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POWERS IN THE VILLAGE: RURAL BENIN BETWEEN DEMOCRATISATION AND DECENTRALISATION

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The current largely donor-driven decentralisation projects in Africa are based on several interlinked master narratives: the democracy and grass-roots narrative, the accountability narrative and the governance narrative. They are based on the key idea of an intrinsic link between economic liberalisation, democracy, decentralisation and development. Democratisation and the current decentralisation projects in francophone Africa are founded on the explicit presupposition by their promoters that the over-centralisation of political decisions at the top of the state stifles local political and economic initiatives. The assumption is that only a decentralised politico-administrative system can ensure good governance. Consequently, decentralisation has been added to the arsenal of political conditionalities associated with the granting of development aid. For donors, it is the key that is supposed to open many doors: decentralisation is not only supposed to lead to the introduction of local democracy and political accountability, it is also supposed to activate the dynamics of development at local level. Independent local administration would be a kind of 'school of democracy' and 'would wash away the traces of authoritarian rule' (Betz, 1996: 63). The levying of taxes by local communities is thought to contribute to the resolution of the problem of endemic corruption. Local control of natural resources and mineral wealth is expected to lead to greater respect for the natural environment. Formerly excluded marginal groups would be empowered. Poverty would decline owing to increased solidarity. Etc.[1] On the basis of empirical research carried out in Benin, this article refutes all these master narratives.

For over twelve years now the Republic of Benin has been in a phase of transition from democratisation to decentralisation. The Marxist-Leninist regime in power since 1972–74 was replaced in 1989–90 by a democratic multi-party system in the course of a peaceful process referred to locally as 'Democratic Renewal' (*renouveau démocratique*).

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[1] For an exposition of the optimistic expectations associated with decentralisation cf. EDI/WB (1989).

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Since then, Benin has often been cited as a model democracy in the African context. Presidential and parliamentary elections have been fair and free, and led, in 1996, to the re-election of President Kérékou, who had resigned in 1990 after eighteen years of rule. The country enjoys free and lively media. The Constitutional Court has admirably fulfilled its role as guardian of the constitution and the country has no political prisoners. Benin has also been spared major outbursts of ethnic and social violence since 1991. In view of the regional context, which is not very positive in this respect, this must be acknowledged as a major political achievement on the part of the country's political elite.

Despite these achievements, the institutionalisation of a plural democracy and the rule of law (*État de droit*) prompted by the 'democratic renewal' has remained incomplete in important respects. This is most noticeable at local level, which is the main focus of this article.[2] The reform of decentralisation, which has been on the agenda since 1993, when the government organised a widespread consultation process on the issue, has not been completed to date (Bako-Arifari, 1997). Following considerable pressure from some of the major bilateral donors, in particular Germany and France, municipal elections were at the time of writing being planned for December 2002. This will represent a major step towards the linking of the democratic institutions that exist at national level with local democratic institutions.

This article addresses three interrelated questions against the background of Benin's long-drawn-out transition process. First, how has the democratisation of the upper echelons of the political regime (e.g. free presidential and parliamentary elections) impacted on political dynamics at local level, in particular in rural areas, where the vast majority (70 per cent) of Benin's 6 million inhabitants live?[3] Second, how is the regime change at national level 'read' by rural people? And, third, in view of the nature of rural political regimes, how are the forthcoming local elections most likely to impact on existing local forms of governance?

Our main thesis is that Benin's democratisation process has reinforced the pre-existing, hybrid and composite form of local government, with obfuscated boundaries between state and private organisations (including Northern NGOs) and between national and local levels. Democratisation has therefore heightened the existing fragmentation of local political arenas and the informalisation of political practices. This not only leads to a high degree of dilution of power at local level, with different veto powers blocking each other, it

[2] For an assessment of Benin's achievement in the area of democratisation and good governance at national level cf. Bierschenk *et al.* (2001).

[3] The literature on the Beninese *renouveau démocratique* is written from an exclusively urban, if not 'Cotonouan', perspective and thus completely ignores the rural areas. Cf. Adamon (1995a, b), Allen (1992a, b), Banégas (1998), Degboé (1995), Dossou (1993), Eboussi Boulanga (1993), Frère (1995), Heilbrunn (1993), Kohnert (1996), Kohnert and Preuss (1992), Laloupo (1993), Nwaijiaku (1994), Raynal (1991) and Vittin (1991).

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also creates a need for constant negotiation between political actors, thus reducing the predictability of political processes and the accountability of local political institutions.

It is our contention that, more likely than not, decentralisation will not fundamentally alter these parameters: in fact, it will further complicate political games at local level. While it will open up new political opportunities and scope for political expression on the part of previously excluded actors, it may ultimately simply increase local veto powers and the number of people profiting from the state. While decentralisation, which in theory signifies increased procedural homogenisation, represents a more intensive presence of the state at local level, in practice it may lead to greater fragmentation of political arenas and greater procedural heterogeneity. It may well result in the emergence of new forms of informal local despotism, which would remain, however, rather impotent as regards regulatory and mobilising capacities.[4]

HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF LOCAL-LEVEL POLITICS[5]

While our initial research question exclusively concerned the impact of recent democratisation on local politics, in the course of our fieldwork we were increasingly made aware that this question can be tackled meaningfully only if democratisation is seen as just the latest in a series

[4] Fieldwork was carried out in 1993 and 1994 by a team of researchers which, besides the authors, included Cyriaque Adjinakou, Nassirou Bako Arifari, Victor Gbessèmehlan, Pierre-Yves Le Meur, Marc Lévy and Edouard Wallace. The five villages in which studies were carried out are situated in the principal regions of Benin: Ahouannounzon (southern Benin), Djoitin (Abomey plateau, i.e. south central), Gbanlin (northern Zou, i.e. north central), Pérédé (southern Borgou), Founogo (northern Borgou, i.e. far north). Obviously we make no claims to statistical representativeness, as these villages cover only a small range of the diverse situations encountered in the rural context. However, the important differences observed from one village to the next (in terms of demography, history, socio-economic context, local culture, etc.) lend added significance to the common points which we will develop. The results of the research have been amply documented in Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (1998). This book was the subject of an intensive debate in *Politique africaine* 74 (1998): 124–42. Fieldwork was based on the ECRIS research procedure developed by the authors (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 1997b). Similar research by Erdmute Alber, who temporarily joined the research group in the field, was later published separately (1997). Cf. also Bako-Arifari (1995, 1999, 2000) and Gbessèmèhlan and Rijnierse (1995). The authors subsequently carried out similar research in urban areas of Benin (Bierschenk, 2000), rural Niger (Olivier de Sardan, 1998) and rural Central African Republic (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 1997a) which largely corroborates the findings presented here. Since our original research in 1993/94 an increasing number of studies have been published that adopt an approach similar to ours, e.g. Abrahams (1995) on Tanzania, Blundo (1997), Kaag (2002), Kaag and Venema (2002) and Nijenhuis (2002) on Senegal, Fay (1995, 2000), Kassibo (1998) and Bouju (2000) on Mali, Gibbon (1994) and Oppen (1996) on East Africa, Laurent (1995) on Burkina Faso, Lentz (1998, 2002) on Ghana, and Lund (2001) and Hahonnou (2002) on Niger. Cf. also Bako-Arifari and Laurent (1998), Bierschenk and Mongbo (1995), Blundo and Mongbo (1998) and the bibliographies by Borhang (1994) and Jacob and Blundo (1997). For earlier references see the outstanding study by Peel (1983); cf. also Kuper (1970) and Moore (1978).

