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Inequalities, individual and collective capabilities in an african rural society : the case of coastal Guinea

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Many rural societies in Africa are marked by strong inequalities between individuals or groups. These inequalities are not limited to the economical sphere but also touch the political, social and even religious one, revealing strong differences of capabilities. Income gaps or even living condition contrasts are more easily measured, but the analysis of access to political, social or religious positions shows as well the influence of social status. Groups, lineages, families are unequal, and this conditions the entitlements and social opportunities available to individuals. Whereas in developed countries, institutions are becoming more complex as their functioning rules have gotten depersonalized, in rural societies of Africa, the capabilities of individuals stay widely determined by the position in their group, and the rules their group has negotiated, or imposed, in a specific place.

In the capability approach, the importance of groups has been taken into account to some extent although a lot less than individual capabilities. Nevertheless, Stewart (2005) argues that they are a critically important category, and not only for enlarging individual capabilities. Beyond the fact that affiliation to a group shapes preferences and behaviors, gives a sense of belonging, thus enhancing well being, we are interested here in the instrumental way groups affect individual well-being or capabilities. This can shape into solidarity or mutual aid networks, but also the capability of winning or maintaining access rights.

In the hierarchical societies which are common in rural Africa, it is the collective capability of the group which will be conveyed to individuals: access to land and other natural resources, access to local political, social or religious positions. Some people are poor, but with their collective capabilities, too weak to enable them to modify a system which functions to their detriment.

We propose to highlight this instrumental link between individual capabilities and collective capabilities through a field research in rural coastal Guinea. After showing the characteristics of poverty in the region, we will describe the patrimonial system which encompasses many economic and social aspects of rural life and tends to reproduce the inequalities. Overcoming it is difficult as it supposes the emergence of counter powers in the villages.

I. The importance of the context : general poverty and local inequalities

A. Rural societies in maritime Guinea

Guinea is one of the poorest countries in the world. It benefits from the HIPC initiative, and in 2007 was ranked 160th according to the human development index. Maritime Guinea, in spite of important assets which let the colonial administration think it could become the granary for the whole West Africa, never reached these expectancies. The many agricultural projects which followed each other never succeeded even in covering the needs of the capital, Conakry.

Nevertheless agriculture is the main activity; it is centered on rice, the base of the diet. But neither rain cultivation nor irrigation spares the households from a difficult lean period when rice is lacking. That is the reason why people look for other sources of income. Households often have a second or third activity: fishing in the rivers or out at sea, salt making, or the many crafts which are part of a multiactivity system allowing the households to limit and control uncertainty

A third point deserves being mentioned here. The population density stays at a modest level. With the exception of the capital, Conakry, the region represents only 20% of the population of the whole country. In this coastal plain where mangroves alternates with lowly hills, the extraction from the land is not very important outside of the influence area of Conakry and to a lesser degree from Khamsar. Timber from the mangrove, charcoal, and food for the cities: mostly rice, palm oil, ground nut, cassava and dried fish, and only part of the year since many villages are difficult to reach during the rainy season, landlocked or isolated by the seasonal flood.

It is in this context that the Maritime Guinea Observatory has been set¹. This pluridisciplinary action research project was designed to produce methods and tools for the improvement of local resource management.

In this program, the Poverty section was designed to study different forms of poverty, using the capability approach. There were two reasons for this choice, both of them central to the capability approach. First, it was necessary to take into account forms of deprivation which are often neglected and to measure basic accomplished functionings related to nutrition, health and education. Second, since poverty should be evaluated according to the local context, learning how the local population describes a rich or a poor person is necessary in order to describe the functionings they value. Part of the information was collected at the household level : details on this survey is given in table 2.

B. Individual forms of inequality

(1) Monetary approaches of income

In rural areas, the estimation of household income is a complex operation. This income, presented in monetary equivalent consists of two parts. The first part, a monetary one, includes the sales, the salaries, the income from non agricultural activities, the money

¹ The Observatoire de la Guinée Maritime (OGM) was a project conducted in partnership by the University Michel de Montaigne of Bordeaux III and the AFVP for the Guinean Ministry of Planning and financed by the FFEM and the AFD. It was directed by Pr. G. Rossi of the University of Bordeaux.

