

**Responsive Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI)**  
Supporting Resilient Forest Livelihoods  
through Local Representation

# **Autochthony, Democratisation and Forest**

## **The Politics of Choice in Burkina Faso**



**Muriel Côte**

## Autochthony, Democratisation and Forest

## **Responsive Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI) Research Programme**

The Responsive Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI) is a research and training program, focusing on environmental governance in Africa. It is jointly managed by the Council for the Development of Social Sciences Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (UIUC). It is funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). The RFGI activities are focused on 12 countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, DR Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. The initiative is also training young, in-country policy researchers in order to build an Africa-wide network of environmental governance analysts.

Nations worldwide have introduced decentralization reforms aspiring to make local government responsive and accountable to the needs and aspirations of citizens so as to improve equity, service delivery and resource management. Natural resources, especially forests, play an important role in these decentralizations since they provide local governments and local people with needed revenue, wealth, and subsistence. Responsive local governments can provide forest resource-dependent populations the flexibility they need to manage, adapt to and remain resilient in their changing environment. RFGI aims to enhance and help institutionalize widespread responsive and accountable local governance processes that reduce vulnerability, enhance local wellbeing, and improve forest management with a special focus on developing safeguards and guidelines to ensure fair and equitable implementation of the Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) and climate-adaptation interventions.

REDD+ is a global Programme for disbursing funds, primarily to pay national governments of developing countries, to reduce forest carbon emission. REDD+ will require permanent local institutions that can integrate local needs with national and international objectives. The results from RFGI Africa research will be compared with results from collaborators in Asia and South America in order to enhance RFGI comparative scope, and to broaden its geographic policy relevance.

# RFGI Working Paper Series Editors' Note

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James Murombedzi, Jesse Ribot

and Gretchen Walters

Struggles for control over and access to nature and natural resources; struggles over land, forests, pastures and fisheries, are struggles for survival, self determination, and meaning. Natural resources are central to rural lives and livelihoods: they provide the material resources for survival, security, and freedom. To engage in the world requires assets that enable individuals, households, and communities to act in and on the world around them. The ability to accumulate assets and the ability to access government and market services depends partly on such resources along with the political-economic infrastructure – rights, recourse, representation, markets, and social services – that are the domain of government. Democracy, which both enables and requires the freedom to act, is predicated on these assets and infrastructures. Since the 1980s, African governments have been implementing local government decentralization reforms aimed at making local government more democratic by making them responsive and accountable to citizen needs and aspirations; in many places this has been done through a decentralisation of natural resource governance to local administrations. In order to be responsive to individual, household and community demands, local governments, too, need resources and decision-making powers. There must be a public domain – a set of public resources, such as forests or fisheries, which constitute this domain of democracy, the domain of decisions and services that citizens can demand of government. Natural resources, when decentralized into the domain of local authority, form an important part of the resources of individuals, households, communities and governments, making possible this move toward local democracy.



Natural resources provide local governments and people with wealth and subsistence. While nature is not the only source of rural income, the decentralization of natural resources governance is a core component of local government reform. However, governance reforms have been implemented in a context broadly characterized by an enduring crisis of the Western economic and financial systems, which in turn has stimulated privatization and liberalization in every sphere of life, including nature. The process has deprived local governments of public resources – depriving individuals and communities of a reason to engage, as a powerless government is not worth trying to influence. Privatization is depriving forest-dependent peoples of their access to formerly ‘public’ or traditionally managed resources. National governments, as well as international bodies such as the United Nations programme, titled the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD), further this trend as they collaborate with private interests to promote the privatization of natural resources. The resulting enclosures threaten the wellbeing of resource-dependent populations and the viability of democratic reforms.

The specter of climate change is deepening the crisis of enclosure. A key response to climate change has been the attempt to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions through enhancing the capacity of forests in the developing world to store carbon, ostensibly for the benefit of the atmosphere as well as the communities who use these forests. UN REDD seeks to pay communities, through their national governments, to conserve their forests as carbon storage. A plus ‘+’ was added to REDD, forming REDD +, to call for improved ecosystems services, forest management, conservation, forest restoration and afforestation to enhance the capacity for carbon storage. Designed on the basis of similar payments for environmental services (PES) schemes, REDD+ has the potential to inject vast new sums of money into local resource use and governance. In the context of fragile local governments, nascent democracies and powerful private interests, such cash inflows result in the commercialization and privatization of forests and natural resources and the dispossession of local resource users. This financialization of natural resources grossly diminishes the scope for democratic natural resource governance schemes. To be sure, the implementation of REDD+ can also learn from and avoid the pitfalls experienced in these PES schemes, especially if they represent local interests in natural resource governance decision making.

The Responsive Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI) is an Africa-wide environmental-governance research and training program focusing on enabling responsive and accountable decentralization to strengthen the representation of forest-based rural people in local-government decision making. Since January

2012, the programme has carried out 33 case studies in 12 African countries, with comparative cases Nepal and Peru, to assess the conditions under which central authorities devolve forest management and use decisions to local government, and the conditions that enable local government to engage in sound, equitable and pro-poor forest management. Aimed at enabling local government to play an integrative role in rural development and natural resource management, these case studies are now being finalized and published to elicit public discourse and debate on local government and local democracy. This Working Paper series will publish the RFGI case studies as well as other comparative studies of decentralized natural resources governance in Africa and elsewhere that focus on the intersection between local democracy and natural resource management schemes. Using the concepts of institutional choice and recognition, the cases deal with a comprehensive range of issues in decentralized forest management in the context of REDD+, including the institutional choices of intervening agencies; the effects of such choices on accountability and representation; and the relationships between local government and other local institutions. The series will also include syntheses discussing the main findings of the RFGI research programme.

Based at CODESRIA, and funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the RFGI is a three year collaborative initiative of CODESRIA, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). RFGI working papers and documents, including the background papers, the RFGI programme description, and the RFGI Methods Handbook, can be found on line at:

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CODESRIA publishes *Africa Development*, the longest standing Africa based social science journal; *Afrika Zamani*, a journal of history; the *African Sociological Review*; the *African Journal of International Affairs*; *Africa Review of Books* and the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*. The Council also co-publishes the *Africa Media Review*; *Identity, Culture and Politics: An Afro-Asian Dialogue*; *The African Anthropologist* and the *Afro-Arab Selections for Social Sciences*. The results of its research and other activities are also disseminated through its Working Paper Series, Green Book Series, Monograph Series, Book Series, Policy Briefs and the CODESRIA Bulletin. Select CODESRIA publications are also accessible online at [www.codesria.org](http://www.codesria.org).

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## About the Author

**Muriel Côte** is a post-doctoral researcher in the political geography department at the University of Zürich. She has completed a PhD on the dynamics of state formation and everyday negotiations of public authority over natural resource production in Burkina Faso, focusing specifically on the cases of small-scale gold and woodfuel production.



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## Abstract

The paper critically engages with the conditions under which identity politics arise in the context of forest decentralisation reforms. It argues that local conflicts framed as competition over claims of autochthony, or 'who came first', should be seen as 'more-than-local' and connected to wider, yet specific, political economic dynamics. It takes two propositions as points of departure: first, political claims of autochthony have intensified under democratisation reforms in Africa. Second, democratic decentralisation reforms are characterised by insignificant devolution of powers and resources to local governments. This conjuncture reflects a number of tensions involving the relation between local and central governments, and it is argued that these tensions become relocated in local arenas and expressed through identity politics articulated around competing claims of autochthony in Northern Burkina Faso. The paper proposes to understand a case of identity politics in forest decentralisation in Northern Burkina Faso through the politics of choice. It is broken down into three dynamics: first, the fragmentation of public authority over forests in Burkina opens up the possibility for multiple institutions to negotiate policy choices; second, the construction of the local as a multifarious institutional arena; and third, the uneven institutional pluralism that characterises the materialisation of this construction in local arenas. This hopes to open up lines of reflection on the relation between the actual absence of devolution and forms of political representation.



