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One step forward, two steps back? Paradoxes of natural resources management decentralisation in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Theory informs us that decentralisation, a process through which powers, responsibilities and resources are devolved by the central state to lower territorial entities and regionally/locally elected bodies, increases efficiency, participation, equity, and environmental sustainability. Many types and forms of decentralisation have been implemented in Africa since the colonial period, with varying degrees of success. This paper explores the process of forest management decentralisation conducted in Cameroon since the mid-1990s, highlighting its foundations and characterising its initial assets. Through the transfer of powers to peripheral actors for the management of forestry fees, Council Forests and Community [or Village] Forests, this policy innovation could be empowering and productive. However, careful observation and analysis of relationships between the central state and regional/local-level decentralised bodies, on the one hand, and of the circulation of powers, on the other, show – after a decade of implementation – that the experiment is increasingly governed by strong tendencies towards 're-centralisation', dictated by the practices of bureaucrats and state representatives. The paper also confirms recent empirical studies of 'the capture of decentralised actors'. It finally shows how bureaucrats and state authorities are haunted by the *Frankenstein's monster* syndrome, concerning state–local relationships in decentralised forest management.

INTRODUCTION

Decentralisation is not a new phenomenon in Africa: according to Ribot (2002), there have been at least four waves of decentralisation in

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francophone West Africa since 1917. With successive crises that have marked the continent since the 1970s – the environmental crisis in the Sahel, a political crisis, an economic crisis, and a social crisis – centralised governance entered into a difficult context characterised by many disturbances, violent popular demands for change, and state paralysis (Bratton & van de Walle 1997; Buitenhuijs & Thiriot 1995). In those circumstances, decentralisation policies appeared as a response aimed at relieving the problems of the central state. There is a wide stock of definitions of decentralisation (Davis *et al.* 1994; Manor 1999; Mawhood 1983a; Rondinelli & Cheema 1983), all of which identify four to five forms of decentralisation (Finken 1996; Larson 2002; Mawhood 1983b; Ribot 2002). They are (i) 'deconcentration', or 'administrative/territorial decentralisation', when the central state redistributes authority to its own representatives within defined geographic units; (ii) 'privatisation', that is the transfer of powers from the central state to non-state entities; (iii) 'fiscal decentralisation', a process by which the central state cedes financial powers to lower levels (Manor 1999; Smoke 2003); (iv) 'delegation', when specific powers are transferred to semi-independent units; (v) 'devolution', or 'democratic decentralisation', or 'substantive decentralisation', that is a process aiming at transferring powers to local governments and to authorities representative of, and accountable to, local populations.

The literature is therefore enriched by studies, reflections and theoretical debates on decentralisation. Presented as the best form of decentralisation (Manor 1999; Ribot 2003), democratic decentralisation implies that authorities or entities representing local populations are elected and, in a 'social contract', are accountable to them (Ribot 1999). Whilst until recently theoretical debate has been generally centred on local governments and on 'politics', decentralisation and related key issues are increasingly echoed in the field of natural resource management (Fisher 1999; Larson 2002; Ribot 2003; Sundar 2001; Sunderlin 1999). To the question, Why decentralise?, Crook & Manor (1994), Fiszbein (1997) and Ribot (2002) maintain that it is because of the search for *efficiency*, *equity*, *service provision*, *participation*, *accountability*, *responsibility*, *national cohesion*, and *environmental sustainability*.

In Cameroon, particularly, the end of the 1980s was characterised by a deep economic recession and by a lot of internal imbalances. This led to the implementation of the structural adjustment programme proposed by the International Monetary Fund. According to Mosser-Cléaud (2003), poverty increased seriously and peaked in the mid-1990s, striking 50 % of the population. In addition, the early 1990s were marked by waves of violent protest against the political regime and its '[bad] governance practices'

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including corruption, nepotism and social injustice. Among others, the forestry sector was considered as one of the more corrupt (Essama-Nssah & Gockowsky 2000; Mbarga 2002). While the whole Cameroonian system was in need of correctives, the forestry sector embarked on a process of liberal reforms prescribed in 1991 by the World Bank through a 'Forest Strategy'. In that sense, decentralisation of forest management can be explained in Cameroon by: (i) pressure from economic and political crises; (ii) pressure from donors, primarily the World Bank; (iii) failure of the central state; and (iv) emulation of liberal reforms in other developing countries.