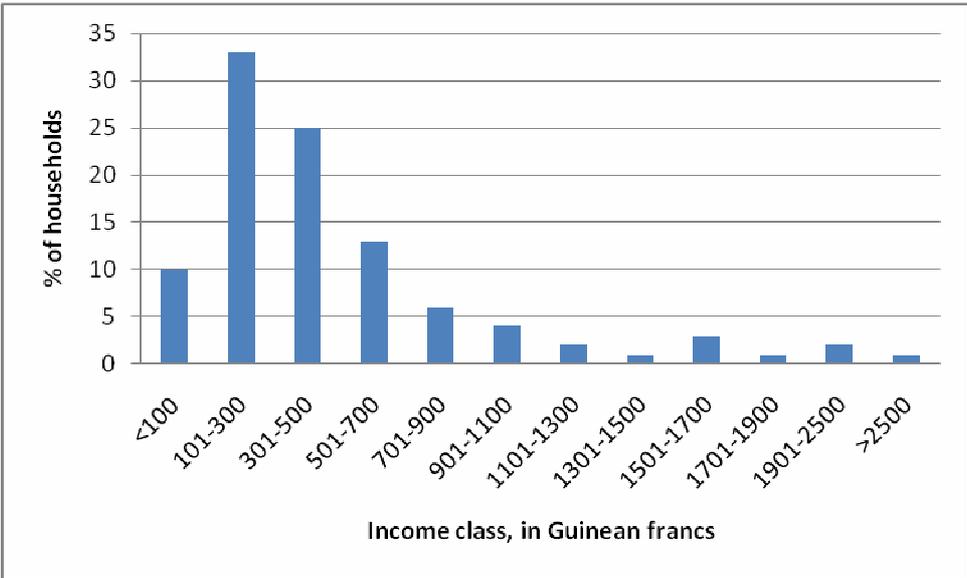
The team in charge of the poverty section was composed of I.Droy, J-L Dubois, D. Leyle et A. Soumah ; for the rural systems section J.E. Bidou, M. Beuriot et D. Savane and for the anthropology section, P. Geslin, M. Fribaut et A. Bangoura, and later E. Fauroux et P. Rey.

gifts. The non monetary part, which is important here includes autoconsommation estimated at the market value. The income is calculated by consumption unit, using the Oxford scale, which allows a weight according to the size and the make-up of the family.

Even when one includes the autoconsommation, the median value is very low: 403 300 FG² per consumption unit and per year (about 100 euros). Although, there are strong differences between the villages where the survey has taken place.

The dispersion of the values is important, with, as shown in fig 1, a strong incidence of very low income and a large spread of higher incomes which concern few households.

Fig. 1 - Distribution of annual income per U.C. in Mankountan



(2) Food insecurity

Living conditions are difficult in this region, and if recent times famines famines have been unknown, food restrictions are nevertheless common.

Nutrition during the lean period is a good criterium of the households standard of living. This is a difficult yearly period when the stock of staples from the farm production ends and the family has to wait for the next crop. In addition, it is during this season (the rainy season) that the work on the farm is the most intense. More over, in Maritime Guinea, the huge amount of rain disrupts traffic and hinders or totally blocks the markets supply. Prices go up accordingly.

Most of the households fear the lean period. For them, it means food reduction both in quantity and in quality.

While over 9 households out of 10 get 3 meals a day, during the lean period, it can drop to one meal a day for adults. The proportion of households which reduce the number of meals varies between 50% and 80% depending on the villages. In most of the cases it is the noon meal which is suppressed. People go out to till the fields and come back at the end of the day.

Rice is the food staple, preferred to cassava, fonio or sweet potato. But, its part is reduced during the lean period; 10% of the households no longer eat rice and go through shortages which can last several weeks.

² In June 2004, 1 euro=2400 Guinean Franc. One year later (mid 2005), 1 euro=4260 Guinean Franc, in mid 2006, during the last survey 1 euro=5500 FG.

Children are the first ones to undergo this change of diet. When rice becomes rare, it is reserved for the adults. The proportion of households which separate adult's and children's meals varies between 20% and 40% depending on the villages.

C. The influence of local context

Income or food insecurity affect the households specifically, setting up individual inequalities. Some other aspect of poverty depend more on services supply and have a larger effect, sometimes spread to a whole village.

(1) Health and health care

Surveys on perception of poverty show how much disease is feared and can make a household topple over into poverty either through the costs of health care, or by the loss of a worker at a crucial time in the agricultural calendar

The proportion of households having suffered a death during the last 12 months is very important, and most of the deceased are infants or young children. Even if the exact age stays uncertain, those numbers fit with the still heavy statistics of infant mortality in the region.

Table 1: mortality recorded in the households

	Brika	Bigori	Madia	Kanof-Kankouf-	Kankayani	Dobali	Kambilam	Boffa insulaire	Boffa continental
% f households having at least one death	32,3	20,0	20,0	28,1	25,0	16,8	18,5	13,9	23,5
Children under one year	69,7	81,0	82,0	74,2	77,8	83,2	86,4	86,1	77,5
Children between 1-5 years	12,1	2,0	2,0	2,2	6,9	6,9	4,9	4,0	3,9

OGM, 2004

Infant vaccination is now a widespread practice, even in landlocked places. The lowest score, in a remote area, is still an almost reassuring 84%. Generally speaking, the most dangerous diseases are not the childhood diseases but the ones linked to poor sanitary conditions (access to drinking water especially) and malaria. The problem being compounded by a deficient access to health care.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy has set much emphasis on access to basic services, particularly education and health. Undeniably there is a wide choice of traditional practitioners many of them efficient and recognized, but modern services are few and far between. In Dobali for example, one of the village of the survey, the mean distance to the nearest health care unit is 39 km, and only by canoe during the rainy season

(2) Access to school : a positive dynamic

In spite of results slightly inferior than national average, boys and especially girls attendance to school is increasing quickly.

Characteristically, household poverty is not really an obstacle to schooling, at least in elementary school. The most decisive factor is the education supply. In rural areas where children go to school on foot, a long distance is an important handicap, so spatial inequality between villages stays important.

