'I Did Not Wash My Hand for Days'

The Stuplime Return of Revolutionary Speech in the Republic of Guinea

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Abstract

This article focuses on the reception of revolutionary oratory in what was once known as The People's Revolutionary Republic of Guinea. Sékou Touré, Guinea's first president, captivated the nation with fiery, unscripted speeches lasting four, five, or six hours. Guinean audiences were enthralled by his sublime revolutionary rhetoric. In a 2008 coup, Captain Moussa Dadis Camara declared himself president, attempting to recreate the fervour of Guinea's revolutionary days. Guinean citizens initially provided a willing revolutionary audience, though Camara's oratory fell far short of Touré's example. The article explores how the effects of shock and boredom that Ngai describes as 'stuplimity' (2005) emerged in reaction to Camara's performances. Stuplimity was a halfway point between Guineans' initial 'revolutionary' suspension of disbelief regarding the junta's intentions and their subsequent rejection and anger, which led to the junta's collapse less than a year after it took power.

Keywords: aesthetics, audience, Guinea, repetition, revolution, stuplimity

I am using the term audience in an extended sense as shorthand for the varied kinds of interlocutors that social actors identify with or react to as they go about the business of social life. Audiences consist of others who elicit a response, even as they draw one into their ranks. (Rutherford 2012: 4)

Ice cream and oaths

We went to the ice cream shop as a special treat for my kids, then aged two and five. The shop had just opened on the Avenue de la République, the biggest street in Guinea's capital, Conakry. I was conducting research on a sabbatical leave and brought my family to join me after several months there alone, and right after a middle-ranks coup had brought Captain Moussa 'Dadis' Camara to power as the National Council for Democracy and Development (CNDD) junta's leader. As we

paid for the ice cream, I looked up at the television in the corner to see Camara speaking animatedly to the camera. He placed his right hand on the Bible, his left on the Qur'an, swearing an oath not to cling to power but rather to prepare the way for credible civilian elections.

So began the nightly televised spectacle that came to be known amongst Guineans as the 'Dadis Show.' It lasted about three months, starting on that night in late February 2009. My first thought on watching him in the ice cream shop was that many Guineans would take offence to Dadis, a Christian, placing his unclean left hand on the Qur'an which is the sacred text of about 90% of the population. In the morning I asked some people at the guesthouse where we were staying about the oath. No one else remarked upon the left hand/right hand issue, but many were excited by the unmediated style of address and the evident frankness of Camara's presentation. This enthusiasm continued over the following weeks, as Dadis used the hours from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. to personally interrogate officials from the previous government for their alleged thefts from the public coffers, challenged foreign representatives of mining companies about backroom deals they negotiated with the prior government, and called to account army officers, including the last president's son, for involvement in transshipping much of South America's cocaine destined for Europe through Guinea and neighbouring Guinea Bissau.

This enthusiasm was also interwoven with trepidation. Dadis often seemed unhinged. Stories emerged of junta members drinking heavily and using drugs, and Dadis himself announced to journalists that he stayed up all night, usually waking around dinnertime. His manic performances in the Dadis Show were both worrying and exciting. They also self-consciously attempted to recreate some of the ambiance that had characterised the time of Guinea's socialist revolution (1958–1984) under President Sékou Touré. The revolution had ended abruptly with Touré's death in office, at which point a military coup replaced him with a taciturn officer, Lansana Conté. After he, too, died in office in 2008, Guinea was ready for a change. Initially, Dadis's fiery rhetoric and allegiance to strict public morality called up the memory of the Touré years. Although Touré's government had been repressive and violent—one-third of the population went into exile in neighbouring countries and an estimated ten to thirty thousand real and perceived political dissidents died in Guinea's death camps—it was a time when public safety was assured and corruption was virtually unknown, and punished harshly when discovered. When Dadis came to power, Guineans welcomed him, and they welcomed the personalised nature of the Dadis Show interrogations, even though they bypassed the judicial system, and typically culminated in a sincere, sometimes tearful apology.

Despite this initial enthusiasm, Guineans had begun to sour on the junta with the arrival of the June rains. He had by then made clear his intention to run for president, reneging on his Dadis Show oath, and it had also started to become clear that he was working more with than against international drug cartels and others pillaging the Guinean economy.

Susanna Fioratta describes Camara's September 2009 visit to the town of Labe, in Guinea's central mountainous region. The junta attempted to mix spectacle and

intimidation, with MiG fighter jets flying low across the city, heavily armed soldiers speeding through the streets, and 'supporters' bussed into the city from the capital, six hours away. As she describes, they were met with a mix of boredom and sarcasm:

Attempts to organize a coherent parade or marchers seemed to have failed. Only a small cluster of CNDD t-shirted pedestrians made their way down the street, chanting in French, 'Dadis must stay!' A group of about five young boys ran up and down the street, shouting, 'Dadis! Dadis! Dadis!' But the growing rows of people observing from either side of the road were quiet for the most part, not responding with cheers or anything other than silence, stares, and the occasional sardonic remark. 'To be with them, you have to do theatre,' said a man standing near me. (Fioratta 2021: 40)

Two days after the spectacle Fioratta describes, unarmed protestors calling for the junta to step aside and allow civilian elections were locked inside a football stadium by security forces, who killed over 150 and gang-raped scores of women. By December, the junta, under investigation by a UN tribunal for crimes against humanity, imploded. Dadis's aide-de-camp shot him in the head, he was medically evacuated to Morocco, and Guinea was ushered toward elections by a coalition of international actors.

