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ECAS 4. Panel 87: Understanding Democratic Culture – Municipal Politics and Local Development in Africa

Municipal Elections in the Inner Niger Delta (Mali) or “Those Who Look for the Power Are among Us”.

At the beginning of the nineties, Mali has undertaken the decentralization of the State, a huge administrative reform. Officially, this policy was presented as an ideal tool which would bring development and democratisation at local level via the multiparty game and local elections, and, consequently, a redistribution of power between all the actors of the society (Béridogo, 1997; Kassibo, 1997). As aid conditionality, decentralization is widely supported by donors. Quoting E. Hahonou, decentralization is understood by the ‘international community’ donors as a strategic instrument or a “Trojan horse” which put the project of democratization in the heart of African societies¹. Based on the voluntary villages’ gathering, Mali has established three decentralized level of authority: Regions, Districts and Municipalities. The main phases of this reform have widely relied on leaders and traditional authorities. Moreover, decentralization has quickly been understood as an opportunity to restore the former socio-political order (Fay and al., 2006). Punctuated with three local elections, a decade has passed since the creation of municipalities.

Although little studied in rural areas, municipal elections and electoral processes are at the moment among one of the most visible aspects of this reform for local actors. Often misunderstood by the ‘international community’ as being a “barometer of the democracy”, elections are nevertheless a necessary condition, although not sufficient, of the liberal representative democracy (Otayek, 1998). Furthermore, local elections are a particularly stimulating object of research. Indeed, on one hand, it is a particular moment which crystallizes the dynamics of a specific local political arena, and the practical preparations for municipal elections and their implementation activate many people at the local level. On the other hand, as we will see, it concerns explicitly the modalities of power exercise.

In this paper, I propose to analyze the way traditional authorities of Wuro, a village in the Inner Niger Delta in Mali, get involved in municipal elections in order to reposition themselves, reaffirm and secure their position in this local political arena. Based on two ethnographic fieldworks (ten month and seven weeks), I have observed a large mobilization of traditional authorities in order to “win the municipality” during electoral processes since 1999. They are elected as mayor and town councillors. However, at first sight, the municipality is often perceived as an empty shell without real stakes. Thus, I propose to try to understand this phenomenon in the following pages.

¹ Hahonou, E., « Politique identitaire et émergence politique des descendants d’esclaves dans l’Ouest nigérien », communication au colloque sur « Les processus électoraux en Afrique. Conceptions de la représentation démocratique et pratiques de la compétition politique » organisé par le LASDEL à Niamey en septembre 2010.

On Sunday, April 26th: “the truth of ballot boxes”

Sunday, April 26th, 2009 is the municipal elections-day in Youwarou, a small town of the Inner Niger Delta. Youwarou is at the same time the name of a rural municipality, a District, and of the chief town of these two administrative sectors. More than a weekly market day, the atmosphere is characterized by excitement and large crowds. Shops are crowded. The entire town seems to go down the streets for this event. Coming from fishing camps, agricultural hamlets and neighbouring pastures, many “strangers” are in town. It is the opportunity to exchange news about the region. Families receive their relatives and “their strangers”. Polling stations are settled in both schools of the town: seven in Homboloré and three in Wuro. Indeed, this town is composed of two villages and stemming from the long-term history of the settlement and from the successive conquests of the area, the traditional authorities of Youwarou do not form a homogeneous group. Wuro is the village of Fulbe semi-nomadic pastoralists and other Fulbe groups. This village has two poles of power. The first one is the political chieftaincy with *Amiru Wuro*, the political chief, who is also the master of the land. The second one is the Yallalbe with the *Jowro*, the master of the pastures. Warlike power last arrived in the area, they own the second biggest pastoral province of the Delta (*leydi*) and manage the access to these pastures. They are the holders of a strong power and recognized as the traditional representatives of the Fulani pastoralists of the area. However, the Yallalbe has initially no political power to manage Wuro village (understood as the government of people). Their power is established on the “property of the grass” and relied on the control and the management of the access to this resource. Nevertheless, they play a major political role in the local arena because, as one of my interlocutors reminds it, “the one who has his hand on the resources has his hand on people”. This complex configuration of powers produces a constant latent rivalry between Wuro chieftaincy and the Yallalbe because both groups are “people of power”. Homboloré is the village of fishermen and “strangers”, of the administration, the justice and development projects.

