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The local appropriation of democracy:

An analysis of the municipal elections in Parakou,
Republic of Benin, 2002/03

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¹ Initial drafts of this paper were presented at the AEGIS Conference on "How people elect their leaders. Parties, party systems and elections in Africa south of the Sahara", in Hamburg 22 and 23 May 2003, and at the Max-Planck-Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle on 30 June 2003. I am grateful to Andreas Mehler for inviting me to the Hamburg conference, and to Galilou Abdoulaye, Agnès Badou and Nassirou Bako-Arifari for helpful comments made during the revision of this draft. The research in Parakou is part of an on-going, long-term research project on social history and regime changes in Parakou since the 1950s. (For previous, related publications, see Bierschenk 1993a, 2000; for work on the wider national political context, cf. Bierschenk 1993b, Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1998, Le Meur, Bierschenk & Floquet 1999, Bierschenk et al. 2000 ; for research on politics in Parakou supervised by the author, see Badou 2004, Braun 2004, Imorou 1998/99). Research on the municipal elections was carried out with the help of Agnès Badou, Mazou Issa and Tamimou Abdoulaye. We conducted around 50 interviews with major political actors in Parakou, before, in between and after the elections, including all municipal councillors with the notable exception of Rachidi Gbadamassi, e.g. the mayor, who proved too evasive despite our constant efforts to pin him down. Events were recorded up to November 2003.

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The local appropriation of democracy: An analysis of the municipal elections in Parakou, Republic of Benin, 2002/03

This paper – an ethnographic account of the recent (2002/03) municipal elections in Parakou, the third-largest city in the Republic of Benin – can be read from different perspectives. On one level, it is an empirical test of the claims frequently formulated by development aid donors with respect to the potential of democratisation and decentralization for political mobilisation and development. On another level and against the backdrop of the extensive political science literature on democratic transformation in Africa and elsewhere, it presents arguments for taking the local level more systematically into account when creating typologies of “democracies with an adjective” (a seemingly favourite past-time of the comparative branch of political science). From a more anthropological perspective, it is a description of how a global technology – democratic elections – is appropriated at local level: in this sense, the paper is about the local meanings of elections in a specific West African context. And, finally, in terms of a local Beninese context, it tells the story of the emergence of a new type of businessman politician, a kind of West African variant of the Berlusconi phenomenon which is unfolding in Beninese politics.

The paper analyses “just one particular case”, which may be a source of irritation for some political scientists. However, it is just not any case but one set in the Republic Benin, one of Africa’s few model democracies.

1. Democratisation and decentralization in Africa: why history and the local level matter

It has been argued increasingly in recent years that developing countries can create favourable conditions for economic development and democratic governance by decentralizing their government structures. Donors have high expectations of decentralization and local democracy. It is expected that the institution of a representative political system at local level will open up political arenas for new actors and will generate greater legitimacy for local political leaders, who will in turn mobilize local resources for development. In other words, it is suggested that there is an intrinsic link between popular participation at local level, better government at local level and the mobilization of potential for local development which is believed to have been stifled hitherto by the rigid control exercised by centralized bureaucracies. “Decentralization”, concluded a policy seminar organized by the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank back in 1989, “if properly applied, has a democratizing effect, as it can be an essential tool for identifying and responding to local priorities, delivering certain services and mobilizing resources” (EDI 1989). If, as the German Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation wrote in 2002, decentralization also carries certain risks and “does not automatically lead to successful development ... , efficient decentralized governmental and administrative structures are an integral component of responsible governance and hence constitute the basis for the structural alleviation of poverty and sustainable development”. Thus, decentralization is seen not as the sole condition but nevertheless considered a necessary one for

“greater efficiency, transparency and closer links with citizens and could (...) hence contribute to democratic development and dynamic economic development” (BMZ 2002: 5).³

In view of the largely shared optimism of donors, which sees decentralization as a catch-all solution for all possible development problems, it is astonishing how few empirical studies have actually been carried out on the effects of decentralization. What is even more surprising is that the very little empirical literature available does not exactly share the donors’ optimism in relation to the close connection between local democracy, better local governance and the unleashing of the potential for local development. As Diana Conyers concluded back in 1983 in her meticulous evaluation of the available literature: “Many of the programmes are not living up to the initial expectations” (Conyers 1983: 106). In this, she echoed a conclusion already reached 40 years earlier by Lucas (1963) in his evaluation of 16 years of local government in the former British parts of Africa: “The contribution of Local Authorities to national economic development has been very slight”. This general scepticism on the part of the social scientist has not changed a great deal over time. In a comparative study of four Asian and African countries, Crook and Manor (1995: 330) concluded that “The claim that (decentralization) will lead to better performance, particularly in the formulation and implementation of locally oriented development policies, has to be treated with some caution”, and go on to say that “The conditions under which it can be successfully established and perform in accordance with the expectations placed upon it are complex, demanding and not often found, at least in the developing world”.⁴

Lucas’s 1963 evaluation of local government in Africa reminds us of a fact that is often neglected in the discussions surrounding the recent wave of democratisation and decentralization in Africa: these are not new phenomena. Decentralization was propagated by the colonial powers, particularly Britain when it was preparing to grant independence to its colonies from 1947 onwards. Indeed, Olowu (2001) identifies four different phases of decentralization experienced on the African continent since the 1940s. While his scheme for the classification of the phases of decentralization has a temporal dimension, the major distinguishing feature of these phases is the forces that catalyzed the reforms. The latest phase, which Olowu traces back to the early 1990s, is driven by the processes of political liberalization and democratisation.

A similar kind of historical amnesia characterizes the ongoing debate on democratic transition in Africa. It is often forgotten that most African countries encountered democracy, political parties and elections intensively for the first time in the 1950s. This historical shortlivedness may be one of the reasons why, in general, even relatively complex development models, like Bratton & van der Walle’s (1994) much-cited one, proved to have so little prognostic force and fails to explain, for example, the success of democ-

³ Cf. two other examples from the extensive donor literature: “*Tout le monde s’accorde à reconnaître que le seul procédé pouvant garantir un processus de développement dont le principal but serait l’épanouissement et l’utilisation de toutes les capacités humaines est la décentralisation*” (KAS 1992 : 7) and DIE 2002 which adopts a similar line of argument.

⁴ More recently, it was found that countries with more tiers of government tend to have higher perceived corruption, and may do a worse job of providing social services (Treisman 2000). Interestingly, it was also found that the smaller the first-tier politico-administrative units, the more extensive the level of corruption. Corruption levels also increase with the number of government tiers.

racy in both Mali and Benin.⁵ One weakness of the Bratton & van der Walle (1994) model lies in the fact that while they base their typology on a historical perspective, they limit their study -- unlike Barrington Moore (1966) to whom they refer -- to the regime that existed immediately before the phase of democratic transition (i.e., in the case of Benin, the period between 1972 and 1989). In my view, a more plausible assumption is that the current phase of democratisation is not only influenced by the nature of the immediately preceding regime, but that political lines of development are continued that originate from early independence, colonial rule and even the pre-colonial period.⁶

Furthermore, even if they are as complex and historicizing in their approach as Bratton & van der Walle's (1994) model, many political science typologies suffer from their systematic neglect of the local level. It would, indeed, be surprising if the local political situation did not display a high level of autonomy, particularly in the case of regimes characterized by low steering capacity on the part of the central state.⁷ It has actually been demonstrated for Benin that local political developments are not simply a reflection of "major" national politics, but that local political history modulates national history to a large extent (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1998, similarly for Mali, cf. Fay 2000). Thus, to relate this general statement to the issue under discussion here, in Benin the local forms of politics that existed during the phase of Marxist-Leninist rule were far more "competitive" than Bratton and Van de Walle's classification of the national regime under the "plebiscitary single-party rule" type will reveal. Paradoxically, many village inhabitants in Dahomey/Benin first experienced democratic forms of politics, and elections in particular, in the context of Marxist-Leninist rule. At the risk of simplifying things somewhat, it might be said that the fate of democratic processes at national and local level since the 1950s in Benin has been almost inverted: at the local -- urban -- level, democratic procedures were introduced during the late colonial period, while the first years of independence saw their rapid abolition, as was the case throughout Africa. And while the regime that came to power in 1972 quickly adopted a Marxist-Leninist orientation, democratic elements were (re)introduced on the local level, whereas the "democratic renewal" regime did not hold any local elections between 1991 and 2002.

Against this historical background, the purpose of this paper is to provide a very early analysis of the local elections which were held in Benin in late 2002/early 2003, twelve years after Benin's change from a Marxist-Leninist to a multi-party democratic state. Since this "democratic renewal" (as the regime change of 1989/90 is referred to locally), Benin has been widely regarded as a model democracy in the African context. The holding of local elections -- resulting from extensive pressure from donors (in par-

⁵ The national political regimes in both countries prior to 1989 were not of the competitive one-party system type, which according to Bratton & van der Walle's classification (1994: 484ff.) provides the best preconditions for democratic transition. Sandbrook (1996: 81) ranks Mali "among the least likely prospects for durable democracy in the world". He does not see this, however, as a negation of his initial theses (one of which states that only stable two-party systems represent long-term democracy), but refers to ... "human agency" (!) (p. 85). It would appear that a consistent application of an institutional approach to empirical research on African democracies is not possible without repeated resort to the level of ad hoc explanation in terms of actors' choices.

⁶ In his impressive detailed study of a Malian *cercle*, Fay (2000) recently demonstrated how productive it can be to view political developments from a long-term perspective.

⁷ Karnoouh's (1973) social-anthropological study demonstrates that the local regimes also display a high level of internal logic in West-European political systems.

ticular France and Germany) -- can be regarded as the rounding off of this transition towards democracy. As we have seen, donors have high expectations of decentralization and local democracy. It is argued, in particular, that the institution of a representative political system at local level will open up political arenas for new actors and will generate greater legitimacy for local political leaders who will in turn be enabled to mobilize local resources for development. This paper tries to gauge whether these expectations have been fulfilled by taking Parakou, Benin's third-largest city, as its main empirical case.

The paper argues that, while it is far too early to draw any conclusions about the long-term effects of regime change, and while decentralization as such was imposed by the international donors, the exact forms it has taken have tended to follow national and local political Beninese rationales. The electoral system has produced municipal councils which at best represent only 60% of the local population and which, in all cases, are dominated by a given locally hegemonic political party, often representing not more than a quarter of the population. Thus, local democracy reflects, and has reinforced a particular characteristic of Beninese democracy. Benin is often admired for its multi-party democracy, whereas in other equally democratic countries like Mali a *de facto* tendency towards a democratic single-party system can be observed. In fact, multi-partyism "Benin style" is composed of a limited number of political parties which are each hegemonic in a given region and which now completely dominate one or the other of the municipal councils.

Furthermore, far from "making democracy the only political game in town", the introduction of local elections has so far not fundamentally reversed the dominant mode of doing politics in town, which is essentially a complex game of multi-level negotiations between segments of the local elites and local representatives of the central state (Bierschenk 2000). Decentralisation has only changed the context in which these negotiations take place; also, it has added to the predominant currency of politics (e.g., negotiations) an additional – new – currency for "buying" into political power, e.g. three elections at strictly circumscribed points in the process of acceding to power positions.

Sociologically speaking, the newly elected local councils are dominated by youngish businessmen who were the only people in a position to financially invest in election campaigns. In this respect, political developments in Benin seem to catch up with developments elsewhere in the region, in particular Nigeria and Ghana, where businessmen have been prominent in politics for some time. In the Benin case, this can indeed be considered as a rejuvenation and renewal of (local) political elites. However, the case of Parakou shows that newcomers only have a chance to rise to the top (the mayorship) if they are supported by national political elite networks.⁸ Furthermore, the fact that these businessmen essentially depend on state contracts augurs badly for any hope there may be of controlling the rampant corruption and neopatrimonialism that exists in Benin (see the text on Benin by Bako-Arifari in Blundo & Olivier de Sardan 2001).

Finally, an analysis of the election campaign shows that local political leaders and the electorate consider decentralization not so much as an opportunity to mobilize local resources for development, but as an opportunity to mobilize external resources (e.g. development aid). Like the "democratic renewal" of 1989/90, the installation of local democracy is seen by Benin's political class as an additional opportunity for "rent seeking".

⁸ while in Cotonou and Porto Novo, two members of the old political guards were elected mayor.

2. The Republic of Benin since 1990: a model democracy?⁹

Benin is often cited as a model democracy in the African context. Since the peaceful regime change of 1989/90, which is referred to locally as the “democratic renewal” (*renouveau démocratique*), presidential and parliamentary elections have been fair and free. The country enjoys free and dynamic media (over 57 private and government newspapers, 42 private and two government radio stations and two national television channels in addition to the foreign channels accessible via satellite). The Constitutional Court has played its role as guardian of the Constitution admirably and the country has no political prisoners. Benin has also been spared major outbursts of ethnic-regionalist and social violence since 1991. Between 1990 and 2000, Benin was rated 2 for political freedom, between 2 and 3 for civil liberties and 2.0 on the combined index by Freedom House.¹⁰ In Sub-Saharan Africa, only South Africa (1 and 2, combined 1.5) has better ratings and only Botswana, Ghana, Mali and Namibia have comparable ones (omitting the islands of Cape Verde and Mauritius). Thus, Benin ranks among the “free” nations in the world which, in view of a regional context that is far from positive in this respect, must be acknowledged as a major achievement on the part of the country’s political elite.