[5] The allusion is obviously to Swartz (1968).

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of transformations introduced into local political arenas by various regime changes since the 1950s—i.e. the loosening up and liberalisation of colonial rule from 1947, through Independence in 1960 and the establishment of Marxist-Leninist single-party rule from 1970–74. The methodological implication of this was the need to systematically combine ethnographic and historic methodologies, substantiated by prolonged periods in the field. Our objective was to understand local contemporary 'modes of governance'—to use the currently fashionable terms—and this involved going back to the 1940s, and in some cases even to the nineteenth century, with the help of oral history and archives.

This type of methodological orientation highlights the multiplicity and diversity of political institutions, cultures and logics—in short, the 'modes of governance' that exist even at village level in a country as small as Benin. This micro-variability seems to be a basic characteristic of contemporary local politics in Africa. It reveals the limited capacity of the state when it comes to the imposition of its rules. Our comparative approach also brought into focus certain elements that are peculiar to Benin, its history and its national political culture. These elements contrast starkly with the situation in neighbouring countries, despite the fact that their political histories developed along parallel lines—at least in part (the case of Togo), if not entirely (the case of Niger)—during the period of colonial rule. The political dynamics of rural Benin are particularly remarkable, as they contradict the clichés about the overall political passivity of rural areas in the context of the current process of democratisation.[6] Compared with the situation in neighbouring countries, the relative unimportance of traditional chieftaincy in Benin, despite laborious attempts at rehabilitation by the chiefs in particular, is very striking.

Furthermore, viewed from a diachronic perspective, the current phase of democratisation in Benin appears to be just another element in the process of state formation in Africa, which was not completed either by the establishment of colonial states or by Independence. Owing to their incapacity to institutionalise and thus limit the legitimate use of violence, and their inability to establish themselves at local level, contemporary African states have, to date, proved extremely fragile, and their processes of state formation still appear to be reversible. Phases characterised by the firm implantation of state power in 'civil society' have alternated with periods of recession in a process involving the tightening and loosening of state control since the advent of colonial rule. As analysed by Elwert (1983) and Godin (1986), Benin's 'socialism' of the 1970s and 1980s appears, therefore, as a project aimed at eliminating the instances of local mediation in place at the

[6] The widespread theses in the academic literature about peasant political passivity in the current processes of modernisation are mentioned by Buijtenhuis and Rijnierse (1993: 59). Cf. also Buijtenhuis and Thiriot (1995).

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time and establishing direct and systematic state power within village communities. Thus decentralisation, which is now on the agenda thirty years on, could be seen as an alternative project being implemented against a background of different ideological orientations and the aim of improving the embeddedness of the central state in local societies.

The majority of studies undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s on the relationship between the state and the African peasantry involved the premise of a fundamental difference (*altérité*) between the state and peasant society.[7] This paradigm has been going out of fashion since the early 1990s, to be replaced by one of intertwining and entanglement between the national and the local, the state and civil society, politics and economics, and by the deconstruction of totalising concepts like 'the state'. A subtitle like Godin's (1986) *The Logic of the African State* has lost its plausibility today. In fact, as is the case in other African countries, the state in Benin is characterised by a wide range of 'logics'—bureaucratic–juridical, clientelist, revolutionary, developmental—as well as logics based on control and repression or on negotiation . . . These divergent logics found within the state encounter and interplay with a wide variety of local logics: consensual-patriarchal, aristocratic-redistributive, despotic-predatory and factional-clientelist, etc. Far from being absent from local political arenas, or dominating them, the reality of the state (including its bureaucratic-administrative component) in Benin today is well integrated as one of a number of elements into power strategies in the rural milieu.[8]

However, a change from the 'alterity–penetration' paradigm to one stressing the 'entanglement of diverse logics' in local politics does not merely constitute a change of analytical orientation. We believe that it also mirrors real historical developments. During colonial rule and early independence, African societies were characterised by a low level of urbanisation, high rural population density, little commercialisation of agricultural produce and hardly any differentiation within civil society. From the 1950s to the 1980s this gave rise to a spate of state-initiated projects that were aimed at gaining direct and repressive control over social processes and implemented by what could be termed 'the developmentalist bureaucratic state'. The current processes of political democratisation show that these projects have failed, at least for the time being. The subsequent phase of 'disengagement of the state from

[7] Cf., for example, Binsbergen *et al.* (1986) and (on Benin) Elwert (1983). This premise of *altérité* even features in such outstanding studies as Spittler (1981, unfortunately never translated from the German). For early more nuanced positions within the state-peasantry paradigm see Geschiere (1982), Geschiere and van der Klei (1987) and in particular Peel (1983). See also Barrows (1976), Kuper (1970) and Thiele (1986). In the francophone context the *altérité* paradigm was vividly attacked by Bayart (1992). Despite its intellectual appeal, however, the latter's paradigm of 'politics from below' remained largely programmatic and has rarely been put to the test in empirical studies. Cf. Geschiere (1993).

[8] Cf. on this point Gbessèmèhlan and Rijnierse (1995) on the 1995 legislative elections which shows the extent to which rural populations are capable of pursuing their own interests in a context of complex and changing electoral rules.

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society' provided room for manoeuvre to a host of intermediary organisations, brokers and political entrepreneurs: peasant organisations, ethnic movements, regional associations, religious movements (non-denominational Churches and Muslim brotherhoods, etc.). In the meantime, the massive expansion of the state since Independence provided rural areas with a whole range of administrative institutions and, in particular, those linked with repression (army, *gendarmerie*, police, customs, forest guards, etc.) and technical services (agriculture, education, health). As representatives of central state power, civil servants have become important actors in local arenas, but they have not succeeded in establishing state hegemony there. They are currently assisted in the villages by a new category of actors, namely project agents and NGO representatives. It is in such local arenas that the logics of the central state, those of the civil servants posted to rural areas and of senior civil servants and members of rural communities living in the towns, are confronted with the logics of various groups of actual peasant actors within a network of local (and regional) forms of politics. We consider this intermediary (meso) level, at which the hegemonic claims of the central state are mediated, as strategic because it allows an understanding of how a logic determined by bureaucratic procedures and the rule of law connects with local political logics 'at the bottom'.

An obvious difficulty arises when it comes to assessing the historical effects on other events of a development like the change to a democratic regime. From the 1980s, many parallel processes that were interrelated had unfolded in Benin prior to 'democratisation'. While having common denominators, they are far from identical, and have an important impact on local politics in rural areas, although it is difficult to determine the exact role played by each process. These processes include:

1. The financial crisis, more precisely the bankruptcy of the state, and its direct consequence, the so-called 'disengagement of the state from society'.
2. The discontinuation of recruitment by the civil service, the subsequent devaluation of school and university diplomas and the beginning of the laying off of permanent agents of the state owing to the financial crisis and the pressure of international institutions which led to a significant 'urban exodus', e.g. the return of unemployed graduates and school drop-outs to their native villages.
3. 'De-ideologisation' and the relaxation of the Marxist regime which started in the early 1980s, i.e. well ahead of the regime's downfall in 1989.
4. The progressive decentralisation of development aid since the early 1980s, which is increasingly distributed through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and which has since become an important stake in local politics.

