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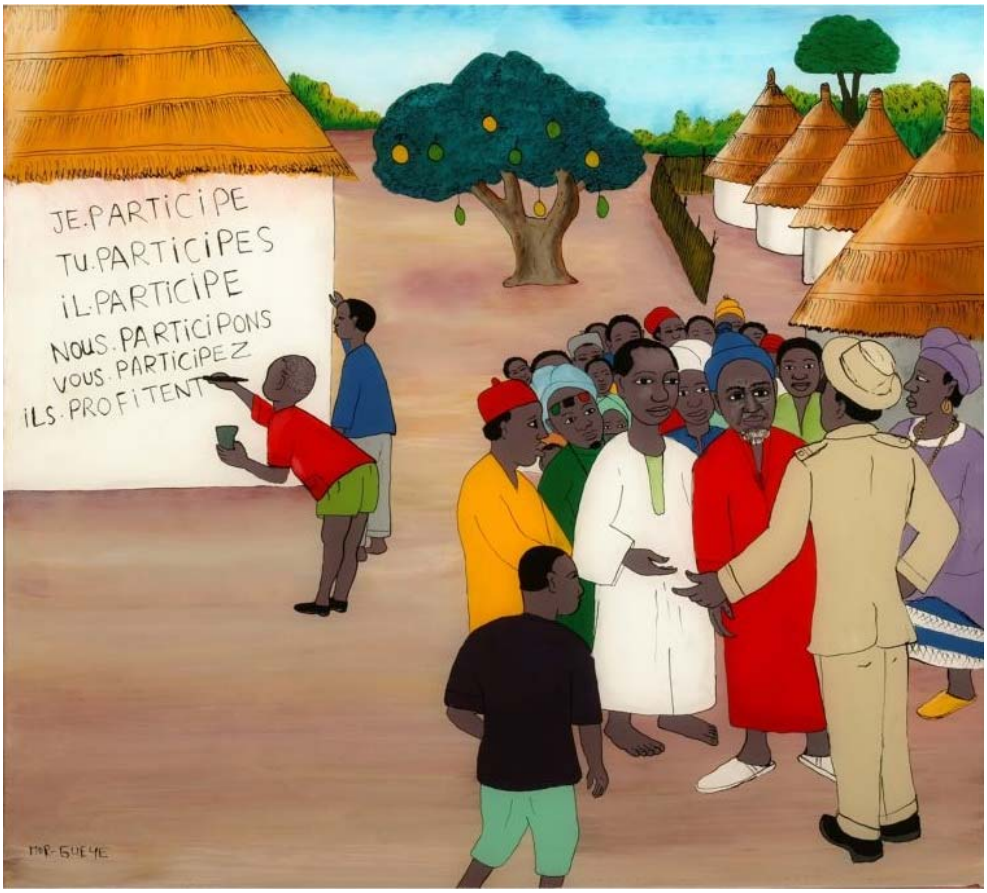

Working Paper 33

State Building and Local Democracy in Benin : Two Cases of Decentralized Forest Management

by

Roch Mongbo

October 2007

WORLD RESOURCES INSTITUTE

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Mor Gueye is an internationally renowned Senegalese artist. At over 80 years of age, Mor Gueye is considered the 'dean' of Senegal's reverse glass painters. This technique, where he paints on one side of a glass pane to be viewed from the other, is popular in urban Senegal. The reverse glass paintings on the cover were photographed by Franklin Pierre Khoury, the art photographer of the Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC.

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ABSTRACT

Beyond local development, the political agenda of decentralization in West Africa was the restoration of State legitimacy and power, and some enhancement of local democracy. The mix of local institutions created in preceding participatory development projects resulted in fragmented forms of authority. Elsewhere, local communities have developed their own institutions for managing local affairs. How, in such a context, do elected local governments wield power, recognize other authorities and contribute to restoration of national State legitimacy? The *Lokoly* forest in Benin was never subject to state intervention. The *Toui-Kilibo* forest, however, has been a protected State forest since 1940 and site of participatory forest management projects since early 1990s. In both cases, the public domain has been enclosed and local government legitimacy over forest resource management contested, hampering the formation of so-called democratic local government. The article compares these two cases, elaborating on social actors' strategies in the symbolic construction and channelling of power, and on the challenges local governments face when attempting to wield legitimate authority over public spaces and articulate local politics to national State building.

Key words: power, local politics, decentralization, local government, natural resource management, democracy, institutional development, West Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The management of public affairs by African political elites from the 1960s through the 1980s was patrimonial (Mbembe, 1988; Bayart, 1989), resulting in corruption and poor performance of public administration and delivery of basic social services meant to construct public domains and state fields of legitimacy. By the end of the 1980s, most African States experienced economic bankruptcy and severe crises of legitimacy. Hence, the popular demands from Benin and in most West and Central African countries for grass roots democracy carried also a quest for new consensus over the public domain and State fields of legitimacy, and for a recraft of the State's institutional framework. Beyond development goals, the political agenda of decentralization was therefore some restoration of State legitimacy and power, together with some enhancement of local democracy.

Previous attempts to improve State performance (1970s and 80s) used technocratic devises for popular participation. These have induced a fragmentation of the public domain in the sense of Ferguson's (1994) 'anti-politics machine', institutionalizing participation that excluded moral and political imperatives or debates from the management of national resources and actual delivery of social services[1] (see Brosius, 1999). Similarly, in the field of natural resource management, donor-funded projects transferred executive mandate to a wide range of local institutions including private bodies, customary authorities and NGOs, resulting in a multiple local forms of authority and belonging (Crook and Manor, 1998; Ribot, 2004). In the African political context where new legitimacies do not erase previous ones (Bierschenk and de Sardan, 1998:20-49), fledging local governments are receiving few public powers and face competition for legitimacy (Ribot, 2007).

How, in such a context, does elected local government wield power so as to contribute to the restoration of national State legitimacy? Through two case studies in Benin, the *Lokoly* and *Toui-Kilibo* forests, this article examines whether fragmentation of authority and belonging are taking place and to what effect. While *Lokoly* has been altogether forgotten in the incorporation processes since the colonial period, *Toui-Kilibo* was classified as a national patrimony and was a site for modern State construction.[2] This article explores the forms of political agencies developed in these locations and the ways in which legitimacy, accountability and rules are constructed—a process that accrues into praxis and institutional arrangements for forest management. The article is organized in three parts. The first gives some background information on the Benin decentralization reform. The second part discusses the issues of legitimacy, agency and power in natural resource management in *Lokoly* and *Toui-Kilibo*, while part three discusses attempts by local governments to establish legitimacy over forest resource management. The

[1] Though the techniques of involving users in the management of social services provision or natural resources are political, these debates remained disarticulated from national political debates. When they appeared on the State agenda, it was often via donors' strategies echoeing international debates.