This article explores the role of the audience in helping to shape and buoy up revolutionary oratory and also tries to explain the audience's role when it abandons would-be revolutionaries. The article toggles between two moments: Guinea's first revolutionary period (1958–1984) under Sékou Touré, Guinea's 'father of independence,' and the short (2008–2009) rule of Dadis Camara, who tried to reignite the revolutionary fervour of the post-independence period. The relationship between Touré and the Guinean population as audience was complex, changed over time, and varied across different ethnic and regional communities. His oratory was artful, and many Guineans adopted his vocabulary and rhetoric.

Like Touré, Dadis Camara began to monopolise public speech soon after the junta took power, though he used it to make outlandish comments. For instance, he claimed his mother was one hundred years old, though he was only forty-four. His French was also inelegant, and many Guineans remarked to me that he was a typical product of the Guinean revolutionary education system, which in 1968 replaced French with Guinea's seven most widely spoken African languages in Guinea's elementary and middle schools. Many mocked Camara's slurring pronunciation and frequently mistaken grammar.¹ It was nevertheless clear that Camara intended to emulate Touré's impassioned oratory and rhythmic prosody. Guineans were a receptive audience for Dadis's self-conscious revolutionary stylings, until they weren't. How should we understand the majority of the Guinean populace's willing suspension of disbelief for some six months, and how do we understand their subsequent rejection of him as a verbose buffoon, a fate that never befell Touré? The article uses the concept of 'stuplimity', a combination of shock and boredom (Ngai 2005) to explain the ways that Guineans gradually became bored with Dadis's hyperactive and crude playing to the camera, like a third-rate reality television star.

Repetition and revolution

Repetition poses a particular challenge for revolutionary movements.² The logic of revolution demands a dramatic rupture (progressive change is not enough, and in fact signals a failure of nerve, of character). Many revolutions establish their founding date as Year Zero in a new calendar. Most revolutions take bloodshed as necessary and indexical proof that they have triggered the forceful resistance of the *ancien regime*. Yet as Marx argued, 'just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes' (1991 [1852]: 15).

Sékou Touré's response to this challenge was to create a revolutionary language that explicitly embraced both socialism and Pan Africanism in the service of revalorising an 'African personality' that had been denigrated by French colonisation and cultural arrogance. In music, gender relations, and statecraft, the Guinean government self-consciously mixed West African traditions with practices borrowed from both capitalist and communist countries in Europe and beyond. Bands playing instruments introduced from Europe (electric guitars, drum sets, saxophones, and trumpets) performed songs that frequently borrowed from the repertoire of deep *jeliya*, the tunes sung and accompanied by West African instruments (balafon, cora, ngoni) that recount Mande history and have a provenance going back almost one thousand years.³ The result was a hybrid musical style that incorporated influences including *jeliya*, Cuban *son* and *rumba*, and the American sounds of James Brown and Jimi Hendrix (Dave 2019). Theatrical performances took masked dances that in many cases would only have been performed for either the male or female adult initiated members of an ethnic group, and performed them on a proscenium stage before an audience of men and women seated in auditorium seats. Men and women living in bigger towns and cities participated in couples dancing in nightclubs and during *soirées dansantes* (dance parties) sponsored by the party state. The Guinea state thus reengineered citizens' sonic, haptic, and proxemic experiences of the arts of music, dance, and storytelling. Their content drew heavily from the traditional corpus of the ethnolinguistic groups that found themselves within colonial Guinea's borders. At the same time, these formal innovations created new forms of audience participation that were part of the attempt to inculcate new forms of national personhood and belonging. They constituted each Guinean as a monadic individual with allegiances and responsibilities first to the nation, above one's family, region, or religion. Hence sacred masquerades were performed on stage for national audiences at the same time that they were banned in their normal village settings.

The Guinean revolution was thus a polymorphous project of social transformation. Throwing off the yoke of colonial domination was of course centrally important and affectively exhilarating. Yet so were the new freedoms and power accorded women as a group (who soon enjoyed preferred entry into *lycées*, university, the civil service, and the armed forces). Young men joined young women

in the JRDA, or Youth of the African Democratic Revolution, to exercise oversight of their elders' behaviour. During the Cultural Revolution they reported counter-revolutionary tendencies, including amongst their elder relatives.⁴ New political, aesthetic, and libidinal energies were released, and most everyone—except the departed French and a small number of formerly powerful chiefs—found themselves winners in this transformed landscape.

