

# Changing elderly and changing youth: Knowledge exchange and labour allocation in a village of southern Guinea-Bissau

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## Summary

The Nalu people in Cablola, a small village in southern Guinea-Bissau, practice a mixed farming system that includes upland farms, mangrove rice fields and orchards. People produce a wide array of crops for the purchase of rice, which is the main staple food. Currently in Guinea-Bissau the cashew nut is the main cash crop, which is extensively sold and/or bartered for rice for household consumption, even though local people experience rice scarcity. In villages nearby to Cablola, many Balanta people are devoted to mangrove rice farming and are experts on this farming system, which requires considerable knowledge, skill and labour. Mangrove rice farming produces higher yields than upland rice farming, and although there was some production recovery recently, mangrove rice production has been largely abandoned in the region.

We followed an ethnographic approach to study elders' and youngsters' views about past and present farming strategies and the mechanisms underlying farming reproduction/disruption. In 2010, the youngsters in Cablola founded an association, known as Youngsters Unite. We attended meetings and working days organised by this association. We also undertook participant observation, engaged in informal talks and interviewed both youngsters and elders.

In Cablola, the main constraint on the improvement of mangrove rice farming is related to a lack of capacity for young labour allocation rather than a consequence of labour unavailability. The changes that came along with both Islamisation and the consequent abandonment of the long term male initiation ceremonies in the bush seem to have triggered readjustments of the interactions between elders and youngsters, which affected the capacity for the allocation of young labour. The local youngsters' association has been used as a new platform for dialogue with elders, and as an instrument to address young people's claims to land ownership.

Cashew nut production carries the possibility of disinvestment in rice production, since rice can be acquired through rice-cashew exchange. However, in Cablola, the land given to Balanta people to plant cashew worked as a bargaining chip for knowledge and technical assistance from the Balanta in mangrove rice farming. Nalu and Balanta knowledge exchange was anchored in the local mutual help network, in which a cash cropping system is promoting a subsistence food system.

The recovery of mangrove rice farming, and particularly the role of the association in this work, has been challenging old and present-day leaderships, (re)negotiating relationships and trust, and promoting knowledge exchange between both elders and youngsters and between the Balanta and the Nalu. The association, within its social context, has boosted the 'courage', as farmers say, needed to build a dyke with mud and hand plough.

# 1 Introduction

Many studies and policies have given attention to the African youths in contexts such as education and health, but there is a considerable lack of information and debate regarding the links between youth and farming (Anyidoho et al. 2012a). The effects of outmigration depleting the sources of young labour in rural areas have been examined in the literature on Guinea-Bissau livelihoods (Gable 2000; Davidson 2009; Sousa 2011; Temudo and Abrantes 2012). Decisions about residency and migration are not definitive, nor are youngsters isolated agents (Sumberg et al. 2012), as their decisions are meaningful and must be understood within the time and space in which they are made. Young people's aspirations are influenced by the 'processes through which food systems are "transferred" from one generation to another' (Sumberg et al. 2012). Marginalisation of young people by gerontocracy can lead to self-perceptions of isolation and disaffection. Moreover, imposing constraints on rural youngsters regarding land access can aggravate political tensions (Richards 2005), which can potentially lead to youth mobilisation for political goals that would rescue them from isolation. Understanding these factors contributes to grasping the reported 'young people's turn away from farming' (White 2012:9).

At the same time, knowledge exchange is crucial for the reproduction or disruption of a certain farming strategy. Okere et al. define local knowledge as a 'people's particular, self-organising, transgenerational cultural value' (2011:276) that is built through a 'transactional meeting of minds, skills and experiences' (2011:277). Knowledge exchange between different ethnic groups or clans can take place in different ways, such as marriage and/or simply by being or moving together (Lentz 2013:170). For the Nalu of Guinea-Bissau, a part of local knowledge is wrapped in secrecy, in the sense that it is reserved for initiated men and women. This distinct access to knowledge has set a boundary between categories of age and genders. The limited access to knowledge reinforces the respect for elders, which therefore allows the elders to hold control over youngsters. Murphy described for Sierra Leone that secret societies contribute to a social system whose primary benefits from youth's labour are secured by the elders of the ruling lineage in a chiefdom' (Murphy 1980:204). Nowadays, only some Nalu villages maintain the male initiation in the bush, and even when it is followed the initiates are younger and stay less time in the bush than before (Frazão-Moreira 1999; Sousa forthcoming), which has affected the interactions between elders and youngsters.

The meaning of youth varies in different societies, and even in a particular society people of very different ages can be considered as youngsters (Anyidoho et al. 2012a; Durham 2000). In this study, youngsters are considered as those that might be single or married but are still looking for a living, are dependent on the decisions

of the household head and/or are not considered in major village decisions. Power relations in the village are extensively determined by age and gender, and at the same time, belonging to a founding lineage affects the power relations among and within age and gender. Although these crossings of identities determine one's place in society, this paper is exclusively aiming to situate youngsters and elders in the past and present farming strategies in the small village of Cablola.

## 1.1. *Historical overview of livelihoods and trade in Guinea-Bissau*

The Nalu people were the first known settlers of Cacubé (Carreira 1962:308) and were followed by other people's immigrations, including the Fulani, Sussu and Balanta people. In general, nowadays, these groups recognise the Nalu land rights and the heads of the Nalu founding lineages (Frazão-Moreira 2009; Temudo 1998).

In the beginning of the 20th century, the Balanta arrived to Cacubé in large numbers (Carreira 1962:313), such that in 1950 there were 7,631 Balanta people out of 11,283 inhabitants. This mass migration induced changes in the production system, namely by introducing (or at least improving<sup>1</sup>) the mangrove rice farming. During the late Portuguese colonial era (until 1974), the economy was based on the exploitation of small farmers' production, and they were pressured to increase agricultural production and the extraction of natural resources for export by the colonial authorities (Mota 1954). Thus, especially after 1930, the rice surplus produced by the Balanta was used both for local trading and for meeting export demands (Ribeiro 1989:235; Carreira 1962:300).

