these Portuguese-style houses were well adapted to commercial transactions, which were generally carried out in the vestibule. The white-washed exterior and the distinctive squared-off lines were symbols of the owners' wealth. At the same time, this architecture gave visual expression to the identity of the Luso-Africans who lived in the houses.

The Luso-Africans of seventeenth and eighteenth century Casamance and Bissau were the descendents of Europeans who, obviously, were distinguished from the local African population by their culture and by their physical appearance. These descendants viewed themselves as „Portuguese“ and, in terms of the cultural and social parameters by which they defined themselves, they may be considered an „ethnic group.“ But neither in their self-image nor in the view of other African groups, was physical appearance a determinant characteristic of being „Portuguese“.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, European visitors refused to accept the Luso-Africans' self-identification as „Portuguese“, calling them instead „mulattoes,“ „blacks“, or the more pejorative „espèce de Portugais“²³ To travellers such as the Englishman Francis Moore (1732) the Luso-Africans' dark complexion reflected their cultural inferiority: „they reckon themselves still as well as if they were actually white“ (Moore 1738: 29). In response, by the early nineteenth century, the Luso-Africans referred to themselves as „white“. Significantly, this identity was not contested by the other African populations with whom the „Portuguese“ continued to maintain commercial relations²⁴

The confrontation between two contradictory discourses on identity, one, West African, based on cultural and socio-economic parameters, and the other, European, founded on 'a priori' physical characteristics, reflected the fundamental challenge to European notions of „race“ posed by the existence of a community that was the product of both cultural and physical merging of Africans and Europeans. The establishment of French colonial authority over Senegal and the Casamance, towards the end of the nineteenth century, caused the economic marginalization of the „Portuguese“, who were then conveniently defined out of existence by the colonizers, as „noirs lusitanisés“. The imposition of „race“-based ethnic definitions was, I would argue, one of the most far-reaching and pernicious aspects of the colonial legacy.

5 The dynamic and complex nature of African Ethnic Identity

Four centuries of Senegambian history clearly illustrate the dynamic nature of ethnic and cultural identity; this historical perspective has relevance to contemporary societies where

ethnicity is linked to social and political conflict. In Casamance and Guinea-Bissau, ethnic groups have slowly changed over time. The history of the Jola peoples illustrates the creation of an ethnic group during the colonial period. Conversely, the decline of the Bagnun peoples, large numbers of whom came, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, to identify themselves as Floups (Jolas), indicates that an ethnic group can gradually lose its autonomous identity and merge with other groups. The history of the Luso-African community documents the establishment of a new group before the colonial period. This „Portuguese“ community was in every respect an ethnic group. The subsequent decline of the Luso-African community, coinciding with the loss of Portuguese colonial power in Senegambia, shows how changing economic relations can directly affect cultural identity.

Whereas ethnic groups change over time, an individual's identification with one or another of these groups is subject to even more rapid change. Thus, within the space of two generations, many nineteenth century Jola-speakers, enslaved by Mandinka Muslims in the Gambia, themselves „became“ Mandinkas. In Casamance today, the same individual may identify primarily as a Jola in one context, as a 'Casamançais' in another situation, and as a Bagnun in a third context. Both within a particular group and between groups then, identity is the ever-changing result of a dynamic process.

But individuals can maintain complex or multiple identities. Change in ethnic identity is often engendered by a contextually informed dialogue between several different senses of self.²⁵ These identities are not mutually exclusive. To reduce identity – even „ethnic identity“ – to a single label is to oversimplify and to overlook precisely that aspect of identity which predisposes to change. Furthermore, I would suggest that the complexity of both individual and group identity and the resulting dynamic potential for change of identity, together constitute a source of hope for the establishment and the survival of contemporary, multi-ethnic civil society²⁶

6 Conclusions

The history of ethnic groups and the politics of identity formation in Senegambia represent a particular case, one which cannot directly be translated to suit a context outside of West African society. Nevertheless, several historical observations are appropriate; they offer a perspective that should temper the contemporary debate in the U.S. about the proper role of the state in addressing issues of inequality related to ethnicity. Three factors are especially relevant. First, Senegambian history emphasizes the dynamic rather than immutable nature of ethnic identity. Second, it is clear that individuals may lay claim to multiple ethnic identities, with their primary allegiance determined by a constellation of social, economic, and other factors. Finally, we are reminded that in precolonial Senegambia (as in other societies at other moments) physical characteristics, including skin color, were not significant markers of ethnic identity. Together, these observations relativize the ascriptive categories – including „race“, and ethnicity – that, viewed from the perspective of America's last 350 years, appear to be preordained and immutable.

What implications might this relativizing perspective have for future social policy in the United States? I conclude by offering this reflection: Any society or polity that seeks to achieve a sense of common purpose and common identity among its diverse constituents must reckon with the complexity, the multiplicity, and the dynamic quality of group and individual identity. Even when a society such as the United States seeks to redress the

effects of discrimination against minorities, it needs to take into account the fact that this minority status comprises only part of individuals' identities, and that ethnic groups are not fixed entities. A government policy that establishes fixed – and necessarily arbitrary – ethnic categories oversimplifies identity, diminishes the possibility that citizens will exercise their multiple identities to find common ground, and polarizes the polity. The results of such policy will almost inevitably be counterproductive.

