

# Being Young in the *Guinée Forestière*: Members of Youth Associations as Political Entrepreneurs

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## Abstract

This paper is a contribution to a better understanding on what it means to be young and to grow up amidst political transformation processes in Guinea in the 2000s. It focuses on students and graduates in Guéckédou, a border town in the *Guinée Forestière*. How do these youths gain a living and participate in a complex and turbulent socio-political landscape? The qualitative research showed that they followed various economic activities in parallel; amongst others they were busy with so-called youth associations, the main focus of this paper. I argue that these youth associations can be described as self-created arenas for both economic and political participation. Thus, the members represent “political entrepreneurs” as their practices have to be situated in-between money-making, investment and political involvement. Interestingly, they thereby collaborate with various actors and institutions, including local elders, the state administration or local political parties and NGOs.

## Introduction

This paper is concerned with young men and women like Albert and Anne.<sup>1</sup> Albert and Anne knew each other from school and later continued their education at the same university in Conakry, the capital of Guinea.<sup>2</sup> Both of

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<sup>2</sup> All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. However, in order to showcase religious and/or ethnic affiliations, I replaced the names with corresponding religious and/or ethnic affiliations, i.e. I

them originally came from the Guéckédou prefecture in the far southeast of the country bordering Sierra Leone and Liberia, the region that represents the geographic starting point of this paper. After having finished their studies in Conakry, Albert and Anne came back to their place of origin in the *Guinée Forestière*, the remote forest region of Guinea. In Guéckédou, the prefecture's capital, they were confronted with an uncertain economic landscape with only a few so-called formal-sector jobs corresponding to their education, for instance within the state administration, branch banks or local sites of national or international NGOs. Moreover, the political circumstances were tense. The long-term President Lansana Conté had died in 2008 and at the time of this research, the country was ruled by the military junta CNDD (*Conseil National pour la Démocratie et le Développement*) and, later on, by an interim government that organized presidential elections.<sup>3</sup> This political situation had consequences both on the economic and the social situation of these well-educated young men and women. Amongst other issues, international funding was put on hold, because most countries would not support a military rule which they perceived as an illegitimate one. Hence many planned or envisaged projects of national and international NGOs paused. Moreover, functioning of the local state administration, the deconcentrated branch units of ministries, and the local authorities such as the mayor were on standby. In other words, they were irregularly in office and above all occupied with monitoring the political situation in Conakry. Besides that, smoldering ethnic tensions complicated everyday life.

Growing up in such a context, characterized by turbulent social and political circumstances, is of course not unique to Guinean youths but forms the background of many young people around the world. Importantly, this paper understands "youth" as a social category and not as a specific age group.<sup>4</sup> Thus, I agree with Durham who suggests that when and where

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replaced the Christian first names with other Christian first names and so on.

<sup>3</sup> The research data for this paper was collected between 2009 and 2010, further explained in the next section.

<sup>4</sup> The United Nations for instance defines „youth“ as persons between the age of 15 and 24 years,

someone considers himself or herself to be a youth or is regarded a youth are both situational and contested (Durham 2009: 723). If expressed differently, it means youth represents a category that is always in the process of being re-made in socio-political practice (Durham 2004). However, the topic of being young in complex socio-political and economic circumstances and youths becoming “political entrepreneurs” might resonate with people from other parts of the world, because young people often face similar challenges.<sup>5</sup>

This paper complements scientific literature focusing on youths, their economic strategies and employment background with their socio-political activities.<sup>6</sup> I argue that the latter i.e. socio-political activities are often neglected while talking about youth unemployment or informal economic practices although they might be key factors to understand young people and their coming of age amidst complex political circumstances.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, I perceive it as particularly fruitful to include a closer look at well-educated young men and women who, after having finished their studies or during semester breaks, return to remote rural areas and small hometowns. Thus, this paper does not focus on youths without formal education; neither does it look at an urban space of an African megacity. Instead, it concentrates at a rather small town with rural peripheries and highlights well-educated youths. My data showed that these youths were, very similar like their friends without university degrees, engaged in various collateral activities to generate their own income and contribute to their families’ income. These activities included cash crop farming and petty trading, for instance with mobile phones or with self-made small cakes. In general, chances for formal employment were rather low. However, instead

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thus stresses biological not social age (UN 2015).

<sup>5</sup> For an example with regard to Africa, see Socpa (2015). Socpa depicts four samples of political entrepreneurship in Cameroon that emerged from the professional groups of businessmen, civil servants, academic staff, and from diverse actors without a certain social standing yet (Socpa 2015: 99).