There have been decentralisation experiments in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1990s in the name of reform, which have received mixed reviews. Their characterisation brings up parameters of failure in some cases and of stagnation in others (Kassibo 2002; Fjeldstad 2002; Kasfir 1983; Oyugi 1983), mainly when applied to natural resources management (Bazaara 2003; Etoungou 2003; Lungusile 2003; Mapedza 2003). The following paper aims – from a political economy perspective and from the angle of 'democratic decentralisation' – to question the process of forest management decentralisation in Cameroon, described as the pioneering experiment in the whole Congo basin (Nguinguiri 1997), the world's second most important forest ecosystem after Amazonia. Part I deals with transfer of powers and authority from the central state to outlying actors since the colonial period. Part II focuses on institutional and policy change in the mid-1990s. The forest management decentralisation experiment is characterised in Part III. Part IV analyses resistance to forest management decentralisation 'at the top' (state-level), from the angle of 'democratic decentralisation' principles. I basically argue that there has been a regression of the experiment through a pendular movement, before drawing out some key lessons in the conclusion.

CENTRAL STATE/LOCAL AUTHORITY RELATIONS IN CAMEROON

Cameroon has experienced three historical sequences of colonial administration:[1] first, the German colonisation from 1884 to 1914; and then a concomitant French and British colonisation, 1919–60. In 1961, the young nation became a federal republic comprising the francophone part (*Cameroun Oriental*) and the anglophone part (Western Cameroon). Like many other sub-Saharan countries, colonial Cameroon had decentralised entities and authorities, such as local governments, 'customary authorities' with delegated responsibilities, and divisional and district officers representing the central government. In Western Cameroon, indirect rule

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principles established by the British had a decentralising sub-stratum, with the 'native administration' covered by a 'Native Authority' (Finken 1996; Stark 1980), while in *Cameroun Oriental*, one could find a form of local government called the *commune*. The former had control over natural resources and the latter had none.

In 1972, after twelve years of independence, Ahmadou Ahidjo, Cameroon's first head of state, launched what he called the 'peaceful revolution of May 20', which changed Cameroon's federal system to a more centralised and 'Jacobin' system,[2] with the advent of the United Republic of Cameroon. This revolution led to a new administrative division of the country,[3] with provinces, divisions (*départements*), sub-divisions (*arrondissements*), and districts. These administrative units set up a pyramidal structure, which conveyed the state's authority downwards from the central government. This was in fact a reshuffling of the cards within the same, single, decision-making structure. For in Cameroon, as in other countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the idea of civil society as a political force was never taken into consideration in public management (see Karlström 1996). The creation of the United Republic of Cameroon was perceived amongst 'anglophones' as a confiscation of their relative autonomy, and their marginalisation by this highly centralising process (Bayart 1980, 1986; Stark 1980).

Central authority supervision of local management of public affairs

According to Mawhood (1983a), Cameroon is a unique case among former French colonies as regards the dynamics of the relationship between the central and local levels. This uniqueness is due to the existence, since colonial times, of both urban local governments (or urban councils – *communes urbaines*) and rural local governments (or rural councils – *communes rurales*). *Communes* constitute the basic unit of territorial decentralisation in Cameroon. In 1976, the country had twenty-two urban local governments and 152 rural local governments (Mawhood 1983a). As a model of decentralised local administration, the rural local governments are worthy of attention. Headed by a mayor/municipal administrator, who is surrounded by an elected municipal council, the rural local governments should, at least on paper, work like real local governments. The local councils adopt programmes, work plans and the relevant budgets on the basis of locally identified social and economic needs. They also implement the projects identified. Since the local governments come under the authority of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation, the mayor is supervised in his/her functions related to the implementation of local

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development by the regional-level representatives of the central state (the senior divisional officer, the sub-divisional officer and the district), in other words the *préfet*, the *sous-préfet* and the *chef de district*.

Historical roots of the system of submission of local representatives to the central state

The creation of local governments in Cameroon is to the credit of the colonial administration, as pointed out above. In the part of Cameroon that fell under French mandate, the first local governments were created in Yaoundé and Douala, the two main towns, in 1941. At that time, they came under the supervision of the colonial high commissioner, who insisted on having authority over them in order to keep the natives under control. The Municipal Commissions of Notables of the first two local governments were not elected, but rather appointed by the colonial authorities. It was only in 1955 that the principle was adopted of electing the local government and the municipal executive members, though this has never been really put into practice. Between 1960 and 1966 – that is, before the 'peaceful revolution' launched by Ahidjo in May 1972 – the status of these local authorities was ambiguous: whilst in francophone Cameroon, local governments came under the control of the central state, in anglophone Cameroon they enjoyed a high degree of autonomy.

