

Democracy, decentralization, institutional plurality: local government in Bancoumana, Mali

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Drawing on 18-months of fieldwork in the Municipality of Bancoumana (Mali), this paper analyzes one intensely mediated instance of local government. Government in this rural area is in fact characterized by the tense co-operation between a variety of actors, among which: 'traditional' authorities whose legitimacy appears to be based on the rules of clanship and descent (the elders or *gwatiguiw*, headmen of variably extended kinship groups); local authorities officially representing the State and the Municipality (bureaucrats and elected officials); semi-traditional institutions like the Village Council, whose members are elected (in fact designated) with a specific mandate according to State law, but they act differently, for example as the 'younger brothers' of lineage elders (the 'arms' enforcing their decisions) or as the mediators between them and the Municipality.

The paper addresses the institutional plurality of local government in Bancoumana in the wider context of Malian decentralization. The rich variety of local political actors including the three mentioned above is presented in terms of process rather than a static or conservative equilibrium. Negotiation, compromise, struggle and co-operation among these local actors generate an extremely dynamic local configuration of power. These processes are addressed both as practice of democracy and as appropriation of the democratic model promoted by the Malian policy of decentralization.

Institutional plurality is further addressed with reference to the 'internal' composition to the local political actors, which are by no means black holes or homogeneous entities. On the one side, groups such as extended families groups and lineages are highly flexible and articulated entities, not last as a consequence of the interaction with bureaucratic practices (taxation is a classical example of how the configuration of the 'domestic' domain based on kinship and descent is affected by State bureaucracy). On the other, the local political actors pertaining to the State are far from behaving homogeneously: for example, the Mayor – an elected official likely to be much 'embedded' in the locality – has significantly different interests and agenda compared to the Secretary General of the Municipality, who is a trained and itinerant administrator. An analysis of the 'local' State administration, which comprises three layers in Mali (the Municipality, the District and the Region) each with its many authorities and representatives, clearly reveals the complexity of such thing as 'the State', ultimately showing the potential of ethnographic enquiry for dismantling abstract socio-legal constructs.