Two instances of dressing down

Both Touré and Dadis employed plain-spoken but passionate oratorical styles. What is striking about Touré's oratory is its extreme modulation in tone, volume, and rhetorical address. A good example comes from a speech during his 1982 visit to France. In his speech at the Paris City Hall,⁵ Touré begins almost shyly, speaking very slowly, using the formulae required by diplomatic protocol; establishing his impeccable manners and lack of aggressivity. He eventually works his way back to a discussion of Guinea's sudden and acrimonious 1958 departure from the French colonial sphere. At this point his mode of address becomes forceful, with both his tone and volume rising and falling, creating dramatic tension. He says,

Guinea had the historic privilege, from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, of being the site of the capital of some of the greatest West African empires. And the Guinean people profited from this historic period by understanding the value of independence and sovereignty; the necessity for man, so that he may be fully human, to be responsible for his [own] life....And that is why, my dear brothers, you ought not to be astonished that Guinea alone chose the path of independence.

Later, his tone has evolved further. With a controlled rage, he begins to address the many characterisations of his regime as brutal and totalitarian, referring without naming these critics (the French press, French government, Amnesty International, French widows of Guineans executed for allegedly participating in counterrevolutionary attacks on Guinea). He continues,

Frequently, outside of Africa, the image one has of Africa is of a beggar, sitting at an intersection or in front of a mosque, with his hands outstretched to receive alms. And even those who, out of generosity or out of understanding of the need for assistance, give aid, give it in a manner that wounds. As for us, we say, history is not a sprint, but a race to a bottomless depth. To create the conditions for human flourishing (*valoriser l'existence de l'homme*) one needs a historical consciousness. A social consciousness. A political consciousness. An economic consciousness. A cultural consciousness. A humane consciousness, in a word.

Near the end of his speech, Touré combines the tone of righteous indignation and measured anger that has built, organically and volcanically, over the course of his speech, with a return to assurances of his goodwill and happiness at visiting Paris where he had once served in the National Assembly.

Those who have come to this reception at the invitation of M. the Mayor, some are friends. Others do not know why or who they have come to see. I would like you to retain a single image; that's one of a sincere man, a man without complexes, a man without *any* rancour, a man who would like to build with the French people a marvellous future between France and his country.

By the end, the listener understands that Touré's speech is in fact suffused with rancour, though he is working to harness it in the interest of his people. The listener is also convinced that his rancour is justified. It is for this reason that even those who know that the torture chambers and death camps Touré denied did exist in Guinea still admire his verbal artistry (Dave 2019:74). I purchased an audio cassette of this speech in a market in Kankan, and over the years saw many tapes of Touré's speeches for sale, and being played, in markets around Guinea. Through 2008, his speeches would be rebroadcast on the state television station, and drew lively audiences, gathered around a TV in a family courtyard.

Dadis Camara never mustered Touré's ability to build dramatic intensity or to entrance an audience. An example of the shabbiness of Dadis's oratory resides in a 12 May 2009 version of the Dadis Show.⁶ Dadis is holding forth in a meeting with Guinean and foreign businesspeople. As was the norm during these meetings, everything is filmed in the antechamber to his bedroom at the Alpha Yaya Diallo military base in Conakry, which became the seat of the new government. Every time Dadis speaks, his small audience applauds. He addresses a Ukrainian businessman named Anatoly Patchenko, the representative of Russian bauxite company Rusal in Guinea.

Dadis: Mr. Patchenko. The others there, they spoke, you spoke. Did anyone applaud here? What he said really, did he lie, or didn't he lie—objectively?

Patchenko: That would be to make a [value judgement?] about Guinée. I don't get involved in politics.

Dadis: Ehh, you talk like that, I deport you. [applause].

[screaming] If you please, come here (*s'il te plait viens là!!*).

[points to seat next to him to indicate Patchenko should come sit beside him]

Patchenko: Excuse me, Mr. President.

Dadis: Will you look at that! (*regarde-moi ça!*)

[now standing as Patchenko sits in chair]

You're playing at being a mafioso! You want to destroy the relations between Russia and Guinea!!

Will you look at that!

A Guinean living in Russia over there. He should talk like that?!

Patchenko: Excuse me Mr. President. Excuse me.

Dadis: This is how you have enriched yourself [*mangé sur*], how do you say, Guinea. You rolled in the muck (*s'embourber*) with the former government. You spoke. Did I speak to you? Did I interrupt you? When those people spoke, did I interrupt them?

It is difficult to capture the strangeness of Dadis's speech in a transcription, but it contrasts with Touré's speech in Paris along a number of axes: both men were replying to a perceived slight by a European. In Touré's case, Parisian Mayor Jacques Chirac in his introductory speech had been courtly in his politesse, yet still at pains to heap praise on France for its supposed benevolence toward its former colony, including the fact that when it offered Guinea a vote for complete independence or continued commonwealth status, it respected Guinea's vote rather than coercing it to remain in the French orbit. This was an absurd basis for Chirac's self-congratulation, but in the case of Touré, whose legitimacy was so directly linked to Guinea's 'No' vote of 1958, it was also a veiled provocation. Touré's response was oblique yet fierce. He played the same rhetorical game as Chirac and won. One YouTube clip of the latter portion of his speech is entitled, 'When Sékou Touré Ridiculed the French Authorities with 100% Pan Africanist Words'.