Presidentialism, informalization and political immobilism

Despite those achievements, the institutionalisation of a pluralist democracy and the rule of law (*état de droit*) triggered by the “democratic renewal” have remained incomplete in several important respects. To begin with, the level of formal politics, the national political system, is extremely biased in favour of the executive and, in particular, the President. The latter (Mr Kérékou at present) enjoys large powers to legislate by decree and he largely controls the budget via his finance and economics minister. Under certain conditions, the budget does not even have to be passed by parliament. For example, it was passed by presidential decree in 2000 and 2002. In other words, parliament and its 83 members can easily be bypassed in the legislative and budgetary process. Furthermore, due the shortage of professional staff and the generally low level of technical skills among MPs, it does not have the technical capacity to challenge the administration. Hearings of outside experts are highly unusual; in fact, they happened for the first time in 2001 (within the framework of an USAID parliamentary capacity building project). A parliamentary budget analysis unit was established only recently with the help of UNDP. As a result, the parliament has not initiated any legislation between 1991 and 2001 (Eberlei &

⁹ The argument in this section is developed further in Bierschenk et al. 2002: 4-16

¹⁰ The scale goes from 1 to 7 for both “political freedom” and “civil liberties” (see “Freedom in the World”, www.freedomhouse.org, updated 19.7.2002). Between 1972 and 1989, Benin’s rating for both categories had been the worst possible, i.e. 7 and 7 (the same as Iraq). In 2001, Benin’s rating dropped from 2 to 3 for political liberties; the reason given for this in the Freedom House country report was that the second round of the presidential election was boycotted by two major candidates. Any regular observer of the country will find the claim that the president then had to run against an “obscure fourth-place candidate” mysterious, to say the least, as the person in question, Bruno Amoussou, has been one of the country’s main political actors for years and is among the most likely successors to President Kérékou after 2006. The report also contains other factual errors such as the claim that the economy is “mixed-statist” (in fact, all of the state companies have been privatized) and that its “economy is based largely on subsistence agriculture”, which, apart from contradicting the “mixed-statist” characterization, is erroneous as Benin’s economy is based on agriculture (cotton being the only export product) and entrepôt-trade.

Henn 2003: 19, 25, 51).¹¹ Furthermore, draft laws frequently accumulate without any action being taken for long periods of time (PNUD 2000: 57). The President also has very extensive powers to appoint senior staff in the administration and state companies. In a political system tainted by clientelism, all this mounts up to a formidable power base.

President Kérékou first came to power following a military coup in 1972 and initially remained in power until 1989. Thanks to the introduction of democratic elections, he was able to regain his position in 1996 and has remained in office since then. Throughout these periods, he has been very skilful in consolidating his position by associating, via clientelist links, a maximum number of segments of local and regional elite networks with the government machinery. (In fact, his mastery of this strategy was probably the major factor behind his surprising re-election in 1996.) Thus, governance by reciprocal assimilation of elite segments (cf. Bayart 1989) represents the basis of the relative political stability that the country has enjoyed both under the Marxist-Leninist regime from 1974 to 1989 and the pluralist democracy thereafter.

However, the high incidence of informal politics and the inclusivity of the political regime which is characteristic of Benin also come at a price. Firstly, governing through clientelist networks leads to a high degree of politicisation of the administration. Secondly, combined with a low level of material resources, inflexible bureaucratic norms, the sub-optimal distribution of personnel (across regions and sectors) and weak intra-administrative control and sanctioning mechanisms, this politicisation has largely contributed to the administration's low level of efficacy when it comes to the implementation of government decisions. Large sections of the administration elude central control – at least in part – and the state's capacity for arbitration and regulation is low. Thirdly, as a result, Benin's political system suffers from a high degree of political immobility. Since the successful completion of the "democratic renewal" process, all major reform projects have only advanced very slowly or stalled completely. In each case, the initiative for the reforms came from external sources; the formulation of reform projects relied to a large extent on foreign and foreign-financed expertise and the degree of implementation was directly correlated with the level of pressure from Benin's foreign donors. Decentralization, which has been high on the donors' list of priorities, but which took over ten years to implement (it was announced in the 1991 constitution), is a case in point. The necessary laws were not passed until March 2001, following considerable pressure from some of the major bilateral donors, and the municipal elections were only held in December 2002/January 2003. Fourthly, public debate is systematically weakened in Benin's brand of neopatrimonialism: opposition is either bought off or isolated.

Institutionalised aid-dependency: Benin as a rentier state

Neopatrimonialism and the informality of political processes are inscribed in the nature of the Beninese rent-based political economy. The Beninese economy is very dependent on external aid. In the 1992-1997 period, aid financed 30% of total public expenditure and over 80% of public investment (Joekes & Houedete: 17). The country's good track record in terms of democracy and human rights since the 1990s have undoubtedly impacted posi-

¹¹ In Ghana, the first time that legislation was initiated by the parliament was in 2002, cf. Eberlei & Henn 2003: 19.

tively on development aid levels. This phenomenon is referred to in Benin as the “democracy bonus” (*prime de la démocratie*). In the donor community the opinion is often expressed in private that the country was in fact “over-assisted”.

Poorly co-ordinated aid – with each donor pursuing its own agenda, creating its own local clientele within and outside the government administration and working on the basis of different funding cycles, timeframes and procedures – has been a major factor in limiting the coherence of government action. It has further reduced the government’s already weak capacity for arbitration and regulation. Actions are undertaken not because they are seen as priorities for the development of the country, but because they bring external financial support.¹²

Furthermore, clientelist politics, which we have identified as a major feature of Benin’s political system, are fostered and stabilized by institutionalised aid dependency. Thus, based on the idea that development aid can fulfil the function of a “rent” in the recipient country, Benin’s political economy can be considered as that of a “rentier state” (Bierschenk 1993b).¹³ With the recent swing in development philosophy towards decentralized aid which aims to reach the beneficiaries directly, the search for “development rent” has been decentralized and generalized. This is a major factor behind the recent flourishing of Benin’s associational sector discussed below.

Political parties, civil society and the media: weak pillars of democracy

Thus, political parties, civil society associations and the media operate in a difficult environment which makes it difficult for them to play their role as “bellwethers of democracy” (Sandbrook 1996: 70). Since 1991, the number of political parties in Benin has increased from 38 to over 122 (PNUD 2000: 44). This seemingly high fragmentation of the party system, which observers often cite as its main weakness, is however misleading.¹⁴ There are in fact two types of political party in Benin (Hounkpe & Lalaye 2000/01): only a handful dominate national political life and, over the last 12 years, they have accounted

¹² This theme is particularly well documented for West Africa. See for example Naudet 1999.

¹³ The concept of “rent” is used in this paper in the Ricardian-Marxian sense of surplus revenues which are not derived from the investment of factors of production (e.g. capital or labour). In this sense, rents are “unearned” revenues; they arise in situations where competition is limited by either natural or socio-political factors. In neo-classical economic theory, rent is a receipt in excess of the opportunity cost of a resource (which would arise in situations of competition). Access to rents needs to be politically organized (“lobbying”). In this perspective, rent seeking describes the activity of economic actors who compete for monopoly positions and preferential access to rents using political and social means. Thus, a rentier state is a state that receives considerable revenues from sources other than taxes on (internal) productive processes, e.g. profits and salaries. The possibility of having access to rent renders the state indifferent to the problems concerning the internal mobilization of factors of production. The concept was originally used in the analysis of the political economy of Near Eastern (and other) oil-producing countries, but can also be usefully employed to highlight certain features of aid-dependent poor African (and other) countries where aid plays a similar economic and political function (rent equivalent) as the oil-derived rents in the Near East. For an introduction into the extensive literature on the subject, cf. Buchanan et al. 1980 and Hazem & Luciani 1987.

¹⁴ In an extraordinary show of Anglo-Saxon bias, Sandbrook (1996: 76) considers that “most propitious for durable and effective democratic governance is a two-party system of stable coalition of parties organised on a left-right basis” and concludes that the prospects of democracies in the Anglophone countries of Ghana, Tanzania and Zambia are more favourable than those in the francophone countries of Mali, Niger and Madagascar.

for around 80 % of the seats in parliament. These parties each have a regional monopoly and are based on alliances of political leaders in a given region.¹⁵ (However, they are not ethnic parties, as it is often falsely claimed – all regions in Benin are multi-ethnic.) Through participation in national elections they try to get into a position to form a government and to advance the interests of their regional electorate (Bako-Arifari 1995, Gbessemehlan & Rijniere 1995).¹⁶

The other 100 or so parties do not aspire to win elections and do not even seriously aim at being represented in parliament. In the majority of cases, the creation of a party and the participation in an election are merely a means for individual local political leaders and their followers to measure their political weight in the hope of being granted positions in government after the elections. (The same strategy also explains the high number of candidates in presidential elections – 17 in 2001 – most of whom have no serious chance of winning.) This strategy is fostered by the electoral system which guarantees representation for a maximum of diverse local interests once they are able to muster a minimum of votes in at least one given electoral district, thus creating a “parliament of minorities” (Hounkpe & Lalaye 2001).¹⁷ And while new parties are being created every year, no party ever dissolves so that many of Benin’s over 100 parties could at best be considered dormant structures.

Thus, Beninese political parties are very light organizations built around the personal ambition of individual politicians (or coalitions of “big men” in the case of the larger parties), who are also their main sponsors as a rule. Reliable figures on party membership do not exist, and it can be safely assumed that there is a very large grey zone between a limited number of party activists (financed by the big men of the party) and the party’s electorate, where membership is simply claimed or assumed and in any case shifting and potentially multiple. Internal conflicts are typically resolved by splitting up: in case of political defeat, the losing faction leaves the party and either creates a new party or joins an existing one. These pronounced segmentary tendencies are a fundamental trait of many African institutions, from lineages and villages to businesses and religious associations and for the political anthropologist they are reminiscent of the shifting coalitions and alliances of Benin’s precolonial chiefdoms.¹⁸

As MPs and parties are not elected on the basis of a programme, but act as a link between the electorate of a given area and the national centres of power, this “political transhumance”, as it is called in Benin and often deplored, would appear to be not inconsistent with the interests of the electorate: politicians are not elected to defend policy is-

¹⁵ On the regional level, we thus find the same kind of one-party dominance (a term which is preferable to *partis uniques régionaux* as used by PNUD 2000: 67) which characterises many African neo-democracies, cf. Bogaards 2000 and Randall & Svasand 2000. Because of Benin’s particular political geography, it has, however, not led to a dominant (non-authoritarian) party system on the national level.

¹⁶ Twelve parties or party alliances are represented in the parliament elected on 30 March 2003, but only five of them account for 71 (e.g. 86 %) of the 83 seats.

¹⁷ As the recent (2002) French presidential elections show, the mechanism described here is not limited to Africa. The proliferation of parties cannot, however, be explained by proportional representation per se, as suggested by Sandbrook (1996: 81).

¹⁸ For an excellent regional case study of these segmentary tendencies in Benin’s party system, cf. Badou 2003.

sues but to ensure that government resources are channelled to their region of origin.¹⁹ The party context within which the local MP fulfils this function is seen as being of secondary importance.²⁰ In fact, like in many other “neo-democracies” (Schmitter 1999) in the world, personalities are prior over parties, and the usual case is for prominent people trying to hedge their status by joining a political party or, more frequently, creating one, than for politicians gaining national prominence through a party career. Thus, it is not surprising that most parties have no political programme and no technical capacities in terms of policy analysis. In addition, parties and individual MPs that find themselves in opposition after an election tend to gravitate towards the government. As one notorious party-hopping MP recently declared, “opposition does not feed a man” (*Le Cordon*, 19.7.01). As a result, all major parties have been seriously weakened by secession and splits since 1996.

While political parties are main players in Benin’s democracy, they themselves are not democratic institutions.²¹ In particular, the composition of party lists for elections is never subjected to a democratic vote by members. Instead, it is decided in complex rounds of negotiations by the parties’ big men (and sometimes, as in the case of the Renaissance of Benin/RB, the main national opposition party, big women), which remain opaque to outside observers and probably most party “members”.²² Conflict over the order of candidates on a list is the main reason why individuals leave one party and join another. Another important characteristic of Benin’s multi-party democracy is the absence of the efficient regulation of party finances. The 1999 law on party finances, which puts a ceiling on the expenses associated with election campaigns and requires parties to publicize their sources of finance, has been systematically violated by all major parties in recent years. All parties need sponsorship from business people who are, in turn, largely dependent on government contracts at national and local level. The feedback mechanism created in this way is a major cause of the rising spiral of corruption that has plagued the country in recent years (Bako-Arifari 2001).

¹⁹ See Wantchékon 2003 empirical study which finds that in Benin, in particular men prefer a clientelist election platform (providing jobs and resources to a given region) over a programmatic one. That women prefer programmatic platforms is plausibly explained by the fact that, compared to men, they have relatively little to gain from a clientelist approach to politics. However, the reference to the influence of the ONG *Vidole* in this context shows that things need to be treated with caution, as Wantchékon fails to explain that *Vidole* is the NGO of former president Soglo’s wife, herself leader of the RB party, and as such clearly part of the clientelist outfit of the RB party.

²⁰ To lose an MP to another party is not, however, in the interest of party leaders who are also expected to be the main providers for their party. A law passed by parliament in July 2001 stipulates that an MP who leaves the party on whose list he was elected loses his mandate (*Le Cordon*, 26.7.01); however, this law has been declared unconstitutional in its current form by the Constitutional Court.

²¹ This theme of party organisation, in particular inner-party democracy, is severely under-researched for Africa outside the southern African region, as is the question of party finance to which we will refer to below.

²² In the weeks before the first round of the municipal elections of December 2002, Rosine Soglo, the wife of the former President Soglo and the leader of the “Renaissance du Bénin (RB)” party, turned up several times at the headquarters of the National Election Commission in order to change the order on the lists that the party presented in Cotonou.

Benin not only boasts numerous political parties, but also has a flourishing “civil society” with a myriad of associations.²³ Some associations have a long history going back to colonial times (e.g. religious communities); some have existed since the revolutionary period and may have benefited from liberalization after 1990 (e.g. community organizations, trade unions, professional associations) and others did not appear until just before or after the democratic renewal in the early 1990s (e.g. NGOs, local development associations, cultural associations, agricultural producers associations). It was estimated in 1999 that there were more than 5000 NGOs in Benin, of which more than 3000 were officially registered (PNUD 2000: 66).

However, not unlike the political parties, the majority of Benin’s NGOs only exist on paper. Indeed, a large number of them are small business ventures that were established by university graduates in response to the reduction in employment opportunities within the administration after 1986. Indeed, the majority of graduates set out to create an NGO, however small, after graduation. Having studied together, NGO promoters are usually linked by ties of friendship, if not kinship. Associations that either defend or promote broader interests vis-à-vis the government or private sector or defend the interests of the users of a particular government service are rare. Instead, the NGOs seek contracts with development agencies, mostly in the decentralized aid business (cf. the case studies on Benin and beyond in Bierschenk et al. 2000).²⁴ They implement any development project for which they can find funding. Indeed, their leaders often combine the functions of private consultants and “development brokers”. In other words, in view of their profit-making orientation and their main function of providing jobs for their promoters, it could be argued that most Beninese NGOs are in fact part of the private sector.