The quality of education supply is problematic (number of pupils per class, condition of classrooms, teachers degrees...) for mastering the basic skill. In addition there is no vocational schooling structures able to make a link between elementary school and apprenticeship. The dynamics generated by an increase of school attendance is not extended to other levels necessary to build the human capital of persons.

This mixing of local inequalities and of lack of structures gives a specific shape to poverty in rural maritime Guinea. Under those conditions, any well-being non-monetary indicator, compounding achievements in education, nutrition and health, is bound to show less inequality than a monetary indicator based on the sole income. There are two reasons for this.

The first one is the weak monetarisation of the area. Little money flows. Many craft activities are still embedded in an economy of reciprocal gifts. Fishing, and to a lesser degree, ground nut cultivation are the main activities generating monetary income. So, its unequal distribution is mainly the result of the repartition of those two activities.

The second one is linked to the nature of the non-monetary indicator itself. Taking into account aspects like education or health, it depends less on the wealth of the household and more on the accessibility of schools or health care units. So, while showing strong differences between villages it tends to soften the disparities between households.

In this way, we may present the problem of collective capabilities. How can a community set up, manage a new school, a health care unit, or a road? Isn't talking about a community for a village an extreme simplification, showing a population sharing common interests, while a real village is crossed by conflicts formed by groups who are in competition for power and resources?

II. The reproduction of inequalities : power and resources

Populations of Maritime Guinea are made of different groups whose demographic size varies a lot. Their cultural similarities have been recognized early and some authors prefer to talk about social groups rather than ethnic groups, which is too fixed a notion for describing those groups³ (Bouju, 1999). Their cultural features have changed a lot during last centuries while they were absorbing very diverse migrant groups. The Guinean coast has harboured the slave trade which is responsible for both the quick mixing of the groups and their differentiation. Each of them has its language, sometimes several, has moved a lot in the region, evolving at the contact of the other groups. This kind of history emphasizes some differences but also gives them common social forms.

A. Inequality of persons, inequality of lineages

All persons are not born equal in the traditional society. Gender inequalities make a woman a minor in those patrilinear societies, so in this section we will speak of men only. Inequalities of social status remain alive and well in rural areas. Generally, the rights a man can enjoy, and therefore his access to resources depend on his position in the family, lineage, and village hierarchy.

³ Historians distinguish three migration waves. An old one, begun as soon as the XVth century and which lasted long ; it concerns the Baga, divided in sub-groups, the Landouma and the Nalou. A second wave, with the Soussou, went down the Fouta Djallon in the XVIth century. Soussou belong to the mande culture ; they form the most important group and they tend to assimilate the other groups. The XIXth century sees other groups coming ; the Peul, not many, but who briefly controlled part of the coast and especially the Diakhanke, another mande group, who came to the coast as muslim preachers and warriors.

In the families which have kept their patriarchal form almost everywhere in the region, inequalities of status exist between the generation of the fathers and the ones of the sons, and among them between the first born and the others. Those extended families often gather three or four generations in a single place, a compound. The elder, head of the compound, extends his authority over his children, however married, his nephews, and to a certain extent over his younger brothers. He disposes of access rights and control over the land resources, organizes the familial work on the collective fields. He manages his own possessions, but also those of the extended family. The other members of the compound who are under his authority are social cadets, both inside and outside of the family and the elder is often the only one to have the right to participate in the public life of the village. So, without generally being a familial despot, he benefits from a coercive power over the members of his compound.

The family is inserted in lineages more or less important in the hierarchy of the village. A man's place in the community depends on his lineage. The most important of them is the one of founder of the village. In this region where most of the villages were founded one or two centuries ago, the foundation narratives are the basis of the social organisation in the village and they legitimate the superiority of the founder's lineage. This is rather common in West Africa. The founder has cast an alliance with the *genius loci* and has become mediator between the human community and the spirits of nature. This power is passed on to the elder of the descendant, who gets eminent rights on the land of the village. He is the « master of the land », title which substance varies a lot according to the areas but here gives strong prerogatives.

Over time, the founders lineage let migrants settle, granting them customary rights on parts of the land, thus, they became indebted to them. Every lineage, with the founder's agreement, may accept foreigners on their own domain, and they become indebted both to them and to the elder of the founder's lineage. So is constructed a chain of dependency links from the elder of the founder's lineage to the most recently settled foreigners.

Those are collective dependency links since they tie lineages or fractions of lineages one to the other. In the hierarchical societies which are common in rural Africa, it is the collective capability of the group which will be conveyed to individuals: access to land and other natural resources, access to participation to the political life of the village and to collective decisions⁴.

So, it is necessary to assess the benefits acquired through belonging to a lineage and how these differences of status shape the management of the whole village.