In a friendly atmosphere where a certain tension is nevertheless perceptible, all the actors involved in this electoral process take their role very seriously. However, in polling stations and in the surroundings, the anthropologist’s presence disturbs. To show familiarity links or to discuss with an assessor or a president of polling station is not allowed. The camera is banned. A president of a polling station asks me the permit allowing me to lead my researches and, thus, to be present and to observe. People are uncomfortable. And so is the sub-prefect. I don’t have a permit delivered by the CENI² to be an official observer of the elections. Thus, I am logically not supposed to be there. The sub-prefect suggests me to make my observations in Wuro, “at the Fulbe place”, where my presence will be officially less disturbing because the schoolyard is not delimited by a wall. This space can be considered as public. Thus, the access cannot be refused to anyone. According to the advice of the sub-prefect, the following ethnographic observations will be made in Wuro.

At the entry of polling stations, lines are forming. The rhythm is slow. Voters are patient or, on the contrary, get slowly impatient. Women are well dressed. Sometimes, some people are turned away at the door of the polling stations because they don’t have their polling card or because there is no correspondence between their identities and those on the polling card. However, even without an ID card, if the voter is enrolled on the attendance list and if three people certify his identity, he can vote. During the day, polling stations are always full.

² Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante

Inside, under the attentive look of the President of the polling station, both representatives of political parties and both representatives of the CENI, the voter shows his polling card to a first assessor: his identity is checked and ticked on a first list. Then, the second assessor gives a ballot paper to the voter. Then, by the third assessor, the identity of the voter is again checked with a second list on which the voter appends his signature or his fingerprint. After a transition in the polling booth, the voter puts his ballot paper in a transparent ballot box next to which sits the fourth and last assessor. Having voted, the elector quickly goes away from the school. Here, discussing partisan preferences is out of the question. The vote is secret and has to stay that way. Only some discreet allusions to symbols of parties are sometimes made by the sympathizers: For example, “the bee makes its honey” or “have you take your spoon of honey this morning?” reference to Adema-P.A.S.J.

The sub-prefect drives his motorcycle between the polling stations of both villages and in worries about the good progress of the ballot. In the schoolyard, sitting on a mat in the shade, an armed guard is in charge of the maintenance of public order. At noon, his meal is taken charge by Wuro’s chief. The son of this one, who also runs for election, pays him cigarettes and credit phone. During the day, candidates move between the polling stations. They observe, speculate on the results, welcome and direct people according to their polling card. The candidates encourage them to vote. Sometimes, they drive a voter who is at the wrong polling stations so allowing him to save more than one hour of walking under a blazing sun to go to the right polling station. They so hope to have won one more voter. In another corner of the schoolyard, sitting under a tree, a relative of the *Jowro* (the master of pastures) has a pile of polling cards and asks regularly some someone’s help (a person who can read as the guard or the anthropologist) to read the names of the polling card and, then, to give its either to its owner, or to a homonym, or to one person “by chance” who will vote for the “right” candidate. Then, a truck chartered by the master of pastures, who is also candidate, unloads a crowd of men: it is Fulbe pastoralists who left their herd in the bush to come to vote. All the means are used in order to win!

At the end of the day, the ballot is coming to the end. Men are sitting down in the schoolyard and form progressively two groups. In a silent and quiet way, waiting for the results, these men show their political preference: a first group supports the chief of Wuro whereas the second one supports the master of pastures. This split represents the tacit historical tension dividing the village between these two poles of power. With the help of the guard, polling stations are closed in order to make the count. Children try to observe through the window. Outside, people follow the counting of ballot papers, trying to forecast the results.

At night time, in the closed polling station, the counting is made by torchlight. Everybody is tired and wishes that it quickly ends. Ballot papers are counted. There is a small gap between the number of ballot papers and the number of signatures on the attendance list. After having counted several times, the different members of the polling station decree in a consensual way that the number of ballot papers finally represent “the truth of ballot boxes”. Then, the vote count is made. There is no distinction between a blank vote and a spoilt paper. These two categories are automatically invalidated by the members of the polling station. Those consider these ballot papers as having been “wasted” by “people who do not know how to vote” or by “old people who did not understand”. The fault falls finally to the candidates who should have explained better the procedure to their electorates. The members of the polling station receive an attendance certificate. Minutes are written with the final results of the polling station and goes to the prefecture. This last one will centralize all the minutes of the polling stations of the District.