During the independence war (1963-1974), Cacubé farmers had an important role in supplying rice to the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde) fighters (Ribeiro 1989). In the areas controlled by the PAIGC, agricultural products and local commodities could be exchanged for imported goods in the 'Stores of the People'. After the independence in 1974, these became state owned enterprises where farmers were obliged to exchange their products or sell them at low prices. Both colonial and postcolonial projects were based on a centralised economy that tried to implement controls over storage and selling (Galli 1987; Berry 1984; Ribeiro 1989; Temudo 2005). After the structural adjustment in 1982 (Galli 1990; Rudebeck 1988), Guinea-Bissau gained prominence in the international cashew nut market. In 2009, it was the eighth largest cashew producer in the world and the second in the African continent, with a total output of 135,708 tons of cashew nut in 2009 (CNC 2009). Cashew nut production became important in local livelihoods, where it has been described as undermining the production of rice and food security (Temudo and Schiefer 2003; Lynn and Jaeger 2004; Gacitua-Mario et al. 2007; Baldé 2008; Sousa 2011).

## 1.2. *Cacubé: a peninsula caught between rice production and a national park*

Mangrove rice farming is the most important source of rice for consumption and trade in Cacubé, and given that rice is the main staple food in the region, mangrove rice farming is of remarkable importance for the region's food security. In spite of this, in Guinea-Bissau, mangrove rice production has decreased since the 1930s (Ribeiro 1989). Understanding the limiting factors of mangrove rice production is crucial to assess the opportunities and restrictions young farmers face nowadays.

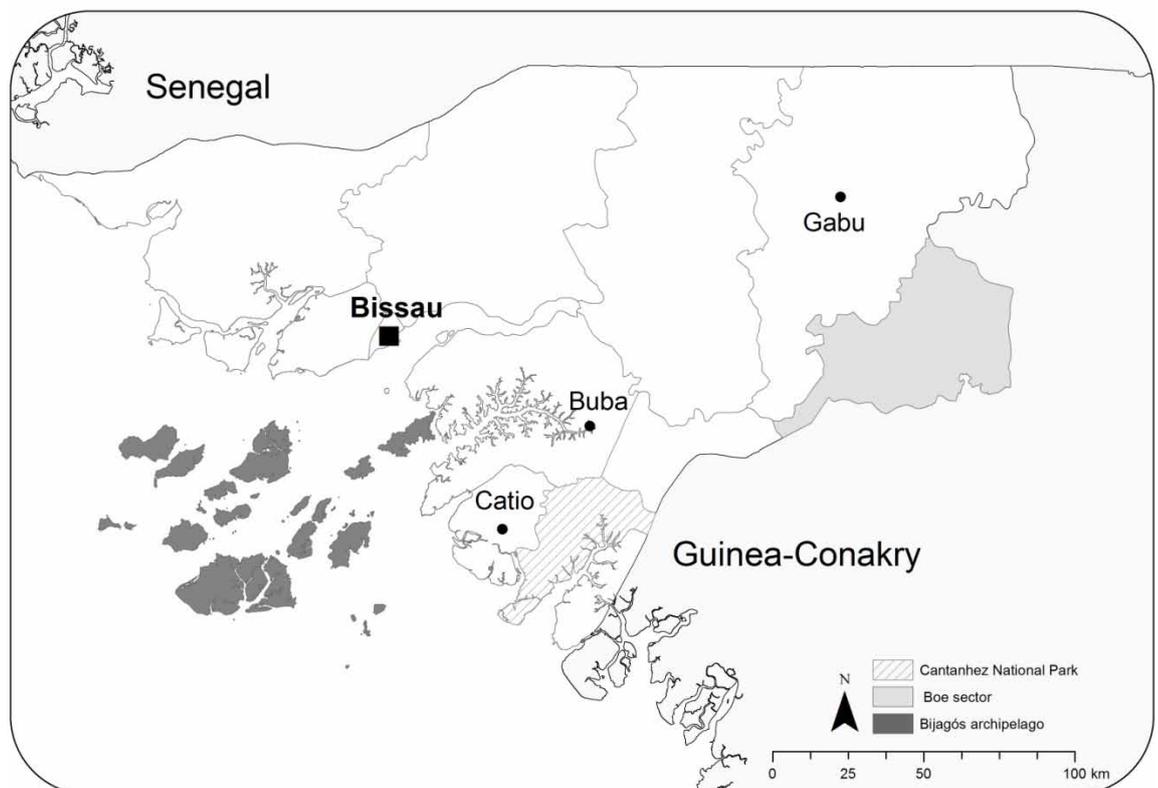
Mangrove rice farming requires specific knowledge and the building of structures like dykes, ditches and canals. In Cablola, these mangrove rice structures were destroyed by Portuguese bombing during the independence war. The situation of the mangrove rice fields was worsened by lack of maintenance as people sought shelter in another village for three years. Therefore, by the end of the independence war in 1974, people mainly relied on upland rice, groundnut and banana production, which was mainly used to purchase rice and other goods. Moreover, in 2002, people in Cablola agreed with a local NGO that they would not farm a considerable part of the forest. Similar agreements with other villages set the basis for the creation of the Cantanhez National Park in 2008. With the national park there was a squeeze

on the land available for swidden farming. In summary, the rudimentary conditions of the mangrove rice fields and constraints in upland land access left local people caught by considerable limitations in producing the rice they need for consumption.

Although Cacubé is one of the less important areas in terms of cashew nut production (Camará 2007:47), people have been planting cashew orchards to generate income and secure land. Youngsters in Cablola claim their access to individual land parcels to plant cashew, and a few have already started planting it. The squeeze on land available for cultivation was followed by a run to mark land. Temudo (1998) lists the circumstances leading to an increase in cashew production in Cacubé as follows: a limited workforce available for more labour-demanding farming; cashew plantation as a strategy of land tenancy; and the ability to get rice through bartering cashews.

## 1.3. *Study focus and research methods*

The peninsula of Cacubé is located in the south-western extreme of Guinea-Bissau in the region of Tombali (see Figure 1). Cablola is a small Nalu village that belongs to one of the seven Nalu territories in the peninsula of Cacubé. Currently there are 120 people living in Cablola, including elders, adults and children, organised in eleven compounds. In the same territory of Cabam there is another Nalu village, four Balanta villages and a few other isolated Balanta compounds.