By Decree no. 66/190/COR of 14 July 1966, the two versions of local government were unified. Bigombé (2003) notes that this standardisation, which was not adapted to the dual nature of Cameroonian administration, with its French and British influences, in fact institutionalised the decline in local government autonomy. Before the launching of political pluralism in December 1990, the appointment of mayors was the common practice. Even since 1990, opposition parties have proof of the co-opting of several candidates to the post of mayor by the central authorities during the various general elections (Bobiokono & Dipanda 2002). Although declaring its interest in the strengthening of local governments, the central state in fact controls them and works towards their authoritarian deconstruction.

The active roles of *préfets*, *sous-préfets* and *chefs de district* in the sole existing form of local government highlights the limits and the 'instrumentality' of this version of decentralisation. Mawhood (1983a) speaks of the 'irresponsibilisation' and 'infantilisation' of local representatives, referring to a seminar paper presented in 1968 by the secretary general of Cameroon's Ministry of Territorial Administration on the 'financial supervision of local governments by senior divisional officers' – that is, by *préfets*. This political and administrative requirement is a proof that the postcolonial central state has always, as part of its political schedule, sought to establish

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a relationship of authority over local representatives. This 'model' is copied from the French system of governance, in which as Chapman (1952) notes:

> The French tend to take for granted the essential irresponsibility of local elected bodies, and accordingly to insist on administrative safeguards against it. This tendency can still be seen in Cameroon laws. Notwithstanding all his powers, a mayor/administrator is subject to close supervision by the prefect. The latter is involved in all local budgeting and can control decisions made about expenditures, contracts, and the work programme. Legal acts of the mayor/administrator have to be submitted for his specific approval before they become enforceable. The supervisory authority may be for different purposes the prefect, the governor of a province, or the Minister of Territorial Administration.

This paper is not concerned really with administrative or territorial decentralisation. But the thesis above will be used to support some components of the argument below, which is concerned with the holding back and taking over of decentralisation in forest management in Cameroon, a practice generated and reproduced by the central state's representatives and officials.

CRISIS IN THE SYSTEM AND POLICY CHANGE AS A RESPONSE

From the mid-1980s, the whole system of governance in Cameroon fell victim to its own limitations and practices, and to the international recession, in the form of a deep and many-sided crisis. The climate of economic recession and the lack of public freedoms characteristic of single party political systems resulted in the emergence and expression of popular demands for greater well-being and political democratisation. As a result of this, one part of the system, the forestry sector, experienced numerous disturbances, including challenges to the monopolistic form of management implemented by the state. In these unsettled circumstances, many, and sometimes very violent, conflicts broke out between logging companies, generally backed by the state, and local communities (Mimbimi 1996; Oyono 2003a). The latter rose to challenge the monopoly of the state and European interest groups over the forests. They also demanded direct access to the financial benefits of commercial logging. Indeed, in the past, there had been some conflicts between local communities and logging companies, but since the 1990s the climate has been nourished by the 'winds of freedom' generated by democracy and by the feeling amongst local communities that it was time to claim their rights over forests.

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Some responses

Under pressure from donors (primarily the World Bank) on the one hand, and in response to these critical developments on the other, the Cameroonian state undertook some reforms to its political, administrative and economic structure. Other than the democratisation of political life, through the introduction of political pluralism in 1990, and economic liberalisation, three responses were important in establishing the relationship between policy change in general and the decentralisation of forest management: (i) the law on freedom of association, promulgated in December 1990; (ii) the reform of the forestry code in 1994; and (iii) the 1996 constitutional revision. There were also progressive rewritings of the forestry taxation system (Bigombé 2003; Carret 2000; Fomété 2001), for which the fundamental provisions were laid down in the 1994/5 forestry reform.

Decentralisation, rural reform and the constitutional revision

The law on freedom of association allowed social actors in rural Cameroon, long excluded from public life, to organise themselves in 'common initiative groups' (Oyono & Temple 2003). It should be pointed out that another form of local-level organisation, village development committees, had been imposed and promoted in the 1970s by administrative authorities and Cameroon's single political party, to provide political guidance and to manipulate the peasants. The institutional changes of the 1990s – primarily rural reform – then allowed newly prescribed rural organisations, the 'common initiative groups', to become 'tools' of social change by targeting social and economic objectives. However, their dependence on the administration was not affected by the new context: in order to be granted legal existence, they had to be recognised, legally, by the regional administrative authorities. Institutional choices made at the village level consistent with the decentralisation policy, involving the creation of various management committees, rest on this rural reform. The 1996 revision of the Constitution also went further than the current administrative division of the country, providing for a type of 'deconcentration' based on the introduction of regions, also called 'regionalisation'.[4]