The night following the election-day, the candidates contact by cell phone the representatives of their party in the different polling stations of the municipality (22 villages) to estimate their result. Next morning, everyone has a more or less precise idea of the situation. Five days later, having put “in coherence certain figures”, the Prefect announces, municipality by municipality, the official results as well as the local councillors recently elected. He also insists on the fact that election-day has passed off in a peaceful and ordered way. The copies of the official documents with these results are quickly and secretly available in the only shop of the locality which has a photocopier for 100 FCFA the sheet.

The results of the elections in Wuro are the following ones. With a rate of 52.71 % participation, Wuro is over the communal (44.98 %³) and national (44.61 %⁴) averages. The Adéma-P.A.S.J. list led by the chieftaincy obtains 50.81 % of the valid votes⁵. The URD list led by the *Jowro* (the master of pastures) has 46.81 % of the valid votes. The three other parties in race collect together 2.37 % of the votes (16 votes on 675). However, if the Adéma-P.A.S.J. has won in Wuro, in the rest of the municipality, the URD has widely won and obtains the majority in the new elected town council⁶. Thus, the *Jowro* is elected as the mayor. Being in the first and third position on the Adéma-P.A.S.J. list, the candidates of Wuro’s chieftaincy also sit in the town council.

Traditional authorities and political competition

In the studied village, since 1999, the stake of local election campaigns is not to know who is going to be on the electoral rolls. Indeed, Wuro's traditional authorities get always involved in the political competition either by standing themselves as candidate, or by supporting a candidate who is one of their relatives. Furthermore, except the electoral rolls led by these actors, there is no real credible alternative. Both from the analytical and subjective point of view, at first sight, it seems rather evident that traditional authorities are keeping in hand the reins of the municipality following a logic of continuity and renewal of the power. The *Jowro* has always been elected as the mayor. Until 2009, the Wuro chief was elected as town councillor. At the latest election, his son and his nephew were elected. Thus, the chieftaincy interests are still represented in the municipal council. We can identify three decisive elements which can explain this particular configuration of municipal elections.

First, Wuro’s traditional authorities benefit from their experience of the machinery of the political competition under the former single-party State UDPM characterized by the factionalism and clientelism rules. At this time, this way of making politics relied widely on traditional authorities (chieftaincy of villages, former cantonal chieftaincy, masters of waters, masters of the land and masters of pastures) because they were having an important capacity of mobilization and control of voters.

³ The statistics of these municipal elections come from my data collected from the sheets of counting of votes for the municipality of Youwarou and from the proclamation of the results of the municipal elections for the District of Youwarou made by the Prefect on May 1st, 2009.

⁴ This results come from a press release of the President of the CENI (Independent National Electoral Commission) at the news of ORTM (Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision du Mali) on May 14th, 2009.

⁵ The percentage of valid votes is calculated on the basis of the number of collected ballot papers from which was subtracted the number of spoilt papers. Let us remind that spoilt papers (blank votes included) are invalidated. For the village of Wuro, 64 spoilt papers are counted. It represents 8,66 % of the collected ballot papers.

⁶ In the new town council, the URD has 12 seats on 17, leaving the last five seats for the Adéma-P.A.S.J.

Then, second important element, the organization of the electoral competition is rooted in a strong personalization of the political game. Because of this fact and because of their ability of mobilization and control of the electorate, the traditional authorities of Wuro are at the head of these political elite which has been formed under the UDPM.

“But here, people do not join a party because it is the party nor they saw the program of the party. No, if Guimba [the first Mayor-*Jowro* of Youwarou] joins the party, all those who follow Guimba directly do not even ask question. If he moves, they move. [...] It’s always necessary to have persons in charge, leaders, political leaders. As long as we don’t have them with us, it’s not possible.” Extract from the interview of B. B., political secretary of the ADEMA-Pasj section of the District of Youwarou.

In order to perceive the local political game, it is necessary to understand “who is who”. Each actor involved in the electoral competition recruits his political clientele within his circles of influence. The first one is constituted by the family. Supporters follow and support first their relatives: “blood is always in front”. If someone does not support publicly a relative, it means that he is publicly against this last one. After the family circle, comes the one of friendship and acquaintances based on the interpersonal relationships that a candidate can develop during his existence (childhood friends, “promotionnaires”, common political path...). This circle is generally not very extensive. Sometimes, slack but present, comes the circle based on loyalty to historic alliances: former close links between families since generations which are often materialized by wedding rings. This mutually allows to expend networks and to increase influence. Let us underline that, with regard to these historic and matrimonial links, political alliances formed during the electoral competition always appear fickle and momentary, the time of an electoral race. Finally, the circle of ethnico-professional identities is fundamental, particularly for the Fulbe groups: “the Fulbe follows the Fulbe. He is not going to put himself behind a Somono or a Bozo (fisherman)”, whereas the opposite is thinkable because the first ones have already dominated the second ones in the past⁷.