<sup>6</sup> For references regarding youth (un)employment in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond, see amongst others Gough et al. (2013), Langevang/Gough (2012).

<sup>7</sup> The Urban Forum special issue 34 (4), introduced by Lindell/Utas (2012), represents an insightful exception and also discusses associations.

of simply waiting for the arrival of political stability and a chance for a white-collar job, young men and women like Albert and Anne occupied themselves with launching and participating in what they called youth associations.<sup>8</sup> Thus, they were part of several groups of young men and women based in Guéckédou who engaged or at least planned to engage in activities like health education campaigning, good governance, promoting vulnerable children and youth in schooling issues or organizing cultural festivities. One of the youth associations that Albert and Anne were part of was the '*Association des Jeunes de Guéckédou*' (so the 'Youth Association from Guéckédou'), in short the AJG. In the following I argue that youth associations like those Albert and Anne were affiliated to represent (self-created) arenas for both economic and political participation. Hence, the related youth practices and activities can be situated in-between money-making, investment and political involvement.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, one can describe the members of such youth associations as also political entrepreneurs. For them the, political uncertainty due to the military regime and/or the upcoming presidential elections at the time of research provided a fertile ground for economic and socio-political involvement. In the midst of the political transition and campaigning, they managed to make some money, to gain work experiences and to network with important local actors and institutions – and all that in a rather remote and rural place. This perspective contradicts with other recent debates that situate youth associational life merely as part of civil society organizations.<sup>10</sup> Instead, I

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<sup>8</sup> My research also included qualitative research with young people who had no postsecondary education. Many of these young men and women I talked to were also affiliated with social groups, for instance related to their profession or their religious background, examples included union movements or scouts, further discussed in Engeler (2015). Of course the membership status in these different social groups was not only related to people's education and, in addition, often blurred. However, I argue that youth associations often consisted of people with a rather good educational background that included students, young graduates and university dropouts.

<sup>9</sup> My notion of "arena" is inspired by Kerkvliet's writings (Kerkvliet 2001; Kerkvliet 2003). He understands arena as places, events, organizations or groups in which relations between state and society become discussed or are negotiated (Kerkvliet 2001: 240). This understanding partly also corresponds with the definitions in Hagmann/Péclard (2010), further discussed in Engeler (2015).

<sup>10</sup> Bratton, for instance, perceives associations as civil society groups and situates them "beyond the state" (Bratton 1989: 411). Diouf, too, argues that youth associations can be situated in opposition to the state, as they often challenge state institutions (Diouf 2003: 8). Honwana argues similarly

argue that these youth associations do not merely represent nonprofit organizations or mere social entrepreneurs instead they are also intended to generate an economic gain. Additionally, youth associations' members actively participate in and benefit from local politics, even though they are often claiming otherwise.

To understand my argument, it is crucial to discuss youth associations, with regard to their historical and social context in a particular setting and with specific reference to the region's history and peculiarity. Therefore, the paper at hand is structured as follows. Firstly, I introduce the reader to the history of the associations in Guinea, particularly in the *Guinée Forestière*. Secondly, I examine youth associations in Guéckédou through the example of the AJG and situate their discourses and activities in the context of income generation and development agencies and also with regard to local politics and intergenerational networks. The following section depicts my research background and approach in the field.

### **Research background and approach**

The main research data for this paper was collected between 2009 and 2010 as part of a broader data set that covered a total of 14 months between 2008 and 2012.<sup>11</sup> The city of Guéckédou was the main research site. Guéckédou center or town has a population of 67,258 (Zensus 2014) and is one of the ten sub-prefectures of Guéckédou prefecture, which together with Kissidougou, Kerouane, Beyla, Macenta, Youmou, Lola and N'Zérékoré prefectures form the geographical region *Guinée Forestière*, roughly corresponding to the administrative region of N'Zérékoré.<sup>12</sup>

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when stating that youthful political practices in the context of associations can be described as "new ways of doing politics" (Honwana 2012: 162).

<sup>11</sup> The Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE), based in Switzerland, financed this fieldwork.

<sup>12</sup> Guinea has in all four geographical regions: *Guinée Forestière*, *Guinée Maritime* or *Basse Côte*, *Moyenne-Guinée* or *Fouta Djallon*, and *Haute-Guinée*. The country is further divided into eight administrative regions: in addition to N'Zérékoré, the others are - Boké, Kindia, Mamou, Labé, Faranah, Kankan and the urban region Conakry.

