Weaving the Essence of a Nation

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... Then I realized that the world was expecting something from me, yet I did not exactly know what it was.

From a Binocular View

There I found her, lying on her back, feet crisscrossed like a politician while listening to a specific radio station directed by a Fulani and for the Fulani community. I did not quite know what they were saying, but maman seemed upset. I remember hearing a few statements along the lines of “They are mistreating our people.... They are brutalizing them.... Something needs to be done. We need to do something.”

My mother explained that more than 19 Fulani merchants had been vandalized and robbed, some even critically injured. This opened my eyes, and I felt compassion for maman as I understood that whatever was being said on the radio directly affected her because of her ties to the Fulani ethnicity. Still I kept listening to this unknown radio station that seemed to portray Guinea as a nation that hates the Fulani people. Multiple times the broadcaster would shout out “Our people are tired of the sufferings. We need a Fulani leader to fix up this issue.” It became obvious to me that the purpose of this radio station was to encourage a robust Fulani alliance against the Guinean regime that is believed to be governed by the Mandinka. When maman put on a different radio frequency, I could hear papa’s mother tongue, Mandinka, and almost the same scenario of pride, division and oppression.

I felt like there was an ethnic tug-of-war going on, and that these two media outlets were perpetuating it. Everyone grouped themselves as “the oppressed.” From my understanding, the perpetrators were the elders (wise-men), the religious leaders, Guinean politicians, and even many friends of mine with whom I grew up and went to school during my childhood. The ethnic problems in Guinea have brought chaos, hatred and lack of structure within the country, communities and workplaces. In hopes of combating this phenomenon to promote national unity, I worked with kids between the ages of 13 and 17, bringing my binocular perspectives into this issue, both in terms of my lives in the United States and Guinea, and of my familial connections to the Mandinka and the Fulani ethnic groups.

The different ethnic groups in Guinea each bring something new that adds to the beauty of the nation. The customs that are embedded in these different ethnic groups make up the true wealth of Guinea. Some of these rich aspects of the Guinean culture are its languages, its various irresistible foods, and its textiles. These contributions, which come from the different parts and peoples of Guinea, make the country beautiful. The fact that this beauty is created from different ethnic groups and communities that are in Guinea make them more valuable than the abundant natural resources Guinea.
The “Kevin Hart version” of Guinea. Amadou Barry always succeeded at making me laugh no matter how hard I tried to be serious.

The fact that this beauty is created from different ethnic groups and communities that are in Guinea make them more valuable than the abundant natural resources Guinea has. I needed to teach my students the importance of understanding Guinea from both its inside and outside.

The History of Ethnic Relations in Guinea

Far before colonialism and before the Republic of Guinea came about, the major groups that occupied the current Guinean periphery during the 1800s fought one another for land acquisition and supremacy. The Susu and the Forestier (people of the forest), mainly occupied Guinea. During this period of time, Africa was divided into kingdoms, and the notion of power was based on the number of territories one acquired. Since present Guinea had no concrete borderlines during that period of time, the Mandinka, who originated from the Manding Empire (present-day Mali), and the Fulbe, who are nomadic cattlers, both settled into Guinea, a place they now call home. These two ethnic groups did not get free passes from the people of the forest or the Susu; while the Fulbe, as nomads, managed their way smoothly into Guinea, the Mandinka used force and influence to settle into Guinea.

The Mandinka were very powerful with lots of influence because of the impact of the emperor Soundiata Keita’s 14th century legacy throughout all of the western part of Africa. Soundiata is viewed as a legend, or a demi-God. After his decline, a group of people, led by his grandson Samori Toure, moved to Upper-Guinea where they lived and promoted Islam throughout the region. Like Soundiata Keita, Samori was a great warrior and an ambitious man. He is known for defeating his rivals and neighbors to gain more territories, which led him to form the city of Kankan, the center of his territories. The people he captured during wars were given to Europeans in exchange for goods. He kept a few captives for agricultural and commercial activities. His weaker captives were “incorporated into households” to clean and help with daily activities.1 Tall, slim, with a lighter complexion, the Fulbe came to Guinea as nomads. They often moved from one place to another to find a better place to develop their community and to take care of their cattle throughout Africa. Upon their encounter of Guinea, “they forced the Susu to relocate in a different area before they could settle in to form a centralized theocratic Muslim state.”2 They too fought neighbors and rivals for territorial acquisition, power and supremacy. Their captives were also sold to Europeans, in exchange for goods.