“If you look at the URD list and the ADEMA list, on both lists, the chief candidates come from Wuro. Because these people know very well that in the villages, it is Wuro that they follow because, in the municipality, they are Fulbe villages. They prefer to see a Fulbe in the lead rather than to follow someone else that they do not know well.” Extract from the interview of A. L., son of Wuro’s chief and town councillor elected in 2009.

Furthermore, in a pragmatic way, those who have interests in breeding or fishing generally follow the *Jowro* (the master of pastures) or the master of waters. A major part of the users of these resources depend on them to survive. These ones cannot afford to incur the risk of a disgrace and to lose their access to the resource. Thus, these traditional authorities have a huge electoral reservoir.

“Because the *Jowro* [the masters of pastures], when they will learn that they have been betrayed by such person ... even the village will be sanctioned because people will not have access any more. [...] First, the *Jowro*, all the pastures, it’s for him. And when the *Jowro* will know that it’s you who betrayed, your herd will suffer. Of course, he cannot prevent you from grazing in the *bourgou* [the pastures] but he will charge you each cow. That’s obvious! That’s why, when you are the *Jowro* here... You saw that in the District, all the *Jowro* have won.” Extract from the

⁷ Let us remind that before the colonization, the Delta was dominated by the Fulbe theocratic empire of Maasina (1818-1862). The Fulbe domination is still present in the minds.

interview of B. B., political secretary of the section ADEMA-Pasj of the circle of Youwarou.

“It is especially on the land. There are villages where the fathers who cultivate, maybe it’s for this one and he comes and he says: if you do not vote for me, the plot you’re cultivating, I’ll take it in order to give it to somebody else. Those are threats that people receive daily. Well, they are villagers and, often, they do not necessarily know that somebody cannot make all what he wants because we are in a State with laws where we cannot make what we want in a whole village only because they did not vote for you.” Extract from the interview of A. L., son of Wuro’s chief and town councillor elected in 2009.

Finally, the last explanatory element of the dominant position of these traditional authorities in the present local political arena is the fact that these last ones were a central cog in the implementation of the decentralization process at the local level. Indeed, Mali has the peculiarity to have followed an original pattern composed of three main phases. The first one was a phase of awareness campaign supposed “to make directly the populations participate in the starting of the decentralization reform by positioning them as actors and by training them”⁸. The second stage was thought as a phase of “dialogue with all the actors of the political, economic and social life to end up in relevant propositions of micro division of the territory from which municipalities [were] created”⁹ (Mission of Decentralization, on 1995: 3). This territorial division was organized on the basis of the voluntary gathering of villages and fractions¹⁰ in municipalities. Concretely, these first two phases have been reduced to a vast and fast national campaign of information and mobilization to all the actors in both rural and urban areas led by the GREM (Groupes Régionaux d’Etudes et de Mobilisation) and the GLEM (Groupes Locaux d’Etudes et de Mobilisation). In these groups, at the level of the District of Youwarou, the representatives of the “civil society” were in fact the “representatives” of the political chieftaincies of the chief-town Youwarou and, so, of Wuro. Bérédogo also observes that in the South of Mali, political chieftaincies were the first recipient of this awareness campaign and the author doubts of the fact that the “cadets sociaux” have received entirely and correctly the information (Bérédogo, 1997). Furthermore, through its presentation and its translation in local languages as “le retour du pouvoir à la maison, au terroir” (Bérédogo, 1997; Fay and al, 2006), has quickly been understood as an opportunity to restore the former socio-political order and to re-legitimize the traditional authorities weakened by the domanialisation of natural resources¹¹.