Basic decentralising orientation in the forestry legislation

The forestry reform launched in 1994, considered by the World Bank as a 'laboratory' of innovation in central Africa (Karsenty 2002), is a landmark in the decentralisation of the management of Cameroon's forests. After

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decades of monolithic 'order' and state monopoly (Diaw & Oyono 1998), the 1994 revision of the forestry code opened the way for the 'institutionalisation' of local management on the one hand, and access for village communities to greater income from the commercial logging of their forests on the other. However, the process of implementing the forestry sector reform linked to decentralisation was not even begun until 1997. Karsenty (2002) explains this lethargy by the absence of appropriate conditions for the policy's application and the lack of any real political will. Another parallel innovation was the design of a zoning plan in the 'forested' areas of Cameroon (*Plan de Zonage*), which allocated the forest to various uses.

THE EXPERIMENT OF DECENTRALISED MANAGEMENT OF CAMEROON'S FORESTS

Council Forests

The first innovation brought by the reforms was the transfer to local authorities – specifically, the rural local governments – of powers to establish and manage Council Forests. Under Cameroon's forestry legislation, a Council Forest is a forest classified for use by a local government, a *commune* (see *Plan de Zonage*), or planted by that local government. The classification operation lays down the boundaries of the designated forest and the objectives of its management. A Council Forest belongs to the private estate of the local government concerned. As of today, only one Council Forest, the Dimako (East province) Council Forest, has been classified. It has a management plan, which sets 70% of its area aside for logging. Its 'classification act' was signed by the prime minister in June 2001, and logging operations are scheduled to begin in October 2003. The area covered by the Dimako Council Forest includes the seventeen villages that make up the rural local government. They are represented by a municipal council, which manages the local government. As part of the establishment of the Council Forest, an *arrêté* signed by the mayor of Dimako in 2001 created a consultative management committee for the forest, including one representative from each of the seventeen villages. The committee's mandate is to assist the municipal council in taking decisions that affect the management of the Council Forest.

Community Forests

The establishment of Community Forests is the second aspect of the decentralisation of forest management in Cameroon. This innovation is

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aimed at giving village communities responsibilities and powers for the management of their forests and financial benefits accruing therefrom. A Community Forest is a forest in the state's non-permanent estate (or the national estate),[5] subject to a 'management agreement', signed between the village community concerned and the forestry administration. The forestry legislation specifies that this is 'a contract whereby the Administration entrusts part of the national estate with a view to its management, conservation and use for the benefit of the community' (Article 3 of the implementing Decree). The creation and management of Community Forests consists of a long organisational, decision-making and technical process, involving many different actors (NGOs, the Ministry of Environment and Forests, logging companies and the village communities concerned). The Community Forestry Development Project (CFDP) established within the Ministry of Forests with the support of the British government has published a handbook for the attribution and management of Community Forests defining the whole process.

The law requires that, in transactions related to this process, the village communities be represented by a 'management committee'. The Community Forests may be exploited through 'small-scale logging' by the village communities themselves, or in partnership with an accredited logging company. The income generated by marketing the lumber from Community Forests must be invested in village-level projects for social and economic development. Around thirty Community Forests are currently being exploited and managed in the country. Six of these are located in the Lomié region, east of the Dja Biosphere Reserve (East province), and have been monitored by CIFOR since 2001. Local people's feelings about the income from these forests varies (Efoua 2002), sometimes considered inadequate, sometimes sufficient. In general, total income from Community Forests under commercial exploitation in the Lomié region since 2001/2 has varied from $26,590 in the case of Echiambor, to $42,355 in the case of the village of Kongo. Approximately 248 applications for Community Forests have been submitted to the Ministry of Environment and Forests by village communities over the last several months.

Forestry fees

The decentralised forestry taxation system, the third major component of the new forest policy, has led to some innovative strategies for the allocation of a share of forestry revenue to local communities. Prior to 1994, the village communities benefited only from the construction of social and economic infrastructure, which was included in the logging companies'

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specifications. The new system for the redistribution of forestry income, established since 1994, is based on two cardinal principles: the payment of forestry fees, by a company logging a given concession, to the local communities (10 % of the total amount), to the relevant rural local government (40 %), and to the central state (50 %); and the allocation of a 'village tax', in fact an 'eco-tax', to the village communities bordering small forest concessions of up to 2,500 ha: the figures are calculated on the basis of $1.5 per cubic metre of wood felled. Under the decentralised forestry taxation system, financial sums are regularly transferred to local communities. For example, in the 2001/2 payments (two tranches), thirteen logging companies paid the total sum of $1,000,000 to the Yokadouma (East province) rural local government, and $145,000 to the village communities of that local government area (*Cameroon Tribune* 13.10.2002). The forty-eight rural local governments in areas where logging is under way, in Cameroon's dense forest, were all involved in this operation, directed by the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