B. Méthodology and presentation of the survey

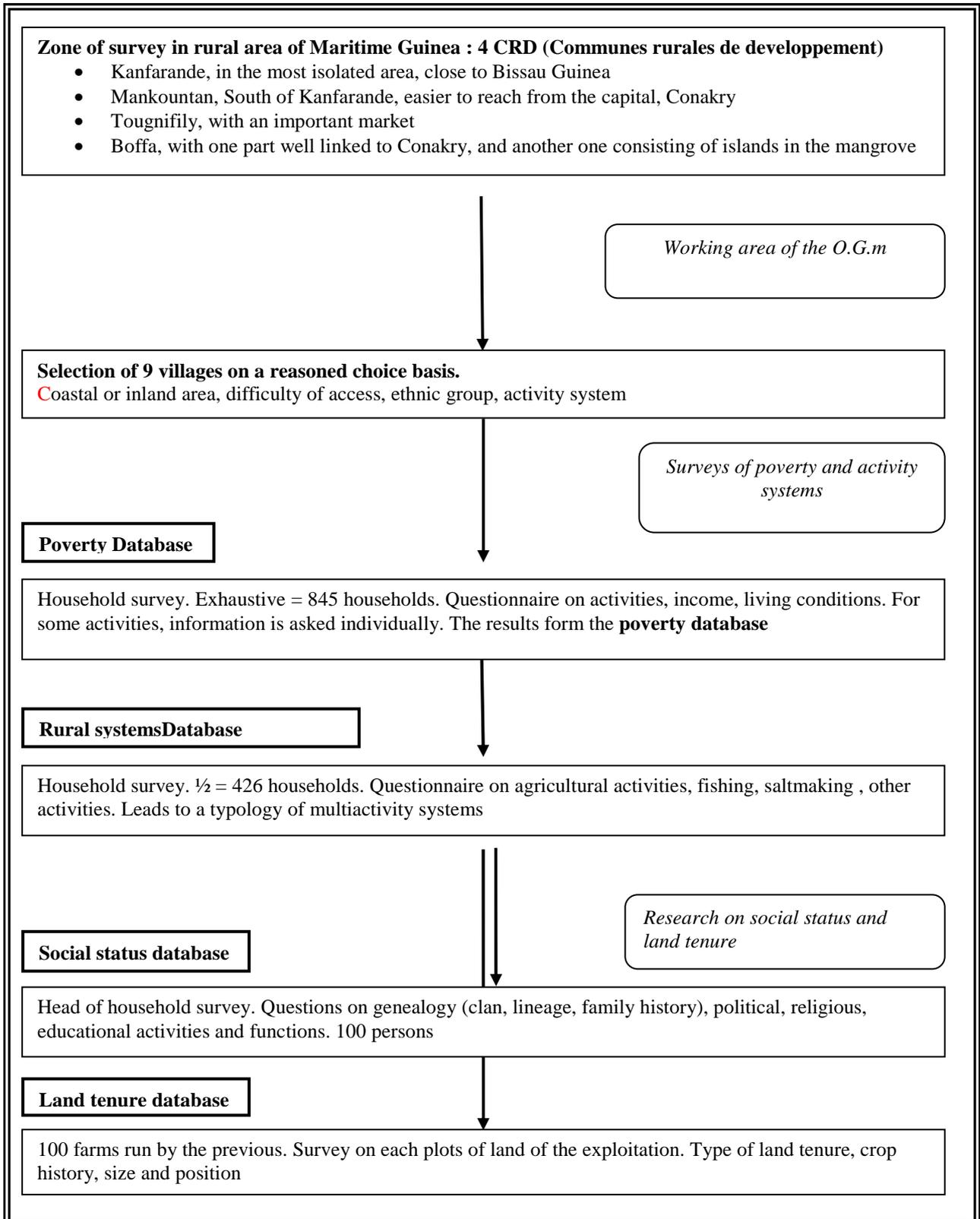
A survey has been conducted on a sample of 850 households, in eight different localities chosen according to a reasoned choice through agro-ecological and socio-economical criteria (inland or coastal, densely populated or not etc.) taking into account various geographical situations and ethnic groups. It includes several units allowing the measure of income, of assets (land, equipment, monetary savings), the evaluation of conditions of living (food security, access to education or to health care). Individual and household questionnaire allow the measure of achieved functionings and, reaching a first level of collective capability, the household one.

A second survey on social status has been conducted on household heads. The objective was to know their lineage, their position in the lineage, the political, social position

⁴ La place dans une famille, dans un lignage et de celui-ci dans un village n est pas la seule source d inegalite. Les inegalites de genre sont evidentes bien que leur autonomie, par rapport à leur mari, au chef de concession et leur place dans le village diffère sensiblement selon les groupes ethniques. Il existe également des castes, plus ou moins clairement individualisées suivant les groupes ethniques de la région et qui sont aussi source d inegalites (Bidou-Droy, 2007)

they were occupying in the formal sphere (decentralized administration for example) or traditional one (healer, sage etc.). This survey aims at showing how individuals, taking advantage of their belonging to important lineages or social groups, get privileged positions in the local society, illustrating the collective capability of the group to control the local politics, and the distribution of resources (land, wood, fishing rights, but also the aid of foreign projects). This may not be a positive capability since it plays against the other groups, accentuating deprivation, sometimes even excluding them from access to resources or to positions whichever the personal characteristics or potentialities of the individuals.

Table 2 : Survey organisation and sampling



Crossing the two surveys will allow us to link social status and income, assets and achieved functionings at the household and the individual level.