These ethnic groups were part of kingdoms before they shrank into smaller groups. They fought one another and defended themselves to preserve their communities as well as to grow. Yet the warfare between these groups became more intensive when the demand for slaves culminated. Europeans supported the conflicts between these communities or groups because they knew that there were going to be captives, whom they could possess through exchanges of small items like mirrors, clothes, and weapons, amongst other goods. Although the trades were unfair to Africans, both parties were pleased as they found exoticness in what they presented to each other. The Africans were curious and the Europeans needed manpower for exploitation. This enhanced the ethnic clashes because the different groups intensified the wars among each other. Therefore, for security and territorial reasons, the ethnic communities relocated by groups in each of the four regions of Guinea.

The Current Ethnic Problems in Guinea

When I was younger, sometime in 2007 or 2008, I remember running to my neighbor’s house and feasting with her kids. Everyone called her Tantie Tata, and she was good to everyone. We were not related, but she was like family to me. I grew up in that sort of environment – one that was built with love and compassion.
Right after I moved to the United States of America in 2009, strange mass struggles started erupting in Guinea. At least 150 people were killed and many others were injured during a confrontation between the authorities and political supporters. This incident occurred at a political campaign event where the candidates for the 2009 presidential election were present with their supporters. According to eyewitnesses, the soldiers went there with the intention to kill. There have been many interpretations of what happened that day, but what remains clear is that someone wanted to be in power, and he was ready to do whatever it takes to get there.

After that tragedy the politicians started motivating their people even more, promising that they would contribute heavily to their own communities before they would contribute to any others. All of the politicians fueled people’s sense of oppression. J’invite mes partisans et frères à voté pour ma partie politique pour qu’ensemble nous puissions dévelopé ‘chez nous.’ They told their people to vote for them, and that once in power those of their like (ethnic relatives) will taste honey. More clashes erupted in the countryside in Guinea. The tension between the Foulani and Mandinka specifically arose. All it took was a small problem before a conflict would break out. According to Pepe Guilamo, a fellow Guinean with whom I worked during my summer internship in Conakry, “Just like the white men divided us to control and rip us off from our resources, these politicians, and other public figures strategize their political agendas in a similar manner.”

My supervisor, Pepe Guilamo, originates from the forest region, and he seemed genuine. Before embarking on my summer journey with the students, we first discussed the current situation of ethnic relations in Guinea in order to know how to better approach the students about it without offending or making anyone feel unease. He explained the structure of Qui Veut Peut, and the work they have done in the past in terms of selecting the students and gaining the trust of their parents. He emphasized the importance of being clear to the parents as well as having their consent, which I understood to be important as I interacted with the kids.

At my first glance of Kipe Primaire Deux (KPD), a well-known primary public school in Conakry, I was shocked and confused as to how a public school could be so well-maintained. Public schools in Conakry have the reputation of being dirty, unsanitary, poorly maintained and disorganized. The smell of the restrooms could sometimes be detected in the classrooms. Without commenting on my surprised reaction, my supervisor took me to the welcome board where it was written, Together let’s maintain this school, which our fathers and grandfathers left us – for we will leave it for the next generation. This unexpected wave of change, and the uniqueness of the place and atmosphere, assured me that we had found the place and students where we could work on promoting national unity. The discipline at KPD made it easy to work with the students.

KPD was in my mind all night long. I knew that it was where I wanted to work. Upon my arrival at the school the following day, my supervisor and two teachers helped me select 30 students by taking into account that close to 10 would go away for vacation, or their immediate attention would be needed from their parents. The following day, we started working with 23 students who were uncertain of why they would be needed from their parents. The seventh grade in Guinea. From the looks on their faces, I could sense that they thought of me as one of the usual aliens who often come through nongovernmental organizations to help them; except that this time that alien was black and looked Guinean. At first, I
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was not sure whether the students were scared of us — I recall from my childhood memories in Guinea that teachers have the tendency of punishing students whenever they behave out of the norms — or if this was a learning culture that was adopted at KPD. Almost half of our first day together consisted of Oui Monsieur - D'accord Monsieur - or Non Monsieur (Yes teacher, OK teacher or No teacher). Their calm atmosphere and mature characters clearly indicated that KPD is a school where students are taught to protect public property and respect their teachers. When issues are tense in Guinea, students are usually the first to demonstrate in the streets. Typically, they start by destroying their own schools, breaking windows and destroying public property. But this was not present at KPD.