[2] See Berstein, 1973; Morin, 1993;Wallestrein, 1984.

conclusion discusses the political processes under way in these two institutional landscapes. The challenges local governments have to face to wield legitimate authority over public spaces and articulate local politics to national State building are discussed, together with the support needed from research and development institutions.

STATE AND DECENTRALIZATION IN BENIN

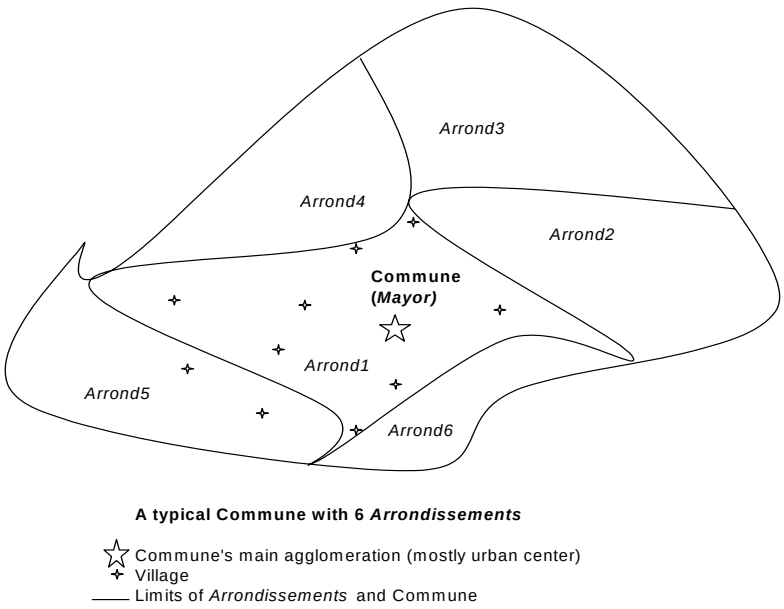
The decentralization reform

Decentralization was agreed on in February 1989 at the National Conference that launched Benin's so-called *'Renouveau Démocratique'* era, putting an end to seventeen years of Marxist rule. Beyond the neo-liberal rationale, local factors including political processes that started after the colonial period dictated the need to decentralize (Mongbo, 1995: 60). One of them is the limited success of (post) colonial political elites in establishing a nationwide State legitimacy and in building a national identity and citizenship. A strong wave of '*retour au terroir*' started from the mid-eighties, bringing elites back to their rural home communities.[3] Local development initiatives were launched that activated a popular claim for political decentralization. Nevertheless, the momentum for decentralization dropped after the National Conference. The 'new' political elite, who attended the national conference as an emerging civil society, won positions in national state institutions in the process of implementing conference decisions. Hence, they opposed any significant transfer of national State power down to local level. This political identity group lacked time to mature before it was dismantled (Brosius, 1999). The drafting of the decentralization law took ten years while local elections announced for 1991 occurred in 2002.

The law provides for political and administrative decentralization. All 77 former *Sous-préfectures* became decentralized *'Collectivités Territoriales'* called *'Communes'*. As shown on figure 1 and depending on area and population sizes, each Commune is divided into four to ten *'Arrondissements'* constituted of villages or town suburbs with little experience in political administration.

[3] The 'back to the home land' was not a rejection of one's national citizenship but rather portrays a stronger claim for it, organized and proclaimed from native communities, as ways of winning audience on the national scene.

Figure 1: Territorial hierarchy within decentralization in Benin



Depending on Commune population size, the communal council (*Conseil Communal*) has 9 to 49 members elected at the *Arrondissement* level. The council elects the Mayor and two deputies from its midst while the Mayor appoints a '*Chefs d'Arrondissement'*. All communes are endowed with budget autonomy and hold different degrees of power over nursery and primary education, health, land management, local development, socio-economic and commercial infrastructures, and local finances (Mongbo, 2001).

The *deconcentration* (administrative decentralization) portion of the reform is meant to bring State's central administration closer to local level for monitoring. Prefects appointed by the Ministry of the Interior for each province (regrouping up to nine communes) coordinate all government activities, oversee and approve the decisions and actions of the *Conseil Communal*, with the power to suspend, cancel or substitute council decisions.

Actual institutional landscape or the decentralization fallacy

While there is insufficient space to describe its unfolding, the local institutional landscape following decentralization reform appears more as institutional confusion and fallacy than the real transfer of executive or decision-making power to local elected bodies. Every field of communal council jurisdiction is occupied by state and non state actors and institutions, together with traditional authorities. The laws are silent on the relations between communal councils and pre-existing local centres of legitimate power such as committees, users associations, and customary authorities. No clear financial provision is made for meeting the costs of service provision. The decentralization laws and decrees

designed in response to people's 1989 demand for democracy and legitimated decision making, have deprived local communities from real share in State power. This reflects the shifts in positions of political actors involved in the national conference (Brosius 1999:283). When voicing popular demand for decentralization, they were fighting the Marxist regime, pulling part of the State's national power down to community level, but did not expect it to be dismantled. Eventually, most of the people fighting the Marxist regime for local power ended up winning powerful position on the national State bureaucracies and power. Changes occurred in their agencies, leaving a political vacuum in the national arena of political legitimacy and power. In the absence of political force to back decentralization understood as local-level decision making, national political elites have worked to create a popular understanding of decentralization as a shallow version of improved administration of development interventions at local level (cf. Gurukkal 2001:69).

LEGITIMACY, AGENCY AND POWER IN FOREST MANAGEMENT

Problem and questions

Some development sociologists and political scientists attribute to external forces determinant role in the shaping of economic and political realities in third world countries, while some others would over idealize endogenous independent processes.[4] I assume that though largely influenced by external forces, local actors and endogenous institutions play determinant roles in the social transformations taking place. We need to take a closer look at the ways in which local political elites emerge, and win power and legitimacy on community and national scenes. How do some deconstruct external forces and turn them into instruments of their own strategies, while others fail to do so (Long, 2001; Mongbo, 1995). The field of natural resource management is particularly interesting for such debates; in Africa forests have attracted the attention of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial powers for their potential to define the public domain (Hornblower, 1930; Jong, 2002).