In contrast to Touré, Dadis seems unable to contain his emotion, jumping out of his seat and at one point screaming. His powerful emotions cause Dadis to lose his ability to control language, to express himself elegantly so as to better attack his enemies. Dadis begins by tutois-ing Patchenko, using the familiar 'you'. At first it is unclear if this is a calculated insult in this context where one adult speaking to another in a formal setting would normally demand the formal 'vous'. As Dadis continues, he switches between *tu* and *vous*, seemingly reverting to *tu* as he becomes more animated. This oscillation appears more a question of the things Dadis ended up being accused of by most Guineans, of being a person 'without culture,' with a soldier's rough manners, a poor education, and a chip on his shoulder. As the harangue continues, it resembles the kinds of chastisements I have occasionally seen Guinean elementary and middle school teachers dole out to wayward students. Verbally violent (and backed by a credible threat of physical violence, as a soldier with an AK-47 stands a metre or so away), they are designed to belittle rather than instruct. The YouTube clip of the exchange is entitled 'Captain Dadis Camara Humiliates a Russian Diplomat'.

In both Touré's and Camara's speech, Guineans took pleasure in their presidents' willingness to claim their full prerogatives in the face of condescending and racist adversaries. The similarities, however, end there. While Touré was eloquent, Dadis was crude in his expression. While Touré chose worthy opponents—General De Gaulle, Chirac, presidents like Senegal's Senghor and Côte d'Ivoire's Houphouët—Dadis chose small targets like Patchenko, who could only speak French with difficulty and who looks like a scared child sitting in his seat while Dadis screams at him. Above all, Touré succeeded in managing and channelling his emotions for a larger goal while Camara appeared incapable of doing so during the year of his rule. Guineans tried to suspend disbelief and to will him toward greater things, but Dadis was simply incapable of fulfilling their aspirations for him. The first time I watched Dadis on TV I was with three Guinean young men who were managing the hostel where I was staying. They spent the whole time mocking him, talking about which drugs they thought he was using.

What bound Touré's and Dadis's modes of address was a revolutionary language that was straightforward, moralising, and intent on sorting people into distinct categories of those engaged in revolutionary work (good) or those 'saboteurs,' and 'fifth columnists' engaged in undercutting the revolution for personal gain (bad). As Žižek has argued in *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008), even the most brutal excesses of revolutionary violence (Stalin comes readily to mind) leave behind the veiled gift—a kernel of revolutionary sincerity that contrasts with the liberal quiescence of post-political consumerism. Sincerity, like good faith, is a concept mostly abandoned in academe and almost crushed into dust under the weight of poststructuralist critique, but the comparison of Dadis and Touré suggest that it may still be useful. As L'Abbé Gregoire wrote of revolutionary language in revolutionary France, sincere revolutionary language should demonstrate 'a dignity that is mid-way between abjectness and roughness' (France 1990). Striking that balance is something Sékou Touré succeeded in doing across the length of his political career. Dadis did not. The difference between the two is not self-evident in their speech, as if dignity were a transcendental thing in the world. It is something created dialogically between these speakers and their audiences (Bakhtin 1982; Tedlock and Mannheim 1995).

Logorrhoea's audience and the problem of repetition

Guineans are seasoned consumers of revolutionary oratory. Sékou Touré often held forth, giving extemporaneous public speeches for four, five, or six hours. From the mid-1960s until his death in 1984, he essentially monopolised public speech in Guinea. Not only were his speeches broadcast live and rebroadcast in recorded form on the national radio, many were also published in a series of 'Tomes' that became virtually the only books published in the country. Touré held forth on the politics of postcolonial authenticity, Pan Africanism, gender relations, religion and its relation to revolutionary politics,⁷ and the significance of the arts, among many other topics.

As Fidel Castro did, Touré delivered his speeches without notes and held his audience's rapt attention throughout. This article takes its title from a story told to me by a friend, a high school history teacher, who worked with me as a researcher for a few months in 2008–2009. Describing a public event during his youth where he went to see Sékou Touré speak, he said, 'I was in the front row of the audience as Sékou spoke. He was screaming, and some of his spit landed on my hand. I did not wash my hand for days!' This gives a sense of the setting in which the dialogic exchange that Brennan (2004) calls the 'transmission of affect' takes place.

Many Guineans still remember Touré's speech with awe and delight, but it was simultaneously true that Touré's audiences in Guinea were carefully assembled by local-level officials who would resort to force if necessary (Dave 2020: 737–740). In the rainforested southeastern corner of the country where I have done research, many people told me about instances when they had been told to assemble: sometimes in a football stadium for independence day celebrations or a visit by officials

from Conakry, sometimes by the side of the road to cheer Touré and a visiting dignitary as they drove by. Whole villages would be kept from farming for the day in order to wait by the side of the road for hours, until the presidential motorcade whisked by, Touré waving his trademark white handkerchief and the cars covering the villagers with red laterite dust. If dignitaries were to make a stopover for a meal or to spend the night, people in the village or town could be requisitioned for several days, prohibited from farming, and instead forced to rehearse songs of welcome and sew fresh boubous (gowns) out of white fabric distributed by government officials.

