

Politics and the Longue Durée of African Oil Communities:

Rentierism, Hybrid Governance, and Anomie in
Gamba (Gabon), c. 1950s - 2015 (and Beyond)

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List of Abbreviations

ADERE	Alliance Démocratique et Républicaine
AEF	Afrique Equatoriale Française
ANPN	Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux
AOF	Afrique Occidentale Française
BDG	Bloc Démocratique Gabonais
CAPG	Complexe des aires protégées de Gamba
CLO	Community Liaison Officer
COLANDEF	Community Land and Development Foundation
COMILOG	La Compagnie Minière de l'Ogooué
COSREG	Compagnie Shell de Recherche et d'Exploitation au <i>Gabon</i>
CPP	Convention People's Party
CRAP	Comité de Réflexion sur l'Après Pétrole
DCE	District Chief Executive
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FON	Friends of the Nation
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HCR	Haut Conseil de la Résistance
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IR	International Relations
IRPP	Impôt sur le Revenu des Personnes Physiques
MP	Member of Parliament
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PDG	Parti Démocratique Gabonais
PDL	Plan de Développement Local
PIAC	Public Interest Accountability Committee

PRMA	Petroleum Revenue Management Act
PWYP	Publish What You Pay
RDA	Rassemblement Démocratique Africain
ROLBG	Réseau des Organisations Libres de la Société Civile pour la Bonne Gouvernance au Gabon
SACSC	Société Agricole et Commerciale de Sette Cama
SGAEI	Société Gabonaise d'Aménagement et d'Équipement Immobilier
SOGARA	Société Gabonaise de Raffinage
SOMIFER	Société des Mines de Fer de Mekambo
SPAEF	Société des Pétroles d'Afrique Equatoriale Française
STMA	Sekondi Takoradi Metropolitan Assembly
UCSOND	United Civil Society Organisations for National Development
UDSG	Union Démocratique et Sociale Gabonaise
UGCC	United Gold Coast Convention
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UOB	Université Omar Bongo
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WRCF	Western Region Coastal Foundation
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

INTRODUCTION

On June 14th, 2018, *Jeune Afrique* published on its website the latest in a series of articles bringing attention to Senegal's burgeoning oil sector. Discovered in 2014 and 2015, Senegal's voluminous offshore fields were turning heads raising the spectre of the resource curse. The article featured Fary Ndao, recent author of *L'Or Noir du Sénégal*,¹ who when asked whether a resource curse existed, responded:

Yes, and it refers to the establishment of resource-rich countries in a rent economy at the expense of buoyant sectors such as industry or agriculture. Setting up a rent economy creates a rent elite, introduces inequalities and a loss of productivity. Senegal is fortunate to have discovered oil at a time when its economy was already diversified. The risk therefore seems less. Controlling this risk will depend in particular on the degree of information possessed by the citizens who, the more they are informed, the more they will be able to question the choices of leaders concerning the use of revenues.²

Ndao's assessment is not unique. Many analysts of politics and sociology, particularly those disposed to appreciating political economy, prefer to explain political, sociological, and economic changes with long chains of causation that inevitably begin with geographic endowments and constraints. It is, after all, among the most scientific ways of objectifying humanity, and differences between cultures across the globe have clearly been shown to have their roots in geography and environment.³ But, and critically, many of these cultures were assessed at a time

¹ *L'or noir du Sénégal: Comprendre l'industrie pétrolière et ses enjeux au Sénégal* (Essai : 2018).

² "Oui et elle désigne l'installation des pays détenteur de ressources naturelles dans une économie de rente aux dépens de secteurs porteurs comme l'industrie ou l'agriculture. Installer une économie de rente crée une élite de rente, introduit des inégalités et une perte de productivité. Le Sénégal a la chance d'avoir découvert du pétrole à un moment où son économie était déjà diversifiée. Le risque semble donc moindre. La maîtrise de ce risque dépendra notamment du degré d'information des citoyens qui, plus ils seront informés, plus ils pourront questionner les choix des dirigeants concernant l'utilisation des revenus."

³ See, e.g., John Desmond Clark, *The Prehistory of Africa* (Edited by Ginette Aumassip, and Fabrizio Mori. Vol. 302. London: Thames and Hudson, 1970); and for later analysis of "cultural geography," Don Mitchell, "There's No Such Thing as Culture: Towards a Reconceptualization of the Idea of Culture in Geography" (*Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 20, no. 1 (1995): 102-16).

when cross-cultural communication was relatively limited, when economies were lower in scale, and, critically, when the transfer of ideas and histories were relatively infrequent.

Even so, Ndao's assessment is not necessarily incorrect either. When a number of assumptions are taken, oil rents can and often do stifle otherwise buoyant sectors as well as corrupt political systems. After movements to nationalize oil sectors in the Middle East in the mid-twentieth century, several analysts pointed to "petrodollars" as the culprit in a process of creeping authoritarianism and increasingly vulnerable—and lackluster—economies.⁴ It might even be conceivable that the publication of oil transactions in Iran would have deterred its appropriation by a small minority of elites, depending on whether large enough factions of civil society were equipped to effectively pressurize the instruments of government—a big assumption to be dealt with later on.

But the more troubling aspect of Ndao's widely held views is that they are derived from a model of political economy with supposedly universal application. The idea that an informed citizenry can lower the risk of corruption is notoriously Western in both time and space, and evokes the errors of the now-defunct modernization and democratization paradigms that once prevailed in academies. Even in many Western political spaces today, the availability of information is no guarantee of the critical checks necessary to preventing the misuse of public funds, among other things. An informed citizenry can only effect real change when it has the will to change, when it knows what change it desires, and when the rules of interaction are widely accepted and agreed upon. This may have been the case in the 18th century—the real birth of the democratization paradigm—but it is not entirely clear today. Ideas, people, and patterns change.

What is most troubling then about the reification of natural resources as cause and consequence is that it tends towards dehumanization, dehistoricization, and oversimplification. At least one study has clearly demonstrated the tendency towards a bureaucratic elite in Senegal, roughly ten years before any oil had been discovered. And since oil could clearly not be attributed to things like informal privatization, other factors such as 'hybridity' were explored.⁵ The risk of oversimplification is not limited to natural resource-based theories, but extends as well to other

⁴ See, e.g., Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, *The Price of Wealth: Economies and Institutions in the Middle East* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁵ Giorgio Blundo, "Seeing Like a State Agent: The Ethnography of Reform in Senegal's Forestry Services" (in *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies*, eds. Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, Leiden: Brill, 2014, pp. 69-89).

understandings of livelihoods changes. Democracy itself—however defined—is still righteously assumed to produce desirable social outcomes, decentralization was once hailed as a means to capitalize on local ingenuity, and the list goes on. What is certain by now—to many Africanists at least—is that the region’s unique history throws a wrench into much presumed universality, but at the same time offers a chance to understand human cause and consequence at a deeper level and in a way which informs efforts towards universality of the human condition. In historical terms, sub-Saharan Africa is among the most recent broader regions to integrate European norms of social and political interaction, the same norms which become generally applied to all human systems.

The movement to reverse this trend must therefore preempt theories of political economy with natural resources as their bases. Oil is not a monolith, nor an unimpeded force of its own. The risks it is said to bring—a rentier class and inequality—as well as its mitigating conditions—transparency, economic diversification, etc.—are simply inapplicable to places where a strong civil society and reliable macroeconomic accounting are non-existent. This simplified view of the effects of a natural resource on a country’s political trajectories has its roots in a host of analyses and initiatives conducted and taken by Western-directed organizations such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Local variations are inevitably lost in this process. Efforts to rein in oil rentier states in Africa through international governance initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and Publish What You Pay (PWYP) are, while well-intentioned, insufficient to ensure lasting accountability to these states’ respective citizenry. Thus, the problem of how to exogenously contribute to the development of democracy — i.e. from an international perspective — in Africa’s oil rentier states remains, as efforts to build ‘accountability’ in these states are allegedly hampered from above and below.

The solution is not further macro-modelling and the endless recycling of similar statistical inputs, but a return to basics and an appropriation of advanced techniques in ethnography, anthropology, and more nuanced understandings of political and social meaning. Accurate determinations of social and political change must derive from internally constituted definitions of these factors. And rather than an exercise in hyper-relativity, or even intellectual nihilism, it is emphatically realistic and based on the simple notion that people in different times and spaces may think, perceive, and conceive quite differently. Unfortunately for grand theorists of the political

economy tradition, this reality is often only discoverable in the more specifically peri-urban and rural spaces of Africa, where “transparency” and “corruption” are highly problematized concepts.

Mirroring the fault lines of recent political commentary, much of sub-Saharan Africa’s poor performance is attributed to both its politico-economic peripheral status in an international system as well as political cultures which appear indigenous to much of the continent as a whole. Defining how each stratum has historically engendered contemporary institutional outcomes is critical to not only improving policy at the international level but also to empowering, or historicizing, local actors. This research therefore proposes to expand the knowledge of how these two phenomena, international structural conditions and politico-historical institutions, interact to affect livelihoods in African oil states as carried out by key actors. And not just any livelihoods, but those unconnected to the “modern” sphere of city centers, representing over 60% of the continent’s population.

To what extent, then, do subnational, pre-existing political institutions in sub-Saharan Africa, vis-à-vis both state and international structures, affect peri-urban rural livelihoods? “Agency” is one area of research which has steadily become important among political scientists and sociologists, especially since the latter years of the Cold War, when structuralist explanations of political phenomena began yielding more space to conceptions of politics emphasizing deconstruction, contingency, and discourse.⁶ This increasing focus on determining who in fact governs, and whose governance actually translates to the health and wealth of local populations, not only revisits the core set questions proposed by political science at large but highlights the pressing concerns of African political scientists themselves. Chabal claims that this approach to the notion of agency, which is “in the process of becoming the new orthodoxy,”⁷ forces political Africanists to revisit their models and concepts in finding the appropriate balance between historical and environmental factors, such as neo-colonialism and the nature of exports, and political factors which are conceived as processes and events rooted internally⁸. This paradigmatic shift from structure to people as mediators of structure will help us understand “the extraordinary

⁶ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991 [1962]); M. Foucault, *L’Ordre du Discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). For a very thorough discussion of the juncture of “agency” and resistance to several forms of domination in Africa, see Jon Abbink and Klaas van Walraven, “Rethinking Resistance in African History: An Introduction,” In *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History* (Leiden: Brill, 2003)

⁷ Patrick Chabal, *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*, (London: Zed Books, 2009), 11.

⁸ Chabal, *Africa*, 13.

ways in which Africans have adapted to rapidly changing international circumstances.”⁹ In turn, identifying patterns of adaptation in Africa has the potential to contribute enormously to our understanding of political change, which has perhaps been too preoccupied with structure in the post World War II era.

Determining which political structures and processes affect peri-urban livelihoods in African politics, whether it be with local systems of government, state bureaucracies, or plutocracies, would not only be a natural response to an epistemological shift in the social sciences but would also be facilitated by today’s changing “international” circumstances, since agency (or, simply put, causality) can only be identified in the context of changing conditions. The question of agency has been made less academic when applied to sub-Saharan Africa thanks to the rapidly changing empirics of external engagement in the continent. Whereas the traditional donor and investment community in African states had been composed primarily of Western actors, East Asian markets for resources have led Chinese, Japanese, and Indian investors and donors to the continent, contributing to the rapid change of international context faced by Africans.

The intense and rapid growth of many developing countries like China has partially caused a boom in world demand for oil, thus depleting global resources, especially in older oilfields such as those in Saudi Arabia. This leaves Africa as one of the few remaining bastions of future oil reserves.¹⁰ Whereas the oil price hikes of the 1970s were largely brought on by OPEC’s oil embargoes, the price hike which began in the mid-1990s and which has stagnated today is more due to the natural consequences of intense exploitation rather than politics, making Africa’s explored and unexplored oil fields all the more important.¹¹ Factors which had contributed to global interest in African hydrocarbons other than depleting resources in the world’s traditional oilfields and the once-untapped potential of those in Africa include the relatively low pecuniary and political costs to doing business, mostly off Africa’s shores. As John Ghazvinian recounts in an impressive piece of onsite investigative journalism, proven offshore reserves are attractive to foreign multinationals due to the relative ease with which they allow exploration, production, and

⁹ Chabal, *Africa*, 12.

¹⁰ M. Klare, and D. Volman, ‘America, China, and the Scramble for Africa’s Oil’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 33, no.108 (2006): 297-309.

¹¹ M. Levi and R. McNally, ‘A Crude Predicament’, *Foreign Affairs*, 90, no.4 (2012): 100-111.

distribution to proceed.¹² These “enclaves”¹³ afford MNCs the combined benefits of avoiding the kind of land-based entanglements with indigenous grievances that led to Nigeria’s Biafran war in 1966 as well as obstacles to shipping and distribution. Such major oil supply disruptions have also been evidenced by the decades-long conflict in the Niger Delta and more recently by the armed uprising in Libya leading to the ouster of former leader Muhammad al-Qaddafi. As a last example, a failed coup attempt in South Sudan and ensuing rebellion has reportedly locked off tens of thousands of barrels of oil in the key Unity State since the beginning of 2014.¹⁴

As a result of these developments, many journalists, politicians, scholars, and commentators of every shade have weighed in on whether the “new scramble for Africa” will bring benefits, in the form of added revenue and developmental opportunities, or costs, in the form of social, environmental, and political degradation. The question cannot be answered without first acknowledging the actors at all levels contributing to either better or worse livelihoods of those affected, and must be viewed through this prism. Humanity indeed reacts similarly to similar environmental conditions, and materialists have departed from this notion for decades. But environmental conditions, when taking into account hundreds of years of ideational shifts, collective memories, forms of legitimacy, and changing patterns of interaction, are scarcely if ever identical. This thesis proposes to examine—from the perspective of politics—when and why livelihoods changes take place in subnational, peri-urban communities, even when they bear material similarities, such as oil resources, the fruits of which are coveted by actors at all levels.

The next chapter surveys the extensive literature on the impact of politics—international, state, and local—on African communities. It demonstrates that the differences between various approaches can often be explained by differing ontological approaches to similar problems, and that these differences need reconciliation if generalizability is indeed the goal. Chapter 2 follows up by justifying the thesis’ research design, a loose comparative study of two oil-bearing communities: Gamba and the Ndougou lagoon in Gabon and Takoradi and the coastal Western

¹² J. Ghazvinian, *Untapped: The Scramble for Africa’s Oil* (New York: Harcourt, 2007).

¹³ See also J. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); J. Ferguson, ‘Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa’, *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 3 (2005): 377-382.

¹⁴ “War-torn South Sudan under economic attack from fall in oil price.” *Financial Times*. December 21, 2014. Accessed December 26, 2018. (<https://www.ft.com/content/6ba9f528-869c-11e4-8a51-00144feabdc0>).

“South Sudan oil revenue at \$3.38 bln, hit by conflict and price falls.” *Reuters*. January 3, 2015. Accessed December 26, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/southsudan-crude/south-sudan-oil-revenue-at-3-38-bln-hit-by-conflict-and-price-falls-idUSL6N0UI02D20150103>)

Region of Ghana. Though not a strict comparison, both geographic African spaces experienced oil exploitation, thus rendering it possible to compare oil's impact on politically-induced changes to livelihoods. Gamba, Gabon remains the focus of this investigation, however, as its long history with oil exploitation allows for the tracing of political interactions and models in the *longue durée*. Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on diachronically historicizing the evolution of social and political anomie in Gamba, coincident with Royal Dutch Shell's intensive exploitation of the region's enormous onshore oil deposits since the 1960s. Fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2015 aimed to identify indicators of [under]development and the critical local actors involved, broadening the scope to include not only material progress and rent-seeking but feelings of alienation, communal spirit, and solidarity. Chapter 5 then focuses on rentierism in Gamba, attempting to relate these findings to the axiomatic predictions of rentier theory. As such, I assess the causality of the state's extractive capacity, relief from taxation and economic diversification, and rentier "mentality" in producing Gamba's developmental outcomes. Chapter 6 argues that neither rentierism nor essentialism adequately account for the underdevelopment of Gamba, and instead aligns with theories of hybrid governance which proffer an epistemological "change of gears," one that hopes to evade the structural-essential binary. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the experiences of Takoradi, Ghana, where successive fieldwork trips in 2016 provide data with which externalize the validity of analytical conclusions reached in Chapter 6. Takoradi's very different pre-oil circumstances allow us a loose comparison with which to isolate the supposed centrality of extractive industries when explaining local political arenas. More time, however, will be spent on elaborating the colonial and post-colonial history of the Ndougou lagoon in Gabon. Not only has Gamba, Gabon had a long experience with oil production, but a such a study never been conducted in Gamba. The research here on Gamba should therefore be treated as the central contributory thrust of this thesis.

CHAPTER 1. Political Structures, Processes, and Livelihoods: A Literature

Review

How do politics impact livelihoods in peri-urban and rural sub-Saharan Africa?

The literature, for better or worse, is very dense on this question, rendering a full and comprehensive accounting nearly impossible. Contributions have been authored by researchers in public, private, and academic institutions. Within academia alone, authors illuminating the subject hail from all imaginable branches of the social sciences and humanities, including economics, political science, geography, sociology, social and cultural anthropology. The following review attempts to survey the most influential of these, i.e. those which either changed the course of, or spawned, further research. In many cases, the influential contribution might be characterized as a *meta-theory*; or the approach in question, while influential, only implicitly touches upon livelihoods in peri-urban and rural spaces. In either case, efforts have been made to infer and derive a conclusion wherever possible and with minimal reliance on questionable warrants.

This review reaches two conclusions. First, there is surprisingly no agreement as to how politics impact livelihoods in peri-urban and rural spaces. Second, I argue that this disagreement can be reduced to differences in ontological and epistemological points of departure, and that furthermore these points of departure tend to coalesce with the relative impact of international, state, and local institutions. Ontological realists aim for the universality of truths, and in doing so are quick to accept “facts” as given, scarcely sidestepping to consider whether a certain construct warrants more qualification or relativization. Ontological realists therefore tend to hail from political science and economics and are, more often than not, epistemological positivists. Concepts such as “states” and “investment” are borrowed from mainstream usage and rarely questioned, leading such researchers to extrapolate higher structures and systems of causality, such as international markets and politics. On the other end of the ontological spectrum are relativists, for whom concepts such as states and investment are constructs among many. These constructs may change depending on the viewpoint of the observer, and cannot be taken for granted and extrapolated until careful consideration is given to the reliability of definitions. Relativists therefore populate the discipline of anthropology, for whom context and validity are chief

concerns, not to mention reflexivity. States, for instance, mean different things and even operate differently in different contexts and even among different people. Those contexts tend to be smaller agglomerations and localities, where individuals become key sources of evidence. As one anthropologist puts it:

This, if anything, is what distinguishes the ontological turn from other methodological and theoretical orientations: not the dubious assumption that it enables one to take people and things “more seriously” than others are able or willing to,[1] but the ambition, and ideally the ability, to pass through what we study, rather as when an artist elicits a new form from the affordances her material allows her to set free, releasing shapes and forces that offer access to what may be called the dark side of things.¹⁵

This review’s purpose is to elicit and compare both the brighter and darker sides of things, particularly when it comes to describing and explaining politics in African peri-urban and rural spaces.

1.1 International Explanations and Ontological Realism

Despite more recent interest in the effects of Sino-American competition for resources and allegiance in sub-Saharan Africa, international forces have been somewhat relegated to secondary status as explanatory factors of governance since the end of the Cold War period. This is a rather intuitive development, since the collapse of the Soviet Union left in its wake a uni-polar international structure which yielded relative stability between nations. Within African states, however, instability quickly became the norm and both scholarly and journalistic attention was diverted to intra-governmental and intra-regional struggles. Only recently has Africa again been hurtled towards center-stage as Eastern engagement in the form of mineral exploration and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) continues apace, prompting a re-reading of international political structural theories aimed at explaining underdevelopment, political instability, and conflict. Does international competition for Africa’s limited resources and political allegiance exacerbate developmental pitfalls, represented in livelihoods? And which international factors are important and why for the purpose of explaining changes in livelihoods?

¹⁵ Martin Holbraad, Morten Axel Pedersen, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The Politics of Ontology: Anthropological Positions,” accessed July 21, 2019, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/the-politics-of-ontology-anthropological-positions>.

Although International Relations (IR) theory has no shortage of explanations regarding this question, it has as a whole notoriously fallen short of adequate, all-encompassing theories with predictive power for the behaviour of African states. This is due in large measure to adherence to ontological realism,¹⁶ where received notions such as “state” and “system” are scarcely questioned or delineated. This is also doubtless related to the penchant of IR to produce knowledge for the most powerful actors through a top-down approach.¹⁷ Central to the assumptions of most IR theory, for example, is the presupposition of a state with both internal and external sovereignty. Whereas African states largely feature external sovereignty, internal sovereignty is harder to come by. Angola, Sudan, Kenya, and Mali all serve as more recent examples of juridical states with a conspicuous lack of centralized authority where conflict zones are prevalent and betray an egregious center-periphery dualism. No other region is more dependent (or interdependent) vis-à-vis the world’s major actors than sub-Saharan Africa, however one chooses to measure it.

Dependency theorists, largely popular for their top-down analyses in the context of the Cold War, are the most outspoken proponents of assigning blame to the international system for Africa’s political and development failures.¹⁸ Walter Rodney’s work is representative of a general approach which holds Africans passive in the face of Western intervention, itself a product of the logic of international capitalism which, taken to its logical extreme, economically punishes peripheral regions.

Walter Rodney recounts in his seminal work how Europe underdeveloped Africa in general. He defines “underdevelopment” as a condition of lower development relative to other nations,¹⁹ and development is a measure of how well a society organizes itself so as to guarantee the well-being of its inhabitants. It is not limited to purely economic conceptions of the term.²⁰ This is appropriate since Rodney makes a well-documented argument from a Marxist-historical persuasion that underdevelopment today in Africa, economic or political, derives from political,

¹⁶ For more on ontological differences in the social sciences, see Berth Danermark, Mats Ekstrom, and Liselotte Jakobsen, *Explaining society: An introduction to critical realism in the social sciences* (Routledge, 2005)

¹⁷ See G. Mohan and B. Lampert, ‘Negotiating China: Reinserting African Agency into China–Africa Relations’, *African Affairs*, 112 :446 (2013), 92-110; W. Brown and S. Harman (eds.), *African Agency in International Politics*. Vol. 2. (Routledge, 2013).

¹⁸ See A. G. Frank, ‘The Development of Underdevelopment’, in R. I. Rhodes (ed.), *Imperialism and Underdevelopment* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970 [1966]), 4-17; I. Wallerstein (ed.), *The Capitalist World-Economy*, Vol. 2, (Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹⁹ W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), 14.

²⁰ Rodney, *How Europe*, 4.

social, and economic domination in the past, and the culprit is the world capitalist system led by Europe.

The pre-colonial and colonial periods saw the intensification of exploitation of African labor and resources to benefit Europe and America. Not only was this carried out with violence and naked force, but the long-term effect was to deprive Africans of autonomous industrial growth which is assumed to be the engine of development. Furthermore, the external orientation of a certain class of African elites helped lead to kleptocratic and neo-patrimonial governments in the future which contributed in large measure to today's African debt. In the seventeenth century leading up to increased involvement in Africa by the European states, the slave trade represented the most egregious form of capitalist penetration and resource extraction. For Rodney, the long-term effects of these processes were clear: They served to deprive Africans of incentives to develop and they provided the circumstances in which African trade became unfavourable to creating consistent African demand for technology relevant to development.²¹

The rapid pace of industrialization in Europe led to mass production as the twentieth century approached. As capital-intensive machines replaced humans, products became cheaper and cheaper, out-competing any African manufactures, most of which was still produced using traditional methods. So began Africa's large-scale import of industrial, mass-produced products. Not only does this drain national coffers, but Africans were deprived of the opportunity to develop critical skills which generate growth in a capitalist economy. Under colonialism, however, this denial of the chance to develop skills and manufacturing amounted to policy, as European states regularly protected their industries through the use of import-tariffs and law.²² European states were keen on avoiding competition which could not only jeopardize their manufacturing supremacy but could also cause civil unrest in the form of unemployment, thereby jeopardizing the capitalists themselves.

Finally, colonialism, after creating dependence and the sustained transfer of wealth to the metropole, began the practice of lending through metropolitan banks. This created a social pathology where Africans felt that "without those capitalist services no money or European goods

²¹ Rodney, *How Europe*, 106-108.

²² Rodney, *How Europe*, 231-232.

would be forthcoming and therefore Africa was in debt to its own exploiters.”²³ This state of affairs was perpetuated into what is known as neo-colonialism.

Colonialism, according to Rodney, left a legacy of several dependencies which have caused Africa’s debt crises today. African states depend on the West (and now the East) for manufactured products, inducing unfavourable terms of trade. Due to a lack of experience in manufacturing and a lack of skilled labour, African states also depend on Western NGOs for job training and other services, as well as on Western banks and states for loans and aid to resolve short-term crises. Finally, they depend on the export of primary commodities which are notoriously vulnerable to international price fluctuations. Volatile prices prevent long-term financial planning and typically preclude any meaningful investment. In short, African economies are not reaping the benefits of integration into the world economic system. Instead, they occupy the periphery whose primary function is to supply the needs of more advanced industrialized economies.

Rodney’s work encapsulates a political-economic perspective with emphasis on structures and world systems in changing livelihoods of Africans, but its broad-brush approach leaves little for an operationalized study. Taking an uneven world system as its starting point, rentier theories focus on one of the most important manifestations of African undevelopment: resource extraction. This study, for reasons detailed in the introduction, proposes to analyze oil rentier states in determining the relative importance of local, state, and international forces for a range of levels of governance and political processes. Oil itself is said to develop and nurture authoritarian regimes, regardless of context or institutional history. This link between a government’s exclusive dependence on natural resources and its poor accountability to the wider citizenry is well-documented, however incomplete in its theoretical development. Hossein Mahdavy²⁴ sought first to explain why substantial oil revenues had not led to development in Iran despite massive public expenditures by the Shah. Mahdavy concluded that since oil revenues flowing to the Iranian government were essentially rent, or money received by virtue of ownership, it need not generate revenue from citizens which in effect renders bureaucracies unaccountable to public demands. Beblawi and Luciani further developed the postulation of the “rentier state,” refining its definition to those states which receive more than 40 percent of their national income from external oil rents

²³ Rodney, *How Europe*, 236.

²⁴ H. Mahdavy, ‘The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran’, in M.A. Cook (ed.), *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

and which accrue to very few hands. The financial autonomy of the state—derived from rents—pre-empts the need for taxation while inflicting on the bureaucratic elite a “rentier mentality,” a condition where pecuniary rewards and prosperity are not linked to work. The rentier mentality thus leads to inefficiency and corruption within state bureaucracies, while lack of taxation results in lack of state legitimacy and diminished political accountability, which in turn curbs democratic participation.²⁵ Subsequent studies have revealed a host of negative economic consequences as well, such as the Dutch Disease²⁶ and a lack of backward and forward linkages,²⁷ though their importance to this research is limited to their secondary effects on political variables.

The interest in resource dependency resurfaced after a brief hiatus after the end of the Cold War, mirroring the return to states as primary units of analysis. Richard Auty first coined the expression “resource curse” in an investigation of why parts of the developing world richly endowed with natural resources were simply not developing. Auty cited the Dutch Disease, the capital-intensive nature of mineral operations, and the way governments in developing states deployed their economic rents as reasons for explaining what is otherwise known as “the paradox of plenty,” which appears in states which are endowed with plenty of natural resources but which suffer a number of macroeconomic ailments, including slow growth and rampant poverty.²⁸ Sachs and Warner confirmed this paradox in a subsequent study revealing that countries with high ratios of natural resource exports to GDP suffered relatively slow growth from 1971 to 1989.²⁹ Due to the fact that these studies were conducted by economists searching for economic phenomena, they largely neglected rentier theory as it is described above. Although Paul Collier and Hoeffler were among the first to tie resource dependency in the Third World to conflict exclusively, few intervening variables other than “greed and grievance” were given as explanatory factors for this relationship.³⁰ Nevertheless, both approaches, oil rentierism and resource curse theory, can be

²⁵ H. Beblawi, ‘The Rentier State in the Arab World’ in H. Beblawi and G. Luciani (eds.), *The Rentier State* (New York: Croom Helm, 1978), 51.

²⁶ A. Gelb et. al., *Oil Windfalls: Blessing or Curse?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). The Dutch Disease refers to the negative impact of the growth on one sector, e.g. natural resources, on other sectors of the economy. For example, quick growth in natural resource exports can appreciate currencies, making it harder for non-resource sectors to export and remain competitive. The result may be an overall debasement of the economy.

²⁷ Frank, *The Development*, 1966.

²⁸ R.M Auty, *Sustaining Development in Mineral Economies: The Resource Curse Thesis*, (London: Routledge, 2003).

²⁹ J. D. Sachs and A. M. Warner, ‘Natural Resource Abundance and Economic Growth’, NBER Working Paper 5398 (1995).

³⁰ P. Collier and A. Hoeffler, ‘Greed and Grievance in Civil War’, Policy Research Working Paper 2355, Development Research Group, (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2000).

criticized for assuming unicausal and unifactorial explanations for both political conflict and instability. Perhaps no other part of the world warrants more penetrating investigations of how subnational forces interact with state and international agents to produce unique development outcomes than in sub-Saharan Africa.

The prominence accorded to the state (conditioned by a world system) by rentier theorists Mahdavy, Beblawi and Luciani has since been questioned, especially when applied to Africa where weak states predominate while the negative effects of rentierism, such as poor accountability, are still felt. Among the earlier applications of this political-economic framework based on rentierism to an African context was made by Richard Joseph, who sought to explain the fundamental issues underlying Nigeria's successive political and social crises through the 1980s. Those fundamentals included the "shift to a mono-mineral export economy, the socio-economic proclivities of the dominant class, the considerable expansion in the state's economic role, and the distinct pattern of competition for access to public resources *in all sectors of Nigerian society*."³¹ Rentierism was also applied to Gabon by Douglas Yates, who argued that African states face a "double-dependency" on both oil and strategic powers, thus exacerbating political variables such as clientelism and low political participation.³² A newer generation of rentier theorists objected to the "uni-contextual" bent of original rentier theorists, arguing that conflict, corruption, and low accountability in African states cannot be solely explained by oil, a contention of recently branded "resource curse" theorists (e.g. Collier, Le Billon, etc.). Other determining factors such as ethnic cleavages and post-colonial institutions must be explored,³³ as well as the participation of MNCs and "subaltern groups" who compete with those who have captured the state for a piece of the rent.³⁴ For example, Norway might have fallen prey to the symptoms of a rentier state had it not been for its strong democratic traditions, smart management of oil windfalls, assiduous and progressive taxation, and relative absence of ethnic and class conflict.

³¹ Richard A. Joseph, "Class, State, and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria." (*Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 21, no. 3 (1983): 21-38), 21. italics added

³² D. Yates, *The Rentier State in Africa: Oil Rent Dependency and Neocolonialism in the Republic of Gabon*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1996).

³³ U. A. Tar, 'Rentier Politics, Extractive Economies and Conflict in the Global South: Emerging Ramifications and Theoretical Exploration', in K. Omeje (ed.) *Extractive Economies and Conflicts in the Global South* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008) 27-49.

³⁴ K. Omeje (ed.), *Extractive Economies and Conflicts in the Global South* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008).

Timothy Mitchell, in a groundbreaking study of political power and oil, uses a political-geographic logic (not so dissimilar from that of Le Billon) to argue that the peculiar processes, distribution and workplace institutions of oil extraction—rather than windfall profits exclusively, which tend to be the focus of the studies above—condition both the relative power of its workforce and the industry’s geopolitical implications. Unlike coal, which was operated by relatively independent miners, was concentrated in the West, and which necessitated a large and disruptible network of railroads and other activities, oil is a “point” resource extracted with minimal manual labor and is more flexibly and easily distributed. Mitchell suggests that, perhaps by design, the promotion of oil-based combustion was in part an effort to reduce the democratizing potential that coalminers’ unions had once wielded. Oil could be extracted and shipped from areas (such as the Middle East) where the lack of democratic institutions or presence of strong oligarchies would aid in silencing worker dissent. In post-war Iraq, for example, the nationalists welcomed the Western cartel because it would obviate the need for a radical redistribution of wealth to lower classes. In places like East and South Asia, however, socialist regimes limited large land holdings and emphasized the growth of a large industrial workforce. Since “democratization has generally depended on engineering such forms of vulnerability,” Western involvement in these areas was relatively slim.³⁵ Mitchell’s chief contribution was in weaving together insights from Le Billon, Yates and various other resource realists to both problematize and qualify the relative impact of oil on the global political landscape. According to Mitchell, oil’s agency in determining political outcomes has not necessarily been overstated, but misunderstood and simplified; the context of the area of extraction matters. The outcome for local governance, however, is not commented upon in-depth. Lastly, Mitchell’s argument makes several assumptions that cannot necessarily be taken at face value: For instance, to what extent was the promotion of oil at the expense of coal not due to overall technical cost-saving? How exactly are Western majors implicated in the foreign policy formulations of their home governments? Are current understandings of democracy limited to the effective ability of an industrial workforce to make political claims?

Lastly, the determinism of the supposed oil curse was also thoroughly problematized by Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, who with others refutes simple correlations and argues for

³⁵ Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London, Verso, 2013, 292p.): 141

qualitative approaches to the impact of oil dependence.³⁶ Not only do contradictions to the oil curse abound—in addition to Norway, there is Australia, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom—³⁷ but the oil-conflict correlation begins to break down depending on the time intervals used.³⁸ Even between two or more contexts where oil has led to negative outcomes, the precise impacts are often felt differently.³⁹ Relatively poor states with fragile institutions and authoritarian dispositions merely *tend* to be more susceptible to the political curse when oil is then extracted.⁴⁰ Lastly, lengthy experience with oil production may result in marginal institutional improvements, especially after oil rents have managed to stabilize otherwise fragile regimes.⁴¹ At the end of the day, poor governance and conflict in rentier states are not predetermined. Only an “ecological” approach that refuses to ignore contexts and factors at the expense of others can potentially, after newly generated theory, account for all cases of success and failure.

1.2 International Explanations and Ontological Relativism

Relativists, in opposition to realists, tend to eschew received notions regarding the international/world system, especially when applied to sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, they recognize and emphasize the impact of the international sphere on political anomie.⁴² Both Christopher Clapham and Jean-François Bayart, in writing on African state interaction with the international system, have been critical of one-directional causalities. Reacting to the theoretical missteps of the once-dominant dependency theorists, Bayart confidently dispenses with the notion

³⁶ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, “Oil Curse, State Instability, and Violence in Developing Countries: Theoretical Lessons for Nigeria.” (*IFRA-Nigeria Working Paper Series* 32, November 27, 2014).

³⁷ Christa Brunnschweiler & Erwin Bulte, “The Resource Curse Revisited and Revised : a Tale of Paradoxes and Red Herrings,” (*Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* vol.55, n°3, 2008, pp.248-64). ; For an explanation of how oil rents can actually contribute to democracy, see Thad Dunning, *Crude Democracy : Natural Resource Wealth and Political Regimes* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 327p.) ; For a demonstration of how oil can have positive social impacts such as eliminating slavery in Saudi Arabia, see Roger Botte, *Esclavages et Abolitions en Terres d’Islam* (Bruxelles, André Versaille, 2010 389p.).