There is a vast literature on the participatory management of natural resources but most authors stick to the involvement of local communities in the institutional and cognitive set up that yields better results in terms of efficiency, equity and sustainability of resource use, rules enforcement and income.[5] There is almost no debate over how the institutional

[4] For both modernization theorists and neo-Marxist scholars, transformative power lays in the hand of western capitalism and imperialism. The neo-populist techno-political literature emblematized by Paolo Frere and Robert Chambers underestimates foreign forces and over-idealizes the potential of internal local forces to induce development.

[5] Anthropological perspectives on ecology have rehabilitated local knowledge and cognition in the resource conservation schemes the world over (see Colding and Folke, 2001; Davis and Wagner, 2003; Giles-Vernick, 1999; Lawi, 1999; Wadley and Colfer, 2004). Resource economists have devoted a great deal of attention to the efficiency of different institutional forms of natural resources management (Cheung, 1970; Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop, 1975; Daguspta and Heal, 1979; Gordon, 1954). The literature of the commons is rich in accounting for

development underway locally could touch the wider issue of national State building. Even advocates for national legislation supporting local empowerment, in line with the United States' tradition of home rule (Tang and Tang, 2001:63), view communities as fragmented and without coordinated authority. The management of natural resources is addressed as disconnected from the general mainstream of national political debates.

The potential of local level collective management of natural resources for the development of democratic culture and nation-State building remains largely unexplored. The interesting account of Agrawal (2001) of forest decentralization in the Kumaon Himalay in India remains an exploration of the central State's attempts to instrumentalize community forest councils in the State-designed forest management scheme.[6] Despite the historical depth of Agrawal's case, we miss the opportunity to explore local community involvement in forest management as a route for investing in the articulation of locally legitimated State power with national State power. The State formation processes analyzed by Agrawal (2001:12) as the formalization and systematization of social action, with the creation of new rules remains in line with the general institutional trends of incorporation processes of the early 1900s.

North (1990 in Poteete and Welch, 2004: 279) describes institutions as commonly understood 'rules of the game'. Institutions gain their social significance by constraining social actions and shaping expectations about social interactions. They define the actions that must, may, or must not be taken under particular circumstances (Ostrom, 1990). But institutions are not God given. Particular agents play important roles in their emergence and reproduction. Hence, the legitimacy granted to a given institution for the management of natural resources cannot be disconnected from the agents enforcing the rules, or from their positions in other spheres of society. Institutions are therefore, as Foucault indicates, a nexus of power struggle as much as structures above society (Foucault, 1982: 222 in Agrawal, 2001: 13). Hence, legitimacy here is not only as van Binsbergen (2003: 29) defines it, the quality of being found in accordance with a set of rules and meanings held collectively by a particular set of people.

As much as the people granting legitimacy and yielding power to the legitimated ones, the legitimated power wielders are full agents in the process. They are playing active roles in the setting of rules and production of meanings, or in advocating rules interpretations that portray them as the most fit ones to receive power. Therefore, of major concern here is how newly elected local governments invest the battlefield of power, meaning and identity occupied by forest users, community institutions, donors-

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diversified institutional forms and rules of resource management, and their relations with human actions (Ostrom, 1990, 2000; Sethi and Somanathan, 1996; Trawick, 2001; Woodhouse, 1997). As for rules enforcement and people's resistance, see Scott, 1985.

[6] As mentioned by this author, 'the village-based forest-management processes in Kumaon may be seen as expressions of (central) state authority preoccupied by efficiency in rules enforcement for forest preservation (p.17). The institutional landscape described is a deconcentration of State forest bureaucracy over community forest units, not a power devolution to democratic locally legitimated political entities legally articulated to the central state.

and project-instituted committees.[7] How do local governments, endowed with popular legitimacy through elections, negotiate legitimacy over forest resources and recognition from existing institutions and stakeholders, and what are the implications for local democracy and the process of nation-State building? To what extend has the recognition legally granted to the elected decentralized authorities been shaped by the recognition attributed by donors and central government and by indigenous communities to users committees and organizations?

Methods and research itinerary

The research focused on agency, power, and the process of recognition winning. It identified and documented particular social actors and the strategies they used in the symbolic construction and channelling of power among groups. The research also charted the evolution of institutions with roles in forest resources management and their sources of and strategies for developing legitimacy and power. Field investigations combined anthropological methods with quantitative surveys. Check lists and structured questionnaires focused on livelihood, access and resource utilizations, and endogenous institutional development (Egboou, 2001; Mongbo et al., 2005). The author observed planning and evaluation sessions to capture local actors' accounts of everyday management of forest resources, and of their position on the local political scene as perceived and projected by them. The author took part in 1993 in the training and settling of the team that launched the participatory management of the Toui-Kilibo forest; and later, in 1999, was involved in one evaluation of the observed project. In 2006, in both sites, the author documented communal authorities' views on the forest and their initiatives on forest management.[8]

LOKOLY AND TOUI-KILIBO FORESTS AS INSTITUTIONAL BATTLEFIELDS

The Lokoly forest is a 979 ha humid, swampy forest extending over 30 km along a 6 to 10 m wide river (Laleye, 2000). It is located in the South Benin, 75 percentlocated in Zogbodomey Commune, the rest in Toffo Commune. Toui-Kilibo is a tropical savannah 47,120 ha forest located in Centre Benin, 75 percentin Ouessè, the rest in Tchaourou Commune. The research was conducted in Zogbodomey and Ouessè communes. The two forests share similar pre-colonial and present de jure status under the decentralization law. They differ in the institutional development each underwent from the colonial period to the enactment of decentralization. To this day the Lokoly forest is managed by community institutions with no intrusion of State institutions while Toui-Kilibo was

[7] Of some interest here is the debate on social taboo (Colding and Folke, 2001) and person hood (Giles-Vernick, 1999) as structuring vectors in the symbolic and political spaces of forest resource management.

[8] For complementary data collected in the process of writing this paper, I was assisted by Jilius Olatoundé, Yvonne Cakpo, Fabrice Mongbo and the late Euloge Agbessi.

managed by State services from the 1940s and then by project-instituted committees since 1994.

Forest resources and riparian communities of Lokoly and Toui-Kilibo

Lokoly

The Lokoly forest is located at the edge of the Benin wetland site 118 (UNESCO Ramsar convention, see Egboou, 2001), 30 km from the main South-North inter-State road and is hard to reach due to path's shape. There are various wood, grass and animal species. A diversified aquatic fauna including crocodiles, lizards and turtles live in the river.

