

Africa

WOMEN OF GUINEA-BISSAU

Liberation Is A Process, by Chantal Sarrazin.



Chantal Sarrazin working with life-history subject Binta Seidi. LSM PHOTOS

Guinea-Bissau is a small country of less than one million people wedged between Senegal and the Republic of Guinea on the western bulge of Africa. After 10 years of armed struggle against the Portuguese colonialist government and its NATO allies, the people of Guinea-Bissau declared their independence on 24 September 1973. One year later, Guinea-Bissau achieved total liberation following the coup in Portugal.

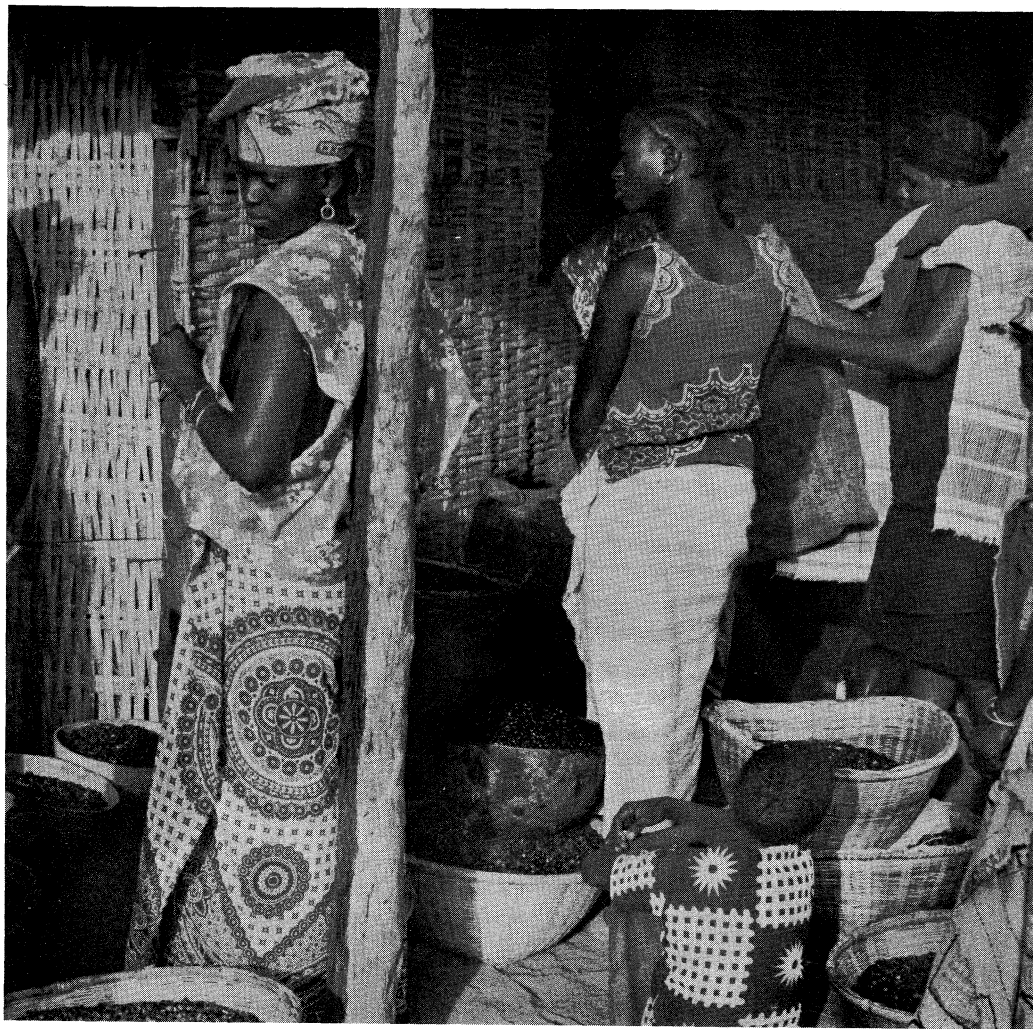
Chantal Sarrazin, a 27-year-old Quebecoise member of Liberation Support Movement, visited Guinea-Bissau with Ole Gjerstad for three months in the Spring of 1975. They were invited by the new revolutionary government primarily because of LSM's work in translating and publishing the PAIGC's journal, *PAIGC Actualités*; a book, *Guinea-Bissau: Toward Final Victory*; and other forms of anti-imperialist support for the struggle in Guinea-Bissau.

The sun shone brilliantly down on Tchugué and the air was hot and dusty. It was still the dry season in Guinea-Bissau. Under a huge, shady mango tree, we met the people of Tchugué, a small village in the south of Guinea-Bissau. Women in brightly-colored dresses tended bawling babies amidst pigs, goats, chickens and barking dogs. The villagers had gathered for a meeting called by the village committee to introduce our two-person team from LSM and to explain the purpose of our mission in Tchugué.

