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Turner, B.

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Global Players & Local Agency in Rural Morocco

BERTRAM TURNER

In large parts of the contemporary Islamic world, the local population is increasingly facing competition between different transnational actors for implementing their respective agendas. These agendas are often framed as legitimising legal templates and claim universal validity. In these competitive processes it is particularly the development organizations which vulgarize ideals of the western way of life and political-legal notions such as development, democratization, good governance, sustainability and environmental protection. These organisations increasingly encounter, however, the repercussions of acts by transnationally active Islamic movements propagating a return to the roots of Islam in everyday life. The socio-legal consequences of the competition between transnational actors for control over local contexts have rarely been addressed and theorized, however. Legal anthropology is challenged, on the one hand, to develop a theoretical framework to address the issue of an increasing competition between transnational actors and, on the other, to analyse how discrepancies between different and contradictory approaches initiate and inform local discourses on violence, conflict, resistance, and local identity. The analysis of a concrete constellation in rural South West Morocco exemplifies the relevance of the matter.¹

The thesis in this article is that focusing on the competition between global players for local control reveals that competition accelerates the scalar dynamics in transnational-state-local interaction. It is argued that the rising degree of legal cross-referencing serves to boost the legal agency of local actors. The article suggests a concept of "empowered legal agency" achieved by an emphasis on socio-legal identity and local culture.

The local setting and its transnational interveners

Before referring to the concrete example, I shall briefly outline the situation in the rural Souss in Morocco and the intervening global players. The Souss is the area of the unique forestal ecosystem of the Argan forest and simultaneously an intensively used agrarian region.

In Morocco, as elsewhere, Western development initiatives face increasing competition from transnationally active Islamic movements, thereby complicating the dynamics of transnational-state-local interaction. The author analyses these dynamics by focusing on the dilemmas that arose when, in his research site, a pious Muslim won a sum of money in the "Ramadan lottery" and was engulfed by contradictory transnational advice. Ironically, this competition between global players boosted the legal agency of local actors.

The majority of the Souss people are farmers and peasants and are organized in village communities. The village legal arena contains, under the umbrella of state law, various constitutive legal components including habitual and various Islamic legal elements. In 1998 a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve was established while, over recent years, agrarian production for the world market has continuously been expanding. This combination attracts many transnational development agencies and

donor organizations, which propagate a sustainable development approach, environmental protection and the formation of civil society structures. A strongly antagonistic approach to intervening in local affairs arrived with the Salafiyya, the transnational Islamic movement, in 1999. The Salafis propagate an adjustment of all spheres of life towards their own idea of the one and only correct Islamic lifestyle, which entails a rigid perception of the basic religious principles. The thing that both types of global players, the secular and the religious, have in common is that they can rely on very few experts on the ground. Development agents running projects tend to be based at regional centres. They instruct and advise local personnel and act as consultants. Development agencies recruit most of their local employees among the young unemployed intellectuals from the region with university diplomas. The Salafiyya is headed by a few religious leaders who transmit Salafi ideology via Islamic schools in the towns. They send missionaries to the countryside for the mobilization of local adherents and assist with the formation of local supporters. The Salafiyya organized a regional charity network of local Salafi cells, while development agencies worked towards self-help, organizing production cooperatives and sustainable forms of resource management.

Differences between the competing actors become particularly obvious when looking at their attitudes towards each other and their implicit mutual interpretation. Officially, development agencies are indifferent towards the religious sphere in Morocco, in general, and towards Islamic activism in the region in particular. The Salafiyya, in contrast, address the issue of development impacts and openly criticize effects they interpret as negative. They condemn western influence and warn against the destructive forces of transnational legal treaties and development cooperation. The Salafis characterize their intervention as integrated within a general discourse on growing tensions between western lifestyle and Islam. Thus, they contribute to an already ongoing debate in rural Morocco about the benefits and disadvantages of concepts of sustainable development in the kind of resource exploitation propagated by western development agencies. In contrast, when asked about their opinion on the increase of Islamic activism and the Salafi criticisms of the pagan neoliberal development agenda, the local Moroccan development brokers representing the German GTZ and Oxfam Canada denied even recognizing the existence of an Islamic opposition to their agenda. How the competitors act in a local context is accurately shown by the following ethnographic example.

Reception for French eco-experts



PHOTO BY BERTRAM TURNER, 2002

The Ramadan lottery and contradictory transnational advice

In the "Ramadan lottery" in autumn 2005, a villager won a small sum of money. This became a big issue in the community. The man, a pious Muslim, was searching for advice on what to do with this money and raised the issue in the village cafe. A public debate was immediately sparked. According to local religious ideas, the money is impure because it comes from a lottery that is *haram*. For this reason, it would not make sense to invest the sum, because one must not benefit from haram money. This religious attitude has had a strong impact on local practice. The local grocer who had granted a credit to the man announced he would accept money for the redemption of the debt without hesitation, because that would not mean "investment." This solution would have been approved by the majority of the villagers. The argument was, firstly, that the interpretation of the grocer was convincing and, secondly, that it is good behaviour and fosters the traditional system of the local economy to pay a debt earlier than necessary once in a while.

The local model of economic cooperation enjoys a longstanding tradition and is perceived as an expression of local solidarity. Customary regulation has contributed much to the economic development of a local moral economy since the 1980s, which has been developed within the cash crop sector. The local credit system allowed for the reinvention and financial hedging of sharecropping arrangements. Thus, sharecropping basically relies on a local legal arrangement that includes the informal credit system because the state legal order considers it an outmoded form of production, and Islamic law also expresses reservations regarding sharecropping. The local peasants prefer to raise credit during the period between sowings and harvest by a local grocer they trust. The grocers customarily only charge very low interest rates and are more interested in committing the debtors to their enterprise.