This has an important bearing on our micro-sociological analyses of the impact of democratisation at local level. Many of the phenomena

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considered to be the consequences of democratisation in Benin might to some degree be better considered as its causes. Thus, in some respects, the year 1985, which saw a major shift in the orientation of the Kérékou regime, seems to constitute a more significant rift in Benin's recent political history than 1989 and 1990, the years of the national conference and the replacement of Marxist-Leninist Kérékou by a democratic multi-party regime. Various changes in the rural milieu which we refer to are hence more strongly related to the return of school drop-outs to the villages, for example, than to the political innovations introduced since 1990.

LOCAL POLITICAL ARENAS IN RURAL BENIN

Our research findings can be summarised as follows. Local political arenas in Benin are characterised by multi-focal political instances, the partial autonomy of local arenas, multiple forms of legitimacy, highly flexible institutional arrangements, the feeble capacity of the state to impose its norms, the inability of local political instances to regulate community problems, and strong dependence on external aid. These factors also enable us to understand the ambivalent attitude of the rural populations to the state in general and the 'Democratic Renewal' in particular.

'Polycephaly' and partial autonomy[9] *of local political arenas*

Three groups coexist in the village of Founougo (Bariba, Zarma and Fulani), each of which claims particular historical rights that are contested by the others. Groups of former 'captives' (Gando) also exist in addition to these. Each group has its own political leaders who regulate the internal affairs of the group; the coexistence of the Bariba and Zarma at higher level is organised through a virtual alliance that exists between them; the Bariba traditional chief enjoyed precedence in this context up to 1972. (It must be noted, however, that this village chieftaincy is actually a colonial invention.) Religious power is divided between the Muslims and animists. An uprising against the village chieftain (*chef d'arrondissement*) in 1972 propelled a youth association (*Su ka tii na*, 'We defend ourselves') to prominence for a time. The association was founded by students from the village who were living in urban areas. With the advent of the Kérékou regime their position was assumed by young school drop-outs who had returned to the village and who were competing with young illiterate peasants for newly created elected posts of 'delegate' (*délégué*), mayor and (village and municipal) councillors. The representatives of traditional power (the heads of the various groups mentioned above), which had been officially abolished and had become the target of attacks by the regime as well as some of the new local leaders continued, however, to regulate the relationships within each of the groups. Other power arenas were created at the same time in the form of the powerful village cotton production groups which managed the main local

[9] Since this section was written Carola Lentz and Tilo Grätz have drawn our attention to Sally Falk Moore's (1978) use of the term 'semi-autonomous field'.

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> collective resource, the cotton rebates. All these actors remain in place today, at a time when the quasi-official restoration of the traditional chieftaincy is planned (investiture ceremony), a step which could not, however, eliminate the political power of a municipal council to be re-elected or the economic power of the cotton groups. [Bako-Arifari, 1998]

Each change of political regime at national level opens the way for the emergence of new local political institutions and new actors on the local political scene. However, the existing institutions of power are not rejected, nor are their actors ostracised. The superimposition of centres of power and instances of regulation—each with its own rules, legitimacy and political personnel—in the absence of any real hierarchy is the major defining principle of the local political arenas. In other words, the various external interventions that originate outside the village, such as the change to a Marxist-Leninist regime in 1972–74 or the 'Democratic Renewal' of 1989–90, are integrated into local forms of political authority without triggering any kind of radical transformation. Thus a local political culture characterised by major conflicts will tend to remain conflictual even under a new 'consensual' national regime; in the same way an essentially consensual local political culture will retain its consensual tendencies even under a national regime promoting class struggle. Thus the predominant socio-political logics of local arenas are partially independent of changes at the national political level.

The political history of the villages studied can thus be described as a series of 'historical compromises' between existing centres of power and new centres which are gradually grafted on to them. With reference to Fredrik Barth (1959) and his classical analysis of the Swat political system, this phenomenon could be described as the 'polycephaly' of local political arenas.[10] Each change of regime at national level adds new instances to the local political system, usually without eliminating the existing ones. Consequently, each of the various local power configurations comprises different political institutions that 'sedimented' at different times.[11] This cumulative character of local political institutions excludes any distinction between 'traditional' and 'modern', with 'traditional' in the given context simply signifying 'originating from a previous era'. Categories like 'modern' and 'traditional' are actually rhetorical devices peculiar to the political discourse of actors; they are exploited according to individual situations, which themselves fluctuate.[12]

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[10] Barth (1959) uses the term 'acephaly'; however, we consider the notion of 'polycephaly' more appropriate to his analysis of political practices. Barth's analysis suffers from the lack of an historical perspective, which we have incorporated here. Other recent authors use terms equivalent to 'polycephaly', such as 'multicentricity' (Blundo, 1997; Jacob and Blundo, 1997).

[11] Lefèbvre (1953: 125) remarked on this 'vertical complexity', which he considered typical of 'peasant societies'.

[12] This strategy of combined registers was analysed in detail by Bierschenk (1995) in the case of the so-called 'traditional chiefs' of Fulani origin in Benin, who are—at the same time—politicians in the modern sense of the word.

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This pattern of superimposed local positions of power can also be reconstructed for the pre-colonial period, at least with respect to villages under the influence of pre-colonial power centres, such as the chiefdoms of Borgou and kingdom of Abomey. Abomey, in particular, systematically established representatives in conquered villages who could be described as 'pre-colonial administrative chiefs'. The latter coexisted with autochthonous authorities, which were already in place and have not disappeared since. 'Colonial administrative chiefs' were later added to these during the colonial period. Descendants of all three groups (pre-Abomeyan village leaders, Abomeyan administrative chiefs and colonial administrative chiefs) still co-exist today and are indiscriminately referred to as' traditional chiefs' or members of the 'traditional elite' (Le Meur 1998).

In contrast, another major event in national history, i.e. independence in 1960, actually had very little institutional impact at local level.[13] We will return to this point. However, the 1974 territorial reform under Kérékou in turn introduced new positions of local power, specifically representatives (*délégués*) of villages or urban communities, mayors, local and community councils. These positions could be accessed through an electoral system from which former 'feudal' (i.e. 'traditional') chiefs were excluded. The introduction of a ballot system in rural areas was not, however, entirely new, as Benin's rural population had already experienced the election process under colonial rule (at national level only, of course). Nevertheless, the systematic holding of local elections after 1974 added sufficiently significant democratic principles to former dynastic principles—themselves remodelled during the colonial period—and signified a considerable extension of the repertoire of rules in the local political game. Herein resides the fundamental importance of the Kérékou regime for local level politics: it constitutes the first real in-depth change of local power relations since the inception of colonial rule.

Hence conditions favourable to the emergence of a local political elite consisting of young peasants were created in many villages in Benin after 1974. Their ascension was facilitated by the promotion of various forms of peasant organisation on the part of the state and also by the then favourable economic situation, which allowed many peasants to accumulate cash through involvement in production. However, this new peasant elite found itself in direct competition (through the occupation of newly created political positions) with local representatives of the state, especially those involved in technical services (administration or rural development) and education (whose numbers increased considerably during the Kérékou regime). At the same time, the latter constituted an essential source of support for the new regime. Primary school teachers and rural development agents were elected in large numbers among the new democratic instances from the very

[13] As Lentz (2002) has now also shown for Ghana.