At the invitation of PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde), my comrade and I had been sent by Liberation Support Movement on a three-month mission to record autobiographies of PAIGC militants who had participated in the armed struggle - young cadre, militants, women and men - for LSM's series: "Life Histories from the Revolution." We were certain that these people, after 11 years of armed struggle against Portuguese colonial rule, would have many rich experiences to speak of. We also thought that their recounted lives would offer North Americans fresh perspectives on the anti-imperialist revolutionary process.

While working on the life histories, in day-to-day contact with the people, I gradually began to realize how significant the advancement of women in Guinea-Bissau has been during their war of liberation. The lives of the peasant women of Guinea-Bissau not only deepened my understanding of their national struggle, but also helped me to see my own political life, as a woman, in a clearer perspective.

IN AFRICA & NORTH AMERICA



Women selling palm fruit at the People's Store in Mores, Guinea-Bissau. LSM PHOTOS

TCHUGUÉ VILLAGE

This village had been a stronghold for Portuguese merchants before the war, but during the period of mobilization in the early 60's, support for the Party (PAIGC) was strong. The colonial troops descended on Tchugué and slaughtered many people. Most of the population fled into the surrounding forest. Periodically, control of the village changed hands until the Portuguese returned to occupy the area in 1972. Today the village is still heavily scarred by the war. War materiel - uniforms, ammo cases (now used as stools), and both live and exploded ammunition - can be seen everywhere.

But the destruction of war is rapidly becoming a relic of the past in Tchugué. The village bustles with new construction. A new people's store is being built where the people can exchange their produce for soap, pots and pans, cloth and other goods. This work must be completed in a month's time before the rainy season, when the village will turn its attention to rice cultivation.

Still the villagers take time from their work to meet with us under the huge mango tree and to approve the life history subjects proposed by the village committee. Then we divide into teams with our translators and meet with the militants whose stories we are to record. I am to tape the story of Cidu na Quida, a 55-year-old peasant woman - my first experience with women in the countryside.

CIDU NA QUIDA'S STORY

When PAIGC militants first came, in secret, to the countryside to organize the peasants, Cidu was the first woman in Tchugué to hear about the start of the armed struggle. At that time those people who helped the Party had to be very secretive since there were a few traitors among the population. A traditional idea among the people was that women could not keep secrets, but Cidu's husband trusted and confided in her.

At first, Cidu secretly prepared rice for the guerrillas in the forest. But as the war became more dangerous, the villagers had to evacuate to the forest themselves. From that time until the end of the war, Cidu worked as a cook in one of PAIGC's military bases.

She also persuaded her youngest son, Manuel, to join PAIGC's army. This was no easy task. Cidu and her husband had sent him to study in a mission school in Catio, an administrative center near Tchugué, because they wanted to have at least one educated son. But when the Party began mobilizing for the struggle, Cidu changed her mind and walked many days to Catio to convince her son to return home and join the guerrilla forces.

The priests had done their work well: Manuel did not want to have anything to do with the "bandits." "My son," Cidu said, "you must leave your studies and come back to go with the Party." He was very hesitant. "You must help us to liberate ourselves from the Portuguese. We must stop being treated like slaves!" Although he was still reluctant, his mother's earnest words had impressed him very much. Manuel decided to join PAIGC. He received military training both in the countryside and in the USSR and later he became a FARP (People's Revolutionary Armed Forces) commander in the North.

Cidu's actions, both her mobilization of her sons and also her own work in the Party, showed her strong commitment and dedication to the struggle. For it was not an easy task to send her own sons away to fight and risk death or at best a long separation. Even today, she has not seen Manuel since he left to join the army many years ago. Like most Guineans, Cidu has suffered in other ways from the war. She has lost her husband and her eldest son. I was moved by the pain which showed in her face when she spoke of these things.

WOMEN'S LIFE IN TCHUGUÉ

We stayed a few weeks in Tchugué and, through our work, got to know quite a few of the

500 or so inhabitants. All the people - knowing the purpose of our visit - made us feel very comfortable and welcome.

When I was not working, I wandered around visiting people and taking pictures to try to capture the daily life of Tchugué on film. A few times I went to pick mangos with some of the women. We sat and ate our green mangos with a pinch of salt and talked to each other in a hand sign language. Then they would touch my short, straight hair and try to figure out how braids could hold in it.

I was strongly impressed with the physical strength and skill of the women, whose lives were so different from my own. Women take charge of all domestic work and participate in all stages of rice production. Because of the primitive technique of cultivation, almost all the people's time throughout the year is devoted to the rice production cycle. Fortunately we have come during the dry season, the one period when relatively little work needs to be done. But the women are always busy. Very early in the morning, before everyone else is up, the rhythmic thudding sound of women pounding rice begins. After the morning meal, the women go to the fields and return with 60-pound baskets of rice on their heads. They are on their way to sell the rice at the People's Store.