The riparian communities in Lokoly are dominated by the Fon ethnic group. Most villages were founded before the 17th century. Settlement continued through the 18th century, scattered in many hamlets, the main agglomerations being Lokoly, Koussoukpa and Dèmè. Village chiefs also oversaw deification of the river and the forest. Newcomers showing mystic powers related to forest and water resources took leading roles within the community. From the mid 18th to the end of the 19th century, villages and leaders were incorporated in the Danxomè Kingdom's administrative framework. Village chiefs' legitimacy became subjected to recognition by and subordination to the Danxomean King. The Chiefs settled everyday affairs, facilitated religious rituals, collected taxes on people and products for the King, and recruited soldiers for wars (Michozounnou, 1992).

By the end of the 1990s, activities conducted by riparian communities in the forest were mostly done in the dry season bringing in an average of 38 percentof annual income. The rainy season was for agriculture, food processing, animal husbandry and trade activities outside the forest. Forty-four percent of the local working population received less than 25 percentof their income from the forest, while 20 percentearn between 25 to 50 percentfrom the forest. The most lucrative activity was the wine extraction and processing, which was conducted by few people due to the high level of necessary investment. For 13 per cent, the forest-based activities make 50 to 75 percent of total income. The remaining 23 percentearn more than 75 percentincome from forest-based activities. These patterns continue to the present. The people's pressure on forest resources remains relatively low, though there is no State control or devices for so-called sustainability (see Egboou, 2001).

Toui-Kilibo

Toui-Kilibo forest can be reached right from the main inter-State road and railways. Three rivers cross it. Wood, game, fish, and palm wine are of the interest to riparian populations. Dominant ethnic groups are Mahi, Nagot and Fulbé. The Nagot settlers were in place before the 17th century when the Mahi arrived from the South. With the building of colonial transport infrastructures in the early 1900s, the Fon arrived from the South, the Pila-Pila and Yom from the North. The third generation of settlers were of the same groups, following a State agricultural campaign in 1965. The last settlement trend started

in the 1980s with Fon, Adja and Betamari leaving their native crowded and exhausted homelands in search for fertile land (Glin, 2000). Each riparian hamlet and village is dominated by one ethnic group, the Nagot (mostly) or the Mahi. The main agglomerations are Toui and Kilibo.

Villages are headed by a Chief, mostly an elder from the founder's clan. He is called *Balê* in Nagot villages and *Gohonon* in Mahi villages.[9] Individual native or migrant farmers plant annual crops of yams, maize, cassava, groundnut and cotton, and perennial trees, mainly cashews. Professional hunters are native Mahi and Nagot. Pastoralists are Fulbé settlers and transhumants. All activities were officially forbidden or restricted in the forest (quite unsuccessful) until the participatory project started early 1990s. By the end of the 1990s, about 70 percentof the women involved in forest related activities were in the charcoal business as their only source of income, while all men combined hunting, harvesting wild products (medical plants, honey, fruits, etc.), and charcoal burning with farming outside the forest (Glin, 2000: 59-70).

Lokoly and Toui-Kilibo forests, both important for ecology and biodiversity, experienced contrasting patterns of incorporation into the Benin nation State. Being remote from the main colonial South-North route, Lokoly was much less in the process than Toui-Kilibo, which had been made a State patrimony and a site for road and railway station construction. Hence, institutions for forest management evolved in different ways.

Institutions in Lokoly and Toui-Kilibo forest management

Lokoly

To the local people, the forest and the river complex are a single sacred entity called *Hlan*, with its forest *Hlan Zoun* and its river *Hlan to.* The indigenous institutions that manage this complex are based on myths and religious beliefs. The pantheon places the river *Hlan* as paramount right after *Mahu Sègbo Lissa*, the Supreme God. Hlan has taboos and rules called *interdits* that portray hygiene, cleanness, purity and sustainability. It is forbidden to cross the river with pork considered as dirty, or with a dead person. A menstruating woman should not come to the river. It is prohibited to catch or kill young female or child-bearing animals or fishes, or to harvest some plants or animal species the week after someone died (Egboou, 2001; Mongbo et al. 2005). These rules contribute to the conservation and sustainable management of forest and river fauna and flora while shaping power relations between resource users and taboo keepers.[10]

Despite apparent rigidity, *interdits* on *Hlan* resources remain open to innovations. Daily social interactions among community members, sometimes involving people from

[9]Chiefs' authority is limited to a portion of the forest within his terroir. Hunters' broderhood cover many villages and forest portions, beyond ethnic boundaries.

[10] Durkheim's distinction between sacred and profane entities as resulting from taboos (1915) could reach the same conclusion if one considers the power asymmetries that derive from knowledge inequalities. As pointed out by Colding and Folke (2001: 585) coating Frazer, 1922 and Bodley, 1994, 'taboos may mark power and status of persons in some cultures'.

outside, produce regulations similar to *interdits*, together with leaders. An example is the *Zounkanhounhoun* initiative: forest and water resources were of free access until the early 1950s; then private appropriation began, with various forms of contract on palm groves until the 1960s when palm wine distilleries became an attractive business. By the mid 1960s, a group of young men rioted and restored the free-access regime and an institutional innovation called *'Zounkanhounhoun'* whereby every year they open paths in the forest and on the river to facilitate access. This institution is still present. The head of the then young people chaired it until his death in 2005. His succession is yet to be organized. In 1999, some Nigerian wood merchants in coalition with Beninese managed to obtain cutting licenses from the State regional forest service and started cutting trees in the deep forest. Villagers stopped the operation and the Hlan priest appointed a youth group to watch the forest and report to him regularly.

Organizational set up of professional groups varies according to the particular resources concerned. Palm wine processors have no particular head person. Everybody plays by the general rule of *Zounkanhounhoun*. But through time, changes occur in rules interpretations and users' practices, which ultimately might bring changes in the rules and institutions. According to an informant:

> We need now to find ways to stop a recent tendency whereby some lazy young men would start extracting wine from some palm trees and stop while there will still remain wine. That is a waste of resources as nobody else is allowed harvest such a tree. We need to talk on these and find ways before it is too late.
>
> *Source: Peasant informant, March 2006*

Fishermen have one committee while the hunters have two different committees depending on the means used (traps or guns). These committees are chaired by the eldest or the most experienced member. Meetings are held when needed. The hunters meet when the government forester is expected to visit the village. Then hunters prepare to 'welcome' him with some game meat. In 2001, one fisherman had his net stolen. He reported to the eldest, who called a meeting. The robber was identified and fined and then appointed chief monitor of fishing implements.

Toui-Kilibo

When the forest was classified in1942, the Balês' authority over their portion of the forest was formally limited to symbolic rituals. Nevertheless, until the end of the 1980s, Balês were consulted by all professionals and settlers, even by the State forest agents. With the participatory project from the early 1990s, the forest was repartitioned into zones under three *Unités d'Aménagement* (management units): cropping, forest and pasture. In total, 17 percentof the forest area was set aside for crop cultivation and 36 percentfor pasture zones. The rest was the preserved forest. In all, 18 forests were classified, with a total size of 1,500,000 ha.