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beginning of the 'revolution'. However, by 1986, agents of the Ministry of Rural Development were forbidden to stand in elections.

Yet, the creation of new political instances, with access regulated from then on by democratic elections, by no means involved the complete disappearance of the 'traditional' chiefs, even during the radical phase of the late 1970s. Although marginalised, the latter retained an informal political influence. Despite their official exclusion by the regime, some of them even succeeded in being elected to the new democratic instances. Furthermore, a certain 'division of political labour' has been observed in some ruling families: while the 'traditional' chief continued to maintain his position 'informally', younger members of the same family got themselves elected to the local democratic instances.

In addition, from 1985 the regime encouraged the creation of home-town associations (*associations de ressortissants*) which brought together civil servants originating from a given place but living elsewhere. These associations, which sprang up all over the country, play numerous and varied roles and place a particular emphasis on the promotion of the 'development' of their villages.[14] They are of interest to us to the extent that they have become actors in local political arenas. Along with the peasant elites and local state representatives, the members of these village associations constitute the third major component of rural politics under Kérékou. Not only have they extended the local political arenas, they have also increased the complexity of their modes of operation in terms of the abundance of coexisting instances, the different legitimacies that regulate them and the various social groups that participate in them.

In contrast, the 'Democratic Renewal' dating from 1989–90 has not produced any major institutional innovation at local level. The projects for the reform of territorial administrative and decentralisation have not yet been put into effect. (Local elections were held in December 2002–January 2003.) The process has not, in fact, progressed beyond the maintenance of the political functions of mayor, village delegates and community and village councils. There have been a few semantic innovations, most of them inspired by the administrative vocabulary of the pre-Marxist regime. The village representative referred to as the *délégué* by the Kérékou regime has become a 'village chief, despite (or perhaps because of) possible confusion with the institution of the 'traditional chief'. The number of local political authorities has been reduced considerably. Paradoxically, 'Democratic Renewal' has resulted in a remarkable reduction of political spaces at local level.

For the most part, the same actors and, in particular, the former members of the mass organisations of the one-party state and the

[14] For a more recent analysis of contemporary associations of this kind in Ghana cf. Lentz (1998), and for Togo cf. Kossi (1998). The first home-town associations came into existence in Dahomey during the late colonial period.

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peasant elite got themselves re-elected in the local elections after the fall of Kérékou in 1990. However, both former and more recent political actors have (re-)formulated their political claims since 1989. The country as a whole is experiencing a renaissance of 'traditional chieftaincies'—many of which actually have no 'tradition' prior to the colonial period—whose claims have become much more forceful since 1989 and have been increasingly integrated into political debate. However, the offensives by the traditional chiefs, who moreover assembled in a 'council of kings of Benin', have on the whole been limited in their success. Nonetheless, new enthronements have occurred in every locality in which traditional chiefs had been swept aside or in which deceased chiefs had not been replaced since 1972. In some cases, 'traditional chiefs' have been instated in places where no such institution previously existed. Land tenure is one important area of intervention by the traditional chiefs. The possibility of levying land tax constitutes an important source of revenue for them. The principal claim of traditional chiefs concerning their integration into the decentralised administrative hierarchy has never been satisfied, however, not even under the Soglo regime (1991–96), which supported them as a matter of electoral strategy. The 'traditional chieftaincy' remains a parallel structure, whose informal relationship with the wielders of local power is yet to be clearly defined and whose influence is relatively limited, especially as compared with the situation in neighbouring Niger and Togo. The limited political influence of traditional chiefs reflects a certain political principle in Benin which has been observed since the 1950s and has merely been accentuated under the Kérékou regime (cf. Bako-Arifari, 1999).

Finally, since 1985 the growing economic crisis and the devaluation of school and university diplomas have prompted the return of high numbers of young unemployed graduates and school drop-outs to their villages of origin, a phenomenon which is referred to in Benin as the *retour à la terre*. These young 'intellectuals' develop numerous activities on their return to their villages. The shape and extent of their interventions in the local arenas differ according to their milieu and the economic opportunities at their disposal. This young generation often gets involved in politics in an indirect manner, e.g. through producers' associations (which they may run, cf. Le Meur *et al.*, 1999) and even through religious organisations (Muslim and Christian).

The 'traditional chiefs' (each with his own historical heritage shaped during different periods), the civil servants originating from the villages but resident in the towns who intervene at local level through the intermediary of their associations, the peasant elite which emerged under Kérékou and the young school drop-outs and unemployed graduates who returned to their villages after 1985 all constitute the many 'strategic groups' of local political actors with varying characteristics and influence within the localities where we conducted our investigations. As we have pointed out, they are each the 'product' of various phases in Benin's history. Their numerous clashes determine

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the primary forms assumed by local political conflicts in the rural milieu.

All this makes local-level politics appear highly fragmented: politics in the village transits through a prism of institutions, legitimacies, rules and actors. Fragmentation is even more pronounced by virtue of the fact that most of Benin's villages are multi-ethnic. This insistence on the fragmentary character of local political systems is, however, in part a reflection of our research methodologies, which focused heavily on individual actors. Once networks and, in particular, families are taken as analytical units, the multiple transversal relations that cut across the conflicts between individuals come into relief. The infra-familial 'division of labour' referred to above between traditional chiefs, who were stripped of their formal influence during the Kérékou regime, and the young members of their families, who have succeeded in getting elected to the new political functions, is a typical example of one of the major local political strategies, namely the accumulation of functions. These strategies are implemented firstly by individual *big men*, who succeed in constituting around themselves coalitions of influential persons belonging to various spheres of influence. Matrimonial relations (e.g. between the imam and the traditional chief, between the leader of the association of peasant producers and the leader of the association of village members, between the spokesman of the young graduates and the village chief, etc.) are one of the main elements cementing these coalitions. It is obvious that 'big families' are important links in local networks of alliances. Beyond the political restructuring prompted by regime changes at local level, the more or less stable continuity of lineages exercising local authority represents an important variable. Nevertheless, the density of family alliances should not be allowed to veil the fact that families are themselves the loci of conflicts between individuals, factions and generations. Finally, groups also exist that are permanently excluded from access to local power. Women, former dependants like the *gando* (who still experience a status of inferiority), ethnic minorities like the Fulani (with the exception of a few individuals) and foreign immigrants in general come to mind.[15] This historical continuity of local exclusion was only slightly attenuated by the Kérékou regime (which, in the case of women, implemented a policy of promotion at national level by introducing quotas for the National Assembly).

On the whole, the political history of the villages studied is anything but a simple mirror image of national political history. The 'partial autonomy' of local arenas means that national history leaves very visible traces, but grandiose events from 'on high' are interpreted in a particular way at local level and are embedded in a specific context that colours, transforms and reorganises them. The periodisations of local

[15] On Benin's *gando* (e.g. former captives) cf. Hardung (1998); on the Fulani cf. Bierschenk (1997) and Bierschenk and Le Meur (1997).