³⁸ Stephen Haber & Victor Menaldo, “Do Natural Resources Fuel Authoritarianism? A Reappraisal of the Resource Curse,” (*American Political Science Review*, vol. 105 / 1, Feb. 2011, p.1-24).

³⁹ Jeff Colgan, *Petro-aggression : When Oil Causes War* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 312p.).

⁴⁰ Benjamin Smith, *Hard Times in the Lands of Plenty: Oil Politics in Iran and Indonesia* (Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 2007).

⁴¹ John Heilbrunn, *Oil, Democracy, and Development in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2014)

⁴² “Political anomie” here refers principally to political disaffection produced by lack of trust in a flagging political system. For further explanation, see Sections 1.5 and 2.1 below.

that Africa “passively absorbs the shock of having been made dependent on other parts of the world.” Rather, “Africa may have played an active role throughout this long process of a reduction to a state of dependency.”⁴³ As Bayart claims, this does not amount to a rejection of the assertion that a state of dependency prevails in Africa. It rather amounts to a rejection that, per dependency theorists, African elites have had no agency in their own *mise en dépendance*.⁴⁴ In this sense, the importance of external agents should not be reduced entirely but “relativized” to consider the fact that Africans themselves, in a struggle to make the best of a dire situation, or just to maximize gains, have had a hand in the long-term entrenchment of dependence. In a sense, they have specialized in it, and have accelerated the process towards the gross inequalities seen today.

How African elites coped with dependence, the specific ways in which they engineered their *mise en dépendance*, was done through strategies of “extraversion,” a concept so empowering of African agency in the international system it has become a veritable catchword among Africanists. Elites practice extraversion to capture and accrue rents generated by a state of dependence. An unhealthy dependence on oil, for instance, creates opportunities for those rightly positioned that a healthier economy would not afford. Dependence closes off to the bulk of society opportunities for enrichment and promotion. Extraversion is thus used to exploit things such as religion, democratic discourse, war, opposition, and even foreign aid, which often become ideological and practical diplomatic tools for negotiating personal power vis-à-vis foreign powers.⁴⁵ Furthermore, extraversion can be conceived as a uniquely African phenomenon, an assertion which indigenizes the concept and serves to explain differences between Africa and its peripheral counterparts in Asia or Latin America. It has been made possible thanks to homegrown African civilization, which comprises an “oral culture, a rather weak development of productive forces, extensive agriculture and pastoral activity without use of private-title land tenure, a rather limited degree of cultural and social polarization, and a limited degree of economic accumulation and political centralization,” the latter of which is present thanks to hyper-dependence.⁴⁶ Based on a thorough reading of history, Bayart is able to classify six types of extraversion strategies: coercion, trickery, flight, mediation, and appropriation vs. rejection.⁴⁷ The central hypothesis is

⁴³ J-F. Bayart, “Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion,” *African Affairs*, 99 (2000), 217-218.

⁴⁴ Bayart, *Africa*, 219.

⁴⁵ J-F. Bayart, *L'Etat en Afrique: la Politique du Ventre*, (Paris, Fayard, 1989).

⁴⁶ Bayart, *Africa*, 231.

⁴⁷ Bayart, *Africa*, 231.

that these strategies comprise a uniquely sub-Saharan African mode of adaptation which has contributed to the high degree of dependence witnessed today.

Christopher Clapham borrows Bayart's concept of extraversion to demonstrate that African big men and neo-patrimonial characteristics are partly a result of intense international insecurity vis-à-vis major powers. "Revolutionary as the colonial state was in the African context, it intensified a dependence of political authority on external resources which was already one of the common features of pre-colonial state systems in the continent."⁴⁸ Arguing against the idea of failed states, Clapham claims no success had ever even existed in the first place, and that what constituted the mirage of real statehood merely dissipated once superpower intervention was retracted.⁴⁹ This view, as opposed to that espoused by Bayart, seems to lend itself more easily to structuralist conceptions of African state behaviour, tying local outcomes to international developments. State agents in this sense do not appear as creative as Bayart's construction of elites exhibiting extraversion. Nevertheless, an interaction is present between local and international levels.

Anthropologists have likewise called into question concepts derived from an international system with received (and often formalized) notions of power relations. A recent school of anthropological research into local adaptation to external shocks is a result of a number of scholars looking to test resource curse theories, the traditional domain of economists, political scientists, and sociologists (see above). In an edited volume by Behrends et al.,⁵⁰ Andrea Behrends and Stephen P. Reyna introduce an "anthropology of oil" whose purpose is to test hypotheses explaining why the external shock of vast sums of petrodollars, normally a positive thing in countries endowed with "institutional capacity," have led in many places, most notably Africa, to a set of political and economic degradations. As this volume's focus is on the political effects of the resource curse, the authors present two perspectives on the "paradox of plenty." The first is the rent-seeking/institutional model with frequent reliance on the work of Terry Karl⁵¹ who emphasizes weak neo-colonial political institutions which are made weaker by the nature of rent-seeking. The second concerns the neo-patrimonialism model where petrostates give rise to new

⁴⁸ C. Clapham, *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32.

⁴⁹ Clapham, *Africa*, 269.

⁵⁰ A. Behrends, S. Reyna, and G. Schlee (eds.), *Crude Domination: An Anthropology of Oil. Vol. 9.* (Berghahn books, 2013).

⁵¹ T. L. Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States. Vol. 26.* (Univ of California Press, 1997).

levels of corruption where 1) client enterprises perform poorly because clients lack the qualifications to manage the enterprises (here they cite Yates⁵²) and where 2) conflict turns violent.⁵³ The authors contend that no anthropological explanation has been offered to accompany those above which could “bring to the study of oil concern for human experience, in local settings, in which culture operates.” The comparative advantage wielded by anthropologists include “the presentation of the reality of an oil-dominated world from the vantage of everyday, experienced lives” which are “lived in local settings” and “an expertise in discovering the significance of culture in the [resource curse].”⁵⁴

Anthropological approaches to oil in general have grounding in a handful of well-known contributions including Suzana Sawyer’s *Crude Chronicles*,⁵⁵ Andrew Apter’s *the Pan-African Nation*⁵⁶ and Fernando Coronil’s *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela*,⁵⁷ all of which take to heart James Ferguson’s critique of James Scott’s *Seeing Like a State*,⁵⁸ which refutes Scott’s “general claims and arguments of broad application”⁵⁹ and contests oil enclaves’ homogenizing/standardizing effect on local communities. Neither of the works above had, however, engaged resource curse theory directly, preferring instead to touch upon oil as a case of another phenomenon. Behrends and Reyna aim to address the fact that “while all developing petro-states exhibit the curse, some suffer it more than others,” therefore “any anthropology of oil needs to explain *both* the struggles for oil rents and the hierarchy of oil’s curse.”⁶⁰ This statement shares the ambition of this thesis, thus implicating many of the volume’s contributors who more directly deal with oil as an analytical fact than the anthropologists working on democratization and decentralization.

In this research program, Behrends, Reyna and Watts are noteworthy for the novelty of their conceptualizations and thus deserve mention. Behrends and Reyna put forward a conceptual

⁵² Yates, *The Rentier State*.

⁵³ Behrends, *Crude*, 6.

⁵⁴ *ibid*.

⁵⁵ S. Sawyer, *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador* (Duke University Press, 2004).

⁵⁶ A. H. Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁵⁷ F. Coronil, *The magical state: Nature, money, and modernity in Venezuela* (University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁵⁸ Scott, *Seeing*.

⁵⁹ Ferguson, *Seeing*, 377.

⁶⁰ Behrends, *Crude*, 20.

framework, based on previous work by Reyna, for an anthropology of oil which is “structural” and explains “*why, and how, certain groups regulate other groups and, in so doing, acquire social value, like capital.*”⁶¹ Moving on, “the amounts of value flowing to particular structural levels indicate the degree of domination. When most of the value is accumulated by one or two structural levels, e.g., transnational oil firms and national elites, then such a MOD [mode of domination] is said to tend towards more ‘crude domination.’”⁶² Extrapolating from this framework, all it takes is to define social value, perhaps done through fieldwork, before embarking on further research which could more precisely produce some structural hierarchy. This hierarchy could then be conceivably compared to those existing elsewhere, offering up a fruitful comparative analysis to follow. Both Behrends and Watts, known for his extensive work on oil politics in the Niger Delta, employ a methodology that takes into consideration local context, culture, and historical factors before drawing any conclusions on oil’s effects on socio-political life. Both Watts and Behrends, writing on the Niger Delta and Sudan and Chad respectively, reach the conclusion that a significant level of social disintegration occurs as a result of pre-existing historical contexts which lack the proper institutional arrangements that would have otherwise smoothly absorbed the fallout of oil rent. Carried to its extreme, this disintegration as well as an exacerbation of chronic identity conflicts can and usually does lead to what Watts termed “petro-violence.”⁶³

Lastly, the developing corpus on the anthropology of oil, what Behrends claimed as “linking the perspective of individuals to larger entities and even global processes without levelling them,”⁶⁴ has most recently been enriched by Remadji Hoinathy who conducts an anthropological examination of people and social dynamics following onshore oil extraction in the southern Chadian region of Bero. Hoinathy aligns himself with Berry in investigating agrarian change, though as a result of oil’s appropriation of land. Like many before him, Hoinathy finds that Bero suffered a significant “monetization” of its socio-political relations. Once the conditions of access and exploitation of the land changed, the means by which villagers acquired money and sustenance changed, confirming the rent-seeking hypothesis proposed above by Behrends and Reyna.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Behrends, *Crude*, 21. (author’s italics)

⁶² Behrends, *Crude*, 22.

⁶³ Behrends, *Crude*. For more on “petro-violence,” see M. J. Watts and I. S. Ibaba, “Turbulent Oil: Conflict and Insecurity in the Niger Delta”, *African Security* (4.1.2011).

⁶⁴ Behrends, *Crude*, 83.

⁶⁵ R. Hoinathy, *Pétrole et Changement Social au Tchad: Rente Pétrolière et Monétisation des Relations Economiques et Sociales Dans la Zone Pétrolière de Doba* (Karthala Editions, 2013).

1.3 Local Explanations and Ontological Realism

The political impact on peri-urban and rural livelihoods is often held to be self-inflicted, that is through one or several cultural attributes extending indeterminately into the past, but which prove relatively deterministic. Local governance and its impact on the citizenry are less likely to respond to international structures, and are more likely to evolve according to an endogenous logic. Because the following authors lean towards “realism” on an ontological spectrum, characterizations are treated as established fact, capable of being easily operationalized in a scientific study. The belief that generalizable conclusions can be reached unites them all. As with international perspectives, proponents of this view range from political scientists to anthropologists, and are more often than not associated with area studies. The task of this section is to identify the relevant characterizations of these innately African institutions in the literature and review the purported connections to contemporary institutions.

While those focusing on exclusively local institutions as factors in governance and livelihoods do so at the expense of ignoring state and international factors, over-emphasis on states as the critical agents of African governance at local levels commits the same error of obfuscation. States, in the Weberian sense, are political units whose overseers exercise monopolies of political and administrative force. In sub-Saharan Africa, of course, state formation was not conducted endogenously but exogenously due to the European colonial scramble of the late nineteenth century, creating borders that represent little more than diplomatic sleights of hand. To speak of state institutions in Africa, as Bratton and van de Walle⁶⁶ do, is to speak not of indigenous institutions prior to colonization but of more or less constructed institutions.

States were nevertheless accorded prominence as independent variables throughout the 20th century as decolonization proceeded apace. In addition, the end of international political polarity during the Cold War hastened the turn in the literature towards states as agents of chaos and confusion as superpower sponsorship was gradually withdrawn. The state-society approach undertaken by Mamdani⁶⁷ and even Badie’s imported state hypothesis⁶⁸ may be useful for

⁶⁶ M. Bratton and N. van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁶⁷ M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject* (Princeton, 1996).

⁶⁸ B. Badie, *The Imported State: The Westernization of Political Order (Mestizo Spaces/Espaces Metisses)* (Stanford University Press, 2000).

analyzing states where institutions are so entrenched as to more closely resemble a Weberian ideal. The “imported state” hypothesis, a prominent component of post-colonial theory,⁶⁹ argues that former colonies adopt their predecessors’ modes of governance and thus face lower economic development than those states which altered their institutions to conform to the realities of geographic and other social conditions. Bertrand Badie’s theory differs considerably from dependency analyses in that the continuing external involvement of former colonizers is not neglected but subsumed as a consequence of weak institutions susceptible to foreign penetration.

More often than not, analysts of “failed states” have difficulties avoiding the omni-present descriptor “neo-patrimonial,” a term used not only to describe the state of African politics but also to explain the continent’s persistent lapses in stability, legitimacy, and accountability. The word “patrimonial” was first used in this sense by Max Weber who had attempted to explain why China at the turn of the 19th century had failed to reach levels of socioeconomic development seen in Europe. He reasoned that China’s patrimonial system whereby patrons, or elites, exercise personal and arbitrary power was more prone to instability and revolution than other, more “rational-legal” systems, thus impeding socioeconomic development.⁷⁰ Although African systems have differed substantially from their Asian counterparts past and present, patrimonialism has been applied to pre-colonial systems in sub-Saharan Africa and used to explain the region’s relative socioeconomic setbacks.

These analyses, however, tend to ignore the cataclysmic changes undergone during and after the scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century, which had the effect of superimposing on these indigenous patrimonial institutions the mere architecture of rational-legal bureaucracy. Jean-François Médard therefore coined the term “neo-patrimonialism” to describe these hybrid systems and explain how the dual rational-legal and patrimonial logics co-exist, compete, and interact to effect the poor governance outcomes we see today.⁷¹ Médard’s seminal work spawned a wide-ranging sub-literature which sought to properly characterize the processual outcomes of neo-patrimonial societies most responsible for Africa’s socioeconomic and political woes. While Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith sought to distinguish politics and administration, claiming

⁶⁹ Badie, *The Imported State*.

⁷⁰ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, Routledge, 2001 [1930]).

⁷¹ J-F. Médard, ‘The Underdeveloped State in Tropical Africa: Political Clientelism or Neo-patrimonialism’, *Private Patronage and Public Power: Political Clientelism in the Modern State* (London: Frances Pinter, 1982), 162.

“clientelism” was a feature of the former and “patrimonialism” only of the latter,⁷² Erdmann and Engel countered that the essence of clientelism was ruler-subject asymmetry and thus could be conceptualized together with patronage.⁷³ Richard Joseph added that patrimonial societies are susceptible to “prebendalism,” where prebends, or unofficial benefits derived from the holding of office are used to maintain political clients.⁷⁴ The paradigm of neo-patrimonialism is also closely associated with corruption and rent-seeking, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Perhaps the most thorough and widely diffused attempt to relate neo-patrimonialism to a relative lack of democracy was made by Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle who, in their own words, began by asking “whether regime transitions in sub-Saharan Africa resemble the democratization [seen in] other parts of the world.”⁷⁵ Referring to the post-war period from the 1940s to the end of the Cold War in the 1980s, it became clear that African liberation from former colonizers would not mean large-scale political liberalization for most Africans. Rather, “the institutional heritage of neopatrimonial rule has shaped regime transitions in much of Africa,”⁷⁶ which have scarcely been in the direction of democratic institutions. Bratton and van de Walle theorize that three informal institutions—presidentialism, clientelism, and the ubiquitous use of state resources for legitimation—are indicative or causative of the lack of democracy in Africa. The authors appropriate Robert Dahl’s well-known definition of democracy as both political representation and political participation in order to vary the patrimonial regimes which make up their independent variables. They then find in their own study that these variations produced different governance outcomes, whereas international forces were merely found to constitute the “conditions under which political change became possible.”⁷⁷

Two issues arise when attempting to infer from this study. First, the three aforementioned informal institutions meant to serve as factors of governance are, in a sense, already characterizations of governance. Clientelism, for instance, must necessarily exclude political participants and damage representation through the opaque nature of clientelistic relationships.

⁷² D. W. Brinkerhoff and A. A. Goldsmith, ‘Promoting the Sustainability of Development Institutions: A Framework for Strategy’, *World Development*, 20:3 (1992), 369-383.

⁷³ G. Erdmann and U. Engel, *Neopatrimonialism Revisited: Beyond a Catch-all Concept* (2006).

⁷⁴ R. A. Joseph, *Class, State, and Prebendal Politics*.

⁷⁵ Bratton, *Democratic*, 61.

⁷⁶ Bratton, *Democratic*, 269.

⁷⁷ Bratton, *Democratic*, 272.

Asserting that clientelism leads to a lack of democracy therefore risks both tautology and the serviceability of the findings to NGOs and other supposed architects of better governance. It is also unclear that the three informal institutions—presidentialism, clientelism, and the ubiquitous use of state resources for legitimation—are linked in any way to indigenous modes of political organizing delinked from universal or Western norms. Second, the conception of international forces in this study was rather limited, as it included only 1) the cross-border sharing of ideas and 2) the political conditions imposed by international donors and lenders.⁷⁸ No mention is made of the consequences of international competition for African resources, the consensus primary cause of foreign interaction with Africans among many scholars.

A growing body of literature by political scientists studying Africa has since elected to focus on informal, indigenous institutions as more appropriate than formal institutions or international forces in explaining regime change and governance in Africa. Legitimacy in Africa comes from the ability to command not territory but people. It follows that “big men” are recognized for their ability to use their offices for the material benefit of their respective clans, ethnicities, or other sub-national groupings to which they belong. Hyden captures this arrangement through conceptualizing an “economy of affection,” a sphere of exchanges that take place between the poles of morality and law. In this space, informal institutions abound. He argues convincingly that power dynamics in Africa are not to be found in formal institutions but in the informal institutions that predominate within the economy of affection, which is neither capitalism nor socialism but an entity in and of itself. He also offers a useful typology of informal institutions on the continent. Depending on the politico-historical development of each state, which is excluded from this typology, states exhibit one of four species of informal institutions: clientelism (due to closed and vertical reciprocal relations), pooling (due to closed but lateral relations), charisma (due to open and vertical relations), and self-defense (due to open and lateral relations).⁷⁹ Theoretical justification for this typology comes from a range of Africanist literature such as that touching upon geography⁸⁰ and the frequency and duration of contact with other social units over time.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Bratton, *Democratic*, 181-182.

⁷⁹ G. Hyden, *African Politics in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁸⁰ J. Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁸¹ P. Hoon, ‘The Verticalization of Personal-Reciprocal Relationships: Changes in the Local Political Economy of Eastern Zambia’, *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association* (Boston, August 2002).

The approaches above, whilst providing key insights towards distinguishing African political systems from their counterparts throughout the world, are susceptible to critique. Although Bratton, van de Walle, and Hyden dismiss international forces as relatively insignificant factors of poor governance in Africa, the institutions they seek to describe are explicitly products of change and adaptation—and the extent to which this change is due to international forces is the object of this thesis, the methodology of which is outlined below. The term “neo-patrimonial” seeks to characterize the state of institutions in Africa after the variegated absorption of European-style bureaucracy into traditional patrimonial systems. The suggestion that these systems ceased to evolve due to external influences once they adapted to colonial contexts remains a highly contentious one. A proper extension of the interplay between “indigenous” continuity and external forces, whether they be political or market-based in nature, necessitates a re-examination of what constitutes those forces in the 21st century and how they are changing things from the ground up. Secondly, the authors above, while seeking to characterize *indigenous* African institutions, focus on *states* as their units of analysis, which have been unmistakably products of international forces interacting with local institutions. Many authors below, persuaded by a relativistic ontology, would even go as far as to relegate states to the imaginary, not to mention a monolithic unit of consequence. Thirdly, and with respect to Bratton and van de Walle’s study only, local institutions are varied according to similar descriptors and definitions used to vary the products of those institutions, namely Dahl’s formulation of democratic governance. This creates the risk of tautology, and an improved study might aim to de-link the conceptualization of indigenous institutions from what one wants to measure (governance). Only then can one determine which institutions, if at all, are predisposed to democratic outcomes.

Coming from a political science perspective, Catherine Boone aims to address these concerns, and laments what she considers an unwarranted preoccupation with the state-led governance outcomes as a factor of despotic rule in the hinterland.⁸² Juridical state institutions are constituted by their constituents, meaning local communities can and do in fact vary for several historical-institutional reasons. Otherwise, “Why would the strategies of an ideologically charged regime like Kwame Nkrumah’s vary across regions *within* Ghana?”⁸³ Boone takes issue with

⁸² C. Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State: Territorial Authority and Institutional Choice* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸³ Boone, *Political*, 15.

theories and paradigms using the state as a starting point in institutional analysis, including those of Mamdani⁸⁴ and Miles,⁸⁵ and opts instead to create an “endogenous model of institutional choice” with the help of several anthropological studies⁸⁶, one which, like the newer generation of rentier theories, works towards a “systematic conceptualization of the strategic contexts [which] can help resolve these [theoretical] problems”.⁸⁷

Boone chooses to classify local community institutions based on the degree to which local elites were dependent on the state at the outset of the study, an approach with solid grounding in political science literature and referred to as the study of agrarian property relations.⁸⁸ The more dependent local elites are on state apparatuses for their privilege, the more power states are able to wield over them. At first this seems to presuppose the existence of elites in local communities which may be absent in some regions, but the formulation allows for more flexibility since the theory states that the lack of a social hierarchy, or the weakness of elites, predisposes local communities to the whims of state regimes. Boone along with the authors above argues that either dispersed or concentrated control over persons and resources leads to either less or more political clout with the state respectively and in the form of bargaining power. Dispersion or concentration in turn depends on a host of factors, such as the elites’ reliance on the market to extract surplus from the local populace, “ecological constraints, differences in geographic scope and salience of political organizations pre-existing or external to the modern state, impact of colonial rule, uneven commercialization of agriculture, and the extent of class formation.”⁸⁹ The extent of local elite dependence on the state is therefore a function of social hierarchy at the local level as well as of the economic independence of local elites.

⁸⁴ Mamdani, *Citizen*.

⁸⁵ W. F. Miles, *Hausaland Divided: Colonialism and Independence in Nigeria and Niger* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

⁸⁶ H. L. Moore, ‘The Changing Nature of Anthropological Knowledge’, *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1-15; J. C. Scott, ‘The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Subsistence and rebellion in Southeast Asia’, (New Haven, *Yale UP*, 1976).

⁸⁷ Boone, *Political*, 16.

⁸⁸ Moore, *The changing nature*; C. Tilly, ‘Reflections on the History of European State-making’, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (1975), 3-83; C. Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); J. M Paige, ‘Land Reform and Agrarian Revolution in El Salvador: Comment on Seligson and Diskin’, *Latin American Research Review* (1996), 127-139; R. Brenner, ‘The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism’, *Past and Present* (1982), 16-113.

⁸⁹ Boone, *Political*, 23-24.

To test her theory that “[state] regimes... pursued institution-building strategies that were designed in response to situations they confronted on the ground,”⁹⁰ Boone borrows a classification of state institution-building from Cohen and Peterson which argues that the state core and its constituent periphery are linked along two dimensions: the “spatial” dimension and the “processural” dimension. Within the spatial dimension, states can either decide to concentrate their administrative presence or pursue “deconcentration.”⁹¹ As for the processural dimension, states may choose to centralize their operations, that is bestow more power in single officers, or devolution, its opposite. Specific combinations of the four strategies produce unique “institutional configurations” as conceived by Boone.⁹² If rulers chose configurations which were predictable according to the communal structures with which they had to deal, for example if a state ruler or regime “chose” to pursue a highly centralized and concentrated regime to guarantee lasting control because local elites were economically dependent and socially weak, Boone’s theory is corroborated. In several comparative studies of Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, and Senegal, Boone uses “process tracing” to construct a historical narrative linking state institution-building strategies to regional and local changes, and found that local and regional changes per the aforementioned factors of elite dependence were said to prompt changes in state institution-building strategies. This finding partially confirms the idea which has often been repeated elsewhere, that “public authority becomes the amalgamated result of the exercise of power by a variety of local institutions, conjugated with the *idea* of the state. Hence the practice of governance varies from place to place, and even from field to field.”⁹³

1.4 Local Explanations and Ontological Relativism

Political scientists and other realists writing on Africa are beneficial in providing general theoretical understanding, or starting points, to analyses of who governs in sub-Saharan Africa, but while strong in theoretical development, they remain considerably weak in conceptual validity

⁹⁰ Boone, *Political*, 33-34.

⁹¹ J. M. Cohen, S. B. Peterson, *Administrative Decentralization: Strategies for Developing Countries* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1999).

⁹² Boone, *Political*, 32.

⁹³ C. Lund, ‘Twilight Institutions: Public Authority and Local Politics in Africa’, *Development and Change* (37:4 (2006), 685-705).

and empirical justification for their broad-brush hypotheses. Others, notably anthropologists and political scientists of a like bent, contend that only a bottom-up, inductive reasoning can accurately characterize power relations on a continent boasting over a billion inhabitants, thousands of languages, and varying forms of local authority and ways of granting and recognizing political legitimacy. Real knowledge of sub-Saharan African political systems is elusive, and the search thereof must be made with caution and an open mind.

Departure from this recognition of diversity has led to failed policies attempting to deliver aid or other development initiatives to local communities, and thus most authors have reacted by advocating ethnographic approaches to understanding local socio-political relations. Another group of authors, who may also be considered as contributing to the literature on development, have reacted instead to the continent-wide thrust towards decentralization following the break-up of the Soviet Union and the widespread imposition of IMF loan conditionality. Most consider these initiatives a failure for the same reasons that aid-backed development initiatives have failed, and that is because at some point an appreciation of “the grain” (see below) had not been properly assumed. If development and decentralization have been two central themes in African politics since independence, it would be remiss to ignore the latest driver and factor of political dynamics on the continent: natural resources, and most importantly oil. This third group engages resource curse theory, described in detail below, yet through an anthropological lens whereas typical resource curse studies were conducted first by economists and later by political scientists. In an analysis to follow, it will be shown that a natural extension of recent developments in this literature is a comparative approach utilizing ethnographic and monographic methods which might eventually arrive at generalizations more useful to development practitioners than those currently in operation. There is as yet no attempt to apply such a comparative approach to oil-bearing communities in particular, although steps have been taken to do so in development in particular.

For most of their livelihoods, independent African states have been developmental states, that is operating in political spaces where the paradigm of development has reconfigured actor preferences and interactions due both to reliance on foreign aid and the discourse on development. More shocking than how effectively state and local elites have appropriated “development” for their own political needs is how utterly the developmentalist state with its international backers⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Goran Hyden, *African Politics in Comparative Perspective*. (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

has failed to convey economic and social gains on the ground. From what is nominally known as the era of the “developmentalist” state following independence to today, African states in many respects have even backtracked on earlier progress. It is no surprise, then, that much literature in academia has asked why. The contribution of anthropology, in this regard, seems to have been overlooked, perhaps due to the inherently weak operationalization of anthropological findings.

The list of anthropologists attempting to explain patterns of development and cultural change in Africa is long. Though the earlier ethnographies by cultural anthropologists had not expressly sought to explain “development” per se, their collective focus on how and why societies, and sub-cultures, transition speaks to political change as well. Here the contributions of Bronislaw Malinowski are so seminal as to perhaps be considered the foundations for understanding and documenting patterns of cultural change. Malinowski’s methods in the early twentieth century relied on extensive use of fieldwork,⁹⁵ and many scholars credit these works with establishing such now-recognized concepts as normal deviation and institutions, concepts employed to undermine older Durkheimian notions of structure which fail to describe such change.⁹⁶

Despite Malinowski’s insistence on the appreciation of diversity and the dismissal of all claims to cultural determinism, many anthropologists and sociologists have since conducted fieldwork with the aim of finding institutional patterns across the African continent. In this regard the work of Jan Vansina stands prominent. Vansina has been prolific in defending the contributions of political traditions in Equatorial Africa to post-colonial practices, having been among the first to classify pre-colonial African political kingdoms in the modern era while using differentiating criteria such as the degree of centralized control and the principle of political succession in each society.⁹⁷ Joining others in an attack on modernization theory and perhaps the democratization paradigm, Vansina later argues that these prior kingdoms (read political institutions) may be traceable to contemporary ways of doing things if “cognitive realities” have not ceased to predict “physical realities.” Because traditions exist in the mind of the beholder, the

⁹⁵ Bronislaw Malinowski, "Practical Anthropology." (*Africa* 2.01 (1929): 22-38.); Bronislaw Malinowski. "Introductory Essay on the Anthropology of Changing African Cultures." (1938); Bronislaw Malinowski. *The Dynamics of Culture Change: An inquiry Into Race Relations in Africa*. (Ed. Phyllis Mary Kaberry. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945).

⁹⁶ George Peter Murdock, "Review: Latin America: The Folk Culture of Yucatan. Robert Redfield." (*American Anthropologist* 45, no. 1 (1943): 133-136).

⁹⁷ Jan Vansina, "A Comparison of African Kingdoms." (*Africa* 32, no. 4 (1962): 324-335); Evans-Pritchard E.E. and Fortes, Meyer, eds. *African Political Systems*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1955).

people who carry them “must have the power of self-determination” and the tradition will not necessarily die until “its carriers abandon its fundamental principles to adopt those of another tradition.”⁹⁸ Vansina’s search for institutional patterns common to many Equatorial political agglomerations represents a branch of political anthropology devoted to arriving at useful generalizations.⁹⁹ Vansina’s focus on finding cross-continent institutional patterns is also shared by authors focusing on development concerns exclusively, and here Chabal and Daloz have been most prolific.¹⁰⁰

Many anthropologists consider, however, that the authors above have lost touch with the central thrust of ethnography, which is not to find structure but rather to break it down and discover difference and diversity. To this extent, there has been a recent revival of Malinowski’s earlier work by those engaged in explaining the failure of development programs administered by centralized bureaucracies. Unsurprisingly, the argument is that centralized initiatives fail to capture realities of social and power dynamics on the ground, and these relations need to be sufficiently studied in order to achieve right policy fit. Implicit in this refocus on indigenous characteristics are relations between local and state institutions, a line of research which has largely remained in the form of monographs despite the limited, but important, contributions employing the comparative method. Whether authors submit monographs or comparative ethnographies, those contributing to the self-designated Africa Power and Politics Program (APPP) research consortium advocate only that researchers place an emphasis on local differences so that states are better equipped in their development programs to “work with the grain.” According to Booth, “the ‘working with the grain’ metaphor is helpful in so far as it places a question-mark over the false universality of the good-governance agenda and commits the APPP to exploring institutional forms that might have better results by virtue of being better anchored in local social realities.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 257-260.

⁹⁹ See Richard E Lonsdale, "The Decline in Foreign-Area Specialization in Geography Doctoral Work." (*Journal of Geography* 85.1 (1986): 4-6) ; John Lonsdale, Preben Kaarsholm, and Jan Hultin, "Invention and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism." (1994) ; Michael Schatzberg, *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁰ Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, "Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument (African issues)" (1999) ; Patrick Chabal, and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Culture Troubles: Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2006).

¹⁰¹ David Booth, "Elites, Governance and the Public Interest in Africa: Working With the Grain." *The Role of Elites in Economic Development* (2009), 11.

Spearheading the movement to revive Malinowski's ethnographic methods are two contributors to APPP, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan and Thomas Bierschenk, who are concerned not only with centralized development in general but base their analyses on impact studies of decentralization policies in the 1990s in particular. Studies by these authors, it should be noted, follow a very important investigation by Sara Berry of social and political change at the local level as a result of state-imposed agriculture policies, whose influence extends to like monographs leading up to the present.¹⁰² In a study of local community governance in the Central African Republic, Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk set out to characterize "public spaces" at the local level and, more specifically, determine the real impact of decentralizing policies on the villages in question.¹⁰³ In the spirit of Vansina's rejection of a "one-way model",¹⁰⁴ the authors not only dismiss one-size-fits-all solutions, but allege that in most African states, the state is hardly present in rural localities, rearing its head only to make infrequent and symbolic gestures of its existence. Therefore, formal interactions and formal structures are not the places to look for local authority structures. Instead, and in line with most political scientists writing on Africa, informal networks are what needs documenting for the purposes of more efficient delivery of goods from both the international and state levels. In conclusion, the authors state that the imposition of formal democratic features like municipal councils would do nothing for balanced socio-economic development or an extension of rights to peasants, since informal relations like matrimonial relations determine the distribution of resources rather than a few ordinances handed down by a distant state. Local power, in essence, doesn't mean better governance. Finally, "it is essential in our opinion that the implementation of these policies [what they call earlier "pressures exerted by financial donors"] 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."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Sara Berry, *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*. (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

¹⁰³ Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *Les Pouvoirs au Village: le Bénin Rural Entre Démocratisation et Décentralisation* (1998).

¹⁰⁴ Vansina, *Paths*, 254-255. Vansina partially concludes that "Economic development did not automatically trigger the appearance of larger-scale political societies," but rather that the equatorial forest led to several kinds of political formation. "Any one-way model," she adds, "of this constant, dynamic, and complex ecological interrelationship oversimplifies the picture."

¹⁰⁵ Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, *Les Pouvoirs*, 468.

Informality, state absence, and the persistence of local power arrangements clearly remained a theme as Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk extended their approach to a more complete study of *les arènes locales* (public spaces) in contemporary Benin. In *Les pouvoirs au Village*, the authors tackle what they consider to be deficiencies in much of the literature on power structures in Africa in general.¹⁰⁶ While ethnologists had tended to focus solely on traditional power represented by chiefs, youth systems, pastoral and agrarian structures, sociologists had tended to analyze these structures through the lens of democratization. In the Francophone and mainstream political science literature, local authority dynamics are often generalized but betray a notable lack of empirical investigation. Finally, cutting through all these disciplines commenting on a supposed political reality of African politics is a marked lack of historical depth. The way forward, then, would be a shift from ahistorical cultural theses and generalizations towards an approach which is both ethnographic and historical at the same time in order to discover “modes of local governance.” In the final analysis, this approach will yield a mapping out of the “micro-variability” which characterizes African political systems and which, according to the authors, predisposes states to favor relative autonomy for local political arenas.¹⁰⁷

In true anthropological fashion, the authors approached the composite cases of Béninois villages not with pre-conceived or well-developed theories but instead with a methodology that emphasized examining all factors of change at the local political level, from pre-colonial and colonial inheritance to modes developed shortly after independence. This methodology entrained a general characterization of the local “public spaces” which were examined during a time of a hyped-up “democratic renewal” and decentralization taking place in the country from the early 1990s onwards. This characterization of local public spaces was one of institutional (in the sense of the word employed by Malinowski) endurance, detachment, local autonomy, *empilement* and, finally, fragmentation. Local public spaces in rural Benin, which are not well-defined but consist of interactions between several groups including but not limited to traditional chiefs, chiefs associations, agricultural syndicates and boards, young graduate associations and unemployed youth, though fluid in nature, are not susceptible to change induced by state initiatives. Therefore, when Soglo found it politically expedient to curry the favor of traditional chiefs, their limited power within public spaces was not aggrandized, nor was it seriously diminished when Kerekou

¹⁰⁶ Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, *Les Pouvoirs*.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 15-20.

stripped them of formal power. Instead, powerful groups emerge and stick around following certain national phases, resulting in a process of *empilement* where no actors are entirely replaced or seriously challenged but are simply piled one on top of the other, resulting in what the authors call “sedimentation” of local public spaces. The absence of the state, except in many cases involving land disputes, means that there is in fact no central authority rural denizens recognize as hegemonic. In some cases of conflict, local representatives of the state are solicited, or the gendarmerie is solicited in some cases of theft, or the sous-prefecture is called upon to adjudicate the succession of chiefs. However, with most other issues, the state plays no role. Instead, institutions are piled on top of one another, creating multiple and overlapping competencies. In this way, local power relations appropriate national changes for their own needs, and local actors become “consumerist” and engage in “institution shopping,” a term reminiscent of “forum shopping” in which parties to a court case seek venues which they feel would reach the most favorable outcome, an activity made possible by concurrent jurisdiction in federated states. It is worth noting that this conception is not far removed from conceptions advanced by certain political scientists such as Hyden and Boone, who in some cases acknowledge similarities between state-society relations in Africa and the United States, where local actors are adept at finding forums most conducive to a favorable outcome in their particular dispute.