From 1994, local communities and forest professionals (charcoal makers, carpentry wood sellers, fishermen, hunters, pastoralists, bee keepers, seedling growers and farmers) were called to participate through committees created at various levels (see figure 2): each village set up formal professional associations called '*Groupements forestiers'*, then a '*Comité Villageois de Gestion Forestière'* (CVGF—committee of forest professionals' associations) with two representatives from each professionals association. Each CVGF appointed two representatives to form the '*Comité de Gestion de l'Unité d'Aménagement de l'Arrondissement'* (CGUA—committee for the coordination of the management unit). Then the president, the treasurer and the secretary from each CGUA gathered to elect the *'Conseil de Coordination des Unités d'Aménagement'* (*CCUA*—Coordination Council). The executive board of the CCUA is operated by each CGUA represented on a cyclical basis for two years, while members of CVGF and CGUA are elected for a four years mandate.

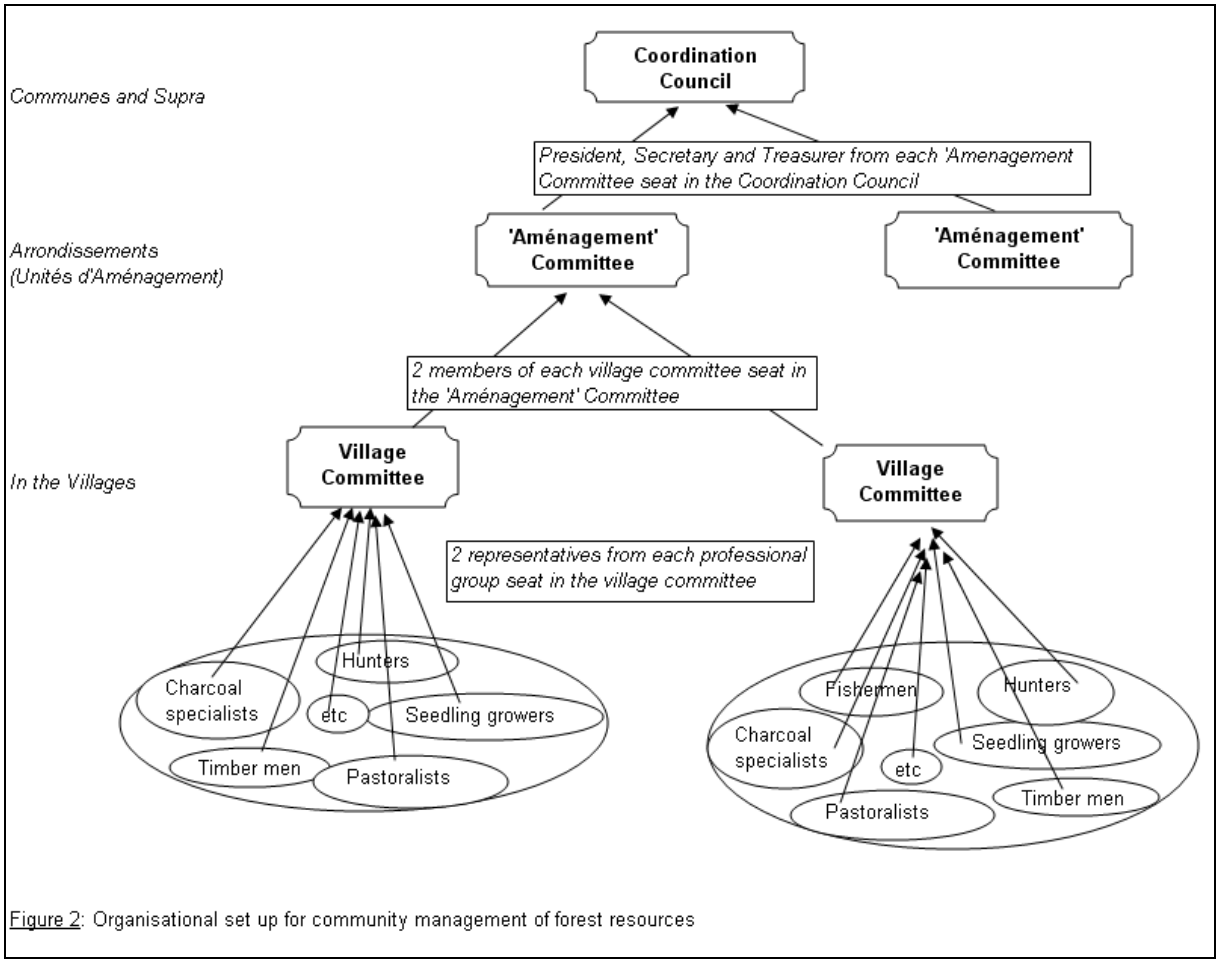

Figure 2: Organisational set up for community management of forest resources

Council and Committee members gain their legitimacy from being democratically elected and are expected to report back to their constituencies at *arrondissement* and village levels. Glin's (2000:59-98) quantitative assessment of the performance of these professional associations concluded that very few were functional and hardly perform any collective activity.

Committees do, however, collect fees on forest products according to rates set by State forest services. Local communities and committees receive about 20 percent of the sum collected. No allocation is earmarked for the local government, though this set up started in 1993, backed by the forest bill (the July 2nd 1993) and the application decree of 2nd July 1996, while the national constitution prescribing political decentralization dates back to December 1990. In addition, the committees receive funds for the production of 34,000 seedlings every year (recruiting wage labourers), of which 20,000 are freely given to villagers while the remaining 14,000 are used to enrich the forest and for planting 200 ha of forest every year in the buffer zones called 'Free Zones', between the cropping and forest zones. Over the past ten years, a forest-products commodity chain emerged out of private forests of fast growing species and from the yearly 200 ha planted in free zones.[11] Free zones are excluded from committees' mandate. Local forest professionals are entitled with free access once they pay the State Forest Service for individual professional permits.

From the end of the 1990s, NGOs were contracted to implement the project. They appointed village staff supervised by village forest agent and higher level forest officers. These teams assist committees in seedling production, forest planting, governance and watchdog activities over forest resources. They ensure that fees collected get to the right destination.