Notes

1. For a diachronic model of Casamance ethnicity see Mark (1992).
2. The most succinct and the most radical expression of this perspective may be that of Amselle (1990: 22): „L'invention des ethnies est l'œuvre conjointe des administrateurs coloniaux, des ethnologues professionnels et de ceux qui combinent les deux qualifications.“ Recently, Turner (1994) has argued convincingly that the present configuration of ethnic labels in south central Zaire is the result of interaction between Belgians and Africans.
3. These factors may vary independently of one another. As Magnant (1989: 330) writes, „chacun de ces éléments constitutifs de la réalité ethnique se déplace de façon indépendante des autres lors de l'établissement de contacts culturels.“
4. For a case study of the evolution of ethnic identity in precolonial Senegambia see Mark (1996). For a similar observation see Augé (1994: 47). Augé writes, „Parlant des cultures et d'ethnies, les ethnologues les plus attentifs ont bien compris qu'ils maniaient ... des catégories relatives et instables.“
5. My own somewhat random sample of 200 words from Gussilay, the dialect of Thionk-Essyl, indicates that at least 32 percent have Bagnun cognates.
6. These villages of origin, Miomp and Essil, are in a region inhabited for centuries by the „Floup“, as they were formerly known. The Floup were Jola-speakers; since the implantation of colonial administration at the beginning of the present century, they have been known as Jola.
7. For a more detailed study of Jola-Mandinka cultural interaction see Mark (1992: 113–127).
8. Parenthetically, it is pertinent to mention that areas of intense interaction between ethnic or cultural groups in contemporary Africa include urban areas. As in America, multi-ethnic cities are also a phenomenon in African society.
9. Bazin concisely summarizes his view of ethnic identity when he states, „Sont authentiquement Bamana ceux qui s'appellent eux-mêmes ainsi“ (Bazin 1985: 122).
10. Amselle writes, „être Bambara n'est pas un état immuable mais bien un statut que l'on acquiert“ (Amselle 1990: 82).
11. For a detailed study of cultural self-definition in contemporary Casamance see Mark 1994.
12. See Wilson's (1987) trenchant critique of „affirmative action“ hiring policies.
13. Steele (1994) writes, „To reform centuries of white entitlement, we do not enforce the democratic principles it violated. Instead we grant precisely the same undemocratic entitlement ... in the name of redress. We use the old sin to correct its own damage.“ „No racial reform on a racist basis.“
14. The term is mine.
15. The idea that identity results from such a dialogue is expressed by Amselle (1990: 85) „L'identité ne peut être définie comme une substance mais comme un état instable qui traduit la lutte permanente que se livrent ceux qui se définissent comme banmana et ceux qui les définissent comme tels.“ The same principle is articulated in a more general manner by Wallerstein (1960), who writes that identity formation is the result of a dialectical interaction between the self-definition by members of the specific group, and imposed definition by members of other groups. For a recent elaboration of this dialectical model, see Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart (1995: 155–163).
16. Immigrants to the United States from the Caribbean tend to be categorized as either Hispanic-Americans or African-Americans, depending upon their physical appearance, their language, and other factors. But these „ethnic“ categories do not correspond to the immigrants' self-identification.

The annual Caribbean Day Carnival in Brooklyn, New York is, in part, an effort by the participants to define themselves. Labor Day Carnival is an expression of national pride and of cultural identity. In effect, the participants are saying, „We are not African-Americans; we are Trinidadians or Jamaicans, or etc. ...“ or, ultimately, „we are Caribbean-Americans.“

17. The following discussion of Luso-African identity is an abridged version of a longer article entitled „Constructing Identity: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Architecture in the Gambia-Geba Region and the articulation of Luso-African Ethnicity,“ (Mark 1995). Luso-African cultural identity has been studied by Brooks (1993) and by Boulègue (1989). I do not claim to have discovered Luso-African cultural identity. Rather, in the following pages I stress the fact that cultural and socio-economic factors, not appearance or skin color, were the defining characteristics of their identity.
18. I do, however, argue that there exists no ‘a priori’ basis nor any biological justification for separating human beings into racial categories, nineteenth century pseudo-scientific race theory and Nazi racial ideas notwithstanding. Race and ethnicity are social constructs that derive whatever meaning they have from specific socio-cultural contexts.
19. For a comprehensive treatment of commerce in the Gambia-Bissau area see Brooks 1993. See also Boulègue 1989.
20. See the comments of Jean Barbot on Cacheu in Hair, Jones and Law (1992: 160).
21. Barbot, P. 160. See also Sieur de la Courbe in Cultru (1973: 191). De la Courbe writes of „certains nègres et mulatres qui se disent Portugais.“
22. I use „Portuguese“ as a synonym for Luso-African and Portuguese to refer to the inhabitants of Portugal.
23. Le Maire, Les Voyages du Sieur Le Maire aux Isles Canaries. Cap-Verd, Sénégal et Gambie (Paris, 1695), p. 38.
24. For a detailed treatment of the evolution of „Portuguese“ identity see Mark (1996).
25. Marc Augé approaches the multiple and dynamic nature of identity in similar manner when he writes, „Tout individu est en relation avec diverses collectivités, par reference auxquelles se définit son identité de classe au sens logique du terme ... Mais tout individu singulier se définit aussi par ses relations symboliques et institutées avec un certain nombre d’autres individus, que ceux-ci appartiennent ou non aux mêmes collectivités que lui“ (Augé 1994: 50).
26. A similar appraisal, which might be termed guardedly optimistic, has been proposed by Cohn-Bendit (Cohn-Bendit & Schmid 1993: 348). Cohn-Bendit cites Michael Walzer’s discussion in *Civil Society and American Democracy* of the individual’s complex identification with several groups, as a means of transcending the particularisms of specific, more narrow and exclusive identities.

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