From the store, they gather at a well to wash clothes with wooden washboards. Other women come to fetch water in huge clay jars. They carry everything from the heaviest jars of water to the skinniest bottles on their heads without ever spilling a drop.

After their afternoon rest, the women walk to the distant fields. There they beat piles of dried rice plants with special t-shaped sticks which make the grains of rice fall off. Usually there is enough rice to fill up their baskets for the next day. Then they begin to pound rice for the evening meal. It looked very simple until I tried it myself. The whole body and arms must be used in hitting the exact center of the bowl as hard as possible. The young girl who showed me how to do it had a good laugh as she watched me spill the rice all over the ground.

I cannot help thinking, however, that Guinean women have been forcibly prevented from developing newer and easier techniques by the forces of colonialism and capitalism. Labor power was extremely cheap for the Portuguese colonialists. They were not concerned with making the work easier or producing things the people needed. They were only interested in extracting maximum profit. Now that the revolution has overcome the initial obstacles to real development, the people can begin to apply themselves to the task of conquering and transforming nature.

ARRANGED MARRIAGE

After leaving Tchugué, we recorded the life story of our guard and translator, Dalme M'Bundu. He had accompanied us during our entire trip in the south. Through working with us on these stories he had come to appreciate their importance. He did his best in recounting his own. Dalme knew the south very well because he fought there during the war. He participated in many important battles including "Operation Amilcar Cabral," when PAIGC forces captured the strategic Portuguese garrison at Guiledge in 1973. He was very anxious to tell us about his experiences in the army. Now that the war was over, his family - from a small village in the far north - had found him a wife. There was pride in his face when he told us.

It surprised me at first that a politically strong militant like Dalme would be happy that his parents had chosen him a wife. It's the Party, after all, which has led the fight against forced marriages set up by parents in return for payments. So isn't an arranged marriage a sign of political weakness in Dalme and the Party?

Now I don't think so; the revolution can't and doesn't change everything overnight. What the Party is trying to change first are the most negative aspects of the traditional system, such as forced marriage and polygamy. Forced marriage is now illegal, while legal measures are being designed to gradually eliminate polygamy without causing economic hardship for women. It is already banned within the Party. Dalme's marriage was voluntary on both sides and therefore consistent with Party principles.

THE NORTH-MORES VILLAGE

We returned to the capital, Bissau, to organize our trip to the northern village of Mores. This Moslem village has become famous as the center of the fighting in the north. Starting from scratch, the population is rebuilding everything. The only things left from before the war are a few burnt sticks which mark the former locations of the huts. The government is trying to help out with seeds, grains and food to last until the first crop. A new hospital, power station, Party Boarding School and, for the first time, an ample water supply make Mores a model of the new Guinea-Bissau. But problems are many: shortage of food, the need for shelter and tools for refugees returning every day from Senegal; inadequate diet; epidemics and an incredibly high infant mortality rate.

Feio, the efficient political commissar, helped us find the people for our life histories as well as Mandinga-Creole interpreters. I soon began recording the stories of a man and a woman, Dao Camara and Binta Seidi.

BINTA SEIDI

As Binta told her story it became clear that among the Mandinga people, women suffered greatly from male domination. Binta is 65 or 70 years old (she isn't sure, since there are no written records) and has known nothing but brutally hard labor all her life. Every year, after the rainy season had destroyed the roads, the Portuguese administrators forced all the Africans - with the exception of children and very old people - to rebuild them. Every day Binta had to leave home at three or four in the morning to work on the roads. She was beaten and not allowed to sit down or eat. In the middle of the day the sun was unbearable and many people fainted or even died. Binta remembers, "The Portuguese told us: 'You can go home when you can't see your own skin!'"

Men, too, were forced to do road work. But from Binta's story I concluded that the Mandinga men didn't do their share of the work at home.* For instance, they planted cotton - a relatively easy task. The women had to care for, weed and pick it and then spin it into thread. Then the men would weave this thread into beautiful designs, again a fairly light task. While the women were working, men often used to sit around talking.

When the war started, the men began to do more work to support the armed struggle and some men joined the army, for they too were oppressed by the Portuguese. The Party struggled with them to take up their share of the labor and to join their wives in the fields. Although there are still times when the men rest and talk while the women work, the situation has greatly improved.