The difference between the United States and Benin, however, is palpable in the level of Weberian formalization of power relations. Whereas *empilement* rightly characterizes the institutional structural organization at the local level and maintains a certain fluidity, in part due to oral culture, the *process* of social and power relations had remained relatively informal. The process of power relations in Beninois villages refers to matrimonial relations, and the deciders in a number of local organizations tend to be related in some way or another.¹⁰⁸

In short, the “autonomie partielle” of local political arenas means that national history leaves its mark but that great events at the national level are anchored in specific contexts which color, transform and reorganise these events.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, and true to their contention that it is too early to make any generalization for the entire continent, these claims remain specific to villages in Benin, and it is left to subsequent authors to forge ahead with the process of locating continent-wide patterns of local institutional change. A retreat of the state may lead to *empilement*

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, 36.

in Benin, but other forms of adaptation in rural areas where, perhaps, matrimonial relations are not as strong, might lead to conflict and forms of local centralization of powers.¹¹⁰ This work is important for helping to advance an open-ended methodology and for its lack of pre-conceived notions of power dynamics which hold that the state is more determinant of institutional change at the local level.

This more “open-ended and ecumenical” approach has since been revived by a number of scholars, most notably by Ben Jones who set out to assess the state-led decentralizing reforms of Uganda from the 1990s through to the present. Jones joins Olivier de Sardan, Bierschenk and Berry in lamenting “state-centric” approaches by both policy-makers in multi-lateral institutions and by academics where “any manifestation of social change is regarded as a reflection of that category of [state] policy or legislation being studied. Research is guided by the assumption that the state is the most important driver of development and change in society.”¹¹¹ Rather, a more appropriate rendering of social change would fall between this latter extreme and Hyden, whose economy of affection at the local level serves as the derivation of larger political systems. Jones cites Berry as instructive here who takes a middle route through the previous two poles of the literature on the relevance of the state in local institutional change. Berry claims the state is both weak in institutional terms and an object of political competition due to its control of land and property. Perhaps informing Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk, Berry prefers to discuss how clans, family networks, and local associations constitute and shape the political space through an analysis of the way state agricultural policies really impacted peasant communities.

In Jones’ monograph, the village of Oledai is introduced as one that falls outside the typical Ugandan success story of state-initiated decentralized development, thus hinting at a state-society characterization rather than a state-centered one. At first glance, Jones’ account of how Oledai absorbed state-level changes appears atypical, even unorthodox. In arguing that “externally funded community projects had a short lifespan in the Teso region [which includes Oledai]” because “they failed to link into people’s political or ideological projects,” Jones cites as evidence the money spent on burial societies rather than local government programs or even churches. The villagers clearly attached more importance to an institution which for them was perceived as

¹¹⁰ Solidarity, for instance, is often upheld through the assistance assured by extended families, allowing for the absorption of social, political, and economic shocks that may arise during sedimentation (*empilement*).

¹¹¹ Ben Jones, *Beyond the State in Rural Uganda*. (Vol. 39. Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 5.

legitimate and not socially contrived. Jones borrows Bayart's concept of extraversion to explain that the development money is derived externally, reinforcing the state apparatus' apathy towards local communities. In other words, and echoing Boone, the state is not dependent on the community for its existence and that is why the development initiatives were carried out haphazardly, without regard for the religious, customary, or social identities of the initiative's subjects. In the region of Teso, a mixture of conflict, the advent of Pentecostalism, and tradition meant that what concerned most people was not the state and its reforms, but securing a proper burial that would allow friends and relatives to live out eternity in peace. Institutionalization and change will therefore not take place in public spaces. "Instead many significant changes belong to logics, structures and practices that have a different provenance. Customary and religious institutions define the parameters for social action. In Oledai, as in much of the world, life is organised around a more disparate set of spaces that nonetheless continue to promise the possibility of change."¹¹² Thus, the unintended consequence of state-led decentralization was not development for this particular community but an appropriation of funds for what members of the community deemed most important, thus inadvertently contributing to institutions which might even detract from the living standards of the region's denizens. Here, the robustness of the local made itself felt, but it depended on the apathy, and then the ignorance of the state. Does this not invoke some prior structural arrangement as a condition for local resilience in the face of state encroachment? In the case of the Ugandan countryside, it seems that rural areas economically detached from the viability of the state have indeed enjoyed local robustness. But this portrait of separate spheres, of local reality and a state "suspended in midair," may not carry its logic in the context of state-society relations in oil-bearing communities, where the state has every reason not to be apathetic and to entangle itself in local politics.

Indeed, when the state is sufficiently interested in land, much of the literature seems to point to a deterioration of state-society relations as well as a breaking down of traditional power relations at the local level. Fisiy vividly demonstrated this process of traditional demise through an ethnography of customary Fon chieftainship faced with democratizing reforms in the North-West Province of Cameroon. Fisiy shows that the compromised authority and legitimacy of the Fon chieftaincy can be traced to their loss of control over the land, an effect of bureaucratization

¹¹² *ibid.* 165.

at the state level and its elective mechanisms. The interdependence of the Fon chiefs and their people has become eroded “as alternative sources of authority, both internal and external, compete for the regulation of community issues.”¹¹³ Since the Fon chiefs, in order to retain a semblance of power, were forced to concede tradition in exchange for the trust of the recently empowered local bureaucrats, the villagers began distrusting the chiefs, signaling a loss of autonomy. It is worth asking the question of whether good governance was satisfied in shifting the power to elected representatives who instituted land reforms, thus stripping the Fon chiefs of their power base, or whether it was harmed in stripping the people of their once-legitimate rulers and granting it to those who are at once more ideologically and physically distanced from their constituents. Another study takes a similar approach to that of Fisiy by analyzing the impact of state-led land reform fueled by the desire to facilitate oil exploitation. Sara Pantuliano, in an article of exceptional thoroughness, describes the coping strategies of the rural Misseriyya pastoralists to the contestation of Sudan’s Abyei State’s abundant oil reserves. She describes the situation almost in structuralist fashion how the “ecosystem of the Misseriyya can be defined as a non-equilibrium environment, with no long-term balance between populations, available resources and other elements” in which the “Misseriyya livelihood system has been systematically weakened by a series of external shocks” which led to a “process of adaptation.”¹¹⁴ The two main livelihood systems, pastoralism and subsistence farming, were undermined due to frequent interruptions to livestock herding routes stemming from appropriation of land for oil exploitation—the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005 redrew regional borders—and conflict as a result of land disputes, leading also to a higher incidence of settlement as opposed to transhumance. Since the advent of oil exploitation in the Muglad basin, Pantuliano reports an intensifying “leadership crisis” involving a “palpable mistrust both of traditional leaders and Misseriyya political leaders” accompanied by social fragmentation. Particular grievances are directed towards the Native Administration for being “excessively politicized and no longer reflecting tribal structures and interests.”¹¹⁵ State-led change thanks to oil exploitation had a measurable effect on governance through inflaming ethnic tensions and extraverting, so to speak, traditional and political leaders. Both ethnographic studies

¹¹³ Cyprian F. Fisiy, “Chieftaincy in the Modern State: An institution at the crossroads of democratic change.” *Paideuma* 41 (1995): 49-62, 51.

¹¹⁴ Sara Pantuliano, “Oil, Land and Conflict: the Decline of Misseriyya Pastoralism in Sudan 1.” *Review of African Political Economy* 37.123 (2010): 7-23, 9.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, 19.

and broad-based surveys therefore tend to show widespread deterioration in governance standards as a result of transformations in land-tenure systems, particularly those imposed by the state for the purpose of capital penetration.¹¹⁶ This begs comparison with Jones, who finds in Uganda a different set of state engagement in local affairs which seemingly had had little effect.

The monographs above, lacking in easily-appropriated hypotheses for international organizations looking to deliver aid and advice, demonstrate the need for a comparative approach, which has its basis in works by Evans who in the 1990s began assembling ethnographic works for worldwide comparison. Those studies by Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk, Jones, and Fisiy would thus be compared to find institutional patterns. Evans' generalizations have been questioned, however, for their insufficient "variation around the African norm"¹¹⁷ and also for the perceived superficiality of Evans' finding that good governance is the result of "a state bureaucracy's attainment of autonomy from particularistic pressures while remaining or becoming embedded in networks of relationships with private business people."¹¹⁸

Without abandoning the latter idea, contributors to the APPP argue that further research should aim to pick up where Evans left off with more studies like those of Olivier de Sardan and Bierschenk in which researchers aim to find out why the particular mix cited above comes about in the first place. In order to have *synergy* between state and society and thus good local governance, the proper mixture of *complementarity* and *embeddedness*, i.e. the division of labour between state and local authorities and the enmeshment of public actors in local social relations, must be present. This, in turn, depends on there being proper *context*, such as history and local traditional organization, and *construction* of social relations.¹¹⁹ Booth believes the APPP should pick up this line of inquiry and that the proper mix of socio-political conditions will hinge on

- whether the dominant forms of local leadership, at the village level and upwards, derive their authority from shared concepts of what is right and proper, and not (or not just) from legal-bureaucratic or electoral mandates;

¹¹⁶ See also Yasin Abdalla Eltayeb El Hadary and Franklin Obeng-Odoom, "Conventions, Changes, and Contradictions in Land Governance in Africa: The Story of Land Grabbing in North Sudan and Ghana", *Africa Today* 59, no.2 (2012): 58-78.

¹¹⁷ Booth, *Working with the Grain*, 21.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.* 21.

¹¹⁹ Evans, Peter. "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy." *World development* 24.6 (1996): 1119-1132.

- whether the local communities are endowed with mechanisms that permit them to discourage free-riding and incentivise cooperation concerning public goods provision;
- [and] the extent to which the prevailing institutions both permit and incentivise technical specialists to apply their expertise to the provision of important public goods.¹²⁰

The research above represents the updated contributions of anthropologists working on governance, and more particularly local governance, in Africa and elsewhere, though it does not capture the entire spectrum of anthropologists working on political dynamics at the local level vis-à-vis external shocks. The literature above has focused mainly on state-society and state-peasant relations typically pursuant to either a decentralizing or democratization program, but democratization is not the only way international forces and state forces intervene in local affairs and touch governance. The exploitation of natural resources, and more particularly oil, of course, has occupied a great number of development scholars through Rentier Theory (see above), and only recently have anthropologists begun to directly engage this body of scholarly work using ethnographic tools. Interestingly enough, there seems to be little to no dialogue between the two anthropological schools of knowledge on local governance in Africa, and this will later be dealt with in detail.

1.5 Describing Livelihoods in Non-Economic Terms

The term “governance” has been wielded haphazardly, not just in this thesis but throughout much political commentary on sub-Saharan Africa. It has also been the catch-all term for desirable social outcomes such as good livelihoods, which is problematic because the concept itself is laden with Western values. In fact, political research on Africa has all but abandoned a valid and potentially fruitful inquiry into whether or not “good” governance actually does lead to improved livelihoods, while the field of economics has by and large dominated discussions of livelihoods (typically represented by macroeconomic accounting, such as GDP or other macro-indexes). The purpose of this section is to problematize governance and arrive at a relativized conception more appropriate to the research design of this thesis.

¹²⁰ Booth, *Working with the Grain*, 25

The progenitor of what has been fashionably called “good governance” is without a doubt intended to be democracy itself, albeit with a minor twist. Literature on democracy has both predated and coincided with that of good governance, since the latter concept was largely invented by Western-backed international organizations. At least in the Western world, building democracy in the newly independent African states became something of an obsessive preoccupation, helping to spur literature on what constitutes democracy, such as Robert Dahl and his foundational definition.¹²¹ Reacting to Schumpeter’s “minimalist” approach to what is democratic, Dahl preferred to broaden the definition from “processual” attributes such as free and competitive elections to a “maximalist” one which encompasses the real outcome of those processes. Contestation or competition and participation or inclusion are necessary to have a true democracy.¹²² For the purposes of measurement, however, this definition proves inadequate. We need, according to many authors, a notion of democracy which is “sufficiently complex, in its basic dimensions consensual, and empirically well-defined.”¹²³ Only something between minimalist and maximalist approaches could overcome the perennial problems of conceptualization, measurement, and aggregation.¹²⁴ Although some find the World Bank’s criteria for good governance, which includes concepts like process, capacity, and institutional respect and which relies on expert surveys to measure those with a unique coding system,¹²⁵ to be quite valid, some Africanists contend that measures such as the World Bank Governance Indicators may not have validity for many African spaces.

Hyden highlights the difficulty of applying Western notions of good governance to African political spaces. In Africa, the economy of affection makes it difficult to overlay traditional Western dualities like public and private, therefore complicating what is legitimately “good” in an African context. This is also due to “clan politics” and the constituent absence of a ruling class like that found in Europe’s constituted states, pre-empting the kind of formalization and rationalization instituted to regulate interactions between classes.¹²⁶ Conversely, others argue that

¹²¹ Robert Dahl, *Poliarchy: Participation and Opposition*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

¹²² See Joseph Alois Schumpeter, *Socialism, Capitalism and Democracy*. (Harper and Brothers, 1942).

¹²³ Dirk Berg-Schlusser, "Indicators of Democracy and Good Governance as Measures of the Quality of Democracy in Africa: A Critical Appraisal." *Acta Politica* 39, no. 3 (2004): 248-278.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ See Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Pablo Zoido-Lobaton, "Governance Matters." (The World Bank, 1999) ; Kraay, Aart, and Daniel Kaufmann. "Growth Without Governance." (The World Bank, 2002).

¹²⁶ Hyden, *African Politics*.

it is exactly the lack of good governance which has resulted in graft and informality. Abrahamsen contends that the good governance discourse creates a false binary pitting alien state intervention against indigenous capitalism in African states. Since Weberian states do not and cannot exist in Africa, they must be dismantled in favor of laissez-faire capitalism. Only then can true economic potential be unleashed. Setting aside the conspiratorial tone alluded to by several Africanists sensitive to guises for capitalist penetration, Abrahamsen then argues for a more careful approach: “Civil society and its relationship to democratisation cannot be understood in abstract terms, but requires instead a specific analysis of the various groups and interests involved in these struggles.”¹²⁷ That is to say, researchers must discover and take seriously what interest groups want and not transpose, as the World Bank purportedly does, their own conceptions and expectations.

This survey demonstrates that the notion of good governance is therefore highly contested when applied to sub-Saharan Africa. This has consequences for the following research design and requires that governance indicators not be taken at face value, but that locating states and communities with disparate governance entails a close, methodical inspection of what constitutes governance. This is an extremely important task, as changes in governance cannot be detected, and therefore agency cannot be traced, unless a valid and well-informed system of coding governance is put in place.

A better way to achieve the correct balance between maximalist and minimalist approaches, or between objectively applied and subjectively derived measures of governance, is to choose a set of indicators general enough as to be applicable to many cultures and specific enough as to avoid many of pitfalls of maximalist approaches, and then, through extensive fieldwork, to locate the modes of governance and the legitimately recognized forms of authority using ethnographic methods. The World Bank has done a fine job of setting out a broad-based definition of good governance at the level of states, but local governance remains a comparatively understudied area. In this regard, a study by Dele Olowu and James S. Wunsch deserves attention for asking under what conditions “decentralization reforms bring about viable systems of local governance in Africa,” local governance being loosely defined as “local systems of collective action that manage a locality’s public affairs and are accountable to local residents.”¹²⁸ What

¹²⁷ Rita Abrahamsen, *Disciplining Democracy: Development Discourse and Good Governance in Africa*. (London: Zed Books, 2000), 55.

¹²⁸ Dele Olowu and James Wunsch, *Local Governance in Africa: The Challenges of Democratic Decentralization*. (Eds. Dele Olowu, and James Stevenson Wunsch. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004.), 1.

distinguishes this work from the overarching corpus of literature on successful decentralization (see above) at large is precisely the authors' problematization and discussion of governance at the local level. The authors found unworkable the World Bank definition of governance which placed disproportionate emphasis on state leaders, as well as another definition which emphasized sharing authority for dispensing public services. Rather, the authors subscribe to what may be termed as an institutional/rational choice-based model¹²⁹ which more completely defines local governance as

a rule-governed process through which residents of a defined area participate in their own governance in limited but locally important matters; are the key decision-makers in determining what their priority concerns are, how they will respond to them, and what and how resources will be raised to deal with those concerns; and are the key decisionmakers in managing and learning from those responses.¹³⁰

Understanding the factors that explain why some states subject to the neo-liberal paradigm underwent more progress to good local governance entails analysing the *process* of local governance as well as *outcomes*, a reflection of the cleavage in the democracy literature above. Certain preconditions must be met for local communities to effectively carry out the work of good governance, such as authority, resources, accountability, effective institutions, and a sound regulatory framework.¹³¹ But whether these are preconditions for sustaining good governance following the transformation wrought by resource exploitation has yet to be considered. Nevertheless, the same impulse that drives this thesis, to better fit state and international policy to variations in local political systems, is present. Aside from structural, or contextual, factors of local governance in African states, the authors identify "indigenous systems" which have also determined the relative success of decentralization programs. These systems include classes such as "community organization," which includes markets governed by women, self-help and

¹²⁹ See e.g. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. (Cambridge university press, 1990) and Goran Hyden. "The Study of Governance." *Governance and Politics in Africa* (Lynner Rienner Boulder, Col 1992).

¹³⁰ Olowu and Wunsch, *Local Governance*, 4.

¹³¹ *ibid.*, 7.

community improvement organizations, and farmers' unions, and those classed as "traditional rulership," namely chiefs and governing councils at numerous levels.¹³² Based on the authors' findings in countries like Tanzania, Uganda and Nigeria, these indigenous systems can either enhance the success of local governance as they negotiate state-led changes, or they can ignore their role as "civil-society partner" if they perceive a conflictual relationship.¹³³

The approach championed by Oluwu and Wunsch strikes a reasonable balance between objectively applied governance indicators, or minimalist approaches, which bear the risk of imposing one culture's definitions on another, and complete subjective approaches which run the risk of extreme relativism. Like the realists above, however, the effort to define a one-size-fits-all form of governance, whether minimalist or maximalist, commits the realist fallacy detailed above of "putting the cart before the horse" and assuming, first, that at least some elements of governance are applicable to all spaces and, second, that these elements (i.e. "traditional rulership") must always lead to improved social, political, and material outcomes. In an effort to draw the definition of governance towards minimalism and an appreciation of local characteristics, Oluwu and Wunsch refer often to "indigenous systems" and the need to discover in each community "a rule-governed process through which residents of a defined area participate in their own governance." In essence, the authors appear to be revisiting a sociological preoccupation with *anomie*.

"Livelihoods" can be characterized in many ways, and are in most cases represented by human development indexes, economic statistics, and, of course, governance indexes. Material comfort is a highly relativized concept, since it is often based on marketed technology whose purpose is not necessarily to better livelihoods. Secondly, Western-conceived indexes are notoriously difficult to measure, and are beyond the capacity of one researcher to fulfill. The best way to take an unbiased stance towards what livelihoods entail is to abandon indexes, statistics, and governance altogether, using an outcome which is applicable across time and space.

The concept of "anomie" is one which has surfaced and re-surfaced since its modern inception in the 19th century by Durkheim, for whom anomie was a breakdown of social regulation

¹³² It should be cautioned, however, that frequent reference to "indigenous systems" and "traditional rulership" perpetuates "otherness," a colonial heritage in of itself which risks obfuscating historical constructions of inequality. See Peter Pels, "What Has Anthropology Learned from the Anthropology of Colonialism?", *Social Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (2008): 280-299.

¹³³ Oluwu and Wunsch, *Local Governance*, 19-22.

when a society transitioned from mechanic to organic solidarity. The concept was revived by R.K. Merton in 1938, who sought to use anomie to explain the impact of industrialization on Western societies.¹³⁴ Merton later defined anomie as “a condition of socioeconomic structures that appears in periods of rapid structural change, when the social systemic processes which reinforce social integration decline in salience and force” while at the same time “the malintegration between social and cultural structures is heightened.”¹³⁵

Anomie never rose to the status of hegemony in understanding undesired social outcomes, but it enjoyed another revival in the late 1990s, when Western-backed development programs and aid were largely seen to fail for lack of cultural adaptation. The subject was more notably addressed by a collective publication which sought to describe anomie in several cultural settings. Each study proceeded with the understanding that when periods of accelerated structural change—spurred by an “exogenous process of contact” or an “endogenous dialectic”¹³⁶—outpace growth, “interpretive models” would cease to “enable the altered reality to be understood again and again in meaningful ways.”¹³⁷ Anomie then leads to “crisis-laden insecurity” among broad swaths of the population. Cultural patterns of interpretation lose their function, social integration within a community breaks down, and valid behavioral norms as well as personal authority disintegrate.¹³⁸ Manifesting anomie are “difficulties in individual adaptation,” a “loss of general social orientation,” “development of feelings of insecurity and marginalization,” “uncontrolled rising expectations,” “feelings of relative deprivation,” and “the questioning of the legitimacy of core social values.”¹³⁹

The outcome of a political system’s interaction with the society it objectifies, and with which it interfaces, is therefore best represented by the internally accepted modes of interaction which allow that society to function predictably and happily. In sum, the call for more participatory and subjective methods of measuring development in general cannot be ignored,

¹³⁴ Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie" *American Sociological Review* 3, no. 5 (1938): 672-682.

¹³⁵ Robert K. Merton, "Foreword." In Peter Atteslander, Bettina Gransow, and John Western, eds. *Comparative Anomie Research: Hidden Barriers-Hidden Potential for Social Development*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), XI.

¹³⁶ Peter Atteslander. "Introduction." In Peter Atteslander, Bettina Gransow, and John Western, eds. *Comparative Anomie Research: Hidden Barriers-Hidden Potential for Social Development*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 11.

¹³⁷ It is worth noting here the parallels with Vansina’s notion of “cognitive reality.”

¹³⁸ Atteslander, *Comparative Anomie*, 9.

¹³⁹ Merton, *Foreword*, XV-XVI.

while at the same time the researcher and policy designer must heed the danger of re-producing local policy structures which do not enjoy broad-based legitimate acceptance.

CHAPTER 2. Theory and Research

2.1 Theory

There are two ontologies established in Chapter 1 for understanding how politics impact peri-urban and rural communities. Realists tend to extrapolate from formal structures all the way to international-structural dimensions, while relativists refuse to “skip” the critical steps of conceptualizing institutions, preferring to begin from the ground up and rarely conceding that generalizable conclusions are ready to be made. Strictly speaking, differing planes of ontological truth should not communicate, but for the opposing conclusions reached by those planes applied to my research question. Both are therefore needed to fill a remarkable void in the knowledge of local politics in Africa, as well as to advance a more ecological¹⁴⁰ understanding of the impacts of political systems. Among the broader research questions is whether the realists are correct in employing received facts in theory generation, not to mention whether chains of causality are reliable and valid. Are the concepts we use to assess local politics both reliable and valid?

For this study, I have chosen to select those which are not always representative of their ontological approaches, but which to me seem the most promisingly reliable, valid (demonstrated repeatedly in various studies), and capable of being operationalized. In the case of ontological realism applied to international structures, oil rentierism is used due to the degree of its theoretical advancement. The internally realistic approach is represented by “Neo-Tillyian” authors, while the relativists are represented by authors on “hybrid governance.” With the exception of rentierism, which is by and large delineated by Douglas Yates with respect to Africa, the latter two have been grouped according to the similarities in both approach and findings of two or more authors (see Table 1).

¹⁴⁰ The contemporary understanding of political ecology owes itself largely to the work of Raymond L. Bryant. In “Political ecology: An emerging research agenda in Third-World studies,” *Political Geography* 11, no. 1, (1992): 12-36, Bryant defines political ecology as “an attempt to develop an integrated understanding of how environmental and political forces interact to mediate social and environmental change” (Abstract). Philippe Le Billon is notable for expanding the holism of political ecology to non-environmental policy concerns. See “The Political Ecology of War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflicts” *Political Geography* 20, no. 5, (2001): 561-584.

Uniting most realists is the underlying assumption that weak institutions and rule of law lead to the state being usurped by individuals and groups of individuals as an instrument of profiteering. When the country is endowed with a commodifiable resource, this tendency is exacerbated. Walter Rodney insistently argued for Africa's continued economic dependence, while Jean-François Bayart and Christopher Clapham deftly theorized individual and group responses to the dependent condition, focusing primarily on political elites. The result is a maelstrom of actors maximizing power and assets. Rentier theorists take the specific case of oil rent dependence to explain how elites, unfettered by law enforcement, exercise their maximizing prerogatives to the detriment of democratic and rule-of-law values. Rentier theory embodies an organized research program with defined concepts, falsifiability, and a theoretical commitment to the rigidity of universalist and structuralist thinking. Also, oil dependence represents an extreme form of dependence due to the unparalleled cash flows and central management of oil revenues. For these reasons, it serves as an ideal representation of ontological realism applied to African politics.

Ontological resource realism is therefore represented by the latest work of Yates, who expertly sums up the causal logic of resource rentierism. Dependency is created by a significant amount of oil rent, leaving aside the question of whether the country had been made dependent by its own political class so as to advance clientelistic interests. Within the political dimensions of rentier theory, the "state" is relieved of the burden of taxation thanks to windfall oil revenues. Neither does it make sense for the political elite to support the administrative infrastructure for tax collection nor do they find it expedient to draw unwanted attention to state activities. Because of this, the political elite cease to be accountable to the citizenry, which severs the channels of democratic participation and de-legitimizes the state (assuming legitimacy is to be had through formal avenues of public accountability). The more dependent a state is on oil for its financial sustenance, the more vulnerable it is to these outcomes.

Rentier theory is arguably grand theory, and this fact might lead some to argue against its applicability to rural and peri-urban spaces. It deals with abstracted concepts (e.g. "rentier mentality," "political accountability," etc.) and builds upon itself syllogistically, sacrificing specifics for analytical cohesion. Figure 1 demonstrates clearly this particular feature of rentier

theory via a tree diagram designed by Yates.¹⁴¹ There are two reasons, however, for why I argue the applicability of rentierism to localities. First, the ontological and human behavioral assumptions underlying the axes of rentier theory are fairly consistent throughout, and are indeed applicable to rural and peri-urban spaces. Corruption is held to be the illegal personal gain through public office, legitimacy rests on the ability of a Weberian state to answer to its citizens, and democratic participation amounts to civil society. Behaviorally, individuals are maximizers facing constraints, albeit less than those in states with strong institutions. A “rentier mentality” should permeate all corners of society where there is perceived access to easy riches. Second, limited democratic participation, decline in state legitimacy, and corruption—the ultimate outcomes of the state’s financial autonomy—are conditions sustained by individuals who themselves reside anywhere. If the state is any apparatus subsidized and sponsored by the main organs of statehood in a capital city, then most municipal government concerns matters of the state, and the theorized incentive to instrumentalize public positions for personal profit remains. Grand theories are there to be qualified, not proven correct.

Table 1: Synthesized Perspectives on Politically-induced Anomie in Africa

	Authors	Ontology	Most instrumental catalyst of change	General process of arriving at social and political anomie in rural/peri-urban spaces
Rentierism	Yates, Omeje, Bayart, Clapham	Realistic	International material interests, e.g. oil extraction	Oil rent > State financial autonomy > rentier mentality and state relief from taxation
Neo-Tillyian	Tilly, Boone, Mamdani	Internally Realistic	State formation and maintenance	Communal structure > Rural social hierarchy and economic autonomy > decentralized despotism as a state strategy
Hybridity	Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, Lund, Hyden, Geschiere	Relative	Lack of local cognitive and institutional hegemonies	Non-hegemonic state and/or competing norms > Reforms/Situational adjustments > Incongruence, dilution, sedimentation

¹⁴¹ Douglas Yates, *The Scramble for African Oil* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

On the other end of the ontological spectrum of theories explaining the impact of politics on rural and peri-urban livelihoods are hybridists. For cultural-political relativists like Médard, Hyden, Moore, Douglas, Peters, or Geschiere, the state in its Weberian conception is problematized and may not even be a valid object of analysis in peri-urban and rural Africa. Among the cultural relativists are hybridists such as Hyden, Bierschenk, Olivier de Sardan, and Lund, for whom a problematic state conditions a territory's politics. Unlike rentierism, in which low accountability and corruption are consequences of a state's dependence on foreign-derived income rather than its own people, low accountability and corruption are ultimately products of uncertainty. The absence of a hegemonic, norm-setting state means that any additional reforms¹⁴² are not guaranteed to be absorbed coherently, creating what Lund calls "incongruence" or what Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan term "fragmentation" or "dilution." The result may be a loss of predictability and the practice of "bricolage"¹⁴³ where the poorest segments of society tend to lose out. Additionally, no public authority feels the pressure to be held accountable thanks to dilution.

A third way acknowledges the uniformity of a state, one which acts according to a neo-Tillyian logic. For believers of extraversion and rentierism, the state in Africa is but a tool for certain elite and private interests. For neo-Tillyian perspectives, the state seeks to reify itself and engages in the four activities: war-making, state-making, protection, and extraction. Its decisions are therefore impactful and have consequences, and its decisions have a state-maintaining logic, departing drastically from the insights of hybridists.¹⁴⁴ Mamdani implicitly adopts this view in arguing that decentralized despotism has been a state strategy to maintain order in the context of dual economies. Clientelism and patrimonialism become the most efficient means to carry out this despotism, which perverts civil society both in the rural and urban sectors, rendering any attempts at reform utterly dependent on the randomized quality of local leadership. Boone's elaboration of Mamdani's thesis, however, relegates decentralized despotism to a state strategy arrived at in only one of four scenarios, and only one in which the sub-national population in question is hierarchical but dependent on the state for its economic well-being. When the sub-national population is

¹⁴² Reforms are meant to convey any changes to the institutional landscape. Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan refer to this process as "sedimentation," while Lund calls it "proliferation." See Lund, *Twilight Institutions*.

¹⁴³ Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse University Press, 1986).

¹⁴⁴ Hybridists, in stark contrast neo-Tillyian authors, would most likely conceive the post-colonial state as a synthesis of institutions where opposing interests can find a place. In this way, hybridity departs from Médard's neo-patrimonialism. But unlike Médard, hybridists assume no negative outcome when postulating the impact of syncretized institutions on forms of anomie.

hierarchical and economically autonomous, the state's Tillyian prerogatives of extraction and state-making predict a regime strategy of usurpation of that sub-national population. Where there is little social hierarchy, the state will either "occupy" the region or remain absent, depending on the derivable economic benefits. Boone's work, built on rigorous theory and supported by case studies, is a fine example of neo-Tillyian application to African settings and guides the analysis in Chapter 6.

Long-term livelihoods in peri-urban and rural spaces can therefore be politically impacted in three ways: via the corrupting effects of a hijacked state dependent on foreign income, via a concerted state strategy of efficient control, or through the uncertainty and opportunism bred by an incongruous proliferation of loosely defined public authorities. Each theory posits a breakdown in public trust and a rise in informal and corruptive behavior, but many of the theorized processes of arriving at these negative conditions are clearly incommensurable and can hardly reinforce each other. For rentierism, the cause of noxious informality is due in part to a bloated state where government jobs are awarded for patronage and bureaucratic work ethic falls, while for Boone's neo-Tillyian approach informality comes as a result of rather the opposite—the strategic retraction of the state where local despots are given free rein. For hybridists it is neither; rather, a confused array of state-like authorities prevent institutionalization.

All three approaches theorize processes which converge on similar outcomes for livelihoods. Though different in name, these outcomes all more or less concern breakdowns in social and political systems which served to ensure stability and the regularization of social and political norms. In other words, they lead to social and political anomie and the problematization of previous interpretive models (patterns of interaction, otherwise referred to simply as institutions). Section 1.5 argued that governance was a value-laden concept which has been errantly substituted in much of the literature for desirable social and political outcomes, while development and economic indexes have questionable reliability in an African context. Instead, anomie is an outcome adapted to any social or political space, and may be considered a universal "bad."

What makes anomie so compelling as a concept and operationalized outcome within a study is also its weakness. "Good governance" is essentially a measure of good relations between state and society, but it is entirely objective. Good governance indicators are based on "hard" data and supplemented by expert testimonies responding to an objective questionnaire. These objective

criteria are more often than not “universal,” and typically draw from consensus reached by multilateral conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Performance on these criteria informs success on many good governance indicators. As touched upon above, this represents a fundamental problem to be dealt with by not only political scientists engaged in a positivistic endeavor to improve government, but also by the oil curse researchers. Furthermore, governance indicators primarily describe state-society relations, but it is rare that Africans living in rural, agrarian conditions have frequent contact with the state or even exposure to the means of enforcing the rule of state law. What rules in these rural and peri-urban spaces tends to be society itself and the norms it has established, or attempted to establish, over time to provide social stability. One can even add to the list of societal objectives that of political stability, if we expand our notion of politics to embrace informal relations of power. Due to the focus on formal structures of power (typically located in urban spaces) by political science and how it has informed governance indicators, we are left with an unsatisfactory idea of “governance” in peri-urban and rural spaces where oil extraction is typically carried out and where the state is relatively absent; even if an African state worked towards improving its governance, little impact would be felt in the periphery. The sociological concept of anomie, i.e. the negative manifestation by citizens of rapid structural change, however, transcends urban-periphery divides. Societies are always in flux, but if the pace of change cannot be sustained by existing cognitive realities and expectations, anomie can prevail. If a society is not allowed the time and resources to adapt to structural reforms such as the fast-growing importance of money vis-à-vis ancestral knowledge, individuals may feel insecure, marginalized, a loss of orientation, or relatively deprived. These are certainly universal “bads” even as characterized by proponents of good governance. It is argued here that anomie is a more direct—and applicable—approach to identifying these negative outcomes in peri-urban and rural spaces.

But what has politics got to do with this? Firstly, politics cannot be disembedded from society. Public authorities are both a product and cause of societal characteristics. A “structural change” engendering anomic trends could therefore be instigated by state-led rentierism, local corruption, a disconnect between local government and its constituents, complex processes of monetization and capitalization, etc. It is the difficult objective of this thesis to determine via historicization the causes of these structural changes, not to mention identifying the structural changes themselves. This represents the inherent weakness of anomie as an operationalized

outcome in this study. Causes of change are neither elegantly derived nor efficiently described, and history is vital to the understanding of *relative* structural stasis. In addition, history is flimsy, and can be interpreted in multiple ways, which is why thick descriptions of the Ndougou's past are necessary. The other weakness of anomie as an operationalized and undesirable outcome is that evidence of anomie (examples) in and of itself does not indicate its cause by power structures, formal and otherwise. More interpretation and thus susceptibility to critique is warranted in order to establish a connection between structural changes and public authorities.