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## Introduction

Séguénéga is a town in the North Burkinabè Sahel. Its name literally means ‘come and squeeze here’ in Mooré, one of the three official languages in Burkina Faso. Behind this name lays the foundation myth of the town, but the origin of the name is contested. Like in many other places, the question of who came first is at the heart of the disagreement, and like in many other places also, the disagreement escalated into a dispute in the context of a natural resource governance intervention aimed at decentralising forest management in Burkina Faso. The paper critically engages with the conditions under which such ‘politics of belonging’ arise under forest decentralisation in Burkina Faso. It has been argued that there is a ubiquitous relation between democratisation reforms and local claims of autochthony articulated as claims for political rights via determinations of belonging (Corulo 2008). This paper sharpens the focus on this relation. It argues that disputes can more specifically be seen as a manifestation of political-economic tensions that are rescaled under conditions of partial democratic decentralisation reforms, taking the case of reconfigurations of forest access under decentralisation reforms in Burkina Faso.

It is not surprising to find that development interventions often revive local rivalries as they open up opportunities that activate new forms of competition over resources. In contexts where resources are scarce, like in Burkina Faso, the prospect of losing and gaining the ability to access natural resources can understandably awaken old enmities. When interventions and reforms entail the mapping of new boundaries in ways that challenge previous territorial arrangements, local disputes between identity-based groups and customary authorities are common. Yet competing claims over autochthony are not isolated and localised incidents. In some contexts the autochthon/stranger cleavage has polarised entire nations as in

the case of *Ivoirité* promoted in Ivory Coast (Marshall-Fratani 2006), and similar exclusionary discourses in Cameroun (Geschiera 2009). This sort of political manipulation can have tragic human implications when it leads to the social and political exclusion of groups alleged not to be autochthonous. Clearly, the politics of belonging is a 'more-than-local' political phenomenon, and autochthony claims are about rights and representation (Cutolo 2008).

With regards to national citizenship, the concomitance of democratisation and autochthony presents us with a paradox: democratisation reforms aiming to open up the scope for citizen participation are giving way to its scope narrowing down with autochthony politics (Geschiera 2011). In this paper I sharpen the focus on the political-economic tensions underlying this paradox. In political ecological work on natural resource governance, one ubiquitous characteristic of democratic decentralisation reforms in the Global South is what has been called re-centralisation, or an absence of actual devolution (Larson and Soto 2008; Ribot 2004; Batterbury and Fernando 2006). I argue that an important component of the politics of belonging is the way political-economic tensions are being re-scaled to local arenas under partial decentralisation reform. This case is made through an examination of forest decentralisation in Burkina Faso. In the case examined the invocation of first-come identity thankfully does not scale up to national politics, yet neither is it simply the result of localized territorial disputes over the control of land or territory. Rather the politics of belonging can be traced back to political-economic tensions between central and local governments over the distribution of forest revenues and rents. Specifically, under conditions of partial decentralisation, local-central tensions are displaced onto local arenas, opposing a multiplicity of overlapping custodian institutions over forest resources that articulate competing claims through registers of autochthony.

The forest decentralisation reform under way in Burkina offers a good context to examine this sort of political-economic restructuring. As in the rest of West Africa, narratives of deforestation have shifted away from advocacies of central control and towards the promotion of local governance of natural resources. Since 2006 municipal councils have been elected in 351 towns in Burkina Faso and at about the same time the decentralisation of forest management to these councils began to be addressed nationally, although the political economy of forest resource control has been complicated by the ubiquitous presence of international aid resources in the sector for a few decades now. At the national level, forest revenues are significant in two ways. First, taxes from woodfuel production generate most national rents from forest production and roughly amount to CFA 250 million every year,<sup>1</sup> which only represents around 6% of

the GDP (MEDD 2011). Second, international funds have regularly poured in under the banner of aid from governmental and non-governmental sources to address deforestation and land degradation since the dramatic Sahelian droughts of the 1970s and 1980s. International creditors and donors have been keen to support forest decentralisation as a way to address the perceived inefficiency of a bankrupt public forest administration. These international funds are difficult to quantify, but just the most recent externally funded project allocated to support local forest governance brought in the equivalent of CFA 18 billion, which largely exceeds woodfuel rents (GoB 2012). Yet with democratic decentralisation, central administration does not simply vanish. Forest decentralisation therefore brings up difficult questions about the way these revenues and rents must be distributed, and especially shared between local and central governments. Claims of autochthony arise within the handling of these difficult questions about redistribution.

The paper traces back a local conflict articulated around competing claims of autochthony in Northern Burkina Faso to the ways new local-central political-economic tensions are handled under decentralisation restructuring. In a context where government is not the only public authority over forests, because donors are involved but also a constellation of extra-legal local authorities, the redistribution of power and authority involves some negotiation and choice about which local institutions to empower under forest decentralisation, and how. The paper presents a framework that describes the most significant choice politics in understanding the emergence of identity politics in this case. The politics of choice is broken down into three dynamics: first, the fragmentation of public authority over forests opens up the possibility to make choices; second, 'the local' is constructed through these choices as a multifarious and pugnacious institutional arena; and third, the uneven institutional pluralism that characterises the materialisation of this construction in local arenas. Each of these dynamics is articulated and illustrated empirically in each subsequent section. The last part of the paper comes back to the anecdote presented at the start of the introduction to illustrate how the politics of choice plays out in the political economy of identity politics. Together, the politics of choice aims to show that identity politics is neither only a localised phenomenon nor a nation-specific problem that may sometimes, like in Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon, flare up to the national scale. It can also be traced back to quite specific political-economic reconfigurations: partial decentralisation indicates a tension between local and central government, and under conditions of fragmented public authority over resources a variety of institutional choices are made and effectively re-scale this tension down in local arenas, in this case between local governments and customary authorities. Understanding the conditions under which customary



authorities become mixed up with local-central government tensions is therefore a crucial question, one that the politics of choice brings to light.

Through this reading, we also begin to see that rather than simply a political means for exclusion, or a cause of political exclusion, the instrumental resonance of autochthony may better be approached as the symptom of frictions emerging from a particular political-economic reconfiguration of power and revenue sharing between local and central administration pushed forward in the name of decentralisation. It shows that the revival of customary power and autochthony politics is not simply a localised political phenomenon. They must be connected to wider dynamics of political-economic restructuring, namely partial decentralisation and the fragmentation of public authority, which become visible as we start asking questions about the politics of institutional choices. This approach does not argue for, or against, a particular type of social engineering, nor does it advance causal relations between certain institutional designs and local political outcomes. It simply argues that in a context where public authority is fragmented over public goods, like forests, paying attention to the institutional choices that are made and why, helps understand why particular registers, such as autochthony, are more pervasive than others in the articulation of political claims.

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## Democracy, Autochthony and Partial Decentralisation: A Politics of Choice Perspective

According to Geschiere (2011), the invocation of autochthony must be critically read as a manifestation of a 'global conjuncture of belonging'. The most encompassing element of this conjuncture is the wave of democratisation reforms that have swept across the so-called 'Global South' since the 1990s. The politics of belonging then started to be read as reconfiguration of citizenship, and much attention has been paid to the new forms of social and political inclusion/exclusion that have emerged from this phenomenon (Jacob and Le Meur 2010). Less attention has been paid to linking this reconfiguration of citizenship to the political-economic restructuring that underlies this paradox. Here I pick apart the advantages of using a politics of institutional choice approach (Ribot 2010) to shed light on the political economic undercurrents of the linkages between democracy and autochthony.