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history have little in common with those of national history. Consequently, the end of colonisation in 1960 has left only faint traces on political life at local level. Yet war veterans still have a clear memory of the abolition of forced labour in 1947 which initiated a phase of liberalisation of colonial power. The rhythm of political events is experienced in different manner at local level. The colonial period is not just a synonym for 'dictatorship', nor is Independence until 1972 a synonym for 'democracy'. Similarly, at the local level the Kérékou regime cannot be considered systematically as a 'dictatorship' or the post-1989 period as 'democracy'. We have already mentioned that Benin's first electoral experience took place under colonial rule and it was the Kérékou regime that provided the real impetus to democratisation at local level from 1974. In contrast, the 'Democratic Renewal' is, in fact, associated with a certain political demobilisation at local level, reflected in the decrease in the number of communal and village councillors and the limitation of public political spaces.

THE FLEXIBILITY OF INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND THE WEAKNESS OF THE STATE'S CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL REGULATION

> During the transition that followed the National Conference, local elections were organised in July 1990 to select mayors and village and neighbourhood chiefs. The title of 'village chief' is particularly equivocal: it is actually another name for the function of 'elected representative' (*délégué élu*) which was created by Kérékou. However, it also refers back to the colonial heritage of the administrative chiefs, and the colonial terminology itself is more or less suggestive of the traditional powers . . . These elections were held (in Ahouannonzoun, at least) on the 'traditional' and colonial basis of the filing or alignment of the electors behind the candidate of their choice and were, therefore, devoid of any legal basis. . . . They were cancelled at national level following intensive debate. The chaotic course of the elections in Ahouannonzoun must be understood against the background of previous conflicts between two major lineages, the Gbétchédji and the Lontchédji. A foreign teacher in the village had won an election contested against the outgoing mayor, René Gbétchédji, in 1982. After some plotting and scheming which 'disheartened' him, he did not stand again. An initial vote took place—accounts differ with respect to the method of voting used (acclamation or alignment?)—and René Gbétchédji was defeated again. His followers then organised disturbances and unrest which resulted in the declaration of the election as invalid by the sub-prefect under the pretext that it was actually an indicative pre-selection ballot . . . The sub-prefect then organised a ballot . . . that was restricted to elected representatives and councillors. Having been selected in this way, the mayor (a man related to the Lontchédji lineage) was 'spontaneously elected' by the population, with the exception of René Gbétchédji's supporters, who demonstrated again and caused some damage to the town hall. . . . New local elections were organised at national level in November. René Gbétchédji, who was illiterate and thus disqualified from the French test that had to be taken by mayoral candidates, went ahead and stood for election anyway, as the test had been abolished at national level in the meantime—the local authorities were not up to date on this development. He narrowly won, thanks, it is said, to the

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> astute distribution of money by his brother, the main local trader, and to the support of the *vodunon*, followers of the *vodun*. [Le Meur, 1998]

This 'accumulation' of local political institutions results in their marked flexibility and malleability; their mutual interrelations, areas of competence and forms of organisation are barely defined, let alone documented. Villages do not have stable 'constitutions'. On the contrary, we witnessed the constant 'negotiation' of competences and a high level of legal pluralism. Many institutions are composed of actors whose modes of access and legitimacies differ considerably. Thus sessions of the village council are sometimes held in the house of the village chief, where the traditional chief presides in the company of local elected representatives. The composition of a given assembly can change according to the matters on the agenda, e.g. when the village council discusses the use of the rebates from cotton production, leaders of the association of village producers can participate and vote, irrespective of whether they have actually been elected to the village council.

Orality, which remains a characteristic feature of village political culture, is one of the factors which explains the fluidity of power institutions: meetings are called orally and the agendas and results of their deliberations are rarely recorded in writing.

In this situation, local actors can choose—to a certain extent—the institution they approach to resolve problems. A case of theft can be taken to the traditional chief, the village chief or district mayor, the national *gendarmerie*, the courts, the office of the village association, other ethnic associations, the association of village producers or, yet again, the local church or mosque authorities; it is tempting to adopt the term 'healer shopping' from medical anthropology and refer to this as 'institution shopping'.[16]

For individual actors, the extreme complexity and fluidity of local institutions mean that participation in political activities is extremely time-consuming (cf. Guyer, 1991: 37). The political game is not played according to clearly defined rules that can facilitate the tasks of the various actors involved. The rules are themselves objects of continuous negotiation, especially owing to the fact that different institutions of arbitration set different rules.[17] This is the reason village community life appears so 'overpoliticised' from the perspective of the observer. Moreover the political game played in such conditions is far from transparent. Such highly diffuse political activity renders empirical

[16] As we discovered after our fieldwork, K. von Benda-Beckman had already coined the term 'forum shopping' back in 1981.

[17] In addition to our study, this characteristic has also been highlighted in other rural African contexts—including those reported by Berry (1985, on the Yoruba of Nigeria), Lund (1998, on land conflicts in eastern Niger), Blundo (1997, on factional strife in Senegal), Chauveau (1994, on the centre-west region of Ivory Coast)—to the extent that it could be considered as peculiar to postcolonial African societies. Cf. Berry (1993); Chauveau *et al.*, (2001).

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research difficult. The absence of a favoured locus for the processing of political problems implies that 'politics' must be tracked down everywhere at once and there is no guarantee that essential issues are reflected in the proceedings of a given instance.

Such complexity and fluidity have two consequences for the functioning of local political arenas. On the one hand, political power is exercised not solely by official political authorities (such as community councils), or by officious ones (such as the traditional chiefs), but also through institutions which at first sight do not seem to be political, but to belong instead to what may be described as 'civil society' (for example, home-town or peasant associations). On the other hand, local state representatives also belong to these arbitration institutions but may act far beyond their formal area of competence, as in the case, for example, of rural extension officers, who play an important role in land conflicts. More often than not, these local state representatives are called upon by conflicting parties to arbitrate—to such an extent, indeed, that the notion of the state as 'external' to peasant societies seems scarcely appropriate, if not completely misleading. Nevertheless, local state representatives cannot claim the sole right to such arbitration functions; they are always obliged to share them with village political institutions and 'civil society'.

The institutional context of local-level politics is itself diffuse. If the powers of sanction and exaction are considered as the two mainstays of the exercise of power, it must be noted that in the villages of Benin these powers are neither centralised within a single institution nor organised in a hierarchical order of systematically distinct institutions which would facilitate a clear perception of subordination and precedence between them. In many cases, public wealth and collective revenues are not controlled by local political authorities. An obvious example is the cotton rebate, which is often the only source of public wealth, and is generally controlled by the executive bureau of producers' associations (Bako-Arifari, 2000). In this sense, the village in Benin is not a 'political unit' but an 'ecology of games' (Long, 1968). It lacks the basic institutions capable of establishing real village despotism. Resources and instances of regulation are diffuse and subject to continual change. There is no favoured political locus, no single legitimacy and no central institution capable of imposing its law and norms on other institutions. In other words, neither the state nor any other local political institution has a monopoly of regulation. Feeble regulatory ability is an identifiable characteristic of the local political arenas. This is why exaction is decentralised and sanctions are rarely, and never systematically, applied.