The city of Guéckédou is well-known for its weekly market, but according to most of my correspondents, it has lost much of its reputation since the civil wars of the neighboring countries Sierra Leone and Liberia, commonly referred to as Mano River War.<sup>13</sup> During that time, many Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees inhabited the city but most of them had left the area in the meantime. In addition, Guéckédou itself was under rebel attack in the 2000s. In recent times, the region gained special attention due to the Ebola outbreak in 2014 (cf. amongst others Benton/Dionne 2015; Bianchi 2015; Lazuta 2015). I will come back to that context in my concluding remarks.

As for methods used for this research, I mainly applied qualitative research methods and strongly built my analysis on the data gathered by living with and participating in the young people's everyday life.<sup>14</sup> Besides participation and observation, I conducted life history interviews and semi-structured interviews, also with members of youth associations. During my research, quite a few youth associations were active in Guéckédou town and I ended up following six of them. They were as follows: the *Association des Jeunes de Tékoulo* (AJT), founded in Tékoulo, a sub-prefecture of Guéckédou, but also active in Guéckédou, the *Associations des Jeunes Artistes de Guéckédou* (AJAG), the *Jeunes Patriots*<sup>15</sup>, the *Club des Enfants*, the *Club des Jeunes* and, finally, the *Guides des Jeunes de Guéckédou* (GJG). All six associations were based in Guéckédou town, but some of them maintained relations with rural areas. Additionally, their activities can all be subsumed under the label "community development". Thus they got involved in or planned to involve themselves in cleaning and repairing roads, health education campaigning or good governance, promoting vulnerable children and youth in schooling issues. Their fields of activities also included organizing festivities like concerts or dancing parties.

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<sup>13</sup> Various researchers from different disciplines discuss these conflicts. For references regarding Guinea during that time cf. Arieff (2009); Jörgel/Utas (2007); Sawyer (2004) amongst others.

<sup>14</sup> For further methodological reflections on sharing (young) people's experiences and ethnographic fieldwork, cf. Engeler (2011).

<sup>15</sup> They did not relate themselves to the Ivorian movement of the *Jeunes Patriotes* described for instance by Koné (2011).

In order to specify some of the important aspects of young people who organize and meet in youth associations I in what follows only write about the *Association des Jeunes the Guéckédou*, abbreviated to AJG. Thus, I have anonymized the context by creating a fictive group and name. However, the example feeds on the data that I had collected from the six associations which I followed at the time of research.

### **From revolutionary youth to youth associations**

Associations are generally understood as groups of people with a common purpose or interest. They are present in many countries, including the African continent. They have existed in many forms during pre-colonial and colonial times and are widely discussed within the social sciences: Early academic research on associations in (West) Africa was especially interested in the social changes implemented by the colonial authorities. They contextualized the associations (even youth associations) with regard to urbanization processes, migration from rural to urban centers, educational reforms, and the division of labor (cf. amongst others Wallerstein (1963); Wallerstein (1970); Little (1965); Little (1957); Meillassoux (1968), for an insightful contextualization cf. Englert (2011)). More recent publications about youth associations within African Studies tackle issues like urbanity, migration and/or politics – very much like early ethnographies on the topic. Most of them also perceive youth as a social category. Utas, for instance, describes youth associations in the context of urban youth in Sierra Leone and calls them “social clubs” (Utas 2012). He includes associations of car washers as well as money-saving associations and points out that the differentiation among various sub-groups is not of significance instead it is the fact that these social clubs are largely forms of social security arrangements that fill the voids in the Sierra Leonean state. “If you get ill, the social club will assist you, and if you get arrested by the police (...) they will do the same thing” (Utas 2012: 3). Most authors also agree that membership in such social clubs or youth associations can generally be described as highly political (Honwana 2012; Lentz 1995; Lentz 1999). Lentz

argues for instance that youth associations in Ghana offer an important forum for political participation and discussion (Lentz 1995). Again other contributions concentrate on the economic dimension and discuss (youth) networks and associations in the context of urban informal economies (Lindell/Utas 2012; Lindell 2010).

In the context of colonial Guinea, Goerg states that while the colonial state sponsored youth associations, it often supervised and controlled the members and their activities (Goerg 1992: 23). Thus, the colonial authorities were well aware of the political power of these groups, which Meillassoux described with regard to Bamako in Mali as “excellent recruitment pools” for the newly established political parties (Meillassoux 1968: 69). Subsequently, the struggle for independence around the 1950s also built the strength of various associations. Thus, organized young people were an important driving force in these political transformation processes, not only in Guinea but also beyond (Schmidt 2005; Goerg 1989).