RESISTANCE 'AT THE TOP' TO POLICY INNOVATIONS

The retention of powers

Decentralisation processes often inflate popular expectations (Manor 1999). The introduction of Community Forests was hailed by all the local communities in Cameroon's dense forest zone as the beginning of an era of equity in intragenerational access to natural resources. They perceived the innovation as the end of 'administrative apartheid' in access to benefits from forest exploitation. Remember that, in Africa, the colonial and the postcolonial state have stood out as the 'legal owners' of the forest. With the recent introduction of Community Forests, some villagers even spoke of 'revenge on the state', after many decades of frustration, as noted by Karsenty (1999). The course of history is marked by a 'conflict of language' between the state and the local communities, concerning ownership of the forest and the issue of access to financial benefits generated by its commercial exploitation. As such, in the logic of these villagers the creation of Community Forests meant that they had won the 'battle'.

However, such revenge is not as tangible as all that. The local communities still seem vulnerable and 'captive'. The first example of this 'captivity' in the decentralised context is the procedures necessary for the creation and the establishment of Community Forests. We have observed that the path from the demarcation of a Community Forest to its final exploitation – through the signing of the management agreement – is long and slow. The forestry services are needed everywhere. Once the

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application has been put together, it is submitted to the central services of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, and a long period of waiting ensues. Some village communities have waited for two years before being given an answer. When everything is ready, a 'management agreement' must be signed between the administration and the village community concerned. This signature is generally marked by deep delays, primarily because administrative authorities (*préfets*) and officials of the Ministry of Forests ask for money (Assembe, pers. com.). Over the last four years, 150 applications have been submitted to the central services of the Ministry of Environment and Forests: 36 have been accepted; 14 have been rejected; the 100 remaining applications are stuck in the recesses of the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

This slowness of the administration is indicative of the central state's wish to take decentralisation step by step, keeping it fully under control (Assembe & Oyono 2002; Bigombé 2003). The legal provisions state that Community Forest management agreements shall be signed for a renewable period of five years. If the forest is 'poorly managed' – in the opinion of the Ministry of Environment and Forests – the agreement is withdrawn. It may be concluded from this that it is not a question of a real and final transfer of managerial powers, but rather of a 'conditional loan'. That is what happened in the year 2002, when the management agreement signed between the village of Kongo, in the Lomié region (East Cameroon) and the Ministry of Environment and Forests in 2001, was suspended for 'poor management'. On that occasion, it happened that 'poor management' simply equalled a search for self-determination. In other words, the management committee of Kongo wanted to market logs from their Community Forests without any supervision from the Ministry of Forests, whose regional agents are considered as corrupt.

The 'urbanisation' of local-level forest management committees

In villages where Community Forests already have management agreements, the 'external elites' have suddenly begun to join in local initiatives. Forest management decentralisation has thus generated a 'localism fever', a new interest of elites in their geographic origin. By so doing, they have aligned themselves with the management committees, which the said elites have been able to divert from the original mandate, and have set themselves up as more than resource persons for these organisations (Oyono 2003b). Others have managed to gain positions in these committees. Five different modes of representation have been identified in our case study of institutional arrangements in local forest management (Oyono 2003b),

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including *competitive elections*, *appointment by consensus*, *statutory appointment*, *self-appointment* and *co-optation*.

Over fifteen committees with a total of ninety members, 40% were selected through *self-appointment* procedures and 27% through *co-optation*, with a large number of 'external elites'. The designation of committee members is generally supervised by mayors, *sous-préfets* and *chefs de districts*. Bigombé (2003) reveals that in the south province of Cameroon, the governor himself asked *sous-préfets* and *chefs de district* to create forestry fees management committees in villages in 2001/2, hence their subordination to, and their control by, these regional-level state authorities. Once self-appointed or co-opted, the elite instantaneously establish alliances with town-based logging companies, to whom they have promised their villages' forests. Subsequent transactions include alliances with central state bureaucrats, for an administrative 'green light', and the hijacking of management committees. In the shadow of this race for the financial fall-out from the logging of Community Forests, these elites have invented mechanisms to 'urbanise' many committees and take over the planning of the management of Community Forests, and finally their 'from-a-distance' control, in 'patron–client' ties. No protest is registered from other members (Efoua 2002). The elite most involved in this 'hijacking' consists of senior civil servants and politicians. They are all, in their own way, and just like the central state, contributing to the decline of the decentralisation process and the retention of powers at the centre.

