

Local Powers and a Distant State in Rural Central African Republic

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‘*The State Stops at PK 12*’ – i.e. 12 kilometres from the capital, Bangui.

THE situation described by this statement, often heard in the Central African Republic, seems to conform to the objectives of the currently fashionable policies of decentralisation and structural adjustment – for example, to end ‘too much state’. However, the absence of the state in the rural areas of the CAR is so striking that the position in certain respects has almost reached the level of caricature. It also reflects the more general situation in other parts of the continent where the excesses of a centralised, over-staffed post-colonial régime can coexist perfectly with the pronounced absence in the rural areas of certain functions which are commonly supposed to be provided by the state, including basic administration and justice, as well as social, educational, and health services.

This absence of the state does not mean that a void exists in its place. Local life may suffer from under-administration, but still be characterised by often latent and disguised greed, conflicts, and negotiation between various authorities, clans, and factions. This means that the study of local powers and politics must not be restricted to ‘formal’ institutions but ought also to take account of all ‘public spaces’ and positions of eminence. The protagonists and stakes involved are, therefore, visible and official to a greater or lesser extent, and always significant in number. This gives rise to complex political configurations which vary from one area, culture, and country to the next. Thus, due to historical factors, the fluidity and weak institutionalisation of most forms of jurisdiction are particularly marked in the CAR, although here can also be found the ‘polycephaly’ and multiplicity of local ‘power poles’ that exist elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.¹

This article is the outcome of research undertaken in the west and

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¹ Cf. Thomas Bierschenk, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, and Marc Lévy (eds.), *La Démocratisation au village: cinq études anthropologiques en République du Bénin* (forthcoming).

north-west of the CAR,² using methodology that the authors had developed earlier: a rapid collective enquiry for the identification of conflicts and strategic groups, known as ECRIS.³ This enables a more detailed analysis to be made than the regular surveys or brief enquiries which are standard practice in the ‘development world’, and systematically takes into account those comparative aspects which tend to be neglected in classical socio-anthropological monographs. We tried to include a wide range of criteria in our choice of villages: the remote and the more accessible, those inside and outside local authority centres, with different ‘ethnic cultures’, either ‘supervised’ by working closely with development aid organisations or ‘independent’ by being without such experience. Hence our selection of the following five sites:

1. Village K in the *préfecture* of Ouham-Pendé. Easy access by nearness to *Route nationale* (RN) 1; presence for a number of years of German development aid projects which have structural implications for the local political arena; ethnic groups: Kaba majority, some Gbaya; cotton cultivation of great economic importance; town hall is 10 km away at Bébouira; population, approximately 630.
2. Village G, an agglomeration divided into four ‘administrative villages’ in the *préfecture* of Ouham. Difficult access, 50 km from Bossangoa, bad roads, public transport consists of two vehicles per week on market day; very limited presence of development aid projects; only one ethnic group: Gbaya; cotton cultivation of great economic importance; the mayor lives in the village, but has to commute on foot to the town hall which is 27 km away; population, approximately 2,000.
3. Villages L, M, and T in the *préfecture* of Ombella-Poko. Easy access, 60 km away from Bangui and within the economic sphere of influence of the nation’s capital thanks to a good road; presence of several projects, under the auspices of the African Development Fund and the United Nations Development Programme, which have structural implications for the local political arena;

² The authors wish to stress that the field work was carried out in 1995, before the recent events in Bangui that led to the implosion of the state even at the centre. It was financed by the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit* (GTZ) as part of preparatory studies in support of decentralisation in the CAR, and for the most part mirrors the report which the authors submitted to the GTZ, *Les Pouvoirs dans l’absence de l’État. Configurations du pouvoir politique local et rapports à l’État en milieu rural centrafricain*, Working Papers on African Societies, No. 1, Berlin, Das Arabische Buch, 1996. They would like to thank those who carried out the individual surveys at each site, namely Blaise Goma, Dominique Gonendji, Gédeon Gotti, Crépin Kabba-Dalli, Brigitte Mbassangao, Dieudonné Nambaye, and Patrice Ngaipere; as well as Sylvia Tag, who was associated with the collective enquiry, Gabriel Ngouaméné, General Secretary of the University of Bangui, whose participation was particularly valuable, Susan Cox for her translation into English, and scholars at the meeting of the Association of Anthropologists of Great Britain and the Commonwealth in Harare, January 1997, who commented on a previous draft.

³ See Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, ‘ECRIS: rapid collective inquiry for the identification of conflicts and strategic groups’, in *Human Organization* (Washington, DC), 56, 1997, pp. 238–44.

ethnic groups: Banda majority, and Dabga; marketing of food crops for Bangui; town hall is 10–15 km away at Damara; population, between 150 and 200 per village.

4. Village N, an agglomeration divided into five ‘administrative villages’ in the *préfecture* of Loabye. Difficult access, 120 km away from M’Baiki, road in bad condition; location of a major forestry project which does not have significant repercussions on the local political milieu; ethnic groups: Boffi, Pygmies, and numerous emigrants of varied origins seeking work; economic resources: diamond mining, coffee plantations, hunting; location of town hall, although the mayor lives 20 km away; population, approximately 1,800.

5. Village P, an agglomeration divided into 12 ‘administrative villages’ in the *préfecture* of Basse-Koto. Difficult access; few development aid projects; ethnic groups: Banda, M’Bororo; cultivation of coffee (cotton production was prohibited by the Government in 1995), livestock and marketing of subsistence crops; location of town hall; population, approximately 2,100.

In order to reach a better understanding of the ensuing analysis, it is important to realise that K is a village in the ‘real’ as well as the administrative sense, in accordance with the definition of local collectives in Ordinances Nos. 5 and 6 of 1988, sections 4 and 1, respectively. On the other hand, L, M, and T are three different villages, also in both senses, but situated in close proximity and forming one site of enquiry. G, N, and P are referred to as ‘agglomerations’, each of which is divided into several ‘administrative villages’, as defined in the same two Ordinances, which means in actual fact that they are little more than ‘neighbourhoods’.

The empirical basis of our analysis is, admittedly, rather narrow, since the five sites surveyed do not cover all the regions of the CAR. Far from it because – to adopt a typology from classical anthropology – they specifically reflect the pre-colonial lineage-based societies of the west and north-west, and do not include the pre-colonial ‘states’ of the north-east and east. Thus, what we have here are merely some of the political, social, and cultural configurations which exist in the Republic. To put this another way, many of the statements in this article should be preceded by the following reservation: ‘in the villages which we surveyed and subject to the findings of complementary research’.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LOCAL POLITICAL ARENAS

The political arenas at all of the sites surveyed are structured around three ‘power poles’: (i) the village chiefs, who are surrounded by small groups of counsellors, (ii) the farmers’ organisations, and (iii) the churches: Catholic, Evangelical, Baptist, Apostolic, Neo-Apostolic,

and, in some cases, a very small Islamic community. Each maintains relations at its own level with the world outside the village, which means that the state, the development aid projects, and the national church organisations are all in various ways involved in the local political arenas despite their unequal powers and influence.