A local development broker completely disregarded all existing reservations and proposed to the winning villager that he use his money for granting micro-credits to others, which would be a "good deed." At the same time, the money would generate capital surplus, with which one could even increase the number of good deeds. Once fed in the circle of benefits, the money would be cleaned and no longer remain haram.

The man caused a great deal of consternation by putting forward this proposal. Micro-credits, previously introduced by external actors, had a poor reputation. They had been introduced as an instrument against rural poverty, and in order to strengthen self-help, and were widely promoted by development actors. The micro-credits were tied to specific small-scale economic enterprises as stipulated by the creditors—but the system was not under the control of its initiators for long. Alongside Moroccan organizations granting micro-credits on behalf of the transnational creditors, some black sheep appeared making credits available under extortionate conditions and for highly risky economic activities. The debtors realized too late what was happening and felt they were in serious trouble. Because of this, none of the villagers was prepared to act publicly against the prohibition on making a profit by exploiting the needs of members of the community.

The development expert's further suggestions merely provoked the shaking of heads. He proposed investing the money in fencing the man's plot in the forest with cacti lines, a favourite project of the environmental protectors. This is, however, against local law, because even plots where the holder is exercising exclusive exploitation rights must remain openly accessible, because pasture is a common right.

The Salafis, in turn, proposed transforming the haram money into halal money by way of the winner surrendering it to them as a charity donation (*sadaqa*). This was cause for common amusement. A *sadaqa* donation is defined as a voluntary pious donation to people in need. The act of giving *sadaqa* protects the giver against possessiveness and purifies his soul and his property and is agreeable to God. Accordingly, there is no need for an intermediary. But there was still a more concrete reason for the public reaction. In the village there is a Salafi grocer, not the lottery winner's creditor, who is well known as an expert in "ritual transformative transactions." The line of argument that he and his co-adherents put forward was not generally convincing, because they were perceived as pretending to transform all haram money into halal simply by investing it in the movements'

charity work. When making such investments, the grocer never shied away from cheating people, as he argued that they earned their money in a haram way and were, therefore, unable to give a *sadaqa*, which the grocer then offered to organize for them. Thus, the Salafis more or less embezzled haram money and invested it in the Salafiyya's charity network in the previous owner's stead, in order to provide the involuntary and deceived giver—and themselves—with spiritual remuneration. At the same time the grocer benefited from the donation itself because of the "financial reflux" from the recipients of charity. However, *sadaqa* brings spiritual benefits for the giver only if the donation is consciously made with good intent. As a result, few trusted this Salafi grocer, and his clientele was made up exclusively of his brothers in belief. In this particular case, when the Salafi grocer offered the same service to the lottery winner, the latter preferred to redeem the larger part of his debt and to remain loyal to his own grocer.

The implicit effect of these debates was that the villagers experienced a growing external challenge to their local model of distributive obligations, which is based on ties of solidarity within the village and on mutuality between people living together. The Salafis criticized the local credit system, while misusing it at the same time. This was because the powerful local social work and mutual aid structures, including redistributive rules, are deeply rooted in local religiosity and are connected with local religious rituals; and for this reason, the Islamic activists explicitly refused to contribute to it. The Salafiyya accepted only those distributive rules, which were in accordance with Islamic law such as *zakat*. An additional argument the Salafis employed was to contend that the local model of mutual material support simply balances out the lack of state assistance for social security. The development agents, on the other hand, emphasized that transnational financial support should be kept apart from local distributive obligations. They explicitly claimed that micro-credits and extra money for environmental protection measures should remain exempt from these obligations. Furthermore, the development agencies overrode the conventional economic circles of good exchange and mutual support based on social and territorial proximity. How to profit from the investments all transnational actors are offering without causing losses to the local economy and undoing local social cohesion remains a matter of considerable debate.

The example reveals that the local legal arena where rules are negotiated is providing an indispensable frame of reference for local identity interacting with and sometimes integrating or absorbing external impulses. The competitive nature of transnational intervention posed a challenge for local cohesion that was new in terms of both its quality and its intensity. Local people acted as members of village-NGOs, production cooperatives, or religious movements in order to access external resources. This provoked serious misunderstandings regarding the judicial competence and intervention potentialities of these new institutions in local areas of conflict.

The most pressing and challenging task in the discursive process turned out to be the re-evaluation of criteria of local identity and local belonging—which in turn had consequences for the local configuration of economic power-relations. The informal village councils intensively discussed the implications of the various legal repertoires for local identity formation. The ability of local actors to canalize transnational interventionism and to create sufficient room to play transnational actors off against each other has finally led to a social process that can be described as "empowering legal agency." This reaction must not necessarily be interpreted as "taming globalization." But identity and social belonging prove to be resilient, as well as indispensable, as the basis for maintaining trust and legal security in the face of external challenges.

Note

1. For more details see Bertram Turner, "Competing Global Players in Rural Morocco: Upgrading Legal Arenas," in "Dynamics of Plural Legal Orders," ed. F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann, special issue, *Journal of Legal Pluralism* 53/54 (2006): 101–39.

Bertram Turner is Senior Researcher at the research group "Legal Pluralism," Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany. He is author of *Asyl und Konflikt: Rechtsethnologische Untersuchungen* (Berlin: Reimer, 2005).
Email: turner@eth.mpg.de