The single case of a Council Forest already classified and awaiting the start of commercial exploitation is not yet a large enough sample from which to draw lessons concerning the brakes put on decentralisation in this particular policy innovation. However, there are indices that can help us to understand the relationship between the central and local levels in this respect. We mentioned above that, in Cameroon, the local governments come under the supervision of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and the central services as well as provincial governors, *préfets*, *sous-préfets* and *chefs de district*. This means that, at the regional level, the mayor of a rural local government, in principle an elected representative,[6] reports to the *préfet*, the *sous-préfet* and the *chef de district*, who are appointed central state representatives. These authorities do not feel accountable to mayors, even less so to the local communities (Bigombé 2003). This purely upwards accountability is an eloquent indicator of central government's resistance to the process of decentralisation through the empowerment of local governments, and an example of the relationship of submission being reproduced. Looking to the future, it must be recognised that the local representatives of central government are likely to assert themselves more,

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and assert their right of control over local authorities to the income from logging of the Dimako Council Forest, to the detriment of the local communities.

The forestry taxation system is the most productive area for finding examples of resistance to decentralisation 'at the top'. Between 1994 and 1998, the 10% of the total sum allocated to each local government was indeed transferred to the village communities concerned. Originally intended to promote local development, these royalties, like the 'village tax', were to a large extent allocated to consumables, since the village communities considered that 'it was now their turn to drink and eat with the money from their forests' (Oyono *et al.* 2003). On 29 April 1998, the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the Ministry of Territorial Administration published a joint *arrêté* (order) laying down the terms for the use of revenue from logging. The *arrêté* states, primarily, that the 10% previously directly transferred to the village level would henceforth be managed by the local government, at the regional level. At the village level, this *arrêté* prescribed the creation of management committees as local branches of a regional committee, town based, and made up of the mayor, the *sous-préfet* or the *chef de district* and many other civil servants. Still intended for local development, the income in question should be injected directly into micro-projects identified and planned jointly by the municipal authorities, the administrative authorities and the representatives of the village forestry fees management committees.

This shift, this 'recentralisation' of the part of forestry revenue allocated to the local communities, carries with it many implications. The administrative and municipal authorities, taking advantage of the opportunity, have developed a strategy for taking over the local management of this income. As usual, these authorities are primarily preoccupied with maintaining and enlarging their influence. As discovered by Milol & Pierre (2000) and Bigombé (2003), once these funds are paid out at the regional level, they generally end up at unjustified destinations. Many socio-economic village-level projects planned in the Ebolowa, Mbang, Djoum, Yokadouma, and Mindourou regions were not finally funded and the money disappeared. Equally, Kouna (2001) reports on the proliferation of fictional projects, the funding for which is released but misappropriated by the municipal and administrative authorities.

When funding is allocated to actual socio-economic projects, the beneficiary communities are subject to strict controls by a whole range of outside actors: the mayor, the *sous-préfet/chef de district*, the representative of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, and so forth. None of these actors is under any obligation to report back. In contrast to what went on

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before, the joint *arrêté* has 'reconcentrated' powers in the hands of the administration. This approach is thus characteristic of the mechanisms used to retain decentralised forestry taxation revenue. In this respect, Djeukam & Nguiffo (2002) note that:

> The downgrading of village development committees in the political process of managing the forestry fees, to the benefit of committees chaired by mayors who were appointed, in this connection, by the governor, is, to a certain extent, part of the logic of the '*patrimonialist*' and '*neo-patrimonialist*' sharing of the revenue from forest exploitation between the [central] authorities and the local political elite, the logic of rewarding political militantism and the logic of maintaining the local political clientele.

Moreover, there is increasing public discussion concerning the setting up of a 'central equalisation fund' from the forestry fees, at the *Fonds d'Equipement et d'Intervention Communale* (FEICOM), a parastatal establishment placed under the supervision of the Ministry of Territorial Administration (and Decentralisation). This means that the 10% of forestry fees allocated to the village communities and the 40% allocated to the local governments should be transferred to the capital, Yaoundé, at the level of FEICOM. The creation of this 'central equalisation fund' is provided for in the 2000/1 finance law, but is not yet implemented. The aim of the fund is to conduct a 'solidarity' distribution of forestry revenue throughout the country, and no longer only in areas with forestry concessions, as is currently the case. Many criticisms have been made of this initiative by the mayors, the elites and the local populations of the areas with forestry concessions. These stakeholders will certainly lose income, given their practices. For the village communities, it represents a double 'recentralisation': their share of the fees was first given over for management by the municipal authorities and the regional administrative authorities in the 1998 joint ministerial *arrêté*, and is now being transferred to the central level.