When Ahmed Sékou Touré, Guinea’s first president, launched various state and nation building projects to underpin the new hegemony, youth associations were included into the one-party state structure. Early on, Sékou Touré’s post-colonial state proclaimed and enforced not only its authority over people’s relations with Islam or Christian missions, but also over their cultural development, especially in the remote *Guinée Forestière*, which was well-known for their “backward” culture (Conrad 2010; Straker 2008). With the help of the demystification campaign and the Cultural Revolution, Sékou Touré and his cadres aimed to set the stage for Guinea’s “new citizens” and launched a vast mobilization against what they considered old-fashioned and colonial socio-political structures.<sup>16</sup> Straker importantly notes that the demystification campaign went through several phases and its transformative processes for demystifying local practices such as Poro and Sande, often described as secret or power societies, had actually started long before Touré’s nation and state building project

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<sup>16</sup> For further information on Touré’s demystification campaign and the Cultural Revolution, cf. McGovern (2013); Rivière (1977); Sarro (2009); Straker (2007b); Straker (2007a); Sarro (2007); Højbjerg (2007) amongst others.



(Straker 2009: 110f).<sup>17</sup> He, accordingly concludes that demystification is only the final step in a gradual demise of traditional mechanism of gerontocratic authority in the *Guinée Forestière* that had reigned for centuries before colonial penetration (Straker 2009: 110). However, important for this paper is Touré's attempt to shape a unified and embedded youth for overcoming regional-ethnic peculiarities and for enabling a revolutionary state to emerge. Hence, Touré's one-party state proclaimed its authority not only over the political but also over the economic, religious and cultural development of its people, especially its young citizens (Straker 2007b). Accordingly, Touré embedded young people and their social organizations like associations into the emerging new political structure, which was especially shaped by the one and only political party, the Democratic Party of Guinea (PDG, *Parti Démocratique de Guinée*). In 1959, the official youth wing of the PDG, the Youth of the African Democratic Revolution (JRDA, *Jeunesse du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*) was created, stressing the increasingly important role of youth within the revolution (Straker 2009: 85; Johnson 1970: 364). During this party structuring, young people became organized within different sub-branches dedicated to young women, to youthful socio-economic action, to culture and art, to school and university, to civil defense, and to the pioneers (Rivière 1971: 172). The numerous young members of these institutions met weekly and were assembled within various sections, federations, commissions and congresses. In this way, the Guinean state apparatus tried to keep young people's political,

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<sup>17</sup> Different authors stress the importance of secret or power societies for past (and present) socio-political relations in the Upper Guinea Coast. These authors mostly refer to the Poro and Sande types of secret societies into which either men (Poro) or women (Sande) were initiated (Højbjerg 2007). D'Azevedo argues that these societies have a political and economic role in the entire Upper Guinea Coast, knitting together, as he sees it, culturally diverse and mobile groups in the forest-savannah transition zone (D'Azevedo 1962: 516). Interestingly, different authors suggest that the Kissi speaking people actually borrowed or appropriated the Poro and Sande societies from neighboring Loma speaking people (Fairhead/Leach 1996; Højbjerg, 2007; Schaeffner 1951). McGovern and Højbjerg are two anthropologists who describe the secret or power societies in the context of Loma-speaking people, who live just to the east of the *pays Kissi*. They describe the societies as associations that used to be particularly relevant to local and regional power figurations (McGovern 2004: 83ff; Højbjerg 2002; Højbjerg 2007). Accordingly, one can suggest that the same must be true for Poro and Sande at Kissi speakers living in and around Guéckédou.

economic and cultural life under close supervision. The youth associations and other associations like Christian youth movements, student organizations or age-sets related to secret or power societies established by Non-state youth groups during colonial or pre-colonial times became forbidden, because the state wanted to manage the potential threat of hardly controllable youths with opportunistic or rebellious ideas. Finally, the Guinean state aimed at creating one single revolutionary youth that was organically and spiritually embedded within the party structure (Rivière 1971: 159).

As in other socialist countries, youths “were imagined by state leaders as the decisive constituency in sustaining the revolutionary momentum” (Burgess 1999: 45). Thus, the Guinean socialist state considered young people as important to realizing the formation of both the post-colonial Guinean state and its new citizens. The political elite therefore placed strategic importance on youth. Nguyen argues that many socialist or Marxist-Leninist countries considered young people as “‘blank sheets of paper’ on which everything can be printed (...). Thus they do not possess any political and ideological stance and therefore are able to be molded and persuaded to work for the communist party’s objectives” (Nguyen 2005: 5). In other words, the party-state mobilized and educated its youth in order to help them find the “revolutionary truth”, in sharp contrast to the “colonial lie”. While writing about Revolutionary Zanzibar, Burgess perceives only minor spaces to negotiate and politically participate in the context of socialist youth groups, as the state did not encourage contested visions (Burgess 2005: 5).