'SWEEPING IT UNDER THE CARPET': A PREDOMINANT LOCAL STRATEGY FOR CONFLICT REGULATION

The mayor of Pèrèrè, a war veteran, former local chief executive and already in place under Kérékou, was re-elected under the 'Democratic Renewal'. He is both a 'Yari' (a descendant of the former Bariba aristocracy) and a Muslim

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> (the religion associated with the Dendi population of the centre of Pèrèrè as opposed to the Bariba on the outskirts, who are animists or Catholic). A consensual mayor, more often to be found at home or in the fields than in his office, he represents no threat to the prerogatives of the Bariba 'traditional chief', who has remained a major moral authority, and limits himself to intervention on the question of the imamate and of the cotton producer groups which divide the people. A latent war of succession has in effect been brewing among the Dendi since the death of the previous imam, between the supporters of the Touré family, hereditary holders of the imamate at Pèrèrè, and another family that supports merit-based nomination. Similarly, a conflict has developed among the village cotton-producing groups, between Dendi and Bariba, concerning the creation of new groups and control of access to inputs. However, religious and ethnic peace is maintained in Pèrèrè through a kind of tacit pact between the notables of the different factions which masks these divisions to the outside. [Wallace, 1998]

Any attempt at developing strong local capacities for political regulation would also conflict with certain basic principles of village social structure. Thanks to the small size of the population in the villages, almost all inhabitants know each other personally. To use the applicable ethnological terminology, they are 'face-to-face societies' marked by 'multiplex' social relations. People are linked by multiple relational ties: my neighbour is also a close relative, our fields are situated next to each other, we are both members of the same self-help group, he is the scout master in the church of which I am the deacon, on Sundays we meet to drink beer in the same bar, which is tended by a mutual cousin . . .

At the same time, villages, like any other groups, are pervaded by conflicts—which explains why some authors prefer to call them 'back-to-back societies'. Such conflicts are not immediately perceived by the short-term visitor, as the inhabitants will always put on a front of solidarity and harmony which many ethnologists and development agents accept at face value. The latter then go on to describe such villages as homogeneous communities built on solidarity, sharing an identical world view and united by a common tradition and 'culture'. This is in fact a myth, conscientiously elaborated for the benefit of outsiders, in particular the international development aid organisations, whose subsidies and 'projects' are highly sought after (cf. Olivier de Sardan, 1995: 74). However, numerous conflicts fester behind these facades and the analysis of such conflicts (to which considerable time was devoted in the course of our fieldwork)[18] allows us to understand the dominant local social rules behind the adopted modes of conflict regulation. Apart from the lack of effective sanctions, mentioned above, the high degree of multiplex relations erects yet another structural barrier against the open expression of conflict: when played out in the

[18] It is useful to recall at this point that the ECRIS procedure which we applied in our research (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 1997b) is based on the premise that conflicts constitute particularly fruitful indicators of social functioning and change in a given society.

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open, conflict entails the risk of destroying the various social relations that an individual may also happen to share with his adversary of the moment, whose help he may need in another situation. In cases of major conflict there are, in fact, two possible options: 'exit' or 'loyalty' (in Hirschman's well known terminology). 'Exit', which involves the departure of one of the two irreconcilable adversaries to either another village or to another part of the same village, is a radical solution that is not uncommon. It is likely that this is one of the factors behind the tendency to segmentation frequently observed in African villages. Nevertheless, the more usual reaction to conflict is that of loyalty, e.g. 'bottling up', which leads to conflicts continuing to fester underground. This promotes an atmosphere favourable to the spread of rumour, suspicion and accusations (of witchcraft, *inter alia*), which were constantly encountered in all the villages surveyed.

This helps us to understand why those in charge of various collective funds are repeatedly accused of 'embezzlement' and why such transgressions and other abuses of confidence are rarely sanctioned. The development world's dominant ideology of 'participation' gives rise to constant campaigns to persuade villagers to contribute to collective endeavours: one day the villagers are asked by some development organisation to make a contribution constituting 'local participation' to a project involving the digging of a well, the next day it's the dispensary, then the women's group, the sending of a tailor to Cotonou for training, the maintenance of the church, the parent–teachers association . . .

When a 'project' arrives in a village, it comes along with a 'standard package' of prerequisites: the creation of a new 'collective' village structure and a minimum of financial participation by village members, to be paid into a common cash deposit. Institutions for development aid will then add their own subsidy, either to this cash deposit or to another. Collective resources are also sustained through fees paid for the use of services provided by the 'project' infrastructure: the cassava mill, the village water pump, the dispensary . . .

Finally, the rebates from the trading of cotton are not given directly to individual producers but are paid over to the cotton producers' association. Given the lively distrust that exists with respect to savings institutions in rural areas, money is usually kept in cash by the treasurer of the association (himself co-operating closely with its president), and written accounts are non-existent or inaccessible. The existence of these cash deposits fosters a permanent suspicion of embezzlement, in a village situation in which there is usually no realm of public debate (*Öffentlichkeit*) and hardly any accepted general habits or rules of public management and delegation, and in a context in which cash is in chronically short supply (due, among other things, to the social pressure for permanent redistribution). In the case of a verified suspicion (difficult to achieve in the absence of clear proceedings for such verification), the primary mechanism of conflict regulation is the 'stifling' of the conflict and the consequent evasion of any sanction. In cases like this, the treasurer and/or president is/are simply replaced,

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and distrust regarding collective cash deposits and those in charge of them is refuelled.[19]

FROM LOCALISATION TO GLOBALISATION: SUPRA-LOCAL LINKS

> The village of Gbanlin in the sub-prefecture of Ouessé is marked by the depth of the conflict between the council, which is controlled by young literates, who in many cases, having dropped out of school and returned from the town, have become farmers and sometimes successful traders, and the traditional notables, themselves quite a disparate group. However, in order to understand the full complexity of the conflict it is necessary to consider the involvement of a large number of actors. An *axosu*, a 'traditional' Fon chief (the founding lineage of Gbanlin is Mahi, not Fon), was enthroned in Gbanlin in 1992 following the investiture of another chief of a higher rank at the Ouessé sub-prefecture. Both investitures were supported by the regime of President Soglo (which came to power following the 'Democratic Renewal'), which 'played on' the rehabilitation of the traditional chieftaincy. The village council is basically composed of 'Renaissants', in other words, members of the Union de la renaissance de l'homme en Christ' (Union of the Renaissance of Man in Christ), an independent fundamentalist Christian Church which spread in Benin in the 1970s. With the support of the sub-prefect, the Association de Développement de la Sous-préfecture (Sub-prefecture Development Association), which is based in Ouessé, launched an offensive against the council in Gbanlin with an enquiry about alleged embezzlement. The following also became involved in the conflict: the Projet de gestion des ressources naturelles (Project for the Management of Natural Resources, the main development project in the area), the Dahomey Communist Party, the Prefect of Zou, the court of Abomey. . . . [Le Meur and Adjinacou, 1998]

The withdrawal of the state from society and, in particular, from public services under way in Benin since the mid-1980s has not only resulted in the renaissance of some traditional chiefdoms mentioned above, it has created increasing space for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), although relatively speaking, in this respect, Benin lags behind other countries such as Senegal and Burkina Faso, which have become veritable NGO paradises.[20]

Certain tasks that were formerly the responsibility of the state's rural development services (e.g. agricultural extension) are gradually being assumed by private structures. In general, senior civil servants and local 'intellectuals' participate in the activities of the NGOs, and it is not uncommon to encounter individuals who lost their job in the public service as a result of the structural adjustment programme featuring among their ranks. A myriad of national NGOs are being created in the

[19] For examples in Niger cf. Olivier de Sardan and Dagobi (2000).

[20] The ideas advanced in this paragraph are discussed in Bierschenk *et al.* (2000). This book, which deals with the topic of 'development brokers', contains several case studies on Benin (by Bako-Arifari, Edja, Mongbo and Sodeik).