Representation, legitimacy, power and democracy in forest management

Lokoly

Institutions are created when needed. Appointment of chairpersons varies according to professions and context (eldest, most experienced or even robber). Representation criteria and source of legitimacy are not standardized but emerge from the struggle among stakeholders for resource control, and depending on readings of changes in demography, environment, market and technologies for resource harvesting. The struggles oppose stakeholders within the community (as in the Zounkanhounhoun), but might also involve outsiders and State services (as with the Nigerians). This context of institutional development sets the basis for the emergence of political agents with local recognition and legitimacy, while making them locally accountable.

Leaders emerging from these social dynamics could be people with (mystic) knowledge or particular agents within some stakeholders groups. There are no democracy rituals or drama—such as formal meetings or term elections of representatives. There are no regular contacts with State forest services, NGO or project staff with their operational routines or logical framework of actions. Nevertheless, there exist spaces for people from each profession to take part in processes of endogenous institutional innovations for

[11] Assuming a 40 to 50 percentsurvival of the seedling distributed every year for private use over the past 10 to 12 years, more than 100 ha of private forests are planted annually. The region is now the main provider of fire, carpentry wood and charcoal for main cities in southern Benin.

access and use of the resources, with subsequent renewal of agents' and leaders' legitimacy.

The whole scene is a political field of corporate power (Bourdieu, 1990) open to all knowledgeable people in each professional sector concerned and to some extent submitted to social control, which, in Habermas' categories, has the potentials for democratic public debate (see Habermas, 1989; Ku, 2000; Staats, 2004). However, the spaces for such local democracy look fragmented over the various professional fields, though linked up horizontally within the *Zounkanhounhoun* and *Hlan* priest umbrella. The mythical and religious bases of these institutions are their main weakness. With the recent trend of Christianization in the area, new adherents refuse to comply to traditional myths, beliefs and rules.

Toui-Kilibo

Term elections are organized, chiefly in order to meet project requirements. Committees' legitimacy is largely altered by the erosion in their constituencies who can hardly grant them any recognition. They win animosity from implementing their mandate, which consist of controlling and fining forest users. This combines with their prominent role in seedlings production and forest plantation to give them the image of forest service village agents or brokers rather than representatives of local forest professionals or communities. This twisting in representation and legitimacy affects their accountability, turned more to forest service and NGO agents than to local communities or professional groups.

Some committee members happen to forget being members or pretend to have backed off:

> Top people (higher committee leaders) take decisions without consulting nor reporting to village level. Therefore I withdraw. **Zan an de yi o, zan an de non wa [**short time goes, short time comes—suggesting the fatalist view that no situation is permanent, but is left to fate for it to change.**]**. Wait and see.
>
> *Source: A peasant Village Committee member, March 2006*

According to an Arrondissement committee chairman:

> When we started, people rushed and won position as member of the CGUA. But when they found no gain, they withdrew but did not resign. In my committee, only three of us remain active, not because we gain anything. We even make enemies by applying the sanctions prescribed by State forest services. We simply have the sense of responsibility.
>
> *Source: A peasant CGUA chairman, March 2006*

The daily management of what is left of these committees portrays them as appendages of the State forest administration, instruments for enforcing State rules. They have built a

network of clients and servants for tax collection, seedling production and forest enrichment. But this power base is threatened by the *'Unités d'Aménagement'* strategy and the group membership for committee representation, both central to the forest protection policy:

- The *Unités d'Aménagement* strategy stimulates private forest planting in addition to the yearly 200 ha of State forest in free zones excluded from the committee. This has deepened the lack of interest in professional group membership and has contributed to a decrease in fee collection over the last four to five years. Tree cutting permit delivery dropped close to nil while monthly charcoal exports fines fell by 40 per cent. Professionals in these fields prefer resorting to the 'free zones' were they are exempt from local taxes.

- Professional group membership figures are no better. Of the thirty professional groups enumerated in 1999, there were ten carpentry groups and four charcoal groups. In February 2006, there were only two charcoal groups left and no carpentry wood group. These professionals remain active though, but in free zones and private forests. The committees have become nothing more than empty shells. In effect, they were given saws to cut the tree branches on which they were sitting.

Finally, participatory management appears as a strategy for further centralizing forest administration away from local communities and for developing a private forest planting sector formalized in State forest services books. A few local elite emerged as committee members, instruments in the State forest administration strategy with no downward accountability to local communities. Their power and legitimacy emanate more from forest administration than from local communities. These elites were extracted from their communities and incorporated into vertical ties with some immediate and non-durable gains from taxes, forest planting and networks. They had no voice in the forest management strategy but enjoyed their status as brokers, intermediating between State bureaucracy and project cultures on one side, the forest professionals and the local communities on the other.

Local governments in the arena of forest management

Lokoly and Toui-Kilibo communities differ in their articulation with recent national politics and in the structure of local governments and local political party arrangements. Zogbodomey (Lokoly) is dominated by the main opposition party, *Renaissance du Bénin (RB)*. At the 2002 communal elections, most council members were elected under the RB banner. In Ouessè (Toui-Kilibo), Mahi and Nagot ethnic groups have been fighting each other since the colonial period for political leadership as well as individual and collective gains from State presence. In 1977 under the Marxist regime, the Mahi got the offices of the district in their zone. Since mid 1990s, most Nagot vote for the party coalition in power with President Kerékou (from 1996 to 2006), while most Mahi vote the RB. At the communal elections in 2002, the Nagot won the Mayorship and conceded the two deputy positions to the Mahi.

Lokoly and the Zogbodomey local government

Communal authorities do not know much about the stakes and taxable income in the forest or of how local authorities manage. In the communal development plan, the forest is mentioned as a potential tourist destination, but no subsequent disposition has ever been taken in communal budget. The *Chef d'Arrondissement* is a native of Koussoukpa riparian village, but his attention was less captured by the local institutional dynamics and peculiarities than by the researchers and development actors operating in the villages. With the assistance of some environmental NGOs, he tried to launch forest users in a tourism management scheme (Egboou and Aguèmon, 2005). He held a meeting in June 2005 with the communities and all intervening institutions. Some NGOs suggested that villagers could reduce the harvesting of forest resources without affecting household income. This, they argued, would maintain the tourist potentials of river and forest, which would yield additional returns for individuals and communities. Villagers, however, argued for the need to construct a bridge over the river and good roads for a better marketing of forest products while rejecting all ideas from NGOs and the local government for managing forest resources in the name of rationality or sustainability:

> Who are you to warn us about forest exhaustion? I am older than any of you here and got from my grandfather that the forest was there before his grandfather. We know what the threats to the forest are and what the remedies are. It is nothing of what you are preaching.
>
> *Source: Old man peasant farmer, Koussoukpa, June 2005*

Or:

> The only job I have is to extract palm wine and process it into alcoholic drink. Do you expect me to stop because you think it might exhaust palm trees? You don't even know anything of how these trees emerge, grow and die.
>
> *Source: Middle aged palm wine processor, Koussoukpa, June 2005.*

Rumors circulated that the government intend to take away the forest as was done for a nearby forest (Lama) and for a few others elsewhere. Villagers rejected any intervention requesting their withdrawal from the forest or that were harmful to their activities. The meeting ended with promises of further discussions. A week later, the Mayor invited intervening institutions for a meeting, a short replay of the previous one. He asked each organization to submit a report of its activities and to prepare for another meeting, which he did not organize until the end of 2006.