Equally, revolutionary Guinea did not encourage dissenting world views/opinions. However, by inventing youth as an important category, the state tried not only to manage its juniors, but also gave them official status with the formation of youth groups like the JRDA or the pioneer movement attached to the PDG.<sup>18</sup> Thus young people became both the henchmen and

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<sup>18</sup> The revolutionary state defined youth in terms of a specific age bracket: the pioneer movement for instance was said to be for youngsters between 7 and 18, the civil defense or people’s militia for

the key actors of Guinea's self-designated revolutionary era. In 1970, Johnson assumed that Sékou Touré "has written off the present generation of office holders and civil servants as irredeemably corrupted by colonialist ideology; hope lies with the younger generation who have come to maturity in the twelve years since independence" (Johnson 1970: 363). In other words, Sékou Touré's nation building programs exploited youths, but the latter could also disassociate themselves from their parents' generation, could gain power and managed to participate in the socio-political and economic landscape.

The post-revolutionary state, which was established after Sékou Touré's death in 1984, promised society and youths more space and more significance vis-à-vis the state. In other words, post-revolutionary socio-political changes and the related ideological shifts and reforms allowed Guinean citizens to enjoy more autonomy to organize themselves in social groups, to articulate alternative ideas and to outline new political imaginations beyond formal politics, i.e. beyond the state and political parties. My data shows that many young students and graduates living in present-day Guéckédou came together in self-organized youth associations, because the state was not based on young people anymore and could also not guarantee formal and lifelong employment. As the example illustrates, the youths I talked to nevertheless made strong references to state institutions and formal politics in order to wrest some agency from an uncertain economic and political landscape. Hence, present-day youth associations in Guinea neither represent a new phenomenon nor can they be described as completely different from socialist youth groups. Instead, the members of youth associations integrate different practices that are adjusted to the post-revolutionary/neoliberal time and can be outlined as political entrepreneurship.

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youths between the age of 20 and 30, and the JRDA included all of them (Mignon 1988).

### ***The Association des Jeunes de Guéckédou (AJG)***

To comprehend these young political entrepreneurs better, I would like to take a closer look at the AJG a representative example as described earlier. I do not claim that the following interpretations can be generalized to all youth associations in Guinea. After conversations with a lot of young people busy with youth associations in Guéckédou and beyond, I can nonetheless assert that some aspects can be taken as illustrative of youthful associational life in Guinea today.

### **Self-created development agents**

The AJG was founded in 2008 and had 30 members - amongst them were Albert and Anne, who stated two main reasons for being part of or launching an association like the AJG. Firstly, they explained that by becoming a member of a youth association they created an additional working environment for themselves. Secondly, they saw their work within the association as a contribution to the country's development, which they generally linked to economic progress. They linked both arguments to the state, because they saw the state as the main employer and as the key development actor. But as the state could not fulfill these tasks, they got together to foster development and at the same time create jobs and therewith ideally an income for themselves. This attitude and thinking is in conjunction with the contemporary neoliberal understanding in which the responsibility for development is moved from the state to individuals. Anne told me thus: "After finishing university you should look for employment, you should make a traineeship. As we know, the state is the largest employer. The state hires a lot of people. However, our country has problems hiring everybody at state level. But as young people, you cannot sit back and do nothing. You have to get together with others, you have to affiliate and unite with others, you have to create an association that helps

the state in its process for development.”<sup>19</sup> And Albert explained, “You know, we the young, we are the motor of this country’s progress and development.”<sup>20</sup> None of my interview partners questioned or unmasked that neoliberal perspective, though.

I participated several times in the AJG’s weekly reunions, which were usually held at the office of a local NGO that allowed them to use their premises on Saturdays. I got to know fifteen active members, most of them males. Only three of the active members were female and none of them held a leading position. However, the President of the group complained about this gender imbalance. Almost all of the AJG-members were born in the Guéckédou prefecture, i.e. either in the town of Guéckédou or in villages of the sub-prefectures, and were of Kissi origin, which represents the dominant ethnic group in the region. Like Albert and Anne most of the followers left the region to attend higher education institutions elsewhere in the country, as there was no such school in Guéckédou at the time of research. Some of them were still students and a few were recent graduates. Thus, most of them studied in distant towns (in part at the same universities) but came back during semester breaks or when they had finished university.