A case of an African structural change, or a change in model/pattern of interpretation, was given by Gem et al., who find the concept of anomie "heuristically fruitful in understanding underground mutations of the social order, rather than ephemeral episodes of conflict or violence."¹⁴⁵ With respect to Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, the authors explored the local interpretive model of traditional solidarity and its relative success under the countries' exogenous contact with globalization and economic opening. "Once taken for granted," they argue, "the rules governing the exchange of gifts and the redistribution of wealth have become subject to complex negotiations. The situation implies that individuals have assumed a degree of freedom but also that those who depend on them no longer know exactly what to expect." Clientelism, for instance, allowed interpretive models to flourish in urban (modern) spaces. The individual burdens become therefore both economic and psychological, as cadets expend mental energy trying to appraise their degree of certainty in solidarity transactions, which came less and less to fruition. And without the ability to provide adequate social security, African states inadvertently necessitate the continued societal reliance on solidarity, however compromised and problematized it has become.¹⁴⁶

Anomie can, in fact, affect any pattern of interpretation within society, including politics.¹⁴⁷ Even if one accepts political and rule-of-law variables as valid barometers for measuring the health of societies, "political anomie" is a measurable/observable construct with known relationships to negatively perceived political degradations,¹⁴⁸ such as the outcomes predicted by rentierism. These

¹⁴⁵ Jean-Pierre Gern, Etienne Mallefer and Olivier Tschannen, "The Economic Crisis, Globalization, and Anomie in West Africa." In Peter Atteslander, Bettina Gransow, and John Western, eds. *Comparative Anomie Research: Hidden Barriers-Hidden Potential for Social Development*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 99-100.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 110.

¹⁴⁷ Sebastian De Grazia, *The Political Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

¹⁴⁸ Charles D. Farris, "Selected Attitudes on Foreign Affairs as Correlates of Authoritarianism and Political Anomie." *The Journal of Politics* 22, no. 1 (1960): 50-67 ; Robert E. Agger, Marshall N. Goldstein, and Stanley A. Pearl. "Political Cynicism: Measurement and Meaning." *The Journal of Politics* (23, no. 3 (1961): 477-506) ;

include limited democratic participation, decline in state legitimacy, inefficiency, and corruption. Among the first to operationalize the term “political anomie,” Ferris defined it as “feelings of powerlessness, cynicism, futility and apathy in relation to the political system.”¹⁴⁹ Only later did the term fall out of fashion, giving way to the much more recognizable “political disaffection.”¹⁵⁰ But because the indexes Yates uses to support concepts such as corruption rely on perceptions, and because these perceptions approximate the individual manifestations of political anomie, the concept is both useful and valid for the purposes of fieldwork data collection. In the case of each theory, anomie must be shown to have derived from informality, corruption, and a handful of other political outcomes.

2.2 Research Design and Case Selection

2.2.1. Restated Problem and Questions

Which political structures and processes lead to political and social anomie in peri-urban and rural communities, and how? I arrived at this slightly reformulated question after discovering ontological nuances in the literature, as well as after opting for anomie as an outcome with more promise for universal application. Keeping in mind my three theoretical approaches, as well as the theoretical interest in restricting cases to oil-bearing communities, the following questions have directed my research as they apply to each community:

1. What political interpretive models¹⁵¹ existed prior to oil exploitation?
2. Did social and political anomic structures arise after oil exploitation? If so, in what form?
3. Which of my three theoretical approaches best explains and accounts for a change in anomic structures?

Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*. Vol. 33. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970).

¹⁴⁹ Ferris, *Selected Attitudes*, 53.

¹⁵⁰ James D. Wright, "Political Disaffection." In *The handbook of Political Behavior* (pp. 1-79. Springer, Boston, MA, 1981) ; Torcal, Mariano, and José Ramón Montero. *Political Disaffection in Contemporary Democracies: Social Capital, Institutions and Politics*. (Routledge, 2006).

¹⁵¹ Otherwise known as patterns of interaction, or even institutions in the sociological sense.

The following research design aimed to answer these questions, and in so doing allowed me to reach tentative conclusions regarding not only the most appropriate ontological approach for understanding politics in peri-urban communities, but also the most impactful strata of governance as well as inter-communal differences which were discovered to be important factors in the development of anomic structures.

2.2.2 Design and Methods

The research questions cannot be answered using quantitative methods, given the problematization of several concepts and definitions. As such, it is most appropriate to proceed with a comparative case study methodology. In addition, Robert K. Yin remarks that *how* questions, as opposed to *what* or *why* questions, “deal with operational links over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence.”¹⁵² A copious amount of quantitative research has been devoted to discovering linear relationships around the resource curse and rentierism, as Chapter 1 has shown, yet this research has tended to leave out consideration of anthropological methods, as anthropologists of oil have noted. And while hybridists have tended to exclude or simply ignore that many local institutions are constituted in interaction with an international system which is itself governed by empirics and quantitative data—FDI, for instance—such quantitative impacts should more properly be tested in a comparison (see below). Since local institutions have no consensus definition due to the relative novelty of both the sub-field and this research question, the choice of a qualitative case study methodology becomes ever more justified. According to Yin, the strength of such a case study is in the high degree of conceptual validity it affords the researcher.¹⁵³ Concepts such as “anomie” and “institutions,” let alone the “resource curse” and “governance,” cannot be fully extrapolated in a quantitative study and fully accounted for. Anthropologists, and even some political scientists, make a very strong case for ethnographic work which evades strict descriptions of what accounts for local community power and good governance.

¹⁵² Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 9.

¹⁵³ *ibid.*

The variation of case study design chosen to answer the research question is the comparative method, and more specifically the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). To test the validity of a theory, the comparative method establishes relationships between two or more variables by holding others constant.¹⁵⁴ In MSSD, as many independent variables between two systems (in this case, states) as possible are held constant so as to isolate those “experimental” variables which may be the cause for a different *dependent* variable between the two systems. “Common systemic characteristics are conceived of as ‘controlled for,’ whereas intersystemic differences are viewed as explanatory variables.”¹⁵⁵

Two fieldwork locations, Gamba in the Département of Ndougou (Gabon) and Takoradi in the Western Region (Ghana), were chosen for comparison over the time period concerned. This time period is designated by the beginning of oil exploration through the present. In this regard, both cases have in common several “control factors” for each community or small region. The control factors include, first and foremost, the existence of upstream oil operations which is said to curse local populations, not only through environmental degradation and economic imbalance but also through the hollowing out of institutions which may have been accountable to the citizenry. Secondly, each community is located within a sub-Saharan African, post-colonial state. That is, each community has had to negotiate presupposed neo-patrimonialism and adjust to the reality of informal power relations and extraversion at the state level which hardly pre-disposes state elites to seriously regard rural constituents.

The differences between the communities may be considered the potential explanatory factors for different anomic outcomes. Some of these factors also appear as explanations for local governance variance in the literature, a convenience which firmly grounds this thesis in several related research programs given above.¹⁵⁶ Prominent among the explanatory factors are pre-colonial culture and indigenous political systems. Though chieftaincy is the most prevalent form of local governance in sub-Saharan Africa, public spaces at the local level are characterized by a

¹⁵⁴ Arend Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method." *American Political Science Review* (65 (1971): 682–693.

¹⁵⁵ Henry Teune, Adam Przeworski, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*. (New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1970), 33.

¹⁵⁶ Both the APPP introduced in Chapter 1 and the anthropology of oil (see Behrends) aim towards a comparative program of ethnography.

proliferation of social forms and structures which mediate power relations.¹⁵⁷ Secondly, though each of the communities is administratively subjected to a post-colonial state, those states do not share the same “extraversion portfolios,” a concept developed by Bayart which describes choices available to extraverted state elites who depend not on their constituents but on external actors. Extraversion portfolios are enhanced and diversified when elites have more resources, such as oil, to instrumentalize towards their domestic authority. Inversely, a lack of resources depletes extraversion portfolios, leading to contestation from within. An extension of this hypothesis would surely have it that elites with less diversified extraversion portfolios are less powerful vis-à-vis internal pressures such as local and regional grievances. Less diversified extraversion portfolios may be the result of declining oil output, allegations of human rights violations, or over-dependence on any single external actor, whether it be a particular state or multinational corporation, all of which is deeply enmeshed in state history and state events. If any of these factors can be traced to changed social and political anomie in these communities, a case for rentierism is made. Thirdly, the studied localities will differ based on the political economic disposition of local elites vis-à-vis the state.¹⁵⁸ Finally, one community (Gamba, Gabon) is located in a rentier state, while the other (Sekondi-Takoradi) is not, or is at least in the process of developing a rentier state, i.e. those which do not meet the criteria for true rentierism but are nonetheless trending in that direction.¹⁵⁹ Gamba is theoretically exposed to all the ailments attributed to states highly dependent on natural resources for government revenue, while Sekondi-Takoradi benefits from more diversified political economies, and should not be expected to undergo the kind of monetization of socio-political relations which takes place as a result of rent-seeking. To pick up where the three factual research questions left off in Section 2.2.1, the introduction of a comparison invites the following three analytical research questions:

4. What institutional differences (patterns of interaction) existed between the two communities before oil exploitation?

¹⁵⁷J.P. Olivier de Sardan, "A Moral Economy of Corruption in Africa?." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (37, no. 1 (1999): 25-52) ; Bierschenk, Thomas, and Jean-Pierre Olivier De Sardan. "Local Powers and a Distant State in Rural Central African Republic." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (35, no. 3 (1997): 441-468.

¹⁵⁸ Boone, *Political Topographies*.

¹⁵⁹ Beblawi and Luciani, *The Rentier State*.

5. Did these institutional differences account for differences in the growth or decrease in anomie?
6. What conclusions can therefore be drawn pertaining to the validity of the three approaches, and more specifically to the most impactful strata (international/exogenous, state-local/endogenous) on livelihoods?

Chapter 3 and Section 7.1 respond to Research Question 1, discussing via diachronic historical narrative the pre-oil interpretive models of Gamba and Sekondi-Takoradi respectively. Likewise, Chapter 4 and Section 7.2 elaborate the post-oil changes in anomic structures in Gamba and Sekondi-Takoradi respectively. Chapter 3 and Section 7.1 heavily rely on secondary sources, namely historical accounts and documentation, while Chapter 4 and Section 7.2 rely on both documentation and interviews.

Since notions of political interpretive models are vague, the twin methods of “process tracing” and Historical Institutionalism have been useful. “The method of process tracing,” states Tulia G. Falletti, “was originally proposed to incorporate historical narratives within highly abstract theories and explanations in the social sciences.”¹⁶⁰ The point is to link the development of institutions and other factors to a different outcome (i.e. factors of changing anomie) with the use of historical narrative, locating cause and effect along the way. It is a method that best suits the discovery of exogenous or endogenous dialectics of changing anomie over time. As Falletti states,

When narratives seek to incorporate relatively long periods of time, changes in variables that are exogenous (or endogenous) to the model are likely to occur and can significantly change the actors’ preferences, options, and strategies. The idea of stable equilibria is severely confining when applied to historical narratives. Hence, analytic narratives are not well suited to incorporating changes that reshape the preferences of actors or the effects of events that may render previously available options no longer viable.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Tulia G. Falletti, “Theory-Guided Process-Tracing in Comparative Politics: Something Old, Something New.” *American Association of Political Science Newsletter* (Fall 2006), 1.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, 3.

Chapters 5-6 and Section 7.3 each respond to Research Question 3, where the chosen theory (see Table 1) is applied to changes in anomie in Gamba and Sekondi-Takoradi respectively. Gamba's lengthier experience with oil extraction, in addition to the fact that little to no like research had been conducted there prior to this study, necessitated a more profound examination of interpretive models and anomie, which then necessitated a lengthier analysis in Chapters 6. Chapter 5 is dedicated to rentierism, since Gabon qualifies as a "rentier state" in the literature, while Ghana evidently does not. I therefore decided that Section 7.3 sufficed to analyse the relative validity of the three approaches in a more holistic sense. Chapters 5 and 6, however, are organized much more along the lines of the theoretical axioms laid out in Table 1.

The reader will note that Chapter 7 falls significantly short of Chapters 3, 4, and 6 in terms of depth and length. The reasons for this are simple. For one, Takoradi and the six coastal districts of the Western Region (Ghana) are, as we shall see, much better represented in both historical and analytical literature, while Gamba and the Ndougou (Gabon) appear only sparingly in the literature. Annie Merlet and Christopher Gray, for instance, have given historical depth to the Loango coast and southern Gabon respectively, but only touch upon the sparsely populated Ndougou region in passing. This is because the Ndougou was always perceived as being part of the outer fringes of the Loango confederacy/kingdom, as well as a relative backwater in southern Gabon where more populated areas—such as that surrounding Tchibanga or Mouila—are understandably better represented. In order to construct a narrative of the Ndougou, therefore, bits of and pieces of these works, among others, must be drawn out and subjected to my own historiography. Only after this can a model of social and political interaction for the Ndougou be confidently presented and used to juxtapose with the introduction of the oil industry in Chapter 4. By contrast, Takoradi and the six coastal districts of the Western Region have not only received systematic treatment by researchers, but have also been subject to oil-impact analyses. The re-interpretation of data for my own purposes in this regard was therefore made easier.

Beginning with Chapter 7, comparisons are made intermittently which address Research Questions 4 and 5 and bring to light key difference in pre-oil patterns as well as key differences in the existence and strength of post-oil anomic structures. Lastly, the Conclusion responds synthetically to Question 6, while also acknowledging limitations in the research design and suggesting a path forward.

2.3. Case Selection and Fieldwork

Two states, Ghana and Gabon, were selected based on adherence to the research design and feasibility. One community from each state was selected for fieldwork, and varies in terms of the potential explanatory factors outlined above. Gabon, like Angola and Nigeria, is among the older and more experienced rentier states on the continent, having first begun exploration as a French colony in 1929, although larger-scale commercial drilling had not begun until after World War II. By 1959 enough crude was pumped to warrant the construction of a pipeline,¹⁶² and by the 1960s Gabon and the chief French operator of its onshore and offshore blocks, state-owned Elf-Aquitaine had made petroleum the Gabonese government's primary source of revenue. Oil production, however, peaked in 1997,¹⁶³ making Gabon an interesting case as to how different institutions react when future revenue streams are no longer guaranteed. Furthermore, the decline of French clout and the rise of Sino-American competition, which has coincidentally prolonged the Bongo regime's oil lifeline, introduces a dynamic international context. As previously explained, fieldwork in Gabon was prioritized for this study, due to the relative lack of research on this region in the literature.

Ghana is a relative newcomer to oil extraction, having only discovered oil in the promising Jubilee field in 2007. That field then came online in 2010, and exploration has proceeded apace. Ghana is interesting to study because the bulk of its oil activities are carried out by Western majors, and the Chinese presence, though felt in other sectors, is not as pronounced here. While most of Ghana's oil activities are offshore following a continent-wide trend, exploration and gas production have extended onshore, implicating local authorities and communities. Oil block Tano 2A, in the southwestern tip of the country bordering Côte d'Ivoire, had yet to come online at the time of fieldwork, but it might appear that a process of monetization has already begun in anticipation of the coming online of several fields.

The two countries are interesting to compare due to their *prima facie* historical differences (see Chapter 3 and Section 7.1) which make it likely that divergent institutional patterns exist between them and their communities which have not yet been identified by previous

¹⁶² Yates, *The Rentier State*, 56-7.

¹⁶³ Yates, *The Scramble*, 31.

ethnographical, sociological or anthropological studies. Finally, these cases both differ importantly in their respective levels of anomie, which is dealt with in Chapter 4 and Section 7.2.

2.3.1. Why choose the Ndougou lagoon (Gamba, Gabon) and the Western Region (Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana)?

Oil communities are ideal spaces to look for answers as to the extent to which certain political processes are responsible for overall changes in livelihoods, perceived and otherwise. Oil communities abound on the continent, as nearly every sub-Saharan nation is engaged in production to at least a very small extent. Thus, the universe of potential cases rose to the hundreds. But since the objective was to discern the most locally impactful political processes and actors, it made sense to choose two oil-bearing communities which differ drastically in such *prima facie* characteristics as state centralization and the scale/size of oil production, which would suggest a locally impactful state and/or a locally impactful international presence respectively, as seen in section 2.1.

I focused most energy on selecting and investigating a community within a highly centralized state apparatus and where oil extraction was both prolonged and intensive. Since most theories of African politics account little for local impacts on local livelihoods, such characteristics would potentially yield the most extreme case of state and international impacts on local livelihoods. Falsification of either rentier theories or Neo-Tillyian perspectives in such a case would demand qualification of mainstream theories and perhaps even adherence to an entirely new framework.

The choice was therefore made to select an oil-bearing community within an African rentier state. Qualifying as oil rentier states in 2014 were Angola, Cameroon, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Nigeria, and Sudan/South Sudan. Reasoning that declining oil industries would shift state and MNC strategies thereby nullifying any putative dominance of state and globally private designs, both Cameroon and Congo-Brazzaville were disregarded as potential cases. Feasibility then took precedence, as communities in both Chad and Sudan/South Sudan were deemed too precarious and insecure for the inquisitive and sensitive nature of political research. Communities within Angola and Nigeria would have constituted ideal cases but for a language barrier in the former and the superfluosity of research in the latter. Gabon remained

as a unique opportunity to uncover a relatively understudied rentier space at the local level, with the added advantage that its national rentier politics had been thoroughly invested and threshed out.

The community most putatively impacted by oil exploitation in Gabon has been Gamba and the surrounding communities lining the Ndougou lagoon. Since the early 1960s, Gamba has hosted Shell Upstream's crude oil terminal, which has drawn from reserves in and around Gamba and the Ndougou lagoon. Since 1989, the massive Rabi-Kounga field north of the lagoon granted Gamba and its corporate/administrative apparatuses a new lease of life. Since then, regional oilfields supplying Gamba's terminal have contributed to approximately half of Gabon's total oil production. Most of the rest of Gabon's oil exports are derived offshore. In addition, Gamba has served as a base of oil operations for an uncharacteristic amount of time as far as African oil-bearing communities go, gifting researchers decades of memories, data, and population continuity.

The next task was to locate a second site and thus the basis for a comparison per section 2.2.2. African oil-bearing communities not residing in oil rentier states vastly outnumber those within. Ghana, however, surfaced as a natural choice for a number of reasons. Though substantial enough to attract junior oil companies, the discovery of the offshore Jubilee field in 2007 failed to demonstrate enough proven reserves to qualify Ghana as a rentier state. In rentier theory and Neo-Tillyian logic, the local impact of the Ghanaian state and its concession operators is presumptively and relatively small, which is only compounded when one considers Ghana's devolved institutions vis-à-vis those of Gabon. On the other hand, the size of the field in nominal terms—370,000,000 barrels of oil—approximates that of Rabi-Kounga's north of Gamba—440,000,000 barrels. The infrastructural, administrative, and demographic impacts on both communities (the Ndougou lagoon and the Western Region) could therefore be reasonably expected to approximate one another. Under these conditions, hybrid governance approaches based on largely subnational processes would arguably predict similarly anomic evolutions in situations of institutional incongruence. Comparing the Ndougou lagoon and the Western Region thus held out the possibility of yielding significant theoretical feedback.

It should be noted, however, that only a "loose" comparison is possible between Gamba and Takoradi, despite both hosting the bulk of their respective country's oil industry. Since Ghana is by no means an oil rentier state, a critique of rentierism can only be achieved through the single case study of Gamba, Gabon. Furthermore, the population of the six coastal districts of Ghana's

Western Region (which includes the city of Takoradi) is most likely in excess of 1.5 million, while that of the Ndougou Department (which includes Gamba) is roughly 14,000. The impact of intervening variables having to do with demography, class formation, and political formations are therefore present. Generalizable conclusions can therefore only relate to the relative impact of oil on local politics and anomie in each space, while these intervening variables must be accepted as factors of differentiation between these two spaces. However, the comparison will acknowledge that the vastly different demographic characteristics of Takoradi and the six coastal districts of the Western Region did in fact significantly alter the region's historical experience and capacity to absorb change.

2.3.2. Data sources and access

The research design called for data generally related to the following: historical perceptions of livelihood changes and evidence of social and political anomie, historical information on relationships of power at all levels (including “public” actors and preferences), and finally more recent livelihoods, evidence of anomie, and relationships of power. For each of the three theories/approaches discussed—particularly with respect to rentierism—more specific information was required in one or several time periods, such as demographic shifts, tax receipts, evidence of democratic accountability, and evidence of state legitimacy. I therefore needed documentary, statistical, and oral data. In both fieldwork sites, reliable data had already been produced when it concerned national statistics, actors, and relationships in both historical and recent timeframes. When data called for these items at the local level, only Sekondi-Takoradi and Ghana's Western Region in general had been adequately documented in both history and recently—unsurprising given its population density and commercial importance. Gamba and the Ndougou lagoon, however, chiefly held esoteric or ancillary importance for historians such as Annie Merlet, due to the outdated importance of the nearby lagunar village Sette Cama. The late Christopher Gray, ex-Peace Corps volunteer who had become a student of Gabonese institutions,

also devoted much time and energy to the region, but was also primarily concerned with ethnographic history.¹⁶⁴

Data collected on Gamba and the Ndougou lagoon, therefore, was mostly done onsite with the help of informant networks. Almost no in-depth documentation existed on the region for the post-colonial era concerning the factors of analysis stipulated, thus I relied most often on interviews with locals and contemporary forms of oral tradition where consensus existed. Once an important contact was procured, I could branch out in web-like fashion and thereby secure more and more interviews. Generally speaking, I searched out and focused on interviewees associated with the following broader categories: the oil industry (Shell-Gabon), the prefectural state, the devolved state (or “local assemblies”), villagers (the Ndougou lagoon), townspeople (Gamba), and clergy. Unsurprisingly, discussions often led to the realization that I had neglected an important actor or group of actors, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), locally-based national politicians, certain civil servants, and fishermen, whom I would contact immediately for information and discussions. All in all, the method of tapping into social networks was satisfactory, and provided me with the most efficient means of surveying and documenting. In any case, it was sufficient to provide me with at least 3-4 interviews per day with targeted interlocutors, totaling over 100 interviewees and hundreds of pages of historical, demographic, and statistical documentation (See Appendix A).

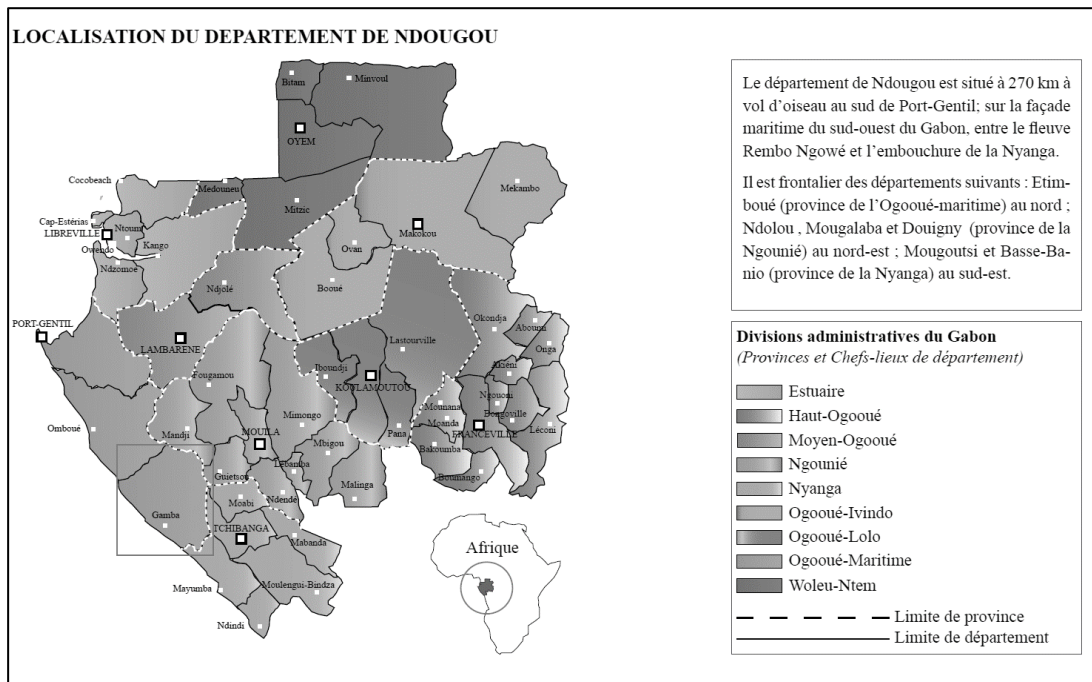
A similar strategy was applied to Sekondi-Takoradi. As in Libreville, I began in Accra with contacts obtained via links at the African Studies Centre in Leiden, Netherlands. Similar categories were targeted and searched out with the networking method, until eventually I was granted appointments with the very active Western Region Coastal Foundation, who were generous enough to provide me with two weeks of planning and contacts in my fieldwork site. Since the region and its recent experience with oil exploitation had already garnered ample national and international interest—both in academic and media circles—it was not necessary to commit as much time and resources to establishing basic facts and trends. Instead, a cursory survey of important actors was sufficient to complement existing literature. After roughly 4 weeks of

¹⁶⁴ Christopher Gray, *Colonial Rule and Crisis in Equatorial Africa: Southern Gabon, c. 1850-1940*. (Vol. 13. University Rochester Press, 2002) ; Christopher Gray "Who Does Historical Research in Gabon? Obstacles to the Development of a Scholarly Tradition." *History in Africa* (21 (1994): 413-433.

research, dozens of interviews were conducted and dozens of pages of relevant documentation and statistics procured (See Appendix B).

In both cases, access to people and documentation was, put simply, the result of persistence. As might be expected, requests for political information were habitually met with suspicion, ambiguity, or even silence. With the overtly political nature of the information sought, I found myself having to gain trust, which typically involved second visits, or even third visits in some instances. In the worst cases, information critical to filling one or several research objectives was simply unattainable. In these instances, I've done my best to alert the reader to conjectures based on incomplete or non-consensual oral data.

2.3.3. Fieldwork in Gabon and the Ndougou lagoon: Conditions, reflections, and limitations



Map 1: The Department of the Ndougou in Gabon (PDL, 2012)

Statistical and documentary evidence being hard to come by, I relied heavily on people and their stories for data, and people are to a large extent affected by the atmospheres surrounding them. Places and circumstances surrounding interviews varied greatly, from office environments and schools to homes and villages, and in each environment different registers of formality took

hold. Many times, an unknown breach in etiquette, change in personnel, or some other factor altered a productive dynamic—even the weather, if atypically hot, could be a factor.¹⁶⁵ Secondly, information was something of a commodity in Gabon. In a context of authoritarian control and oral cultures, knowledge of the past and personal stories might be considered assets or even weapons. Therefore, caution on the part of my interlocutors was normal, except in more informal contexts made so through introductions by trusted contacts, the nature of questioning, or through meeting in a residential context. In brief, physical and social environments were always conditioning the process of data acquisition. The following descriptions seek to share those environments so that readers might better understand the context in which information was distilled, including the limitations that inevitably arose during the process.

I spent the first two weeks of my Gabon stay in the capital of Libreville, in order to interview a number of academics and other actors involved in national politics. With an estimated population of 700,000 (roughly 40% that of Gabon), Libreville is by far the country's largest city. As such, it is fairly cosmopolitan and its denizens relatively unperturbed by outsiders. What's more, the categories of interviewees I selected in Libreville favored candid dialogue, as most if not all interviewees were familiar with the character of my research. Academics at the University of Omar Bongo were most esoteric yet receptive to my queries,¹⁶⁶ while public officers tended towards caution and/or obscuration and obfuscation, such as was the case at the United States Embassy, and surprisingly less so at the Ministry of Hydrocarbons. Most vocal, expressive, and undeniably candid were opposition elements, who had no qualms expressing real opinions but who in the process may have sacrificed authenticated facts. All of these factors had to be considered and balanced when interpreting the validity of claims and the honesty of opinions.

Gamba presented its own opportunities, challenges, and inherent limitations for the outside researcher. Though much of the difficulties in data acquisition might be attributable to much of the region in general, Gamba had its own unique idiosyncrasies. Much of those idiosyncrasies

¹⁶⁵ My stay in Gamba, for instance, was often punctuated with visits to the prefect, from whom I needed renewals of my *laisser-passer* documentation. If an administrative assistant was present whom I had never met, I would often wait for thirty or more minutes before an audience with the prefect, while my boat captain and prefect-appointed driver patiently waited outside for the day's work to begin.

¹⁶⁶ Questions of an overt political nature would often be dealt with in disciplinary jargon, especially where anthropologists and historians were concerned. Nevertheless, politically sensitive questions were not necessarily evaded; instead, they were touched upon circuitously and sometimes euphemistically, reflecting the paucity of political research at the University of Omar Bongo.

revolve around context and environment, and so are not capable of being subsumed under known categorical headings. The best way for readers to capture the conditions of research is through the following descriptions.

2.3.3.1. Traveling to Gamba: checkpoints, precariousness, enclavement

Some writers talk about something known colloquially as “place lag,” where the pace of travel exceeds the pace of adjustment to place and atmosphere. This was as much a challenge for me as it was an indication of Gamba and the Ndougou’s relative isolation from even countrywide networks of exchange. Arriving at Gamba was the first challenge, as no airlines—save chartered flights exceeding 10,000 euros—were scheduling service from Libreville to Gamba’s small but jet-worthy airport. Neither of the handful of suggested airlines in either my Brandt guide or my *Petit Futé* were providing service to Gamba, and the third airline had presumably been closed for business. Ferries were only servicing the popular Libreville-Port Gentil route, turning around well short of Gamba. The only way to access Gamba, then, was by road and bush taxi.

As the crow flies, Gamba is less than 400km from Libreville, but one can only access the country’s potentially 10th largest city circuitously, and sometimes treacherously. A well-paved road, the N1, links Libreville to Mouila, after which it intermittently gives way to flattened dirt or gravel. The bus from Libreville services most larger towns along this route, including Lambarene, until after a bumpy and compact 10-hour drive it arrives at Tchibanga, the administrative and commercial hub of the Nyanga department. Since bush taxies ferrying people and goods to Gamba only depart in the morning, the quickest overland journey from Libreville to Gamba necessitates two days’ travel, and, consequently, an overnight stay in Tchibanga. The morning of departure, bush taxis leaving for Gamba and other regional destinations from Tchibanga’s bustling central market square depart as early as 6 a.m. The first 2-hour leg of the journey scales pseudo-paved and dirt roads, which are even hazardous during the dry season; our driver stopped to assist one bus whose tire popped in the middle of the forested bluffs. Once near the Gulf shore, bush taxis to Gamba are forced to turn west and off-road along a coastal marsh.



Photograph 1: A welcome signs greets those entering Gamba. The Royal Dutch Shell logo is opposite Gabon's national flag. (July, 2015)

If Gamba can be considered an enclave, it is because the treacherous drive through the marshes renders cheap and easy movement in and out of the Ndougou a complete fantasy. First, only pickup trucks equipped for off-roading can reasonably traverse the ruts, fallen trees, and rocks. During the dry season, sand and mud routinely stop vehicles for hours on end, as is what happened to my bush taxi on the way to Gamba. During the rainy season, most traffic grounds to halt as the seasonal marshes are subject to recurrent and heavy flooding. Second, once one successfully crosses the marshes, one must board a ferry to cross the Nyanga River at Mougagara. Formerly a manual ferry operated with ropes and pulleys, the newly engine-powered mini-barge must first transport the pickup truck before turning around to retrieve the passengers, for fear that an overloaded truck would sink the barge. The lack of a bridge means that scaled-up commerce and movement of people cannot take hold, as pickup trucks are rather limited in their capacities to carry people, foodstuffs, and other goods sold in the Gamba market or in Plaine (“district” or “quarter”) 3. During my own trip, a dozen unbuckled passengers sat atop heaps of foodstuffs (mostly yams), while five of us squeezed tightly into the 3-4 seat cabin. For a slightly larger fee I sat in the front passenger seat, while a teenage girl squeezed in between me and the driver, as the girl was forced to shift and contort herself to avoid interfering with the manual stick shift. Once

disembarked in Gamba, those traveling in the back of the pickup were caked in red clay from head to toe, due to the dirt kicked up by oncoming or leading traffic on the Gamba-Mayonami road.

One further but no less difficult obstacle in arriving at Gamba is the gauntlet of security checkpoints one encounters from Libreville to Tchibanga, and from Tchibanga to Gamba. Seemingly every hour, our progress was ensnared by huddles of police officers reviewing our documents. At each of the checkpoints—typically before entering municipal districts—everyone displayed their national identification, and my passport was almost always singled out for further inspection. In the meantime, our driver would routinely disembark with a manila envelope and return empty-handed. The most pugnacious of officers was stationed before the entrance to Gamba's borders, which comes only after the entrance to the Yenzi management camp. There and upon first arriving, the officer took issue with my paperwork attesting to the purpose of my visit, and ordered that I disembark. After a fair amount of quarreling and negotiation, he agreed to allow me to proceed with the others to the bus station so as to recuperate my suitcase, on the promise that the driver would bring me back to the checkpoint. Once back at the checkpoint, I was forced to phone my contact at Shell to come in person and make a convincing argument as to my stay. My contact later explained that the officer was simply looking for bribes.

2.3.3.2. Atmosphere

Anyone who sojourns long enough in a certain locality might make connections between the atmosphere—the weather, the layout, the general mood—and the social mores of the denizens themselves. Gamba proves no exception. Upon entering the town, a sign welcomes you to Gamba, and the logo of Royal Dutch Shell is proudly placed opposite the national flag of Gabon. Continuing on the road one spots the expansive Yenzi management camp, cordoned off with security fencing and guarded by a series of gates, each manned with private security. Plantations growing local wares straddle both of the road thereafter, until one reaches Plaine Bienvenue, a district characterized by ranch houses and widely separated government offices. Moving closer towards the town square, the impressively maintained high school occupies a significant corner. Turning right, one finally reaches the town square, soon after which the shops and markets of Plaine 3 predominate. The vast majority of the city's life takes place in Plaine 3, which is at once

chaotic, sometimes convivial, and always busy. This despite Plaine 3 occupying the smallest territory of all districts. Its unplanned residential zones are set off behind the shops, and if undiscerning, it is entirely too easy for one to miss the sprawl of Plaine 3's dwellings, and where undoubtedly most of the local flavor is.

A rough translation of *Gamba* or *N'Gamba* from Vili/Loumbou to English yields "mist" or "fog," a potent metaphor which inspired the title of this thesis. The nightly drop in temperature often reaches the local dew point, meaning the lagoon gradually becomes shrouded in a gray, heavy mist. By early morning, visibility, especially near the banks of the lagoon, can shrink to a few dozen meters. As often happens, a lack of wind and sun can leave the heavy mist in place until well after noon. In such conditions, the concentrated population of Plaine 3 is even more hidden from view. The lagoon in these conditions is scarcely navigable, and only so with the aid of an experienced boat pilot who has a good enough sense of direction to avoid the dozens of islands which inevitably obstruct what would otherwise be a simple course heading.