**Figure 1.** Location of Cantanhez National Park in Guinea-Bissau, where Cacubé is located. The administrative capitals of Catió (Tombali region), Buba (Quinara region) and Gabu (Gabu region) are also shown. (Borders of Guinea-Conakry, Senegal and Guinea-Bissau were downloaded from <http://www.diva-gis.org/gdata>)

This study is based on 16 months of fieldwork in Cablola spanning from November 2009 to January 2010, from September 2010 to May 2011, and during February 2013 by the first author (JS); and February to May 2013 by the third author (ALL). Information was collected through 134 semi-structured interviews, of which 39 were considered very relevant for this paper, and during several informal discussions and participant observation conducted in Cablola and its vicinity. Participant observation carried out in the everyday life of Cablola, and during meetings and working days of the youth association Youngsters Unite, was crucial to understanding how this organisation is structured and works. The name of the village and informants are coded and the information anonymised. The second author of this paper (AD) is a member of Youngsters Unite, a farmer and a student from Cablola. He worked as a language translator and field assistant. He commented and provided insights for this particular paper<sup>2</sup>, and beyond this we held many conversations during formal (mainly interviews) and numerous informal circumstances about the history and present-day life of Cacubé, Guinea-Bissau, and beyond. Often we discussed our understandings of particular events we had experienced together or individually. As described by Gudeman and Rivera (1995:243), 'ideas emerge and are fashioned in conversations', and these interactions produced common outputs. These conversations questioned the views of JS and ALL, as European women in Cablola, as they also probably questioned the views of AD, as a young man from Cablola.

During semi-structured interviews we gathered data on (i) trends and constraints of rice production; (ii) perceptions of the youngsters and elderly towards the youngsters' association; (iii) transmission of knowledge and the reproduction of the local farming systems; and (iv) Balanta-Nalu and elder-youngster relations regarding mangrove rice farming and land access. Given that this is a detailed case study of a specific area and set of actors, any extrapolation to the region or to other ethnic groups would be inappropriate. Translated terms are written in italics with the original language indicated by an abbreviation after the term: 'nl' for Nalu and 'kl' for Guinean Creole.

## 2 Rice is the staple: 'If we do not eat rice we haven't eaten'

In Cablola, after the first harvest in September/October rice stores deplete between December and May as the rice production of these farmers falls short of household requirements. The rainy season (June to September) is also called the 'hunger period' because rice stocks in the region are low and rice prices increase. In general, farmers cope with rice shortage by reducing the amount of rice used in meals, establishing loan agreements or working for daily wage payments in agricultural activities. The year-round supplying capacity of rice stocks is influenced by (i) whether a farmer grows mangrove rice, upland rice or both; (ii) weather conditions; (iii) labour availability;

(iv) family size and/or number of guests living in the household; (v) crop loss; and (vi) ceremonies being held by the household.

As described by Temudo (2011) for Cacubé, many Balanta people that live nearby to Cablola abandoned mangrove rice farming and invested in cashew nut and wine production. At the same time, many other Balanta farmers are recognised as specialist mangrove rice farmers, as they mainly rely on this farming strategy for a living. For their part, the Nalu of Cablola practice a mixed farming system of mangrove and upland rice farming, relying also on groundnut, cassava, palm oil, beans and cashew to purchase rice, and yet they continue to experience rice scarcity. Other complementary strategies can be specific to each household, like the production of honey, kola nuts, fishing and hunting.

Married women, and occasionally young unmarried women, travel every week to the local market to sell tomatoes, chili, salt, cassava, soap, brooms, baskets, mats and palm oil. The income from these sales is split between their personal and household needs. An elder addressed the role women play in food security:

'In the majority of cases these days, women are those supplying men with rice [when the rice produced by the household is depleted], they make soap and take it to the market, they buy potato and take it to the market ... when women get money they invest in the palm oil business, then they buy soda again, cook soap and take it to the market.' (an old man in a village near Cablola, 10.03.2011).

With this small-scale but continuous production-trade-manufacturing, women exchange products for rice for household consumption, or acquire rice to be husked and sold again at higher prices (Figure 2).

### 2.1. Constraints to the purchase of rice

The adoption and development of cashew production introduced a very specific trading system in which the farmers do not control their purchasing capacity. In years when the cashew price is higher, the rice price is kept high by the traders to maintain their advantageous terms of trade for cashew-rice bartering. As farmers say, 'now rice [price] follows the cashew [price]' (a Nalu man, 15.05.2011). In 2011, it was difficult to find anyone who wanted to sell rice in February/March because people who had rice surpluses (only mangrove rice farmers) were waiting for the increase in rice prices that happens in the cashew season of April/May. This enhances the vulnerability of households that are not able to produce the required rice for consumption.

Since 2009, Fula traders from Guinea-Conakry have come to the region to buy rice *baribaidu*<sup>3</sup> and they drive up the price of rice even more: 'They come, a lot of them, and compete to buy rice and so the rice price increases, and they make trading agreements with Balanta



**Figure 2. Women travelling to the local markets to sell their and/or their households' products.**

farmers in the mangrove fields, before harvests' (a Nalu young man, 19.02.2013). They sell mobile phones and merchandise on credit to the Balanta before the harvests and then come back to collect the debt in rice. Also, the cashew traders that buy cashew nuts in the area are now buying the rice locally to exchange it for cashew nuts afterwards, taking advantage of the high rice prices in force at the time. This diminishes considerably the rice stocks available in the region for people who do not have cashew to exchange. During the cashew season, traders are only interested in cashew. If local people do not have sufficient rice stocks for the 'hunger period', even if they have other products or money, it is difficult to find anyone who has rice to sell or exchange.

## **2.2. Constraints on the expansion of rice production**

In the past, before the independence war, people in Cablola farmed far down in the mangrove, nearer to the sea canal, compared to where they are farming now (Figure 3). The recovery of mangrove farming is being constrained by labour allocation, but also reportedly by climate driven constraints, such as a shorter rainy season and an increased 'sea strength'.