In Guéckédou, they were (re-)united with their friends and former schoolfellows. They often labeled themselves “intellectuals” because of their education – and “sons and daughters of Guéckédou” due to their regional affiliation. I asked different members of the AJG if ethnic affiliation is mandatory to become part of their association. They said that ethnic affiliation was not a requisite. However, I also realized that almost all members were born in the Guéckédou prefecture and were from the same

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<sup>19</sup> “Après avoir terminé les études, tu dois chercher de l’emploi, tu dois faire des stages. Nous savons que l’Etat, l’Etat c’est le plus grand employeur. Il emploie beaucoup de personnes, l’Etat. Mais dans notre pays, il y a des difficultés au niveau de l’Etat pour employer tout le monde. Alors nous en tant que jeunes, on peut pas rester bras croisés. Il faut qu’on soit ensemble, qu’on se réunit pour mettre en place une association qui va aider l’Etat dans son processus de développement”, 14.09.2010, communication with Anne, member of the AJG.

<sup>20</sup> “Tu sais, nous, les jeunes, nous sommes le moteur du progrès et du développement dans ce pays”, 06.09.2010, communication with Albert, member of the AJG.

ethnic background. I would argue that this was not because of an implied sense of exclusion on behalf of the association but rather due to the fact that most members were students and therefore they were often re-united while studying abroad, which often creates a stronger sense of belonging between people coming from the same region and/or ethnic group.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, they described themselves as youths and identified with this social status, also as political strategy as I would argue.<sup>22</sup> Of those who had already finished university, only two were able to find formal employment with an NGO branch or the state administration. All the others, including the students, did not have any regular source of income. Like Albert and Anne, most were busy with different activities besides their studies and commitments for youth associations: the young men for instance worked as motorbike taxi drivers, in small businesses such as DVD rental stores and seasonally in the local rice fields. Several young women tried to realize traineeships at one of the local branches of national or international NGOs, financial institutions or the state administration and, depending on their family situation, kept house and went to the fields and gardens in the urban peripheries. All in all, both young men and women of this association can be described as creative improvisers busy with various income generating activities. Jones (2010) or Jeffrey/Dyson (2013) appropriately describe this economic navigation in the context of youth and entrepreneurship as “zigzag capitalism”: “Young people feel they have to constantly move about, hustle and find novel lines of approach to get things done” (Jeffrey/Dyson 2013: R2). This perspective goes in line with my own, more general reflections on being young and growing up in Guéckédou: the life histories of young (in this case also well-educated) men and women often trace meandering life trajectories rather than linear life courses with clear cut transitions from youth to adult status and accordingly related economic

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<sup>21</sup> Actually, they were often also united in corresponding youth associations at the universities (with regard to that cf. Lentz (1999); Lentz (1995)). However, during the time of research I could not undertake in-depth fieldwork at the universities or in these other towns respectively.

<sup>22</sup> This militates for understanding “youth” as social and relational category situated in a dynamic social and political context (Durham 2000; Whyte et al. 2008).

positions (Engeler 2015) – or, with Jeffrey/Dyson (2013: R2), “life has become an exercise in ‘zigzagging’.”

When asked about their initial idea of forming an association, two of the founding members of the AJG, Richard and Charles, told me that “first, it is about you. You need to have a source of inspiration. If your idea is good, your friends will support and follow you.”<sup>23</sup> However, they did not expound more on what that source of inspiration could be. Interestingly, another member, Alphonse, stressed on outside influences as their motivation for finally creating the youth association: “You know, we once got a journal distributed by the NGO *Plan*. The journal is called ‘*Planète Jeunes*’. It portrayed a youth association in Senegal. So we thought, we want to have a youth association too.”<sup>24</sup> It can thus be identified that both the founders’ creativity and inspiration related to international NGOs and development aid are important. The latter aspect was not only relevant while explaining the reasons to fund youth associations but also informed the group’s way of talking, organizing and representing: Many of the youth association’s discourses, planned activities and projects were closely related to the language, ideas and dominant imagery of NGOs and international donors present in Guékédou and entire *Guinée Forestière* since the 1990s, thus since Guinea’s entanglement with the Mano River War.

This became visible in the youth association’s discourses and practices. Amongst other things, the AJG planned a theatre piece for local school children. The play which was organized on World Aids Day indirectly informed the kids about the danger of unprotected sexual intercourse. The event, which took place at the community hall, was supported by the local authorities and financed by a branch of *Médecins sans Frontières*.<sup>25</sup> Other activities were related to the education of “underprivileged” or

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<sup>23</sup> „D’abord, c’est toi. Il faut avoir une source d’inspiration. Si ton idée, c’est bon, les amis vont te supporter, ils vont te suivre“, 01.12.2009, communication with Richard and Charles, members of the AJG.