C. Results

1) *The groups*

The heads of households were gathered in five groups, according to their social status

- The elders of the founder's lineages. They are not many since, by definition there is just one per village. 11 of them went into the sample.
- The elders of the received lineages. They have authority on their own lineage, but they are dependant of the elder of the founder's lineage. Their place in the village hierarchy depends on the time their ancestors arrived, on their number, on the number of people their ancestors have received on their domain. If, for instance they descend from the founder's family or mates, they get a respectable place
- The cadets of the founder's lineage. This is an heterogeneous category as the separation of their line of descent may be old or new. The most ancient lines are superior, as their number.
- The cadets of the received lineages. Clearly they are the largest group. Both under the authority of the elder of their lineage and under the one of the founder's lineage, they are far from the places where decisions are made.
- We have added a last category ; the heads of household still living in their father's compound. They are still young, usually.

2) *Women, granaries...*

Depending on the site of the villages, the farms may be situated either on the slopes, where the basic practise is slash and burn cultivation, or in the mangrove, that the peasants have converted into paddy fields using the annual flood. Only in few places farms extend both on the slopes and in the mangrove.

Considering tenure, the basic difference between the two land uses is that in the mangrove, the paddy fields are owned by individuals⁵ who are able to transmit them to their sons by inheritance while on the slopes there are few plots which are under individual tenure. Every year, big fields are open and divided into parcels suitable for family needs. The land rights are collective and managed by the elder of the lineage or even the elder of the founder's lineage if such is the the custom.

Table 3 shows the cultivated surfaces, by type of culture and by social status of the farmer. If the sample shows that the elders of the founders' lineages enjoy some advantage for the paddy fields in the mangrove farms and the slash and burn fields elsewhere, this advantage remains slight. The difference is significant only for the plantations⁶.

It could be surprising that the elders do not draw a bigger advantage of their land rights in terms of production. Indeed, the statistics show only the cultivated surface, and in a region where the bulk of the production is meant to cover the household consumption, only a few farmers aim at getting some surplus for trade. So the cultivated surface is mostly in proportion with the size of the family.

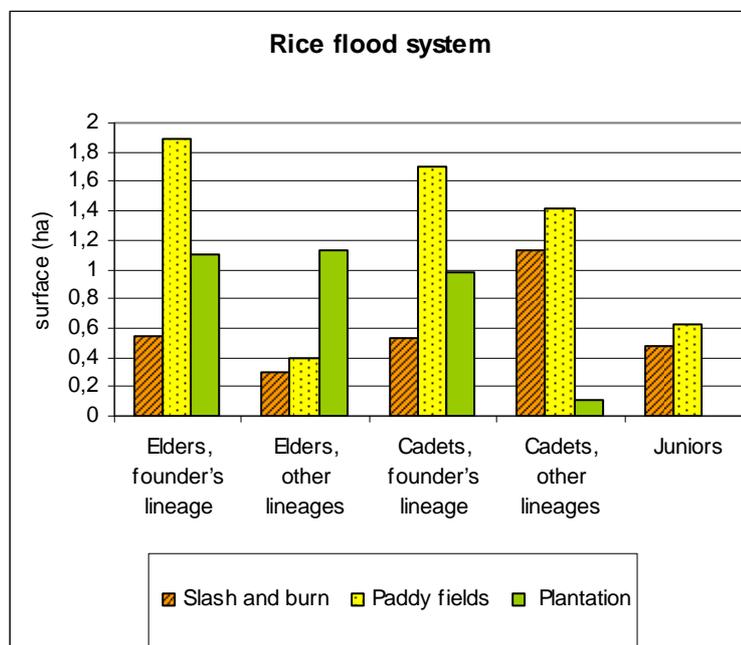
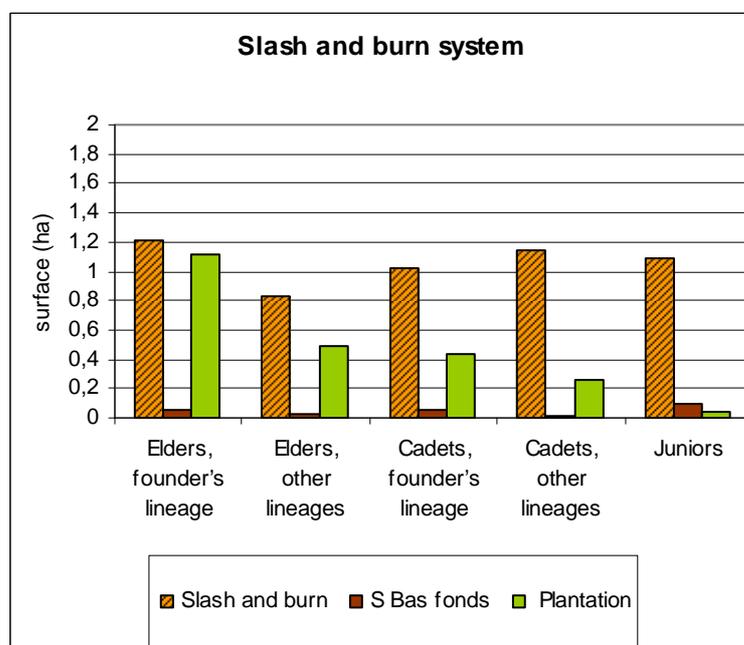
⁵ Which is a rather recent evolution; they were still collective about 1940.