Over the course of the 1960s, Touré's relationship with ordinary Guineans began to subtly shift. From 1964, the Parti Démocratique de Guinée, Guinea's one-party state, began to impose itself with increasing force in people's lives. Farmers and pastoralists were no longer asked to pay taxes in cash but in kind. The portions of a farmer's rice, plantain, or manioc crop taken by the state (often to provide free food rations for citizens living in towns and cities) were collected by local officials. Borrowing a 'decentralized despotic' page from the playbook of the colonial regime (Mamdani 1996), the central government pitted municipalities against one another. Administrators at the levels of local revolutionary powers (PRLs) and arrondissements were rewarded for collecting more in-kind taxes than administrators in neighbouring PRLs, leading to confiscation of half and even three-quarters of some farmers' crops. As several farmers in this fertile region have told me, 'the revolution was the only time that we ever knew hunger—because of the *normes* [in-kind taxes]'. In an arena closer to political oratory, Guineans were also called upon to develop dance, choir, and theatre performances for the biannual *Quinzaine Artistique* (Artistic Fortnight). Again, working from the lowest administrative level (PRL) upward, communities entered a months-long competitive process like an artistic World Cup, in which groups competed locally, regionally, and finally nationally, with the top performers travelling to Conakry to perform for the president and the National Political Bureau.⁸

Guineans were thus a knowing and politically sophisticated audience, and over time they came to realise that failure to show up or insufficient enthusiasm could lead to harassment or even jailing. This is a crucial element in understanding what kind of audience Guineans constituted for Touré's oratory, but it is not the whole story. As Lisa Wedeen (1999) demonstrates in her book about Hafiz al-Asad's authoritarian spectacle and the ways it interpolated the Syrian population, the sincerity of citizens' enunciations was not in fact the objective of the many required slogans, catchphrases, and spectacular ceremonies the government organised. Ceremonies and a discourse of obsequious obedience was rather something that began as a performative speech act and hardened over the years into a habitus. As Wedeen writes, 'In official Syrian political discourse, President Hafiz al-Asad is regularly depicted as omnipresent and omniscient. In newspaper photographs he appears as the "father," the "combatant," the "first teacher," the "savior of Lebanon," the "leader forever," or the "gallant knight"...If only by dint of repetition, everyone is fluent in this symbolic vocabulary of the Syrian state' (Wedeen 1999: 1). The honorifics were

similar in Guinea: 'Supreme Leader of the Revolution' and similar phrases became part of every citizen's state-prescribed cant.

We might, however, pause over Wedeen's phrase, 'if only by dint of repetition'. For it is repetition that constitutes a central technique of Touré's verbosity and the entry into (political) language of several generations of Guineans, born roughly between the 1930s and 1980s.

As the language of the revolution recycled its formulae and catchphrases endlessly, Touré himself showed no signs of the kinds of linguistic exhaustion many Guineans describe themselves experiencing. His logorrhoea never flagged. Linguist Alpha Ousmane Barry has analysed Touré's speech and remarks upon the heavy use of repetition: 'Repetition is a procedure used to create and forge a link between the orator's intention and the sought-after effect in the listener' (2002: 100).

Guineans knew the language of the revolution by heart. An exemplary call-and-response sequence could be initiated by any Guinean holding oratorical authority, from Touré himself all the way down to a primary school teacher. The prescribed responses were known by every Guinean:

Honour!	To the people!
Glory!	To the people!
Victory!	To the people!

Or,

Imperialism!	Down!
Colonialism!	Down!
Neo-colonialism!	Down!

Or,

Traffickers!	To the gallows!
Devils [<i>Cheyane</i>]!	To the gallows!
Traitors!	To the gallows!

One of the most common was:

Ready!	Ready for the Revolution!
Ready!	Ready for the Popular Revolution!
Ready!	Ready for production! ⁹

Such slogans infiltrated Guineans' everyday speech, and their rhythmic prosody still characterised the way many Guineans spoke when I first lived there, five years after Touré's death. This type of speech was defined by a play between repetition and variation within formulae. It also mobilised a call-and-response exchange that reminded participants both of the joyful framing of everyday music-making and life-cycle celebrations, and of the fact that their prescribed responses were required, even if also given freely. Even 15–20 years after Touré's death and the end of the

one-party state, some people, especially those who had been teachers and mid-level functionaries, continued to talk in this way.

This overabundance of language was radically dissociated from the spartan lives Guineans were living as they chanted state slogans. I find Sianne Ngai's concept of 'stuplimity' good to think with here. She describes stuplimity as 'a concatenation of boredom and astonishment—a bringing together of what 'dulls' and what 'irritates' or agitates; of sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue.' (Ngai 2005: 271). Stuplimity is a particular 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1978) that may help to explain how people manage an overflow of images, sounds, demands on their attention. She describes repetition and reiteration (as exemplified in 'thick' repetitive texts by Samuel Beckett and Gertrude Stein): "This power of the finite and iterable to resist formal concepts and categories recalls a similar claim Kierkegaard makes in *Repetition*: "Every general esthetic category runs aground on farce." And there is often a comical or even farcical element to stuplimity.' (ibid: 272). Indeed, an old friend always used the revolutionary slogan, '*Prêt pour la révolution!*' as Americans would use 'Cheese!' before taking a snapshot with family or friends. It always prompted involuntary and slightly nervous laughter (cf. Efthymiou and Lionis this issue).