Bayart, Geschiere, and Nyamnjoh (2001) propose that autochthony is a 'new style of subjectivation' within which the meaning of citizenship is being re-defined but they warn against hasty interpretations of autochthony as a reinvention of tradition that results from an instrumentalisation of political leaders. Claims of autochthony are better approached as a political phenomenon than a mere political strategy. For example, Hilgers' (2011) work on the articulation of local political campaigns around claims of autochthony shows that autochthony strikes a deep chord for rulers and ruled alike. He proposes to view autochthony as a form of 'political capital in a global age'. This age is characterised by political and economic reconfigurations of African states since the 1990s where the channels of access to public resources have become various and complex. In this case, claims for autochthony are not so much the manifestation of a political will to exclude

specific others, but a political resource that has ubiquitous resonance in a context where public authority remains to be defined (Dunn 2009).

The fragmentation of public authority is therefore a crucial element of this global conjuncture of belonging. Along with the wave of democratisation reforms, the 1990s have also seen widespread economic reforms aiming to shrink public administration and have given a *de facto* public mandate to non-state institutions (Hagmann and Peclard 2010; Raeymaekers, Menkhau, and Vlassenroot 2008). Yet public administration has not disappeared, and public authority is not so much absent as characterised by ubiquitous institutional pluralism, which is most striking in local-scale governance dynamics (Lund 2006). In some cases, local institutional pluralism has been shown to exacerbate local political competition for public authority, and to erode relations of accountability. Manor (2004) for example argues in the context of natural resource management that this occurs when localised user committees are created and when they are allocated more funds than local elected governments. What Manor points to is that local institutional pluralism is not a problem *per se*, but rather the imbalance of power and resource endowment between local institutions. This suggests that the wider political economy of powers and resources has much to contribute to the dynamics of local political fragmentation articulated around competition for public authority. One central question therefore is to understand whether there is a relation between these political economic dynamics under decentralisation and localised political fragmentation articulated around competing claims of autochthony.

It is fair to assume that local political competition becomes articulated around claims of autochthony when decentralization entails a reconfiguration of resources and powers between traditional authorities and local governments. Buur and Kyed (2007) show that this arises when traditional leaders are either directly empowered to manage natural resources, or on the contrary when their powers are taken away by the creation of local governments. Yet in many national settings, traditional authorities have a *de facto* rather than *de jure* mandate. In these contexts, understanding the revival of customary power under decentralisation requires that we examine the conditions under which the politics of local institutional choice arises under the laws of decentralization, but also in discourse and practice (Ribot, Chhatre, and Lankina 2008).

Normative approaches to democracy consider that local institutional pluralism can produce healthy institutional competition that fosters an inclusive political environment for local relations of accountability, because it encourages leaders to respond to citizens' demands. As an example, Blair (2001) shows that in Bolivia a

plural civil society provides a multiplicity of channels for citizens to express their demands, and provides a healthy incentive for the responsiveness of elected local governments. Yet in some settings, civil society is composed of traditional authorities who exercise *de facto* authority over the management of natural resources and while decentralisation reforms do not explicitly redefine their mandate, a normative inclination towards the empowerment of a loosely defined civil society may have the same effect (Wardell and Lund 2006). In Mali for example, Gautier, Hautdidier, and Gazull (2011) show that the transfer of forest control to woodcutters' associations under the aegis of decentralisation gave way to exclusionary politics towards strangers articulated around arguments about the boundaries of ritual or customary territories. In this case the connections between autochthony and democracy are characterised by slippage of contentious local politics towards the customary domain, and this emerges not so much from the way customary authorities were or were not empowered, but from the empowerment of a loosely defined civil society. As pointed out by Hagberg (2010:13) 'the local' must be conceptualised 'as an emic category that is invented and mobilised by social and political actors'. Understanding what social categories are included and excluded to represent the local frames the range of possible relations between these categories.

According to Poteete and Ribot (2011), one encompassing element of the way the 'local is mobilised' has less to do with the specific institutions 'chosen' to represent 'the local' than with the various knots of tensions that emerge from the reluctance of central administration to transfer decision-making and fiscal powers to local administration. Turning on its head the notion of repertoire employed by Scott (1998) to describe 'weapons of the weak', they argue that 'repertoires of domination' frame the range of relations between a variety of actors at different scales through their involvement in inventing or choosing what constitutes 'the local'. The politics of choice offers a good framework to start picking apart the political economic dynamics underpinning forms of local political fragmentation.

Three dimensions may be identified from the discussion above to mobilise the 'politics of choice' as a lens to understand the linkages between autochthony and democracy. Firstly, attention must be paid to the way central governments choose to transfer power and resources to local governments, and to mapping out the effects of such politics of choice for the fragmentation of public authority over forest resources. Secondly, the way the local is being invented must be scrutinised. There is often a *rapport de force* between central government attempts to render these local practices legible to central administration on the one hand, and donors' ostensible objective to keep these practices free from the grip of a national bureaucratic apparatus (and perhaps keeping them under their own forms of control). In a context where a multiplicity of legislators, often donors and central

governments, are involved in crafting state reforms, the invention of the local must be studied as an effect of competing visions between central government and donors (Lavigne-Delville and Abdelkader 2010). Lastly, local configurations of power and authority emerge as these competing visions land on the ground, and constitute a third element of the politics of choice. Specifically, attention is paid not so much to the local institutions empowered but to the redistribution of power and resources between them in the name of decentralisation. Such redistribution frames opportunities for collaboration and competition in local arenas (Bierschenk 2010; Blundo 2006). These three dimensions of choice politics span a diversity of time and geographical scales that help capture the 'global conjuncture of belonging' from a political economic perspective.

Taking this empirical approach does not imply that any given reform can be rightly or wrongly implemented, or that specific institutional choices result in specific political outcomes. It simply offers an empirical framework for approaching the politics of belonging within forest decentralisation as a political-economic process and to situate it within that process. Examining local identity politics from the point of view of the politics of choice also helps to move aside framings that link autochthony and state formation (and its normative declinations) through simplistic dynamics of elite capture and political manipulation. The social perils of the politics of belonging are real and important, but their elucidation is incomplete without an understanding of the political as well as economic conditions under which they arise. Bringing up the politics of institutional choice starts outlining a central aspect of the political economic tensions that underlie a seemingly calibrated reform. Bringing these tensions to the centre of the analysis of the relation between democracy and autochthony makes it clearer that what is at stake is not simply the exclusion of specific others, but a means to claim rights to political representation. To this end we must map out the political economic tensions that are recast under decentralization reforms and the way they reframe the range of possible relations between leaders and subjects.

## **Research Approach and Methods**

Burkina Faso is situated in a region where dependency on forest resources can be characterised as high subsistence and low commercial value. Yet the harsh climatic conditions and perceived risks of land degradation and deforestation heighten the stakes of forest management. Participatory forest management schemes have been undertaken since the 1980s but these were often dislocated from central state administration and forest decentralisation has been proposed as a more

accountable model of local forest governance (Deweese 2013). Although a detailed national reform plan towards forest decentralisation has been conceived for almost a decade now, no nationwide implementation has yet been undertaken on the grounds, and this is partly because central government resources are too scarce to implement this systematically (Dié 2011). In this context a number of donors have stepped in to support the reform. The study focuses on the implementation of one such initiative that is financially supported through bilateral donor cooperation, technically supported by an International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO), and that is carried out in the name of forest decentralisation reforms in Burkina.

Fieldwork research was carried out for over 12 months between 2010 and 2012. At the national level, interviews were undertaken with environmental ministry staff as well as INGO staff and representatives of creditor governments supplying technical and financial support for the forest decentralisation reform in Burkina. These interviews aimed to compare the visions of a variety of legislations. This was complemented with the analysis of project and policy documents as well as published literature that added width and historical depth to the analysis.