### *2.2.1. Decrease in rainfall and/or lack of workforce*

The shortening of the rainy season has been described by several authors (Embaló 2008, FAO/GIEWS 2002, Funk 1991:205, Oliveira, Havik, and Schiefer 1996), and farmers' reports are in line with those: 'Before there were four months of intense rain in the six months of the raining season, now there are one or two months with "proper" rain' (a Nalu man, 20.09.2010). For mangrove rice farming, the decrease in rainfall presents two main limitations: (i) it might favour the presence of salt in rice fields since salt washing by the rains may be insufficient; and (ii) the fresh water level inside the fields has to be carefully controlled because if the rain stops early it can cause total loss. The mixed farming system of upland and mangrove

rice farming found in Cablola obliges the farmer to sow the upland rice in the first days of rain, and then start mangrove rice ploughing. Consequently, these farmers are coping with higher risks since a shorter rainy period means that slow progress translates into high risk of rice damage. A shorter rainy season thus increases the pressure of a seasonal labour shortage/scarcity.

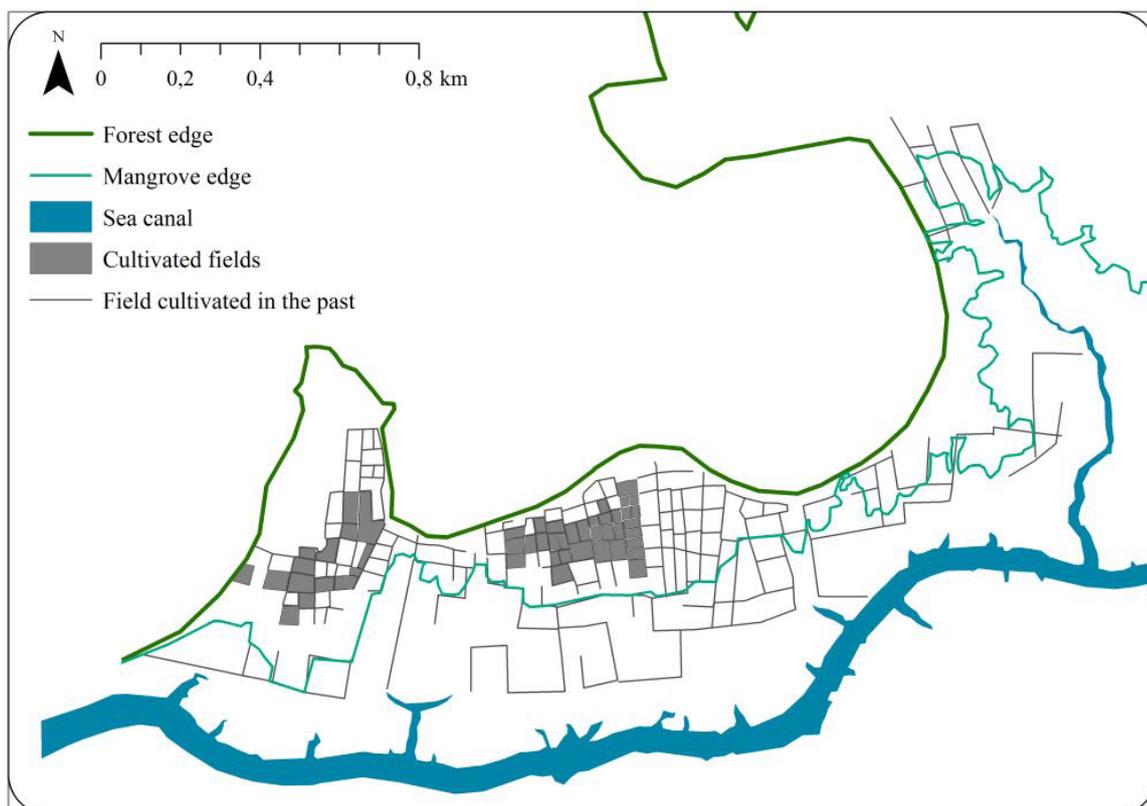
### *2.2.2. A 'stronger sea' and/or labour shortage*

Some sea canals are reported to have more water than before, but to our knowledge there is no scientific study confirming that this relates to a sea-level rise. In Cablola, elders say that previously they were able to cross a sea canal to the other side of the margin using a wooden bridge but now because it has more water they use a canoe. Balanta farmers from other village described the same for another place on the same sea canal. These reports may correspond to the worldwide spread of sea level rise (Dasgupta et al. 2009), or to a change in the sediment structure, as happened in the north of Guinea-Bissau in the colonial period (Ribeiro 1989:235). At the same time, the perceptions reported by farmers about the sea having 'more strength' may be influenced as well by reduced labour availability and therefore reduced capacity to fix and build proper dykes.

## **3 Elders and youngsters**

'Tension between younger and older generations is as old as time and allows society to find a healthy middle ground between risky and risk-averse behaviour.' (Durham 2000:195)

Most African farmers still enjoy an unusual degree of autonomy, mainly because of rudimentary technology and independence from external inputs and controls (Hyden 1986:15). Although non-mechanized production confers independence, because other means of production tend to disappear in periods of political instability, there are also risks in depending on human



**Figure 3. Fields of mangrove rice that were cultivated in the agricultural years of 2009/2010, 2010/2011 and 2012/2013 (shaded in grey) and evidence of fields cultivated in the past (grey lines).**

labour – namely that food security becomes dependent on the migrations, aspirations and commitment of young people.

### **3.1. The four paths: school of ‘marabou’, school of Portuguese, learning a profession, ‘things of the land’**

Young people can follow different livelihood strategies, which can overlap in practice. Parents, and especially fathers, can influence or lead their children to invest in certain strategies, such as: (i) the *marabou*, koranic or Islamic school; (ii) the ‘Portuguese’ school; (iii) learning a technical profession; or (iv) taking care of the ‘things of the land’ (land assets and magical ceremonies). Some participants described that some elders have a lottery to select which child will follow a certain strategy (two Nalu young men, 10.03.2012).

Some children are sent to the koranic schools at very young ages and may go abroad to other villages where they can stay in a house of family members or in the masters’ house. It is not required for them to pay school fees in a strict sense, but parents normally send money or goods to the teacher. In these schools, students learn Islamic writing but essentially they learn the Islamic prayers.