The students and I talked about the conditions of a couple of big public schools in Conakry. Although there were groups of students who came in the morning and others who came at night, these schools had more students than there were seats available. Many people stood in the classrooms, in the hallways and by the windows to learn whatever they could see or hear. According to my supervisor, these conditions encourage fraud, corruption and disorder. In some cases, students pay money to advance to the next level, and others are failed or punished by teachers just because they do not personally like them or because they have had an issue in the past. “The walls are written on everywhere, the classrooms have holes in them and the windows are broken. It is a total disaster,” says my supervisor. Our students knew this reality, yet never knew that they were an exception because KPD, unlike other schools, has been promoting change together, without distinction of ethnicity or gender. Without even realizing it, the students have exemplified nationalism in a unified fashion while at school.

“Why did my brothers finish college and still have not found jobs?” — Boubacar

Boubacar Barry missed day two of week one because of family reasons that I was not aware of. I called his emergency contact the same night to check on him. I came to find out that Boubacar Barry was an orphan who lived with his illiterate uncle who cares less for school. The lady who answered the phone when I called was Boubacar’s neighbor; she briefed me on Boubacar’s family situation and the hardships he faces. She told me that Boubacar’s uncle wanted him to work instead of going to school.

What happened the following day stunned me, however, as it was the most remarkable moment I had encountered since I had landed in Guinea. I wanted to find out more about Boubacar, and so to encourage him to speak, I told him stories about my childhood when I lived with my uncle for four years. Boubacar listened carefully to the funny and sometimes sad stories I told him. He smiled softly and told me that I was brave. He then said to me that he was grateful for his uncle who has been taking care of him since his parents passed. I did not imagine that a 14-year-old would speak so generously about his situation, despite his struggles. He was a boy who was always positively minded. Boubacar taught me that the negativity and hardships we often face should not stop or reduce our perseverance to attain and succeed in other things.

It was a rainy day, with less traffic than usual. The hot weather had cooled off, which allowed me to enjoy the beautiful air. I waited half an hour before the students showed up, one after another. As always, I asked all the people how they were feeling, and if there was anything they would like to share. Most students shared whatever was crossing their minds, except Boubacar. I had spoken to Boubacar’s uncle in person without his nephew’s knowledge the day before class. I understood that Boubacar’s uncle had nine children, three of whom were under five years old. He needed to feed them, and alone he knew he could not. He told me that he had decided to let Boubacar live with him because he wanted to give Boubacar a home in which to stay. I sensed that because Boubacar was older than his children, he felt that Boubacar could bring some financial contribution to the family.

Nevertheless, I asked Boubacar the following day at school to tell us how he was feeling, and how everything was going for him. He had missed class for the second time, thus I was intrigued to hear him out. He got up and told me in a very calm and relaxed manner, “Teacher, everything is going well in my life. My friends are good to me and my family treats me well.” I was still impressed by the fact that he refused to talk about the hardship he was facing at home, but even more by the way he hid it. He acted as if nothing was troubling him. I had some serious conversations with two of his teachers, but they were not concerned, understanding the need the uncle had
that was making Boubacar miss out on his education. He was my best student. This brave young man left his village after both of his parents had passed to come to school in the city where he studied hard to have the highest GPA amongst his classmates despite the challenges he was facing at home. Boubacar did his housework before school, went to Islamic school, then to the KPD from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., and then assisted his uncle at his different daily jobs. I came to respect him.