Many mornings were spent in these conditions, where the air was so thick that simple ambulation became arduous. My boat captain and prefect-appointed minder would typically arrive late at the small boat ramp, often by two hours and bearing expressionless and drawn faces. Their contempt for the day's work ahead was obvious, but the mist was so heavy they hardly had energy to express it. After a week of touring villages and repeating the somber morning routine, it became necessary to greet the two with drinks, manioc or other edibles so as to lubricate the wheels of sociability and industry. Such offerings had the added advantage of distracting my minder during early-morning interviews, where his presence was likely to moderate the openness of chiefs in particular, who clearly wished to remain on the prefect's good side. If sufficiently sated, he would saunter off and recline somewhere to drift off to sleep, while the boat captain would continue whatever personal business he had with friends and family in any particular village. This was my best chance to extract valuable information, and the effectiveness of the approach contributed to more productive second visits.

When midday broke and the sun burnt off the remaining mist, the heat could become so unbearable that potential interviewees often retreated indoors to eat and nap. Those working the plantations would return to the villages and often congregate in homes to enjoy a common meal, whether it be rotisserie turtle or roasted buffalo. During these rare occasions where young and middle-aged men were available for discussion, I often felt unduly callous in pressing for

discussions. It was already enough that I sought answers to sensitive questions with a minder present. But questioning also seemed to interrupt a daily ritual adapted to the commanding cyclical patterns of the local weather system, such as conserving as much energy as possible at high noon and eating in a cool, dry place. Empathy therefore often led me to postpone questioning until evenings. Evenings, for these reasons, tended to become the most opportune time to procure sensitive information and achieve the candor necessary towards procuring that information. People most often felt comfortable under cover of darkness, away from the prying eyes of my minder and perhaps also enlivened by the forgiving coolness which descended with the sun. It was in conditions such as these that even my prefect-appointed boat captain suddenly revealed the village-wide rumors of vampirism in Sette-Cama, motioning towards a schoolhouse with a lit cigarette while enjoying a beer on the porch of the village guesthouse. It was also under these conditions that the cantonal chief of Pitonga stared me down with half-drunken, fiery eyes, and professed to know the truth of what really went on in the Ndougou lagoon. All in all, the best information was procured in the most informal, obscure of circumstances, when locals were neither dictated to by the air, the sun, nor fear.

2.3.4. Fieldwork in Ghana's Western Region

The conditions of data acquisition were, and perhaps unsurprisingly to those familiar with the region, much more conducive in Ghana and the Western Region than in Gabon and the Ndougou. This was so for a few reasons, not least of which was the ease of accessing Sekondi-Takoradi via the N1. Buses were running to the city regularly and took approximately 5-6 hours. All of the issues which arise when attempting to access an enclave were therefore absent, including the monotony of stopping at several gratuitous checkpoints and having papers checked regularly. At the time of fieldwork, Ghana, unlike Gabon, had no distinction between a research visa and a tourist visa. For this reason, the level of scrutiny by uniformed officers when exiting and entering Sekondi-Takoradi was much less, not to mention my angst. Because all areas of interest in the Western Region were accessible via road, there was no need to procure a motorboat as was the case in the Ndougou. Also, no one suggested to me that I should report my activities to either of

the District Chief Executives, whereas such was often the case with respect to the prefect in the Ndougou.

Data acquisition in the Western Region was also facilitated by a culture of transparency, to be discussed in further detail below. Sekondi-Takoradi is also a cosmopolitan city, habituated to free movement and the free exchange of ideas and people. My intentions were therefore accepted at face value during interviews with villagers and chiefs, who understood immediately that the information given would only be used for educational purposes. In fact, and unlike in the Ndougou, chiefs and villagers of the Western Region were very eager to talk and give interviews, whereas those in the Ndougou much of the time did so out of complacency and a sense of courtesy. In a nod to the vitality of Ghana's free press, chiefs and villagers seemed keen that their story and their plight be published for a wider audience. This was the case in Nyankrom, for instance, where villagers were quick to give their opinion on local companies, even against that of their Queen Mother. It is perhaps due to these factors that much more information on Sekondi-Takoradi's experience with oil extraction has appeared in the press and in scholarship outlets.

CHAPTER 3. A Political-Institutional History of southern Gabon and the Ndougou Lagoon

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize today's local political systems and traditions in Ndougou lagoon using secondary historical accounts, which are supplemented by and cross-referenced with archival research. The focus is the development of southern Gabon's political institutions as they have negotiated and withstood both internal and external shocks and catalysts for change. The goal is to arrive at an appropriate conception of a political interpretive model in the present-day communities where fieldwork has been conducted. In other words, what is the pre-oil baseline from which changes in interpretive models should be observed, and what factors and events have conventionally shaped these institutions over time? What have been the modal effects of state-level and international circumstances which might differentiate these communities in Gabon and distinguish them from their counterparts elsewhere?

Historical narrative is typically chronological and facilitates the understanding of causal chains of events. Therefore, the chapter is organized chronologically and divided into eras which demarcate cataclysmic events in Gabonese history and which have more often than not been cited as major catalysts of change in the political development and norms of the country as a whole. Reconstructing the history of *local* politics, as opposed to state politics, however, presents its complications, which in turn derive from poor written documentation in the pre-colonial era as well as the administrative biases of colonial agents. In part, fieldwork and onsite archival research serve to fill in these blanks. After all, part of this thesis' objective is to advance or extend theoretical literature which recognizes the paucity of precise historical and descriptive data at the local level—divorced to the fullest possible extent from mere cognitive realities—which may have misinformed theory and even our understanding of effective developmental policy. The final section synthesizes the likeliest factors of local political change and anomie in and around the Ndougou lagoon.

The Département of Ndougou is located in southern Gabon, straddling the coast and protruding into the interior by several hundred kilometers. Before colonial territorialization, the Ndougou was neither a state nor acephalous, occupying the once-northern outer boundaries of the Loango Kingdom, a loose confederation of matrilineal clans led by the Maloango in present-day Point

Noire. The Ndougou's current boundaries were no doubt influenced not only by common socio-historical characteristics shared by its people but also by the substantial lagoon from which the Département takes its name, with its extremities demarcated by important regional tributary systems, not least of which is the Nyanga river to the east. Nor were the Département's boundaries created with geographical homogeneity in mind, as it boasts dense tropical rainforests, littoral ecosystems, and coastal plains. The Département's climate is common to most of littoral Gabon. There is one long dry season during the summer and one long rainy season in winter, with intermittent and shorter dry and rainy seasons.

Climate and geography have to a considerable extent structured lifestyles and means of subsistence within the Ndougou, with most non-market labor devoted to the sowing and harvesting of seasonal crops, including manioc and tubercle, practices which have persisted for centuries. Fishing also features as an ancient and prominent market activity, with most non-salaried workers harvesting several species of fish from the rivers and the lagoon. Fish is therefore the most significant source of protein for the Ndougou's residents. Although bovine meat, bushmeat, and other fauna are almost unanimously desired and sought after by the local inhabitants, the Ndougou is sandwiched by two national parks and several *aires protégées* where killing and slaughtering wild animals, most significantly elephants, are heavily regulated and enforced by local authorities.

The rapid growth of Gamba since the arrival of the Compagnie Shell de Recherche et d'Exploitation au Gabon (COSREG) in the late 1950s has structured not only the socio-economic context of the Département but also the local government. Gamba, with roughly 12,000 of the Ndougou's roughly 14,000 estimated residents,¹⁶⁷ seats the sous-préfet as well as the Conseil Départementale. In addition, the city of Gamba, chartered as late as 1997, had already replaced Sette-Cama, formerly the seat of the sous-préfet and largest city on the lagoon as the region's political and economic capital. The existence of Shell's onshore oil terminal—the convergence of all oil pipelines descending from the interior—as well as its offices and housing for Shell upper- and lower-management had ensured by the 1980s that Gamba would overtake Sette Cama in regional importance. Both the City Hall of Gamba as well as the Conseil Départemental are dependent on Shell International and Shell Gabon for the vast majority of their revenue. It is worth

¹⁶⁷ Population statistics vary widely, but it is commonly understood that roughly 2,000 people inhabit the Department at any given time.

mentioning as well that a significant plurality of the Ndougou's elected and appointed officials were once employees for Shell.

Gamba together with the Ndougou offers a highly apt case study of local political dynamics in African oil states. The Ndougou has been producing onshore oil as long as Gabon has been hyper-dependent on oil, with the region's crude contributing to roughly thirty percent of the national government's revenue, which itself is as yet highly dependent on oil receipts. For this reason, incentives remain high for the Gabonese state to impose restrictions and controls facilitating the production and distribution of crude oil, beginning with the prominent onshore fields and other spaces implicated in the onshore downstream sector. The well-documented ethos of patronage which permeates the upper echelons of the Gabonese state is made possible with unaccounted-for oil rents. It follows logically that the political lifespan of the Gabonese elite necessitates the continued stream of oil rents, and therefore the stabilizing of regions most heavily exploited. The co-optation of well-endowed oil companies and importing states, often backed by host states, also becomes a necessity. Oil has no value unless it is extracted from underground sedimentary basins and sold as an export (Gabon consumes roughly one percent of its crude).¹⁶⁸

A state may exist without either acquiescence or legitimacy, but not forever. Two propositions applied to African states are therefore irreconcilable—that a dual system exists in African states whereby the center and periphery may co-exist without mutual engagement, and that African states are in part superstructure wholes of their former constituent parts. While the latter can be more easily defended, it has not been shown in what manner a “periphery” does, in fact, engage and transform the state. Investigating oil-bearing communities in rentier states allows us to test the limits, because their superstructures, their state-elite apparatuses, have more incentive than ever to confine peripheries and disenfranchise them. If it can be shown that those least likely to display contestation or engagement (the inhabitants of oil-bearing communities in oil rentier states who are most “tempted” by patronage politics and the negative consequences of rapid monetization) in fact do so through one of several means, the state-centered approach to characterizing African political dynamics must be reconsidered and qualified. How did local communities in the Ndougou, the depository of Gabon's onshore oil wealth, adapt to a rentier

¹⁶⁸ “Gabon.” US Energy Information Administration (<https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/country.php?iso=GAB>), Accessed December 27, 2018.

environment, and by what means and in what manner did they engage the state, if at all? How did they manage the dual impacts of state control and the promise of a richer, more modern life?

3.1 Southern Gabon prior to the European slave trade (circa 2000 B.C. to 1472 A.D.)

Prior to the arrival of Portuguese traders in 1472 A.D., the expanse of dense equatorial forest, savannah, river systems, and littoral regions that is today known as “Gabon” was not an ahistorical backwater devoid of linear development and intergroup exchanges. This conception has its roots in colonial ideology and is meant to justify outside intervention in the name of civilization and commerce. It is also more innocently the result of scant information as to who and what existed within Gabon’s modern territorial borders, doubtless because of the lack of written documents and the difficulty of tracing oral traditions among Western Bantu speakers. Most of the knowledge surrounding this relatively unknown yet critical era in Gabon’s history is pieced together through archeological findings and sophisticated linguistics analytics, making it a rough sketch what had most likely occurred without resorting to loose conjecture and risking anachronism.

Jan Vansina was pioneering in piecing together the pre-European history of the Equatorial forest through the systematic application of comparative historical linguistics, while Kairn Klieman has provided important revisions with the help of both glottochronological methods and newly discovered archaeological evidence. Glottochronology works by creating a genetic classification of languages. At some point a “mother” language splits into “daughter” languages, and the daughters will show common cognates, or genetic traits, with the mother. The percentage of cognates that each daughter has in common with the mother allows researchers to give an estimate as to dates of divergence, which are then transposed to geographic spaces to more aptly describe migration patterns. The rate of technological progress is not only determined through archeological findings but also through the appearance of “innovations” or loan words found in a daughter language’s lexicon.¹⁶⁹ It is thus possible to reconstruct Gabon’s pre-European history

¹⁶⁹ Kairn Klieman, “Towards A History of Pre-colonial Gabon: Farmers and Forest Specialists along the Ogooue’, c. 500 B.C.-100 A.D.” in Michael C. Reed and James F. Barnes (eds.) *Culture, Ecology, and Politics in Gabon’s Rainforest* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 99-104.

despite the shortcomings inherent in oral traditions for the purposes of historicity. In turn, the understanding of pre-European political institutions gleaned from these methods can be compared to Gabon's contemporary institutions and allow us to deduce factors of change.

Pygmies are the oldest known inhabitants of southern Gabon and Gabon in general, perhaps predating the arrival of the Western Bantu circa 2000 B.C. on the order of thousands of years. Once the Bantu arrived, a process of intermingling and adaptation ensued as Western Bantu learned a great deal about forest living from pygmy populations. To this day, Western Bantu societies descending from Gabon's original forest-clearers and agrarians largely valorize the pygmies for their noble tradition and mystical knowledge of the forest. While many pygmies became absorbed into Western Bantu groups and especially influenced Bantu traditions in rainforest areas, others were, however, shunned by the same groups, thus explaining both the loss of ancestral pygmy languages as well as their persistence as forest cultures.

Relatively new glottochronological and archaeological evidence extrapolated by Kairn Klieman suggests that, in a slight departure from Vansina who argues for a direct "Myene-Tsogo" split from Western Bantu via coastal waters around 1450 B.C., Bantu-speaking peoples might have begun arriving in northern coastal Gabon as early as 4000 B.C. This "proto-coastlands" community would have its modern-day linguistic heirs in Myene-speaking groups such as the Mpongwe, Orungu, Nkomi, Galwa, and Adjumba. The interior and southern regions of Gabon would be populated by groups which had split from the proto-coastlands community in Cameroon, known to Klieman as the "proto-Nyong-Lomani" community.¹⁷⁰ These groups would eventually segment in a long process of environmentally-induced specialization, giving birth to contemporary groups such as the Fang, Vili, Punu after a process of "filling-in" and another split by the "Southwestern sub-family" in 1120 B.C. identified by Vansina. This was likely followed by successive splits within the Southwestern sub-family in 950 B.C. and the emergence of the Congo and the Gabon-Congo linguistic sub-families.¹⁷¹ The last migratory thrusts of the Western Bantu in Equatorial Africa were achieved after the importation of the banana from Asia and culminated in the exploration of all lands for arability and the banana's cultivation.

¹⁷⁰ Kairn Klieman, *The Pygmies Were Our Compass: Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c. 1900 CE*. (Greenwood Pub Group, 2003), 43-44 ; Klieman, *Towards a History*, 107.

¹⁷¹ Vansina, *Paths*, 56.

The process previously referred to as “filling-in” likely occurred from 500-1000 A.D. and allowed peoples to move away from rivers into interior lands. This spawned more speech communities adapting to new environmental needs. For Gabon this was notably what Klieman calls the proto-Nzebi-Vili speech community which in turn diverged to form the proto-Igana-Vili in the southwest, the proto-Irimba-Punu in central areas, and the proto-Nzebi-Ibeembe between the Congo river and the Massif du Chaillu. The latter group, for instance, are ancestral to modern-day Nzebi, Ibongo-Nzebi, and Teke dialects.¹⁷²

The seeds of political legitimacy among many Bantu-speaking peoples were purportedly sown during these times, when creeping Bantu-speaking agriculturalists encountered autochthonous “Batwa,” a regional name for forest specialists (i.e. “pygmies” in Western nomenclature or “Baka” in the equatorial region), a term justified by Klieman’s demonstration that these autochtones were not only hunters-gatherers but specialists in forest products with regional and long-distance trade contacts. They were in fact *active participants* within the societies around them.¹⁷³ According to Kopytoff’s “first-comer” paradigm,¹⁷⁴ migrant experiences on the frontier modified Bantu traditions in legitimizing and indeed highly regarding those who could master the land. The Batwa (forest specialists), prior to the introduction of the banana and ironworking which allowed for more efficient cultivation, were hunter-gatherers and possessed intimate knowledge of how to procure forest products. This knowledge being of critical importance to newly arriving Bantu, the Batwa first-comers became highly revered by colonists and were believed to be endowed with magical powers by the latter (even as they became feared and loathed for much the same reason). As Klieman reports in his study, “from very early times the Bantu societies of west-central Africa held a common set of beliefs about Batwa supernatural powers. Furthermore, their beliefs about these supernatural powers *played an integral role in the development of central African notions of politico-religious leadership.*”¹⁷⁵

As pre-ironworking and pre-banana subsistence practices gave way to higher-yield banana cultivation and technological progress, Bantu began specializing in agriculture as the benefits of surplus allowed trade and limited political development. The Bantu were thus gradually diverging

¹⁷² Klieman *The Pygmies*, 103.

¹⁷³ Klieman, *Towards a History*, 129-130.

¹⁷⁴ Igor Kopytoff eds., *The African Frontier: the Reproduction of Traditional African societies*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

¹⁷⁵ Klieman, *The Pygmies*, 133. italics added

from the subsistence practices of forest specialists, whose reliance on and proximity to nature were still considered admirable. Evidence supports the proposition that the Batwa during this process retained economic autonomy and contacts between them and the Bantu decreased gradually over time.¹⁷⁶ Aspiring big men and chiefs, therefore, increasingly sought to legitimize their increasing authority by placing the primordial figure of Batwa, evermore absent from the day-to-day experiences of agriculturalists, at the origins of a lineage or even clan. The institution of chiefship having effectively usurped the politico-religious power of first-comers, this demonstration of lineage was necessary in order to secure loyal followers through both respect and fear.¹⁷⁷ The legacy of first-comer legitimacy, it is argued, still lives on today through secret societies such as Bwiti.

After 1000 A.D., the cyclical drift of farmers in search of fertile land marked the end of all but perhaps few migrations. Relative stability and waning opportunities for new acculturation ensued, reaffirming that this time marks the beginning of a dual process of sedimentation and condensation of cultures through matrimony and trade.¹⁷⁸

The political traditions in existence from 1000 A.D. to 1472 A.D. were the product of ancestral Bantu traditions, autochthons, infrequent contacts with the eastern Bantu, and internal adaptations to new, mostly forest habitats. Thanks to convergence it is indeed possible to speak of political traditions in Gabon indigenous to this area, even as subgroups continued to form and adapt themselves to more local environments and contacts with other peoples. Though Gabon had been primarily forest before intensive clearing for farming, other habitats did exist, suggesting subtle differences in political tradition throughout the country. Nevertheless, to speak of a unitary tradition makes much sense when one considers the amount of forest coverage in Gabon relative to other regions in West Africa, for example. The Gabonese forest lifestyle, after ancestral traditions, was perhaps most causative of the development of political institutions owing in part to the labor-intensive nature of forest-clearing and the relative freedom from external threats. While sparse populations meeting with labour-intensive farming practices meant that child-bearing was a priority, the security buffer provided by forests and distanced groups of people led to a lack of centralized authority and a relative fluidity of cultures and group identities. While ethnic identities

¹⁷⁶ Klieman, *Towards a History*, 125.

¹⁷⁷ Klieman, *The Pygmies*, 161-162.

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 68-69.

did in fact exist before European penetration of Gabon's interiors, they were therefore not as strictly self-defined as they might be today.

The basic units of social organization common to all equatorial African groups had traditionally been the house, the village, and the district.¹⁷⁹ This has been shown both by the endurance of ancient loanwords from ancestors sharing similar social structures and the continuity of these traditions through the 19th century, especially with respect to the village and district, the latter of which would form the bases of clan identity and even early statehood. The house of 10-40 people was established by a "big man" who was recognized for his achievements in clearing forest and gathering followers, especially young men and wives. Membership was based on the ideology of kinship, even though kin of the big man was not unilinear and often included members with no matrilineal or patrilineal relation to the "father" whatsoever. Thus the big man could increase his power not only through marriage, as women were the key to production, but through attracting clients, friends, and other dependents to the house.

The village, composed of several houses with an estimated mean population of 100 persons, has been cited by Vansina as the "very foundation" of Bantu society.¹⁸⁰ An aggregate of houses, the village was led by a big man who was advised by a council of big men from their respective houses. The big man of the village was respected and received tribute in the form of hunting spoils from subordinate big men, presumably in exchange for his territorial protection. The village's *raison d'être* was common defense and security. It could engage in both restrictive and unlimited warfare with other villages, the latter usually fighting alongside other villages as part of a district. This principal political function served to underlie a common *esprit de corps* and reinforced the village big man's status as "father" and head of the village "family." The solidarity of villages and their centrality to traditional political life meant that even though villages were impermanent and often resettled following warfare or exploitation of arable land, villages were kept intact even as the big man himself might give way to another. Thanks to security and perhaps the optimal population of villages for maintaining an equatorial forest habitat, villages still largely exist in their ancestral forms.

Before the emergence of states, many of which rose and fell with the Atlantic slave trade, districts were the largest units of social and political organization, and though subject to a relative

¹⁷⁹ Vansina, *Paths*, 71-83.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 78.

degree of fluidity in composition and self-identification, they were the main sources of group identity. Districts formed when villages came to unite for purposes of common defense, trade and intermarriage. However, the district might more correctly be described as not an alliance of villages but rather of founding houses, as houses were free to move from village to village. In extending lineage ideology, the formalized clans-to-be “were seen as unalterable and permanent, given by nature, because all of a clan’s members were thought to be the progeny of a single person. All the founding ancestors, one for each affiliated House, were held to be equal siblings issued from a common parent.”¹⁸¹ The permanence of these organizations, represented only in cognitive reality, contributed to the robustness of districts and clans as larger units of common defense and, over time, as bastions of cultural development as common customs emerged as well as important networks of matrimonial alliances and trade.

The structures and ideologies above, derived from archaeological and linguistic evidence, conform to European observations upon the Portuguese arrival at the Gabon Estuary in 1472. Nevertheless, societies did change and vary from the norm after 1000 A.D. and even before, and the reasons for this are central to the questions posed for this chapter. Once migration was more or less complete, the linguistic subgroups began segmenting and varying their institutions due to both internal and external influences. While external influences included interactions with different environments and peoples, internal technological innovations and changing population densities served to upset regional balances and power.

It makes sense to divide precolonial Gabon into two geographical parts, thanks to differing institutional histories experienced by each. North of Gabon’s main waterway, the Ogooué river, the language families hitherto known as the Myene (in the region surrounding the Estuary and Cape Lopez), “Southwestern”, and “Cameroon” (around the present-day region of Woleu-Ntem) predominated. South of the Ogooué, the “Southwestern” and “Gabon-Congo” groups were most prevalent. As time wore on in the early second millennium A.D., each set of peoples experienced similar patterns of segmentation and, to varying degrees, centralization. Once large-scale migrations of language groups were complete, internal innovations in agriculture and higher yields began supporting higher population densities. Higher densities in turn meant increased insecurity, competition, and warfare. Those villages which successfully achieved internal cohesion, either

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*, 82.

through the recognition of dominant houses or modified lineage ideologies and lines of succession, prevailed. Those which did not quickly adapted. As villages became more and more the extended “lineages” of dominant households, districts in turn became the loose alliances of houses. Ancestral traditions of lineage were then applied to the districts as legitimation of power, whereby the district steadily became extended “families” and hierarchy was determined by generation, whether the system adopted be matrilineal or patrilineal. In some instances many houses even began to dominate others, creating not just loose confederacies but kingdoms. After a sufficient amount of time and sedimentation lapsed, districts coalesced into clans. Intra-district trade, commerce, shared ideological convictions, and matrimonial ties all served to create common identities. In most instances, the need to acquire manpower for labor diminished as densities increased, thus subtly transforming one ancestral tradition, matrimony and the acquisition of several wives, into a means to both procure bridewealth and indebt its recipients. Since bridewealth and other prestige objects, such as leopard’s skin, had come to reflect the power of a house, bridewealth become more valuable than the bride herself. As a consequence, those who gave brides became creditors. In this way, ancestral traditions morphed to reflect changing realities, where the need for manpower acquiesced to the need to acquire objects attesting to the prestige of a house. Trade, common defense, and matrimony therefore were both cause and consequence of a clan’s development.¹⁸²

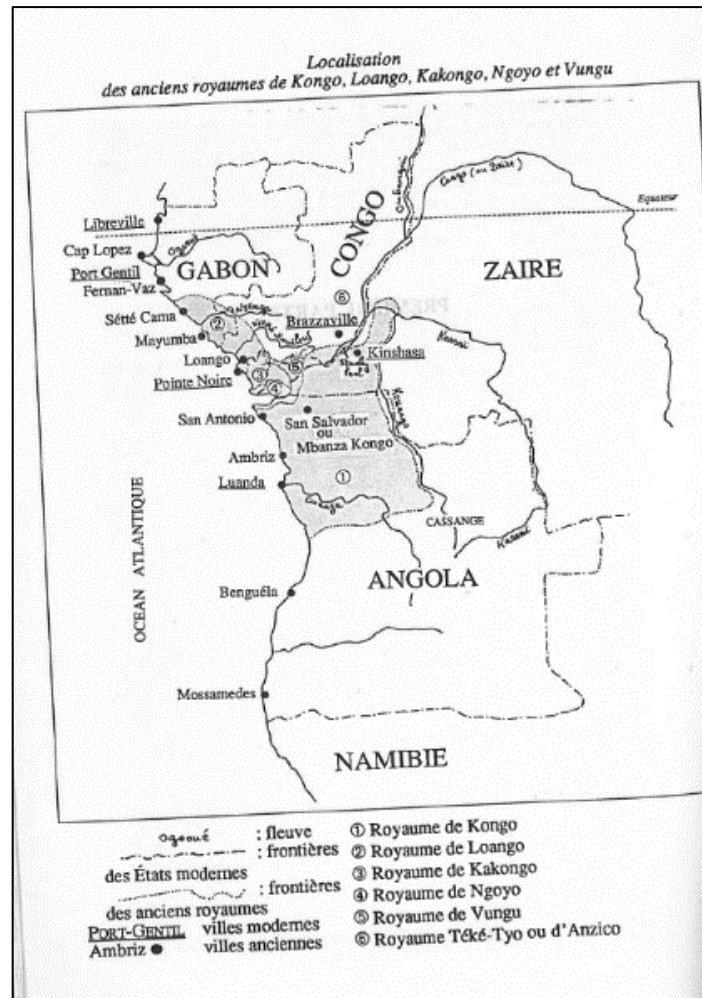
In contrast to the political trajectory of northern Gabon in the first half of the second millennium, the southern half experienced a much higher degree of centralization.¹⁸³ Houses, villages, and districts gave way to chiefdoms, principalities, and even kingdoms, levels of hierarchical organization unseen in most regions north of the Estuary. After the sixth century A.D., the coastal region straddled by the Congo river to the south and the Ngounie and upper Ogooué rivers to the north experienced increasing agricultural yields, as well as higher endowments of natural resources such as copper. As a result, the Southwestern and Gabon-Congo speakers, among them the burgeoning Kongo and Teke groups, benefited from trade, specialization, and consequently higher wealth and population density. Whereas houses within districts generally enjoyed a stable balance of power, those better-positioned to exploit trade grew in power and

¹⁸² *ibid.*, 101-127.

¹⁸³ Unlike their counterparts to the south, the peoples settling northern Gabon retained the village and house as their primary social and political units and were much more autonomous vis-à-vis larger clan interests and politics than their equals in the south. (Vansina, *Paths*, 129-137)

prestige, engendering more formalized principles of succession and legitimacy and triggering power struggles. When districts morphed into chiefdoms, neighboring districts followed suit in order to head off the potential threats. Principles of legitimation were also absorbed and reproduced, as the linguistic evidence demonstrates. Both Kongo and Teke referred to chiefs as the “master of the land” and “founder” who had a special relationship with nature and thus merited the right to the vestiges of noble animals such as leopards, eagles, and pythons.

When one chiefdom conquered or subordinated another, a “principality” was formed. The singularity and prestige of the institution is affirmed by the appearance of clapperless bells throughout the southwest equatorial region, which date back to before 1200 A.D. In Teke the prince was initiated in a public ceremony replete with rituals and a celebration of his link to the nature spirit. A ruler over vassals, the prince served as the court of last resort and sustained himself



Map 2: Loango (north) at its height, c. 1700. (Merlet, *Autour du Loango*, 17)

through tribute, fines, and loot. The presence of a court engendered social stratification, with the leaders of Houses comprising the aristocracy.

Sometime between the creation of chiefdoms and the emergence of principalities, matrilinearity emerged as a legitimate principle of succession among the Kongo.¹⁸⁴ The chief significance of this development was its enablement of both royal territorial expansion and the diffusion of ideological norms. Its reach extended from the bank of the Congo to the Gabon Estuary and as far east as the upper Ogooué, an expanse encompassing most of southern Gabon. The relative success of matrilinearity vis-à-vis its counterpart where succession is concerned (patrilinearity as practiced among the groups north of the Ogooué) lies in its dynamics. Unlike in patrilinearity where prominent houses resided in one village or house, the exchange of wives for goods led to the multiplication of royal and chiefly lineages through broad swaths of territory. In this way, villages slowly ceased to be the domains of a single lineage, as several matrilineages could occupy a single hamlet. Chieftaincy in a village was therefore contested, and the legitimate chief had to lay claim to the land itself, arguing that he founded the settlement and thus owned the land on which several lineages happened to be residing. This state of affairs arrived logically at the creation of the matrilineage as well as the head of a clan, since most members could trace their lineage to the mother of a prominent house. Such was the ideology, at least, accompanying and justifying the rise of the Loango and Kongo kingdoms as early as the thirteenth century A.D. Vansina is quick to point out that, in practice, these kingdoms arose through the conquest of competing clans. In fact, the Kongo kingdom predated the matrilineage, which became expedient as a means to both oppose growing centralization and secure one's place within it.¹⁸⁵

Just as upsets in the balance of power triggered power structures within districts and between chiefdoms, war, military innovations and trade set principalities against one another, leading eventually to the creation of kingdoms. Kingdoms such as the Loango state, the Kongo state, and the Tio kingdom within the Teke territory grew further in trade and specialization, a process which supported higher populations, marketplaces, and demand for luxury products by notables. Laws were enacted and common currencies were developed. By the end of the

¹⁸⁴ Expansion of the Kongo kingdom towards the southern Gabonese coast would eventually give birth to the Loango confederacy/kingdom.

¹⁸⁵ Vansina, *Paths*.

fourteenth century, all three kingdoms in the southwest equatorial region possessed the requisite—even quasi-Weberian—state-like qualities, well before contact with Europeans and the Atlantic slave trade.

All three kingdoms were similar in that they had a king, the head of a clan who was seen as a big man and arbiter of last resort. They all came about through both conquest and peaceful submission of smaller kingdoms and principalities, and all promulgated specific religious histories and ideologies of state formation and lineage. Finally, each realm consisted of two groups of title-holders: one operating at court in the capital and the other consisting of territorial officials. The major differences between the kingdoms were in the relative degrees of centralization. While the Kongo kingdom centralized tribute, justice, the military and currency, Loango exhibited only some centralization of justice and tribute. The Tio, on the other hand, centralized few if any of these things, as territorial officials were not accountable at court as in Loango and Kongo, and the king himself ruled not because of ancestry as in the two latter kingdoms but because he held the shrine of the national nature spirit. In Loango, the structure was based on matriclans with a precise and formalized line of succession, whereas in both Tio and Kongo prominent houses comprised the higher levels.

The influence of these kingdoms on the peoples of Gabon was often profound. Loango's territorial reach extended from south of Loango to the coastal regions latitudinal to the upper Ngounie and beyond. Strongly decentralized, the peoples occupying the coastal southwest of Gabon were grouped into villages with associations of boys and men. In the twelfth century A.D. and before the kingdom arose, matriclans appeared from the south and the institution was adapted to local characteristics. Clans were viewed as equals and a “network of regional alliances” was invented. Mayumba, less than 100km south of the Sette Cama and closer to the core territory, had become incorporated into the Loango kingdom after principality status around 1500 A.D.¹⁸⁶

In contrast to Tio, Loango was dominated by merchants and therefore its governance structure was more secular than otherwise. As Merlet asserts, the evolution of political institutions centered around conflicts between the Fumu-si (merchant chiefs), the clan chiefs, and the Fumu/Maloango, the royal political power based near Pointe Noire. 27 Vili clans in the 14th century inhabited southwestern Gabon through force and iron, because strict matrilinearity and

¹⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 146-152.

exogamy forbade marriage of a daughter to the chiefs of autochthonal clans and caused a coastal expansion. Because the Vili were mostly ruled by Fumu-si merchants, the 27 Vili clans known together as the Buvandji, they could only exercise a secular power over their subjects. This was evidenced by the interdiction of Buvandji rulers to enter the Nkisi-si, the sanctuaries where protective and potent charms were kept. They therefore had to devise other means of legitimation, such as the famous iron bell. At the end of the 15th century, there was a succession crisis thanks to strict matrilinearity, and the fumu-si would capitalize to extract real power, claiming that the interreign of a minister was not legitimate and didn't have the same legitimacy and sacral powers as the Maloango, the king of Loango.

The ethnic portrait of the Ndougou lagoon was completed when the Loumbou arrived in the geographic confines of the Ndougou in the 15th century, where they encountered the autochthonal Varama, slowly displacing them up the Rembo Bongo. Not long after, the Vili and the “rois forgerons,” identifiable by their continued use of iron clochettes to mark status and political legitimacy, conquered the region, pushing further north until being rebuffed by the Nkomi at Cap Lopez. Thenceforth the Buvandji clan of the Vili would come to demographically dominate the political structure of the region through the contemporary era, along with the Varama and the Loumbou.¹⁸⁷

Between roughly 500 A.D. and 1500 A.D. when the Europeans arrived, political institutions in southern Gabon evolved from one common Western Bantu tradition into several and variegated clans, chiefdoms, and groups with different ideologies and political organizations. As Klieman demonstrates, however, most Western Bantu-speaking peoples did adopt the common ideology of the “first-comer” paradigm, and legitimacy was rarely granted unless the heads of these political organizations—even the Fumu-si among the Vili—could demonstrate an ancestral link to those first-comers. The ancestral system depended on stable population densities and limited trade, and when both grew for myriad reasons, technological and socio-political innovations ruptured inter-group equilibria and triggered domino-effects of centralization and innovative adaptation. The conditions for higher population density and increased trade depended on access to resource endowments and its filtration through particular cultural schemes—what Vansina calls “acceptance in the cognitive realm”¹⁸⁸—such that “centralizing societies began in

¹⁸⁷ Annie Merlet, *Autour du Loango: XIVe-XIXe siècle*. (Centre culturel français Saint-Exupéry-Sépie, 1991).

¹⁸⁸ Vansina, *Paths*, 195.

areas of rich resources”¹⁸⁹ while not all richly endowed societies inhabiting a diverse ecotone developed centralizing innovations. In general, population growth typically followed access to resources leading to internal cohesion for defensive measures. Internal cohesion facilitated trade, which further enriched some houses vis-à-vis others, an unstable situation which produced innovations as both a means to consolidate wealth and prestige (patrimony) and a means to defend (further centralization). The patchwork of institutions comprising southern Gabon around 1500 A.D. was the result of unequal access to resources and differing dynamics of cognitive absorption, or different ideas of “what was perceivable and imaginable as change.”¹⁹⁰ When critical resources for empowerment eventually shifted from material goods to people as slaves, it is not difficult to imagine how transformational the Atlantic slave trade would soon become.