Although farmers invest considerably to guarantee that some of their children attend state school education, it is fairly precarious in the country (PRCM 2011:9; UNICEF 2011), especially in the most remote areas (UN 2006:5). In Cablola, the youngsters that complete preparatory school can go study in Catió, the capital of Tombali region (see Figure 1). Usually students come back to the village during school holidays and participate in agricultural work during the rainy season, helping out with the ploughing, tilling and guarding of the croplands from wildlife and birds during the early stages of the crops’ development. Parents often take over the children’s work of guarding the croplands so that their children can attend school. However, the constraints of the school education that the state is able to provide hamper the opportunities that literate young people might possibly have.

Going abroad to learn a technical profession such as mechanics, tailoring or masonry can be suggested by the parents or by youngsters themselves. Buba, Gabu and Bissau are the places where people of Cacubé often choose to go for such training.

The majority of youngsters from Cablola have stayed in the village and invested in farming. Even those who studied at the high school of Catió came back to Cablola after interrupting their studies due to school failure or lack of means to pursue their studies. From Cablola there is only one young man learning a profession in Gabu, and another who is in the military in Bissau.

### 3.2. Village institutional setting: the 'real' elders are gone

#### 3.2.1. Islam and changes to generational values

In Cablola there are seven male elders; the youngest is 51 years old and the eldest is approximately 65-70 years old. For the Nalu of Cacubé, the elderly corresponds to a category of age that plays a role in village-level and family-level decisions, magical and religious ceremonies, land allocation to youngsters, definition of collective goals and interaction with other institutions (such as with the state officials or NGOs). Today, these same elders say that 'there is no elderly anymore, they all died'<sup>4</sup> (elder woman in Cablola, 16.03.2013). The 'elders of the past' are recognized to have performed great initiations (such as the *mantchol*, nl, the second male initiation), stayed in the forest for a long time for the first initiation (*ntchaper*, nl, the first male initiation), had magical powers to talk to the spirits, and drank palm wine. The elders of today say, 'we are youngsters (*mininu*, kl)' (an elder Nalu woman and an elder Nalu man), in the sense that they do not resemble the 'elders of the past'. If the elderly changed, how could it be that the youngsters would not? The fact that elders of today do not recognize themselves as a mirror of their own elders means that a lot has changed, and the interface between elders and youngsters was subject to new forms of negotiation. Islamisation and the softening of the male initiation ceremonies that marked very clearly the limits between age categories have enhanced the vulnerability of gerontocracy and young people's ability to challenge it.

The Nalu of Cablola started to follow Islam three generations ago. The grandfather of a youngster of 29 years old was a 'drinker' (*bibidur*, kl); nowadays, the Nalu present themselves as Muslims, although they continue to follow spiritist/animist practices<sup>5</sup>. Worship of ancestors' spirits and bush spirits (*irās*, kl) coexists with Islamisation, although the latter brought some extent of change to Nalu society.

#### 3.2.2. The women's mbeleket<sup>6</sup>: are young people leaving Cablola?

Quintino (1962:329) wrote that for the Nalu, 'the dead are a class of age'. These stay in the *barimé* (nl, altar of the dead), in the *casa garandi* (kl, big house) of the household, where worship to the ancestors takes place. The *barimé* is the responsibility of the eldest man in the house. When youngsters go abroad, the elders of the household ask for protection for the youngsters in the *barimé*. The *barimé* is responsible for making the village a welcoming place for guests, protecting those who migrate and guaranteeing fertility (*bambarā*, kl). Elders and youngsters negotiate the future within the community and among themselves, while the dead validate, support or oppose the choices made and assist the living.

Youngsters from the region, especially those who are yet to marry, go to cities such as Bissau to study or learn

a technical profession. Some come back, others do not, others come to visit once in a while, and, it is said, sometimes the decision to return is not in their hands – Cablola seems to be a place where this is commonly reported. While men are responsible for the *barimé*, women own the *mbeleket* (nl, women's shrine). In the *mbeleket* women can call their children to come back, even if they are far away from the village. A young Nalu living in Bissau, nephew of a family in Cablola, says:

'Who left Cablola? Only Amidu and Mamadu. Inussa came to Bissau one year, they [elder women, including his mother] refused to let him be away, he went back. I guess they made it in secret. Fodé used to come to Bissau very often but he suddenly stopped. Amara stayed in Bissau for several years but he went back with nothing, people say his mother called him in the *mbeleket*. Calling people in the *mbeleket* is a sin. They go back, what do they do there? They just want to see them there? If you want to ask someone to go back, call him, don't go to the *mbeleket*.'

It is said that for a Nalu to emigrate is not easy (two Nalu young men), and regardless of the reason for this, lack of workforce is not a major limitation in Cablola.

### 3.3. Age-defined narratives

New social arrangements challenge people's narratives and may promote their reconfiguration. During our conversations with elders to understand the reason for mangrove rice abandonment in Cablola, their views were remarkably consistent and very often embedded in criticism of the behaviour of today's youngsters. The elders had a single perspective on today's youth: youngsters are not like the youngsters of the past; the youngsters of today are not as they used to be. Although these reports seem rather superficial, they work as an instrument of criticism and reflect the lack of control that elders have over youngsters.

#### 3.3.1. When the elders were young they were hardworking, cooperative and respectful

The recent past is recounted by the elders as a time that was very different from the present. Cablola used to be a very strict gerontocracy, in which youngsters would not dare to challenge the elders. Respectfulness, abundance of resources and cooperation are part of elders' narratives about their youth. Fishing and hunting catches were shared in the village and people were not allowed to ask money for these. Hunting without the permission of the elders had severe implications, as an elder stressed: 'You would die, or something really bad would happen'. Previously, it is said, rice was so abundant that people could not consume it all before the next harvest (two Nalu elders). Plentiful resources of fish, rice and bushmeat are also things of the past. Fruit trees of kola, oranges and limes, among others, were planted all together, without land divisions. People owned the trees but not the land. It is recounted that there were

only two households in the village and elders controlled each other's granaries and managed it together.

Respect and fear of the elders are described as things of the past. When a youngster misbehaved, any elder could punish him or her, but now people do not want their children to be punished by others. Democracy and development made things change, elders say, which include 'personal, psychological transformation', as portrayed by Bordonaro (2009:138) in his study of Bijagós<sup>7</sup> youth.