Binta responded to the PAIGC mobilization by bringing food to the guerrillas in the forest, always risking being captured by the Portuguese. She also cared for her aged husband in addition to her increased responsibilities as a member of the village committee. But, strong as she was, Binta also had to cope with the timidity and internalized sense of inferiority that is the heritage of women in most male-dominated societies. At first, for example, she was afraid to come to work alone with me partly because I am white. (The only Whites she had known before were Portuguese colonialists.) But soon we became quite close. One day she brought me some rice and asked me if I had a mother where I came from. She said, "Tell her to pound this rice for you and that you have another mother in Guinea." Binta's strength and enthusiasm were infectious. Working with her filled me with innovative ideas and great optimism. It is very inspiring that she and I, women with very different backgrounds, can work together as comrades.

* See A. Cabral, "Brief Analysis of the Social Structure in Guinea-Bissau" in *Guinea-Bissau: Toward Final Victory*, LSM Press.



Gathering rice in the fields of Tchugue Village. LSM PHOTOS

WOMEN OF THE PARTY

I recognized Ana Maria Gomes at a meeting and celebration when women from Bissau came to visit the women of Mores. I was glad to see Ana Maria again. I'd recorded part of her life story in Bissau. Ana Maria is a strong militant who moved into the forest with the guerrillas when she was only thirteen. She received political and military training and learned to read and write from PAIGC militants in the forest. A few years later, she was sent by the Party to the Soviet Union to study nursing. She worked mostly in the north and was put in charge of the nurses in Mores. Because of her discipline and political commitment she became a political commissar of the sector and is now a deputy to the National Assembly.

Ana Maria is one of the "new women" of Guinea-Bissau who have grown up with the PAIGC. Another is a young militant named Sadjo who worked at the Tchugue sanitation post. She had studied for four years in Cuba. Ana Maria and Sadjo were sent overseas by Amilcar Cabral (PAIGC's beloved leader who was assassinated in 1973 by the Portuguese) to learn skills which would be useful in the reconstruction of a liberated Guinea-Bissau. These women are relatively free of the fetters of traditional women's inferiority and are playing an important role in transforming the women's position in Guinean society.

PROBLEMS & PROGRESS

During the course of my stay I noted that there were still obstacles for young women cadre in continuing their development. Later I learned, in an interview with Carmen Pereira* (member of the Party Executive) that an organization of women in the Party and Government was then being formed. This new organization is a very exciting development since it is designed to advance the position of women from within the organization and political line of the Party.

There is much work for such an organization to do. Some women, for instance, with years of training haven't been given tasks which utilize their skills. Also, when I talked with a group of student nurses in Mores, they were very uneasy and rapidly became intimidated and defensive about answering my questions. I brought this up with Aminata Camara, the political commissar of the nurses, who acknowledged that the female nurses were frequently afraid to speak up and raise their problems at meetings. Not only their traditional background but, more importantly, the vestiges of centuries of oppression by Portuguese colonialism is at the roots of their problems.

I had come to Guinea-Bissau with a view that people who had made a revolution would be relatively free from such difficulties, expecting a high level of consciousness from everybody. But my work with Guinean women has forced me to recognize that revolution is a continuing process. While Guinean women have many struggles ahead, they have actually made tremendous progress over the course of the armed struggle.

In fact, although women had previously been mere servants for their husbands, women's tasks in the traditional system were transformed into important responsibilities during the war. Without food, there can be no war, so PAIGC put women in charge of food production. They no longer grew food as laborers for their husbands but as militants contributing to the revolution. Later on during the war, women proved to be very capable in talking with and mobilizing villagers and many served in the new role of political commissar. Some worked as nurses in combat and helped transport artillery when there were no casualties to care for. Later on, the Party made sure women were elected as members of the village committees and the people's tribunals. These women served as important models for the population to learn from.

Along with all these changes went a great deal of political education which was reinforced by the example of women's new social roles. Men were taught that the revolution needed the women and that they therefore had to work together side-by-side. Men were patiently persuaded that for some to be free all had to be freed. As Dao Camara told us, "The Party said everyone has to work and we men must always respect women."

LIBERATION

Our LSM team did not go to Guinea-Bissau with the idea of passing judgement on women or the revolution but rather to learn from their struggle. We found that the Guinean women have begun to change and liberate themselves because they have a larger goal, national liberation, which demands that they change in order to achieve it. Their history of intense oppression, which made them so receptive to PAIGC during the period of mobilization, has continued to generate a willingness to struggle and change.

Whether in Africa or North America, people transform themselves most effectively when their main aim isn't personal transformation but the transformation of the world they live in. Some contradictions (such as living as a woman in a male supremacist society) can only be resolved as a part of the resolution of the larger social contradictions in the world.

Before we can expect to change our lives, we women in North America will have to adopt the same spirit of self-sacrifice and willingness to struggle to advance the revolution and build international socialism as have the women in Guinea-Bissau. It is only through struggling for these goals that we will be able to change our own roles as women.

* See *LSM NEWS*, Vol. II, No. 3, Fall 1975.