Ethnographic research was also conducted over the fieldwork period, specifically in the municipality of Séguénéga that benefits from an externally funded project aiming to create municipal forests. Séguénéga is located in the Yatenga province in North Burkina. The area benefits from a short rainy season and long dry season, and timber resources are scarce relative to the south of the country that receives twice as much rainfall. It is relatively remote, with the nearest tarmac road situated 50 km away from Séguénéga, also the name of the municipal capital town. The town counts around 6,000 inhabitants, the vast majority of who makes a living through subsistence farming (agriculture, husbandry, and agroforestry) and petty commerce. They make domestic use of forest resources, especially woodfuel, but with its remote location in the relatively drier region of Burkina Faso, the local production of forest resources in Séguénéga does not have a national significance. Methodologically, the minimal local-central tensions over access to the rents of forest resources has the advantage that questions of forest access are not an especially political sensitive topic, as it can be further South, and these questions are relatively easy for a researcher to access. At the same time, localised daily reliance on forest resources means that local stakes for access are relatively high and relations of power observable.

Ethnographic work included individual interviews with a broad range of local actors with authority over forest resources, ranging from a local forest agent, traditional authorities, a local project facilitator, municipal authorities, local



state representatives, and user groups created as part of the project. Participant observation was conducted during project meetings among local decision-makers, and group interviews with ‘beneficiary villages’ were also undertaken spanning more than half of the 12 villages involved in the creation of a municipal forest in Séguénéga. Being based in Séguénéga for fieldwork had the advantage of enhancing an understanding of local politics beyond these techniques. Data collection focused on mapping out the variety of institutions involved, paying particular attention to the relations of cooperation and contention between them. Taking conflict as a lens brings into light relations of power in a given political economic setting (Le Meur 2002). A multi-sited deployment of these techniques helped to build an overview of the redistribution of power and resources across scales under forest decentralisation in Burkina Faso (Marcus 1995). The following begins to present the material with an examination of the way local-central tensions exacerbates the fragmentation of public authority over forest resources in Burkina.

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## Partial Forest Decentralisation and the Fragmentation of Public Authority

Until 2006 public authority over forest resources was centralised in Burkina Faso. This centralisation was initiated in 1935 with the adoption of a forest code elaborated by the French colonial administration. At that time, the area known today as Burkina Faso was part of a wider territory under French colonial rule over a territory then called the *Afrique Occidentale Française* (Bouda 2009; Ribot 2001). In the areas known today as Burkina Faso, the Forest Code aimed to balance out the twin imperatives of commercial flows guaranteed by a railway network whose construction required timber extraction, and environmental conservation. To achieve this aim, the Forest Code divided territories between *forêts protégées* and *forêts classées*. The latter are forest reserves gazetted mostly in the south of the country and where access to forest resources was closed to residents and exclusively reserved for the extraction of timber for the railway (Côte 2014:137-142). Following Independence in 1960, gazetted forests and their restricted access regime was maintained. Although the railway project stopped during the period of Independence, the post-colonial forest administration maintained this access regime on the grounds of fostering forest conservation. To enforce this regime a hierarchical forest administration was gradually elaborated and articulated around a largely repressive mandate for forest administrators, which endures today (Hagberg 2006).

The fact that the management of forests has historically been highly centralised has not precluded central-local forest management sharing arrangements. When repressive natural resource management approaches fell out of policy fashion in the 1980s, participatory approaches promoted highly localised and often short-lived agroforestry projects. These were often supported by international funding

as well as nationwide participatory land management schemes such as the well-documented *gestion de terroirs* through which village-level natural resource management committees were created and international funding sometimes channelled (Bassett, Blanc-Pamard and Boutrais 2007). Participatory approaches created a mandate for civil society in the management of natural resources in non-gazetted forests. It was for example possible to levy local taxes, like the '*taxe d'ébranchage*' on the pruning of trees aimed for the construction of animal pens. This was allowed insofar as these measures were inscribed in a local by-law signed by the *Préfet départemental*, the most localised representative of public administration in Burkina (IED 2009). Participatory approaches did inscribe in law a mandate for local traditional and customary leaders but conflicts arose between them in the constitution of natural resource management committees, which shows that they were *de facto* involved (Gausset 2008; Batterbury 2005).

With democratic decentralisation, the mandate of traditional leaders is not clarified any further but the creation of municipal councils across the country in 2006 effectively adds one more local institution with a loose mandate over natural resource management. Almost 10 years after they were first voted in, the mandate of municipal councils remains to be clearly legislated in the domain of forest management, and this has fostered some local political tensions. This is particularly clear in the woodfuel sector. The production of woodfuel is subject to a national tax collected on every cubic meter produced by local forest agents. In areas that supply the main cities with woodfuel, production is particularly intense, and the central administration has created the possibility for woodcutters to organise production through woodcutter cooperatives. Lacking legislation in the share of forest revenue between central and local administration has made it difficult for cooperatives and municipal councils to cooperate on the management of woodfuel production. In many places municipal councils have begun issuing local decrees (*arrêté municipal*) aiming to collect 'parking taxes' on trucks and donkey-drawn carts used by wholesale woodfuel merchants to load the timber in compensation for the lack of resource-sharing arrangements over woodfuel production. This has generated some tensions between woodcutter cooperatives and municipal councils (Kabré et al. 2009:42; IUCN 2011:28). Partial decentralisation has therefore contributed to the fragmentation of public authority over forests in Burkina Faso.

The effects of partial decentralisation on the fragmentation of public authority are also visible outside areas where woodfuel production is managed through woodcutter cooperatives. In theory forest decentralisation differs from participatory approaches in that central administration ought to give up some

of its power to the benefit of local governments, but so far transfers have been nominal rather than substantive. In 2004 the *Code Général des Collectivités Territoriales* that frames devolution reforms provisioned that nine specific powers be transferred to municipalities over natural resources within their territory, including the delivery of timber and woodfuel permits (CGCT 2004, Art. 89). It specifies that municipalities are only able to exercise these powers in areas that have been classified as 'zones of conservation' (CGCT 2004, Art. 90). In other words, the transfer of power over resources to local governments becomes effective with the creation of these zones. The latest Forest Code further stipulates that such zones can be created everywhere except for spaces whose '*size, ecological and esthetical importance requires measures and precautions that are beyond the means and capacities of one single municipality*' (GoB 2011, Arts. 18 to 21). The procedure requires extensive local consultations with forest users, but compensation for their work is left at the discretion of local governments, while forest agents are already notoriously underfunded and under-equipped (Dié 2011:52). A national Action Plan was devised under the technical oversight of the Food and Agriculture Organisation to bring these loose legislative changes into practice (GoB 2006). The plan specifies that the reform should have been operational throughout the national territory by 2010 and that central administration should take half of the financial responsibility for the Action Plan, and the rest should be charged to the local and/or regional governments (*collectivité territoriales*) (40%) and to donors (10%) (GoB 2006:97). However to date very few municipal forests have been created, and in most cases their creation relies almost entirely on external funding. Therefore in the absence of political will and economic resources to invest in the reform process, international donor organisations have acquired an important role for pushing the reform forward. Partial forest decentralisation therefore not only has effects on the fragmentation of public authority over forest resource production in local arenas, it also gives a mandate to global actors, governmental and non-governmental alike, to design and implement national reform.

The context described here is not unique to Burkina Faso. It recalls the 'repertoires of domination' described by Poteete and Ribot (2011) in Botswana and Senegal where central administrations are also resisting power and resource transfers for elected governments to be able to govern the management of natural resources. Yet what is noteworthy is that these 'repertoires of domination' not only inform us about the *rapport de force* at work between local and central governments, a first element of the politics of institutional choice. In addition to starving local governments of powers and resources, these repertoires can also be seen as dynamics of the fragmentation of public authority over forest resources.