1. *The Village Chiefs*

They generally obtained their posts through elections in which supporters lined up behind their chosen candidates. However, most village chiefs have been recruited from the same families for generations, which means that they have a traditional as well as a democratic legitimacy. Having attained their positions once, they tend to be regularly reappointed, and this can result in long periods of office that may last up to several decades.

At site 1, the village chief has been selected for three generations from the majority clan. Currently the grandson of the previous chief who ruled from 1938 to 1994, he had been challenged by the grandson of the very first chief who came from the founding family of the village, subsequently outnumbered by the family of the current chief. He was elected in 1994 despite being younger (aged 30) than his opponent (62), who was subsequently appointed as his assistant.

At site 2, the chief of the original nucleus, now known as administrative village I, has been in office since 1969. Following the division of the agglomeration into four villages, he was nominated as 'group chief' in 1987 by the canton chief, a close relative and direct descendant of the first canton chief who obtained the post on the basis of his co-operation with the colonists. The chief of village II was elected in 1982; his late uncle was previously the *capita*, i.e. the representative of a clan and counsellor of the then village (now group) chief. The chief of III was elected in 1986 and succeeded his older brother, while the chief of IV was elected in 1989 and succeeded his uncle.

At site 5, nine of the 12 administrative village chiefs succeeded close relatives, usually their fathers – in four cases following elections, and in five on the basis of nominations by their predecessors, without elections (including two appointed in 1995). One had been a chief since the 1940s and two others since the 1950s. In the 11th village, a chief from the traditional ruling line was recently sacked by the mayor, and in another the post had been the subject of a dispute between two clans.

Pre-colonial traditions of chieftainship, as found elsewhere in Africa, seem to have been never very strongly developed in the CAR. The societies situated in the areas studied were characterised by widespread segmentation and weak institutionalisation of local political power. The current villages were established in a variety of ways: some

through the merging of hamlets under pressure from the colonial régime, often to facilitate the construction of a road, as at sites 1 and 3, while others developed around military posts created at the beginning of the colonial era, for example site 4. But collective memory does not extend far into the nineteenth century, at least not very reliably.

The village chiefs are thus primarily the successors of those who were appointed by the French, and who played an essentially repressive rôle during the colonial period.⁴ Having fully embraced the tradition of a purely ‘administrative chieftainship’ devoid of all aristocratic pre-colonial roots, most of today’s chiefs, despite being elected, see themselves first and foremost as representatives of the state in a quite literal interpretation of Ordinance No. 6 of 1988, section 9: ‘It is the duty of the village chief to implement the decisions passed by the administrative authority and the local authority’. They visually emphasise this by sporting an official medal which symbolically reinforces the official definition of their duty.

However, the state provides practically no resources for chiefs to exercise the rôle it has assigned to them. They do not have access to official disciplinary structures, for example, in the form of a local police force. They have few ways of imposing sanctions against the inhabitants of their villages and, following the elimination of the poll tax, the state does not provide them with any direct funds whatsoever. In effect, the chiefs have to exercise their influence by participating in a permanently informal process of negotiation, to a far greater extent than was the case during the colonial era when their fathers and grandfathers were in power. They are now forced to form alliances with other poles of power – mainly leaders of the farmers’ organisations who have access to significant financial resources. Moreover, their influence can also be undermined by the practice common in some villages, as at site 1, of appointing their failed electoral opponents as assistants, and by the fact that a chief’s decisions can always be contested by appeal to the mayor of the local authority.

The most important function undertaken by village chiefs is to resolve disputes, and such activities appear to be the main source of their receipts via the ‘*droits de (rights of) table*’ that exist in all the villages (although it is important to note that farming is the main occupation of the chiefs). Needless-to-say, serious conflict between two

⁴ The repressive rôle of chiefs was ‘mitigated’ in other parts of Africa by their fulfilment of redistribution tasks, and by the perpetuation of the paternalistic attitudes associated with traditional chieftainship.

villagers may be resolved by the elders if both come from the same clan, or through direct discussion between the two families involved. If this does not succeed, they will be called by the chief to a meeting at which his close counsellors are also present – be it his assistant or the ‘customary judge’. Each party pays a fee to the chief which, depending on the village, varies between 300 and 500 CFA francs. When the verdict is passed, this sum is divided by the chief between himself and his counsellors.

If one of the parties does not agree with the judgement he/she can appeal to the mayor and then – or instead – to the police. The process involving the passing of judgements by the mayor is the same as that by the chief, but with higher ‘*droits de table*’.⁵ However, most conflicts are regulated at village level, including those within farmers’ groups and associations which often involve cases of misappropriation and embezzlement of funds.

2. *The Farmers’ Organisations*

Each of the villages surveyed had one or more organisations which can be divided into three categories:

(i) The *associations de producteurs de coton* buy seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides on a collective basis, organise the sale of cotton through the *Société cotonnière du Centrafrique* (SOCOA), manage the rebates (‘*ristournes*’) and effectively impose a mandatory levy on producers which is not, however, based on an act of sovereignty as required under law for the imposition of a tax. Membership of these *Groupements d’intérêt rural* (GIRs) is mandatory for all cotton producers, and the rebates managed by these rural interest groups help to create an investment fund that is used to finance local projects, such as wells, school classrooms, sanitary installations, and other infrastructural requirements. In other words, in these villages the real ‘local budget’ is not controlled by either the village chief, who as we have seen has no financial resources, or by an elected village council which was not found to exist in any of the sites surveyed, but by autonomous groups of farmers who are privileged taxpayers of a kind.

(ii) The *associations de producteurs de café* operate on similar lines, with the important difference that membership of these GIRs is voluntary and that the rebates are, it would seem, for the most part repaid to individual growers. Both the acquisition of inputs and the marketing of

⁵ According to the mayor of the local authority at site 1, these higher ‘*droits de table*’ are paid to a special treasury agent, although we were unable to trace such entries during 1995.

coffee can be undertaken as independent activities, but the advantage of belonging to these rural interest groups lies in the fact that members are advised by the *Agence de développement de la zone caféière*, and that their inputs are subsidised, although the higher prices paid by private coffee buyers are preferred by many farmers. These GIRs are, thus, rather similar to what would be known elsewhere as voluntary rural co-operatives. They are considerably less important in political terms than those for the cotton producers due to the optional nature of their membership, and the individual redistribution of rebates.

(iii) The *groupements de producteurs* are associations of particular social categories (youth, women, mixed) or simply '*organisations de base*'. These can take the form of a sewing workshop, as at site 1, or small enterprises that produce pigs, soap, or fruit juices, as at site 3. They are the product of the external impetus of aid projects, at least in the cases mentioned here, and their survival depends basically on the motivation of salaried professionals, particularly when they live locally.