The local government never questioned the legitimacy of customary institution as assessed by community people or against State regulations. They timidly try to attract donor funding and tourism professionals. In case they get anything done, they would bypass endogenous institutions and set up new competing institutions with no legitimacy to address sustainability matters.

The Toui-Kilibo forest and the Ouessè local government

Contrary to Zogbodomey, the Ouessè local government had a clear idea of the resources at stake and had no doubt as to their legitimacy as *maître d'ouvrage* (master of works). The communal development plan asserted that 'the management of natural resources legally fall under the jurisdictions of the local government and would no longer be the exclusive domain of any council outside the local government'. They tried to get a hold of the resources generated by the forest coordination council, which the latter considered a mere agitation of a local government ignorant of forest management realities:

> Right when he got into office, the Mayor jumped on us and demanded that we report on our management. He thought we had funds in our account. He finally noticed that there is nothing in this business and congratulated us for our voluntary office for the commune….
>
> *Source: A forest council member, field work March 2006*

Since then, nothing has happened. The Mayor confesses that he has to be careful in attacking the forest committees people too much, fearing for the large audience they seem to enjoy in the communities through their network of forest professionals and seedling growers. The Mahi-Nagot divide emerged also, questioning the relevance of merging earnings from Nagot and Mahi forests in the Commune's common account.

State forest agents recommend that local government plant its own forest, promising to assist in all possible ways. Once the Commune plants its own forest, it will enjoy all management rights as prescribed by law. Within the present forest law, a Commune cannot claim any classified State forest unless the State government passes a decree that transfers the forest to the Commune. Such an event cannot be expected in the near future as forest service staff are the people who can draft such a decree. Unless most local governments interested in protected forests take a radical concerted action that forces the government in such direction, nothing will change. Unfortunately, as indicated earlier in this article, the emergence of such a political identity group backing the decentralization process cannot be expected any time soon.

CONCLUSION

The political agenda of decentralization in West Africa was the restoration of State legitimacy and power at local and national levels, together with some enhancement of local democracy. Within preceding development projects implemented since the mid 1980s, public mandate had been transferred to local organisations and committees in the name of community participation. In cases of no State intervention, local communities developed particular institutional arrangements for the management of local affairs. Hence, most elected local governments experience opposition from established stakeholders, and are denied State legitimacy over public domain at the local level. The

cases of forest management in *Lokoly* and *Toui-Kilibo* in Benin show the challenges local governments have to face to wield any legitimate and effective authority over public spaces.

In *Lokoly* forest, access and management are regulated by priests, chiefs and local forest professionals (in charge of specific forest or water resources), usually functioning with little interference from centrally legitimated authorities. Rules of access and use are locally produced and shared, with room for challenge and change. Authorities in charge of enforcing the rules are established pragmatically and opportunistically, not in a standardized manner, depending on the particular professional group involved (fishers, hunters, palm wine processors, etc.). The legitimacy of chairpersons is unquestioned. Their position appears as a mandatory as well as a powerful one, obtained by meeting criteria set by resource users, to whom they account when needed. These leadership/mandatory positions are indicative of the ongoing struggles for the control of natural and human resources. In those struggles, young men can win over elders as in the Zounkanhounhoun episode. Criteria setting and leader's appointment are not stepwise mechanistic processes but rather dialectical, and might lead to unexpected decisions as a fisherman convicted of robbery being appointed chief monitor of fishing implements.

In *Toui-Kilibo*, despite the participatory rhetoric, rules of access and use of forest resources are largely dictated by the State central government agencies while users' committees and organisations in charge of enforcing them are appointed within State projects in a standardized and mechanistic manner. Local communities and forest users do not have a rooted adherence to these authorities as do users in *Lokoly* to endogenous managing institutions. In *Toui-Kilibo*, contrary to what formal discourse want us to believe, local forest authorities are not accountable to users or local communities. They are project-dependent clients involved in wage-based seedling production and forest planting, and are incorporated into the State forest bureaucracy to whom they account. As in *Lokoly*, the situation reflects the ongoing struggles for the control of resources. But in Toui-Kilibo, bureaucrats endowed with central State's legitimacy and resources use their dominant position to exclude forest users from decision making.

Though the mythical and religious basis of the *Lokoly* framework is shaken by recent Christianization waves, it remains dominant; part of its legitimacy being based on real power devolution to leaders appointed through social processes in which most forest users take significant part. The resulting authority relations are horizontal, being established and contested among local actors. In *Toui-Kilibo*, committee leaders' constituencies have shrunken by attrition over the years and they play no role in the setting of rules of access and use of forest resources. At the expense of their own future development as political agents, *Toui-Kilibo* project-established local authorities have been used as instrument for the consolidation of the State bureaucracy's power over forest management. They are a product and instrument of the historical mindset based on the belief that natural resource management can only be achieved under the direct and close supervision of (para-) State forestry institutions and agents (Cline-Cole, 1997:524). The resulting 'participation' safeguards and reproduces the hegemony of dominant forestry discourse and practices.

Local partakers in the 'participatory' processes in *Toui-Kilibo* are cut off from their communities and incorporated into vertically legitimated types of authorities and central State structures. The endogenous management processes in *Lokoly* produce horizontal ones. The institutional arrangements in *Lokoly* open paths for local democracy while those in *Toui-Kilibo* obstruct local democratization. Despite these contrasting institutional arrangements, both cases produced a similar response to local government's attempt to intervene. In both cases local government had the wrong picture of the political landscape and got into the arenas through the wrong doors. In Zogbodomey commune (*Lokoy* forest), the local government opened debates with all forest users and intervening institutions without prior negotiations with local legitimate professional leaders, village chiefs and priests. In Ouessè commune (*Toui-Kilibo* forest), the local government jumped on the management council to later find out that the actual decision makers were State staff. During the first four years of their five-year mandate, none of these local governments managed to find its way to the forest via the right institutional gate (local authorities for *Lokoly* and State forestry staff and regulations for *Toui-Kilibo*). The capacity of local governments to properly assess political stakes and stakeholders will be key to their success in establishing political legitimacy over mandatory public domains.

