

Report on Faculty Development Award for “ Body Counts: Colonialism and the Corporeal in Guinea-Bissau.” Eric Gable

1. Project Description.

I planned to write an article for *American Ethnologist* based on library research supplemented with ethnographic material I have gathered, exploring, on the one hand, Portuguese attempts to control the bodies of Manjaco in order to make them into subjects in the new colony and, on the other hand, the forms of resistance that occurred as a result. The paper was to focus on two domains of colonial accounting: “body counts” during military conflicts, and efforts to manage and restrict (for reasons of hygiene) the transportation of corpses of migrants for traditional funerals in home villages.

The article was to address at once classic and current themes in my discipline. In anthropology it is axiomatic that dead bodies are as important as living ones. What people do with the dead—where they put them, and who gets to put them there—maps social space and marks those who control that space. Currently anthropology’s enduring fascination with death and burial is undergoing a resurgence as anthropologists engage with the work of Foucault and other scholars on the relationship between “governmentality” and “biopower” in order to understand the ways that states or colonial regimes use everything from hygienic codes to organized violence and terror to claim and control the bodies of their subjects.

2. Goals and Objectives.

The ultimate goal was to write and submit an article of roughly 30 pages to *American Ethnologist* by August 2009. I did not accomplish this specific goal but I was able to use some of the material I gathered during the period of research in an article I published in *African Studies Review* (Guinea-Bissau: Yesterday...and Tomorrow, 2009, 52(2):165–179). This article addressed the question of long-term continuities in governmentalities in Guinea-Bissau from the colonial era past, through the ethnographic present and projected processes for the near future. I had not planned to have to spend as much time as I did on this project, which meant that other work I had anticipated for the summer was postponed.

What I was able to accomplish in terms of research was to read some of the best anthropological work on colonial states I also have been translating two key richly detailed accounts by Portuguese military commanders and to do research on library data bases for other memoirs of the violent conflicts that inaugurated colonial rule between 1908 and 1914.

One area of research I had planned to work on during the period of the award but did not, was to provide a multi-ethnic context for Manjaco funerary practices by comparing them to other ethnic groups in West Africa. I was specifically interested in a form of a very widespread West African funerary divinatory practice called, by anthropologists, “corpse carrying.” In this form of divination the body of the deceased is carried on a bier while living members of the family interrogate it to determine the cause

of death. In Manjaco and other West African societies there is no such thing as death by natural causes. All people are thought to have been killed either because they violated some law or because someone else wished them dead. The interrogation of the corpse is crucial to burial. In Manjaco the corpse carrying, like many burials themselves, are done with effigies. This is a response to massive emigration—emigration which makes Manjaco different from many of the other ethnic in Guinea-Bissau which have not emigrated as early (e.g. mid-19th century) and as permanently as Manjaco—coupled, I hypothesized with Portuguese laws and efforts to restrict the transport of corpses. Manjaco live and die in Paris, say, or Dakar. But they are “interrogated” via effigy, and “buried” via effigy in home villages. One goal of my research was to discover how common this practice of using effigies is in West Africa. Although I was not able to complete this portion of the research in the summer, I continue to work on it sporadically, and hope to revisit the larger goals of the project by the end of 2010.