At site 1, the co-ordinator of the *Programme d'appui aux organisations de base de l'Ouham-Pendé*, a project financed by the GTZ, who lives in the village of K, was responsible for the formation of several groups of producers, as well as a committee for the construction of a health centre and a strongly political 'council of elders'. She not only convenes but also chairs the meetings of these *organisations de base*, and acts as secretary during a general assembly of the village group called to resolve a serious conflict. She decided on the basis of frequent internal disagreements to split the women's association into two sections, but claims: 'I have no political rôle because I am a woman and hence apolitical'.

At site 5, a village pharmacy was established thanks to the initiative of the community development agent. He formed its managing committee and attends (and practically runs) each meeting.

Unlike the GIRs, *organisations de base* reflect a subsidy-based logic given the involvement of external donors and their funding. They are often established in the hope of receiving development aid, and apart from the fact that a sizeable number exist merely on paper, in all cases the meagre results achieved seldom justified the scope of the funding provided by donors. Like the development organisations which are behind their creation, these groups concentrate their efforts on inputs and not outputs: the procurement of subsidies as opposed to production of any kind.

At site 3, the scope of the funding (over 20 million CFA francs in two years) provided by an American institution for the activities of a local group which involve the voluntary participation of some 20 farmers (of whom nearly one

third come from the same family) would appear to legitimise this kind of strategy, even if the improvement of agri-pastoral production far from justifies the sums invested.

Some small enterprises – including the pig production unit in another village, which also belongs to site 3 – are an exception to this virtual ‘rule’ of economic non-viability because they are managed by relatively well educated members of particular families who have returned to the village following their training. By adopting the fashionable ‘community ideology’, private ventures can sometimes obtain funds for investment at a favourable cost (i.e. often ‘for free’). Their political significance resides in the continuing attempts being made to find external help for ‘community’ projects.

This ‘rent-seeking’ attitude means that those who manage to obtain the support of a development aid organisation immediately inspire the creation of a series of similar groups. They often compete in the same micro-sector – for example, in the production of fruit juices – in the hope of convincing the same external source of funding of the viability of their respective enterprises. This tendency towards segmentation is reinforced by rivalry between the project backers, especially when they finance the work of local co-ordinators whose success is measured in terms of the number of *organisations de base* which they have promoted, although this means that they are in competition for control of the same ‘clientele’.

A blatant example was encountered at site 5, where a village pharmacy was established in 1993 with the help of a loan from the UNDP which was repaid, as planned, within two years. But the Government, with the support of the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef), thereafter decided to create another pharmacy at P, this time classified as a ‘community’ entity, despite the likelihood that the sale of medication at heavily subsidised prices will cause the rapid decline of the existing village pharmacy.

The infrastructure measures realised with acquired aid – for example, the construction of an office for an *organisation de base* – have the primary function of window dressing, and serve to justify the existence of the ‘project’ when subject to evaluation.

Thus, the ‘achievements’ of the groups at site 3 are the target of intensive ‘development tourism’. During the year 1994–5, villages L and P were visited 12 times by representatives of the African Development Fund from Washington, Bangui, and other African capitals, and on 19 other occasions the inhabitants welcomed, *inter alia*, the President of the CAR (for the inauguration of a building), the Prime Minister, a delegation of women ministers from neighbouring countries, experts from the World Bank, the UNDP, and other aid organisations, senior civil servants, national television reporters (for a documentary), and students who were writing their final theses on the groups.

All the villages have an *Association de parents d'élèves* (APE) since their creation was made obligatory by the Minister for Education. In reality, however, they are directed by the heads of local schools, who can close down their offices. Most APEs are very inactive: they practically never succeed in eliciting regular contributions from parents, despite the fact that the sums per pupil are minimal: 50–250 CFA francs.

For example, the APE at site 1, which includes the parents of approximately 170 school pupils, had only 2,500 CFA francs in its coffers. However, an APE can also function as an institution for the 'procurement of subsidies', which if successful will provide it with a budget which can significantly exceed that of the town hall, as at site 4.

A wide variety of other organisations have emerged spontaneously in the villages, including savings associations (*tontines*) and working groups of young men and women (*kelengba*), which often have fewer than 10 members. They have been created on the basis of family links or loyalties, as well as comparable financial resources and physical labour. The regular subscriptions paid generally on a weekly basis, vary from 250 to more than 1,000 CFA francs. It is interesting to note that the *tontines* have practically never been the object of suspicions and accusations concerning the misappropriation of funds, although they can exist, as we discovered at site 1, for more than ten years. There can be no doubt that the informal character of these organisations and their small membership facilitate their rapid dissolution in the case of major conflicts. Some, for example the *kwa kwe kwa* for youth at site 2, which is based on family connections, can also function as a working group that performs tasks for other farmers and pays the money received into a communal fund.

3. *The Churches*

Organised forms of traditional religions have all but disappeared in the villages surveyed, in contrast to manifestations of magic and 'witchcraft' which are far from extinct. The religious space in the village is thus almost exclusively occupied by various Christian churches. We found instances of the strong influence of a single church – more than 95 per cent of the inhabitants at site 1 are members of the *Union des frères évangéliques baptistes* (UFEB), while at least 80 per cent at site 4 are Catholics – as well as competition between different denominations. The absence of an independent African church was surprising: the majority had their spiritual headquarters in Europe or the United States, including the Catholics and the Baptists (UFEB and

Midmission), as well as the Apostolics and Neo-Apostolics. But the aforementioned 'Evangelical Church of Brethren', although introduced by American missionaries, is now virtually an autonomous institution.

The churches would appear to have little direct influence on rural political processes, although at site 1 the pastor of the dominant church is also one of the 'big men' there. He enjoys considerable authority as the eldest member of the village, and is the father of the president of the 'farmers' group'.

It seems clear that the churches in the CAR will continue to play an important rôle in the establishment of a trans-ethnic cultural and linguistic idiom, not least by the promotion of a 'biblical culture', with which a significant percentage of the population identifies, as well as Sango as the national language. The churches provide social structures which facilitate a minimal level of integration for newcomers to a village irrespective of origin: for example, those who join a choir or a scout association all help to create a practical (also trans-ethnic) solidarity, as when one of the faithful faces serious health problems. Congregations also play an essential rôle in the creation of a 'supra-ethnic' socio-political arena in most villages, and hence in the fabric of the nation, despite the growing rift between Christians and non-Christians, particularly the Muslims (among whom the M'Bororo are the most numerous) and the Pygmies.

The numerous movements and groups attached to the churches offer important scope for exercising modern organisational competencies. The religious associations are, of course, generally hierarchical in nature and hence a priori non-democratic, and the parish counsellors are not elected but nominated on the basis of their moral status. As regards the regulated forms of worship, as well as the popular troops of scouts with their paramilitary attractions, these are visible ways of social control being exercised by elders on their juniors (young men, women, and children). Membership of both churches and/or linked groups is voluntary, and the regular recording and publication of their accounts are standard practice. This may perhaps explain why the various funds managed by the churches are rarely misappropriated, in contrast to those acquired by 'farmers' groups'. Thus, the total sum held in the name of the *Union des frères évangéliques baptistes* at site 1 exceeds all other local funds, with the exception of the base organisations within the *groupement villageois*.