The rejection of the local government's attempts in *Lokoly* bears a different meaning from that of *Toui-Kilibo*. In the first case, local communities defend the forest as a 'common resource' where their access right should be respected if external actors, including national or local government, were to intervene. At the same time, they use the forest as a bargaining chip to attract State fundings in the village (bridge, roads) for a better incorporation in the market economy. In Zogbodomey, local government is not denied the legitimacy to intervene on the forest as long as this intervention does not affect the livelihood of indigenous users (wine processors, hunters, fishermen).

The *Toui-Kilibo* forest has been integrated in the public domain—state controlled—since the colonial period. The existence of a public good is often equated with space and State, the physical domain of its anchorage, which is linked with the authority or public power that founds it (Gazier and Touffut, 2006:11). But in *Toui-Kilibo,* State staff shows very opportunistic reading of State law, adopting a patrimonial attitude towards State resources. They suggest that local government plant its own forest and leave the State forest (in fact a central government domain) alone. This is a vision of public domain linked to a vision of the State where the public domain of the State is the private domain of government. By excluding local authorities from State forests, this top-down management encloses the local 'public'—in the sense of historical use—domain (see Hill, 1910; Peffer, 1949; Barton, 2001).

The members of the elected local government seem to share this vision of the public domain and the State—considering the forest as belonging to government. They do not make much of an attempt to use existing State laws and endogenous relevant institutions to make claims on this forest and strengthen their own legitimacy. The Zogbodomey government continues lobbying NGOs and the Ouessè local government remains silent, seriously considering the idea of planting a communal forest, in fact a private domain for

the local government. In both cases, because local government does not read or support local dynamics and institutions, society loses an opportunity for a locally rooted democracy as an integral part of a national State building process, that might articulate local dynamics to national policy.

Local governments are key players that deserve attention to help change this state of affairs. They are at the right social and institutional position to articulate local dynamics and public debates into national State policy processes. To achieve this, they would need to improve their own capacity to read and cope with the institutional and political landscapes in place, while their awareness of being political agents that are part of a national State building process needs to increase. A major handicap on this route is the attitude of the central State and its bureaucracy—as shown with the forest staff—that consists of denying local government, any significant access to public goods, including State budgets and human resources. As in some cases in the past, donors could be of significant assistance in this particular matter for the fate of democracy and national State building in Africa. Further investigations will also be needed on the potentials for endogenous institutional experiences to contribute to local democracy and national State building. Furthermore, we need to know which forms of political identity groups are emerging within the actual implementation of decentralization reforms in West Africa, and in which ways they might weigh in on national debates on public resource allocation.

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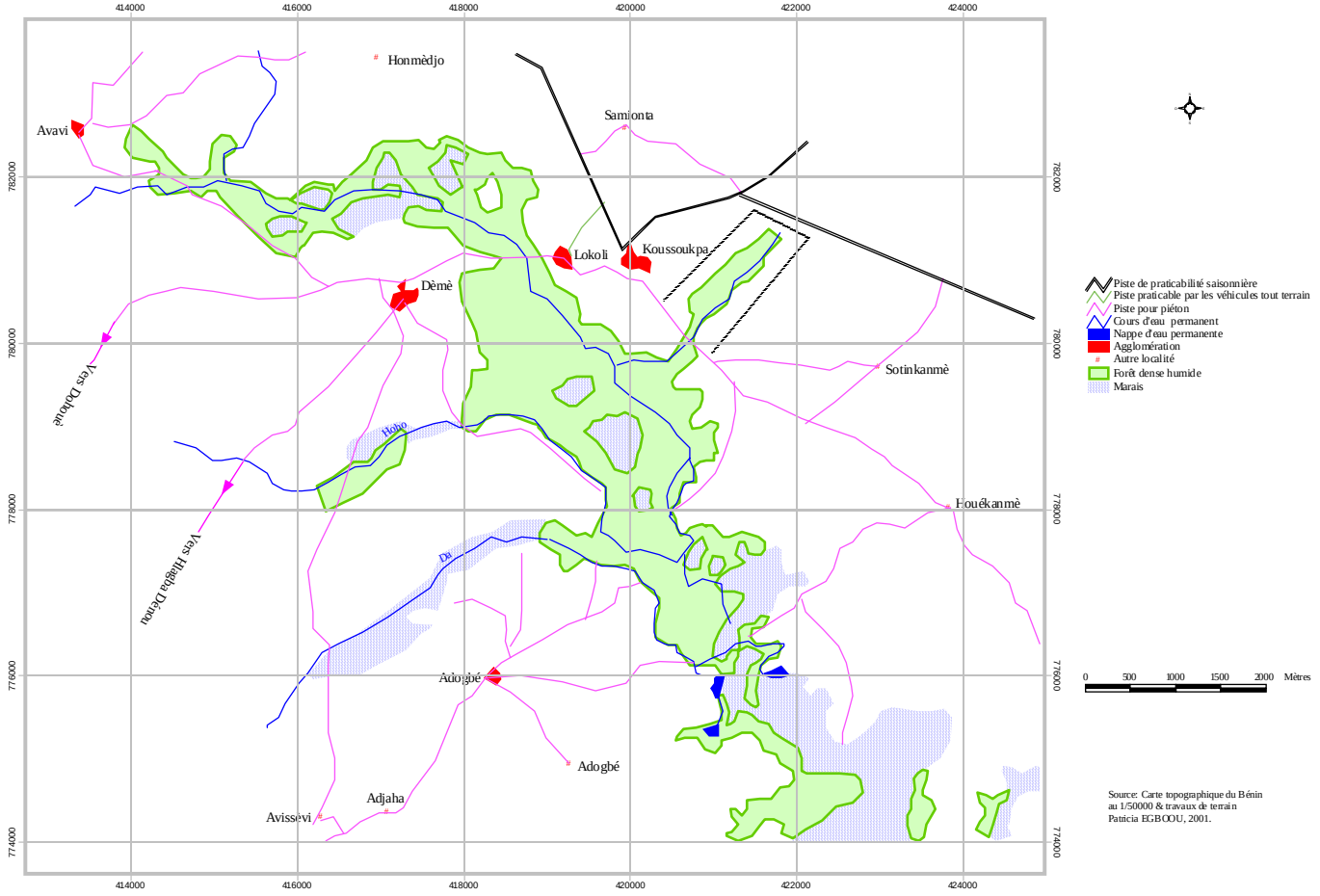

Figure 3: Localization of the Marecageuse Forest in Koussoukpa

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