In a recent study, Oyono (2003b) analyses the organisational infrastructure of decentralised forest management. He shows that the various management committees established in the villages since 1999 do not ensure 'responsible representation', and therefore are not accountable to the local populations. Whether in the management of the forestry fees or in the management of income from marketing the timber from Community Forests, the committees are seen to be seeking individual profit and a 'representation annuity'. The large amounts of money from the forestry fees intended to fund rural micro-projects are most frequently misappropriated by regional-level authorities (*sous-préfets* and officials of the Ministry of Forests), with the active complicity of village-level committee members.

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Moreover, management committee members are also directly responsible for misappropriating the income from the 'eco-tax' paid directly by the logging companies, and income from the exploitation of Community Forests. For example, the forestry fees management committee of Toungrelo village in the Dimako region (East Cameroon) was accused of diverting US$14,000 in 2001 (Kouna 2001; Bigombé 2003); when the local population wanted to take the chairman to court, the *sous-préfet* asked them, in an authoritarian manner indeed, to withdraw the complaint. These practices can be put down to local resistance to democratic decentralisation and to the misappropriation of the expected profits.

Putting the brakes on forest management decentralisation in Cameroon: political egoism or excess of authoritarian zeal?

Two explanations are produced for the relationship between the central and local levels in the process of resistance 'at the top' (Ribot & Oyono 2004), and the constraints on the decentralisation of the management of Cameroon's forests. The first is that the central state truly wants to decentralise and promote new democratic governance systems at both regional and local levels, without any ulterior motives, but has underestimated the reaction to this and has now decided to regulate the basic mechanisms. The second is that, since the historical practices of a simple deconcentration of powers, or coadministration, may be interpreted ambiguously, the central state only began to implement some level of devolution under pressure mainly from the donors and, to a lesser extent, the domestic demands of public participation and justice. This latter explanation is based on the fact that forest management is a strategic issue in Cameroon, and so the donors, aware of the issues and the popular threats produced by the context of democratisation, have forced the state to involve outlying actors in handling forestry revenue. By doing this, the local communities and the local authorities, who are constantly haunted by dreams of access to forestry 'royalties', could be politically appeased.

Nevertheless, questions must be asked as to the nature of the solution now being adopted by the Cameroonian government, with regard to the form of decentralisation of forest management. One thing is certain: in the area of governance, as with any other policy innovation, the central state is not in full control of all the mechanisms (Karsenty 2002), by any means. The cross-cutting nature of the forestry reforms is linked to what is happening at the most central level. Many different actors – whose interests are not in the least convergent, even in the short term – are thrown together, crash into each other, and sometimes seem as if they are about to

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make the state voiceless. Vertically, the implementation of the process of decentralisation too involves a whole string of stakeholders, from the centre to the edges, of disproportionate institutional weight and political and material means.

'*Corrupting culture*' *as a driving force*

Study of this vertical dimension shows two constant factors. Firstly, there is the absence of any 'participatory culture', and the persistence of command reflexes in the agents of the state at different levels (provincial and regional). For example, the agents of the central state continue to manipulate the village communities, and to deny them either existential or political maturity. Then – as noted by Bigombé (2003), Etoungou (2003) and Oyono (2003b), and as pointed out above – the course of the decentralised management of Cameroon's forests has been diverted and taken over at the regional level by the administrative and municipal authorities, and the 'external elite' of the villages. This dominant group marches to corruption with the sound of its 'stomach', as in many other sectors of Cameroon's public life (see Bayart 1993; Mbembé 1989). In short, forest management is marked by gifts and patronage, by corruption, viewed as a cultural problem, in the sense used by Ackerman (1999); that is, 'the misuse of public power for private gain' transformed into a *societal* choice and reproduced as 'total behaviours'.

The surface of Cameroon's forest management is strewn with political and financial pitfalls, and indeed many others. Resistance to democratic decentralisation certainly plays a role in the power-retaining strategies of some well-off actors within the central state sphere. In addition to this, these actors organise a system of indices and survival reflexes in a crude attempt to save their 'consumable' profits, and perpetuate the postcolonial and neo-patrimonial logic that 'the goat grazes where it is tethered'. In other words, any agent of a state service may, from a 'maximalist' perspective, take advantage of the real or potential material benefits within his/her grasp. In such conditions, shaky and voluntarily hesitant processes are considered more appropriate by groups of actors clinging to their privileged position, once democratic decentralisation has set free the mechanisms, which are difficult to neutralise. In the current situation, there is as yet no real resistance.