Trying to get Boubacar to open up about his real story was not easy because he did not want to be portrayed as a pitiful person. His character reminded me of my paternal grandfather, who often told me that a man should not cry, nor be emotional. Nevertheless, Boubacar fixed me straight in the eyes and first said to me, “My parents died when I was three or four; I could not remember clearly. My uncle told me that my mother was a very beautiful Fulani woman, with the heart of an angel. She was a center of attention because of her beauty and everyone loved her. According to my uncle my father, his brother, was very rigorous and a man of his word; people misunderstood his serious personality to be a harsh, cold and heartless person.” Boubacar went on and told me that he grew up with his uncle who he thought was his biological father for a couple of years. From the look on Boubacar’s face, I could tell that he was getting nervous and emotional. “My uncle does not value education but he is good to me,” he said. This moment became engraved in me because Boubacar understood his hardships and felt that it was perhaps something to endure. He spoke with a cold face while attempting to make me understand that he is grateful to his uncle who raised him since his parents passed. I sensed in his narration that he defined the hardship he was going through as merely a phase of life.

Ahmadou Barry was attempting to enumerate the different resources that are found in his home village, Koubia.

Boubacar was the most active and brilliant student out of all of them. Yet I was concerned more about him than the rest of his classmates. At home he was surrounded by people who devalued education. Boubacar’s uncle thought that the Guinean system was manipulated in favor of people from the opposing ethnic group, the Mandinka. Boubacar loved school, but it seemed like he was starting to believe that even by achieving high education, he would still not be able to find a job and do well in life. I recall when he asked me on two different occasions about the reasons that are keeping his older brothers (his cousins) unemployed even after achieving college.

“Protecting and honoring my tradition” – Moussa

Throughout the selection process of the students we worked with at Kipe Primaire Deux, my supervisor and I noticed that the superintendent only invited his top students to take part. There were enough people to select four from each of the four most dominant ethnic groups in Guinea: the Mandinka, the Foulani, the Susu and the Gbèrsè. However the students the superintendent presented to us, with consideration of their characters and backgrounds, we felt did not seem to fit well with the mission of my internship, to promote national unity through education. Therefore we asked to have all the students join us, and we randomly invited each of the students we selected. Nonetheless, at the speed of the light a small boy came to me and told me he wanted to be part of it. He told me very confidently that he was the best student in his classroom, and that if I doubted him I could ask his mother. My supervisor and I laughed hard and then asked him what
part of Guinea his parents come from. He told us that both of his parents originated from Banankoro, which validated his selection. We realized from his strong Mandinka accent that he does not live in a diverse environment, and that his character, personality and background could help us reshape or consider some of the ways we wished to promote national unity.

Clustered in a pack of giants, small Moussa Keita squeezed his way out to shout and impose his presence despite his squeaky voice: "Moi Mr...Moi Mr!" (me teacher...me teacher), he would say! His strong persona did not go unnoticed because everyone quieted down and geared their attention towards him. While the majority of his classmates are between 15 and 16, small Moussa is only 13, yet cunning and strong like a lion. In fact his friends think of him as a small container with a big engine. His way of reasoning or doing in general is bigger than his physical appearance. He refuses to be intimidated but instead likes leadership and the spotlight. The confidence in his tone and his body language pinpoints his dominant character amongst his classmates. Small Moussa is courageous and fearless when it comes to expressing how he feels, what he thinks and/or what he wants. For instance, when everyone was asked to introduce themselves and tell a little bit about their families' structures, most students, except small Moussa, sweetened up their narrations to tell me what they thought I should hear, telling only the good things. After observing three of his classmates formulate stories that only illuminated the positive aspects of their families, small Moussa raised his hand to have the feu vert (green light) to tell his own story. "My parents originated from the same region, and they are both Mandinka, one of the most dominant ethnic groups.... My father travelled to his native village to marry my mother when he was ready in terms of the customs in his culture and because he was believed to have met his religious obligations." When asked about his extended family, small Moussa also added, "My uncle who now resides in Angola has four mixed children with his wife who's from the Susu ethnic group. She practices voodoo. She makes my uncle spend all his money on her, while his siblings and other family members suffer."

Small Moussa’s feelings and understandings of his uncle’s situation and the isolation from the rest of the family seemed to come from his background. Those who influenced him, such as his parents and other family members, shaped his lifestyle. Thus the fact that his uncle faced rejection from most of his family members because he married someone out of his ethnic norms was legitimate to small Moussa. His strong opposition to his uncle’s marriage decision was due to the fact that he thought that marrying someone from a different ethnic group sabotaged his culture and customs, since that is what he learned in his surroundings.