Firstly at the national level, delays in fiscal transfers have created a mandate for international donors to exert public authority over the implementation of the reform. Secondly, local levels of governance are characterised by a variety of local institutions with few effective powers, and a larger room for negotiation over who is in charge of forest resource production. The creation of local governments only adds one additional layer to an already fragmented civil society. In the following section I show that in a context of such uncertainty in public authority over forests, decentralisation operates through the politics of institutional choice. Specifically, its implementation requires that municipal councils be socially constructed as separate from civil society, and civil society as a counter power to municipal councils. This emerges from negotiations between the conflicting visions between government and donors over the way the 'local ought to be mobilised' (Hagberg 2010) described below.

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## Constructing ‘the Local’: Rescaling Political-Economic Tensions

Decentralisation is an iterative process or trial and error, which partly explains why some legislation is still missing. In the plural institutional context described above, some choices need to be made about who will steer the creation of municipal forests in local arenas and how powers and revenues will be shared between those involved. Yet local environmental governance has not begun with forest decentralisation in 2006. Rather the forest decentralisation reform layers onto policies and practices of the past that on the ground bring together a multitude of organisations and authorities including traditional or customary authorities, civil society land management groups, or *groupements*, local forest administration civil servants, etc. Forest decentralisation and the creation of municipal councils require a clear stance on the way these organisations and authorities now relate. Given the fragmentation of public authority at a national scale, such a stance emerges from negotiations between central administration and donors. Their visions and imperatives regarding the added value of decentralising forest management do not neatly align. They do reach a common ground over the necessity to create a civil society that acts as a counter power to municipal councils with the aim of ensuring the latter's downward accountability.

The added value of forest decentralisation is often presented in its re-articulation of local and central government but in fact discussions mostly revolve around the clarification of roles and powers between local organisations and authorities. According to central administration authorities, participatory approaches to land and resource management epitomised in the *Programme National de Gestion des Terroirs* in the 1990s have been a welcome shift because this has brought formal authorities and citizens closer, but they have also led to a proliferation of localised, un-coordinated and short-lived projects. As the General Director of Forests put it

*‘[p]articipatory approaches were useful, and they are not over, but we need mechanisms, so that if something fails we know whose responsibility it is. [...] With decentralisation we have an institutional environment that encourages accountability’* (Director of Forest Department, Ouagadougou, interview on 22 February 2012). This account is typical of advocates of forest decentralisation. It locates the mixed success of earlier natural resource governance in the pluralisation of institutions in charge of natural resources locally that undermined any sense of accountability over the management of resources. Lack of accountability here is read as a factor of lack of clarity about the responsibility of various organisations and authorities whose mandate largely escaped central control. From the point of view of central forestry administration then, the multiplication of civil society organisations has improved grassroots participation to natural resource management but it has also eroded administrative oversight since these organisations are not clearly accountable to central administration. Transferring oversight of grassroots management to elected governments seems an ideal institutional reform to anchor grassroots efforts within the juridico-legal apparatus of the state. To borrow the terminology of Scott (1998), one could then say that for central administrators, democratic decentralisation aims to render civil society more legible, in the sense that Scott (1998) describes.

Yet as pointed out in the previous section, donors are also heavily involved in crafting forest decentralisation legislation and implementation, but their vision does not neatly align with the legibility imperatives of the central forestry administration.

The agendas of donors in pushing forward the decentralisation reform are somewhat different from that of central administrators. They share the ideal that decentralisation is useful to enhance accountability, but instead of increasing central oversight, some donors believe that democratic decentralisation will bring about greater local discretion in the management of forest resources because it contributes to securing local rights to these resources, and loosening the central grip over these resources. This is clear in the following statement where a member of an influential INGO in the forest sector in Burkina explains the appeal of supporting decentralisation:

Our beneficiaries started asking us: ‘Why should we invest [in natural resource protection] if we’re not sure that the resource belongs to us?’ So our priority is that they [beneficiaries] have exclusive rights over forests; that they can control how it is managed, which means that the rights of access to forests must be in the hands of villages, of the structures at the village-level rather than being superseded or overtopped by some central administration. (INGO international programme director, Skype interview on 07 November 2012).

Contrary to the statement of central administrators, in this rendition forest decentralisation is considered a useful institutional mechanism to loosen the grip of central control onto local forest users. The underlying narrative is that current centralised control over resources acts as a disincentive for forest users to invest in the protection of the resources they use. Donors support democratic decentralisation as the best possible institutional option for securing local resource users' access to, and control over, resources is to support its devolution to local elected governments. According to donors, participatory approaches have encouraged the proliferation of grassroots associations but their power has remained weak because they have not been recognised by central administration as formal management structures – a mishap that anchoring natural resource management to the local state, through the creation of municipal forests, may address:

The commune's critical role is to provide legitimacy; if it endorses and coordinates between the villages, as a court of appeal or as an arbitrator of conflicts that cannot be managed at the local level, then it backs up the legitimacy of the forest user committee [...] Our vision is that the municipal council is not so much the power holder as the facilitator. We don't want to see in future a municipal forest service that takes the place of forest service in terms of controlling access and revenues. This should be the role of local forest user committees. (INGO international programme director, Skype interview in November 2012).

Thus central administration and donors have slightly misaligned agendas regarding decentralisation. The former sees decentralisation as an opportunity to render the multiplicity of civil society organisations more legible. The underlying rationale is that when local civil society organisations become obliged to collaborate with local governments, they will be submitted to greater oversight from the juridico-legal apparatus. Donors on the other hand aim to enhance tenure security of local resource users. For donors, the added value of decentralising forest management lays in harnessing the role of local resource user groups to the local state as a way to enhance their political leverage vis-à-vis central government. Their different objectives, increasing legibility and tenure security, are not mutually exclusive objectives. However there can be trade-offs between those objectives when local elected governments are seen to fall prey to patrimonial practices. In this case, local governments alone do not adequately represent 'the local' as this quote illustrates:

The advantage if the local person in charge is elected is that he is a native from the area so he is familiar with the users' concerns, but the disadvantage on the other hand is that he may be biased and in case there is a problem he may be tangled in conflicts of interests and may be inclined to favour the status quo. Then, nothing moves forward. (INGO national coordinator, Ouagadougou, interview on 29 March 2012).



Concerns over elite capture mean that decentralising forest management requires a construction of 'the local' as a plural institutional arena where civil society organisations can act as a counter power to local elected governments who may get caught up in conflicts of interest, over electoral concerns for example. This narrative is not benign. It is repeatedly invoked to justify the current state of stagnation in fiscal transfers. Central bureaucrats very often back up their scepticism towards fiscal reforms with highly publicised cases of embezzlements of taxes and favour treatments for the allocation of urban land allotments by municipal councils. Yet ironically, it seems that central government is caught in conflicts of interests regarding these transfers similar to those they imagine local governments would be faced with if transfers went ahead. Somewhat paradoxically then, decentralisation is perceived to be useful by both central authorities and donors insofar as 'the local' is constructed and represented by local governments that are counter-powered by '*civil society*'.

Examining the rationales underlying decentralisation makes it possible to put a finger on a second dimension of the politics of choice that emerges out of partial decentralisation and the fragmentation of public authority. It pertains the *rapport de force* between a central administration that holds back the reform on the one hand, and donors willing to push it forward on the other. A number of contradictions emerge in this political process. Firstly, democratic decentralisation aims to make civil society more legible but in a context where central government and donors have competing visions it paradoxically requires the multiplication of local institutions, which effectively challenges legibility objectives. Secondly, decentralisation aims to transfer powers to local democratic structures, but *a priori* suspicions of 'elite capture' encourages the decentralisation of powers to non-elected civil society instead. This recalls the observations that Ribot (2009) makes in the decentralisation of forest resource management in Senegal where local councils are 'given the head without the tongue'. Yet the point to be taken away here is less about the disempowerment of local government and more about the nurturing of a kind of uneven local institutional pluralism that inevitably brings civil society actors and local governments into competition with one another with regards to political powers and revenues from forest resource production. Below I show that in the context of natural resource management, customary authorities naturally emerge as civil society counter-power holders, which expectedly comes into competition with that of the municipal council.