Municipal council as power and opportunities

Facing raids and conquests, different empires, French colonization and, then, the centralized Malian State stemming from Independences, Wuro’s traditional authorities have always finally managed to compose, to negotiate with the transformations of the central power by

⁸ Mission de Décentralisation, *Programme de décentralisation, Guide de découpage territorial*, Primature, République du Mali, 1995, pp. 5. (my translation)

⁹ Mission de Décentralisation, *Programme de décentralisation, Guide de découpage territorial*, Primature, République du Mali, 1995, pp. 3. (my translation)

¹⁰ The fraction is the basic administrative unit in nomadic environment.

¹¹ The third and last phase of this decentralization process corresponds to the implementation of Regions, Districts and Municipalities, on one hand, by the power transfer (always unfinished) from the central government to the collectivities, and, on the other hand, by the municipal elections of June 6th, 1999 which established the first local town council elected for a five-year period. Up to now, in Mali, this decentralization process ends up in contrasted situations according to the local contexts and the concerned sectors.

using their ability of control and mobilization of local populations. Thus, they have a strong political and historical rooting. However, today, before the rest of the population, local traditional authorities have clearly perceived the potential of change of the decentralization process which carries a reorganization of the local political arena. In this reform, they have anticipated the fact that the major municipal stake is “a possible total upheaval” (Fay, 1999: 131, my translation). While the local socio-political organization is initially highly organized into a hierarchy and fundamentally unequal, from now on, “those who look for the power are among us”, i.e. every Malian citizen has legally the right to stand for municipal election¹². However, to be elected involves the fact of having access to several opportunities given by the municipality that directly concern the configuration of the local powers. Facing this situation of insecurity, Wuro’s traditional authorities mobilize in a opportunist and strategic way the argument of citizenship and they spend time, money and energy in order to “win the municipality” either by being a candidate, or by supporting one of their relatives. S Koné observes a similar situation at Tinkolé, a municipality of the southwest of Mali. There, if the chieftaincy’s holders seem to subscribe to the decentralization project, they are annoyed by the innovative character of the way of accessing power and they decide to get involved in the political competition (Koné, 1997). Wuro’s traditional authorities explain essentially their political commitment by the following three purposes.

First of all, to be elected and sit in the municipal council, mainly as a mayor, it allows on one hand, winning symbolically in prestige and power and, on the other hand, the accumulation of traditional and elective legitimacies.

“To be a mayor when I’m already a *Jowro*, it’s like to put a heel at your shoes; that can only increase your height.” Extract from the interview of B.B., the mayor-*Jowro* of Youwarou.

Then, legally, municipalities are in charge of the management, the development, the preservation and the protection of the ecological balance of their territory. Nevertheless the State remains the owner of the land. With, for example, the implementation of the pastoral Charter or the local conventions, municipalities are encouraged to set up democratic and participative tools for the management of natural resources that favour, at least, the consultation and, at most, the joint management of these resources with the concerned traditional authorities. The practical modalities of implementation of these tools are extremely variable according to local contexts. Furthermore, on one hand, municipalities’ prerogatives concerning the land are not fixed by the law with more precision. On the other hand, municipalities are composed of a list of villages without any territorial delimitation. Thus, because of an anticipation effect with regard to this situation and a possible territorial division of production spaces between municipalities, Wuro’s traditional authorities get involved in the race for the municipality. They get organized in a proactive way and place their pawns on the municipal chessboard in this eventuality. In this way, they will be in the foreground in case of

¹² On my field, I have nevertheless observed the fact that besides the necessary legal criteria to be a candidate at municipal elections, several other informal criteria are taken into account such as, for example, the candidate’s social status, his ethnic group, his age, his sex, his skills, his level of schooling, his main place of life, his ability to get the incomes of the development sector, the relationship between autochthons and allochthons, etc. Subjected to a strong contextual variability, these various informal criteria are notably the product of the balance of power stemming from the long-term local history. This situation echoes with the notion of “candidabiliter” according to the expression of J-P. Olivier de Sardan (Colloque sur « Les processus électoraux en Afrique. Conceptions de la représentation démocratique et pratiques de la compétition politique » organisé par le LASDEL à Niamey en septembre 2010). On this sujet, see also Jacob, J-P., Hilgers, M., « Anthropologie de la candidature électorale au Burkina Faso », *Afrique contemporaine*, vol.4, n°228, 2008.

power transfer from the central government to municipalities and they do not risk the involvement of a local elected representative, whoever he is, in their business. Traditional authorities have established a tacit agreement so that the municipality does not get involved directly in the government of natural resources. They have agreed that each master of a resource is the intermediary between the municipality and the users of his resource. Thus, there is a pragmatic distribution of the tasks within the town council: modelled on the discourses substantializing ethnico-professional identities, the mayor-*Jowro* is in charge of the questions concerning pastures; those concerning waters and land are respectively assigned to the master of waters and to the master of the land. It's locally presented as a positive attempt of conciliation between the traditional and municipal logics.