<sup>24</sup> “Tu sais, un jour, *Plan* nous a donné un journal, ‘*Planète Jeunes*’. Là, on a parlé d’une association de jeunes au Sénégal. Donc, nous, on pensait que nous aussi on veut avoir une association“, 05.12.2009, communication with Alphonse, member of the AJG.

<sup>25</sup> *Médecins sans Frontières* was at the time of research one of the few international NGOs that stayed in the region after the takeover by the CNDD.

“vulnerable” parts of the society, including young children from rural areas or illiterate mothers. Further projects especially addressed “peace-building” and “good governance”. Altogether, their fields of activities and their modes of expression were in unison with the donors’ funding strategies, thus they also attracted potential donors. .

Besides informing about their talks and projects, the development aid background also shaped the AJG’s way of representing themselves: They tried to project images of their group, either through flyers, signboards or hand-written posters at their home or through labeled T-shirts. Like local branches of NGOs or international development agencies, which very often named their headquarters and offices, cars and clothes after their parent organizations, the youth associations tried to become visible in the public space of Guéckédou – through specific activities and also through logos, group names and emblems.

In general, the international NGO and donor background was very formative for youth associations like the AJG. The young members’ everyday practices were aimed at getting a piece of the cake from the development economy and they showed their readiness to be included in development agencies’ and related activities/work respectively. Green labels social groups like the AJG as “development agents in waiting”, because they occupy a position close to development agencies (Green 2012: 310). This description interestingly relates to Honwana’s reflections on being young in Africa, which she describes as a prolonged adolescence, in which young people are unable to find employment, get married and establish their own families (Honwana 2012). She labels the phase as a “liminal, neither-here-nor-there state”, indicated as a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood as “waithood” (Honwana 2012: 3).

### **Intergenerational networkers**

Remarkably, and a key point for my argument is the fact that the members of the AJG were not only waiting “in the shadows” of international NGOs



to foster their country's development and earn some money but also following other ideas and related projects. These activities were particularly intermingled with local state institutions, political parties and power brokers. At the time of research, the AJG was for instance in the middle of a planning phase for a "cultural week", which was to take place in Guéckédou town. To this end, the members of the AJG tried to mobilize a variety of musicians and artists from the entire Guéckédou prefecture and therefore contacted different actors and institutions who could promote their ideas and lend them support.

Amongst them were several elders, mostly from the towns' founding families and members of the local council of elders.<sup>26</sup> I could participate at a couple of these encounters and learnt that besides telling their intention the members of the AJG also listened carefully to the elders' responses. They would often narrate from memory the musical performances and dances of the revolutionary times, taking place as part of the the JRDA or the pioneer movement. It was common for the elders to participate in them. In some cases, they also travelled and performed in Cuba and many of the then socialist countries. The elders were also very keen to learn about contemporary youth activities. They explained to me that they appreciate the meetings with young people not merely because they learn about ongoing activities, rumors or problems in town but because they regard the local youth as being "their arms, legs and eyes".<sup>27</sup> The encounters with the members of the AJG usually concluded with speeches of support for the project of a cultural week, sometimes also with indications of still active musicians or dancers.

The members of the AJG also contacted the head of the local youth department to garner support. Immediately after the creation of their association, they registered it at the youth department of the local state administration, at the time of research based within the *Maison des Jeunes*. The *Maison des Jeunes* was built during the presidency of Sékou Touré as one

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<sup>26</sup> Rey provides us with further details on the role of the elders in Guinea (Rey 2007).

<sup>27</sup> "Les jeunes sont nos pieds, nos bras, nos yeux", 08.10.2010, communication with Mr. Komano, president of the council of the elders at the time of research.

of the several monumental construction projects during the socialist state era. It was commonly said to be the biggest party headquarters and youth club in the whole of Guinea. It served as “permanence”, referring to the office and headquarters of the local PDG branch and its associated youth groupings and cultural institutions. Hence, the monumental building mirrors the socialist state era and the close connection between the state, the party and local youth during these times.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, it still serves as the seat for the local youth department. In one of the corridors of the *Maison des Jeunes*, one could find the DPJ’s two offices reserved for the *Monsieur le Directeur*, the head of the DPJ, and his staff and aides. However, the most impressive and, at times, the most vivid part of the *Maison des Jeunes* was the huge community hall with its large stage. There, the prefect welcomed central state representatives, international NGOs, celebrated World AIDS Day, political parties carried out their election meetings and campaigns, and, lastly, youth groups like the AJG tried to organize cultural or musical events. Hence, the members of the AJG explained their project also vis-à-vis the DPJ and tried to negotiate access to the community hall. While they explained the project, the members of the AJG also stressed the idea of promoting “Kissi culture” and strengthening “Kissi values and traditions” in the urban space of Guéckédou. The *Monsieur le Directeur*, not only a civil servant but also a member of a locally based political party, sympathized with the idea and suggested to contact other party members to coordinate their activities with regard to the presidential campaign. The AJG representatives did not reject that idea.