Something new and important caught our attention while assessing small Moussa’s way of reasoning. We realized that only working with them at school would not make an impact in their lives or promote national unity. We needed to also involve the people in the communities of the students, since those people often shape their perspectives. In week three, we conducted a trial to assess how people think of other ethnic groups in the communities in which the students lived. We asked the students to tell us what they knew about each of the ethnic groups in Guinea, and then to ask the people in their neighborhoods for help. My supervisor and I knew they could not talk about all the ethnic groups without asking for help, thus we wanted to encourage them to ask others from their communities.

The results were great, because most people told the students about the histories of their ethnic groups, while emphasizing how they also felt about other ethnic groups. Essentially we made four trips in different neighborhoods where the students told people about the importance of protecting public property, as well as some of the resources that are available to them. We also emphasized the importance of unity, and how that can stabilize the country for progress and opportunity. Small Moussa’s honesty, courage and electrifying presence had taught me that to impact someone’s life is to look beyond his character and actions to rather assess his family and surroundings.

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Une Dame De Fer

On the far left front of the class was seated Foulematou Sylla, one of the only two girls who participated in my summer internship project. These young girls were so quiet that their presence in the classroom was almost unnoticed. Whenever I posed a question, they would say yes or no –
nothing more. At first, I thought that they did not know the answers to the questions being posed, thus I thought that I should not call on them. To my great surprise, Foulematou was going to teach me something new that I had not yet realized. One day I overheard her whisper the answer to a question I had posed to the whole class. I asked her to say it louder so that everyone in the classroom could hear it. Before I could even finish my sentence, I sensed that she was frightened already. She repeatedly told me that she couldn’t remember what she whispered to Mariama, the other girl. I became quiet for a moment to reassess her presence in this classroom.

I started focusing on both girls with hopes of getting them involved just like the rest of the class, especially Foulematou because she attended more often than Mariama. Foulematou never raised her hands for a question; I had to always choose her to answer. Most often, she got the answers right. I could tell she liked being the one who answered all the questions. The tiny little girl who sat in the corner was much more relaxed now. I grabbed this opportunity to get to know her better. Foulematou beautifully talked about her pregnant single mother who took care of her. She added, “I wake up at 6 a.m. every morning to sweep, mop the floor and wash the dishes. Then I have to memorize my assigned sourate (Qur’anic verse) of the day before going back home to prep for school.” While she was talking about her daily routine and family I could hardly process anything else because I was so impressed.

Foulematou defied every fallacy about gender roles and positioning within the Guinean society. Yet the sad thing about that is that she did not know. Not only does the Guinean culture and community categorize women as subordinate, women believe that they are subordinate.

I remember when I was still young, expecting my future wife to be a good cook, to clean well and to stay home with the children while I would be at work making money. This was totally normal to me because that is what I witnessed most people do in Guinea. However, living in America has changed my viewpoint on gender roles, if there is any such thing. I have learned while going to school here, and also by interacting with people, that there is no specific way that women or men should behave or live towards one another, or amongst themselves. Like maman, many women’s unrecognized contributions to society are worth praising.

I worked with many students in Guinea, but three of those students had stories that changed my life, stories I could not ignore. Boubacar, small Moussa, and Foulematou each have aspects of their lives that explain the ethnic tensions in Guinea, and also the gender roles. Boubacar was a young man who loved education and accepted the challenges he encountered to achieve it. He knew the importance of obtaining education, but was worried that the system in Guinea wouldn’t allow him to succeed because of his identity. He started believing that his people were oppressed since his brothers finished college, yet were still unemployed. Boubacar gave me hope that there are people in Guinea who want change and want Guinea to progress and are willing to overcome that “oppression.”

From a squeaky voice small Moussa showed me that it is important to value and to possess a strong sense of

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identity. He valued his Mandinka identity before anything else. Despite that, I was impressed by his strength of character. If this boy were to be brought up with the logical understanding of his identity on a national level, he would contribute well to the benefit of the nation.