The following example highlights the way, through the town council, the traditional authorities of Wuro and Homboloré consolidate their position in the local political arena and they still hold dominion over the government of natural resources. In the framework of a local development project supported by a donor, a village association of Homboloré asks a flooded plot of land to the town council in order to regenerate *bourgou* (*Echinochla stagnina*) and produce marketable forage for the livestock. This situation is rather complex. Indeed, breaking openly the ethnico-professional borders, it is about a fishermen's association of Homboloré claiming the access to a flooded plot of land on the *hariima*¹³ of Wuro in order to produce some forage and, then, to come within the breeding market that is supposed to be the exclusive domain of Fulbe breeders. Yet, the town should not “lose” the support of the development partner. One way or another, the municipal council has to bring a positive outcome to this request. After several negotiations freeze¹⁴, the municipality decides to delegate the traditional authorities of Wuro and Homboloré (i.e. themselves, a part of the town council) for the delimitation of this space. A representative of the master of waters, the master of lands' son and the *Jowro* as well as the Imam and some customary notables manage to reach an agreement and point out a plot to the association. Thus, the town council is legally responsible for this attribution but, thanks to the subtleties of the law, has found an exit so that, in the facts, it is always the traditional authorities who manage this complex land issue.

Finally, the third purpose why Wuro's traditional authorities get involved in the municipality is the fact that town councillors play a function of intermediation for their respective political clientele mainly with the administration, the development projects and the justice¹⁵. Allowing delivering some services, this function of intermediation represents an essential stake for the traditional authorities. Indeed, dominated by different empires, then under the colonization, until the day before the decentralization, those actors held the strategic position of interface between “their people” and the central power of that time. This central position is strengthened by the constant distrust that existed and always exists between the local representatives of the administration and the local populations¹⁶. To be elected in the town council allows these traditional authorities to preserve this function that they believe as one of the foundations of their role so legitimizing their dominion. As a kind of moral commitment, these traditional authorities consider that they are in charge of guiding, directing “their people”.

¹³ In the Inner Niger Delta, the *hariima* is a pasture reserved for the dairy cow of the village and “traditionally” managed, in this case, by the master of the lands of Wuro.

¹⁴ Let us remind that the mayor of the municipality is also the *Jowro* or the master of pastures and the representative of the Fulbe pastoralists.

¹⁵ Especially in the follow-up of supplementary judgments for the delivery of birth certificates and ID cards, indispensable elements to obtain his polling card and be able to vote on the election-day.

¹⁶ The exactions committed by the local agents of the “Service des Eaux et Forêts” are still present in minds.

“Because me, I’m all the same in charge of the communities. That, it’s acknowledged.” Extract from the interview of B.B., the mayor-*Jowro* of Youwarou.

Furthermore, Wuro’s traditional authorities become aware of the fact that outside the town council, it’s more and more difficult for them to be able to assume this position.

“- My father [Wuro’s chief] has always been a leader. He always had people with him, people who turned to him when they had problems. It is him who guides them, either with the administration or for other issues. It is him who guides them and he helps them to resolve their problems. With his age, he cannot do it any more. But, somebody has to do it. And me, I have well understood that even at the level of the administration here, as an elected official, we can make a lot of things. With the administration, relationships form very well. But if you are an ordinary citizen, it is not evident. [...] we cannot ask them to make wrong stuff or to release somebody who did bad things. That, me, I am never going to ask it to a gendarme or to whomever to release a thief even if it’s a brother. If it’s a thief, he has to stay in jail. But, it’s especially to support people who fall in the arbitrary power. Unfortunately, it’s what often happens. People are accused wrongly or they are wrongly punished and there, when they are relatives or people with whom you are together since the beginning, we try to look for a solution.

- But if you are elected, you’ll have more weight?

- Yes because it is what we always saw. Because when mayors appear in offices, even for the impossible, they manage to get out of trouble.” Extract from the interview of A. L., son of Wuro’s chief and town councillor elected in 2009.