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## Uneven Institutional Pluralism in Two Municipal Forests of Northern Burkina

### **Forest User Committees: Empowering Customary Authorities Through Civil Society**

In North Burkina, forest resources are scarce and may have little national significance, but they are valuable resources locally, and so authority over them is politically significant. Livelihoods are largely agrarian based, with a vast majority of the population relying on subsistence agriculture, and most also rely on wood for fuel. Authority over the production of woodfuel is with the local forest agent, a local extension staff employed by the Ministry of Environment. Accordingly with the law, the forest agent collects a tax on the commercial production of woodfuel . Subsistence-based wood collection is not supervised by the forest agent, but by village-based traditional authorities. In the area under study and in other places across West Africa, traditional authority at the level of villages and settlements is often shared between two different lineages that have separate political functions distributed on a principle of anteriority. The earth priest is the holder of the ‘first-coming’ family lineage that founded the settlement and is generally acknowledged to have authority over land and natural resources. The village chief is often the lineage holder of the family that colonised the settlement later on and has authority over political disputes (Kuba and Lentz 2006). The earth priest <sup>2</sup> is therefore in theory the authority over subsistence-based forest resources, but in a context where the means and capacities of the forest administration are weak, it is frequent and sometimes necessary when ‘*you have to go through them to get things done*’ (local forest agent, Séguénéga, interview on 16 April 2012). So in fact, customary and state authority overlaps.

The creation of the municipal council since the first general municipal elections in 2006 has not directly challenged either the role of the Forest administration or that of customary authorities but rather became an additional local institution acting alongside. Each village elects two councillors who sit at the municipal council and elect a mayor at its head. At the village level, institutions have also been created. Members of the *Comités Villageois de Développement* (CVD) are elected on a consensual basis, unlike municipal councillors who register on political party lists, but the CVD executive capacities are limited. In fact it has not improved much from those of similar committees called *Comités Villageois de Gestion des Terroirs* (CVGT) that have been created under the *Programme National de Gestion des Terroirs* since the 1990s (Bagré et al. 2011). So while the decentralisation reform does not directly challenge either the forest administration or customary authorities, it sediments over the previous nationwide programme where village-level institutions used to have more discretion over natural resource management.

Unlike councillors, CVD members are not elected on a partisan basis. They are constituted every three years through consensual vote. Their mandate has now been clearly codified in relation to natural resource management but they are generally expected to provide operational support to the municipal council. In this sense, the municipal council is the deliberative organ, and the CVDs are its executive arm (CGCT 2004, Art. 223). In addition, the latter has a special commission dedicated to environment and development matters (CEDL) and receives funds from central administration, while CVD committees do not. The CVD bureau ought to comprise at least three specialised commissions: one for women's affairs, one for youth's affairs and finally one for the promotion of agrarian development, but they do not have one specialised in environmental affairs.<sup>3</sup> The municipal council on the other hand counts three commissions including one for local environment and development affairs (CGCT 2004, Art. 221).

It is in this complex institutional environment that the creation of municipal forests ought to take place. Government guidelines advocate that CVDs elaborate a local by-law similar to that of the Local Convention (MECV 2010). Instead of drawing on CVDs at village level, the Organisation encouraged the creation of a Forest User Committee for each village involved, which together would form an FUC. This responds to the double imperative of a civil society association that would specifically represent forest users, and that would be independent from existing administration so as to act as a counter power. Both these imperatives have specific local political implications.

Firstly, the fact that the organisation empowered the FUCs instead of CVDs locates decision-making power away from the municipal council. A high-level

member of staff at the Ministry of Environment has frowned upon this initiative, noting that this new structure '*undermines the capacity of CVD*' by taking away its mandate (Forest department ministry staff, Ouagadougou, interview on 22.02.2012). Another option would have been to create a new commission within the CVD bureaux specialised in environmental and development affairs (GoB 2010). Donors did not consider it, partly because CVD committees were not constituted in all the villages at the time the intervention was designed by donors, but also because administrative authorities are mobilised as an arbitrator rather than a power holder. This was well assimilated by local administration: 'the role of the CVD is to make propositions to the FUC, and it becomes an arbitrator in case the FUC comes into conflict with another party' (elected municipal councillor, Séguénéga, interview on 17 November 2011). In effect the fact that the FUCs have the role of a counter power to the administration introduces a tension between them and the municipal council.

Secondly, creating a civil society forest user group that is independent from local administration gives a mandate for traditional authorities. In North Burkina, a common practice is for each lineage belonging to a settlement or a village to appoint individuals that represents the lineage. One CVD member explains: 'For each village two individuals were chosen from each ward [saka] but these individuals must not be CVD and they were chosen because they have a particular interest in the bush' (CVD President, Sima, interview on 29 January 2012). In practice this means that the FUCs are not entirely divorced from traditional authority. Indeed the presidents of both FUCs were members of the earth priest lineages from the biggest villages of each forest created.

For donors, this is not necessarily problematic: firstly, customary and CVD authorities are included in some activities, like trainings in land conflict, which they support through their intervention. Secondly, what is important at the end of the day is that forest users feel they are adequately represented. Members of CVD and FUC committees were unanimous on the point that this additional structure was useful. While some discontent was felt with regards to the fact that it was 'always the same people at the head of things', it was also acknowledged that these individuals have the relevant experience, meaning with foreigners and development project as well as with bush matters, and it was therefore legitimate for them to be at the front. It should not come as a surprise that the heart of local politics infiltrates in some way or other the conduct – the contrary would make a teleological point. What is significant here is *how* it does so.

In Séguénéga, customary authorities were not specifically encouraged to become power holders but this 'naturally' occurred anyway. This state of affairs emerged

out of the intersection of a vision for a representative civil society that is separate from the existing administration on the one hand, and that of beneficiaries on the other who consider that since this intervention tackles the management of landed resources, it is only natural to elect individuals connected with customary land authorities because they have a certain expertise in the domain of natural resource management. The extent to which this overlap between FUCs and customary authorities mediates relations with the municipal council largely depends on the way resources and powers are distributed between them.

### **Local Conventions: A New Mandate for Customary Authorities**

In a context where fiscal reforms are partial, there is little room to redistribute local powers over forest resources. In Burkina, one possibility is to create a local by-law called a 'local convention' that delineates the roles and responsibilities of the various institutions involved in the management of forest resources.<sup>4</sup> In Séguénéga local conventions transformed power relations among local institutions more than they transformed those between central and local government administration.

To begin with, the local conventions do not challenge the authority of the central forest administration since fiscal powers continue to be centralised. The only significant tax perceived over forest resources in the area is that on woodfuel and timber resources, but in the absence of fiscal transfers, this tax continues to be collected by the local forest agent, the extension of the central forest administration. The local convention aims to inscribe that they 'better reflect local forest uses than the legislation does' (INGO international programme director, Skype interview on 7 November 2012). Yet these must also be harmonised with national legislation. So there is in fact little room to create significant new rules, as was pointed out by a legal consultant hired to oversee this harmonisation (Séguénéga, interview on 20 October 2011).

What is resolutely new with the conventions is that they give a mandate for the FUC to monitor infractions. Some infractions, such as the illegal collection of greenwood or timber, or lighting bushfires, are often difficult to enforce by forest agents, especially here given that they each exercise their functions over a large area covering two municipalities. Under the local conventions the local state forest agent is still able to enforce sanctions over these infractions, and with the conventions, so are FUC committee members. In this sense the local conventions make forest access more restrictive without changing forest resource use, and if they are implemented as such, it can be argued that the FUCs complement rather than replace the state forest agent. Yet while central forest administration power

is not challenged, the local conventions do redistribute powers in significant ways among local institutions. This is illustrated in Table 1 that summarises the ways in which the fines collected from infractions should be distributed in Sima and Teonsgo, the names given to the areas to be targeted for the creation of municipal forests. This repartition was decided upon through a number of meetings that included the FUC representatives of all 12 villages involved in the forest of Sima, and seven villages for the forest of Teonsgo.