Sunday services fulfil certain public functions: important information relating to the village is often read out, and the amount of money collected the previous week from the congregation is displayed

on a board indicating the sums donated by the men and by the women, with the age of the contributors also taken into account. They are important sites of social life thanks to the refreshment stands which many people frequent immediately after the services. The continued presence of churches in the villages for decades certainly undermines the theories propounded by those expatriate developmental experts who claim that the capacity of farmers to manage their own affairs, as well as the growth of rural civil society, has only come about during the past few years as the result of the efforts of development aid organisations.

On some occasions, conflicts between parishioners have been resolved within the local church, for example at sites 1 and 4, in the presence of the assembled congregation, with the pastor or the parish council acting as ‘justice of the peace’ in preference to seeking the arbitration services of the village chief.

4. *The Diversity of Rural Political Institutions*

It is the village chiefs and their councils who have the power to regulate the local authority institutions, according to Ordinances Nos. 5 and 6 of 1988.⁶ In reality, however, a series of political posts and bodies can be found below the village chief (the neighbourhood chief), alongside him (the various counsellors), and above him (the group chief), and these are not mentioned in the legal texts.

Villages in the CAR are officially recognised as such when they have more than 50 inhabitants. Those we visited had from 670 to 2,100, although some in the north-west have around 200, all of whom originate from the same family. Those who live in the more densely populated villages tend to belong to several clans that were originally migratory groups. In other words, the members of today’s clans are descendants of those who arrived at the current site at a particular moment in time (or consecutively), and then went on to build their houses and clear their fields close to each other. This is the reason why each clan has a clearly defined area within the village, and why members often have adjacent fields with the clan elder fulfilling certain ritual functions.

Although neighbourhood clans are examples of primary arenas of solidarity, this does not exclude the possibility of virulent internal

⁶ Articles 2–4 of Ordinance No. 6 of 1988 state that different socio-economic groups, including women and ‘young people’, should be represented on village councils, although these do not seem to exist as such anywhere.

conflicts. It is the clan which raises the bride-price for the young men who want to marry, but they must do so outside the clan, whose membership is transmitted from father to son. This exogamy explains the existence of inter-clan kinship relations in villages where everybody is usually related to everybody else. As is only to be expected, it is the clan which organises the funerals of its members, and which meets most of the costs.

This kind of solidarity explains why the inhabitants of site 4 created several GIRs based on their division into neighbourhood clans, and why those at site 3 preferred to have their cotton weighed in their neighbourhood and not at the one and only village GIR. The results of some elections (for example, for the village chief at site 1) reflect the demographic weight of the different clans. In addition, some conflicts can be resolved within the clan without having to be brought to the village chief.

In other words, neighbourhood clans constitute a sociological reality in the villages despite appearing more as an institution of ‘civil’ than of ‘political’ society. The only hierarchical component in their structure is the rôle of the clan elder who represents them when required. In a number of cases, the CAR administration has responded by dividing villages of a certain size (which could be referred to as an ‘agglomeration’) on the basis of the neighbourhood clans, and declaring them to be ‘administrative villages’, as at sites 2, 4, and 5. In these cases, clan elders can either act as village chiefs or form a *conseil de sages*, as was done at site 1 at the instigation of the project financed by the GTZ.

The municipalities at our surveyed sites encompassed many villages (between 60 and 118) in the administrative sense, and hence a corresponding number of chiefs. The villages which form part of one and the same agglomeration generally constitute a *groupe*, and have a *chef de groupe* who is selected from among the village chiefs, even though this type of grouping does not appear, as far as the rural areas are concerned, to be covered by any legal text.⁷ However, the appointment of a ‘group chief’ indicates the need for an intermediary between the local authority and the ‘administrative village’, which is often rather small and, as we have already seen, a mere neighbourhood within an agglomeration. This phenomenon could also be interpreted as a de facto survival of the colonial canton, of which the ‘group chief’ is often the heir, as at sites 2 and 3.

⁷ Ordinance No. 6 of 1988, article 15, defines ‘groups’ as ‘an ensemble of neighbourhoods’ which only exist in ‘urban agglomerations’ as administrative units.

In other words, there is a legal void between the two ordinance-based territorial collectivities, the villages and the local authorities, in which 'group chiefs' have become established, and where the old canton is perpetuated in other semi-official forms. This seems to us to stem from a practical difficulty in everyday political life in the rural areas, whereby the local authority is perceived as too vast and distant, whilst the official village, which tends to be merely a neighbourhood, seems to be too small and insignificant.

In those villages where the mayor actually resides (although this does not automatically mean, as is clear from sites 2, 4, and 5, that the town hall is also located there), the chief is naturally less important since he can find someone else acting as his paramount village chief. Conversely, the mayor is not likely to have much practical influence beyond his place of residence.

The village chief is always accompanied by a small group of counsellors, particularly when involved in the arbitration of conflicts, but the name given to their functions varies from one site to the next, just as do the ways in which the members themselves acquire their posts, none of which have been legally defined.

At site 1, following the election of the village chief, the defeated runner-up was made his assistant and first counsellor, while the candidate who came third is called the *capita* and acts as spokesman for the chief, with responsibility for transmitting his messages and convening meetings of the villagers. In this particular case, the three persons involved each represent one of the majority clans in the area.

At site 2, when the last canton chief died in the 1980s, the chiefs of the majority clans were considered as *capitas* and together with other elders formed the *conseil des notables*, an institution which no longer exists. The chiefs of the current administrative villages were elected from within their neighbourhood clans, where the defeated candidates were automatically appointed as *capitas*. Each of them is thus a close relative of the village chief, and can normally expect to be appointed as his replacement when he dies. In this instance, the title of *capita* appears to represent both the function of assistant and messenger.

At site 3, the counsellors of the village chief include a judge, a secretary, an orderly, a female counsellor for women's issues (known as '*mama makondji*'), and sometimes a *capita*. They are chosen by the chief himself, and are not necessarily close relatives.

At site 5, the counsellors are the judge and the guard (who mainly acts as a messenger like the *capita* in other cases), and are nominated by the chief from among his close relatives.

All villages have their 'big men', who have effective political

influence mainly on the basis of their personal qualities and not their official functions.

The pastor of site 1, previously mentioned, is an obvious example, as is the former mayor at site 4 who was dismissed several years ago. His only formal duty is to act as a replacement for the local *député* (member of parliament), but he ‘stands in’ for the mayor who lives 20 km away, and also acts as the president of the informal *conseil des notables*.

Similarly at site 5, the *député* has adopted the rôle of an eminent citizen who intervenes in local political affairs. Here we also found an example of a ‘big-man-in-the-making’, aged about 30, who had left school after completing his final year, and who owes his popularity primarily to the fact that he has been selected several times for the football team of the *préfecture*. He claims to defend the young in the area against the mayor and other ‘old people’, and is assistant treasurer of a youth leisure group, *Gbaka*. He is above all an *agent de la barrière de pluie*, and since all vehicles which pass nearby must stop in front of his house, this area has transformed into an important public place (to which he has added a transit hut), thereby enabling him to generate useful social contacts. According to a rumour currently circulating, he is to be appointed as manager of the community pharmacy which the Government is creating with the help of Unicef.