3.2 Southern Gabon during the Atlantic Slave Trade (1472-c.1880)

The Atlantic slave trade, followed by a more voluminous and profitable trade in commodities towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, had devastating effects on not only southern Gabon’s peoples but on the entire region. The slave trade succeeded in depopulating entire villages after scores of men and women were kidnapped, sold, brutalized and starved. The demographic toll on the broader region is undeniable, as roughly 1,000,000 people would be exported to the Americas and nearly as many would perish before ever seeing a port of call. Though the volume of slave commerce subsided after the British banned it in 1807, it was not adequately enforced until 1830. Even then, Brazilian and Spanish slavers continued to rely on hinterland caravans to carry out the dirty work, while nothing prevented coastal Africans themselves from acquiring and exploiting slaves. Aside from the enormous shock to human sensibility, a regional burst of trade during this time reconfigured populations as many groups, houses, kingdoms, and clans sought to increase wealth by either inserting themselves advantageously in the trade supply chains or by migrating themselves to popular trade routes. The diffuse nature of the trade sapped the central power of kings and propped up merchants looking to create their own following. In all, insertion into a European world market system enriched,

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 194.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 195.

depossession, shifted and integrated. It did not, however, fundamentally change the way equatorial Africans ruled themselves. The riches soon became a means to old ends, i.e. the acquisition of a larger and larger following in an effort to create for oneself the conditions for power and prestige. The trade was ultimately absorbed into existing institutions, a testament to their perennial durability.¹⁹¹

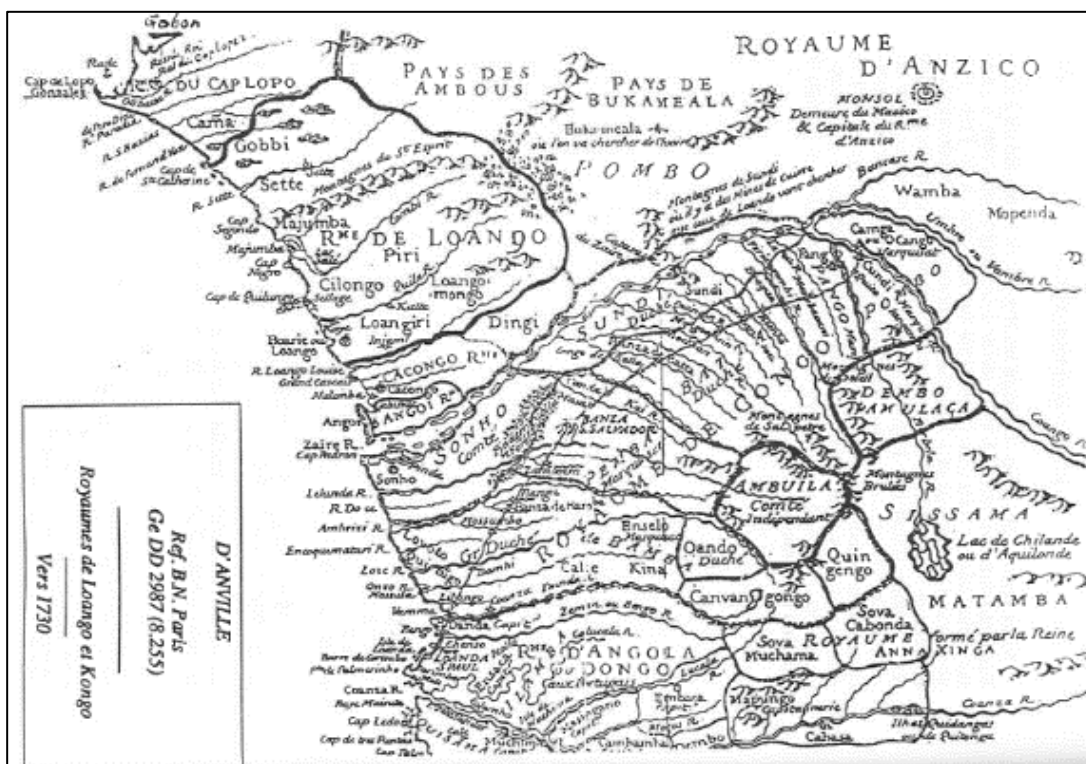
When the Portuguese first arrived at the Gabon Estuary in 1472, they saw little reason to establish a trading outpost and port of call. The Myene-speaking Mpongwe were decentralized, thanks in part to their patrilineal lineages, and sparsely populated the landscape. Instead, the Portuguese proceeded to the Kongo kingdom near the Congo estuary where in 1483 they found a standard national currency, centralized government, and adequate commercial differentiation. From this time until the 1570s Kongo was the primary point of trade along the equatorial coast, exporting 7,000 slaves a year to the Americas from the 1520s to the 1560s. Foreshadowing chronic regional destabilization as a result of the trade, however, the kingdom was forced to defend its advantaged position from the inland Tio kings in 1567 as well as from the Jaga in 1568. Only the Portuguese succeeded in repelling the latter attackers keen on cutting out middlemen in the slave trade. After the invasion, the Portuguese transferred their base of operations north along the coast to Loango, the new port of call for slaving ships.¹⁹²

Loango, whose systems and matriclans were highly influential in southern coastal Gabon, served as a successful point of call for several reasons. Firstly, a common currency in the raffia cloth and centralization of the interior facilitated transactions. Secondly, Europeans rarely if ever needed to penetrate the Loango hinterland themselves thanks to a sprawling system of caravans to sites mining for copper and iron. The sites and routes, operated by “Vili” traders—a name soon ascribed to many southern coastal peoples—could be appropriated towards the transport of slaves as well. The caravaneers extended deep into southern Gabon and as far northeast as the upper Ogooué. Formerly fishermen, the Vili soon transitioned almost entirely to trading in slaves and commodities. For these reasons as well the Dutch made Loango their regional trading base in 1593, first buying ivory and then Gabon’s renowned *okoume*. Incidentally, the first systematic and detailed descriptions of Gabonese peoples began when Dutchman Barent Erikszoon first

¹⁹¹ Merlet, *Autour du Loango*.

¹⁹² *ibid.*

bought ivory in Gabon in 1594, as the Dutch kept more thorough records than the Portuguese.¹⁹³ Despite these developments, only 300 slaves a year were exported from Loango between 1630 and 1650, and only 1000 a year by 1660. The Dutch at Cape Lopez, for instance, had not become interested in the slave trade until the 1630 conquest of northeast Brazil, disallowing coastal Gabon from ever becoming a “significant source of supply.”¹⁹⁴ Nevertheless, in 1650 Loango caved to pressure from the Dutch and permitted the trade. The volume of trade in slaves depended on demand in the Americas, which would not reach peak heights until the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.



Map 3: Loango and Kongo, c. 1730 (in Merlet, *Autour du Loango*, 44)

Trade in other commodities, however, was beginning to have integrating effects, speeding the effects of centralization and feeding pre-existing matrimonial alliance networks. By the late seventeenth century, for instance, the Adyumba monarchy at Cape Lopez had grown more

¹⁹³ Patterson, David, *The Northern Gabon Coast to 1875*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 9.

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 13.

powerful than those smaller groupings in the Estuary, even if they too spoke Myene. Owing to the decentralizing effects of patrilineal systems as well as intergroup competition and its residual effects on the inability of kings to tax or demand tribute, the forming of ever-larger political agglomerations had been forestalled, if not prevented. The Adyumba king, by contrast, reigned over a population influenced by the matrilineal Loango kingdom to the south, and thus was able to exploit lineage to extract tribute.

Though slave exports remained low in Loango, trade volumes began to empower the merchant Fumu-si even more. Around 1660, something akin to a bourgeois revolution led Fumu-si during a succession crisis to place severe limitations on the Maloango, including the interdiction to go outside during the day, talk to foreigners, see the sea, and to distribute land without the agreement of the Fumu-si.¹⁹⁵ The Maloango would now be elected and subject to humiliating initiations to prove his worth, one of which was to symbolically stop at the threshold of an nkisi-si, through which he was forbidden to pass. It is reasonable to conclude that the Fumu-si never quite accepted the legitimacy of the Maloango, who was not an autotochtone, and whose authoritarian disposition before the fumu-si revolutions was reportedly universally despised. Of course, the Maloango did not merely rely on invented sacralizations, but also on prestige from the Kongo kingdom.¹⁹⁶

From 1660 to 1830, the demand for slaves in the Americas rose significantly as the French and English in turn began participating in the trade, multiplying the social and economic effects of higher trade volumes in the region. 6,000 slaves a year were now being exported from Loango between 1685 and 1705 and as many as 13,500 a year from 1755 to 1793. These reports, however, should be measured against evidence submitted before the British parliament in 1789 suggesting that the slave trade in Gabon was still in its “infancy” during the 1760s,¹⁹⁷ attesting to Gabon’s relative backwater status as a port of entry for slave ships. During this relative peak in Gabon’s slaving system, however, the trade finally reached limited parts of Gabon hitherto left relatively untouched. The Dutch had built warehouses along the coast as part of land cessions by local chiefs, and Vili traders became more and more professionalized and began using arms, extending deeper and deeper into Gabonese territory.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹⁶ Merlet, *Autour du Loango*.

¹⁹⁷ Patterson, *Northern Gabon*, 33.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 35.

By the 18th century, a state resembling that of Loango had been built, and only decades later the seeds of its demise were sown. Despite strict exogamy and deference to hereditary lineage structures which, earlier on, significantly advantaged the Fumu and the Maloango, the slave trade engendered a second, loosely termed “bourgeois” revolution by the fumu-si and the mafouques (tax collectors and agents of the finance minister in Diosso-Bwali, the capital of Loango). Loango survived and thrived off the slave trade, and by the mid-18th century, the height of both, clan hierarchies were somewhat re-established along geographical proximity to the coast, notably the environs of Sette-Cama, in lieu of traditional lineage ties and first-come oral history. This meant in practice that the Vili, inhabiting most coastal areas where Europeans, notably Portuguese, had set up “factories” to house and distribute slaves, benefited most, with the Loumbou, Varama, and then Punu—the latter intermediaries set up in the region of the upper Nyanga river who had violently invaded in the mid-17th century in order to benefit from the slave trade—in turn establishing themselves along the most frequented commercial routes. As Merlet and others argue, despite the geographical determinance of hierarchy developed during this time, political institutions among Loango’s peoples scarcely changed, and even encouraged the assimilation of an economy based on the slave trade. The Vili-Loumbou-Varama-Punu all disallowed the capturing and enslavement of members of their own clans, except when enslavement was doled out as punishment for certain crimes against the community. To facilitate the trade and avoid conflict between the several ethnicities along commercial routes, therefore, a system of alliances was created which respected to the fullest possible extent the exigencies of oral tradition. Whether contrived or plausible, myths of common origin were invoked to establish alliances. Attesting to the persistence of strict exogamy, while these alliances were based on myths of common origin, intermarriage between clans from different ethnicities was still banned.¹⁹⁹

Chiefs sought to sell slaves so as to acquire goods which could then be used to acquire dependents, wives, and ammunition. Pricing mechanisms were also becoming standardized, as a slave typically sold for a packet of textiles, guns, powder, brass and other items considered precious. After the integrating effects of standardized currencies set in (the iron rod became the standard reference among the Fang, e.g.), many institutions did change to accommodate higher demand for slaves. Death sentences were commuted to slavery, criminal codes carried slavery as

¹⁹⁹ Merlet, *Autour du Loango*.

a sentence for the most minor of crimes, many leaders developed the practice of hoarding currency and contributing to capital formation, and finally there appeared a system of social stratification among the slaves themselves. By 1830, these practices and alterations had enveloped all of present-day Gabon.²⁰⁰

If 1660-1830 marked the peak of the slave trade in Gabon, the industrial age in Europe from 1830-1880 and the de jure abolition of the slave trade ushered in a volume of exchange that would dwarf slaving, which managed to persist as a black market nonetheless. When the British slave trade ended in law and in fact in 1808, island merchants filled the demand gap by purchasing their own slaves.²⁰¹ Also in spite of the unilateral ban, the Orungu and Mpongwe succeeded themselves in exploiting new opportunities through domestic slave trading, even as interregional and international trade in redwood and ivory increased several-fold.²⁰² In “legitimate commerce,” from Cameroon to the Congo river, ports of entry multiplied. But in general, the methods of trade did not change as much as the sheer volume and social impact of increased commerce. Although nominal colonial occupation began in Gabon as soon as 1839 when the French attempted to conclude treaties with chiefs at the Gabon Estuary, it would nevertheless not be until the 1880s and the Act of Berlin when colonial powers sought to penetrate the interior themselves and monopolize the extraction of resources. Until that happened, the economic and social impacts of the trade would be profound, yet not so destabilizing as to overturn ancestral traditions.

The socio-economic impact of the slave and Atlantic trades on Gabonese societies was marked but limited in comparison with both West Africa and the Congo. In the economic realm, the most noteworthy change as the volume of trade increased was in food production and agricultural practices. As the number of slaves and their dealers rose, so did the calories demanded to maintain them. Higher-yielding crops such as cassava, groundnuts, and tobacco gradually replaced the banana along the Ogooué, in southern Gabon, and among the Masango people in southern Gabon respectively. Women were increasingly relied upon to pick up the slack in labor. An effect of higher-yield cultivation was the regional specialization in crop production and access to wider markets as a result of integration and common currencies. Small communities gradually lost some skills while acquiring others as other regions might produce something more cheaply

²⁰⁰ Patterson, *Northern Gabon*.

²⁰¹ *ibid.*, 41.

²⁰² *ibid.*, 46.

and efficiently. All the attendant changes, however, were invariably met with local innovations informed by cultural knowledge and experience.

Another major effect with consequences for modern identity politics was the inadvertent creation of a fledgling inter-clan class system. The main beneficiaries of this system were the Mpongwe of the Gabon Estuary, who were ideally placed to conclude final sales with Europeans of goods procured from the hinterland. Like a supply chain reaching its point of sale, value in goods like slaves, ivory, dyewood, ebony, and rubber increased as they travelled towards the coast. Each group of people from the source of the good to its final destination before export jealously guarded their link in the chain. The Fang most inland on the Como river sold ivory downstream to the Bakalai, who in turn passed the ivory downstream to the Shekiani, before finally arriving in the hands of Mpongwe merchants who monopolized contact with the Europeans. Whereas often the trade relied on an intricate system of trust and credit—the bundles or *pacquets* acquired at the point of sale would be parceled out as they made their way upstream—it could also lead to localized wars. Skilled in extracting the highest possible profits from Europeans, the Mpongwe naturally became wealthier and consolidated their self-image as superior hinterland barbarians. The same Mpongwe, fast adopting European tastes, would be the source of the *métis*, a privileged status both envied and detested by modern and nineteenth century populations.²⁰³

Another consequence of social stratification thanks to economic specialization and the gradual penetration of the economic frontier towards the interior was the *mise-en-dépendance* of forest specialists. Although their products were still in demand during this time, they were heavily dependent on neighboring agricultural communities for European trade items which were fast becoming a common currency. This in turn contributed to their diminishing position in the developing Gabonese socio-economic class system.²⁰⁴

The third major socio-economic effect of the Atlantic trade was depopulation. As mentioned above, some 982,000 people were exported as slaves from equatorial coasts between 1660-1793, and another estimated 240,000 between 1810 and 1843. Roughly half this total lost their lives before departure to the Americas, and only a third of all exports were women, contributing to their employment in crop cultivation. In Gabon, 36.08 percent of slave exports were from Mayumba (Loango) in southern Gabon and from the upper Ogooué, and 19.42 percent

²⁰³ *ibid.*, 57-67.

²⁰⁴ Klieman, *Towards a History*, 132-33.

were from Teke and other related groups farther east. Despite the wanton capture, kidnapping, starving, and brutalizing of so many peoples, however, experts suggest that population growth merely stagnated, thanks to a coincidental growth in agricultural output which offset heavy losses and supported higher population densities. As the losses amounted to roughly 0.4 percent of the total population a year, it is inconceivable to many that growth did not eclipse this figure.

Political institutions were challenged but largely remained intact. While the trade realigned power brokers, shifted populations, and created new optimal levels of centralization, it was absorbed into older traditions of matrilineal and patrilineal succession while the structural integrity of houses, villages, and clans was preserved. While many kingdoms such as the Orungu centralized, many gradually disintegrated as merchant princes overtook royal princes and aristocracy in wealth and prestige. When a kingdom's subunits became more and more autonomous vis-à-vis the capital and their overlords, there was little else holding these kingdoms together. As early as 1698, for example, accounts by European sailors in the northern coast attest to the relative absence of kingdoms, however small, which once dotted the littoral regions.²⁰⁵ This process of disintegration also led to the breakup of the Kongo kingdom as early as the seventeenth century. A similar fate befell the Loango kingdom throughout the eighteenth century, even as merchant princes continued to wield the legitimacy of matrilineal descent and matriclans. The region remained relatively decentralized thereafter and governed by alliances of big men. Though the Maloango retained elements of his spiritual powers, political force fully gave way to the fumu-si who, through their connections to slavers and their ability to tax, broke the ancient bonds of dependence linking them not only to the maloango but the fumu as well. In one account published by a French official during the mid-17th century, a mafouque was referred to by locals near Mayumba as the "chief of Loango," even though that same mafouque referred to the maloango as his "father." At the same time, a report by a European slaver, while characterizing the living standards during the peak of Loango as "prosperous," even surpassing the underclasses of Europe, he said that some communities still paid a symbolic tribute to the Loango. Though the tribute had always been reportedly symbolic, its continued remittance suggests the durability of spiritual institutions.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Patterson, *Northern Gabon*, 24.

²⁰⁶ Merlet, *Autour du Loango*.

The post-1830 trade rush also resulted in the migration of many other groups of clans towards the Atlantic and river confluences, resulting in the rough mosaic of clan regions that persist today. Most notable among these migrations were the Fang, who in 1840 descended from the Woleu and Ntem rivers towards the coast, middle Ogooué, and the confluence of the Ogooué and the Ngounie rivers. Two decades earlier the Bakele traveled inland from the estuary towards the coast, while the Bishiwa moved down the Ivindo towards the confluence of the Ogooué. In eastern Gabon, the Nzabi and Tsangi moved south and west in search of better trade routes. In northeastern Gabon, peoples moved south and westward to take advantage of the overland trade to Loango. During this time, the Okande on the banks of the Ogooué between the Ngounie and the Ivindo had created a kingdom, which only imploded thanks to the same centrifugal forces created by trade that inflicted other kingdoms. In the Estuary, Mpongwe society had throughout the 19th century transformed into firms, marking status with dress and ostentatious displays of wealth. Despite this last instance, little else changed for the peoples of Gabon with the minor exception in the swelling of patrilineal ranks.²⁰⁷

Throughout this tumultuous era of increasing trade, the peoples of southern Gabon continually adapted changing environmental circumstances to previously held traditions. Goods were acquired as a means not only to wealth but power and prestige. Matrimonial compensation was needed to acquire dependents, followers, wives, power, and prestige. Trade simply sped up this process, but did not subvert it. Kingdoms were still formed and legitimized through lineage ideologies. Houses and villages were still the most common units of socio-political construction outside the kingdoms. What the experience of the Atlantic trade from 1492-1880 imparts on us is how strong and enduring cognitive perceptions of power are, and what it actually takes to erode them. If any concerted, external force was to overturn the local autonomy and self-determination of the pre-colonial Gabonese, it would be the onslaught of French bureaucracy, administration, and outright conquest.

²⁰⁷ Vansina, *Paths*, 197-237.

3.3 Southern Gabon during Colonial Occupation

No other political development or external force would have such a devastating impact on Gabonese—and southern Gabonese—political institutions than colonial penetration and administration by bureaucrats, soldiers, and corporations all wielding power through the end of a barrel. As France ratcheted up its control of the Gabonese region towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, brute force, together with the realignment of indigenous political preferences and aspirations through the administration of territory and people, would nearly eviscerate the core of traditional elements in Gabonese society and politics. This section tells this tale—from 1839 to independence in 1960—primarily through the eyes of French colonial protagonists and their indigenous respondents, neither of which should be confused as the sole agents in the colony’s institutional development. Rather, such a traditionalist history is meant to paint a broad brush of important developments which helped set the backdrop for multifaceted engagement and development of the Ndougou’s institutional future. The following history therefore divides the colonial era into three sub-eras based on the depth of administrative and military penetration. From 1839 to 1885, France’s engagement with Gabon was mostly limited to littoral regions, while the period from 1885 to 1910 saw interior penetration and the ravages of the concessionary system. Finally, the institution of Afrique Equatoriale Française (AEF) in 1910 saw a more direct challenge to ancestral Western Bantu traditions through the imposition of *indigénat*, chief appointments, and the intensification of conflicts between the French military and rebellious elements among local populations. Two elements critical to resolving colonialism’s impact on traditional institutions concern the extent of differentiation of French practices across the territory and what accounted for this differentiation. The experiences of the Ndougou are periodically presented as both similar and in contrast to colony-wide trends.

From 1839 to 1885, the year of the Congress of Berlin and when France had roughly completed its systematic exploration of Gabon’s interior, French control of Gabon was limited to coastal regions where successive treaties with traditional leaders had been signed. A convergence of interests ranging from France’s commitment to suppressing the slave trade to providing protection for maritime commerce brought the French Navy to Gabon’s shores in 1837. In that year, the young officer Edouard Bouet-Williaumez set out on the *Malouine* to accomplish the larger objective of establishing *points d’appui*, commercial and military stations along the coast

meant to secure trade and rein in slavers. By 1839, Bouet had signed a treaty with the Myene-speaking Mpongwe chief known as “King Denis” to the French, who in reality was better described as a big man ruling over a district within the myene-speaking Estuary peoples. In 1842, another Estuary big man, “King Louis,” signed a treaty ceding external sovereignty to France. Once the Navy established its port at Fort d’Aumale in the Estuary, not far from what would soon become Libreville, naval officers were able to make longer overland and sea routes up and down Gabon’s coastal region, signing treaties as they advanced. By 1846, France had claimed virtually all of the Estuary deemed appropriate for military and agricultural activities. Similar treaties were then signed in 1852 with the Benga clan heads at Cape Esterias, north of Libreville, in 1862 with the Orungu chiefs at Cape Lopez to the south, and in 1868 with the Nkomi chiefs at Fernan Vaz, even further south. By this time, the French authorities can be said to have extended their loose dominance, mostly concerned with resource extraction, over the entirety of Gabon’s coastal region.

Even so, France’s territorial control during the period from 1839-1875 was limited compared to the scramble that would ensue. Economic activity increased as littoral regions were integrated, a process explained in more detailed in the preceding section, and the French were content to allow open trade. This was partly the result of a mutual understanding with France’s European rivals as well as the perception that Gabon was not as precious as other French holdings, such as Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire. French Foreign Minister François Pierre Guillaume Guizot therefore stated in 1844 that France would do no more than exercise external sovereignty over the region, a policy meant to avoid antagonizing the British while also holding out for a brighter, resource-rich future. As a result, firms were more established than military and administrative outposts, and each were content to rely on intermediaries to bring goods to ports and supply depots. Reluctance to penetrate the interior was exemplified by the circumstances which led to the founding of Libreville. Throughout the 1840s, the Mpongwe had steadily become the chief intermediaries between Europeans and the interior, where ivory, rubber, and slaves were to be found. As they became more involved, the Mpongwe further enriched themselves and began acquiring certain European customs while refusing employment as agricultural laborers, traits the French would soon despise. In 1849, Bouet took a group of “liberated” Vili traders from Loango to found a settlement called Libreville, a crowd-pleasing way to both circumvent Mpongwe in the region and hopefully win hearts and minds.

As mentioned above, France, with pressure from Great Britain, nominally banned the slave trade in 1818 in territories above the equator, leaving Loango south of the equator to persist unencumbered to benefit from its primary real source of wealth. Sette Cama, in the present-day department of Ndougou, was a critical supply post where slaves were held and sold to Portuguese sailors destined for Brazil. It is no surprise then that after 1836, with the ban on the slave trade extending southward below the equator and thus implicating and affecting the Loango kingdom, the real power of the Loango kingdom rapidly disintegrated even further. Between 1836 and approximately 1865, the trade went underground to an extent as British and French patrols scoured coastal Gabon, intercepting ships whenever possible and arresting interlopers. On one occasion mentioned above, a French patrol was said to have captured a ship of Vili slaves. Though it cannot be confirmed, the possibility that Vili sold their own—those who had not even been justly tried and convicted by customary law—suggests a deterioration of political cultures wrought by the trade. In 1845, explorer Bouet-Williaumez drafted a report claiming that 500-600 slaves were kept at all times in Mayumba. By this time, Merlet tells us that the chefs de terre in the region under question, the fumu-si, as well as the mafouques, had become “parasites,” contributing to the “atomization” of lineage. In contradiction with what has been suggested regarding the rest of Gabon, traditional leaders became much more interested in personal gains, either as a means to self-enrichment or to buttress their power, despite the collective good and stability promoted by ancient lineages spanning larger regions and distances. They had become dependent on the trade, selling Western products and liaising with Western merchants.²⁰⁸

When the trade was more firmly halted in 1865, a prelude to encroaching French administration, and the depleted kingdom of Loango left without its revenue, the matrilineal links and oral traditions which bonded people across hundreds of kilometers were severed. This is not to say that matrilineal traditions had ceased within tighter atoms; indeed, an account by Le Testu as late as 1907 confirms the preponderance in southwestern Gabon of strict matrilinearity and devotion to ancestors. It merely suggests that the means by which larger political organizations—such as Loango—had historically been held together were, perhaps irrevocably, destroyed. The medium of power was now material goods, even if circumscribed by traditional structures, habits, and bestowing of legitimacy. This conflict between political legitimacy derived from traditions

²⁰⁸ Merlet, *Autour du Loango*.

and that derived from Western material goods was the basis of a violent conflict which broke out shortly after the abolition of “*la traite*,” between coastal factions of traditional leaders and those coastal usurpers deemed upstarts by the *fumu-si*, the former of whom were increasingly influential in politics and public management thanks to their newly acquired wealth. It is plausible that neither side won a clear victory, but that in any case successive leaders sought the need to justify their statuses through traditional means.²⁰⁹

Institutional change among the autochtons during this era would therefore not come from force and administration as much as from trade (discussed earlier) and missionary activity. Treaties were merely an instrument to exclude European rivals, and were drawn and signed so hastily and so vaguely that their enforceability still remains in doubt. Many accounts report chiefs having scribbled an “X” after being presented with a host of goods. The practice of gift-giving was soon institutionalized in agreements in the form of annual contributions, and as part of French efforts to create networks of big men loyal to them. The British and the Germans also practiced this, as their firms had large holdings and a commercial presence in Gabon. Although the French firms Lecour of Nantes and Dubarry Frères of Le Havre made significant gains, it was firms like Hatton and Cookson, John Holt, and Woermann that took the lion’s share of the profits. No doubt a reason for deeper French *emprise* towards the end of the nineteenth century, this highly competitive environment was among the reasons for why French authorities had also given *carte blanche* to Catholic missionaries, another being the need to groom a local elite. In 1844 religious leader Bessieux and his order, the Fathers of the Holy Ghost, established a seminary near Fort d’Aumale, partly in an effort to counter the omnipresent American protestant missionaries and their expanding influence. Soon thereafter a decree obliging that all school instruction be done in French effectively removed the American menace and cemented French Catholic control of missionary activity. Thus, by 1875, commerce and Christianity (and not yet “civilization”) planted seeds of social change which would steadily germinate in the years to come. Porters now worked for outsiders, creating wage employment, a heretofore unknown concept, and many ethnic groups would be alarmed by the evolving monopolistic practices of firms. Christianity in turn introduced a cosmology that, although not entirely incompatible with Western Bantu conceptions of the universe, had begun to endear autochtones to their colonial masters. But when Bessieux began

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*

expanding his missionary activity over broader areas throughout the 1870s, more sinister developments with more serious consequences were beginning to unfold.²¹⁰

The 1870s witnessed a sea change in French public support for colonial ventures, with public backing for interior penetration rising precipitously. The root causes were intensified nationalism, competition for territory (overseas and otherwise), and augmented military capabilities (not until the 1890s would industrialization and the demand for primary commodities become a factor). When the French were defeated by Germany at the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, itself partly a consequence of industrialization, the public's will to restore national pride, the demand for primary commodities in France's factories, and international competition aligned to thrust the nation into Gabon's interior. After interior explorations by Paul du Chaillu who traced the Fang passage from the north, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza captured French imaginations by tracing a route from the Gabonese coast to the Congo basin from 1874 to 1882. After de Brazza's first two expeditions along the Ogooué and the ratification of the Makoko treaties which recognized a French protectorate over the right bank of the river, de Brazza was entrusted with taking control and preparing the local populations for long-distance trade. In the middle-to-upper Ogooué regions, the Kande, Duma, and especially the Teke had long since abandoned self-sufficient economies thanks to the legitimate trade, making them ripe for a new scheme of more intense regional integration.²¹¹ By the 1880s, other explorers had together succeeded in mapping nearly all of Gabon's territory. In 1883, French encroachment in Gabon's southern regions allowed treaties to be signed with the Vili chiefs at Loango and beyond.

By 1883, a French expedition aimed at surveying commerce on the Loango coast found that four companies were operating in Sette Cama, all of which variously engaged in the rubber, ivory and palm trades: Edwards Brothers and John Holt, both British firms, Woermann, German, and Hatton and Cookson, another British firm which according to the expedition exercised, along with Woermann, "the most influence on the indigenous peoples." The local executive for Hatton and Cookson is now buried, along with other European officials including ex-colonial governor Leremercier, on the beach outside Sette Cama.²¹² Another adjacent cemetery would become the final resting place of Sette Cama's local population.

²¹⁰ *ibid.*

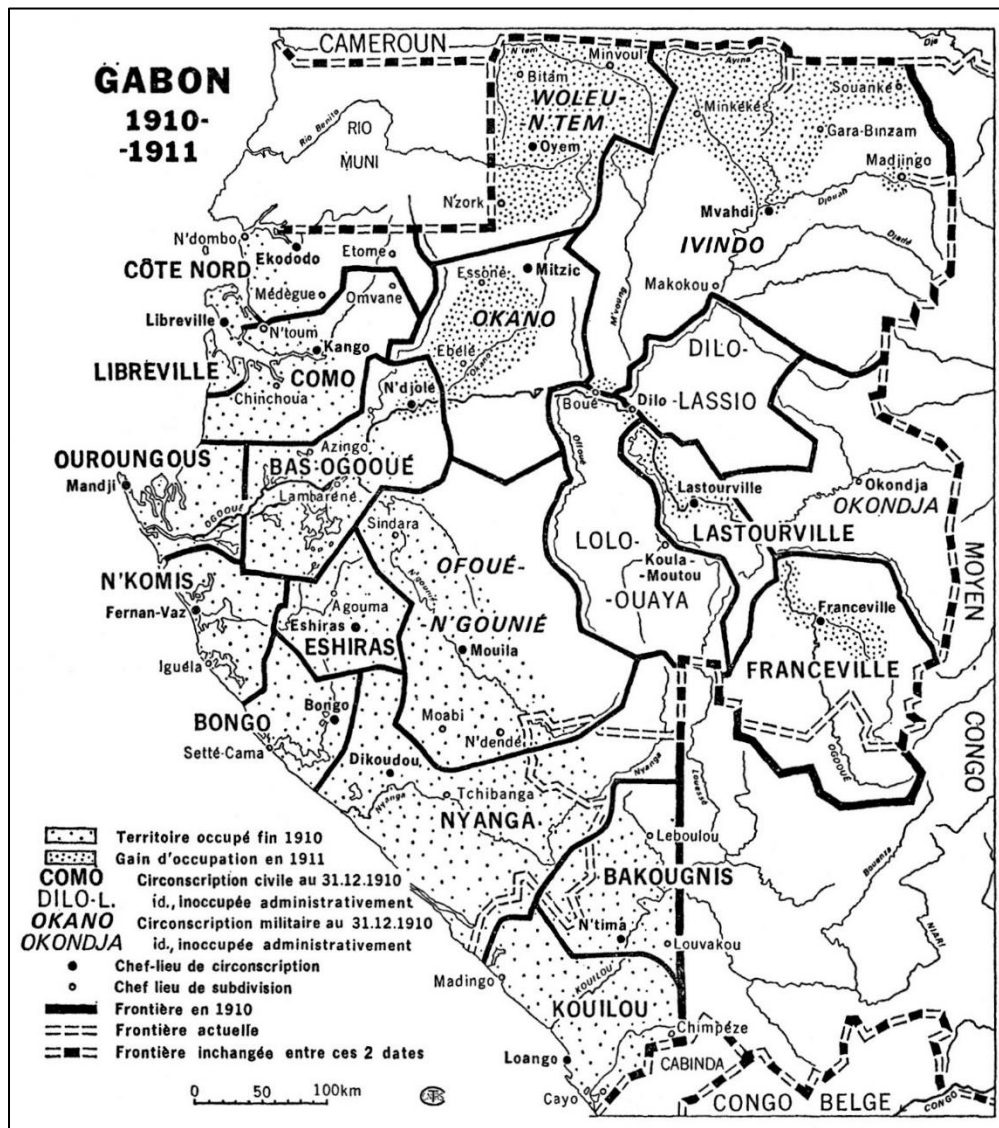
²¹¹ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "French Congo and Gabon, 1886-1905." *The Cambridge History of Africa* 6 (1985) : 298-315. 298.

²¹² Merlet, *Autour du Loango*.

Territoriality and administration went hand in hand with exploration as authorities sought to protect their gains and provide safe havens for French industry. One indicator that the French were becoming more serious about governing Gabon was in 1881 when control over “Middle Congo” was transferred from the Navy to the Ministry of Trade and Colonies, and then in 1894 when an autonomous Ministry of the Colonies was established at the cabinet level. By this time, the Congress of Berlin in 1885 had confirmed Gabon as a French domain, and the French began taking steps to wield their sovereign advantage in the purpose of squeezing out its foreign missionary and commercial competitors. It was during this time that the American evangelists and their schools were forced to transfer their activities to the French Société des missions évangéliques de Paris (SME), thus ending their prominence and setting the stage for the inception of the Evangelical Church of Gabon later on. At the same time, Catholic missionaries made extensive advances. In 1899, André Raponda Walker became the first Gabonese to be ordained a priest, and in 1900 the Brothers of Saint Gabriel opened their well-regarded school in Montfort in Libreville. Christian values had begun to encroach upon, but not supplant, spirit-based religions as the universal cosmology and understanding of the supernatural world.