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hope of channelling the external development aid resources handed over by 'partners' (Northern NGOs, NGOs based on bilateral and multilateral co-operation, and international institutions alike) to such-and-such a region. Conversely, the creation of these NGOs often meets the demands of donors in search of local representatives, to the extent that NGOs are essentially characterised more by a logic of rent (e.g. input) than by a logic of productivity (e.g. output). An essential function of NGO co-ordinators can be described correctly as 'development brokerage'.

What kind of influence do NGOs have on the dynamics of local political arenas? The NGOS and their leading actors intervene in the local spaces of negotiation which, as we have seen, are only slightly hierarchised or not at all, entering into relationships of conflict or alliance with those already in place and consequently contributing to the further enhancement of the existing institutional complexity and the fluidity of local politics. To begin with, the contact between NGOs and donors is usually established through the intermediary of a chain of mediators which bypasses state institutions. This phenomenon of connection between local actors and 'supra-local' instances and, in part, with international networks, is also to be found in the 'religious' domain and not only in the sphere of development proper. (The two domains often intersect, as many religious organisations are involved in development.) In south Benin, the 'Democratic Renewal' and the village school drop-outs returning from towns have promoted the rapid growth of more or less syncretic or prophetic African Christian religions while, in the north, returning erudite Muslims, who have been steeped in Arabic language and culture and educated in Nigeria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have introduced new visions of Islam and are calling for profound changes in religious practices (Abdoulaye, 2002). Like NGOs, these religious communities bear witness to the existence of supra-local, partly international, networks within local arenas, to which local actors are linked and which can be mobilised, for example, in the case of conflicts with vodun priests or traditional imams and sometimes even in the context of more overtly political conflicts. In other words, the state is unable to exercise control over relations between villagers and the outside world.

Furthermore, these external networks gradually take over services which were the responsibility of the state, but which it can no longer fulfil. When the NGOs operating in a village manage to get hold of external resources they end up enjoying easy access to funds several times greater than the government's local budget. The NGOs use these resources as a substitute for the incapacity of the state and its sectoral services (or to palliate the non-existence of the former), for example, by providing agricultural agents with pharmaceutical supplies.

This gradual erosion of the functions and the legitimacy of the state apparatus in local arenas in favour of supra-local networks, which is generally associated with NGOs and religious groups, is by far the element that most distinguishes contemporary local political arenas in rural areas from those of the 1960s and 1970s.

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THE LOCAL PRESENCE OF THE STATE AND HOW THE 'DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL' IS VIEWED BY RURAL POPULATIONS

We now return to the question of the relationship between the state and local communities in Benin and ask how the 'Democratic Renewal' is seen by rural people.[21] It is possible to speak of a 'relative distance of the state' from the local arenas, which means that while the state enjoys only a minimal presence in the village it is not entirely absent either. It is incapable of dominating the local political game, but it cannot be ignored by the actors involved. In fact the precise form assumed by the presence of the state depends on the way in which state representatives interpret their role. The state apparatus itself contains several layers of mediation, coupled with a generally very high degree of venality of government agents.[22] We have already mentioned the limited capacity of the state and its shortcomings in terms of providing technical services in the fields of health and education, for example: these services are either non-existent or of poor quality. Another indicator of the limited presence of the state at local (village) level can be discerned in the virtual absence of political parties except at election times.

The scope for action enjoyed by the political parties (authorised once again in 1990), which is regarded as an indicator of the regime's democratic nature by the outside world, is largely restricted to major urban centres. Political parties do not have a continuous presence in rural areas, except—at best—in rural administrative centres. In small administrative units like villages and urban neighbourhoods, party activity is evident only at election time and quickly disappears once the elections are over. Moreover, such elections often resort to the system of block votes, thus concentrating preference for a local or regional candidate (a *fils de village*; cf. also the notion of *logique du terroir* in Bako-Arifari, 1995). In cases where votes are shared between different political parties, their allocation seems to run along existing lines of local alliances and conflicts and does not reflect an ideological choice between contending parties. Rural political parties do not structure the local political game in the rural milieu. On the other hand, local political strategies integrate the state and its (albeit) limited capacity for arbitration or sanction as constituting potential resources.

In cases of conflict, local representatives of the state can be called on to intervene by the various political parties, without any attention being paid to constitutional differences between legal and executive roles or to the official attribution of the various technical services. This observation applies to three out of the four major issues in local politics, i.e. land control, the appropriation of resources from agriculture and access

[21] Our analyses in this paragraph refer to the situation that prevailed during our fieldwork in 1993 and 1994 and do not take into account the implications of the re-election of Kérékou in 1996.

[22] The venality of officials has been intensively studied in the authors' on-going research project on everyday corruption in West Africa. See Olivier de Sardan (1999) and Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2000) for the results.

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to local positions of socio-political eminence. It is only in relation to the fourth, local access to and control of external resources (e.g. from development aid), that, as we have seen, the state plays practically no role whatsoever. In areas where local posts are established the *gendarmerie* intervenes in the lucrative regulation of local conflicts, such as fights or theft; it moves outside its local posts only when confronted with cases of serious infractions and crimes. For their part, the agricultural and rural agents intervene in issues of land tenure or, on occasion, by providing informal registration certificates, thus fulfilling the function of land survey agents. With regard to conflicts of succession to local chieftaincies, the sub-prefects are the competent authorities. Access to local state representatives can become an important element of the political processes in various situations. Otherwise, except in similar cases, state regulatory mechanisms are generally ignored by the population.

Elections constitute another form of state presence which, notwithstanding their complex mechanism, populations use for their own ends (cf. Gbessèmèhlan and Rijnierse, 1995). The state also intervenes at local level through the delimitation of administrative boundaries and through the selection of locations as capitals of territorial-administrative units. In the eyes of local people, the stakes involved here are highly significant: for a town or village to be transformed into the *chef-lieu* of a commune or *sous préfecture* (formerly *district*) or even of a *département* (province) means gaining access to infrastructure and resources. A final stake introduced by the state is the distribution of cotton rebates. The rule that rebates are paid to peasant associations (as opposed to individual producers) is imposed by the state. The result is further obfuscation of the boundary between private, public and community wealth, which largely explains why the majority of political conflicts in cotton-producing regions revolve around the control of these rebates.

Local perceptions of the state are fundamentally ambivalent. On the one hand, the state is decried by rural populations as a 'commando state' (Elwert, 1983) because of its abuses, the exactions perpetrated by its agents and the unpredictable and repressive nature of its interventions. An enduring historical experience of 'justified fear' of the state, dating back to the rule of the kingdom of Abomey prior to the colonial period, has been accumulated in south Benin. On the other hand, the state is expected to provide services, in particular in the areas of health, education, public security and the arbitration of local conflicts. Successive national political regimes are judged by rural populations on the basis of these expectations and the corresponding evaluations are nuanced using terms such as 'too much' or 'not enough'. The balance sheet of the changes introduced by the 'Democratic Renewal' at local level as compared with the preceding Kérékou regime is less clearcut than it might seem. This is due partly to the continuity of state personnel (there was considerably less 'renewal' in this context at local level than at national level) and of elected local representatives (during the 1990 elections organised by the new regime the same persons were generally reconfirmed in their appointments as village chief or mayor

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and on village and community councils). By contrast the 1974 territorial reforms effected by the Kérékou regime had constituted a major rupture.