Furthermore, Benin’s NGOs are not very independent of the state. Many of them include at least one or more politician and/or civil servant. In fact, having good links with the administration seems to be a prerequisite for success in obtaining contracts. Moreover, the reverse is also true: throughout the 1990s Benin’s numerous local “development associations” were important springboards for the launching of the national careers of local politicians. Recently, it has become fashionable for politicians in search of legitimacy to claim that they are “representatives of civil society” in order to dissociate themselves from the negative reputation of political parties.

In other words, leaders of many so-called civil society organizations have multiple identities and straddle the worlds of politics and the private sector. Hence, the distinction between civil society, the state and the market sector, on which much of the current development discourse is based, needs to be qualified in the context of Benin; in Benin, civil society is weakly developed and has barely freed itself from either the state or the market.

²³ Strictly speaking, civil society is defined as an autonomous space composed of civil associations that pursue public goals. The sphere of civil society is distinct from both the state and the market. In this strict definition of the concept, civil society organizations are not only non-government but also non-profit organizations. In the current debate concerning Africa, a more restricted definition is often used, one that simply identifies civil society with NGOs.

²⁴ Running an NGO instead of a consultancy has two main advantages: firstly, NGO’s are exempt from tax under the Law of 1901 on non-profit associations; and, secondly, in a context in which donors like to deal directly with civil society, possession of an NGO helps in obtaining funding for development projects.

The dynamism of Benin's media and the freedom of expression they enjoy are an essential component of the country's image as a (model) African democracy. Today, Benin can boast a small number of highly qualified and professional journalists. However, apart from a few exceptions, the media's potential as the forum for informed public debate on complex policy choices is rather limited.²⁵

To begin with, the reasons for this lie in the often low professional standards of many of the country's journalists. Another feature of the country's media is its concentration on the capital in terms of both reporting and distribution. While readers can choose from a wide range of press publications in Cotonou, the variety available becomes far more limited and supply increasingly erratic the further one moves away from the capital. Similarly, it is still rare to find reports of anything more controversial of regional or local import in the print media than the opening of a local school or the visit of a minister to a region. Furthermore, the printed media publish exclusively in French which is not read by the majority of the population. Television sets are also heavily concentrated in the capital and the country's other major cities; there are, however, some programmes in local languages. In terms of reach, radio is by far the most effective of the public media; it covers the entire country and has programmes in all of the major local languages.

On a more fundamental level, Benin's press – and to a lesser extent its television and radio organizations – has serious structural problems which are linked to its fragile financial base. In the absence of a subscription system, all press publications have to compete for buyers every day in the streets, a factor that favours a certain preference for large headlines announcing yet another scandal. While this becomes relatively quickly obvious to even the foreign reader, there is another less obvious side to the functioning of the press in Benin: the majority of articles in any given publication on any given day are, in fact, paid for by the beneficiaries. These could be a politician who wants his opening of a new school in his native village reported, an aid agency which wants an article published about its activities, a foreign embassy which wants the aid it disburses in Benin detailed or a politician who wants to undermine a rival by spreading rumours of the latter's scandalous private life or his mismanagement of public funds. As Emmanuel Adjovi (2003: 158), one of Benin's few top journalists, concludes: "In Benin we see the venality of many information professionals who behave like vulgar mercenaries of the pen or of the microphone in the service of whoever offers most".²⁶

3. The local context: Parakou before the recent municipal elections²⁷

Parakou and the surrounding region of Borgou are located in northern Benin, formerly known as the colony of Dahomey. As the capital of a former colonial *cercle* and present-

²⁵ The media are another institution of African democracies for which we lack serious analyses. For Benin, see Adjovi 2003, for another recent study on Senegal, see Wittmann 2003.

²⁶ For example, the technical teams working in the media regularly demand private supplementary payments – under the label of "*per-diem*s" – before they will move their equipment to a given event. Donors collude with these practices, and thus reinforce them: nowadays, the budgets of most of the numerous aid-financed seminars in Benin include an item referred to as "communication" or the like, which is actually intended to cover the costs of attracting a television crew or a press or radio reporter to their opening and final sessions.

²⁷ The following section draws heavily on research particularly in Parakou over the last ten years. This research has been partially documented in Bierschenk 1993a and Bierschenk 2000. For parallel research on politics in Benin's rural areas, see Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1998.

day province and thanks to its important location on the end of the south-north railway line, Parakou grew from a large village of about 3,000 inhabitants in 1900 to an urban centre with over 150,000 inhabitants and, today, it is by far the biggest city in north Benin and the third-largest in the country. Over the past century, its administrative and entrepôt functions (it is here that goods travelling from the coast to the Sahel states, in particular Niger, have to be unloaded from train to lorry) have attracted immigrants from all over the country and beyond, transforming Parakou into Benin's most multi-ethnic city. Nowadays, probably over a third of the city's population has originated from the country's south. In fact, the *sudistes* who came to Parakou in large numbers from the 1930s onwards to work in its different administrative services or with the railway, were generally better educated and had more lucrative jobs than people immigrating from the northern regions. Naturally, this generated resentment among their northern countrymen and this situation has been skillfully exploited by local politicians since the very beginnings of local democracy in the 1950s. In this "frontier town" (Kopytoff 1987) where nobody's local roots go back further than three generations, an ethnicising discourse, drawing a sharp line between "southerners" and "northerners", has been a constant factor of local politics since colonial times (no local politician with any ambition could refrain from playing on this theme), and has produced occasional violent outbreaks by a supposedly "autochthonous" (e.g., "northern") population against "immigrants from the south". In fact, the southern Beninese often associate Parakou with occasional but recurring massive outbursts of violence, usually in association with a political election. Such outbursts often resemble pogroms directed against the members of the population originating from the south. The riots in 1963 and 1991 are examples of events that made headlines throughout the country.

Prior to the recent municipal elections, the central state was represented in Parakou by the *circonscription urbaine*, the urban district authority, whose chief representative was the (appointed) urban district head, known locally as the *chef cir*. The urban district authority was, however, by no means the only body incorporating a local state presence. It constantly had to co-ordinate its activities with the other local instances of the central state which included (and still include) the police, the *gendarmerie*, the courts (whose status was significantly increased in 1989 following the "democratic renewal of 1989) and various technical services (school authorities, health authorities, road construction authorities, the agricultural administration etc.). The Prefect, or regional governor of Borgou province, also plays a special role here, as he is resident in Parakou. Formally speaking, he represents a separate hierarchical level between the central state and the district authority, although, in reality, he sometimes intervenes directly in the city's affairs. For example, until recently, he was responsible for the regulation of the inner city property market.

However, the city was managed not only by these various local state instances, but also by a series of intermediate institutions. In 2002, these included the elected mayors of five municipalities (*communes*) into which the city was divided and heads of the twenty-one city neighbourhoods wards (*quartiers*) (elected in 1991 and ever since then waiting to be re-elected, until the recent municipal elections), the so-called traditional chiefs who include, in particular, the "King" of Parakou and a few other less important chiefs from the outlying districts, various organizations representing economic actors, in particular the trucking companies, the people who run the cross-country taxi service, the cotton manu-

facturers, the Parakou Citizen's Association (*association de ressortissants*) TEMBI, the "Council of Sages", which consists almost exclusively of pensioned civil servants, and the Islamic association. All of these organizations were either represented to varying degrees on the consultative council, which was established in 1990, or they are invited to participate in its consultations on specific occasions.

Many of these intermediate organizations were (and continue to be) founded on diffuse membership criteria, and, indeed, in many cases mandatory membership which is associated with certain territorial or professional criteria, which are not necessarily observed in reality. Their internal modes of functioning are very unclear and, despite the existence of a formal election procedure, they are usually controlled by a few individuals. They function in accordance with a co-optation logic primarily based on candidates' reputation and socio-political status and – to a limited extent – financial resources. In many cases, their members do not join voluntarily and they are not always aware of their membership. For example, the way its leaders see it, every inhabitant of Parakou is a member of the citizens' association TEMBI – provided that he/she originates from the north and not the south of the country. These organizations act, together with, independently of and sometimes against the different instances of the state, as instances for the regulation of social relations and political conflicts. They tax their members in different ways, and may even use physical violence to this end. For example, the chairman of the Association of Motorcycle Taxis at one point had road blocks erected to force payment of membership fees. In other words, these authorities, which appear to the untrained eye as civil state organizations, compete directly with the state in three core areas: they contest its constitutive monopolies in the exercise of power, regulation and taxation.²⁸

The type of political system currently in place at local level in Parakou could thus be described as a "negotiated political order" that is neither democratic nor despotic. Instead, it is based on the principle of participation via clientelist networks dominated by local elites. One of the major features of this system is its high degree of institutional and legal pluralism. Local political arenas are multi-centred and central state representatives are unable to impose decisions on powerful local players. Decisions are based on complicated negotiations between the local representatives of the state, different segments of the local political elites and a multitude of local institutional actors (traditional chiefs, development associations, NGOs, religious groups, local sections of political parties, peasants' organizations, the security forces etc.). In the absence of a clear system of rules, regulations and sanctions, and given the number of local vetoing powers, these decisions are notoriously difficult to implement. In other words, the local administration has very weak arbitration and regulatory powers and this contributes to the semi-autonomy enjoyed by local political groups.

²⁸ These intermediate institutions are the products of different historical conjunctures. They could be described as organizational sediments that formed in the course of the development of the city administration from the end of World War II. In the course of history, new mediating authorities arose as the result of negotiations between the state and the city's elites. These authorities complement the existing city administration and often outlive the government that created them. When a city administration has been replaced by a new one in the aftermath of a change in national government, the mediating authorities it created do not simply disappear. They remain part of the existing arsenal of intermediate bodies, to which new bodies created by the new regime will also be added.

The described systematic mediation of state rule at local level corresponds to a characteristic system of public finance. This is based only partly on the logic of taxation and, to a significant extent, on a logic of sponsorship. Special appeals (*appells à contribution*) are launched to acquire resources for public projects such as road construction or the renovation of the city high school. Intermediary organisations mentioned above can participate in these projects as, so to speak, privileged tax payers. This system of financing local community tasks through donations can be seamlessly extended to a system of financing by decentralised development-aid donors. In fact, Parakou profits from a host of development projects, and a myriad of NGOs are active in the city. The combined amount of money that flows into the city in this way surpasses many times the resources based on local taxes and transfers from the Benin government.²⁹ At the same time, this system reinforces the need for constant negotiations between the participating actors.

Local civil societies are not very developed and barely differentiated from political elite networks. So-called civil society leaders often double as civil servants or politicians. In addition, the formal local economy is highly embedded in the political context: the larger private sector operators all depend to an enormous extent on contracts with the administration. Indeed, main local actors typically “straddle” the sectors of polity, economy and civil society and, as a rule, have multiple identities and functions.

4. Local elections in Benin and Parakou, December 2002/January 2003

The national and local political contexts described in the preceding sections raises interesting considerations with respect to the probable destiny of the local democratic institutions which have recently been introduced in Benin as part of decentralization policy. Two alternative scenarios would appear to be possible in the long term. In one of these, the political authorities to be created, in particular the elected municipal council and the mayoralty, will succeed in forcing the other actors, bodies and authorities to observe its regulative competencies and register of legitimacy and thus become the main focus of local politics in the long term. Such a situation whereby “democracy becomes the only game in town” is what the donor countries. In a less optimistic scenario, the pre-existing local logic involving negotiation among a limited number of players as the main mode of local politics will remain intact, and the new authorities will have to negotiate their place and role in the existing configuration of the myriad local political instances and bodies.

At this point in time, it is clearly far too early to provide a final assessment as regards the effect of democratic decentralization on the city’s municipal political regime. The scope of this section shall, therefore, be limited to providing responses to the following three questions which arise from some of the major expectations of donors with respect to democratic decentralization and which were already referred to in the first part of this paper. The first two questions concern democratisation as such, and the third concerns the supposed link between local democracy and economic development:

- Firstly, has the political system become more representative? Have political arenas been opened which were previously closed?

²⁹ For an assessment of local finances, see Braun 2003. An analysis of the comparative weight of local financial sources and donor based financial inflows does not yet exist.

- Secondly, have democratic rules of the political game replaced, or at least pushed into the background, pre-existing modes of political practice? In particular, have elections been able to contain the “negotatory mode” which was so characteristic of political life in the city prior to 2003?
- Thirdly, has local democracy led to an increased degree of local resource mobilization, or – at least – an increased awareness among the local political elite of its necessity? Has local democracy thus replaced the prevailing logic of rent-seeking for the financing of public goods?

As we shall see, the answer to the first two questions is “yes, but only to a very limited extent,” while the answer to the third question is “not at all so far”. As we shall also see, three major reasons for the – so far – limited success of democratic decentralization can be identified in the unusual system of municipal election adopted in Benin, in the absence of inner-party democracy, and in the context of the prevailing practices for the financing of political parties.

The story and its main actors

The institutionalisation of democracy in Benin was finally completed in December 2002 and January 2003 when local elections were held in two rounds following a very turbulent election campaign which, although not entirely peaceful, passed without any major outbreaks of violence. As already mentioned, the institutionalisation of local democracy had been on the political agenda since the “democratic renewal” of 1989/90 and had, indeed, been prescribed by the 1991 constitution. Despite the considerable interest shown in the process by France and Germany, Benin’s two major bilateral donors, it had taken over ten years for all of the necessary laws to be put in place. From the late 1990s, repeated announcements were made about the holding of local elections in the near future, however the elections were always deferred. After the presidential election of spring 2001, in which President Kérékou was re-elected for a second – and constitutionally last – term, it was widely expected that he would cash in on the momentum of the successful presidential campaign and finally give the go-ahead for local elections. Also, the holding of local elections within six months of the presidential election would have made it possible to use the existing electoral register and thus make considerable savings. However, the opportunity passed again until, finally, in early 2003, new electoral lists were drawn up and a date was set for the first round of local elections. The major parties set up their electoral committees to prepare the campaign by early autumn 2003.³⁰

In September 2002, the political parties which supported president Kérékou (the “presidential movement”) which at the time was a minority group in parliament, decided to present a unified list at the local elections as the *Union du Bénin du Future* (UBF). Bruno Amoussou, the main figure in the presidential movement after President Kérékou himself, Minister of Planning, leader of Benin’s Social Democratic Party (PSD) – as such the main representative of the south-western region (the Mono) in Benin’s political geography – and a man widely tipped by all political observers as one of the most likely successors of Kérékou after 2006, emerged as the national coordinator of the UBF. Under

³⁰ For an analysis of political parties and their strategies in Parakou in the course of the various national elections of the 1990s, cf. Badou 2003.