Stuplimity also helps us resist any false choice between sincerity and cynicism within Guinean audiences. Dave writes of Guinean pro-government songs, 'While I have described the ways in which audiences maintain distance from the political messages in song lyrics, I do not read this estrangement as an act of protest or resistance against the message. Instead, it represents an act of quiet accommodation to a *jeli* singing praise to a dictator' (2019: 106). There is a saying in Guinea that during the revolution in every family 'there was one [person] in the village, one in the government, and one in prison.' In other words, every family experienced the Touré period as both a boon and an assault, but from the village, the challenge was to try to remain under the radar.

The object sublime and the agency of the audience

Ngai's concept of stuplimity is part of her exploration of 'ugly feelings' that issue from modern capitalist society, in which people's ideological and material investments in the very systems that cause them irritation, envy, resentment, and anxiety nonetheless exert a kind of gravitational pull on them. The book goes in depth to untangle the gendered aspects of these affects and points at times to the racial facets of the genesis of ugly feelings. The authors she cites in discussing stuplimity are mostly from the realm of Euro-American high art (Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, Andy Warhol, John Cage, amongst others), and to better apply her insights to the Guinean setting, it is important to more explicitly address the difference that race makes.¹⁰ One of the leading thinkers about the relations between blackness and forms of radical seriality that border on and bounce off of ugly feelings like stuplimity is artist/theorist Arthur Jafa.¹¹

Jafa's main utilisation of stuplimity as aesthetic strategy is his 2013 installation, *Apex*.¹² Set to a hypnotic techno track, the installation unfurls 841 images in just under eight minutes. Ninety-eight percent syntagmatic, the video does not provide either the time or the paradigmatic footholds that might allow the viewer to create a standard narrative. The images work, instead, at an unconscious level: Wu-Tang Clan, Baule masquerade, lynching victim, FLN fighters from *The Battle of Algiers*, Sid Vicious, Miles, Krazy Kat.... The images, products of Jafa's practice of collecting, curating, and grouping pictures since the age of seven, come at the viewer relentlessly, hypnotically, with quiet violence. As Tina Campt argues in her study, *Listening to Images* (2017), quiet does not mean silent. Campt analyses archives of ID photos, photo albums, ethnographic photos, mugshots—all of Black people in Africa and the diaspora. She writes, 'Each chapter explores a selection of photos that I define as "quiet" to the extent that, before they are analysed, they must be attended to by way of the unspoken relations that structure them' (2017: 8). This well describes the work the viewer is enjoined to do in *Apex* as Jafa's images flicker by for half a second each. The mode of this work thus necessarily shifts away from patient contemplation and toward something more unconscious, oblique, and terrifying.

Jafa has described his understanding of Black life and art in the United States using the term 'abject sublime.' He has written about,

the central conundrum of black being (the double bind of our ontological existence) lies in the fact that common misery both defines and limits who we are. such that our efforts to eliminate those forces which constrain also function to dissipate much of what gives us our specificity, our uniqueness, our flavor and that by destroying the binds that define we will cease to be, but this is the good death (cachoeria) and to be embraced. (2003:257)

The abject sublime is helpful to understanding life in Guinea, where it helps explain people's tolerance of and patience with obstreperous characters, the fluency with which they manage the intermixing of violence and powerful expressivity, and their insistence on deriving joy from life under sometimes dire circumstances. Even when Sékou Touré's government became most abusive toward its own population, Guineans knew that they were bound to one another, and to other Africans, as the targets of European racism and historical exploitation. It is this suppleness that brings me back to Guinean political oratory, affect, and the agency of the audience.

James Scott proposes a parable/thought experiment in his essays on anarchism. He suggests that roughly two thousand years ago there were probably dozens of men moving through the streets, temples, and bazaars of the Levant claiming to be the son of God (Scott 2012). His point is that the one we have come to know as Jesus Christ succeeded in placing himself at the centre of what would become a world religion and placing himself in the sights of the Romans not merely by his own rhetorical prowess and charisma. Charisma, Scott argues, is co-produced by the charismatic figure and her audience. What does the audience want and require in a specific historical moment? How do they convey it to the one who is

addressing them, and how do speakers respond, changing and reformulating their addresses in cognizance of the audience's needs? These questions invite us to focus on the flow of energies between speaker and audience in real time—between Jesus of Nazareth and his audience, Sékou Touré and his audience, Dadis Camara and his audience.