### 3.3.2. *Nowadays youngsters are naughty, lazy and selfish*

The young people's lack of interest and engagement in agriculture has been described elsewhere (Anyidoho et al. 2012a), and several youngsters in Cablola told us about their desire to leave the village and find a position in the army or an urban job. However, these desires were often followed by a description of the lack of opportunities elsewhere and a consequent compliance with a farming future. On arrival in the village, it was common to find the youngsters sitting down playing checkers and drinking black tea. This was an image elders regularly used to describe the youngsters, to which they added 'Now there are a lot of eaters and only a few workers'<sup>8</sup> (two elders in Cablola). Elders say they used to plough from very early morning and they used to call one another to work. An elder man said: "Now if the youngsters go to plough they arrive at 9am in the field, they work 30 minutes, they put the plough down and they start chatting about "Real Madrid beat Barcelona". Similarly, an elder woman sings: 'Serifo, I want you to go to the mangrove rice fields. "No my grandma I won't go". Therefore, although youngsters accommodate the attachment to farming, they were not perceived by the elders as being innovative or hard working.

## 4 Allocating young labour

### 4.1. *Initiation ceremonies and labour allocation*

*Ntchaper* (nl, male initiation in the bush) takes place in some Nalu villages nowadays and relates to the bush ceremony<sup>9</sup> of male circumcision. In 2011, the *ntchaper* was followed in Cablola and the children stayed in the forest for almost two months. The elders say that in the past people went to *ntchaper* when they were older and had to stay in the forest for two to three years. During this period the young men could not visit the village or talk to *blufos* (kl, those who are not yet circumcised).

The '*ntchaper* of the past' used to be an initiation ceremony, a platform for knowledge exchange between elders and youngsters about medicines, social life and magic, which at the same time 'imbues them [the youngsters] with fear and respect for their elders' ownership of knowledge and their prerogatives over its distribution' (Murphy 1980:199, referring to the

initiation in Sierra Leone). At the same time, during the years that *ntchaper* lasted, the youngsters going through the initiation used to work in the mangrove rice fields on different days from the *blufos* so that they would not meet (a Nalu elder). It seems that for elders it was fairly easy to allocate the labour of young people during *ntchaper*.

Nowadays *ntchaper* does not contribute to allocation of workforce anymore, as the children stay in the forest for a short period at a very young age. If in the past the initiation ceremony seems to have played a role in the control and allocation of young labour, nowadays it is a ceremony that requires rice and money. Rice has to be sent to the *ntchaper's* sacred grove every day to feed the children, the circumcised men that look after them and the many guests that come over. Each household has to contribute daily with a certain amount of rice to be cooked and sent to the *catchaper* (nl, the place of circumcision) (two Nalu men). Clothes, artefacts, beverages and cookies are also bought to celebrate the *ntchaper* when the children<sup>10</sup> come back to the village (a Nalu woman). Only clothes are compulsory; the rest depends on the means of the family (a young Nalu man). Other villages are abandoning this practice and circumcision is performed at home. A Nalu man from another village says, 'we do not follow *ntchaper* because we want to spend our time in other issues'.

### 4.2. *Mandjuandades of today: groups for work*

An important part of farming labour is allocated within the household; however, people also organize work transversally among households to accomplish the most demanding tasks. Men are mainly responsible for slashing the vegetation (*pabi* or *farfari*, kl), sowing by throwing seeds (*uaga*, kl), covering (*garbata*, kl), ploughing (*labra*, kl) and harvesting (*quebur*, kl). Women are mainly in charge of rice seedling transplantation to the mangrove rice fields<sup>11</sup> (*paranta*, kl), grinding (*pila*, kl) and parting the grain and the husk (*fequi*, kl), though they also participate in harvesting and sowing.

The work group in a village can include people of different ages, as long as a member of each participating household is present. These co-operative groups work by turns in the fields of their members. This makes the work quicker and easier, allows people to keep up with the agricultural calendar, acts as insurance against individual sickness and injury, and potentially adds enthusiasm and vitality. The group member receiving the workers is responsible for providing good food (rice meal with sauce and fish) together with black tea, sugar and cigarettes when these are available. Inside Cablola these groups work for free following a logic of mutual help. Whenever these groups go outside of the village to work and/or outside of the mutual help system of reciprocity, people joining the group are paid in money or goods according to pre-arranged agreements.

There are also work groups of young men and women (*mandjuandade*, kl) that work for other villages. Temudo and Shiefer (2003:399) describe how previously these groups were paid in rice after harvest, but now 'all *mandjuandade* demands an improved diet, i.e. meals including either fish or meat, and, in addition, tobacco, cola nuts, alcohol [for Balanta groups] and money'. At the same time, the authors also refer to a rearrangement of the terms of payment in the *mandjuandades* after the civil war of 1997-98, because the food was scarce due to urban refugees (Temudo and Schiefer 2003:408). This flexibility of 'charging what to whom' is evident in Cablola and abroad. When working outside the village the amount charged is dependent, among other factors, on the mutual help systems established between the two parties.

Borges (2011) highlights these informal associations as having an important role as institutions for education, saying that in *mandjuandade* groups 'each person acquires and gathers knowledge, skill and behaviours throughout his/her life, from the daily life experiences and the contact with institutions of the society where he/she was raised' (our translation:206).

## 5 Elders and youngsters negotiating farming strategies

In Cablola the migration of young people from the village to the urban centres is not significant. There are functional groups of work. Therefore, what are the problems in Cablola? Why are people struggling and consuming their rice seed stocks throughout the 'hunger period' and then having to deal with a lack of seed during ploughing? Labour availability is not perceived as a problem in Cablola. Instead workforce allocation is a constraint, especially in testing innovations that require considerable collective labour. This is what mainly hampers the recovery or improvement of mangrove rice farming. Nevertheless, today's youngsters, the first generation to follow a short period of *ntchaper* at younger ages, have founded a platform to allocate young people's labour for mangrove rice farming.

### 5.1. Youngsters Unite

In 2010, five youngsters informally founded the association Youngsters Unite and invited the village inhabitants to become members. The structure of the association is based on a president, a vice-president, a secretary, a treasurer and a president's counsellor. A woman was chosen as treasurer because she is reliable and usually 'it is difficult to take money from women' (a young man). The counsellor is the only elder in close contact with the association's leadership. He is in charge of counselling and transmitting youngsters' thoughts, claims and decisions to the elders, as much as the other way around.