Bruno Amoussou, there was a group of departmental (provincial) coordinators who organized the compilation of the election lists in Benin's 77 new communes or municipalities (former *sous-prefectures* and *districts urbains*). Kérékou had proposed that the UBF's lists should be created on the basis of a bottom-up process, a kind of "primaries" process whereby the "local population" would decide on the composition of the lists in each electoral ward. Thus, the UBF coordinators travelled across the country to organize these primaries.

Among Benin's 77 communes, the elections in the three largest towns which had a special status expressed by the term municipality -- Cotonou (the "economic capital"), Porto-Novo (the political capital) and Parakou (the "capital" of the North) -- were obviously of particular interest. There was little real doubt that the *Renaissance du Benin* (RB) party, the main opposition party run by former president Soglo and his wife which has its strongholds in the centre-south of the country around the old pre-colonial capital Abomey, would take Cotonou where southerners largely outnumber the northerners. There was never any doubt either that the PRD, the party of Adrien Houngbedji, the second major opposition figure at the time and president of the National Assembly, would win in its fief of Porto-Novo. In fact, many people believed that the likelihood of the opposition assuming power in Benin's two largest cities had been a considerable factor behind the government's and president's hesitancy in giving the go-ahead for the local elections. It should be noted that, like Kérékou, for reasons of age, Soglo is constitutionally ineligible to contest the presidency in 2006. Thus, the prospect of becoming mayor of Cotonou offered him an opportunity to increase his political influence as well as gaining a kind of revenge for having lost the presidency to Kérékou in 1996 as the incumbent. Like Bruno Amoussou, Houngbedji, on the other hand, can and most likely will run for president in 2006, and for him retaining power over the city of Porto-Novo was an asset in a different political strategy.

There was also never any doubt that the UBF, the alliance behind President Kérékou, whose major stronghold is located in the north of the country, would take Parakou. The north had been the fief of the FARD-Alafia party during the first two parliamentary elections (1991 and 1996). However, this party's exclusive regionalist (i.e. northern) character, which made it difficult for Kérékou's southern supporters to vote for it, was increasingly perceived as problematic. Its image as a party of the north put a quasi-natural ceiling on its potential for growth. Furthermore, the FARD-Alafia's position in the north was weakened in 1997 when a large internal opposition group left the party and founded the CAR-Dunya. One reason for the founding of the UBF -- in which Bruno Amoussou, a "Southern" politician, was instrumental -- was probably to overcome the northern parties' narrow regionalist bias and, in anticipation of the parliamentary elections of March 2003, to create a wide political alliance around President Kérékou with a country-wide base.

The municipal elections were seen as a test of this strategy.³¹ Ousmane Batoko, at the time Civil Service Minister -- one of the very few major political advisors who had been consistently close to President Kérékou from at least the 1980s, and who was also

³¹ This strategy was vindicated by the results of the March 2003 parliamentary election, in which the UBF won by far the largest number of seats (31 out of 83), and boosted both the standing of the UBF's national coordinator, Bruno Amoussa, and his chances in the competition to succeed Kérékou.

credited with the aspiration of contesting the forthcoming presidential election of 2006 -- was the candidate most likely to win in Parakou. He had been referring to himself publicly as the “natural mayor” of Parakou for years. In 1999, he was elected from the FARD-Alafia list as the first of four members of parliament for the Parakou electoral district (which extends beyond the municipality of Parakou). In December 2002, he even published a kind of local development programme, the only major Parakou politician to do so.³²

However, a rift occurred in October 2003; Batoko withdrew from the UBF and presented independent FARD-Alafia lists in Parakou’s three electoral wards (*arrondissements*), while in the rest of the country FARD candidates sailed under the UBF flag. At the same time, a new name emerged on the local political scene, Rachidi Gbadamassi who was hitherto largely unknown as a politician. In other words, there was a split in the presidential movement in its northern fief of Parakou and the local campaign was increasingly perceived by the national media as a personal contest between the two opposing figures who represented two very different types of political actor (even though Gbadamassi was only based in second position on one of the UBF lists and claimed, until well after the elections, not to be interested in the mayor’s seat). Based on his age (around 60) and profession (civil servant and professional politician), in a sense Batoko, the son of a former mayor of Parakou (in the late 1950s), represented the older traditional type of politician who had been running the country since, and even before, independence, while Gbadamassi, a rich local Yoruba businessman of around 35 years of age and president of the local football club (the Parakou Buffalos) liked to present himself as representative of the younger generation. Gbadamassi was a member of an intra-UBF tendency which had been active under the title of *comité des jeunes pour une relève de qualité* for some time. During the campaign, both men claimed to have the support of President Kérékou (and both systematically dismissed the other’s claim in this regard), however Kérékou himself remained silent on this issue – in public at least – until the end.³³

In fact, local observers considered the contest to be a three-horse race between Batoko, Gbadamassi and Amadou Moutari who was also seen (realistically, as it emerged) as having a good chance of making an impact. Around 50 years of age, which in Beninese perception still classifies him as a member of the “younger generation”, Moutari was, even more than Gbadamassi, a newcomer to politics. He was a former Air Afrique pilot who ran a successful travel agency in Cotonou and was president of the company which managed the local market hall Arzeke. When he decided to run for the municipal council, instead of joining either the UBF or the FARD-Alafia, he preferred to create his own electoral alliance named ASSIRI (lit. in Dendi: the confided secret, in the sense of pact, agreement), and persuaded Lolo Chidiac, a Lebanese-Beninese of around 70 years of age, who had been one of the most notorious trouble-makers in local and national politics

³² *FARD-Alafia, Sous-section de Parakou, Nos priorités pour Parakou (2003 – 2007), s.l. décembre 2002.* In fact, this programme contained the conclusions of a seminar conducted in 1997 under the auspices of two local NGOs, one of them run by Batoko and financed by French technical cooperation; in the run up to the municipal elections in 2002, the local section of FARD-Alafia simply re-issued the seminar conclusions under the party name.

³³ Gbadamassi had a poster printed which showed him standing next to Kérékou who was seated at his desk. FARD-Alafia threatened to take the UBF to court, claiming that it was illegal for local candidates to use the image of the president for their publicity, however the threat came to nothing.

since independence, to join him. Despite the fact that Moutari, like the UBF and the FARD-Alafia, vaguely considered himself as close to the presidential movement, he preferred to be seen as officially independent of any particular national political affiliation.

Of course, the RB party, the party of ex-president Soglo – which is viewed in Parakou as very much the party of the “southerners” and which had, to everybody’s surprise, won one of the four parliamentary seats for Parakou in the 1999 parliamentary elections – presented lists in all three electoral wards, hoping to win most of the votes of the 40% of the city’s population originating from the south. Apart from these four major parties or lists, another 18 parties or lists, many of them created on an *ad hoc* basis for these elections, contested the election, some of them only in one or two electoral wards, and most of them with obviously no real chance of winning any seats.³⁴

The campaign was very animated but, surprisingly in view of Parakou’s notoriety for ethnic troubles, completely free of violence, and very few ethnic or regionalist references were made by the candidates.³⁵ The major exception here was Batoko, who, when he began to get a sense that victory would not come easy, increasingly referred in his public speeches to a putative “plot against the north”. Some anonymous tracts denigrating the personal character of candidates were circulated, however this appears to have been limited to the parties fighting for the support of the RB electorate. Also, there were hardly any attempts at electoral fraud, and the few that did occur, were not politically organized. Thus, by all accounts, the elections were “free and fair”, and the turnout, in the first round at least, was very high (over 75%), as it had been in all elections in Parakou since 1991.

In the first round of the elections in December 2003, the UBF won six out of the eight seats in Parakou’s second electoral ward, while the FARD-Alafia won the remaining two. Both Batoko and Gbadamassi were elected to the municipal council, Batoko as head of his list and Gbadamassi as number three on the UBF list. As required under the electoral law, a second round of elections was held in the two other electoral wards in which no party had gained a 40% majority (the constitutional court took an unexpectedly protracted period to confirm the first-round results). The final result was that out of 25 council seats, the UBF took 16, the FARD-Alafia five, the ASSIRI three and the RB two (cf. table on p. 28). In other words, the results exactly mirrored those in the southern cities where the parliamentary opposition won overwhelming majorities, the difference being that in Parakou, the dominating tendency (presidential movement) was split into three parties represented in the municipal council, while in the southern cities the hegemonic tendencies (the parliamentary opposition) expressed themselves in a single party.³⁶

³⁴ Thus, around 350 candidates on 20 lists contested the 25 council seats. The largest of the smaller lists were the IRETI (which presented itself as the political voice of the Yoruba/Nagot population) with 5,0 % of the vote (weighted average in the first round in all of Parakou), the UCB-Faaba (3,2 %) of Nazaire Dossa, RUND (3,1 %) and BARKA (3,0 %) of Aboudou Saidi, a former *chef de district* who claimed that most of Parakou’s current major infrastructure had been created when he was running the town hall.

³⁵ While in other regions of Benin, small outburst of pre-electoral and post-electoral acts of violence were reported, for example in Cotonou and Ouessé (*Le Progres*, 17.2.2003). In Malanville, one person died in post-electoral violence.

³⁶ In Cotonou, the RB won 32 of 51 seats and Soglo was elected mayor; in Porto-Novo, the PRD gained 24 out of 25 seats and Houngbedji was elected mayor. However, he later resigned from this post and took up his seat in the National Assembly, which he won in March 2003, and afterwards, to everybody’s great sur-

Previously, Gbadamassi had declared several times in public that, despite being the most visible and outspoken politician on the UBF list, he had no intention of becoming mayor. In fact, he was only positioned in second place, and there was one person ahead of him and one behind who looked like far more likely candidates: Yacoubou Assouma, a former minister and now General Secretary of the Ministry of Finance who is known locally as “de Gaulle” on account of his physical height, and Baba Moussa Allasane who, like Batoko, is the son of one of the first generation of politicians in Parakou (his father was member of the territorial assembly in the 1950s), technical director for water in the National Society for Electricity and Water and president of Parakou’s development association since early 2003. My personal bet at the time was that “de Gaulle” would succeed in becoming mayor (see the annex for a sociological profile of Parakou’s municipal councillors).

After the two rounds of elections, for several weeks the city resounded with all sorts of speculation about all kinds of alleged political manoeuvres as part of the major candidates’ efforts to ensure that they would gain sufficient votes to secure the mayoralty. It should be noted that Benin’s notoriety for the pervasiveness of its corruption is matched by its reputation as the home of vodun and all kinds of other occult practices. There is no doubt that political manoeuvring was going on an intense scale: more than once, our interviews with local politicians were interrupted by phone calls from other politicians, more often than not from a different party. A key issue was the transfer of votes from those parties which had failed to attain the minimum of 10% of the vote necessary to be allowed to contest the second round of elections. The most important of these were the IRETI, the UCP-FAABA, the RUND and the BARKA (cf. note 34), and it later emerged that the leader of the second was offered, and accepted, the post of general secretary of the regional Chamber of Industry and Commerce, while the leader of the fourth was awarded the post of special advisor to the mayor.³⁷

However, the negotiations were by no means limited to local politicians (this, at least, was the firm conviction of everybody we spoke to in Parakou) and also involved numerous interventions on the part of national politicians. Many people, including, it would appear, Batoko himself, expected that he would ultimately manage to rally the UBF councillors with help in the wings from Kérékou.³⁸ One rumour was that “de Gaulle” was being offered the post of ambassador to Morocco, Lebanon or Saudi Arabia – the country varied according to the different accounts in circulation – and Baba Moussa the directorship of the West African interstate school of engineering in Burkina Faso so as to eliminate them from the race. The weak performance of the FARD-Alafia and Ba-

prise, – he had formed an alliance with Soglo in the previous parliament -- he joined the presidential movement, no doubt in anticipation of the presidential elections of 2006.

³⁷ It appears that the local leader of the RUND (Idrissou Ibrahim), who was MP for Parakou at the time of the local elections, saw his participation in the municipal elections rather as a test for the up-coming parliamentary elections when, however, he lost his seat. In any case, he seems not to have been included in any negotiation for the transfer of votes. Most RUND candidates supported ASSIRI in the second round. IRETI candidates supported UBF in the second round. There was no apparent compensation in terms of posts, but many people in Parakou are convinced that IRETI leaders had received financial gratifications for their UBF support.

³⁸ Arouna Boubakar, the second most prominent among FARD-Alafia’s elected municipal councillors, publicly predicted that the issue of the mayoralty of Parakou would be decided by Kérékou himself. Cf. *Le Nouvel Essor* (Parakou), 28.1.2003

toko clearly validated the UBF's strategy and thus strengthened the chances of the UBF's national coordinator, Bruno Amoussou, against Batoko in the struggle to succeed Kérékou. From this obvious observation, it was only a small step to the conclusion that Batoko fell victim to a Machiavellian coup actively orchestrated by Amoussou with the help of Gbadamassi. Another name which cropped up as somebody active behind the scenes was that of Yaya Boni, a native of Parakou and current president of the West African Development Bank (WADB/BOAD) which was in the final stage of negotiations for two loans to the city of Parakou in the road construction and electric energy sectors.

This was when Gbadamassi demonstrated once again – to anyone who may still have doubted him – what an adept politician he is. It appears that he first took the UBF councillors to the traditional king of Parakou where he made everybody swear on the Qur'an that, whatever might happen, they would all vote for the candidate they had chosen among themselves. To make doubly sure, he also made them drink a potion, prepared at the court of the king, which, it was said, would cause the death of anyone who would try to betray his fellow councillors. Some reports say that Yacoubou Assouma and Baba Moussa did not participate in this ritual but that all the others did. Gbadamassi then took the whole group (again with the exception of Yacoubou Assouma, Baba Moussa and also without Alima Abdoulaye and Al-Hadj Vita) to an unknown location – to Germany, it was said in town --, from which they did not return until the evening of the election of the mayor by the city council. Later, it became known that they had gone to stay in a hotel in Lomé in Togo, all expenses paid by Gbadamassi. (It was in this hotel that Yaya Boni was said to have met Gbadamassi.) It further appears that on the eve of the meeting of the municipal council for the election of the mayor, Gbadamassi called a meeting of the UBF councillors and asked who was going to go forward as a candidate for the mayoralty. Both Yacoubou Assouma and Baba Moussa declared their intention to contest the mayoralty, whereupon Gbadamassi proposed that the two go to another room so as to decide among themselves who would be the candidate. When the two returned after an hour and confessed that they had not been able to settle the issue, Gbadamassi declared that in that case he himself would go forward and nobody objected.