All performance, indeed, all conversation, is dialogic. In dialogue, as Bakhtin wrote, the word always belongs halfway to the addressee. This is true in all verbal exchanges, but the exchange of energy and the ability of that exchange to redirect the address of a performer is especially pronounced in certain performative genres, such as live musical performance and political oratory. In West Africa, both dancers and drummers articulate a multi-layered aesthetic of emergence in live dance performance: drummers challenge and provide cues to dancers that force them to adjust and improvise in the moment to meet the shift introduced 'in the break' (cf. Moten 2003 on similar dynamics within jazz improvisation). Dancers, too, can challenge drummers as they move in and out or ahead of the beat.¹³

This type of exchange between performers and audience has stereotypically been attributed to African and African diaspora performance genres, but the ways that audiences and speakers feed one another is just as evident in a populist rally held by Donald Trump or Rodrigo Duterte. What is most striking in Guinea is the extent to which the socialist government was invested in tamping down potentially unruly effervescence.¹⁴ As in the cases of banning masquerades in their 'normal' village settings but re-presenting them to Guinean and international audiences as part of a stage performance, Sékou Touré's political speeches drew from the self-consciously modernist post-Bandung aesthetic of the independence-era political rally or speech. He spoke from a raised dais with electric amplification and with the audience seated in front of (rather than in a circle around) him. Touré gave all of his major speeches in French rather than in one of Guinea's African languages.

Yet Touré, like Dadis, was invested in using public speech to create bonds both between individuals and the nation and amongst themselves. They called upon people to assemble in crowds and, at the limit, coerced or paid them to assemble together.¹⁵ Teresa Brennan argues in her book, *The Transmission of Affect*, that the two senses most likely to transmit affect within crowds are those of smell and hearing. Brennan argues against the primacy accorded to vision in Eurocentric thought and the assumption that our bodies are self-contained in ways that make them impermeable to the contagion of sentiments originating in other persons. How then, she asks, do we enter some rooms and immediately 'feel the atmosphere?' (2004: 1). She goes on to argue that chemicals linked to fear, anger, or effervescent well-being can be transmitted by our sense of smell. Similar affects may be transmitted aurally, particularly by prosody, or melody, pitch, and stress in human speech (2004: 70). The question of prosody and rhythm in speech suggests that one reason that people in crowds react positively to political rhetoric regardless of its content is because of the affective experience resulting from the touch, smells, and especially sounds of political oratory.

The Touré-era government made sophisticated use of public speeches and celebrations across the country to maintain this type of engagement and to replenish, as it were, the affective charge of the one-party state's policies and positions. Dadis Camara and his comrades in the junta were initially met with spontaneous crowds lining the streets and cheering them on as they drove through Conakry and as they gave public speeches. They diminished steadily over the nine months that followed, despite Dadis's reality TV behaviour and the government's readiness to pay young people and musicians to sing their praises (Dave 2019). Another key difference was the form of mediation involved: while radio broadcasts of Touré's speeches called up experiences many Guineans had at one time or another of being in the audience for one of his rallies, this was not true of Dadis. Although Dadis Show performances often had small audiences in the anteroom of his apartment, they were clearly staged for the television cameras. One journalist working in Conakry told me of five- and six-hour waits in the anteroom, trying to do an interview with the president, and witnessing several moments in which Dadis's screaming monologues appeared to be 'theatre pieces'. On one occasion, he woke up in the early evening, sent word out to the cameramen in the anteroom to begin filming, and appeared several minutes later, dashing through the curtain and screaming, 'This country is fucked!' While the sycophants surrounding Dadis treated such stunts with utmost seriousness, many Guineans in 2009 had also watched enough television to identify manufactured melodrama. It had predictably stupefying effects of shock (at the crude language) and boredom.

First time, tragedy; second time, farce

In the heady days of the revolution, Miriam Makeba, Maryse Condé, and Stokely Carmichael all came to live in Conakry; Fanon and Mandela visited; and Kwame Nkrumah was welcomed as an honorary co-president after being deposed in Ghana. Under pressure from French intrigue and internal power struggles, much of the revolutionary period became caught up in the search for traitors and the imposition of draconian political, economic, and social restrictions enforced by secret police, a network of citizen informers, and the liberal use of prison camps doling out torture and executions to real and perceived enemies of the state.

A friend told me an anecdote about Sékou Touré: He was in a meeting with his cabinet ministers. A brand-new limousine had just been delivered for use by the Guinean government. Touré announced, 'Whichever one of you has some coins in his pocket, I will give you the car for the price of those coins.' All of the ministers had large denomination bills, but none had any coins. Touré's point that they had become too distant from ordinary Guineans was backed by his bold wager that he knew what was in their pockets. Whether or not the story took place as it was narrated to me, Guineans had become co-authors by remembering, disseminating, and perhaps embellishing the story, even many years after Touré's death. It was not accidental, perhaps, that my friend recounted this story during the CNDD junta's

time in power, just at the point where Guineans I knew were becoming wary about Camara's plans for a power grab.