Through missions, the would-be colonial authorities presumably saw an opportunity to lay the groundwork for African menial labor and the facilitation of extractive industries. Perhaps in better faith, Father Carrie, departing from present-day Congo in 1887, arrived in present-day Gabon just a year later to establish with the help of other priests missions which would educate village children and create a future “elite” in the service of primarily French interests. In an exploratory mission to Loango years earlier, in 1864, Father Carrie would write of his disappointment upon seeing the dilapidated state of the Loango capital (one Dutch explorer in the 18th century had compared it to Amsterdam with an estimated population of 15,000), which to the

Father had looked no grander than a larger village. His disappointment may have compounded when he later encountered a culture intrinsically resistant to the mores of Christianity.²¹³



Map 4: Gabon at the onset of the AEF, 1910. (Bernault, Ambigues)

In 1888 the region's first mission was built in Mayumba, the former slaving port and as yet the region's largest city and economic capital; Mayumba sold primarily rubber, and a chief there had recently fought a company for granting refuge to his runaway slave. Violence and disputes soon arose when the "Boyo" affair forced clergymen to become less rigid and more tolerant of the local context and indigenous belief systems. Boyo was a ritual similar to Mwiri, which still exists

²¹³ *ibid.*

today. Its purpose was to maintain order and achieve the obeisance of women. *Ngangas*, witchdoctors whose participation in the ceremonies was critical, launched an offensive, poisoning African catechists and threatening others. Displaying of the cross was not permitted. Not until priests learned to demonstrate to *ngangas* and chiefs that they too could achieve the obeisance of women did chiefs in 17 separate villages of the region begin renouncing Boyo and even burning down its prayer houses.²¹⁴

In 1889, Father Carrie, or an associate, arrived in Sette Cama for the first time with a letter signed by two local chiefs and the colonial governor permitting the construction of a mission. A site was soon chosen on a small Ndougou lagoon island known as “Ngaley” (or “Ngale”), and by 1891 classrooms became functional, instructing the children of chiefs and former slaves—the latter were typically freed by French authorities. Indigenous populations did not feel comfortable entrusting their children to “*les blancs*” and their belief systems until the 1920s, just when enrolment at the mission began to stagnate. But from 1893 to 1934, the total numbers of boys and schools vacillated between 50 and 110. Crosses were eventually built in many of the lagunar villages, but large-scale adherence to the Catholic faith would not persist as intended. In any case, factors like the cultural practice of polygamy demanded calls for adaptation to Catholicism which would have fallen flat when confronted with its strictest European proselytizers.²¹⁵

In commerce, French authorities began to put in place a concessionary policy modeled on the Belgian Congo—the *régime concessionnaire*—a convenient way to exclude British, German, and American firms trading in ivory, rubber, and then okoume, but nevertheless a terrible omen for the territory’s autochtones. Once the Ogooué was effectively opened up by de Brazza, the Ministry of the Colonies and private concerns turned towards exploiting inland resources. Obstacles to efficient exploitation abounded, however. First, the French administration’s manpower during these years was very limited, with the future AEF’s white community totalling no more than 800, most of which were stationed in Libreville, Brazzaville, and Pointe Noire. Second, France’s public bourse and the authorities therein were unable and unwilling to finance the effective state administration of all of Gabon. Third, local populations preferred British and German products. In order to make Gabon profitable, then, private concerns would have to assume the cost of development, taxation, and policing in exchange for a monopoly of trade in a

²¹⁴ *ibid.*

²¹⁵ Jean Silvio Koumba, “Esquisse de l’Histoire de Sette Cama.” (Tourist-Art Consulting: Libreville, 2015).

predesignated zone. Thus, in 1894, the Société de Haute Ogooué (SHO) received 11 million hectares in eastern Gabon. In 1896, André Lebon, Minister for the Colonies, formalized the process of handing over territory and administration by decree. Lebon's successors ended up granting forty concessions by 1900, each given a thirty-year monopoly on "products of the soil," such as ivory and rubber, in return for a fixed annual payment to the state as well as fifteen percent of all profits.²¹⁶

Despite the presumed advantages granted to them, the *entreprises de colonisation* were, on the whole, a colossal failure from the perspectives of business, development, and human rights. Firstly, despite all their efforts and retention of property rights, most of the forty concessionaires filed for bankruptcy by 1904-5, when only a total of seven survived. The latter seven, including the SHO, reportedly "owed their success to the extreme severity of their methods."²¹⁷ The SHO's zone covered roughly half of Gabon and virtually all the territory in the east, an area rich in timber. The company serves as a representative example of the practices of concessionaires until roughly 1910, which was marked by underdevelopment, conflict, and instability. When authorities realized as early as 1884 that Africans would not readily sell their labor, a poll tax was administered which not only contributed to state and private liquidity but which also had the intended effect of pushing Africans into labor markets in order to acquire currency.²¹⁸ Development, of course, was of secondary, even tertiary, importance. Companies had no incentives to invest or develop infrastructure when extracting wood and rubber. They had only to pay porters for collection, not even according to the value of the product. For the African, there was little distinction between the merchant or the soldier, who each regarded him or her as a possession to be exploited, and, when necessary, beaten. Abuses were aggravated by the shortage of labor expected from a forested and underpopulated land.²¹⁹ When groups organized and either refused to work or obstructed the flow of goods, companies could call on colonial forces (e.g. *les tirailleurs sénégalais*) and mercenaries to put down riots and labor skirmishes. What's more, the notoriously monopolistic practice of setting low supplier prices (when suppliers were by and large local populations) and charging extortionist prices for their own manufactured products did nothing to rectify the situation. Lastly, payments for SHO products were made in company currencies.

²¹⁶ Coquery-Vidrovitch, *French Congo*, 303-307.

²¹⁷ *ibid.*, 309.

²¹⁸ *ibid.*, 310.

²¹⁹ *ibid.*, 308-315.

Until 1907, the Circonscription de Bongo, with the subdivisions of Bongo (up the Rembo Bongo) and Sette Cama, was dominated by Hatton and Cookson which was maintaining cocoa and coconut plantations. Such was the dominance of the English competitors that the *cessionnaires* of the French Société Agricole et Commerciale de Sette Cama (SACSC) routinely petitioned the Ministry of Colonies to enforce their concession, either with colonial forces, personnel, or favorable taxation. The difficulties of SACSC in capitalizing on their concessions were made evident through the frequent strikes by locals who objected to physical abuse by the SACSC-employed *traitants*. The year 1902, for instance, witnessed the killing of six *indigènes* during a skirmish with armed *traitants*. In defending their actions, the SACSC merely wrote to the Ministry that competition from the English and local “rebellion” necessitated their rough treatment, and that only more personnel could overturn the dire state of affairs.²²⁰

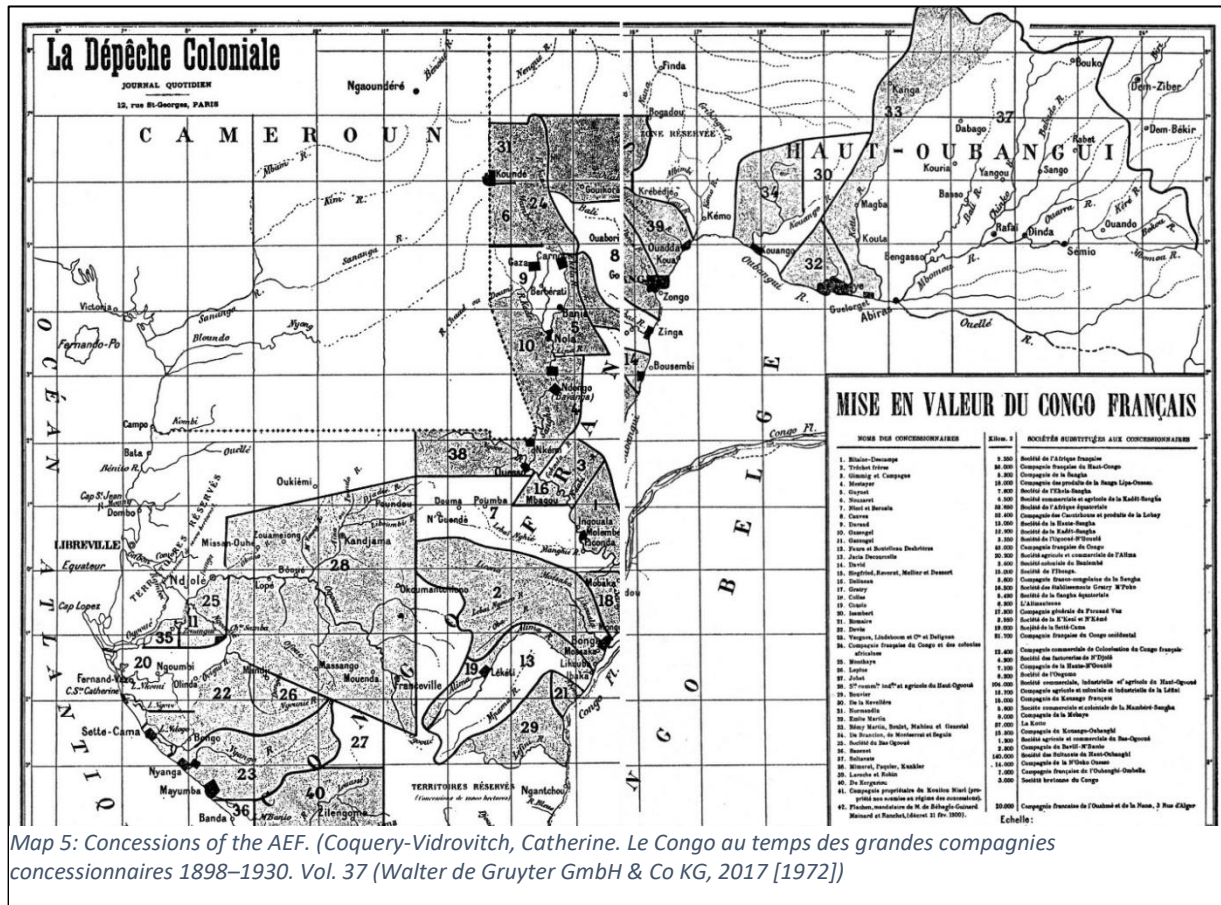
The extent of economic and physical abuse wrought by the concessionary era was further documented de Brazza himself, who in a mission in 1910 confirmed reports of brutality by the companies. The report helped lead to a return to open competition and the abandonment of concessions. For all intents and purposes, however, the damage done to traditional institutions must have been severe. No longer were autochtones operating as middlemen and setting their own “wages.” From the concession-era onwards, facilitated by colonial penetration of the interior, regional economies were directly re-oriented to the international market, and wage labor became the norm. Property, human capital, and Christianity, however, were mere antecedents to the cultural shock that would follow with the establishment of the confederation Afrique Equatoriale Française (AEF) in 1910.

The AEF era extended from 1910 to 1958, and its defining characteristics, the execution of direct administration and social engineering, would doubtless transform indigenous political systems in profound ways. This required “capturing” the rural peasantry by either introducing modernity when feasible or by the use of force and various legal sanctions. The push for liberalization in the post-World War II years leading to independence, in addition to the obvious benefits derived from the low-scale distribution of modern medicine and public schooling, served much of this modernizing purpose, the goal of which was to transform peasants into market

²²⁰ Letters written by Director of SACSC to the Ministry of Colonies, 29 December, 1902, 11 February, 1903, 17 February, 1903, Société Agricole et Commerciale du Sette Cama, Dossier Commun aux Sociétés du Fernan Vaz et du Sette Cama, 1899/1930, Carton 62 COL 33, Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France.

economy laborers. In 1913, for instance, the humanitarian and ethnographer Albert Schweitzer began his medical mission in Lambarene, a city straddling the upper Ogooué. After the AEF had been inaugurated with Brazzaville as its capital, however, the gradual demise of concessions meant new arrangements were needed to “pacify” the indigenous Gabonese when the draw of modernization was not expedient.

This was done twofold by creating a new administrative hierarchy and grooming a local elite dependent on French interests. *Canton* chiefs would be appointed by colonial officers to administer justice and resolve disputes, severely curtailing the power of traditional chiefs (*chefs de terre* and *chefs de famille/clan*) who either matched or fell short of the power retained by administrative chiefs, which was still limited in the grand scheme. Administrative chiefs were expected to gather the necessary labor for industrial projects as well as apply customary law, a means to subvert traditional dispute settlement mechanisms by integrating “custom,” as administrators defined it, within the administrative court hierarchy.²²¹



²²¹ For a similar argument, see C.C. Mojekwu, "Law in African Culture and Society." (*African Society, Culture and Politics: an Introduction to African Studies*, 1978).

Prior to 1906, the area around Sette Cama was administered by the colony of Moyen-Congo, while the colony of Gabon's territory began not far north of the Ndougou lagoon. During this time, the area was directly administered by the Chef de Poste de Sette Cama, whose mandate was to protect French nationals, regulate conflicts between indigenous peoples and the companies operating in the area, enforce fixed prices, facilitate commerce, and, last but not least, recruit labor as part of France's infamous "forced labor" regime. The same general hierarchy/dynamic was in place after the region around Sette Cama was definitively placed within the now-fixed colony of Gabon in 1908. Although only 4 persons were recruited to work in Sette Cama's postal and telegraph services in 1903, the number of those recruited for "*prestations*" would rise to 150 in 1926, many of whom would be consigned to menial labor extracting palm products. To give a sense of scale, the population of the Ndougou lagoon was estimated in 1899 at 8,000 with approximately 230 villages, Sette Cama being but among the largest.²²² In 1918, it was estimated that 23,800 person-days of free labor was exacted. The toll of forced labor came with moderate resistance, especially from chefs de terre who saw real power give way to administrative conduits and chiefs working for the Chef de Poste de Sette Cama. In one instance, authorities of the Circonscription de Bongo reported that disputes between *chefs de terre* and administrative chiefs were intensifying, as one *chef de village* routinely sought to reaffirm his authority over a nearby *chef de terre* by encouraging plantation workers to stop maintaining his land.²²³ Additionally, a local tribunal was established in 1926 which usurped many traditional powers by placing local "notables" on the bench. While many abandoned the region to avoid head taxes by France and its auxiliaries, some chefs de terre like the activist in N'Gamba (present-day Gamba) violently resisted French colonialism. The latter was eventually imprisoned in Libreville for one year.²²⁴

In addition to local administration, the second means of subjecting the Gabonese was accomplished through the infamous institution of *indigénat*, the upshot of the French *mission civilisatrice* which created a hierarchy of indigenous social classes based on the extent of assimilation to French culture. Whereas the interbred *métis* among the Church-educated Mpongwe/Estuary elite would acquire many of the rights of the French *colons* and serve among

²²² Koumba, *Esquisse*.

²²³ "Rapport Mensuel, January, 1922," Rapports Mensuels, Circonscription de Bongo, 1922, Carton D 21, 51MIOM/44(1-2), Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France.

²²⁴ Koumba, *Esquisse*.

the corps of French Congo's bureaucrats, the rest of the population subject to *indigénat* became second-rate citizens subject to penalties and taxation without adequate legal recourse. The French policy of assimilation, according to Edward Mortimer, was in fact a perversion of Lord Lugard's indirect rule as it was first applied in Nigeria. Instead of governing on the cheap and readying colonies for eventual self-governance, assimilation sought "the largest amount of administrative, economic and financial independence that is compatible with the greatest possible political dependence."²²⁵ The largely Anglo-Saxon idea of self-determination, as Mortimer states, was more readily accepted in an international context, such as was the case with the inauguration of the League of Nations. Whereas the British largely ruled over territories with borders that more closely fitted pre-colonial "boundaries" and peoples more accustomed to centralization, French territories like Gabon had no such advantages, thus applying a pure scheme of indirect rule proved less adequate to the terminal goal of extraction.²²⁶

This piece of social engineering ended up introducing a class element to inter-clan relations, and the visible heights to which Mpongwe *métis* rose must have had an effect on the aspirations of autochtones throughout the country. Even though interclan relations prior to *indigénat* were often conflictual and indeed garrulous, the relative lack of material disparities between clans, with the minor exception of the Mpongwe, in part meant that ethics of mutual toleration and egalitarianism had persisted. As soon as it was clear that territoriality and money were the new currencies of power, however, society fractured along new lines. The socio-political equilibrium which had thus far survived the onslaught of intensive trade was beginning to give way to a disjointed system where power was becoming disembedded from its former legitimacy. This was a recipe for contestation and conflict.

Ironically, much of the resistance and opposition to *indigénat* and forced labor would come from the ranks of *métis* themselves, although inequitable clan relations somewhat intensified. From 1924-1945, *indigénat*, together with the savvy placement of administrative chiefs, helped build the Congo-Océan railroad, one example of concessionary exactions that caused a great deal of hardship, transformed standards of living, and fueled resistance movements. In 1925, the Haut-Ogooué region consisting of present-day Bongoville (formerly Lewai) was transferred to the

²²⁵ Jules Harmand (1910) in Edward Mortimer, *France and the Africans, 1940-60: a Political History* (London: Faber, 1969), 33.

²²⁶ Mortimer, *France and the Africans*, 32-37.

Middle Congo for the sole purpose of providing more labor for the construction of the Congo-Ocean railroad. The practice of granting concessions did come to an end shortly after the public outcry following the publication of André Gide's *Voyage au Congo* in 1927, but this did not stop the practice of forced labor by private enterprise.²²⁷ In addition, those Mpongwe Estuary elite—the *métis*—educated in France or in colonial French schools became a formidable voice for reform. In 1918, for instance, Tchikaya and Mapako-Gnali were sent to the Ponty school in Senegal, and in the same year the Libreville branch of the *Ligue de droits de l'homme* was founded, a resistance movement aimed at curbing colonial abuses. Expat Gabonese and World War I veterans Bigmann and Antchouey then published *L'Echo Gabonais* and then *La Voix Coloniale* in Nice, publications with close ties to the *Ligue* as well as the *Jeunesse Gabonaise*, all of which were composed primarily of Mpongwe elite.

Elites, or *évolués*, were likewise groomed for local politics in the Ndougou lagoon, but the success in doing so by the Mission Ngale would wane over time. From 1893 to 1934, the total numbers of boys and schoolchildren vacillated between 50 and 110. In 1933, the mission's congregation peaked at approximately 1,705 members and since then fell. The mission's students typically became something of a local elite class, speaking French, reciting Bible verses, and being able to perform basic maths. Evangelized and trained, many would either join the clergy and make up the first group of indigenous priests in 1934 (6 in total) or go to work for European companies like Woermann, Hatton and Cookson, or, later on, primarily French companies. It is no wonder, then, that it was primarily chiefs whose contact with French administration was most frequent that wished their children to be sent to missionary schools, despite earlier objections and mistrust. In 1918, local chiefs banded together to save the church from insolvency and closing.²²⁸

The decline, stagnation, and perception of failure among the clergy with respect to its impact on and recruitment of the local population has its roots in several factors given by Jean Silvio Koumba, a jurist in Libreville with knowledge of the Ndougou's history. Not only did Vili and Loumbou groups in the area remain suspicious of the strict monotheism of Catholicism, but difficulties in recruitment were also owed to a lack of finances within the Church itself, which could scarcely afford to pay decent salaries. Koumba also cites the encroaching presence of companies in and around the lagoon, which paid better salaries and whose effects on local

²²⁷ *ibid.*, 38.

²²⁸ Koumba, *Esquisse*.

populations were at once physical, temporal, and psychological. As a result, for these reasons and for others which have yet to be elucidated, Catholicism failed to hold sway, but that does not mean we should discount its presence during these years as influential on the cosmology of local populations. If the population of the region was estimated in the thousands near 1933 when missionary membership reached 1,705, it is safe to assume many were now aware of an alternative belief system and began adhering to technological hierarchies. In any case, high winds would destroy the mission building, and consequently lay to rest whatever impact the Ngale mission might have had on the local population.²²⁹

Returning to events in Libreville, calls for reform of *indigénat* were not enough to counter the resentment that the more populous Fang had begun to develop of the *métis*. Becoming ever more dominant in the Estuary region, the Fang migration from the Woleu-Ntem had resulted in a widespread decline of traditional chiefly powers. Leadership hence passed to the most westernized elements capable of defending Fang interests—wage earners and educated elite.²³⁰ In 1922, one such Fang was Léon Mba, a critic of Mpongwe dominance in the colonial administration who was appointed canton chief in a large district of Libreville, a position which he used to mount diatribes against the colonial administration and henceforth build his career. In 1926, Francois-de-Paul Vane created the Mutuelle Gabonaise, a group of Mpongwe militating against the privileged Mpongwe *métis*, and soon thereafter the *métis*, in turn, formed the Amicale des Métis to protect their own interests. In response, the Fang, still encroaching upon traditional Mpongwe territory and elite privileges, created the Comité des Intérêts Pahouins. This formalization of inter-ethnic tensions would form the basis of electoral compositions in the colonial and post-colonial eras.

In the years leading up to World War II, after which Gabon would begin to take on its post-colonial characteristics, world depression would have a destabilizing effect on the region and prompt evermore extreme measures by French authorities to quell dissent and unrest. In 1929, an Awandji revolt against administrative and concessionary abuses was put down by colonial authorities, and in 1933 Mba was exiled for his surreptitious activities and increasing popularity among Estuary Fang. In 1937, Vane won a victory for the anti-*métis* voices through his election to the Governor-General's Council of Administration, a precursor to the type of power cessions granted to indigenous Gabonese after World War II. Reports to Libreville from administrators in

²²⁹ *ibid.*

²³⁰ Mortimer, *France and the Africans*, 39-40.

in Bongo (north of the Ndougou lagoon), however, fail to mention any such agitation. By all accounts, much of southern Gabon remained relatively peaceful.

The post-World War II era is in itself distinctive, for this granted to indigenous Gabonese a level of political and economic autonomy that would help shape post-colonial politics. The war's devastation of metropolitan French infrastructure and the abuses of occupation left the nation severely weakened, and the war itself provided an opportunity for Gabonese nationalists to act on their grievances with decided leverage. Most educated Gabonese therefore supported the Vichy regime, leading to the swift reconquest of the AEF by Leclerc and the Free French forces in 1940. Management of the recaptured AEF was handed to Felix Eboué, born in Guyana. A loyal Gaullist, Eboué nevertheless worked to win over indigenous populations through the establishment of Gabon's first public secondary schools, the abolition of the indigénat after WWII, and the increased participatory role of local elites in the political process. Prior to the liberation of Paris, facilitating Eboué's push for reforms was a general colonial policy shift to the left following adhesion to Free France

At the Brazzaville Conference of 1944, called by de Gaulle to liberalize the empire and grant more political rights to colonies within the French imperial realm, Eboué's ideas were somewhat well received despite de Gaulle's failure to reference self-determination at the conference, and it was generally agreed that smoother governance required local elite participation. In 1946, these principles were put into practice with the inauguration of the Fourth French Republic, in which the newly formed Gabon with its attendant boundaries became an Overseas Territory of France. Forced labor and indigénat were effectively abolished, black Africans became French citizens, an advisory Territorial Assembly was established, and Gabon was even given representation in the French National Assembly.

In the decades preceding Gabon's independence in 1960, liberalized (and relatively localized) French colonial administration in the Ndougou would seem to have impacted the local population in two significant ways: market labour, whether forced or salaried, and formal education. As briefly mentioned above, it would be difficult to argue that the structure of politics and power at the local level faced significant changes in southern Gabon throughout colonial administration, as prior subjects of the Loango kingdom were by no means acephalous and were indeed habituated to centralized rule. Administrative chiefs—chefs de canton, chefs de regroupement, and chefs de village—by many accounts, seem to have by and large possessed

legitimacy through lineage and personal qualities. This is no accident, because French administrators deftly sought out legitimate auxiliaries whenever possible, a pragmatic strategy still carried out by the current regime. More difficult to determine, however, is when and how chiefs in this region ceased gradually to occupy spiritual-defensive roles within their communities, to which we will turn further on. For now, it suffices to say that the chiefly occupation is likely to have not changed much in southwestern Gabon since the 1920s, especially compared to the more acephalous Fang of the Woleu-Ntem.

Although forced labor throughout French Africa was nominally abolished in 1946, it would be incorrect to state that the practice in Gabon of workers opting to sell their labor engendered a transformative process. Taxes were still collected, requiring people to seek salaried work in one of the very few companies operating in the Ndougou. Now that the means of subsistence had been sufficiently monetized, and those participating in agriculture, fishing, and hunting retrained for salaried work, one might argue that forced labor ceased to be necessary. According to a report published by the local government in Gamba, foresting activities stagnated and declined from 1935-1937, but Sette Cama remained an export hub for several species of lumber from the interior,²³¹ and it was clear to chiefs that salaried employment conferred prestige and elite status. Also, the continued trade and presence of several companies encouraged regional migration to the lagoon on a moderate scale. In any case, it does not seem as though the region was vitally important for lumber, as interior lands such as the Woleu Ntem in the north or outskirts of Lascoursville to the east were favored foresting sites by the concessionnaires.

Perhaps more important for the changing customs of villagers around the lagoon was the construction of the first secular school in Sette Cama in 1947, which began its instruction to children in 1948. We can only assume that the compulsory schooling of locals was effective, as many interviewed chiefs often recalled having to travel several days to arrive at school in Sette Cama, intermittently the seat of districts during the colonial era depending on the importance of the region for trade and extraction. There they learned French and French history, as well as other remedial subjects (e.g. maths) before possibly graduating to secondary school elsewhere. Many older chiefs today seem divided on their impressions of France. While some recall their fathers

²³¹ “Plan de développement local du département de Ndougou et de la Commune de Gamba : 2013-2017” (Comité de réflexion sur l’après-pétrole, UNDP, Conseil du Commune de Gamba, Conseil départemental de Ndougou. Released in 2012).

having occupied important positions during the colonial era with pride, others betray a marked antagonism towards the symbolism of colonial subjugation, with one chief bitterly recalling that village people were routinely made to carry on their shoulders colonial administrators through densely wooded areas.²³² Rather than creating French people, formal schooling in the colonial era seemed to have created Francophones at most.

Far removed from the relative backwater of the Ndougou, party lines in Libreville began to reflect class and ethnic interests which much of the time intersected and fractured along regional lines as well. Jean-Hilaire Aubaume, a representative of the more traditional Fang in the northern Woleu-Ntem region from where their migration first began, was the first Gabonese elected to the French National Assembly. Aubaume headed the more conciliatory UDSG, whose passive stance towards colonial ventures endeared him to French authorities, as well as helped to create a bitter rivalry with the more “Marxist-liberationist” Mba, who self-aligned with Houphouët Boigny and even some regional Marxist elements. After returning from exile in 1936, Mba spent 10 years as a civil servant in Brazzaville and, upon return to Libreville in 1946, helped create the Comité Mixte Gabonais, largely composed of Estuary Fang and influenced by Boigny’s RDA. In this period Mba made a calculated move to moderate his Marxist stance by drawing various groups which could potentially help him unseat Aubaume in elections to the National Assembly. Many feared an impending Fang dominance of national politics, and Mba successfully exploited groups sharing these fears. In 1954, Gondjout, who represented the Estuary’s non-Fang elite, agreed to enter into an alliance with Mba which, having vastly expanded Mba’s political base, contributed to his election as mayor of Libreville in 1956. Other factors in Mba’s favor included the RDA’s break with French Communists, tempering Mba’s image as a radical Marxist. The Bloc Démocratique Gabonais (BDG) was also supported by local French industries and the wealthy Mpongwe elite, thanks to Gondjout’s own constituency. Despite the demise of the concessionary era and forced labor, many companies had stayed on and diverted their attention towards other profitable extractive resources, such as manganese in Franceville, timber, iron in Mekambo, and uranium in the Haut-Ogooué. In 1956, ironically the year the *loi cadre* was passed in the French National Assembly, petroleum was first produced near Port-Gentil at the mouth of the Ogooué river. The

²³² Interview with Chef de village of Mougagara (Mougagara, Gabon, August 5, 2015).

managers of exploitative companies such as COMILOG and SOMIFER formed a critical base of support for the BDG.

In 1956, the *loi cadre* enforced all the terms of agreement reached at the 1944 Brazzaville Conference, and in that year the French National Assembly passed enabling legislation. In effect, the law re-organized the AEF along the lines of the British Commonwealth, where territories would elect true representative assemblies under the external sovereignty of the French executive. The BDG succeeded in electing a large contingent to the new assembly with the help of gerrymandered districts. Mba became the Vice President of the Government Council and the BDG held majorities in the legislature and cabinet. Though Mba had his sights on the monopolization of power and marginalization of Aubame, the rivals united over the anti-colonial push leading up to 1960.

In 1958, the return of de Gaulle and the subsequent dissolution of the Fourth Republic was to upend France's longstanding legal relationship to its Overseas Territories. De Gaulle therefore proposed a referendum to all its territories on whether or not to become independent or join the French Community modelled on the Commonwealth. An overwhelming majority of Gabonese, 190,334 to 15,244, voted in favor of remaining in the Community. Mba and Aubame at this time sided with continued association with France, while Gabon's non-Fang and non-Mpongwe groups feared an independent state dominated by the two powerful contingents. At the end, Gabon, avoiding the threat of a subordinated status in another federation like the AEF, joined the continent-wide push for independence and became an independent republic in 1960 with Mba as Prime Minister.²³³

3.4 Factors of Change and Anomie in Southern Gabon

The colonial era witnessed the most profound shocks to indigenous and traditional political systems, and thus perhaps the most intense rapidity of change and instances of resistance. The factors most responsible for this change were first trade, then territoriality, the relations of economic production (including the creation of a proletariat and its mistreatment by colonial and

²³³ James Franklin Barnes, *Gabon: Beyond the Colonial Legacy* (Westview Press, 1992) ; Gardinier, David E., and Douglas A. Yates. *Historical Dictionary of Gabon*. (Scarecrow Press, 1981).

company authorities), religious and cultural education (including language), and changes to individual aspirations given the opportunity cost of withdrawing from the state and its administrative apparatuses, among other potential factors of anomie. Each will be briefly considered in the following section, followed by a synopsis of what in fact remained of pre-colonial political systems after the scourge of colonialism.

Trade, territoriality, and relations of economic production in Gabon were interrelated and positively so. For the French, the procurement of wood and minerals needed to be maximized with the use of mercantilism, which meant capitalizing on labor surpluses through the integration of traditional, subsistence cultures into wage-earning collectives, henceforth creating a class structure based on the control of production rather than familial ties. Chiefs, whose legitimacy stemmed from birthright and the distribution of riches in both northern patrilineal and southern matrilineal societies, became slowly deprived of that legitimacy as they became less and less capable of channeling gifts and prestige objects. To make things worse, wage earners were migrating *en masse* to cities and concessionaires to earn their own keep, hollowing villages of the chiefs' means of acquiring riches and labor. In the Ndougou, by contrast, instances of exodus and flight from concessionaires appear consistently on monthly administrative reports throughout the 1920s.²³⁴ Eventually, villagers, recognizing the emasculation of chiefs, began petitioning the local *sous-prefecture* and appointed canton chiefs (representatives of the new, omnipotent state; Ambouroue-Avaro) rather than the traditional chief himself for their grievances and for their needs. The traditional political structure grew up around subsistence agriculture above all else (as in most Western Bantu tradition),²³⁵ and though it may have managed to survive before the demarcation of territorial borders, the conscription of wage-earners and the externalization of force and law sounded the final death knell of these systems. The slow disintegration of subsistence sharing economies, which occurred faster in coastal regions where all factors of change were more present, gradually gave way to economies based on the legal enforcement of personal property and capital exchange.

When the imposition of territoriality became more widespread after the inauguration of AEF in 1910, traditional matriclans of coastal southern Gabon, where most of today's onshore oil

²³⁴ Rapports Mensuels, Circonscription de Bongo, 1922, Carton D 21, 51MIOM/44(1-2), Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France.

²³⁵ See Bernardin Minko Mve, *Gabon entre Tradition et Post-modernité: Dynamique des Structures d'Accueil Fang*. (Editions L'Harmattan, 2003).

drilling occurs, proved unable to withstand the profound disruptions as a result of direct administration through canton chiefs. As already pointed out, chiefs were appointed mainly to collect taxes, adjudicate customary law, and ensure the supply of manpower—through indigénat—to concessionaires and other colonial projects. Earlier on, this was the domain of traditional authorities. The chiefs were also appointed to administer geographical boundaries which had never existed; power was never demarcated geographically but was exercised through marital exchange, and the composition and location of villages remained somewhat fluid into the early twentieth century. As the French had not taken proper heed of precolonial districts, chiefs were appointed for Orungu, Nkomi, and Ngowe “tribes,” and subdivisions such as the Mitsogo, Apindji, Bapunu, and Gisira were further created. Where resistance did not occur, and where traditional chiefs and leaders were less and less solicited for re-distribution, new ethnic identities began to emerge, signifying a shift in the cognitive realities of some Gabonese and thus near-complete institutional change. People began to see themselves in relation to a broader colonial structure. As some clans became absorbed into others within this new structure, evidence suggests notables like Sousatte claimed new ethnic identities, in this case Gisir, in order to advance certain political and economic interests. With the establishment of the *Conseil des notables* in 1937, representatives of designated “ethnicities” met and hashed out their differences, contributing to the sedimentation of new identities. Furthermore, this grouping of Western-educated elite who met to allocate resources for the construction of roads, schools, hospitals, etc. helped create a new class-ethnicity structure which would put in place the fault lines of political conflict for years to come. Thus, territoriality helped crystallize new identities divorced from the old, and the appointment of chiefs dependent on French administration also helped to personalize power in individuals seen as representative of a distant, powerful force.²³⁶

In the Ndougou lagoon, oral tradition and records taken by Europeans in the 15th century assuredly indicate a relatively centralized kingdom of Loango, first a vassal of Kongo and then relatively independent as the slave trade proceeded, with symbolic tributes continued to be paid to the Maloango. The trade itself caused a flurry of population displacements in the Ndougou and set up a hierarchy between clans, and, although it was strictly determined by proximity to the coast, lineage chiefs felt obliged to justify both alliances and hierarchical roles with references to the

²³⁶ Gray, *Colonial Rule*.

past, even as the influence of the Maloango waned. Matrilinearity became “atomized” but not obliterated. It would seem that the very strict exogamy and respect for authority present in the southwestern populations of Gabon often facilitated colonial exploits in lumber, palm oil, and rubber. Unlike the acephalous, patrilinear Fang, whose obedience and subjugation the French administrators had a great deal of difficulty achieving, the Loumbou/Vili/Punu chiefs, once co-opted by the French administration, seemed to have been respected among the local population, despite the refusals to regroup into larger villages and the instances of exodus. The record demonstrates that physically violent conflicts in the region as a result of forced labor were few and far between.

Most traditional authorities in southern matrilineans did not simply acquiesce to the usurpation of their traditional powers through chiefs and market labor, and their resistance proved the extent of the challenges. Resistance—in both its overt and covert forms—also signalled anomie, the ill-adaptation to new structures and the consequences thereof for individuals and groups. Nicolas Metegue N’nah (1981) details the steady acts of resistance by traditional elements through the 1920s, when the northern Fang of the Woleu-Ntem region perpetrated their last desperate attempts to conserve political traditions. As social conditions for most Gabonese deteriorated under the concessions—many porters and *pagayeurs* who formerly benefited as intermediaries suffered abominable wages and high mortality rates during voyages that could last over a month—and as traditional chiefs lost manpower to forced labor, armed conflicts sprung up which drew French military intervention. In 1879, for instance, the Nkomi of the Fernan-Vaz with their Rengondo, resentful of the imposition of customs on “their” territory and the usurious practices of Western companies, restricted commerce throughout the region. In 1881, Nkomi militants arrested the merchant Mac Kissac for not respecting the interdiction, which required the colonial authorities to negotiate his release. In the north, Fang and Kele united to set their own customs prices, which led to the destruction of several villages by colonial armed forces in retaliation. Perhaps no rebellion was more threatening than that organized by Emane Tole, a Fang born near Ndjole around 1845. Tole, a respected leader in the region, sought to preserve his local monopoly on commerce against larcenous colonial taxation and expropriation through desperate

acts of aggression such as the abduction of an SHO agent, the physical obstruction of European commerce, and the engagement of French forces and indigenous mercenaries.²³⁷

In regards to chief appointments, districts (clans) reacted in different ways, betraying the varying of political traditions among the southern Gabonese. While some such as the Tsogo-speaking clan retained traditional autonomy thanks to the memory of rebel leader Mbombe by exercising passive resistance, and while others reacted by burning down offices of appointed chiefs, others in more traditionally centralized districts and clans absorbed the new organization more easily. Here, for example, one can see the successful appointment of canton chiefs among the Gisir ethnic group, already accustomed to centralized authority thanks to Loango's influence.²³⁸ Nonetheless, when the abovementioned sporadic bouts of conflict abated around 1920, real resistance would have to take non-physical forms.