Despite being defined in Ordinance No. 5 of 1988, article 4, we failed to find a ‘village council’ in any of our five sites. But the idea of a village council, or *conseil des notables*, is generally covered by the existence of very diverse informal bodies which, as will be clear from the context, were not characterised by the absence of social rules.

In the cotton-growing regions where the GIRs control the real investment resources, it would appear common to allow the village chief to participate actively in the rural interest group, for example, by nominating him as honorary president. In addition, different organisations of farmers (often called *organisations de base*) are sometimes united into ‘groups’ which are co-ordinated by development aid organisations.

At site 1, as already mentioned, a *conseil des sages* was recently created which basically consists of the elders of the main clans.

At site 2, which has a resident mayor, a group/village chief, and three other village chiefs, we encountered different definitions of the concept of ‘local authority’ or ‘municipal’ council. In some cases it seemed to refer to meetings of town hall personnel presided over by the mayor, and on other occasions to meetings devoted to different questions concerning the village involving the mayor, his first assistant, and the four chiefs, who constituted a kind of *conseil des notables*. But this is sometimes extended to include members of the GIR office if the distribution of rebates is on the agenda. Then, this assembly, which could be described as an extended *conseil des sages*, involves members whose access to this body is based on three types of political legitimacy: the mayor and his assistants are nominated by the state, the village chiefs add a touch of

democracy to their traditional dynastic legitimacy, and the members of the GIR office are nominated by the mayor on behalf of the entire village community – albeit contrary to what is stated in the official documents, since they should have been elected by the individual members of the group.

At site 3, plans were being made to establish a local authority council which in addition to the village chief, his assistant and the *capita*, as well as group members, would also include representatives of other bodies, such as the parents' association.

At site 4, the *conseil des notables*, which is convened and presided over by the deputy mayor (a 'big man'), consists of the five 'administrative' chiefs of the official villages, as well as the representative of the Muslims and the chief of the Pygmies who live in a separate neighbourhood which is not, however, an 'official' entity. However, prior to visits by important state functionaries, the mayor convenes a meeting of an extended *conseil* which also includes representatives of the churches and local associations.

The main feature of the different institutions with counselling and decision-making rôles at village level is their unofficial character as regards constitution and competencies. They include members with varying political legitimacy, who in many cases are not elected according to the same 'one man, one vote' principle. The composition of the councils can vary depending on the agenda of meetings convened: questions of investment and distribution of rebates will be decided by different members to those who will convene to discuss the establishment of a village militia. An important factor behind the extreme flexibility of these local institutions is the generally oral nature of village political culture. Nowhere did we find any trace of the *journal de village*, or 'village logbook', as required by Ordinance No. 6 of 1988, article 8. Meetings are called verbally, and their agendas and outcomes are rarely recorded in written form. And if minutes are taken, they are not available for consultation by the inhabitants – the very incarnation of hell for a jurist.

The creation at site 1 of a kind of federation of different *organisations de base* from eight villages demonstrates the facts briefly mentioned above. Although the development aid organisations define their rôle as apolitical, and limit themselves to providing technical assistance, they clearly influence the structure of the local political arenas through the numerous 'groups' which have been created at their instigation, albeit not covered in Ordinances specifically drawn up to define local authority law. However, they exercise considerable political power, due to their control over collective funds, and the official governing local authorities like the elected village chiefs – who do not control, as we have seen, any local funds – have to come to terms with them.

Thus, the aid agencies engender forms of socio-political organisations in the villages under the cover of their participatory or technocratic ideology. In the best-case scenarios, they constitute parallel structures to those defined in the municipal codes, but too often these are contravened. This is all the more true when their projects finance locally-based professional co-ordinators who play a primarily ‘political’ rôle, even if they like to consider themselves, as do the institutions which pay them, as completely apolitical.

5. *The Excluded Groups*

It was not possible to systematically identify the socio-economic factors which determine access to local political arenas in the course of our survey. For example, we were unable to establish the extent to which, and in what form, poverty impedes political participation. Superficially, age – at least in the case of men – does not appear to be particularly relevant as regards those who are members of the political élites. This does not mean, however, that conflict between the generations does not exist: it can take different forms, and does not exclude the presence of young men in posts of responsibility.

In site 2, the young ‘protesters’ formed a structure independent of the GIR, but in site 3 they stayed inside. Some may become village chiefs, or presidents of farmers’ associations, but remain subject to the rigorous control of the elders, as in site 1. The Pygmies in site 4 proved to be completely excluded from political processes in their village.

The exclusion of the Pygmies is rooted in a historical racism which is widespread and linked with the traditionally unequal social relationships between village clans and their despised clients. Few of the rural inhabitants have any understanding of the way of life of the Pygmies, and do not hesitate to exploit them, be it as labourers or as suppliers of the spoils of their hunting and gathering activities.

Others who are similarly marginalised, although for different reasons, are the semi-nomadic Fulani livestock breeders, known as the M’Bororo, who are Muslims and who often put themselves in an isolated position. Their prosperity, which is based among other things on family links with cattle marketers, makes them a popular target for the growing number of bandits on the roads, some of whom operate with the active complicity of the inhabitants of certain villages. This is a blatant expression of the absence of the state in rural areas. In some cases, however, as at site 5, the M’Bororo have their own legal/political structures in the form of *communes d’élevage*, or ‘livestock-herder

municipalities', which are, in a sense, the legacy of the *groupements de nomades* which existed under colonialism. They function parallel with the corresponding political structures of farmers, and enter into compromise strategies with the 'normal' municipalities.

Although women generally play a minor rôle in the local political arenas, this does not preclude the existence of indirect political influence. They have the same voting rights as men, and generally make use of them. They are not formally prohibited from participating in public meetings, where they can freely express themselves if they wish to do so, but claim that they are often not invited. Apart from the fact that young women tend to be too heavily occupied with their household and child-rearing tasks to hold public office, and that they are strongly inhibited against speaking in public – 'we are ashamed' they explained – their access to positions of public responsibility in the villages appears to be subject to the agreement of their husbands.

At site 1, a woman who openly expressed her interest in becoming a group treasurer withdrew her candidacy following the denial of permission by her husband. Older women are less reticent, and one at site 5 is a village chief, while another in her 40s, with no children, is the mayor's second assistant. At site 2, we were told that during the elections for the village chief someone is chosen by each clan to defend the interests of its favourite candidate. This is not necessarily the clan's eldest but the person with the most outstanding rhetorical skills, and hence may not be a man but an (elderly) woman.

Occasionally, older women are among the village chief's close counsellors, and an arbitrary rôle in the resolution of conjugal conflicts is often reserved for these *mama makondji*. We did not explore the possibility of economic independence as a factor promoting greater political involvement on the part of women.