However, there are vague signs of verbal reproof from the peripheral actors, notably the village communities (Etoungou 2003). In 2002, the populations of villages managing Community Forests in the Lomié region insisted on contracting loggers to sell their wood, and so decided to refuse

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the assistance of the forestry services, which were vehemently opposed to the strategy. The communities achieved what they wanted. There are no other specific instances. It is possible that the reaction of local communities to excessive 'recentralisation' may imitate the violent outbreaks which accompanied demands for more honourable access to the forest's bounty at the beginning of the 1990s (Mimbimi 1996).

The issue of local capacities

Native communities in the 'forested' zone of Cameroon (mainly East, South, South West and Centre provinces) host diffuse societies in which the power of traditional authorities was emasculated by contact with colonisation (Geschiere 1982; Ngoa 1968). The system of social control in force, weak as it is, cannot promote and control a collective effort like that required for local management. The mode of appropriation of decentralisation at the local level seems very dependent on social organisation. As such, there are no strong organisational schemes, internal rules or an infrastructure of sanctions governing the functioning of management committees (Etoungou 2003; Oyono 2003b), despite reliable proof of embezzlement. Committee members behave as they want, in the absence of any relevant internal authority. Thus, in addition to 'external factors', the lack or weakness of organisational and management capacities should be mentioned as one of the determining factors in the democratic decentralisation 'debacle' in this part of rural Cameroon.

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Democratic decentralisation is based on parameters such as powers held by local actors, institutional forms taken by the process at regional and local levels, responsiveness, accountable representation, and positive outcomes. Cameroon's experiment of forest management decentralisation runs risks explainable by, mainly, attempts by regional-level administrative authorities and national-level bureaucrats to take back powers and resources devolved to elected bodies and to other local actors. Another explanation is the immaturity of organisational infrastructure set up at the village level in support of devolution. Many management committees have been created hastily by administrative authorities, bureaucrats and mayors, without any preparation, hence their easy 'capture' by those actors.

As with any experimental process, the decentralisation of forest management may, in a linear manner, be achieved and then reversed, before it attains a more productive maturity. Whilst such a development is both

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desirable and predictable, we cannot foresee how the process will evolve now, with the recent creation of a Vice-Ministry of Decentralisation within the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation.[7] This new factor could lead to a paradox feared by the outlying actors: the 'systematisation' and escalation of administrative and authoritarian control over the current process of decentralisation, and the postponement of its conversion to a truly democratic approach. It is predictable that with this other process of 'administrative empowerment', Cameroon's 'model' of forest management decentralisation will, more than in the past, be crossed by forces fertilised by 'recentralisation' tendencies.

The way leading to democratic decentralisation needs effective change in policy and in practice. To that effect, real powers must be transferred unequivocally to 'decentralised bodies' (local management committees and *communes*), powers to manage forests and benefits accruing therefrom as well as powers to make decisions about local management. In addition, there is no chance for democratic decentralisation when representatives of the central administration live off corruption. A 'monitoring system' can be implemented with the aim of following up 'administrative behaviours' of national and sub-national authorities in this particular stage of the 'experiment', while facilitating downward accountability and sanctioning enforcement at both regional and village levels.

NOTES

1. If the German administrative heritage did not survive, this is not the case for the British and French ones, which have profoundly 'structured' Cameroon's administrative culture and practices. The bipolarity of this administrative culture, marked by the predominance of francophone Cameroon, has created an anglophone 'discomfort' (Mawhood 1993; Stark 1980).

2. The notion is used in this specific context by Mbembe (1989). It originally derives from the French '*Etat Jacobin*', a highly centralised and invasive system.

3. Decree 72/349 of 24 July 1972.

4. Cameroon is currently divided into ten provinces. Under 'regionalisation', these provinces will become four regions.

5. Cameroon's forestry code divides the country's forests into two types: (i) the 'permanent forest estate' which includes protected areas, Council Forests, and areas allocated to concessionaires for commercial logging; and (ii) the 'non-permanent forest estate', which describes forests that can be used either for purposes other than protection/conservation, or for commercial exploitation, such as farming and small-scale logging.

6. Unfortunately, many mayors are appointed by the central state to replace an elected person.

7. The ministry is now denominated '*Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale et de la Décentralisation*'. Many *sous-préfets* and *chefs de district* we met after this change admitted that they did not know the meaning of decentralisation or, further, its functional basis.

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