The following day Gbadamassi turned up at the inaugural session of the new city council with twelve other UBF councillors all dressed in clothing made of the same fabric, as is the Beninese custom for close friends, a husband and wife, a man and his mistress or the members of a local association when attending social occasions like weddings.³⁹ When the prefect asked for the candidates for the mayoralty to declare themselves, three men put themselves forward: Gbadamassi for the UBF, Batoko for the FARD-Alafia and Moutari for the ASSIRI. In the secret ballot, Gbadamassi obtained 18 votes (thus two more than the number of UBF councillors), Batoko obtained five (one more than his party's number of seats) and Moutari only got one (ASSIRI had three councillors). One ballot was spoiled. It is widely speculated that the two RB councillors voted

³⁹ Allassane Baba Moussa, Yacoubou Assouma, Alimatou Abdoulaye and Al Hadj Vita were not dressed in the same "uniform" however. The first three (who had not been in Lomé either) obviously wanted to mark their distance from Gbadamassi. Later events – in particular the distribution of posts in the municipal council – indicate that these three individuals, all of whom were elected on UBF lists, considered themselves, and were considered, as being in opposition to Gbadamassi. It is not clear why Al Hadj Vita did not dress like Gbadamassi's group as he was clearly not in opposition to him; he was later elected *chef* of the 2nd *arrondissement* having been proposed by Gbadamassi.

for Gbadamassi, as did Moutari's two fellow ASSIRI councillors, while from the UBF group, either Yacoubou Assouma or Baba Moussa voted for Batoko and the other spoiled his vote. We cannot know for sure, but examination of the list of functions in the new council reveals strikingly that most councillors were allocated assignments (which entail more or less significant expense allowances) with the exception of the FARD-Alafia group, Moutari of ASSIRI (although his fellow ASSIRI councillors have assignments) and, within UBF, Alimatou Abdoulaye, Baba Moussa Allassane and Assouma Yacoubou (see annex).⁴⁰

A few weeks later, Gbadamassi also headed the UBF list at the parliamentary elections which were held on 30 March 2003. The UBF won three out of the four seats in Parakou's electoral district. For a time, some people thought that Gbadamassi would opt for the parliamentary seat, as did his party colleague, Issa Salifou, in Malanville and Adrien Houngbedji in Porto-Novo, as this would give him more scope and time for his business in addition to parliamentary immunity. However, he did just the opposite, and gave his parliamentary seat to his replacement, (Karimou Saliou Youassou) the president of ALKAWALI (see below p. ALKAWALI 25)

Businessmen entering the political arena

Gbadamassi's success indicates a major shift in the sociological composition of Benin's overaged political class. It should be remembered that the country's political life has been dominated by people who have been in politics since the 1980s, if not the 1970s. This is not only true of President Kérékou himself, but also of his main opponent, Soglo, who was hailed as a new man at the time of the democratic renewal in 1990, but had actually already held ministerial office in the late 1960s. "Benin's political arena", writes Tessy Bakary in *Jeune Afrique* (April 1996, quoted in Monga 1997: 161), "appears as a sort of Jurassic Park, peopled with three species of 'professional' politicians: the dinosaurs, or has-beens, who dream of once again becoming what they were or what they could not be; the wannabes and the others, in between, who dream of becoming something; and the born-again of democracy who appeared after the National Conference."

Democratic decentralization has meant that there are around 1000 new political posts – council seats – to be filled in the country, and many of them have gone to young people. The annexe gives an indication of the rejuvenation of the political class brought about by decentralization. Decentralization has not only opened up political arenas in the sense that many of the new actors are younger than the established politicians, around three quarters of Parakou's municipal councillors are also new to formal politics. What is also striking is the fact that many of those who entered (local) politics with the advent of decentralization are businessmen, tradesmen or hold middle-level salaried jobs.⁴¹ Out of 25 municipal councillors, only six (24%) belong to the category of high-ranking civil ser-

⁴⁰ UBF councillor Mohammed Hadi Sidi is a simple member of the "lucrative" public contracts and procurement. The reason that he has no more prominent function is explained by some by the fact that his commercial activities in the port of Cotonou simply do not leave him enough time to be present in Parakou, by others that he has fallen out with Gbadamassi.

⁴¹ In this respect, Benin seems to be simply catching up with other African countries where for some time businessmen have played an important role in formal politics. For Ghana, see Nugent 2003, for the heavy share of businessmen in the Kenyan parliament, see Hornsby 1989.

vants (often referred to as “intellectuals” in local parlance) which typically constituted Benin’s political class in the past. The remaining three quarters belong to sociological categories which had not previously been very prominent in politics, under either the Marxist-Leninist or democratic renewal regimes: ten (40%) hold middle-level salaried jobs (including drivers) or are tradesmen and nine (36%) are businessmen (in fact, seven businessmen and two business women) who are involved in trade and transport and would appear, for the most part, to be rather wealthy. Of course, Parakou has been renowned since the late 1950s for the high social standing and considerable political influence enjoyed by its commercial class. However, the typical division of labour had been that businessmen who, in the 1960s and 1970s, were mostly people with very limited schooling, financed the politicians who were civil servants and, in exchange, profited from their political connections. Baba Moussa’s and Batoko’s fathers, who were top actors in Parakou’s city politics during the first short wave of democratisation in the 1950s, were, in fact, typical examples of this kind of arrangement. One generation later, young businessmen with a higher level of education than their processors⁴² have decided to enter the political arena themselves.

While this phenomenon is most striking at local level, the underlying trend was also confirmed in the recent parliamentary elections. In fact, in the sitting parliament (83 members), high-ranking civil servants hold 38 seats (45%) while 20 (24%) are held by members of the liberal professions. (This latter category is completely absent from Parakou’s municipal council.) This means that around 70% of the seats are still held by “intellectuals,” however, this is a marked decline from the near 100% they controlled in the first parliament of the “democratic renewal” era. Ten MPs (13%) in the current parliament are businessmen and a further eight (10%) hold highly-paid salaried positions in the private sector. On the other hand, salaried employees and tradesmen, who make up the largest group in Parakou’s municipal council, are absent from the National Assembly.

It should be noted that women fared fairly badly in Parakou’s municipal elections and hold only three seats (12%).⁴³ Two of them are rich business women. In fact, their case demonstrates how difficult it is to establish neat socio-professional categories in the context of African political economies which are marked by a high degree of “straddling” and resource pooling (concurrently or over the course of a life). It is also not evident that individual actors are the only relevant units for the analysis of African politics. For the socio-economic position of these two business women is at least, in part, also a reflection of their husbands’ positions. The husband of Zihratout Deen (no. 13 in the annex) is a

⁴² Gbadamassi is said to have left school during the 8th grade (*classe de quatrième*).

⁴³ However, the proportion of women in the municipal council is markedly higher than in the National Assembly where only 5 out of 83 MPs (6%) are female. Altogether, women represented only 8,4 % of the total of 5700 candidates who presented themselves in the local elections of December 2002/January 2003 even though female candidatures were encouraged by a number of national NGOs and their foreign donors (Le Cordon no. 91, 21.11.2002). -- Other interesting comparisons can be made between the two instances: while the average age of MPs and municipal councillors seems to be roughly the same (slightly above 50 years), not unexpectedly there are considerably more newcomers to politics in the municipal council of Parakou (72%) than in the National Assembly (14%, down from 45% in the first democratically elected assembly of 1991). These numbers are calculated on the basis of newspaper reports, most notably *Le Telegramme*, no. 283 of 5.4.2003, and need to be treated with caution as they are based on the declarations of MPs themselves. Little research has been done on the sociological composition of African parliaments. For one of the few studies existing, see Hornsby 1998.

high-ranking army officer said to be very close to president Kérékou and Alimatou Abdoulaye (no. 1), had been married to Lolo Chidiac (no. 9), an old hand in Beninese politics since at least 1960. In addition, the latter also commands other types of social capital, for when people proposed her for the UBF list, she clearly benefited from the fact that she belongs to one of the large old families of Parakou, established in the very heart of the city since before colonization, which has produced several notorious top actors involved in the local and national political and economic arenas since the early 20th century. It should also be recalled that Batoko, Baba Moussa and Arouna are direct descendants of top actors in city politics from the 1950s. An actor-based analysis of politics clearly needs to be complemented by one based on families, at least on the local level.

Party finance is, of course, one of the major factors behind this remarkable rise of Beninese businessmen as political entrepreneurs. Elections are costly, and political parties rely heavily on sponsors to conduct their election campaigns.⁴⁴ All observers concur that the recent local elections saw the entry of money into the realm of politics on a previously unprecedented scale.

The close connection between politicians and businessmen has always been a problem in the context of an economy which is politically closely embedded and in which success in business depends largely on obtaining government contracts. This structural rent-dependency of businessmen is obviously a major source of corruption, which has become systemic in the country since the crisis of the late 1980s. If anything, the direct entry of young businessmen like Gbadamassi into politics will heighten this trend. Gbadamassi is member of a network of businessmen whose activities are centred around the port of Cotonou, the country's "economic lung" (to use a worn-out metaphor coined by Benin's media). The port is a hotbed of corruption and the unofficial receipts which are generated there are essential for the financing of political parties and prominent politicians (Bako-Arifari 2001a). The network comprises other politicians, most of them in their 30s and 40s – for example, the recently elected mayor of the northern border town of Malanville, Issa Salifou, who later gave up his post to take up a seat in parliament – who are heavily involved in import activities, in particular the importation of used cars. Many observers would see the Minister of Transport at the time of the municipal elections (late 2002/early 2003), Joseph Attin, as a member of this network. It appears that he runs one of the exceedingly lucrative car parks where imported cars are stationed, through a man of straw. Benin imports over 250,000 used cars annually, ostensibly for transit to the Sahel countries, however only about 35,000 of them are registered at Malanville, the exit point; it is assumed that all of the others find their way unofficially to Nigeria.

It would appear that Gbadamassi's particular function in this network is to act as the carrier of funds between businessmen and politicians. Before the Minister of Transport, Joseph Attin, joined the UBF, Gbadamassi was vice-president of his party.⁴⁵ In 1997, he founded and headed a group who, as self-styled representatives of Benin's youth

⁴⁴ Even though many authors allude to it in passing, the financing of elections and the topic of party finance in Africa lack serious investigation. A few studies do exist, cf. Scott 1982, Banégas 1997, Nugent 2003.

⁴⁵ This could not be confirmed for certain, however. Other interviewees saw Joseph Attin without any particular party affiliation, and said that Gbadamassi, before joining the UBF, was a member of the RDL party (later renamed MERCI) of Sévérin Adjovi, one of Benin's richest businessmen and one-time minister of Defence. Adjovi is also heavily engaged in the car-import business.

(*mouvement des jeunes pour Kérékou*), supported the re-election of Kérékou in 2001. Thus, he has enjoyed enormous popularity among young people in Parakou for some time – and well before his political ambitions became obvious. A kind of Beninese Bernhard Tapie, he is the president and the main financier of Parakou’s football club (the Parakou Buffalos), a role which gives him a regular platform in the city stadium – where, significantly, the UBF held their main election rally in December 2002. When Baba Moussa, Assouma de Gaulle and other UBF notables entered, they were greeted with friendly applause, but when Gbadamassi arrived, it was confetti and standing ovations. In early 2003, Gbadamassi also financed a general assembly of TEMBI, the city’s development association, at which Baba Moussa, his later rival for the mayoralty, was elected president. He also appears to be financing two local youth associations. One comprises young people engaged in the informal sector, which dominates Parakou’s overland taxi station, while the other, ALKAWALI (in Dendi: alliance of trust), appears to represent young people with better formal education but uncertain job prospects (in Benin called *jeunes diplômés sans emploi*) or school and university dropouts.⁴⁶ In both cases, frustration with the domination of local political processes by the older generation and the lack of political openings for younger people were at the origin of the foundation of these associations.⁴⁷ In particular ALKAWALI positions itself also as an explicit alternative to Parakou’s oldest and for a long time only development association, TEMBI, which it criticises for its narrow ethnic-regionalist base. By contrast, ALKAWALI -- which has an ambition to transform itself one day into a political party -- sees itself as an organisation for all of Parakou’s politically-minded youth, independent of linguistic or regionalist criteria.⁴⁸

When the UBF directive to hold set up lists in the different electoral wards was issued in September 2003, these groups appeared much better organized than the loose networks of neighbourhood sages who habitually arrange these things.⁴⁹ Before the elders could act, the youth associations of the second electoral ward had already proposed a list with Allassane Baba Mousa in top position, followed by Gbadamassi and only then Batoko (Yacoubou Assouma was fourth.). Batoko protested, not only about his position but also about the fact that the list did not contain certain names of his choice. However, in an apparently rather stormy “popular assembly” which the youth associations had called at very short notice, and of which Batoko claimed to have not even been informed, the majority of those present decided simply to ignore him, as it ignored the protest of other

⁴⁶ Members of ALKAWALI disclaim being financed by Gbadamassi. He is said to have only paid his membership dues. Other sources pretend that Gbadamassi financed at least the founding congress of ALKAWALI in March 2000.

⁴⁷ For example, one of the founders of ALKAWALI claims to have been elected by the local FARD-Alafia section to head the list for the 1996 national elections, but was then unseated by the order of a big man of the party with more clout in the region. The foundation of ALKAWALI in March 2000 was a reaction to this experience which was common to many young people. Soon after the foundation, ALKAWALI was coveted by established politicians.

⁴⁸ The stress laid by ALKAWALI on not excluding “Southerners” from membership might indicate the end of “old-fashioned” ethnic local politics which had been characteristic for Parakou since the early 1950s. While it is too early to confirm this trend, it should be recalled that the recent municipal elections were largely free of ethnic references, and completely free of organised (ethnic) violence. – There are other youth groups in opposition to Gbadamassi, in particular Al-Heri.