6. *Multiplex Social Relationships and Façades of Village Unity*

Although the large number of migrant workers at site 4 has given rise to the wide variety of small shops and restaurants that give this agglomeration a rather 'urban' look, the relatively small size of most villages means that all the inhabitants are known to each other. In such 'face-to-face societies', as they have been termed, social relationships are 'multiplex' in nature. In other words, my neighbour is probably also a near relative, our fields are so close that we can help each other with our work; he is in charge of the scout group and I am a deacon in the same church; we are both members of the GIR office; we meet

at least once a week for a drink in the only bistro in the village, which is run by his sister-in-law; and it is clearly important that we maintain our relationships.

Like all human groupings, villages are equally prone to the effects of serious conflicts, and this prompts some scholars to speak of ‘back-to-back societies’. However, this side of life is not necessarily obvious to visitors because villagers often feel the need to present a façade of unity and consensus to the outside world. This can lead hasty ‘experts’ (and, sometimes, social anthropologists) to regard villages as homogeneous communities characterised by solidarity and respect for traditions that are based on a shared ‘culture’ giving all inhabitants one and the same ‘world vision’. In reality, this perception is a total fiction that has been carefully orchestrated by villagers for outsiders, albeit often defended with passion, above all *vis-à-vis* aid organisations from whom they are hoping to elicit funds.

As regards site 1, therefore, it is possible that the spectacular and slightly theatrical resolution of a long-standing group conflict in front of the researcher was linked to the fact that – despite efforts to present ourselves otherwise – our study was perceived as capable of bringing aid to the village.

Needless-to-say, given that one’s place of birth is hardly a matter of choice, it is not uncommon to meet people who cannot tolerate each other, even in villages. Thus, to illustrate by way of entirely plausible but completely fictitious examples, a first assistant may consider the village chief to be an incompetent drunkard, a wife may argue with her husband’s sister every morning at the well, you may suspect a close neighbour of having stolen your goat, and a deacon could be caught committing adultery with a parishioner.

In actual fact, the surveys carried out at the five sites revealed that the most common causes of village conflicts were the following: (i) accusations of misappropriation of funds by groups and associations, as well as (ii) differences concerning their use of collective resources; (iii) both real and alleged thefts; (iv) insults and fights; (v) outstanding debts; and (vi) family arguments, divorces, adulterous affairs. It is interesting to note the virtual absence of conflicts concerning land issues due, of course, to the very low density of population. This can be reversed when a rural area becomes peri-urban, as at site 4, and when both livestock and tillage farmers coexist, as at sites 3 and 5.

Although conflicts between individuals may seem trivial, they are particularly rich sources of information concerning the functioning of a society and its transformation. Indeed, their study allows us to

‘demystify’ the notion of the rural community living in complete harmony, which is widespread in the world of development aid, and to discover the main local rules concerning the resolution of conflicts. The existence of multiplex relationships in social groups of a limited size constitutes an effective structural barrier to the open resolution of serious differences, since the ensuing publicity runs the risk of making matters worse between two opponents who may need each other’s support in future. If open confrontation *is* pursued, the conflicting parties are faced with two options: to move to another village or, less dramatically, to a different neighbourhood. The more radical solution is adopted on occasions, and could without doubt explain the tendency towards segmentation which we observed several times in different contexts. For example, it would appear that following a murder at site 3, the members of a family left their clan and old village to establish themselves at their current location within a different ethnic group.

However, the most common reaction remains to ‘suppress’ conflicts in villages, including those that are political. This means that unresolved antagonisms can persist in a latent form between protagonists and shift in disguised form to other areas of their multiplex relationships. Thus, at site 1, a conflict in the GIR, between the president (whose father was the pastor) and a member (who was a deacon), moved to the church. In addition, continuing disagreements tend to block all forms of collective action where they occur. For example, if one association or group boycotts the activities of another, this often leads to their cessation. Thus, at site 3 a practically new manioc mill remained unused due to the rumoured misappropriation of funds.

Conflicts suppressed in public can spread underground, but their suppression can also be interpreted as a conservation measure that has been taken in order to avoid the high costs of open contradiction in a face-to-face society. This is, no doubt, behind the innumerable presumptions, suspicions, and accusations of witchcraft which we encountered in all the villages, and which seemed to rest on a rather insubstantial basis – a couched threat, an ambiguous declaration, an equivocal gesture – albeit all issued against a latent background of conflict.

What may be described as a general ‘economy of suspicion’ is fed by the existence of numerous collective funds in villages, and by ‘community’ forms of management. The dominance of the ideology of ‘participation’ in the world of development aid has resulted in an ongoing flow of cash in and out of villages, be it for the construction of

a well or a medical health centre, or perhaps to support the women's group or enable the village tailor to enrol in a training course in Bangui, or to provide funds for the religious community or the parents' association. The proceedings of user fees levied by a number of local authority institutions – for the manioc mill, the well, the dispensary, etcetera – are generally administered by a part-time salaried worker who is theoretically supervised by an ad hoc committee. The reimbursed *ristournes* from cotton sales are not paid directly to individual producers but to the GIR office. In most instances, the development aid organisations will only make payments to groups or associations.⁸

In the absence of rural banks, the different collective funds that have been accumulated in villages are stored in the form of notes and coins, often under the responsibility of a single individual. These are permanent sources of suspicion of embezzlement in an environment characterised by a general shortage of cash, not to mention the absence or inaccessibility of systematic records, which means that it is as difficult to verify the accounts as it is easy to falsify them. Apart from the fact that cases of theft are often suppressed, it is difficult to impose material sanctions on farmers and agricultural workers who are not in receipt of a fixed salary. Fines and repayments can be deducted 'at source' from the income of cotton producers, but in other cases, the losses are simply 'written off' and the treasurer is replaced. At none of the five sites were there less than several accusations of misappropriation circulating in relation to funds being held by this or that group or organisation.

However, as already indicated, there are two modes in which communal resources are managed which seem to defy this 'economy of suspicion'. The *tontines*, which exist everywhere, are widely trusted: they work on an affinity basis and are in receipt of sums which could not be described as negligible, since they range from 200 to 2,000 CFA francs per week for 5–10 persons. In addition, most villagers are favourably disposed towards the funds held by the churches, whose budgets often clearly exceed those of other associations, apart from the GIRs of cotton producers.

⁸ The standard practice for the receipt of subsidies from a development aid organisation would appear to be the mandatory possession of a bank account by the group concerned. This is only possible in a big town but would seem to make the most 'banal' form of misappropriation of funds – disappearing with the cash box – more difficult. Thus, the suspicions of embezzlement become more complex in form; for example, by spreading word that the construction of an office for the GIR was commissioned at an inflated price in order to benefit a close relative or a political ally.

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE VILLAGES AND THE STATE

At the beginning of this study we described both the state and the development aid organisations as ‘virtual’ actors within the local political arenas. As the political rôle of the latter has already been described in several contexts we now need to focus our attention on the function of the state in rural communities.