**Table 1:** Distribution of fine resources in the municipal forests of Sima and Teonsgo.

	FUC	Village-level FUCs	Municipal council	Forest agent
Sima	35%	50%	10%	5%
Teonsgo	50%	35%	10%	5%

Before conventions were elaborated it was common for money from a fine to be shared between the forest agent and whoever might have helped in capturing the outlaw. In the case of greenwood extraction without a duly paid tax, the sanction is well known locally. It incurs the confiscation the outlaw's axe and a 5,000 CFA (9 Euro) fine (forest agent, Séguénéga, interview on 04 May 2012). It could not be clearly established whether this is shared with the central administration, and how much of the fine is usually shared with the individual who contributed to capturing the outlaw. Assuming that these lay entirely within the discretion of the local state forest agent, the changes introduced with the conventions and summarised in the table above, suggest that while the central administration is not challenged, the discretionary powers of the individual local state forest agents are significantly reduced, which brings into question the extent to which this is likely to be applied. What is noteworthy here is that although the redistribution of power chosen by FUC members seems to reduce the grip of central administration, in effect it only challenges that of the individual local forest agent. Thus we have an increasing privatisation of public authority over forests in local arenas, both through the empowerment of civil society to the detriment of the municipal council, and through the simultaneous maintenance of central forest revenues and disempowerment of the local forest agent. This is significant in and of itself, but what is emphasised in Table 1 is the plurality of institutions involved in exercising public authority and the unevenness of powers now distributed to them.

Local conventions introduced three new institutions able to claim a share of the money generated from the fines under a municipal forest regime: the village-level FUC, the inter-village FUC and the municipal council. The municipal council is only attributed a small share of these benefits but this is an improvement from the total absence of own revenues from natural resources previous to the project. Importantly, the FUC receives a much greater part of the fines to be collected from infractions than the municipal council. This is consistent with the politics of defining civil society as a counter power to local government. As developed previously, the FUC is neatly aligned with customary authorities that are able to exercise *de facto* counter power to the municipal council. Yet in a context where the devolution of fiscal powers is lacking, and therefore where local tax revenue is scarce, the tension between local and central governments is effectively rescaled down to local arenas through the promotion of an uneven institutional pluralism.

This section has presented the third and last dimension of the politics of choice as it is framed in this paper, which refers to the way powers are distributed among local institutions. Firstly, as FUCs are created and defined as civil society that stands outside local administration, customary authorities are ‘naturally’ chosen locally in the area of natural resource management as members of the FUC. Secondly, the creation of an FUC also encourages a redistribution of power that brings them in competition with the municipal council. Not only is public authority fragmented in local arenas but it is done so unevenly. In a context where fiscal transfers have not been effectuated and where the FUCs are defined as a counter power to the municipal council, the tension between local and central government was displaced onto the relation between local government and customary authorities representing the FUC. It must be noted that once the external support ends (provisioned in 2016), the FUCs will be almost entirely dependent on the revenues raised from fines collected after infractions. Considering the enforcement capacities of FUCs are weak, these fines are likely to be difficult to apply. The only other source of revenue the FUCs have according to local conventions is a tax on the sand collected in the forest for the production of cement. Below I describe the emergence of competing claims of autochthony that emerge from attempts to collect this tax, and show how it can be traced back to the three dimensions of choice politics described thus far.

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## The Politics of Choice and Belonging in Séguénéga

The contested myth of origin related at the beginning of this paper portrays the respective positions of traditional authorities in Séguénéga, the municipal capital, and those of the village of Sima, where one FUC is based. The disagreement comes from the fact that the settlement of Sima historically preceded that of Séguénéga, but the latter has grown fast and started encroaching on Sima whose authorities are becoming nervous about the possibility of losing political control over land to customary authorities in Séguénéga.<sup>5</sup> Here I show that competing claims of autochthony between these settlements cannot be understood without the politics of choice underlying the process of forest decentralisation in Burkina Faso.

While Séguénéga and Sima are historically two distinct settlements with discrete customary land authorities, agricultural land agreements between claimants in Séguénéga and lenders in Sima date so far back that the imagined boundary along the 5 km stretch of small dirt road that separates them has become blurred. A jurisdictional boundary was nevertheless agreed upon in 2006 with the creation of the municipality of Séguénéga. As soon as municipal councillors were elected, every settlement registered as a 'village' was provided with a signpost to be placed appropriately at its entrance by the CVDs of each village. At that time the CVD from Sima planted theirs at the exit of Séguénéga, thereby claiming that the entire 5 km stretch of road belongs to the village of Sima. The fact that this location was not contested then seems to indicate that both Sima and Séguénéga residents deemed it an appropriate boundary at the time.

The town of Séguénéga is fast growing partly due to the recent expansion of artisanal gold mining. This has boosted the local house building industry, and



thereby also the demand for sand that is used for the mixing of cement bricks. The bush on either side of the dirt road between Sima and Séguénéga is well endowed in high-quality sand and a growing number of 50-ton trucks come to collect large quantities of sand in the area. In 2011 residents of Sima had started complaining to their CVD representatives that the passage of trucks was damaging the road and their fields, causing them additional farm work to bring the fields into shape for the rainy season. At that time, the local convention was being elaborated and the CVD committee in Sima handed the issue over to the village-level FUC.

Reflecting local concern shared around the extraction of sand, one innovative rule inscribed in the Local Convention was the taxation of trucks. In the text, entrepreneurs collecting sand and stones must have an authorisation delivered by the FUC after paying a fee of 2,500 CFA per truck and per trip, to be shared between the village-level FUC (1,500 CFA) and the municipality (1,000 CFA) (unpublished Convention Local de la Forêt de Sima).<sup>6</sup>

In order to collect these sand taxes, the village-level FUC in Sima picked seven of its members, one for each day of the week, to take turn in delivering hand-written authorisations to sand collectors against the fee as inscribed in the Convention. They set up a couple of chairs under the signpost indicating the limit between Sima and Séguénéga. Before they had the opportunity to collect their first tax, a farmer from Séguénéga attending to his nearby field came up to the FUC representative to ask about their dealings. The presence of the FUC representative infuriated the farmer. His indignation was triggered by the implicit claim that his field was in fact under the jurisdiction of Sima customary authorities; collars were grabbed and threats to life were made. The next day, the signpost under which the committee had sat had disappeared. It had been pulled out of the ground overnight. The day after, the mayor initiated an investigation to catch the signpost thieves, which momentarily appeased the unrest, and the collection of FUC taxes was put on hold.

After a few days, the investigation was declared inconclusive. A new signpost would be handed to CVDs, but to agree on the place where the new signpost ought to be planted municipal councillors convened a meeting between the customary authorities of Sima and Séguénéga. At that time, word came from the earth priest in Sima that 'the bush had to be closed to strangers' the following cropping season, which was only a few months away. They explained that sacrifices needed to be made to encourage the recovery of the soil. This effectively meant that the hundreds of farmers from Séguénéga cultivating on Sima lands would have to find agricultural lands elsewhere at very short notice. This thinly disguised threat was matched by customary authorities in Séguénéga who spread a rumour

that Sima residents should be prevented from working in the artisanal gold mines in Séguénéga. Careful political mediation conducted by municipal councillors managed to convince customary authorities in Sima to make the necessary sacrifices without closing the bush, thus demonstrating in the words of the mayor that 'this is not a problem of land scarcity, it is a problem to do with boundaries, and a matter of susceptibility' (Mayor of Séguénéga, interview on 15 May 2012).