⁶ Usually for cashew nut in the north of the area, palm oil in the south. There are also little orchards for citrus, mangoes and kola nuts close to the compounds.

Table 3 : cultivated surfaces, by type of culture and social status

	S Cultures seches	S Parcelles riz inondee	S Plantation	S Bas fonds	S jardins de case
En système de riziculture inondee					
Elders, founder's lineage	5 409	18 965	10 976	0	0
Elders, other lineages	3 048	3 904	11 239	0	0
Cadets, founder's lineage	5 342	16 989	9 838	40	0
Cadets, other lineages	11 301	14 161	1 105	206	6
Juniors	4 767	6 281	0	0	0
En système culture seche					
Elders, founder's lineage	12 085	0	11 123	576	0
Elders, other lineages	8359	0	4 943	256	0
Cadets, founder's lineage	10 218	0	4 317	496	71
Cadets, other lineages	11 489	0	2 537	195	0
Juniors	10 932	0	396	970	0

Source : OGM, 2006.



Nevertheless, there are in some districts a minority of such farms.

In pluvial culture, they are well represented in the norther districts, where they amount to ¼ of the farms. They are run by large households who, in addition to their

important workforce, also use worker groups⁷ and day laborers. They secure their food needs with a few paddy fields in the mangrove or on the slopes and grow ground nut for trade, like in Casamance or Guinea Bissau. The sales provide them substantial income⁸.

In the mangrove districts, one can find some larger farms dedicated to rice growing which similarly are run by large families. But they are few : less than 10% of the farms sell rice on a regular basis.

However little, the elders construct their economical advantage through the mobilisation of work force, either their own household's through polygamy, or using work groups, diverse and important in this region.

The role of polygamy in capitalisation among african families has been highlighted long ago⁹. In Maritime Guinea, it is easily displayed through the use of feminine labour in ground nut cultivation, the making of palm oil, smoking fish or other activities. The elders use more than any other the opportunity brought by polygamy.

Tableau 4 : number of adults in the household, by social status

	<i>number of adults</i>
Elders, founder's lineage	3.56
Elders, other lineages	3.09
Cadets, founder's lineage	3.43
Cadets, other lineages	3.19
Recently arrived	2.80
Juniors	2.58

The role of work groups is as important in the farm management since it allows to produce more than is required to cover the household needs. But access to work groups shows the social and economical inequalities. Between ¼ and ½ of the farmers never use work groups. On the contrary, there is just a minority of big users of work groups : 10% of the population employs more than 100 days of work.

3) Some outcomes of the land control

The management by the elders of their lineage's land has at least two effects, one economical and another one social.

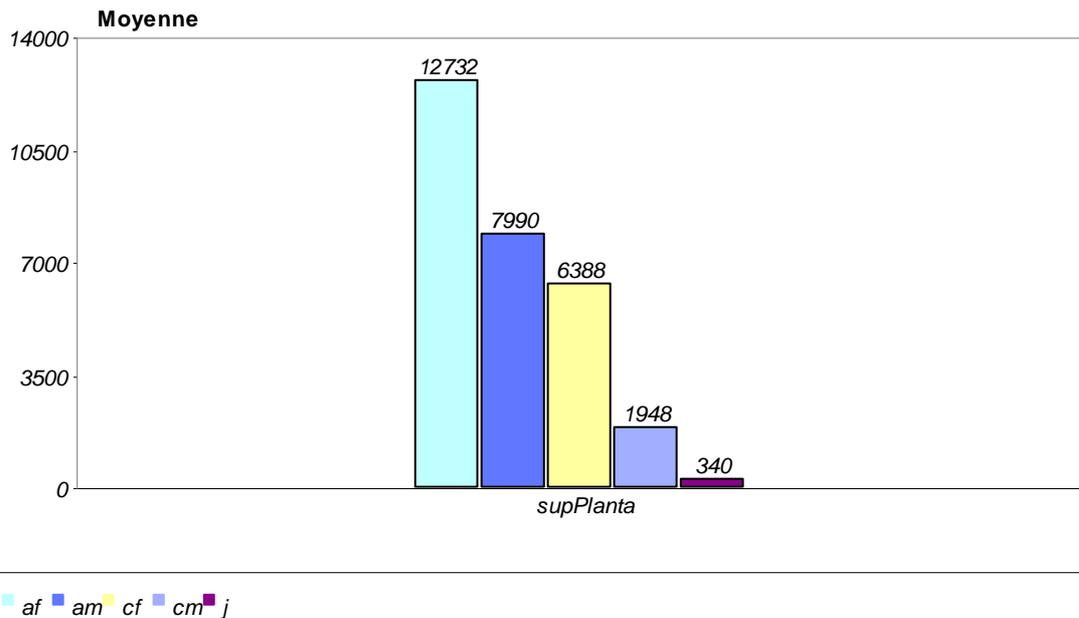
As administrators, they are able to lend some land, to give parts of the collective domain for someone to clear. They also are able to turn collective rights into individual ones. As often in Africa, one of the easiest ways to do it is to plant trees. They may use this possibility generously to their own profit. In Maritime Guinea, the trees are mostly cashew nut trees and oil palms trees. In addition to the profit those plantation may bring, they are mainly used to mark the land : they have proliferated wherever their position is strategic, close to the roads, in the periphery of towns where the value of the land increases

Fig. 2 : Surface of plantations, by social status (m²)

⁷ Worker groups are very diverse, in size (from a few persons up to one hundred), in composition (men, women, young), and in goals (from honoring parents to earning money). In addition to ploughing the fields or other hard work, they are supposed to manifest some sort of togetherness.