1. Absence of State Regulatory Capacities

Although the state is not entirely absent in the villages, its presence remains sporadic and essentially linked with the occasional arrival of a representative, generally as part of a tour which normally does not exceed one day. The frequency of these ‘state visits’ by a minister, *préfet*, or financial controller is limited for obvious reasons, while the *sous-préfets*, who consider themselves as part of a hierarchical authority, have no transport, telephone, or postal service which would enable them to keep in regular contact with the villages and local authorities in their area.

At site 2, the mayor of the local authority has to travel a distance of 50 km on foot if summoned by the *sous-préfet*, and this takes him between $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 days. At site 3, where the *sous-préfecture* is located in the same place as the town hall, the *sous-préfet* lends his private vehicle to the mayor to enable him to make his rounds.

For many years, going as far back as the pre-colonial era of the slave hunters, the legacy left by the state includes bad memories of its despotic or terrorist incursions, its raids on men and products, its repressive actions, collective punishments, and retaliatory actions.

Most recent examples include the arrest of the village chief at site 3 by men sent by Jean-Bédél Bokassa in 1974; the 1985 massacres in the north which were organised by the military under General André Kolingba at site 1; the punitive suspension of marketing by the cotton companies during the 1990s at site 2; and the prohibition on cultivation of cotton at site 5.

Independently of their technical objectives, there can be no doubt that an implicit function of these ‘state visits’ is to prove the very existence of the state to villagers by means of the ritual character of the public meetings which are staged on these occasions. Very often, these visits also seem to help the resolution of conflicts, with the law being laid down by representatives of the executive.

For example, at site 4, the president of the parents’ association had been dismissed, and new elections were called by the director of the local school, who had no legal authority in this matter. The management committee,

however, accepted the measure. The dismissed president told us that he intended to complain to 'the minister' on the occasion of his next visit.

In contrast to the interventions by agents of the state, those by the various development agencies are primarily *incitatives*, despite their occasional adoption of an authoritarian approach. However, the rural population has developed various ways of reacting, and indifference is by no means the least common. Despite the fact that visits by technicians of all kinds are indisputably more regular occurrences than official 'state tours', they too are hindered by a lack of transport. Some, of course, are local residents, in which case they already constitute an important element of the village arena, not least if recruited and supported by 'projects' which inspire expectations of more aid (and corresponding frustration of agents 'without projects'). Such hopes are often aroused by the arrival of salaried staff seeking detailed data about the composition and activities of households, the functional effectiveness of local groups/organisations/institutions, the expectations towards decentralisation and local democracy. But although externally-supported enquiries are almost always viewed as precursors of much-desired 'development', they can also on occasions give rise to misunderstandings and have repercussions for subsequent surveys.

Thus, to summarise, the state is very limited as to what it can do when it comes to the institutionalised regulation of the local level in rural areas. The fact that the political parties have no ongoing rôle even in the villages in which they are represented – generally the main municipal centres – is also indicative of this situation. However, the multi-party elections for the *assemblée nationale* have created new 'actors' who are also influential at the regional and sometimes local political levels.

2. *Mayors and their Administrations*

The mayors who are currently in power, and their assistants, were nominated during 1995 by the state in the form of *délégations spéciales*, and it would appear that party membership played an important rôle in this process. By the same token, some were appointed without having the majority support of the population – and they would doubtless lose their seats if elections were to be held, as stipulated by Ordinance No. 6 of 1988, articles 18–19. However, local 'big men' cannot afford to ignore a mayor who resides in their village, because that is the place where he has real influence. In any other village within his jurisdiction, he is in the same situation as other state representatives. In other words,

looked at from the village, the mayor and the town hall are institutions which are located at a considerable geographical and social distance.

At site 2, the mayor is responsible for a local authority consisting of more than 100 villages situated within a radius of almost 100 km. He lives 27 km away from the town hall and can only go there on foot, which means that several months can pass between his visits. At site 3, the inhabitants can only remember a single appearance by the mayor since his nomination, and that was on the occasion of an official visit by the President of the CAR. In an interview, it turned out that the mayor knew only a small minority of the 89 village chiefs by name, and even fewer on a personal basis. At site 4, the mayor of the local authority lives more than 50 km from the town hall, and had not been in his office for over two months.

Like elected village chiefs, the currently nominated mayors find themselves in an ambiguous situation. On the one hand, they are 'actors' within the local social and political scene, who have a reputation to maintain, relatives and allies to deal with, etcetera; and on the other hand, they are the representatives at the very bottom of the state chain, who do not necessarily dispose of the resources essential to the fulfilment of this function. Moreover, as already noted, the state is seldom able to control the activities of a mayor on a regular basis. The dangers of abuse are all the more real, especially at his place of residence where his power is most effective, because the mayor represents in some respects a doorway to national administrative and judicial institutions. Thus, complaints are registered through him, and it is his job to see that they are resolved by the competent tribunals, although the actions of the state were not always characterised by scrupulous respect for the principle of the division of powers. Unlike the majority of his subjects, the mayor does have the advantage of regular contacts with the *sous-préfecture* and official services, particularly the police, to whom he can appeal for help.

The mayor is located at the first level of state institutions which operate on the basis of bureaucratic rules, and which are required to fulfil certain administrative functions for citizens, such as, for example, the recording of civil status.⁹ According to our observations, the rules in question are not systematically observed, as demonstrated, for example, by the general failure to comply with the obligation to publicise the agenda of, or decisions taken at, municipal council

⁹ In the bigger local authorities, auxiliary offices of the town hall exist which are generally exclusively devoted to issues of civil status. The fact that this service is usually hampered by the frequent failure to register births until children reach school-going age or the first time that official papers are required, is blamed by the villagers on their long distance from these offices, and the high level of infant mortality.

meetings in accordance with Ordinance No. 6 of 1988, articles 26 and 33. The charges which the local authorities levy on certain services are sometimes paid directly by taxpayers to officials on the pretext that the required fiscal stamps are not available. The personnel employed by town halls are often underqualified when it comes to the fulfilment of required functions: the most shocking case is that of auxiliary teachers employed as 'community agents' who are either badly or completely unpaid and incompetent. By the same token, the accountants did not always seem to be suitably qualified.

3. *Local Authority Finances*

The local authorities are financed in part by subsidies authorised by the state. In addition, there is an entire series of taxes which can be levied at this level.

According to information supplied by the town hall at site 3, the local authority has income at its disposal (apart from hunting and firearms licenses) from the following taxes: on market stalls, on pools of water which appear at the edges of marshlands during the dry season, on parking for vehicles in transit, on wood for heating, on commercial patents, on the regulation of civil status, on the slaughter of animals.

It was not possible for us to substantiate whether this list is exhaustive or the extent to which these taxes have a legal basis. However, we were under the impression that considerable confusion reigns in town halls because in many cases neither the state institution which is supposed to levy/collect taxes nor the legal sums involved are clearly defined.