In 2010 and 2011, there were several meetings to discuss the goals of the association and to plan the working calendar. Men participated more regularly in the meetings than women; women attended but did not take an active part in the discussions. Every man in the meeting was expected by other members to say a few words, even if it was to reinforce what others previously said. The participation of men was remarkable, and often different opinions were offered and discussed. It seemed to us that participation was a form of proving engagement and showing support or contestation. Repetition of ideas did not matter; instead, speaking up was taken as a sign of commitment.

The main goal of Youngsters Unite was to ensure that there would be sufficient rice stocks in Cablola year round, avoiding the need for people to go looking for rice outside the village in the 'hunger period'. Rice stocks held within the association would allow Cablola to be independent from market prices and supplies. The association's goals were presented as follows: (i) to create a fund for the association through the associates' contributions (100 XOF/week<sup>12</sup>) and potential funding from NGOs; (ii) to plant potato, *granja* oil palms, lime and coconut and sell them to buy rice and create the association rice stocks; and (iii) to recover mangrove rice fields that were damaged since the independence war.

By late 2010, the association had completed the following activities in the village: (i) cleaning a plot of land and preparing bricks for the construction of a new church; (ii) cleaning the vegetation around the school; (iii) restructuring the old health centre and transforming it into the Youth Centre of Cablola, which functions as the association office and also as a guest house<sup>13</sup>; and (iv) cleaning the path to the natural spring, used by the adult women's work group to water the onion field. During 2011, as planned, the association grew potato in the humid savannah. However, Balanta cows damaged the potato field. During 2012, the association grew groundnut, cocoyam, potato and yam. The groundnut was almost all damaged by nocturnal wildlife. The cocoyam, on the other hand, gave a good harvest. A young woman of the association prepared the remaining groundnut to stock and harvested the cocoyam.

### 5.2. Youngsters' individual and collective goals and the struggle for land

It was not always easy for the association's leaders to achieve the mass participation of its members, and there were a few moments of tension and dismay. Often they had their individual plans for 'business', which mainly refer to small jobs that generate some money, such as buying chickens and selling them in Bissau, vegetation clearing in cashew orchards by individual contracts and short-term jobs of zinc-roofing houses, among others. However, considerable efforts were put into meetings to plan the following work and there was tolerance

for the postponement of working days, which were substantially dependent on the availability of association members. Meetings were also important to apologise for failure, acknowledge those who made efforts for the association, manage expectations and plan future work. The association became a space for debate and action and found a place within the local social landscape of the village. Debates mainly occurred among association members, although sometimes they overflowed the association's borders and became debates among village inhabitants, including elders.

Although it was not the only goal behind the will of the youngsters to found an association, expectations on land access for youngsters played a role. One of the goals was to install an orchard whose production would contribute to the rice stocks of the association through the selling of coconut, fresh and kernel palm oil and lime juice, among others. By 2010, the elders were committed to allocate a land parcel to the association. Individually, within their families, youngsters were willing to establish their own orchards, a process that contributes to land division. Apparently, the association was used as a vehicle to reinforce youngsters' goals, which were not fulfilled by the elders. A young man claimed: 'They say that we do not work... if they do not give us land they can say nothing'.

Since 2009, we have heard reports that raise a change in the way people perceive their own society: 'People now think differently, now things are not owned collectively anymore' (young man; the same idea was also shared by an elder man). Around 2012-2013 there was a shift in the village's strategy regarding land management, and currently everyone from the village who farms in a certain plot of land is allowed to plant cashew. In February 2013, there were several newly founded cashew orchards and the land was being individually divided. This shift was probably enabled by land access uncertainty raised by the national park legislation, but it was in line with a broader strategy of land marking, and with the association's investment in mangrove rice recovery, which would diminish the land needed for swidden farming.

The association kept the same concern regarding the allocation of mangrove land. In order to revive mangrove rice farming, the village needed to build a large dyke that would block the seawater and close three sea canals, a project requiring considerable labour and technical skills. To allocate workforce, the association included within the dyke mangrove areas that were not being cultivated; these were to be allocated to the people that participated in the construction of the main dyke. This structure was in the early stages of construction in February 2013.

Despite the few outputs of the association regarding rice stocks in the village so far, the elders recognized youngsters' efforts and supported the decision of investing in the recovery of mangrove rice farming. They also approved that new mangrove land would be allocated to people, including at least one mangrove

rice plot to the youngsters' association. This platform seems to have been important for the strengthening of youngsters' leadership and trust. During 2013, the youngsters, together with the elders, were engaged in recovering mangrove rice fields and put into practice what was, for a long time, denied by the elders through their narratives about today's 'lazy youngsters'. This does not mean that people went back to the old times; rather, it means that youngsters have appropriated new forms of action internally.

### **5.3. Balanta counselling: the importance of mutual help systems**

People with expertise in dyke design, structure and construction techniques are known locally as *engenherus* (kl, engineers). In the early phases of the construction of the dyke, people from Cablola received advice from *engenherus* from a Balanta village nearby. They came for two days and worked together with the Nalu free of charge. Previous offerings encouraged this cooperation. Those Balanta farmers have borrowed the Nalu upland rice before their mangrove rice harvest; and the Nalu gave them land to install cashew orchards in the territory of Cablola. This makes them socially obliged to reciprocate, it being advantageous for both parties to keep the alliance. These Balanta people were important for the construction itself and shared technical knowledge with the Nalu, such as alignment of dykes, details about the techniques of dyke construction, ditch structure and depth and the spring tide calendar, among others. A few Nalu elders already had some knowledge in these areas, but they welcomed Balanta advice and expertise.

There was also an elderly Balanta guest living in Cablola who came a few years ago looking for medical treatment. The Nalu gave him medical treatment, food and shelter without charging him. During that period, youngsters learnt from him 'how the water behaves', namely the cycle of spring tides. This is another example of companionship turned into mutual help: healing for knowledge.