⁴⁹ Apparently, Gbadamassi approached ALKAWALI already in early 2002 in the name of his *collectif des jeunes pour une relève de qualité* and ALKAWALI started from Mai 2002 to discuss the establishment of election lists.

neighbourhood elders who were even, they claimed, threatened with physical violence.⁵⁰ This is when Batoko decided to withdraw and sail under the flags of FARD-Alafia. In other words, Gbadamassi used the possibilities that the city's political economy – with large-scale structural underemployment of young males in particular – provided for building up a clientele. But he did modernize these long-existing clientelist practices by relying more heavily than other politicians before him on youth associations which he either founded or took over, but financed in any case. Furthermore, while concentrating in particular on the city's youth, he did not forget the more traditional peddlers of political influence, in particular the city's numerous mosques and their imams who all seem to have received more or less significant sums of money from him during the election campaign.⁵¹ Apart from the one big meeting in the city's stadium, already referred to above, he relied more heavily than other candidates on a "campaign of proximity" which involved systematically visiting all of the city's neighbourhoods and the canvassing of individual households by his supporters. As these practices necessarily entail the distribution of monetary gifts, they constitute more costly forms of political campaigning than mass meetings.⁵²

Thus, Gbadamassi represents a new model of economic and social success which has been emerging in Benin in recent years, against the backdrop of the country's rent-based and highly informalized economy, the close links between the economic and political spheres and an almost permanent crisis in the formal education sector and labour market for school leavers. It is estimated that around 40,000 young people, in the main male and reasonably well educated, are employed, for the most part temporarily, in the informalized service economy around the port of Cotonou. The entry requirements for this activity are the ability to speak French, possession of a mobile telephone, a visiting card and a lot of time to spend hanging around the port, however what ultimately decides these young men's economic fortune is the quality of the network they develop with, for example, the customs officers. To be a *transitaire* is one of these informal activities typical for Benin which are exercised by far too many people given the limited opportunities they provide, in which consequently most people earn very little money on average, but in which, with a little luck, the right kind of networking and sufficient cleverness, individuals occasionally manage to land a major coup which, if cleverly exploited, may even become the basis for the establishment of a lucrative career. Gbadamassi, in the eyes of many young people, succeeded exceedingly well in this: even though he has limited schooling, he knows, in his own words, "how to transform 10 million into 20".⁵³ In this

⁵⁰ According to Batoko (Le Republicain no. 563, 27.3.03) the youth "reminded Ali Yérîma (a local MP) that he was not yet above the age of the whip".

⁵¹ In one spectacular instance, which was reported to me by several sources, a large crowd had gathered in a mosque to mourn the death of its imam, who was one of the city's most influential imams. Gbadamassi, who was present, like all of Parakou's elite, apparently stood up at the meeting and promised in front of the entire congregation that he would finish the construction of the mosque which the deceased imam had left unfinished. That same evening, the first lorry arrived with sand and cement.

⁵² In the habitual style of local politics, when visiting Parakou's neighbourhoods, Gbadamassi would first be introduced by one of his local supporters who had called the neighbourhood meeting, then give a short speech and then distribute four envelopes with money for the mosque, the elderly, the women and the youth. On the one occasion on which I observed this process directly, immediately after his departure, a physical fight broke out between those present over the distribution of the contents of these envelopes.

⁵³ The exact quote from the Le Progrès newspaper (no. 1122 of 8.3.03) is: "Un homme d'affaire sait transformer 10 millions en 20 millions".

world of treasure hunting, success is measured in money, and the corresponding consumption styles lay great stress on the public exhibition of wealth.⁵⁴ One popular way of doing this is for such individuals to mark their rise in the world by throwing a large public party every time their income reaches a new level. In the past, this “level” would have been set at the first, second, third, tenth million CFA francs (one million CFA francs being equivalent to around € 1,500) earned, but today people give a party at the billion threshold (1 billion CFA francs is equivalent to 1.5 million €). Gbadamassi threw a big public party some time ago when his income reached 13 billion.

Political representation and the selectivity of the electoral system

The recently elected municipal council is not only selective in terms of the socio-professional categories represented. The way the democratic election process functions is also highly selective in a different and more strictly political sense. As already mentioned, Parakou’s population is made up of something between a 30 and 40 % of people who originated from the south and settled in the city, sometimes several generations back. Many, if not most of them, continue to maintain their links with the south. Locally, they are considered as “southerners” (a term which is sometime simply reduced to the ethnonym *Fon*) and as such, foreigners, while the many people who migrated to Parakou from the north consider themselves as “locals”. This divide between the northerners and southerners in Parakou has provided the backdrop to the recurrent ethnic clashes in the city, and has been constantly exploited and reinforced by local politicians.⁵⁵

The southerners were largely underrepresented in – if not completely absent from – the diffuse pre-decentralization local political system which involved several overlapping political institutions constructed on the basis of clientelism as described in section 3. For example, they were expelled from the local development association TEMBI in the early 1990s as they were not considered *fils de terroir*. On the other hand, however, southern candidates did much better in the National Assembly elections, as their community has a strong tendency for block voting. In all three National Assembly elections in the 1990s, they overwhelmingly voted for ex-president Soglo’s *Renaissance du Bénin* (RB) party. In the 1999 elections, the RB obtained over 25% of the votes in Parakou’s electoral ward (which is larger than Parakou city) and gained one of the four seats, making Parakou the only city in the north where the RB was represented by a MP.

Ideally, democracy should lead to a more equal political representation of the different constituencies of which Parakou is composed. It may be safely assumed that this was the principle which the donors who pushed for local democracy in Benin had in mind. That fact that the reality of Benin’s decentralization process differs from these expectations is demonstrated in the table. The winning coalition (UBF) obtained 16 of the 25 council seats (i.e. 64%) despite having obtained only around one quarter of the votes. In terms of the votes cast, the other three parties represented on the council finished very close to each other (i.e. between 11.1% and 14.4%), however, their results translated into significantly different numbers of seats (one, three and five). The RB had only 11,4% of

⁵⁴ For comparative purposes, see the articles by Salem (2001) and Malaquais (2001) on similar “figures of success” in Mauritania and Cameroon.

⁵⁵ Bierschenk 2000. The most serious incidents happened in 1964 and 1991 but many smaller incidents were not reported by the press.

the votes (down from over 25% in the parliamentary elections of 1999), as the southern vote was split over several parties, but managed to obtain two seats. Despite recording a worse result at the polls (11.1%), the ASSIRI obtained more, e. g. three, seats. Altogether, the city council represents only about 64% of votes cast, 36% of the votes having gone to smaller parties and lists (over twenty of them in total) which did not gain any seats.

(table about here)

This selectivity of political representation is, of course, a result of the particular electoral procedure adopted by Benin's parliament for the local elections, a procedure which is based on the French model but with an even higher in-built bias towards the larger groups. As already stated, and as shown by the table, communes and municipalities are generally divided into electoral wards – three in the case of Parakou. Only parties and lists⁵⁶ were allowed to stand, and they had to present as many candidates as there were seats to be filled in a given ward. Typically, most of the lists were made up of one or, at most, two people with some notoriety in town, the rest being mere ciphers whose principal function was to fill the list. The elections were held in two rounds. Candidates who gained at least 40% of votes in the first round were given more than half the seats in the electoral wards and the rest were split according to the *règle de la plus forte moyenne* (which again favours the bigger parties) among the totality of parties and lists present. This is why the UBF, which won around 42% of the votes in the second electoral ward in the first round, gained six out of eight seats, and the FARD-Alafia, with about 16%, obtained two. The remaining 42% of the voters were not represented. If nobody had gained 40% of the votes in the first round – as was the case in Parakou's first and third electoral ward --, there would have been a second round of elections to which only those parties and lists that had obtained over 10% of the votes in the first round would have been admitted. Not all voters understood this provision, particularly as the same election bulletins were used in the second round as in the first, so a considerable number of people continued to vote in the second round for lists that were not legally eligible. In fact, as late as the week before the first round of elections, there were very few people in Parakou – including some candidates – who were able to fully understand the electoral system and detect the severe bias towards the larger groups that it incorporated. Furthermore, not everybody, including the politicians, knew that there was going to be a second round, nor the conditions under which it would be held. In the second round, the distortional effect of the election mode was even greater than in the first round, with the party which came first obtaining the majority of the seats.⁵⁷

This winner-takes-all thrust of the electoral system had been carefully engineered by Benin's parliament in which, prior to the election in March 2003, the opposition to President Kérékou had a majority. It should be recalled that democratic decentralization was a reform project which had been pushed by the donors, but about which Benin's political class and, in particular, the government had been more than hesitant. In the end, the

⁵⁶ In this text, I use the terms party and list interchangeably when discussing the local elections.

⁵⁷ This is why, in the third electoral ward, UBF, with 32 % of the votes, won four seats out of six, ASSIRI, with 27 %, only 1, as did FARD-Alafia with 19 %.

donors prevailed as far as the implementation of the project as such was concerned, but it was Benin's parliamentarians who decided how to put it into practice. Benin's opposition parties (in the 1996 to 2004 assemblies) had a good chance of winning the twin capitals of Cotonou and Porto-Novo, given the demographic weighting of the southern populations there. In fact, it was this prospect that was probably behind the government's long hesitation in implementing the process of decentralization. There are several instances in Benin's history of governments collapsing on foot of social unrest in the capital, and other examples can be found in the international context whereby special provisions are made for the capital-area to avoid uneasy co-habitations.⁵⁸ In any case, once there was no way to defer decentralization any further, Benin's parliamentarians devised an electoral procedure that made the likelihood of the opposition winning the capitals into a certainty. There is no indication that the donors were aware of this, and if they were, there was nothing they could do about it.

In this way, the establishment of democratic government at local level has reinforced the specific existing electoral and political geography of Benin. Paradoxically, the recent wave of democratisation in Africa has created *de facto* one-party systems (or, to be more precise, a single hegemonic party and a fractured opposition) in the most shining models of democracy like Mali. Benin appears to be an exception to this rule of neopatrimonial democracy, with some six to eight parties being seriously engaged in political competition on the national level, and with no party in a hegemonic position. However, a closer look reveals that this apparent competitiveness of the Beninese party system actually rests on parties that all have a very clear regional base and are often regionally dominant. Politically, Benin is divided into four regions, and each of the major four parties dominates one of them: the PSD party in the South West (the Mono region) under the leadership of Bruno Amoussou, the PRD party in the South East (the Ouémé north of Porto Novo) under the leadership of Adrien Houngbedji, the RB party in the centre region around Abomey under the leadership of the Soglo couple, and FARD-Alafia in the North, under the leadership of Sacca Kina. This political geography has its roots in the late colonial period (it was three regions then, cf. Decalo 1968 and Staniland 1973), it remerged after the 1990/91 *renouveau démocratique* and has now been reinforced by democratic decentralization.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ There was not elected mayor in Washington, DC until 1973, in Paris until about the same time, and in Mexico City until 1997.

⁵⁹ However, a recent tendency is the emergence of regional opposition parties, usually outside the big regional centres, which are encouraged by parties which are themselves dominant in other regions. This tendency started in the mid-1990s in the North, where FARD-Alafia was weakened by the emergence of the USD party which was allied with the RB (e.g., the "Soglo camp"). More recently, in particular the March 2003 parliamentary elections, the "Kérékou camp" in turn very successfully applied the same strategy to the southern regions, where the PRD party has been weakened by MADEP in the South-East, and the RB party in the Centre by *Force Clé*. These opposition parties also have a clear regional base, even if their territory is smaller. As a result of these interlocking regionalist cleavages, there exist now parties in the "South" which are allied to the "Northern camp" (e.g., Kérékou), while likewise parties in the "North" are linked to the "Southern camp" (e.g., the Soglos). Thus, while regionalism continues to be the main currency of Beninese politics, the tendency is increasingly towards micro-regionalism. It should be noted in passing that the same tendency is observable in the proto-political spheres of development associations and students' organisations. For example, while in the 1960s the FACEEN (*Front d'action commune des étudiants et élèves du Nord*) was an important spring-board for future politicians, the early 1990s saw the creation of the AEEP

Selectivity is an inherent element of representational democracy. However, it might be argued that too strong a degree of selectivity may conflict with the objective of political mobilization, which was one of the driving forces behind Benin's decentralization project. In the first round of elections, Benin's voters came out in large numbers, as expected and as they had done in all presidential and parliamentary elections since the early 1990s. The first round of municipal elections merely confirmed this tendency, with participation at 75%. However, if we compare participation rates in the two wards where two rounds were held, they decreased from 78 % to 60 %, which constitutes an unusually low turnout for Benin. Almost a quarter of voters (almost 9,000 of a total of 38,000) simply stayed at home for the second round. This appears to indicate that the peculiar electoral system which Benin has adopted for its local forms of democracy entails a strong and very real risk of voter demobilization.

Little violence but intensive negotiations: democracy as a new way of playing old games

As we have seen, complex and recurrent negotiations between elite actors and their clientèles and violence or the threat of violence were two main features of local politics in Parakou prior to 2002. Decentralization aimed to substitute a new currency, i.e. democratic voting, for the existing ones, i.e. political trading and violence. However, the election campaign and subsequent events would appear to indicate that, so far, this substitution has only been completed to a limited extent.

Although it was very lively, the election campaign in Parakou was remarkable for the almost complete absence of physical violence – even if the “grassroots” approach to the establishment of the UBF lists gave those actors who could muster large numbers of people in a given place at a given time a significant advantage. It is obvious that these crowds (mostly comprising young men) not only constituted a pool of potential voters, but also embodied a veiled threat against political opponents.⁶⁰ In the national context, Parakou emerges as a positive exception in terms of the relatively minor role played by physical violence in the course of the campaign as many cases of pre and post-electoral violence were reported from other parts of the country.⁶¹

On the other hand, however, the electoral procedure devised by the Beninese parliament provided ample opportunity for negotiation and political trafficking, both among local actors and between local and national politicians: when the lists were being drawn up, between the first and second round of elections when the remaining candidates were trying to hold their groups together, buy off the leaders of those lists that had failed to obtain 10% of the vote and enlist the support of national big men, and after the second round of elections, when – in preparation for the elections of the mayors and their deputies, the political task of the leaders was, again, to hold their groups together and enter into secret alliances with municipal councillors from other groups, for example by promising them posts as councillors and heads of various municipal committees. During this

(*Association des étudiants et élèves de Parakou*) with a similar function (and from which a line can be drawn to ALKAWALI, see above).