Take, for example, the case of firewood. The mayor of the local authority to which site 3 belongs explained that his administration levies a tax on the production of all charcoal in that area. In the villages of site 3, however, charcoal was in actual fact not subject to a tax, although one chief intends to impose such a charge in his village. In any case, when the merchandise is delivered to the capital Bangui, the tax is levied once again by the local authority administration there.

Thus, in reality the municipal budgets are largely fictional. Most projected resources and incomes only 'exist on paper'. They are non-existent for several reasons, above all since the majority of the local authorities are unable to collect any taxes outside their main centres.

At site 2, for example, neither the necessary personnel nor transport are available for levying a tax on market stalls throughout the municipal area; its collection is more or less confined to the village where the mayor lives.

This indicates yet again how the local authority's scope for action is

basically limited to the place in which the town hall is located and/or where the mayor resides. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that even when taxes are collected, despite all the obstacles, that they are actually paid into the local treasury. As already noted, the main income perceived at village level, and certainly one of the most important at municipal level, is the *droits de table*, which parties pay to the village chief or mayor when judgement is passed to resolve their conflicts. We found no trace of these payments in the local authority budgets, and it is possible that like the village chief and his assistants, the mayor also divides what has been received between himself and his assistants.

The significant gap between projected budgets and end-of-year balances can be thus explained not only in terms of the often imaginary nature of the figures provided, but also by the large-scale failure to collect taxes.

In the local authority at site 1, end-of-year receipts for 'civil status' in 1994 totalled 21,100 CFA francs, as opposed to a projected 150,000, while receipts for 'market rights' projected at 369,200 actually amounted to only 14,500 CFA francs.

In the local authority at site 2, for which the projected budget for the 1995 financial year exceeded 4 million CFA francs, a mere 8,150 francs had been collected by October, and the salaries for personnel were seven months in arrears.

The resources available to local authorities also differ significantly, and this is reflected in their very variable personnel structures. For example, the town hall at site 4 employs only three people, in contrast to a claimed (but unverified) 27 at site 3.

4. *Lack of Transparency in Political Processes*

We found it extremely difficult to obtain any reliable data about local authority receipts and expenses. When figures were finally produced, there were no accompanying explanations. Even the municipal employees whose job it is to collect taxes did not seem to know any details about the annual outcome. When pressed for information, they may have vaguely been able to recall a speech given by the *sous-préfet*, in the course of which he estimated what the size of the budget for the town hall would be that year. The mayors when questioned all enunciated empty political formulae. If even professional researchers have such difficulties in gaining reliable information, we might safely deduce that the population is not informed on the subject

of the management of the local authority, its resources, and the use of its finances.

This ignorance is demonstrative of the lack of transparency which characterises political processes in general, in both the villages and local authorities. We have already described the main aspects of this in the course of our analysis: the ignorance of the legal basis of territorial collective actions (which is as widespread at village level and among local authority personnel as among the general population); the predominantly oral nature of political decisions and actions; the multitude of informal and ad hoc institutional arrangements and negotiated local rules; the necessity of adapting to the requirements of development aid organisations; the inefficient control of the state over its representatives in the field, and hence the risk of power being abused and public funds being monopolised for private ends; the almost total absence of information provided by the media; the structural incapacity to impose sanctions when rules are broken; and the widespread practice of making all payments in cash. These factors engender a remarkable opacity which we consider to be a central characteristic of the local political process.

CONCLUSION: DEMOCRATISATION AND DECENTRALISATION?

It is important to note that the election of leaders is a common feature of life in the villages surveyed – with the notable exception of the churches. Moreover, the vast majority of the people interviewed on the subject of democracy were always positive, emphasising two particular dimensions that can be summarised as follows: ‘democracy equals free expression of opinions plus free election of political leaders’. By way of contrast, a multi-party system does not appear to play any part in this definition, no doubt because it is far from representing a major preoccupation in the rural world.

However, it is important to report a certain ambiguity in the laudatory appreciations expressed by one and all as regards the ‘free expression of opinions’. This, in effect, concerns pronouncements which describe a general civil right – the ability to say what one thinks about how the country is being run – but which actually contradict numerous local practices which tend to lead, both in village arenas and *vis-à-vis* development institutions, to the minimisation of disagreement and conflicts, and the failure to openly express negative opinions.

When it comes to the possible shape or form which ‘decentralisation’ of the political-administrative system would take, there is a general

vagueness in the villages about the meaning of the term. But then even the political élites in the country are not very clear about the nature and implications of this strategy. Some local ‘big men’ see this as leading to the possible reinforcement of the power of mayors and chiefs. However, when asked ‘What does decentralisation mean to you?’, the standard response was generally, ‘Tell me what it is about’.

At this stage, it is possible to make a number of statements with regard to decentralisation, which – at least according to official pronouncements at the time of our research – was one of the main objectives of the Central African Republic:

1. Contrary to various remarks by those in power there exists no widespread popular desire to really decentralise, either at national or local level, and there is no coherent policy which is aimed at initiating such a dynamic.

2. The decentralisation project tended during 1995 to be limited to drawing up relevant legal documents which have little sense in view of the fact that existing texts are not being implemented. It would, therefore, be unrealistic to imagine that the new texts, no matter how well formulated, will somehow automatically apply themselves.

3. Decentralisation would mean *inter alia* that the institutional rules which apply to territorial collectivities have to be modified in order that local political and administrative relations can be formally democratised. However, it would be completely unrealistic to believe that such a project would enable and promote the automatic realisation of other objectives, such as balanced socio-economic development, environmental protection, the advancement of women, and the social integration of the Pygmies. Their political exclusion will not necessarily be ended by the introduction of democratically elected municipal councils, and neither will the political marginalisation of women. And we remain unconvinced that more stringent controls by local authorities over the natural resources situated in their territories – for example, the equatorial forests – would necessarily lead to a more environment-friendly use of these assets. Needless-to-say, we believe that these objectives are very important. However, they cannot be attained simply by modifying legal texts, or by political-administrative reforms, but would require the putting in place of specific projects.

4. It is important to separate the concepts of ‘regionalisation’ and ‘decentralisation’ which are amalgamated in government declarations that tend to favour the creation of regions over decentralisation to the local level. Our investigations focused on local authorities and village communities, which appear to have been largely neglected despite the

feasibility of achieving 'decentralisation' at these levels independently of the creation of regions.

Finally, a more general remark which we feel should be emphasised. Decentralisation policies are beginning to multiply in Africa because of the growing realisation that the state needs to be reorganised, as well as the necessity of responding to the pressures being exerted by financial donors. The process has long since been under way in several parts of the continent. It is essential in our opinion that the implementation of these policies be subject to socio-anthropological analysis. All monitoring of decentralisation in Africa ought to include a comparative assessment of its impact on different local political configurations.

From this point of view, decentralisation involves not only a redefinition of the relations between central and local powers, but also raises the question of the local presence of a state which in many African countries is currently remarkable in its absence.