## **6 Conclusions**

In Cablola, people rely on different livelihood strategies and several crops play a role in subsistence and income. In spite of this, people in Cablola perceive the importance of recovering mangrove rice production as a way of ensuring rice sufficiency in the village. Triggered by the foundation of an association, the youngsters of Cablola, with the support of elders, put themselves forward to build a dyke to prevent the sea from flooding the mangrove rice fields. This is a major effort that requires the allocation of labour for a village-level goal that can minimise local people's dependence on the market to purchase rice.

As described by Durham (2000:114), youth are 'central to negotiating continuity and change in any context' but

may feel 'dis-incentivised by the perception of the high risks and low income associated with most agricultural activities' (Anyidoho et al. 2012a:9). The youth of Cablola are no exception. Youngsters engage in short-term business and daily-wage working opportunities away from the village, and many wish to leave and find a job in the city. However, they state that there are no better opportunities in the urban environments than those they have in the village. Therefore, although farming is perceived as the 'last resort' (Tadele and Gella 2012:36), there are grounds for farming innovation and increasing production.

Initiation ceremonies are often interpreted as a redistribution of food surplus and wealth, but in Cacubé the *ntchaper* ceremony, the initiation in the bush that in the past could last up to three years, was an important strategy for allocating a young workforce to mangrove rice farming. In the past, this ceremony played an equally important role in attributing a place for young people in society. Much has changed in the meanings of elders and youth since that past. The disappearance of these long-term ceremonies left an empty space regarding the social role of youth in society. In Cablola, this space was claimed by local youth with the foundation of a youngsters' association that was used to negotiate their role in the political sphere of the village. The youth association reinvented a space of interaction for youngsters and negotiation with elders. This propitiated the youngsters' and elders' commitment to the recovery of mangrove rice production.

Nowadays, in Cablola it is difficult to allocate people to work in a collective project that is physically demanding, risky and time consuming, such as the construction of a dyke to protect the mangrove rice fields. The capacity for workforce allocation held by a few young leaders and the commitment of the elders were reinforced by individual goals of land allocation and the desire for livelihood improvement. The entanglement left by land access constraints, the need to mark land and crop losses led people to invest in two different strategies: the cashew nut, which is the main cash crop of Guinea-Bissau and is used as a land marker; and mangrove rice farming, which is the most productive type of rice cultivation. In Cablola, mangrove rice and cashew farming strategies contributed to mutual help alliances: when the Nalu gave land to the Balanta to install their cashew orchards they ensured knowledge exchange. Another context for knowledge exchange was enabled by the long term treatment given to an elderly Balanta man in Cablola, which propitiated the close sociability of the Balanta and some younger Nalu. For this particular context, knowledge was exchanged for cashew and healing. More attention should be given to the relevance of trans-ethnic knowledge sharing and mutual help systems.

Elsewhere, cashew nut investment has been described as leading to rice insecurity; however, in Cablola<sup>14</sup> it had multiple effects. Cashew farming responds to a change in society where the need for individual gains and guarantees (like land access) have replaced the strong

economic bonds that linked different households in the past. Land tenure and access are no longer mainly embedded in a collective perspective of ownership managed by founding lineages; instead, there are also individualised regimes of ownership at play. Nevertheless, mutual alliances remain remarkably alive, and these have enabled the allocation of labour for mangrove rice farming in the village, as well as knowledge exchange with the Balanta.

A young Nalu man says, 'at first, our elders did not want associations, for them it was a waste of time, they just invested in the mangrove rice farming'. However, in the case of Cablola the association, aligned with other factors, contributed to the investment in mangrove rice farming. A changing youth and a changing elderly turned to social instruments other than initiation, magic or strict gerontocracy to allocate the collective workforce. There is considerable diversity within the aspirations of local people (Anyidoho et al. 2012b), and the engagement of different youngsters with the association varied. Currently, Youngsters Unite relies mainly on the efforts of five youngsters – three married and two single young men – and the association is inherently vulnerable to changes in their interests and efforts, as the activity of other associates depends mainly on them. This informal association has been a meaningful platform within the village social landscape, which will persist as long as it serves the individual and/or mutual goals of local people.

## END NOTES

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- 1 Different reports from the elders coexist: two informants from a village near Cablola recounted that the Nalu learnt mangrove rice farming with the Baga (in Guinea-Conakry) and the Balanta helped to improve the technique afterwards; while others say that the Nalu did not farm mangrove rice before the arrival of the Balanta, from whom they learnt this technique.
  - 2 A draft of this manuscript was translated to Creole and Ansomane Dabo provided his insights on the specific content.
  - 3 Rice *baribaridu* is boiled before being husked, which makes the grain swell up. Rice prepared in this way is more expensive than the rice *queredja* that is simply ground without boiling.

- <sup>4</sup> A youngster said to us: 'They are always running away from the responsibility of being the elders. What is an elder? The eldest is the elder' (a young man).
- <sup>5</sup> 'There are some practices of my culture that I did not see, I only heard about. Therefore I do not know if they are true. But there are things that we keep on doing' (a young man).
- <sup>6</sup> The *mbeleket* is described by Frazão-Moreira (2009:122-123) as a sacred place controlled by women where people can come and ask to be purified to take away bad luck and diseases.
- <sup>7</sup> Bijagós is an archipelago in Guinea-Bissau.
- <sup>8</sup> This seems to be a broadly used expression in Guinea-Bissau nowadays since Bivar and Temudo (in press) also quoted it from local people.
- <sup>9</sup> In other Nalu villages where the bush ceremonies have been abandoned the circumcision does not take place in the male sacred bush (*catchaper*, nl), but in a house in the village.
- <sup>10</sup> They are still children when they come back to the village (*lafon*, nl).
- <sup>11</sup> Mangrove rice is firstly sown upland, in the gardens or near the croplands. After achieving the seedling phase it is transplanted into the ploughed fields in the mangrove (*bolanha*, kl). More information in Temudo's (1998) PhD dissertation.
- <sup>12</sup> Equivalent to 0.13 GBP (exchange rate of 1 GBP=779.99 XOF).
- <sup>13</sup> The association does not charge guests or researchers to stay over.
- <sup>14</sup> Bivar and Temudo refer to the role of cashew in mangrove rice farming through the importance of cashew wine in hiring workforce (see Bivar and Temudo 2013).

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