⁸ Sales are important for ground nut, especially in the northern districts, Kambilam, Dobali, Kankayani or more to the South in Madya. They were in th order of 400 000 FG, in 2005 (OGM, 2006).

⁹ Meillassoux, for example



There is also a social outcome from the management of the land by the elder. In slash and burn cultivation, the plots the families receive every year are given by the elder. Although it belongs to his responsibility (and to his well understood interest) that every man of his lineage be happy with the outcome, every year this prerogative reminds them that he has ways to control them.

4) Norms and conflicts

West African villages have been described as places of elementary totalitarianism¹⁰, where the domination of chieftains or elders of influential lineages is exercised through the control of land, under the wrap of supernatural powers, which always helps individuals to accept authority. If mutual assistance exists and gives people some security the counterpart is a rather harsh compliance to collective rules.

In the villages, conflicts which could not be directly settled by the heads of the concerned families are brought in front of the Elders. This traditional institution gathers the elders of the major lineages of the village ; other people may be invited for a specific case but, after having heard everybody, the elder of the founder's lineage will come to a decision alone. This is rather common in those patriarchal societies, the local variations rest on the number of members of the counsel or the weight of the founder's lineage.

The course of action is characteristic. The most important is to preserve the « harmony » of the village. In those conditions, the social cadet cannot be right against his elder. Social position is as important as truth and must be respected. So the settlement is reached through a negotiation that the stake holders manage while considering each other's strength. One can resort to other authorities (administrative, judicial or even elders of a superior level) although this move is often discouraged.

This conflict settlement may seem efficient if not impartial. It has been qualified of a « consensual inequity » (Rey, 2007), and if the inequity is apparent, the consensus supposes a voluntary agreement, a common position, freely agreed upon. When failing to agree results in social desaffiliation, the compliance is there but the freedom may be hard to find. The resentments stay, which poison the village life and eventually flare up.

¹⁰ DUVAL M. *Un totalitarisme sans Etat*. L'Harmattan, Paris, 1986, 180 p.

5) A neo-patrimonial management case : the salt pans of Thia

Thia Meyenkhouré, on the Rio Pongo, is an old slave trading harbour and the seat of the small kingdom of the Katty. Their descendants keep the exclusive control of the traditional institutions of the village, the modern administration like the district and the local development projects. At the end of the nineties, a co-op of salt producers was created with the help of Charente Maritime Cooperation a French organisation. A member of the family was elected president of the co-op.

It worked well until the French organisation stepped out, letting the locals take the direction. The rest of the story is rather classical: misappropriation of funds by the president, audit. But in reverse of what happened in other co-ops, in Thia the members refused to dismiss the president. The situation was locked, the result has been the death of the cooperative and the departure of the projects. The weight of the local power structure is such that any questioning is not yet possible

This is a very classic narrative, and characteristic of the type of the style of management which has been called « neo-patrimonial » (Medard 1982, Bayart 1989)

III. Which empowerment?

A. An unlikely local democracy

Decentralisation in Africa has often been imposed by international organisations, often within structural adjustment policies. Two results were expected: reduce the weight of the State and improve the participation of the population to the political life, at least at the local level. In Guinea, this process began in 1985, after the death of Sekou Toure. It resulted in the creation of the Communautés Rurales de Développement (CRD) from 1985 to 1992. But most of the times, the african governments have resisted as much as possible in front of the international organisations. This resistance has taken a few recurrent forms.

A deconcentrated administration has been maintained, parallel to the decentralised one. The creation of decentralised levels has been contained to intermediary levels like the “commune” or in Guinea CRD. The regional level, where a government may fear secessionist attempts, or the micro-local one, where the population can be efficiently controlled have usually stayed under the control of the deconcentrated administration (Bidou et al., 2007). In Guinea, the sous-prefecture which is the centralised equivalent of the decentralised CRD remains under the direct authority of a préfet appointed by the head of government. At the local level, the district and, under it, the sector are under the authority of the sous-prefet.

In addition, the central administration has been slowing down the endowment of the decentralised communities with the financial means necessary to their action. In Guinea, although all the CRD had been established by 1992, most of them didn't get a tangible budget before 2004, when an amendment of the law, handed them the bulk of the taxes they had so far been collecting for the state.

At the level of the villages or groups of villages the modern institutions consist of a chief and his council. Elected by his fellow villagers, appointed by the sous préfet, or chosen by the elders, the chief of the sector cannot remain in his position if the elders of his village disagree. Besides, the councils of sectors and to a lesser degree of districts are populated by members of the strong lineages, often young men who sometimes had the opportunity to go to school, cadets of the strong lineages put there by their elders.