At the end of the Touré years, many Guineans describe being exhausted by the constant barrage of heightened oratory and disappointed that it had yielded so little in material terms. In 1989 (five years after Touré's death), when I first went to live in Guinea, the average lifespan was thirty-nine years for men and forty-one for women. Lansana Conté, the soldier who replaced Touré, said little, but within fifteen years the life expectancy in the country had risen by ten years. Yet in the last decade of his rule, Conté was sick and he, his family members, and his government ministers pillaged the country's wealth, undoing most of the good they may have done earlier. At the time of his death, Guineans were eager for public morality to be restored and were more than a little eager for some rousing oratory. At first it seemed that Dadis Camara would provide both, but within a few months it became clear that the Dadis Show confessions led primarily to the junta claiming its own cut of various illicit economies. Dadis's public speech became increasingly intemperate and even incoherent, and even a month after coming to power, some Guineans were mockingly referring to him as 'El Dadis.'¹⁶ People tuned in to the Dadis Show, knowing they would enjoy a slight frisson of shock at his intemperate language and behaviour, yet also bored before the fact at a logorrhoea that did not signify much.

The object sublime of Sékou Touré's oratory mixed awe, fear, and delight, as expressed by my friend's decision not to wash his hand for days. Dadis's oratory, whose prosody exhibited no variation but was always turned up to the highest, most manic level, pleased Guinean audiences for a moment. Within six months, however, it elicited stupor, annoyance and boredom that soon after morphed into the protests that led to his downfall. Like many other such political figures, Dadis Camara was a populist leader greedy for attention and power but unfit for office. Guinean audiences could not make him more honest or less venal, but they did try to lift him up to make him a more worthy public speaker. Like amateur night at the Apollo Theater or the local poetry slam, audiences can help lift up marginal performers or get the talented but nervous ones over the hump until they become transported by their own artistry. Yet many others are beyond recuperation by the agency of the audience and vanish from memory like those other would-be sons of God who were also walking the roads of Palestine two thousand years ago.

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Notes

1. Guineans often refer to this cohort born between 1960 and 1975 as a "lost generation." They were robbed of real control of the French language which was the language of state bureaucracy and higher education before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution when national language policy was introduced. The Cultural Revolution also introduced new criteria for education, including a large component of agricultural labor that replaced academic work. This appeared like a bracing dose of revolutionary egalitarianism to some urban party members, but the rice-growing peasants I did research with had a different view. They often ruefully referred to this period, saying, "We were isolated farmers, and we sent our children to school so they could learn French, communicate with people all over the country and the world, and learn to do something other than farming. Instead they came back having learned nothing they would not have learned by working in the fields." In essence, Guinea's educated urban elites constructed an educational policy to rectify a problem of abjection and self-hatred that probably did not exist for 90% of the population that lived as rural farmers.
2. The paradox is less acute when we consider that 'revolution' originally refers to the recurrent circular movement of planets in orbit (Mehlman 1977: 2).
3. See Nomi Dave's excellent analysis of the incorporation of the very old melodic line from the song Duga, from the *jeliya* repertoire, into the Bembeya Jazz song *Armée Guinéenne* (2019: 54–57). This 1970s paean to the Guinean army utilizes the famous song said to be composed by Mande emperor Sundiata Keita's personal jeli in the thirteenth century on the eve of his fateful battle with archenemy Soumangouro Kanté.
4. Guinea's Cultural Revolution began in 1968 and was modeled on China's.
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DhrJvX6CZ8>
6. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xex2jj>
7. Guinea broke from Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy to insist that religion had a central role to play in moving the revolution forward in Guinea, and elsewhere in Africa. Most of his references were to Islam, the religion of 85% to 90% of Guinea's population, but they most often extended to Christianity, though Catholicism in particular was tainted as the religion of the colonizer, and the Catholic Church and its schools were nationalized, with all non-African clergy kicked out in the 1960s.
8. As Straker (2009) discusses, these fortnights allowed young Guineans chances to travel and to mingle across genders and ethnic groups in ways almost none of their parents had done.
9. These examples are taken from Barry (2002: 82, 86, 96), but I have heard most of them from Guinean interlocutors, recounting the slogans of the revolutionary days.
10. Other authors such as Rankine (2014) and Hong (2020) have pushed forward the racial elements of these and similar dynamics.
11. Jafa is probably best known as the cinematographer of Julie Dash's 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*, and as the maker of the 2016 video *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*.
12. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/273164>
13. This is similar to the process Charles Keil calls, 'Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music' and that Keil and Steven Feld analyze across many different musical traditions in their book *Music Grooves* (1994).

14. Adrienne Cohen (2019) explores the ways that even today, performers in Conakry's professional dance community draw criticism from their revolutionary era-trained elders if their performances are deemed too virtuosic. Revolutionary dance incorporated an ideal of choreographed control, which strengthened the control of culture ministry apparatchiks and dance company directors.
15. Fioratta (2019) describes busloads of Guineans being brought to a rally he held in the Fouta Jallon, an area already hostile to him just nine months into his rule.
16. I have discussed elsewhere (McGovern 2017: 210) the ways in which many Guineans indulged long-standing stereotypes of the savagery of people like Dadis, who were from the country's rain-forest periphery. The stereotypes of cannibalism and animality came furiously after the military massacre of pro-democracy protesters in September 2009.

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