⁶⁰ This was most marked in the 2nd electoral ward where Gbadamassi and Batoko were opponents. See above.

⁶¹ See footnote 35. There was one fatality in Malanville arising from the conflict surrounding the election of the mayor.

period local politicians made frenzied use of mobile telephones for arranging discreet meetings, making offers and proposing counter-offers.⁶² In fact, while the election of the mayor was secret, it was easy to deduce who had voted for him and who had not (in part quite independently of party affiliation, see p. 22) on the basis of the distribution of different post in the early weeks after Gbadamassi took office. While most of these negotiations obviously took place behind the scenes, the general public was given a distant impression of them through the tracts denouncing one politician or another which circulated around the city.⁶³

We have seen that while both Gbadamassi and Batoko managed to hold their groups together and obtain additional votes from councillors elected on other lists (Gbadamassi at least two and Batoko – who had clearly hoped for more – just one), Moutari was clearly the loser in this political game: in the end all he had was his own vote as both of his fellow councillors had defected. The significance here lies in the fact that among the three candidates for the mayoralty, he was the only one who could genuinely be labelled a political novice and truly independent candidate who had no support from national politicians. Thus, it would appear that while decentralization opened up new arenas for new politicians, success still remained dependent on the candidates' capacity to muster the support of national political networks.

The election of the mayor did not signal the end of the negotiations and circulation of tracts, furthermore it marked the re-emergence of physical violence as an expression of political conflict, albeit on a limited scale. A particular, if simmering, conflict which erupted occasionally had been part of political life in Parakou for around ten years. In the early 1990s, Benin received a grant from the French Development Bank AFD (*Agence Française de Développement*) for the reconstruction of Parakou's Arzeke central market. This was interpreted locally as a political ploy on the part of President Soglo to increase his popularity in the North, however it did not save him from a narrow defeat in the presidential elections of 1996. Such gifts, especially when granted to a group, can arouse passions which take the well-intentioned donor by surprise, and this was the case with the AFD and the city of Parakou. The AFD had linked its gift to a condition which was written into a contract with the owner of the market, i.e. the city, stipulating that a shareholding company be set up to manage the market – one quarter of which was to be owned by the city of Parakou and the other three quarters by private shareholders – and that the management of market infrastructures be self-financing. In concrete terms, this meant that the management company (*Société de Gestion du Marché de Parakou/SGMP*) had to set rents for the market shops and stalls at a level that would ensure that it could at least cover its costs. The AFD made the further disbursement of funds, for example for a planned car park, conditional on this requirement being met. This led to constant haggling between shop owners and the management company over the level of the rents. The shop owners accused the management company of exploitative practices, arguing that the exorbitant

⁶² We happened to be present at some of these negotiations and every now and then our discussions with local politicians about the strategies they proposed to adopt for the second round were interrupted by phone calls from Cotonou, in some cases from very prominent individuals.

⁶³ Before the election, anonymous tracts were most frequent in RB party circles; it would appear that various factions were embroiled in a conflict which was staged, in part, through the circulation of denunciatory tracts. After the elections, the tracts – some of which were followed up by the press – appeared to emanate mainly from the anti-Gbadamassi camp.

level of rents made it impossible for them to run their businesses profitably while the company referred to the constraints imposed on them by the contract and the fact that their shareholders had obviously invested in the project for the purpose of making a profit. Stormy demonstrations, which were organized by the shop-owners using slogans calling for social justice but actually staged out by the young men at hand, were one of the ways in which the conflict was conducted. However, ethnic arguments (at one point the “Dendi” shop-owners accused the management company of being run by “Baribas”) were also involved and the city government found itself caught in the middle, torn between its desire for civic peace and tranquillity which the demonstrations threatened to disrupt, its dual role as owner of the market and co-owner of the management company, which had entered into contractual obligations with the city council, and the moral obligation to somehow adhere to the legal requirements governing the situation. In reality, the situation was even more complex as some shop-owners, including, it would appear, some of the company shareholders, had managed to get hold of leases for several shops (which was a breach of the “one shop per person” rule) and sublet them (which was again strictly against the rules) at a higher price – which would indicate that the rents charged by the management company were, if anything, lower than their market value.⁶⁴

When the job of running the city was handed over by the government-appointed *chef de la circonscription urbaine* to the newly elected mayor and the municipal council, the conflict developed a new dimension. As we know, Moutari, who had been defeated in the competition for the post of mayor, was the president of the board of the Arzeke market management company. During the campaign, Gbadamassi had accused him several times of using company resources (in particular the market radio and the meeting room) to conduct his campaign and had threatened to remove him from the SGMP after the elections. In any case, one of Gbadamassi’s election promises was that he would reduce the rents for the market shops and stalls. It would appear, in fact, that after the elections he entered into discreet negotiations with Moutari to come to an arrangement, but when an arrangement had already been reached (according to Moutari), suddenly changed tactics and went public. At the Municipal Council session of 30 July 2003, he argued that the shop-owners needed to be relieved of the “intolerable burden” of high rents, and accused the SGMP of being intransigent. A rather stormy debate ensued, with Moutari eventually being banned from speaking and voting on the issue. The Municipal Council voted by a majority of 21 (with two abstentions) to simply annul the contract with the SGMP. Gbadamassi closed the session with the announcement that the police, the *gendarmérie* and “other security forces” would be sent to the premises of SGMP immediately to enforce the decision (*Le Matinal*, 31.7.03). A day or two later, he apparently decided to head up the “other security forces” in person and take over the premises of SGMP, however when his group arrived at the market they were attacked by Moutari’s supporters. Gbadamassi and other members of his group were hit and the front window of his car was broken before they hastily retreated.

The two protagonists then decided to take the matter to court, Gbadamassi accusing Moutari and others of assault and Moutari, in turn, accusing the municipality of unlawful breach of contract. Legally, Moutari won on both accounts. On 11 September, he and most of the other accused were acquitted (one person was given a suspended

⁶⁴ For a detailed study of this situation, see Imorou 1998/99, for a shorter published version, Imorou 2000.

prison sentence of 11 days and a fine of FCFA 20,000, around € 30). The court later also declared the Municipal Council's cancellation of the management contract unlawful. However, Moutari would have no opportunity to enjoy his victory; soon after the first verdict he fell ill and had to be moved to Paris where he died on the 25 September (2003). On reporting this event to me, a native of Parakou commented: "No death in Africa is ever natural". In other words, just as he had proven too strong for Batoko, Baba Moussa and Yacoubou, Gbadamassi had also proven too strong for Moutari. It could be said that his strength lay in his capacity to muster and combine weapons of different kinds so that when he failed in one battle, for example negotiation, he simply switched to another approach, e.g. showing up in force or taking his opponent to court, until he finally prevailed. This, at least, is how people who were close to Moutari saw it, and how they defined the responsibility for Moutari's death. In an open letter, of which copies were forwarded to the Prefect, the public prosecutor and the local heads of police and *gendarmerie*, they forbade Gbadamassi or anybody from his group to attend Moutari's funeral "in the interest of the peace and tranquillity of Parakou" – a phrase containing a veiled threat of physical violence which nobody in Parakou would have any difficulty in deciphering (*Le Matinal*, 3.10.03)

"Vote for me because I have friends abroad willing to help this city": The decentralisation of rent-seeking

As already pointed out, one of the main ideas behind the introduction of decentralization was that by bringing government closer to the people, local resources for development would be mobilized more easily. It was assumed that a democratically elected municipal council would have greater legitimacy when it came to taxing the local economy than a distant government in the capital.

However, this notion of the need to mobilize local resources was notably absent from the election campaign. Indeed, only one candidate, Batoko, bothered to present a local development programme at all (see footnote 32). On closer inspection this turned out to be a reprint – under the auspices of FARD-Alafia – of the conclusions of a seminar held back in 1997, which was organized jointly by Batoko's own NGO (at a time when he was minister for the Civil Service) and that of a political friend of his and financed by French development co-operation. Entitled "Our Priorities for Parakou", the "plan" contained a long list of desirable actions to be carried out in the city (e.g. "find an intelligent and pragmatic solution to the reconciliation of Qur'anic and modern schools"). The plan did not specify any priorities or estimated costs. Batoko occasionally made very general references to the programme in his speeches and it can safely be assumed that its contents remained unknown to most voters (while it was given to foreign visitors).

More frequent references were made in his speeches to rich but unnamed friends abroad who were willing to "help" Parakou, provided the electorate was intelligent enough to vote for the right persons. In fact, all of the major candidates constantly made vague allusions of this kind to their contacts and connections. In all cases, no names were ever specified and the implication was always that the generosity of the foreign benefactor was closely linked to a particular person being elected mayor, otherwise the mysteri-

ous foreigner would keep his wallet firmly closed.⁶⁵ In other words, local democracy was presented by Parakou's politicians not as a condition for more intensive local resource mobilization (as we have seen, Gbadamassi even promised the reduction of municipal fees), but for rent-seeking in the development world. Thus, the electorate was encouraged to vote for the politicians who claimed to have the most substantial address book.

This theme of rent-seeking also figured prominently in the publicized actions of the elected mayor after February 2003. During the first few months after Gbadamassi's election, a number of articles appeared in the local press expressing some scepticism as regards the new mayor's capabilities in the area of "international relations". Gbadamassi's opponents were clearly behind these articles. They stressed that compared to the mayors of the other major cities Gbadamassi cut a "pitiful figure" and represented a "local disgrace" (*focus Afrique* 2002, 5.6.2003) – an obvious reference to his low level of education and lack of international experience – and that the team surrounding him consisted of "miniature intellectuals" (*intellectuels buriburi*). However, the mayor refused to allow himself to be disturbed by any of this. Soon after his election he began an intensive tour of Europe, and France, in particular. (He travelled to Orleans, which is twinned with Parakou, and also paid several visits to Toulouse, Lyon and other French cities). He also went to the Netherlands and Denmark (on the invitation of a group of young parliamentarians). On 5 June 2003, the Municipal Council declared itself satisfied with the "abundant harvest" (*moisson fructueuse*) produced by the trip and at the time there were reports in the press concerning the launch of a programme for the reconstruction of Parakou's urban roads to be financed by the World Bank and a loan from the African Development Bank for the improvement of the city's electricity supply. Although these programmes had been agreed long before the new Municipal Council took office, they were presented by Gbadamassi as "his" projects for the city and even more so as a close political link with the President of the WADB, Yaya Boni who comes from Parakou, was attributed to him.⁶⁶ The *Association Nationale des Communes du Bénin/ANCB* (National Association of Municipalities of Benin) was established in November 2003 and Gbadamassi elected as its chairman.⁶⁷ This also gave him new opportunities for travel, particularly to France, from whence he returned *inter alia* with a partnership agreement between the University of Toulouse and the newly-established University of Parakou (*Le Matinal*, various issues).

At the same time, public criticism of Gbadamassi shifted to a different area, that of his management of the city. The first whisperings to the effect that the Mayor's numerous trips had yet to translate into any concrete flow of resources were heard in autumn 2003 (*Le Matinal*, 5.11.03). The city's tax revenue was not increasing either: the only local tax that had been introduced was a levy on *véhicules et bétail en transit*, i.e. a tax which protected the resources of the city's residents at the expense of non-native merchants (*Le Matinal*, 5.6.2003). As opposed to this, the city administration's ongoing spending had

⁶⁵ After the elections, Batoko became somewhat more specific and claimed that Tokyo would have been prepared to enter a twinning arrangement with Parakou if he had been elected. Cf. *La Montagne* no. 30, 27.3.04.

⁶⁶ Yaya Boni is viewed in Benin as a possible successor to Kérékou.

⁶⁷ This appointment is less surprising than some of my Beninese interviewees may have thought. The UBF holds the majority in the ANCB and Parakou is the largest city in the country in which the Mayor belongs to the UBF.

increased considerably: there were now three additional deputy mayors, three *chefs d'arrondissements* and 18 additional municipal councillors whose financial needs had to be met.⁶⁸ To these were added a series of *conseillers spéciaux*, nominated by the Mayor in payment of political obligations, including Moïse Kérékou, the son of the country's president, who was appointed *conseiller spécial pour les affaires du Moyen-Orient* (!).⁶⁹ No progress was made in the establishment of the urban development plan and in late 2003 rumours were circulating to the effect that due to a negative evaluation Parakou was being threatened with suspension from the "Decentralized Urban Management Project" which is financed by the World Bank (*Le Matinal*, 5.6.03).⁷⁰

5. Conclusions: The Localization of Democracy

This paper is about the successful local appropriation of a global technology: multi-party democracy. The case presented here centres on the municipal elections in Parakou, Benin, in late 2002/early 2003, with occasional comparative glances at the local elections in the country's other major cities and at Benin's parliamentary elections which were staged a few months later (March 2003).

The appropriation of multi-party democracy in Benin can be deemed to have been successful on a number of counts. Starting with the technical and organizational level, it should be stressed what a tremendous organizational challenge the holding of elections poses for any government, and particularly an African one. Even if the considerable financial burden occasioned by an election is largely alleviated with the help of donors eager to promote democracy, it is no mean feat for the government of a poor country with a rudimentary communications network and an administration that functions at a far from optimum level to organize a chain of procedures to take place within the short span of twelve hours at several thousand locations scattered throughout a national territory almost half as large as Germany and all that this entails in terms of logistical preparation and

⁶⁸ The municipal councillors are not paid salaries but they are entitled to expenses. It was known that the city administration provided all councillors with a mobile telephone, that the latter had demanded life insurance to the total sum of FCFA 320 million (ca. € 488.000) (substantiating this claim by referring to deputies in the national parliament) and that several new four-wheel-drive service vehicles had been acquired (total cost FCFA 100,000, ca. € 152,448). One official at the city administration commented ironically: "we now have a heavyweight team", a clearly intentionally ambiguous comment which could be interpreted as meaning that the new team represented a heavy burden on the city's budget.