The tiny, calm, intelligent young girl that I misunderstood because she believed that her voice was secondary to those of the boys opened my eyes to realize the subordinated position in which women are placed in the Guinean society. Foulematou could, at first, hardly look me in the eyes or raise her hand to answer questions that she knew. She was brought up to behave this way, to hold herself back from expressing herself before others. I realized that she played a significant role during my summer internship because she did not only challenge the boys; she was among the best. One day she came back to class after missing the previous day. This was at the close of the program. I was rehearsing with the class the poems to present and what to do. Everyone seemed to struggle, but when Foulematou came, she picked it up right away and was able to articulate it better than the others who had been practicing. This marked me and made me think about my childhood memories in America. First I realized that the Guinean community, including my own family, enforced this tradition – the tradition of subordination of women. But living in America opened my eyes and I realized how much women contribute to the world we live in today. For Guinea to progress in prosperity and peace, women have to be part of it. They are Guinean, as well.

Guinea Is Us – We Are Guinea

There is no nation without a people. Many times I would stare at my students and envision the next generation that will uplift Guinea. Among these students perhaps the next president of Guinea will emerge, the prime minister or some generals of the army. Often I would think about the future of my students, who I have come to love as if they were part of my family. Today they are innocent, but how will they be when they grow older and are in the position of authority?

Just like their elders and my elders, they might just focus on taking their “share” of the country when they can. That is the sort of mentality many Guineans share. It is understandable, however, considering that the second official Guinean president blatantly stated, “Le mouton se nourrit la ou on l’attache, tout en insinuant qu’il a aussi le droit de prendre l’argent de la caisse de l’état Guineen.” Without fear of or consideration for the critics against him, late President Lansana Conté told the people of Guinea that he would be using the resources and funds of Guinea whenever he felt like it because it was there where he could take it. This abuse of power and authoritarianism is very common within the government, religious and communal spheres. Everyone wants a “share” of the country as if Guinea were a cake. I remember during my middle school days being taught that the Europeans divided Africa like a cake when they discovered the continent. I remember how my teachers would picture the consequences of the scramble for Africa and how that has caused major damage to the whole continent. Yet these very people steal the resources and money of the general public once they are in a position of authority. Again, to them, as Guineans, it is acceptable to take and steal resources for themselves at the expense of others.

Promoting national unity first through an understanding of Guinea as a nation, not as ethnic groups, is essential to the formation of the people. Every Guinean should consider themselves part of a national Guinean identity. As I often told my students, we cannot ask from the nation when we are not willing to give back, or refuse to defend its interests. There cannot be the nation of Guinea without the people who live by its cultures and norms, and there cannot be the people of Guinea without Guinea. In a sense, nationalism can be seen in two different aspects. First, nationalism is viewing and defending Guinea, as distinguished from other nations. And second, nationalism is taking care of the inner-Guinea, which means to care and protect its people and public properties, amongst many other things.

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No one is to be left behind, especially not women.
I Am A Bridge

I have always considered my ability to speak more than five languages as a gift from God. I take pride in it. Yet I never realized how much impact the fact that my mother and my father are from different ethnic groups has made in my life and my identity. Perhaps it was because I was too young and naive to have realized my role in Guinean ethnic relations; or perhaps I needed to experience life in America to find my uniqueness within the Guinean community. It could be one or another, or both; I honestly am unsure. Whatever it is, I feel that I understand the notion of identity as a Guinean through a different lens than my mother and father. My mother, with a light-skinned complexion and thin body type, comes from a family that is completely Fulani. But my father, who is thick, tall and dark-skinned, comes from a Mandinka family. They have both blessed me with a vision they do not have. They see my binocularity as problematic because I see beyond their ethnic values and norms. I see a national identity, which is forged through the union of all the communities, ethnic and religious groups that represent Guinea. And I see this weaving as something beautiful that brings a particularity to a nation.