Localised land pressure has indeed increased in recent years, but land scarcity falls short of a satisfactory explanation for customary authorities to have become so 'susceptible'. In this example, the politics of belonging can be read rather as a claim for rights to have rights, in a context where state administration is relatively weak, where local elected government administration is relatively new, and where citizens express their discontent through customary representatives who exert significant *de facto* public authority in local arenas. Yet the linkages between democratic decentralisation and autochthony are forged in a specific political economic context. The three dimensions of the politics of choice presented here aim to pick apart this context.

Firstly, with the creation of municipal councils, democratic decentralisation creates one additional local institution with a public mandate, but the lack of fiscal decentralisation effectively decentralises these tensions onto local arenas. Secondly, the incident can be traced back to the fact that partial decentralisation creates a mandate for donors to exercise public authority over the implementation of forest decentralisation, and to the social construction of a civil society that is only as independent from, but as a counter power to, local governments. Thirdly the remarkable 'slippage' of local political competition onto the customary domain must be understood within localised politics of choice. Through the creation of the FUC customary, authorities become *de facto* empowered and as their political legitimacy relies on principles of anteriority, it is hardly surprising that the decentralised political economic tensions become articulated around competing claims of autochthony.



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## Conclusion:

# Autochthony and State Formation in Africa

The relation between democratisation and autochthony cannot be understood without probing the political economic context in which it takes place. African studies' research on the politics of belonging and political ecology work on the decentralisation of natural resources together help understand the political economic conditions under which competing political claims of autochthony arise. Firstly, political claims of autochthony are not a localised phenomenon, but emerge within a broader context of democratisation reforms in Africa (Geschiere 2011); secondly, the reluctance of central government to decentralise powers and resources to local governments, or the re-centralising described in the political ecology literature, is one prevailing characteristic underlying democratic decentralisation reforms (Batterbury and Fernando 2006). Bringing these insights together, local forms of identity politics emerge from the re-scaling of political economic tensions between local and central governments onto local arenas. This case illustrates how partial decentralisation opens up spaces for making a variety of choices about which institution is best qualified to exert public authority over forests under decentralised management, and identity politics arising within the politics of institutional choice.

The first element of the politics of choice pertains to a repertoire of domination that characterises the lack of effective power-sharing agreements between central and local administrations (Poteete and Ribot 2011). What is significant about this repertoire is not only does it starve local governments of effective governing powers, but it also results in the fragmentation of public authority at national level, as it creates a mandate for donors to exercise public authority over the implementation of the forest decentralisation reform. The second element of

the politics of choice is the way in which tensions within a fragmented public domain are resolved through the social construction of 'the local'. The politics of choice between donors and central administration promotes a construction of the local people via institutions that are separate from local administration and act as counter powers to it. The local is conceived of as everything other than the municipal council. The third element of the politics of choice includes the ways that this construction is reflected in the uneven redistribution of powers in local arenas among the actors conceived as government and as its other, the local. In the context of forest management, customary authorities become empowered through the creation of a Forest User Committee designed to be in competition with the municipal council over tax collection and framed as counter powers to the municipal council.

The last section of the paper illustrates the three elements of the politics of choice at work through competing access to revenue in a municipal forest that is articulated through competing claims of autochthony. The slippage of the dispute into the customary domain emerges not only from the empowerment of customary authorities, whether it is intended or not, but also from intensified local competition over the collection of taxes resulting from central resistance to transfer fiscal powers. The politics of choice thus defined helps us tease out the way tensions about control over resources do shift under decentralisation and helps sharpen our understanding of the relationship between democratisation reforms and identity politics.

There is an unnerving paradox underlying the relation between democracy and the politics of belonging. On the one hand democratic decentralisation aims to open up spaces for the expression of inclusive national citizenship, but on the other hand, such reforms awaken neo-traditional identities. Buur and Kyed (2007) suggest that the 'return of the customary' may occur when traditional authorities already assume (*de facto* as well as *de jure*) state functions that have become challenged with democratic decentralisation and democratisation more widely. This echoes Dunn's proposition that the politics of belonging emerges out of an ontological uncertainty, which I might further specify relates to the difficulty in locating public authority.

In Burkina, the political resonance of autochthony can hardly, and thankfully not, be compared to contexts such as the Ivory Coast, Cameroon and Rwanda, where autochthony has become effectively constitutionalised and where political competition has blown up into deadly physical violence. Unlike much of the scholarship on the politics of belonging also, this paper brings forth a case where claims of autochthony are not instrumentalised by national political elites. Yet

rather than being at odds with the wider debate about the politics of belonging, I would advance that the inverted relationship between class domination, writ large, and autochthony here offers a new angle from which to examine the relations between autochthony and democracy. It offers an opportunity to query the relation between democratisation and autochthony without polarising the analysis between 'shrewd political manipulation, on the one hand, and deep emotional involvement, on the other' (Geschiere 2011:335). With this case we are able to see that the politics of belonging do not always emerge out of a strategy to exclude specific others, but rather as an available means to order people in a context where public authority can be characterized as ontologically uncertain. This angle does not necessarily deny the grave political and economic implications that may emerge from the politics of belonging. However, it sheds light on the fact that the political significance of autochthony may be as much related to the configurations of political inclusion/exclusion it gives rise to, as to the political economic (re)configurations that give rise to it.

There are wider linkages between autochthony, democracy and dynamics of state formation. Hagmann and Peclard (2010:554) argue that 'negotiations about the boundary of inclusion/exclusion are central to statehood in Africa'. In this paper autochthony comes across as a powerful tool for such negotiation, rather than necessarily one for exclusion, and the invocation of autochthony certainly serves to claim citizenship rights. It is a register that makes constitutional changes meaningful. Autochthony can then be seen as a 'boundary object' through which democratisation is made sense of in practice. In African studies, this speaks to perceived transformations in neo-patrimonial relations (Bøas and Dunn 2013). This concern is mirrored in the anxieties of policy makers over elite capture by newly formed local government, anxieties that may turn into self-fulfilling prophecies as policy makers hold back from investing in local governments. For scholars, controlling autochthony has proven a crucial resource for the accumulation of political and economic power, but it has often been associated with undesirable neo-patrimonial dynamics, which are often portrayed as deviances, or even failures, of modern institutions. Yet this portrayal of autochthony as an indigenous expression of citizenship runs the risk of yet again exoticising the dynamics of state formation in Africa. This paper simply argues that understanding the linkages between autochthony and state formation requires that we critically ask who controls registers of belonging and to what end (Hilgers 2011), and this question cannot be answered without a close look at the intricate relation between democratisation and shifting configurations of control over resources under decentralisation reforms.



# Notes

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1. CFA 1.00 = Euro 0.00152 (or 655 CFA = 1 Euro).
2. This is a commonly used word in the English literature. In French these authorities are referred to as Chef de Terre, in Mooré they are the 'tengsoab namba' (sg. Tengsoaba), and here they are referred to as the Ful naaba because the first coming lineage is of a specific ethnic group called the Fulse (sing. Fulga).
3. Decree No. 2007- 032/PRES/PM/MATD portant organisation, composition et fonctionnement des Conseils Villageois de Développement.
4. In order to be applicable, local conventions must be discussed in a municipal council meeting, signed by its president, the mayor, and signed off by the geographically relevant provincial administrative authorities, a bureaucrat appointed by the Ministry of Territorial Administration.
5. Interestingly, in oral histories, the growth of Séguénéga is attributed to the fact that it was chosen by colonial administration as a rural outpost, as a '*chef lieu de cercle*'. This choice was encouraged by the presence of a water reserve created by the White Fathers, and by the presence of hills conducive to building an observation post. Indeed the prefecture in Séguénéga is a building that was created in the mid-1950s on top of one of the hills. With these elements, historical depth could be added to the politics of choice by including the sedimentation of choices made under colonial administration, but insufficient data was collected to convincingly insert this dimension into the argument here.
6. CFA 655 = 1 Euro.





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