⁶⁹ Together with Issa Salifou (elected first mayor of Malanville, then MP, Eustache Akpovi, Rachidi Gbadamassi, Moïse Kérékou belongs to the « collectif des jeunes pour une relève de qualité ». All of them were elected MPs in March 2003. Just before the parliamentary elections, the group disowned Lazare Séhouéto, holder of a Ph.D. in anthropology from Germany and Minister of Economy and Commerce who had, until then, been considered as their representative in government. However, Séhouéto's party (*Force Clé*) did very well in attacking the RB party in their own fief around Abomey (where they gained 5 seats), and he was appointed to the more important post of Minister of Rural Development, while Eustache Akpovi became vice-president of the National Assembly.

⁷⁰ In terms of the current status of our research, it is not possible to distinguish the factual content from the political motivation of the critics in question. It is significant, however, that in late 2003 this criticism no longer appeared to come from Gbadamassi's old opponents, but that it had been adopted by the ALKAWALI association, which had been a major cornerstone of Gbadamassi's electoral success. Cf. press declaration by the chairman of ALKAWALI of 26.10.03, reported in *Le Matinal* 4.11.03.

administrative control.⁷¹ Add to this the challenges of the vote counting procedures, the transmission of results first to a departmental and then national collection point, the procedures for checking and validating the figures, the routines of dealing with irregularities and complaints etc. and we can clearly gauge to which extent the Beninese government and administration have become old hands at democracy.

There are many indications that the population has also internalized democracy to a significant extent: the animated mood of the election campaigns, the high level of information about the issues and personalities at stake demonstrated by a large part of the electorate (my guess is that more Beninese voters knew the names of more top candidates in their localities than would be the case in a municipal election in Germany), the high voter turnout which would be the envy of many older democracies, the near absence of electoral violence and organized fraud and, last but not least, the facts that more or less everybody accepted the results and that the democratically elected institutions were able to commence their work as planned.

Thus, in the case of Benin it is possible to refer with confidence to a relatively successful appropriation of democratic procedures. However, appropriation in this context does not mean the straightforward adoption of procedures and institutions, it also involves their transformation. The case analyzed above also involves transformation in the course of appropriation. On the one hand, the elements of local democracy are integrated into an existing national style of politics and the local elections in Benin largely maintained in unaltered form the existing political geography (with initially three and today four politically relevant regions), whose basic characteristics have existed since the 1950s. In the short term, at least, the introduction of local democracy does not mean the emergence of a corrective for the extreme rent-orientation of the Beninese economy and politics; instead, it means the decentralization of rent-seeking. Another characteristic feature of Beninese politics, i.e. the prevalence of negotiation, was also barely rectified as a result of the introduction of election procedures. Indeed, decentralization actually extended the scope for negotiation available to Benin's politicians as it created a new space for manoeuvre between the national and municipal levels. The dominance of the national level over the local level was only neutralized to a limited extent: in the big cities, the support of the national level (on which the municipal elections were viewed as a test run for the subsequent parliamentary elections) was crucial to political success, in particular also for the political newcomers.

As expected, local politics is also personalized to a significant extent despite the party-based electoral system whereby only parties or electoral lists are admitted at the ballot. The fact that, all in all, the so-called "traditional leaders" only played a limited role in the elections also reflects a typical characteristic of politics in Benin (where the colonial cantons were abolished as early as 1959), which distinguishes the country from its neighbours. And the fact that the political conflicts largely presented as an intergenerational conflict also corresponds to a familiar pattern in Beninese politics which extends

⁷¹ I have no figures on the numbers of polling stations in Benin. In the Malian parliamentary elections of 1997, in which I participated as an election observer, there were around 10,000 stations throughout the country (for some 5.5 million voters) compared to around 20,000 in a country like the United Kingdom which is smaller in size, has a far better developed road and communications network and is immensely richer.

back to the late colonial era and probably even earlier. Thus, the two main cleavages of Beninese politics, i.e. regionalism and “generationalism”, were updated once again in the course of the municipal elections.

On the other hand, however, the introduction of democracy at local level also unleashed a certain transformative force in relation to the Beninese polity, the long-term effects of which cannot at present be estimated. The local elections continued and reinforced a trend towards political micro-regionalisms. This trend first emerged with the transformation of the Dahoman three-region/three-party system to a four/four configuration after 1991, and continued with the complexification of regionalism, whereby regional opposition parties form alliances with hegemonic parties from other regions. Furthermore, the introduction of elected municipal councils generated areas of activity and possibilities for advancement for a considerable number (approximately 1000) of junior politicians and hence alleviated the generational conflict in part. The most obvious development that arose during the municipal elections and was confirmed by the subsequent parliamentary elections was, however, the entry of businessmen into the arenas of formal politics. In the medium run, this could signify the replacement of an long-established model for political-social success with roots in the colonial era, i.e. that of the *haut cadres*, by a new model, i.e. that of the businessmen who achieved success in Benin’s post-colonial rent economy. It is not possible to predict, however, whether this means that a new version of the relationship between politics and economics has become established in Benin and will prevail in the long term. What is certain, however, is that Benin has undergone a development that has long been identifiable in other, in particular Anglophone, parts of Africa.

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Annexe : Profil sociologique des membres du conseil municipal de Parakou, 2003¹

No	Nom	Arr ²	Fonction dans le CM	Formation politique	Age ³	Sexe	Profession	apparten. ethnique	ancien /nouvel acteur politique	apparten. politique antérieure	observations biographiques
1	Alimatou ABDOULAYE ADAM	I	---	UBF	~40	f	entrepreneur (boulangerie)	Dendi	nouveau	CAR-Dunya	appart. à une « grande famille » de Pkou (Abdoulaye Issa) ; ex-femme de Lolo Chidiac (no. 10)
2	Amadou ISSIFOU	I	chef 1er arr.	UBF	~35	m	entrepreneur (transport, importation des voitures)	Dendi & Bariba	nouveau	PSB	réseau des chargeurs des camions au port, membre ALKAWALI et CJPRQ ⁴
3	Nicolas NONGOUTE	I	3e adjoint au maire	UBF	55	m	journaliste à Radio Parakou à la retraite	Ditamari	nouveau	PRPB, CAR Dunya, IPD	venu et resté à Parakou par le canal de la fonction publique
4	Mouhamadou	I	mem. de la	UBF		m	chauffeur de	Bariba	nouveau		réseau des

¹ Sources : Statistiques de la Commission Electorale Locale (CEL) de Parakou (pour la colonne 2, 3, 4 et 6) et enquêtes personnelles. Je remercie en particulier Agnes Badou, Galilou Abdoulaye et Nassirou Bako-Arifari pour leur assistance.

² Arrondissement

³ Dans la plupart des cas, il s'agit de l'âge approximatif.

⁴ « **Comité des Jeunes pour une relève de qualité** », formation soutenant le président Kérékou lors des élections présidentielles de 2001, présidé par Saliou Issa Salifou, maire de Malanville et élu (comme R. Gbadamassi) député le 30 mars 2003.

	Hadi SIDI		comm. d'attribution des marchés				camion				chargeurs des camions au port de Cotonou
5	Bissiriou ADAMO	I	membre commission affaires domaniales	UBF	~50	m	soudeur	Nagot	nouveau	CAP Suru	
6	Nassirou ABDOULAYE	I	président de la commission du suivi des projets	UBF	~40	m	employé COBEMAG ; gestionnaire bureau d'étude	Anii & Yoruba (se dit Dendi)	(nouveau))	PRD	ENA, études universitaires, candidat PRD aux élections lég. de 1999 ; membre fondateur d'ALKAWALI, considéré comme proche de Gbadamassi
7	Boubacar AROUNA	I	---	FARD-Alafia	~50	m	haut cadre (dir. gén. OBSS), nommé ministre après la démission de Batoko	Dendi	nouveau		fil aîné de Mama AROUNA, ancien maire de Pkou et ministre
8	Moutari AMADOU	I	---	ASSIRI	~50	m	entrepreneur (prés. du conseil d'administration du marché central de Pkou, agence de voyage), an-	Dendi (orig. Hausa)	nouveau		mort 25 septembre 2003

							cien pilote				
9	Michel Lolo CHIDIAC	I	prés. comm. loisirs et sport	ASSIRI	~70	m	entrepreneur	Dendi (p : Libanais, m : Bariba)	ancien	PNDD	big man de la politique nationale et locale depuis 1960
10	Michel ALAVO MEHA	I	affaires domaniales	RB	~ 52	m	électricien-formateur à la COTEB	Fon	nouveau	UDFP	rés. à Pkou depuis 1974
11	Danien KOINOU	I	rapporteur comm. aff. domaniales	RB	~45	m	vitrier	Fon	nouveau	RB	chef quartier Albarika, réside. à Pkou depuis 1979
12	Ousmane BATOKO	II	---	FARD-Alafia	54	m	Administrateur civil, ministre (fin 2002, début 2003)	Dendi (orig. Gourmantché & Bariba)	ancien	FARD/PRPB	fils de Mohammed Bato-ko, ancien maire de Pkou ; militant du FACEEN dans les années 1960, proche du président Kérékou depuis le temps du PRPB
13	Zihratou DEEN	II	---	FARD-Alafia	~50	f	entrepreneur	Yoruba	nouveau	FARD	femme du Col. Amada, proche de Kérékou
14	Allassane BABA MOUSSA	II	---	UBF	~50	m	haut cadre (dir. techn. eau, SBEE)	Dendi & Bariba	nouveau	FARD	président assoc. développement (TEMBI, élu en 2001), fils de

											Baba Moussa, ancien député
15	Rachidi GBADAMASSI	II	maire	UBF	33	m	entrepreneur	Yorouba & Dendi	nouveau	FARD-Alafia (membre inactif) ; PSD	vice-président des CPRQ ¹ , pres. du foot- ball-club de Pkou, membre ALKAWALI
16	Assouma Ya- coubou	II	---	UBF	54	m	haut cadre (Sécr.-Gén. du Min. Finances)	Dendi	ancien	FARD- Alafia, CAR- Dunya	dit « de Gaulle », an- cien président TEMBI, ancien député, ancien ministre
17	Seibou ZAKARI (dit « Al Hadj Vi- ta »)	II	chef de 2e arr.	UBF	56 (*1947)	m	entrepreneur	Dendi & Hausa	(ancien)	PNDD, PSD	big man local, "roi" des Hausa au Bénin, semi-lettré
18	Samou SEIDOU ADAMBI	II	1er adjoint au maire	UBF	26 (*1977)	m	gérant Cham- bre de Com- merce et de l'Industrie de Pkou	Dendi	nouveau	UDFP, FARD-Alafia	études uni- vers.; fils de l'ancien imam de Yebouberi ; membre ALKAWALI
19	Clarisse DOGO POUNAMI	II	mem. comm. affaires domaniales	UBF	53	f	aide-soignante à la retraite	Ditamari	nouveau	IPD	
20	Douarou Boni CHABI	III		FARD- Alafia		m	entrepreneur (transporteur)	Bariba	nouveau		trésorier du comité de ges- tion de la mos- quée de Zongo
21	Bio Jean DOKO	III	commission infrastructure	ASSIRI		m	?		ancien	FARD	ancien maire de l'ancienne

			et commerce								2e commune
22	Joseph OUROU GOURA	III	vice-prés. comm. aff. écon. et fin. ; conseiller technique à l'éducation à la mairie	UBF	~50	m	enseignant, ancien direc- teur de collège	Bariba	(ancien)	FARD-Alafia	ancien prési- dent TEMBI
23	Sanrigui CHABI IRANIN	III	2e adjoint au maire	UBF	~50	m	cadre (ad- ministrateur civil)	Hausa (p) & Bariba (m)	ancien	PRPB, PND, PNDD-Bani, PS, FARD- Alafia	Ancien chef du service voirie Parakou (avant 1989), ancien chef CUP dans les années 1990
24	Francois KORA GOUDA	III	chef du 3e arr.	UBF	37	m	ménusier	Bariba (p) & Nagot (m)	nouveau	FARD ?	
25	Mamam BAKARI	III	pdt. comm. aff. doma- niales	UBF	54	m	retraité OCBN		nouveau	CAR	

Tableau : Résultats des élections municipales de Parakou, 2002/03¹

Arrondissement	Population /inscrits	Taux de participation ²	UBF ³	FARD-Alafia	ASSIRI	RB	Autres formations
I (11 sièges)	56.148 /31.286	1 ^{er} tour : 78, 6% (24.602 votants 23.045 expr.)	4.872 voix 21,1 %	3.049 voix 13,2 %	2.668 voix 11,6 %	3.739 voix 15,9 %	8.717 voix 37,8 %
		2 ^e tour : 63,8 % (19.974 votants 19.545 expr.)	5.868 voix 30,0 % 6 sièges	2.940 voix 15,0 % 1 siège	3.079 voix 15,8 % 2 sièges	3.794 voix 19,4 % 2 sièges	3.864 voix 19,8 % ---
II (8 sièges)	39.108 /22.638	1 ^{er} tour : 79,1 % (17.914 votants 17.483 expr.)	7.349 voix 42,3 % 6 sièges	2.801 voix 16,0 % 2 sièges	1.013 voix 5,8 % ---	1.515 voix 8,7 % ---	4.764 voix 27,2 % ---
III (6 sièges)	32.091 /17.715	1 ^{er} tour : 75,7 % (13.415 votants 12.948 expr.)	2.263 voix 17,5 %	1.769 voix 13,8 %	2.205 voix 17,2 %	910 voix 7 %	5.801 voix 44,6 %
		2 ^e tour : 52,3 % (9.275 votants, 9070 expr.)	2.894 voix 31,9 % 4 sièges	1.694 voix 18,7 % 1 siège	2.417 voix 26,7 % 1 siège	717 voix 7,9 %	1.348 voix 14,8 %
Total Parakou ⁴	127.347 /71.639	55.931 votants, 53.435 expr.	14.484 voix 27,1 %	7.619 voix 14,3 %	5.886 voix 11 %	6.164 voix 11,5 %	19.282 voix 36,1 %
Sièges obtenus			16	4	3	2	---

¹ Sources : 1^{er} tour : Commission Electorale Nationale Autonome (CENA) ; 2^e tour du 1^{er} arrondissement : Commission Electorales Locale de Parakou (CEL) (pas encore validées par la CENA) ; 2^e tour du 3^e arrondissement : Journal La Montagne no. 14 du 23.1.2003

² expr. = suffrages exprimés (et, pour le 1^{er} tour, validés par la CENA). Les pourcentages sont calculés au nombre des inscrits.

³ Les pourcentages sont calculés au total des voix exprimés.

⁴ au premier tour