Being half Mandinka and half Fulani is something I am proud of. It makes me this bridge from which I have navigated all my life, as it helps me discover this rich and profound beauty that comes about through diversity. I speak both languages well and understand both groups’ cultural norms. I have lived with members of both communities for some time in my childhood. Therefore I have a strong understanding of both groups, which is why I would support keeping the cultures of both of these groups alive. Alain Foka, a Cameroonian journalist, stated in his archives, “No one has the right to delete a page in the history of a people for a people without history is a soulless world.” However, this does not imply that different communities should not coexist. And a mélange of cultures does not make those communities impure. In fact, setting aside ethnic beliefs in national contexts helps avoid conflicts. There is a much more collective yearning for a better life and a people who would defend their nation and fight for their rights together. Some people have refused to accept this notion of nationalism because they feel the government has abandoned them. They lack opportunities to earn a good living, the infrastructure is poorly maintained and the resources are not available to the people. Furthermore, many people seem not to understand their roles and rights as citizens. My internship, therefore, focused on teaching the young Guineans about the nature of nationalism.

My site supervisor and I selected students from different ethnic groups to promote and exemplify diversity and unity. Together we enumerated the different regions of Guinea, their populations and lifestyles. Students knew about the areas that their parents and family members came from. They were not as knowledgeable, however, of other regions. Thus my supervisor and I decided to teach the students about the four regions of Guinea and their components.

We started by giving an overall understanding of all the regions before we elaborated on each one of them. Each time we focused on a region, we asked four students to assist us. This was interesting because together we were able to mention and talk about certain aspects of the regions that were not taught in schools. For example, when we talked about the region of Zerekore, two of our students, Mohamed Minimono and Fanta Tolno, told us that the north end of this region had been a source of conflict between Guinea and the Ivory Coast from 1930 to 1935. According to Mohamed and Fanta, that part of the region had once been mined for gold and the people who lived there had used it to make sculptures and jewelry. This area is composed of many ethnic groups from different nationalities because it is located at the Guinean border. Thus when a conflict over gold erupted between the Ivoirian ethnic group and Guinean ethnic group that were present there, the Ivoirians complained that their people were being killed in the Guinean territory. The French seized the area and ended the conflict. Mohamed and Fanta told us that they heard this story from their parents, who originated from Zerekore. Essentially, the fact that the students exchanged some knowledge about their homeland, which they knew individually, and which concerned them all, brought them closer to each other.

In our classroom, learning about the different regions and people of Guinea required a close look at the natural
resources present in those regions. Guinea Conakry is geographically well-positioned for trade and has more than enough natural resources to sustain its population. I asked the students to name all the Guinean natural resources that they could think of. Surprisingly they named them all, from diamonds, to bauxites, iron, gold, limestone and much more. They even named the most recent discoveries, such as oil. Therefore it is clear that people are aware of the natural resources Guinea has, but I wondered why there has never been a strong movement demanding a strict monitoring of these resources. The same way people complain about electricity, they should also complain about the management of those resources. The elite members of the government often control the exploitation of those resources. Thus it is arguable that the reason why so little comes out of the exploitation of natural resources is because members of the government take those resources for themselves. The Guinean population is aware of this corruption, but they fear to protest against it because the authorities themselves are corrupt.

Nevertheless, a thorough comprehension of Guinea was necessary to better grasp the notion of nationalism. To protect and respect the integrity of your nation is to love your homeland. The students and I talked about the importance of nationalism and how being a good citizen can be rewarding to oneself, as well as the next generation. My supervisor and I explained the importance of public properties and that those properties are there for the population, not the government. Through different scenarios, we explained and showed the students that every citizen has his or her obligations and rights. We role-played a scenario in which students put trash by their neighbors’ desks, as an example of bad citizenship. We mentioned the harm Guineans do to themselves by burning tires on the roads or destroying public transportation.

My summer internship served as an opportunity to show the students that it is important for one to know his or her homeland, and to defend it. It is important that the students know the different regions and ethnic groups, which does not mean Guinea is divided — rather, this diversity beautifies the nation and everyone is equal as Guineans. My ability to comprehend Guinea from two different lenses, from my experience living in Guinea and America, and as a person with ties to both the Mandinka and the Fulani ethnic groups, helped me better articulate the role that unity can play in the progress of the nation to the students with whom I worked. As we always said every morning before class, together we can progress. This was a slogan I developed with my talented students, whom I believe will be the next leaders of Guinea. My students and I believe that peace, prosperity and upward mobility for our nation can only be attained through acceptance, unity and sympathy, and that it is important that everyone partakes in this cause despite one’s gender, ethnic groups, beliefs or political stance.

Notes
2. Ibid.