Moreover the 'Democratic Renewal' has, to date, seen relatively few innovations at local level. The formal aspects of democracy that are vital to the positive appreciation of the 'Democratic Renewal' in the eyes of external observers are of scant importance to rural populations, or they represent nothing new to them. Freedom of the press, a multi-party system or a strong emphasis on the rule of law is of little import to rural populations: there is no rural press, the national press hardly ever reports on issues concerning the rural world, political parties have no impact on the local political scene, the courts and the judiciary are totally absent from the countryside. Of the changes brought about by the 'Democratic Renewal', freedom of speech and of religious practice are the most appreciated: the repressive period of the Kérékou regime, associated with the struggle against 'feudalism' and 'superstition' and implemented from 1977, resulted in widespread abuse and repression in rural areas (anti-witchcraft campaigns, of which vodun cults and 'witch doctors' of both sexes bore the brunt), leaving negative memories in its wake. (However, the gradual liberalisation of the regime from 1980—in rural areas at least—has partially attenuated this negative memory.) The resurgence of the traditional chieftaincies, and the 'elders' as a whole, is a development that is seen in a positive light, as a restoration of legitimate symbolic prerogatives, especially to the extent that such actors cause no disruption of the local power configuration. There is, however, widely shared concern about the decrease in public security and a fear that freedom is turning into anarchy; there is also a perception that the judicial vacuum with regard to the lower echelons of the territorial administration has increased. The widespread popular logic that holds the regime in power responsible for the state of the economy often blames the 'Democratic Renewal' for the current economic crisis, which contrasts starkly with memories of the relative economic prosperity (mainly due to Nigeria's petroleum boom) of the initial years of the Kérékou regime.

LOCAL-LEVEL POLITICS AND DECENTRALISATION

This brief summary of the results of our research argues for a degree of scepticism as regards the hopes on which decentralisation projects in Africa are founded. Our case studies demonstrate the extreme complexity and fluidity of local politics, characterised as it is by a myriad of institutions and decision-making loci (traditional, neo-traditional, informal and formal) which do not have strictly defined competences and lack clearly organised hierarchical relations of subordination and dependence, and whose various forms possess hardly any collective power of regulation or sanction. The regulatory powers of the modern state are hardly better. If the state is actually present in local political arenas, it is merely one actor among others and it is far from capable of imposing its logics (be they bureaucratic-administrative, developmen-

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talist or simply democratic) on other actors. Its representatives are forced to engage in constant negotiation.

Local arenas of power are relatively independent of the state. On the other hand, owing to decentralised development co-operation, they have direct connections with the international system. Political rifts at national level drift piecemeal into the awareness of the local level. A change of regime at national level merely creates additional instances at local level and opens the political arenas to new actors who take up positions alongside those already in place without removing them.

In other words, far from being the radical rift opening the way to good governance so dear to aid donors, the current processes of decentralisation in Africa merely represent another moment in a long series of regime changes imposed from above by the state and experienced in Africa since the end of the Second World War. Thus it can be expected that, like so many previous state interventions, the decentralisation project will be ground down in the local arenas in accordance with the dominant logics of accumulation of the instances prevalent there. A hasty amalgamation of decentralisation and local democracy must, therefore, be avoided. The question of local democracy remains entirely unresolved. It remains to be seen whether the new local political institutions (endowed with new competences) to be created by decentralisation will manage to impose their modes of regulation and registers of legitimacy on the actors and institutions of the local scene; or whether the villages and rural towns of Benin will ultimately become the centres of democracy dreamed of by the promoters of decentralisation; or whether, again, these new institutions will not simply add to the 'pile' of already existing institutions with which local actors must negotiate to obtain some limited space.

Of course, at best, decentralisation can bring about the formal democratisation of local political relations. However, in our opinion, it would be unrealistic to imagine that decentralisation will be able to realise an entire series of objectives in one fell swoop, i.e. geographically and socially balanced economic development, environmental protection, the promotion of women, social integration of marginal groups, etc. Such objectives are of course important and praiseworthy. However, they cannot be achieved through the simple modification of legal texts. We remain likewise unconvinced that giving municipalities the right to supervise the exploitation of natural resources in their area (e.g. the residual forest areas of the Zou region) will lead to an improvement in their utilisation.

Nor are we convinced that European experience of decentralisation is easily transposable to Africa. Germany has a particularly long tradition of decentralised politico-administrative structures. In France, on the other hand, recent experience is based on a strongly centralised political system. The African situation is quite different from either of these cases. In Benin, as in other African countries, there is no question of decentralising either the powers of sanction or the powers of exaction commanded by a state that was formerly strongly centralised, or of institutionalising democratic supervision of the forms of sanction and

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exaction exercised by a centralised local power. All attempts to achieve 'decentralisation' entail several tasks which taken separately constitute individual challenges. On the one hand, it is a matter of institutionalising a monopoly of political sanction and exaction at local level. On the other hand, it is a matter of achieving the democratic supervision of these institutions and of expanding the social base of local power. Finally, it is necessary to create an effective system of central state supervision of the institutions of local political power. In other words, in so far as one accepts the above analyses, 'decentralisation' implies the establishment of decentralised institutions that work in areas from which the state has been very removed to date. This is the only condition under which a decentralisation project could contribute to the (democratic) construction of the state.

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ABSTRACT

The Republic of Benin has often been cited as a model democracy in the African context. After years of pressure from bilateral aid donors, particularly France and Germany, municipal elections were held in 2002. This article addresses three related questions. How have free presidential and parliamentary elections affected political dynamics at the local level, especially in the rural areas where most people live? What do rural people think about the change of national regime? How will decentralisation affect local government? Based on empirical research in rural Benin, it shows that democratisation means more of the same hybrid and composite form of local government. The boundaries between the state and private organisations (including Northern NGOs), and between the national and local levels, remain blurred. Local political arenas are more fragmented than ever, and informal politics flourish. This not only dilutes power at the local level, as different veto powers block one another, it entails constant negotiation between those involved, making political processes less predictable and local political institutions less accountable. Decentralisation is only making matters worse.

RÉSUMÉ

La République du Bénin est souvent citée comme un modèle de démocratie dans le contexte africain. Après des années de pression exercée par les bailleurs de fonds bilatéraux, particulièrement la France et l'Allemagne, des élections municipales ont eu lieu en 2002. Cet article aborde trois questions connexes. Comment les élections présidentielles et parlementaires libres ont-elles affecté la dynamique politique au niveau local, notamment dans les zones rurales où vit la majorité de la population? Que pense la population rurale du changement de régime national? Comment la décentralisation va-t-elle affecter l'administration locale? L'article montre, en se basant sur des travaux de recherche empirique menés en zone rurale au Bénin, que la démocratisation se traduit par plus d'administration locale de même forme hybride et composite. La limite entre organisation publique et organisation privée (y compris les ONG du Nord), et entre niveau national et niveau local, demeure floue. L'échiquier politique local n'a jamais été aussi fragmenté et la politique informelle prospère. Ceci non seulement dilue le pouvoir au niveau local, différents pouvoirs de veto se bloquant mutuellement, mais engendre aussi une négociation constante entre les parties prenantes, rendant ainsi le processus politique plus imprévisible et les institutions politiques locales moins comptables de leurs actes. La décentralisation ne fait qu'aggraver la situation.

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