All in all, by planning events such as the cultural week, young people like the members of the AJG gradually built up a network with diverse local actors. Thereby, international donors were not the most important ones.

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<sup>28</sup> Similar institutions or party headquarters existed all over Guinea. By the end of the socialist regime in 1984 all of them were transferred to the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture and thereafter redecorated as *Maison des Jeunes*. The Conté regime established a national youth policy in 1993, but cuts in resources and on-going reorganizations of the ministries together with shifting regimes and power relations complicated an effective youth-centered work in the past years. The reorganization, management and re-equipment of the numerous *Maison des Jeunes* – also in Guéckédou – were often entrusted to international donors and their development agencies.

Instead, institutions and actors with local roots, and hailing from different generations or with relations to the state or a political party were regarded as similarly relevant. The latter is surprising because members of the AJG usually claimed that their association is “apolitical”, by which most of them meant, it had no relations to political parties. I would argue that these associations and their members can nevertheless be described as politically active, because they actively entered local networks of decision-makers and organized a cultural week during a period of ethnically-oriented political campaigning.

### **Political entrepreneurs**

The example of the AJG shows that youth associations in Guinea can neither be described as mere civil society groups or social entrepreneurs situated beside the state or the political realm, nor are they just formed for profit. Instead, they represent important arenas for both political participation *and* entrepreneurship. Accordingly, members of youth associations like the AJG can be described as self-created political entrepreneurs, acting within the continuum of political parties, local authorities and development projects. They may be sponsored by an international NGO to perform a theatre piece for local school children to inform them about the danger of unprotected sexual intercourse. But they could also organize a cultural week in the midst of presidential elections and therewith relate to several important local political actors and institutions to, for instance, boost their chances to work for the future state administration. Thus, by referring to data related to both discourses and practices of youth associations such as the AJG this paper argues that the combination of economic and political practices is one of the most promising strategies for young people living in rather uncertain socio-political contexts. Actually, political entrepreneurship was one of the key niches for young well-educated men and women living in Guéckédou.

Very similar to socialist times, when young people mainly got organized within the state and the party structure, the members of youth associations I talked to related themselves quite closely to state and party institutions and

activists, although they refused to admit the proximity. Moreover, young political entrepreneurs do not necessarily act against long-established power brokers but rather try to connect to various different actors, including older generations like the local elders, and national or international NGOs.

## **Conclusion**

Guinea went through a challenging time between 2009 and 2010. In Guéckédou, young well-educated men and women, often returnees from the capital or other main Guinean towns with higher education institutions, did not simply wait for stability, instead by means of cash crop farming, petty trading, unpaid internships or creating youth associations, they managed the complex socio-political landscape. Thereby, they could not only earn a small income but also work for the country and their personal future. Importantly, neither NGOs nor the council of elders or the state administration and political parties were excluded as potential partners. Hence, the young people within these groupings creatively imagined their communities' future in tandem with local power brokers and institutions, and, most importantly, also stayed in close collaboration with representatives of older generations.

Unlike during socialist times, the post-revolutionary Guinean state no longer perceives young people as the nation's "new citizens" and therefore career paths related to state institutions, central to the first post-independence generation, are no longer easily available. Hence, contemporary youths combine political and economic activities related to well-financed domains such as national or international NGOs.

The combination of being development agents, civil society activists and political actors, of being and becoming political entrepreneurs, also proved to be a fertile ground for income generating activities and political participation during the Ebola outbreak in the Guéckédou prefecture. When I contacted Albert in early 2014, he proudly mentioned that he got the

chance to work for *Médecins sans Frontières* because they knew him since the aforementioned theatre play. They respected him as representative of local youth. He was made part of their information campaign in the Guéckédou prefecture and he was also invited to the local round table of decision-makers to discuss the disease and local responses. He knew many of the participants as friendly supporters of the cultural week that he had organized as a member of the AJG. Thus, Albert successfully did “business” as he called his activities in the fairway of NGOs, political parties and the presidential elections in autumn 2015. He was not the only one. Many of my former informants contacted between 2014 and 2015 were involved in one or the other activities related to the Ebola prevention or the presidential elections. In other words, political entrepreneurship seemed again especially fruitful for some of the well-educated youths in Guéckédou.

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