Moreover, to maintain this privileged position of interface between groups of populations and the outside, to be unavoidable, it allows maintaining strategically the networks of interpersonal relationships which establish the basis of a future electorate.

Finally, in my opinion, two other strategic arguments induce the political involvement of these traditional authorities. To be elected as a town councillor allows being in the foreground to receive all kind of information. Indeed, it implies to be invited to take part in several meetings, awareness campaigns, work sessions with the administration, “development consultants-experts” organized mainly by the State and the development partners. Information constitutes itself an essential stake of power and an economic challenge, particularly in this context of municipalities’ implementation and races for the incomes of the development sector. Let us note that since the beginning of the decentralization process, NGOs and other development partners have an increasing tendency to work in direct collaboration with municipalities. Thus, to be a municipal elected representative allows being informed in time and getting organized according to the received information and the concerned stakes.

“Those who are in the town council, those who have a political life, they decide everything. And you are there and you say yourself “well, I am responsible” but you hear things only when it has taken place. You hear things in the last minute. Yet, it’s better to be there and that things take place in your presence. If there is something, in any case, you will know. And if there are injustices, that people want to make wrong stuff, you can refuse. That’s when you are present. When, at the last moment, you are present with a *fait accompli*, even if it’s not fair, it’s often not easy to be able to change things.” Extract from the interview of A. L., son of Wuro’s chief and town councillor elected in 2009.

Second key economic stake, to sit in the town council allows these traditional authorities to maintain in their advantage a system of government of natural resources that ensures them

considerable incomes because of the monetarization of transactions giving access to these natural resources (“grass price”, “the part of the water”, bonuses for the mediation of conflicts...).

For example, the municipality of Youwarou set up a particular system of taxation of the herds coming in *Jowro*'s pastures. Every herd has to pay, on one hand, the traditional “grass price” to the *Jowro*-mayor of Youwarou, and, on the other hand, 2000 FCFA as tax for the municipality collected by the mayor-*Jowro* of Youwarou. This organization is considered as avant-gardist because the mayor-*Jowro* is the only traditional authority of Youwarou who “shares” his income with the municipality.

“The town council continues to tax the *bourgou*. We are going to continue to tax the *bourgou* as it was made in the past [referring to both first municipal mandates]. But for the management of the *bourgou*, we too, manage and, we too, are going to continue to manage the *bourgou*. ” Extract from the interview of B.B., the mayor-*Jowro* of Youwarou.

Thus, this agreement does not erase at all the determination of the *Jowro* to hold dominion over the *leydi* Yallalbe, his pastures. It's the same for the master of the land and the master of waters concerning their respective resource. They do not intend to be contested in their traditional legitimacy of government of these resources.

Conclusion

The decentralization is a complex process made of continuities and changes, without fundamental breaking point. Playing on the thread of the ambivalence, the paradox of the decentralization is that, on one hand, because of the establishment of a new elected local power, this process could appear as a potential threat for traditional chieftaincies; and, on the other hand, the decentralization also gives them a set of opportunities to reposition themselves, reaffirm and secure their position in the local political arena. As a “Trojan horse”, decentralization has effectively a democratic aim via the opening of the political space. However, it also carries in itself the potential elements of its padlocking. The political game is unstable and uncertain. In this context, as a playing card among others in the political competition, traditional authorities mobilize their strong political and historical rooting and their political skills as the control of populations and users of natural resources in order to “win the municipality”.

The implementation of the decentralization through municipal elections concerns directly the power representation. Previously, because of the successive dominions which have crossed Wuro's long-term history (raids, conquests, Maasina Empire, colonization, the First and Second Republic), the power was mainly perceived as central, vertical and coming from the outside (Fay, 1995). The local level generally settled arrangement with the central power under the shape of taxes. Yet, the decentralization involves a redefinition of this representation. Because of the municipal elections, as the actors say, “those who look for the power are among us”. This observation involves a potential horizontality and endogenous character of the power which have been quickly anticipated by Wuro's traditional authorities, before the rest of the population. Thus, by adapting themselves and by operating several imperceptible slidings, Wuro's traditional authorities manage to remain at the head of the locality. Thus, while we are in a context of democratic opening, this situation gives locally to the rest of the population the impression of a lack of possible in terms of political future

because they are still governed by the same local political elite. However, the studied electoral processes do not correspond to the simple renewal of traditional authorities' powers of former days but involve a slow transformation of the modalities of the power exercise in the local political arena.

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