The traditional legitimacy of the elders has been opposed to the modern legitimacy of representational or participative democracy. But locally, the problem cannot be set in these terms. The traditional form extends up to the district level without counterparts and little control. The authority of the state is effective down to the level of the sous prefecture. What can be expected from the CRD, squeezed between the deconcentrated authorities and the traditional power? The main problem is not the choice between centralisation or decentralisation but the way to improve the local governance.

B. Letting be ?

One of the strongest arguments considering local societies as communities with their own rules where it is useless and even counterproductive to get involved, is that the State doesn't have the means to intervene. The examples are many and range from justice to environmental protection and it is easy to describe the shortcomings of the guinean administration. Likewise, many development projects which intervene at a local level also have tried to manipulate the rural societies, often ending in failure.

Letting the local communities organise themselves is also based on the belief that there are traditional adjustments and they are in working order. The conventional wisdom is that decision making is consensual and that the council of elders come to an unanimity of opinion about decisions relative to their communities. As the reproductibility of the system depends on good environmental management, the elders will be responsible enough to extract and distribute resources up to a sustainable limit. And that is roughly what they have done in Maritime Guinea. Indeed, these traditional adjustments are inequitable. But insofar as the domination remains bearable, the community common good stays protected (Rey, 2007).

For these two reasons, in a number of African countries, administrative reforms lean on local authorities in order to progressively integrate them into the institutional system. But should they be integrated without, in the slightest, questioning of the local balance of powers ?

Traditional patrimonialism, as it is, has a decent side made up of social capital, where the set of norms and personal relations secure social cohesion. On another side they establish a certain type of domination. Under patrimonialism, all power relation, political as well as economic or administrative are personal relations. There is no differentiation between the private and the public spheres.

The State with its administration, however disabled, the development projects have brought another logic, the legal rational one. In the villages, the two spheres permeate each other : the elders control the councils of sectors, districts, sometimes CRD. Depending on the context, informal politics invade formal institutions and this particular mix becomes institutionalised (Bratton and van de Walde, 1997).

But the changes bring about insecurity, and the risk is to only support the individuals close to the local centers of power, and to develop approaches which will accentuate the marginalisation of part of the population.

Probably because in this region of Maritime Guinea density of population is still low, monetary flows sparse, and the capital rather far, these risks are still limited. But in other circumstances when land becomes rare, or the economic value of some resources (as wood) increases, the collusion between traditional and modern elites becomes more obvious. This is one of the risks of administrative decentralization when it is monopolized by local elites. It reinforces the neopatrimonial management with its display of clientelism and corruption

Overcoming it is difficult as it supposes the emergence of counter powers in the villages.

C. A Malian counter-example

These cases are still rarely be found ; such as this example, in the neighbouring country of Mali, where the author describes the opposition between this neo-patrimonial management which seems so prevailing and a form of participative development. He describes a bitter conflict between the newly elected mayor of the commune, a man of caste, and his political opponents belonging to the noble families and leaning on their lineage power. The question is not about an opposition between traditional and modern : the traditional elite has its share of modern, diploma holders, members of the diaspora who went to the malian capital and even to Europe. What is at stake is the way of settling conflicts : neo-patrimonial or legalist and of course the supremacy of distinctive social groups : village elite or development militants.

Curiously, the electoral victory goes to the caste man. In the same time, it breaks this form of domination inherited from the french colonial times, when the traditional power had been reorganised but reinforced according to modern principles of authority and legality. The passage between the two registers had opened the way to clientelism which generates corruption (Levy 2005).

Follows a description, almost too beautiful, of a truly efficient participative development. Of course one wonders if this is an outstanding case or an example of the political changes going on in Mali.

Comparisons are difficult : land locked villages in Maritime Guinea versus the cotton belt in Mali, where most farmers have learned the virtues of associative practises in the producers groups set for more than thirty years by the cotton company, the CMDT. To enhance the organisation of the producers, the CMDT provided alphabetization classes for adults and further training. Many problems remain, and this is not a general solution, and perhaps not even for the malian cotton belt but at least there has been progress in terms of empowerment.

Conclusion

Northern Maritime Guinea shows a peculiar form of poverty. Inadequate sanitary standards result in high mortality, food insecurity (although usually not very severe), very low monetary income, where few people may be considered rich, important illiteracy where differences are linked to the location rather from the inequalities within the village. This would give an image of generalized poverty. On a second look, inequalities are very strong, but they belong in the realm of status, power, access to resources, whether implemented or not, and control of the population. Inequalities are set in the hierarchy of the society and bound to last and this raises doubts about eventual actions.

To consider village societies as black boxes, may be efficient. If a group is strong enough to set itself as the sole speaker to development projects, and its legitimacy is not contested, it will probably be strong enough to carry these projects out. But it will reinforce the forms of neopatrimonial management, and, as stakes are getting higher (land tenure registration, use of resources, access to development projets), will increase inequality. The alternative seems to be the constitution of a local public space where agents are able to compete with some

transparency. The last decades have diversified the actors of the rural civil society. Professional groups, associations carry some new legitimacy. However difficult, reduction of poverty is tied to the institutionlisation of public debate.

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