After the successful implantation of French colonialism following the marginalization of armed resisters and otherwise, acts of resistance manifested in the cognitive realm where territoriality could not penetrate, and these vestiges of ancestral power among Gabon's peoples largely remain to this day. Here we can also see the limits of missionary and Western secular education, which indeed served to acculturate indigenous leaders and perpetuate the new class structure, clearly illegitimate to those clinging to former ways. The first sign of cognitive resistance was reported in 1880 in the form of Bwiti, a secret society which began as syncretic rites among the Fang combining elements of Christian and ancestral Mwriti rites, which declined because they were a means of controlling people, objects, and phenomena in physical space. Gray (2002), for instance, cites the demise of leopard men, men disguised as leopards who enforced edicts of Mwiri. Murderous attacks by leopard men were suppressed especially in the southern Punu-speaking areas, where colonial administrators punished the practice by death. In the Ndougou region, *hommes-tigres* were reported by administrators in Bongo and apprehended for acts of cannibalism. The administration even had difficulties recruiting the efforts of local chiefs in apprehending the *hommes-tigres*, as one *chef de terre* refused to investigate the alleged killing of a "slave" by an administrative chief due to his confessed incompetence in vampirism.²³⁹ Gray

²³⁷ Nicolas Métégué N'Nah, *Histoire du Gabon: des Origines à l'Aube du XXI^e siècle*. (Editions L'Harmattan, 2006).

²³⁸ Gray, *Colonial Rule*.

²³⁹ Rapports Trimestriels, Circonscription de Bongo, 1922, Carton D 24, 51MIOM/47(1-2). Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France.

also sees an increased incidence of leopard attacks in the early twentieth century as a result of constraints applied to movements of dependents between clans, a consequence of the colonial imposition of territoriality. One example is the closing of the salt trade on the coast in the early 20th century because of its link with trade in dependents. Formerly a way to rid clans of undesirable members, the use of leopard men became a crime and subsequently vanished. This might explain the growing Bwiti initiation society throughout the 1920s, which, though assuming some older functions of Mwiri, “promised esoteric insights into the workings of the universe through an hallucinatory initiation experience and the performance of spectacular miracles.”²⁴⁰

Bwiti has varied in different forms since its first appearance in 1880, and it differs based on local circumstances. Through contemporary times it has proliferated most in Gabon’s interior, while it has largely been either vulgarized or modified on the coast where European and outside influences have been strongest. Exorcism rites, however, have hardly varied since the times of de Chaillu (Raponda-Walker and Sillans, 1983). Despite the differences, Bwiti in all its forms serves to allow its participants to “see” dangers and threats that await them, including witchcraft. Its functions *to protect villages*, where the sources of traditional authority have long since disappeared. Perhaps that explains why Myene-speaking peoples, thanks to their historical roles as trading intermediaries between Europeans and the interior, are most drawn to the cult.²⁴¹

With the departure of traditional ways of life, women also took to secret societies to safeguard what little power remained after the degradation of the matrilineal system. As men moved to urban centers looking to sell their labor, women were largely over-represented in villages. Furthermore, Christianity introduced the concept of individuality and the concept of divorce, rupturing what was once an eternal bond in marriage and limiting the control over dependents. In responding to the perceived and growing division between men and women in the colonial order, women (and men) flocked to ritual societies known ancestrally as Njembe and Njomi, where the symbolic role of women could be maintained in a traditional setting.²⁴²

In the Ndougou, and in addition to exodus and refusals to work or regroup, most conflict seemed to have come in the form of resistance to missionary education of the Catholic variety, and

²⁴⁰ Gray, *Colonial Rule*, 203.

²⁴¹ François Gaulme, "Le Bwiti chez les Nkomi: Association Culturelle et Evolution Historique sur le Littoral Gabonais." (*Journal des Africanistes* 49.2 (1979): 37-87) ; Gaulme, François. *Le Pays de Cama: un Ancien État Côtier du Gabon et ses Origines. Vol. 2.* (KARTHALA Editions, 1981).

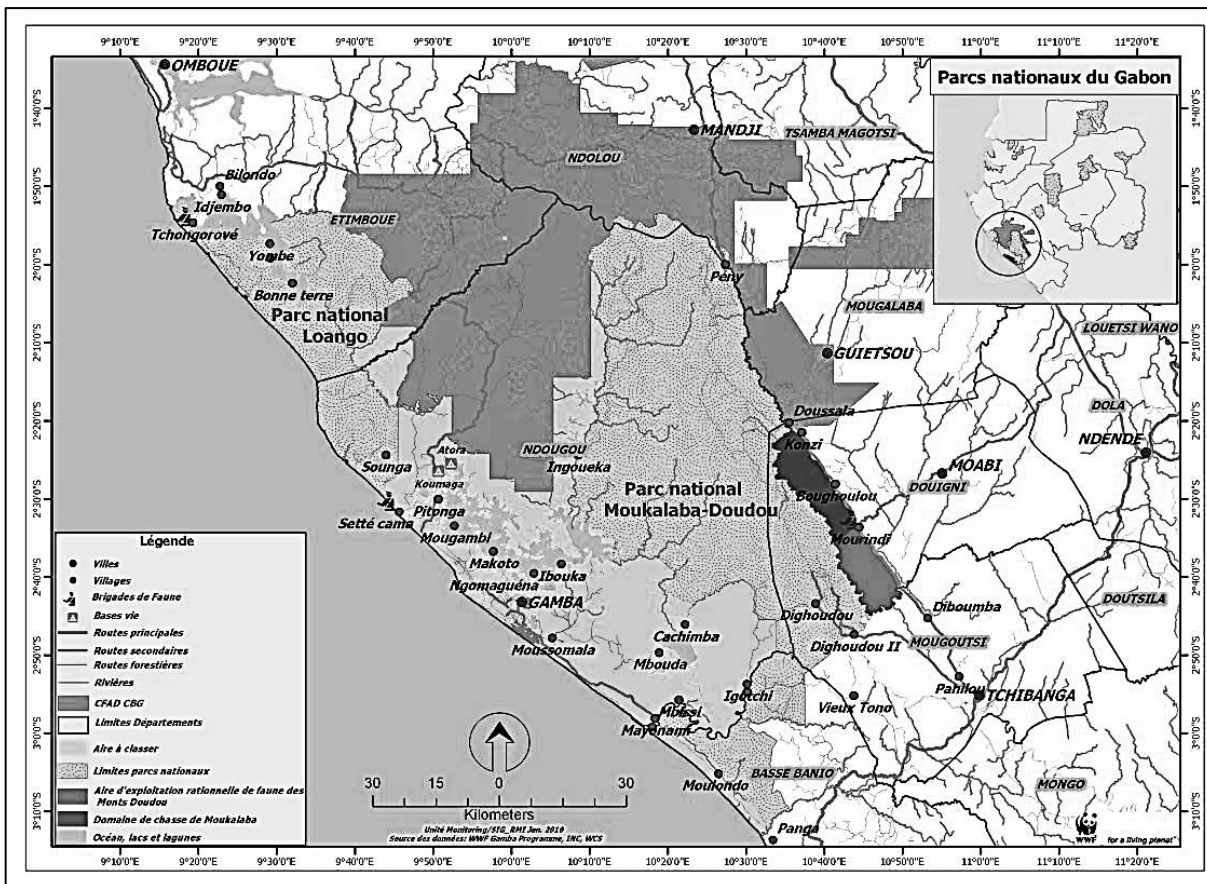
²⁴² Gray, *Colonial Rule*.

this despite chiefs largely trumpeting its cause for want of legitimacy among the French administrators. Ngangas, or witchdoctors, were still present during the turbulent concessionary era and later, a fact confirmed by testimony from interviewees, including a hospital practitioner who claimed that, in the past few decades, it had become easier and easier to treat patients with Western medicine due to the disappearance of traditional ngangas.²⁴³ On the wane but not yet disappeared, one might conclude that at the time of independence and the discovery of oil, the Ndougou region was clearly no longer a self-sovereign system of powerful lineages and clans descending from the maloango. It was, however, clearly beholden to its traditional beliefs, the oral traditions which shape people's cosmologies and teach them to respect authorities who possess both noble blood and sufficient personal qualities to guarantee the smooth functioning of village life.

In conclusion, the march of trade, administration, territoriality and education clearly upended all precolonial traditions, emasculating traditional authorities of their sources of legitimacy and placing it in the hands of individuals answerable only to French administrators. Monopolistic practices during the concessionary era oriented populations not towards local communities and the preservation of life as it always was but towards riches and commodification of nearly everything. The end product was a "schizophrenia" (Vansina) which would permeate Gabonese societies through the present era: Traditional and administrative authorities would co-exist, and peoples escaped "modern" life by initiation to secret societies which modified ancestral traditions by co-opting new ones. In confirming the thesis of Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, it seems the process of sedimentation has yet to be completed, and the *empilement* of positions of authority is still very much in effect. What extra layers of sedimentation would the large-scale exploitation of oilfields bring? To what extent would further instances of anomie be owed to similar factors of change seen in colonial and pre-oil experiences?

²⁴³ Interview with Dr. Sisso, Hospital in Gamba, July 28, 2015

4.1. *Tranquilité*: Gamba and the Ndougou, c. 1950s - 1967



Map 6: The Ndougou Lagoon and its villages. (WWF 2010)

The purpose of this sub-chapter is to tell the post-discovery story of the city of Gamba and its overlaying Département de Ndougou in a specific way, and with a specific purpose in mind. That purpose is to delineate the political actors and factors most responsible for changes in observed phenomena and the development of anomic structures. These outcomes include, but are not limited to, the overall satisfaction of the Ndougou’s subjects with their situation as well as their material, spiritual, and associative well-beings (including social and political anomie). Political actors and factors will not be restricted to their formalized variants so prevalent in the West, as

discussed in Chapter 1, but may include any individuals or groups thereof with a demonstrable impact on political events and processes, which in turn impact anomic structures. The two questions to answer in this subchapter are 1) When are the critical junctures in the lives of the Ndougou's community members which significantly affected anomic structures and 2) Who and what were involved with those changes? *How* and *why* those people and institutions were involved is the purview of later chapters.

Since our controlling context is that of oil exploitation, our diachronic story begins shortly before Gabon's independence in 1960, when a consortium of private and state-owned oil companies—the Compagnie Shell de Recherche et d'Exploration au Gabon (COSREG), the Société des Pétroles d'Afrique Equatoriale Française (SPAEF), and elements of the Gabonese state—began exploring the littoral region of the Ogooué-Maritime Province. In 1957, the consortium discovered oil off the coast of Port-Gentil, the region's capital and later Gabon's longstanding oil-industry base of operations. Five years later, in 1962, discoveries were made further south on the island of Mandji. Finally, in 1964 and after approximately four years of prospecting, COSREG/SPAEF discovered the Gamba well, a dozen kilometers south of the present-day Ville de Gamba. The site, close to today's Vembo site, remained an important hub of operations within Shell's development of the area's oilfields. The arrival of the oil industry in one of Gabon's most remote regions would have a considerable and indisputable impact on the lives, and livelihoods, of its autochtones.

It is revealing that the nature of life in the Ndougou around 1960 can only be documented by reference to oral histories and a few scant observations by COSREG (to become Shell-Gabon in 1963), while a broader picture must be inferred and extrapolated through circumstantial evidence and limited archival material. It suggests that the region was indeed as sparse and disconnected from wider economies as observation suggests, and most assuredly based on agrarian modes of production. One detailed report of Gamba, published in 1967 for the purposes of encouraging sound urban development, suggests Shell officials found “no trace” of habitation around the recently granted exploitation zone (formerly Nyanga Wildlife Reserve), as the District of Sette Cama, at 0.5 persons per square kilometer, was among the least dense districts in Gabon.²⁴⁴ The report seemingly corrects COSREG's initial accounts, finding that the local Bavarama

²⁴⁴ SMUH, *Gamba*.

autochtones were scattered in villages of 25-100 around the lagoon.²⁴⁵ This latter estimate appears accurate and agrees with original participant estimates, the more elderly of whom tend to describe a more vibrant lagoon dotted with “real” villages. It also agrees with prefectural reports, which attest to the District having at least 24 villages (presumably not including temporary fishing, plantation, and hunting encampments). Perhaps the reason for why COSREG found no trace of civilization is because the region was indeed described as “very calm.”²⁴⁶ Sette Cama by the time of oil prospection had maintained its historical role as the economic and political capital of the lagunar region, evidenced by its status as the seat of the District’s *sous-préfet*. The village is estimated to have been inhabited by approximately 200 people at this time.

While most of pre-oil lagunar population was engaged in agrarian activities which persist to this day, a small minority held public or private sector jobs. As mentioned in Chapter 2.1, Sette Cama had historically been the hub for the slave, ivory, and wood trades. But with the effective ban on slavery and slave trading as well as newer laws prohibiting the poaching of now-protected wildlife,²⁴⁷ foresting had become the only local activity on a commercial scale. The reach of the lumber industry, though, must have been limited, however destructive it had been to those unfortunate enough to suffer its exploits. Indeed, the nominal *chef de village* of Mougagara, a small village separated from the Ndougou by the Nyanga river, expressed a deep mistrust for “whites,” recalling the time when the French lumber company was active in the region. They had reportedly abandoned their lumbering operations with everything in a ruined state, among which were the people themselves, who had to carry colonial officers on their backs. The chief described this state of forced labor as “*esclavage*.”²⁴⁸ Nevertheless, reports suggest that less than 10% of the Ndougou were likely employed, in some capacity, by the foresters in the late colonial and early independence periods.²⁴⁹ This meant that the Ndougou’s direct experience with foreign aims was limited., despite an internationally renowned hunting lodge in Sette Cama serving Western clients, and despite the collective memory of foreign Catholic missionaries.

²⁴⁵ *ibid.*

²⁴⁶ « Fiche d’Activités du Mois de Janvier, 1968, District Autonome de Gamba” by J. Bernard Saulnerond, Le Préfet de l’Ogooué-Maritime, February 8, 1968, Carton 3375, Région de l’Ogooué-Maritime, Fiches mensuelles d’activités, 1968, Archives Nationales du Gabon, Libreville, Gabon.

²⁴⁷ Le décret du 18 novembre 1947 réglementant la chasse dans les territoires africains; le décret du 27 avril 1954 relatif à la protection de la nature dans les territoires africains; la loi n° 46/60 du 8 juin 1960 réglementant l’exercice de la chasse et l’usage des armes de chasse, et son décret d’application, le décret n° 84/PR du 12 avril 1961.

²⁴⁸ Chef de Village of Mougagara

²⁴⁹ Plan de développement local

Aside from state employees attached to the *sous-préfet* in Sette Cama, the vast majority of inhabitants of the Ndougou had no salary and either subsistence farmed, fished, or gathered their dietary means of existence. They often relocated their villages to take advantage of fields lying fallow. The local economy was therefore not monetized to a sufficient extent which would allow money to play a role in local affairs. No evidence suggests there was any practical means to import food products or more advanced technology other than through COSREG (Shell-Gabon). Though several autochtones of older generations had completed studies in Port Gentil, all interviewees claimed to have returned for their families. While several contemporary reports suggest that commercial fishing may become a viable alternative after the complete departure of the oil industry, there is nothing to indicate that any of the autochtones had taken to larger-scale or deep-sea fishing. A report mentions locals still using dugout canoes and rowing to the banks of Ndougou to sell fish, and when several elder interviewees were asked about pre-oil industry travel,²⁵⁰ they unanimously cited their manual *pirogues*. A villager from Ingouéka, for example, stated that before Shell's arrival and the post-oil proliferation of motorized boats, it would take three days to arrive at the only primary school in the area, located at the time in Sette Cama.²⁵¹ The same dugout rowboats were ostensibly used for fishing in the lagoon's bountiful fresh waters. Further proof of the relative lack of industry existed in the near-absence of roads unrelated to the local foresting companies, something which Shell would have to address upon discovery of the Gamba well.²⁵²

As with now, political authorities before oil were diverse and most likely competed with one another. The state was embodied in the *sous-préfet* in Sette Cama with its various agents enforcing the decrees of Gabon's executive branch as well as adjudicating more serious disputes. Before independence, the colonial state was needed to carry out forced labor, where young men were impressed into the transportation of felled trees as well as the construction of infrastructure needed to support the foresting scheme. A "commandant" and militia had been charged with manning security checkpoints at the mouth of the Nyanga and in Sette Cama. It was illegal for anyone to fell a palm tree, and the act was punishable by up to several months or even years in prison. Another source of authority derived from agents patrolling the newly created parks and

²⁵⁰ SMUH, Gamba.

²⁵¹ Interviews with villagers of Ingouéka, August 3, 2015

²⁵² S. Blaney, S. Mbouity, P. Moussounda Nzamba, J-M Nkombé, M. Thibault, O. Mboumba Mavoungou, and J.P. Bayé, "Caractéristiques Socio-Economiques de la Ville de Gamba, Département de Ndougou." (WWF-Programme Régional pour l'Afrique Centrale, Libreville, Gabon: 1998).

protected wildlife areas, though it remains unclear whether poaching laws in protected areas were ever truly enforced.

In such an environment of agrarian production coupled with the relative absence of cost-effective transportation and low state presence, villagers ostensibly counted on local lineage chiefs and *ngangas* to provide social and religious services, enforce customs and law, and regulate land tenure. A professor of linguistics at the University of Omar Bongo (UOB) claims the criteria for succession to chieftaincy were rather precise and encompassing. The chiefly status was “mystic-spiritual,” and the pretender needed customary knowledge (such as proverbs, lineage knowledge, and the protocol for dispute resolution, “*voyance*”) and ideally a “double view” which permitted the candidate to “*veiller le jour comme la nuit.*”²⁵³ This consisted of the pretender/candidate demonstrating his having had an “astral voyage” to enable him to see where ancestral spirits and earthly embodiments met. Only then could one therefore be competent to serve the chief’s function of land tenure. In those days, *chef de terre/linéage* and *chef administratif* were not necessarily separable when *chefs de terre* were appointed to take up administrative roles.

Though it remains common practice for those interested in procuring land to receive the assent of a *chef de village*, it exists today as a vestige or symbol of respect for former chiefly prerogatives exercised by *chefs de terre*. In the beginning of the 1960s, however, such may not have been the case. Several interviewees and one report claim that during the time of Shell’s arrival, a first-comer named Fidèle Boukosso, Vili of the Kuani clan, controlled the contemporary area of Gamba. Anyone wishing to inhabit or use the land had to obtain Mr. Boukosso’s permission, who would then allocate a plot of land and adequate space to practice “traditional activities,” such as farming or spiritual worship. In fact, such was Boukosso’s authority that Shell reportedly entered negotiations with him and his clan, who dictated to Shell where oil prospecting could take place. Boukosso reportedly had lots of power in the region, and though he held no legal title, he had “*une influence mystique.*”²⁵⁴ Though ultimately difficult to verify (Shell-Gabon is sensitive to charges of extra-legal bargaining), the legend of Boukosso’s direct negotiations with Shell reveals an idealization of the past. The outcome of presumed negotiations was the discovery of the nearby Ivinga well, after which Shell built a cement house for the Boukosso clan and even offered fresh water and transportation for the clan’s schoolchildren, via a dirt road which already

²⁵³ Interview with Professor Mouvounou, UOB, Libreville, July 6, 2015.

²⁵⁴ Interview with the Secretary General of City Hall, September 7, 2015.

existed between Sette Cama and the area of Gamba.²⁵⁵ Despite the uniquely low density of inhabitation in and around present-day Gamba, Shell, with the full backing of the Gabonese state, thought it worthwhile to placate local interests, however modest its gestures were.

Lastly, many interviewees, especially among the elders, collectively recall the pre-oil era as a time of relative tranquility and broad-based satisfaction with the way things were, which could be considered “traditional.” Most, but not all, interlocutors invoke the righteous deeds of healers, claiming in addition that relatively few people—or witches and sorcerers—used their innate powers of psychokinesis and telepathy to adversely affect their brethren, as is often the case today. Reporting to Libreville in 1968, the Prefect of the Ogooué-Maritime, J. Bernard Saulnerond, claimed that “*féticheurs ou herboristes vivent en bon accord avec tous les autres villageois*,” suggesting that while sorcery may have been an issue in other areas of Gabon and thus required consistent monitoring by the executive in Libreville, it certainly was not the case in the Ndougou.²⁵⁶ Dispensing with the idea that “modern,” “rational” systems of social provisions and public authority had not existed, the sitting Senator of Gamba, an autochtone of the region, laid out the basics of a relatively intricate institutional framework. Four classes of *ngangas* existed: Healers, who could be counted on for a range of illnesses from headaches and toothaches to malaria; consultants, who advised the chief in his duties; initiators who were responsible for properly initiating villagers into sects; and *fétichistes*, the guardians of the spirits’ earthly embodiments. Western medicine was virtually non-existent in the countryside.²⁵⁷

Money also had limited importance, and the tilt of evidence suggests that traditional forms of solidarity were in place. Even as late as the 1960s, at least one witness confirms that autochtones of the Ndougou lagoon were still using seashells as currency when needed and were otherwise bartering.²⁵⁸ Women planted, men picked, and people lived “very well,” according to the Senator. People drank palm wine, as *le vin des blancs* and whisky were not as procurable, though alcoholism remained rare. The *troublement politique* one can observe today was relatively absent from public

²⁵⁵ Blaney et al., *Caractéristiques Gamba*.

²⁵⁶ “Fiche d’Activités du Mois de Janvier, 1968, District Autonome de Gamba” by J. Bernard Saulnerond, Le Préfet de l’Ogooué-Maritime, February 8, 1968, Carton 3375, Région de l’Ogooué-Maritime, Fiches mensuelles d’activités, 1968, Archives Nationales du Gabon, Libreville, Gabon.

²⁵⁷ Interview with current Senator from Gamba, Interviewee’s Residence, Gamba, August 19, 2015.

²⁵⁸ Interview with Secretary-General of City Hall, City Hall, Gamba, August 31, 2015.

life.²⁵⁹ Prostitution, often a desperate calling of today's moneyless women and girls in oil-bearing communities throughout the world, did not apparently exist.²⁶⁰

According to several testimonies, public spaces existed in every village of the lagoon, and were centered upon the *dibandza*, known today as the *corps de garde*. A “*salle polyvalente*,” it was a pavillion-like structure where one ate communally, consulted elders and village notables, or cared for people in need.²⁶¹ One brother of the Ndougou's cantonal chief remembers the healer, who terribly frightened him with his strange behavior and dress, treating people for malaria and distributing a form of mosquito nets.²⁶² It is easy to conceive of the *dibandza* as the space where oral history and knowledge of lineage was transmitted via the grandparents of today's middle-aged autochtones,²⁶³ and where Bwiti and Ndjembe were once observed more assiduously.

As hinted at earlier, if the Bongo regime appointed a chief without clan ties, he rarely had local legitimacy.²⁶⁴ Few foreigners, including Gabon's predominant Fang, were known to the autochtones of the early 1960s, and harmony with others was only gradually known and accepted after the arrival of COSREG,²⁶⁵ thus it is unsurprising that outsiders claiming authority would arouse suspicion. In the past, even the nearby Punu, though respected as people, were not permitted to intermarry within Loumbou clans. For historical reasons documented above, outsiders had always been termed “slaves.”²⁶⁶

From a strictly methodological perspective, it is unfortunate that independence should have occurred in 1960, as Shell was then prospecting the Ndougou for oil finds. But the obtention of independence in Gabon did not impact anomic structures as significantly as oil production, which has been made clear. Only from 1967 did the Omar Bongo regime adopt a deliberate policy of naming chiefs who were obedient to the ruling party, as the French had done with respect to the colonial state; only the second administrative criterion was that the chiefs have “traditional legitimacy.”²⁶⁷

²⁵⁹ Senator from Gamba, August 19

²⁶⁰ Dr. Sisso

²⁶¹ Senator from Gamba, August 19

²⁶² Interview with Robert Moundanga, Pitonga, August 21, 2015.

²⁶³ Interview with Etienne Pouebou, Pitonga, August 13, 2015.

²⁶⁴ Interview with Professor Ratanga-Atoz, Interviewee's Residence, Libreville, July 8, 2015.

²⁶⁵ Senator from Gamba, August 19

²⁶⁶ Interview with M. Koumba, Jurist, Loumbou, Interviewee's Offices in Libreville, July 8, 2015.

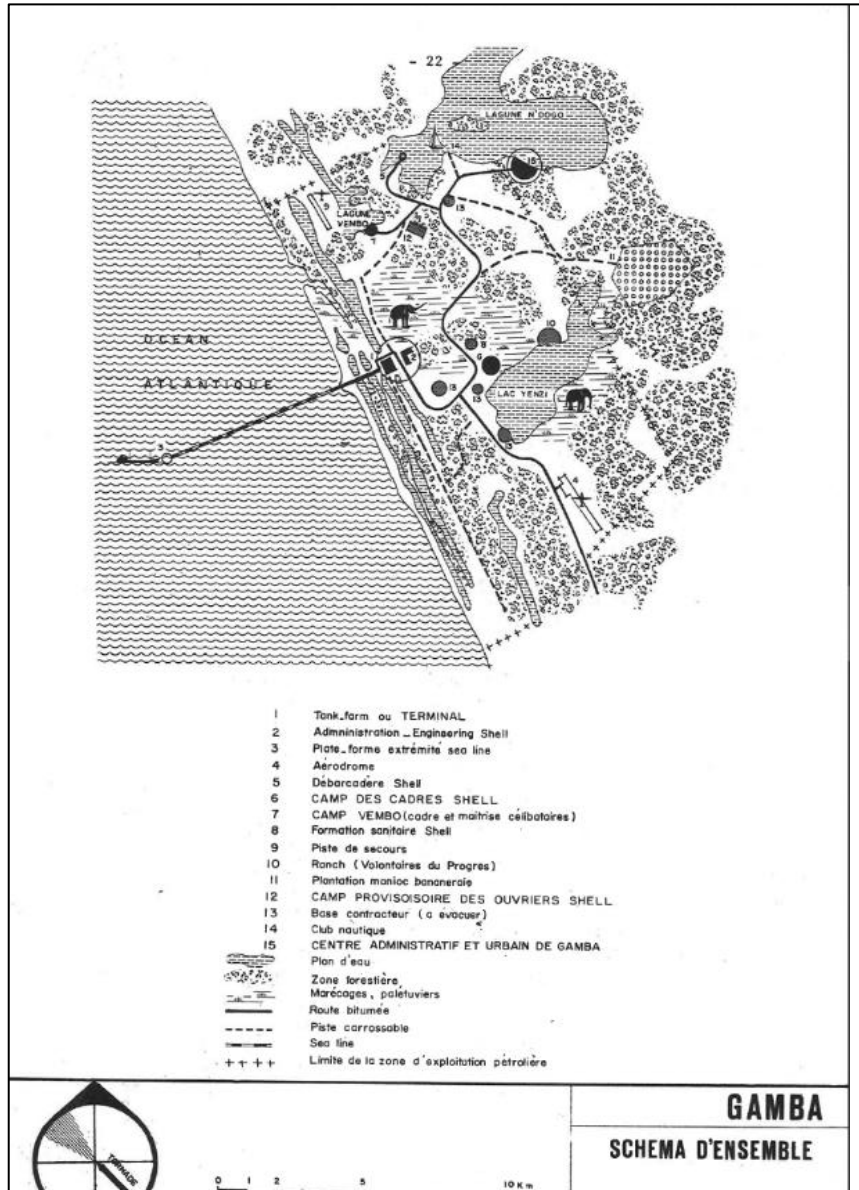
²⁶⁷ Interview with Professor of anthropology Joseph Tonda, UOB, Libreville, July 7, 2015.

4.2. The First Drops: Gamba and the Ndougou, 1967-1989

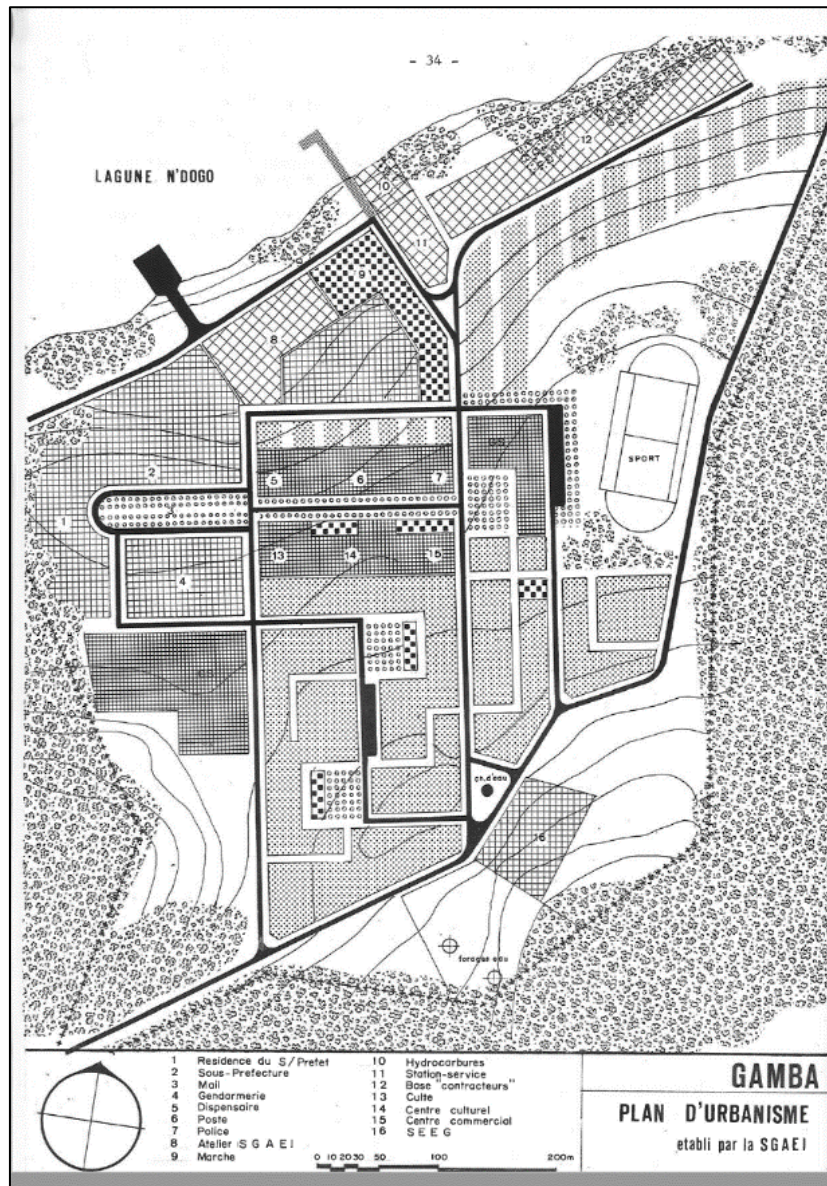
Events proceeded quickly after Shell's discovery of the Gamba well in 1964. Two years later, in 1966, investments were procured to begin extraction. Analyses by Shell/SPAEF projected 3.5-4.0 million tons of oil between 1967 and 1975, progressing towards 6 million tons in 1980 before decline would set in.²⁶⁸ The infrastructure and personnel needed to extract crude oil necessitated a host of lodging and services, which quickly became a priority after Shell had completed a sea-line meant to send crude oil from the recently built pipeline terminal at Point Pedras to the deeper waters of the Gulf of Guinea, where the crude would then be shipped for refining. While Shell relied heavily on local manpower for construction of these basic elements, engineers and management came from trained professionals in the West or in Port Gentil. Early construction workers were housed in hastily built wooden structures near the present-day Vembo encampment, threatening unplanned and dangerous urban development if not managed properly.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ SMUH, *Gamba*, 5.

²⁶⁹ SMUH, *Gamba*, 9.



Map 7: Shell's Concession, c. 1970. (SMUH)



Map 8: Urban Plan for Gamba. (SMUH)

Shell therefore set about convincing the Gabonese government to adopt its proposed urbanization plan to accompany an expected jump in the local population, due not only to Shell's employees and contractors but also to regional migrants hopeful of finding work. In and outside the exploitation concession granted to Shell, the company hoped to model its real estate organization after what La Compagnie Minière de l'Ogooué (COMILOG) had done for its manganese mines in Moanda, taking charge of lodging and furnishings for its personnel, from management and specialists to workers and even commerce and local administrators. For

managers and specialists/engineers, lodging would be provided within walking distance to the pipeline terminal at Pedras (the future Yenzi camp), while workers would be lodged just outside the exploitation zone in order to allow for free development of the concession (the future Plaine 3 of Gamba). Foreign workers—non-local Gabonese, African, and Western—would, in the case of non-Gabonese, be granted limited citizenship rights during their terms of stay. The provision of real estate and amenities would attempt a proper living environment in order to avert homesickness, especially in a sparse environment heretofore “neglected” by the Gabonese administration.²⁷⁰ In addition to the urbanization plan, Shell proposed a new administrative agglomeration coterminous with the planned creation of Gamba.

Evidence suggests the Gabonese government accepted Shell’s proposals unconditionally, as today’s urban layout perfectly resembles Shell’s initial intentions. One can only postulate that Gabon’s ready acceptance was due to the importance of the new finds for the national economy, alongside a growing acknowledgement that mismanagement of extraction may lead to the kind of “socioeconomic revolution”²⁷¹ seen in other contentious extractive spaces. In 1967, the same year Shell’s proposals were pushed through Gabon’s state instruments, the local Ivinga field was also discovered. The Gabonese state, by all accounts an arm of the newly inaugurated President Ali Bongo, acceded to Shell’s requests that the state take charge of the management of construction outside the exploitation zone, i.e. Gamba. The state responded by naming the Société Gabonaise d’Aménagement et d’Équipement Immobilier (SGAEI) to plan the urban development of Gamba, which itself was decreed an agglomeration on November 2, 1967. In January of 1968, SGAEI’s board of executives approved a multi-phase construction plan. The short term phase would realize the construction of several elements, including a *base d’accostage* to service the existing and intensifying traffic in the Ndougou lagoon, housing for 250 workers and their families (estimated at 1,250 people total), and social and administrative structures to accommodate a longer term projected population of 5,000-6,000 people. In the medium term (less than five years), SGAEI aimed to attract “exterior support” for the projected influx of migrants, as well as provisions to accommodate an additional population of 1,500-2,000. In the longer term (20+ years), SGAEI envisaged a decline in the supply of unskilled labor via Shell and its contractors, coupled with an increase in the need for technological expertise to operate ageing wells, themselves expected to

²⁷⁰ SMUH, *Gamba*, 9.

²⁷¹ SMUH, *Gamba*, 8-11.

dry up within 20 years. Longer term plans thus included improvements in the quality of existing housing to meet the needs of higher skilled workers. Little to no planning was made to achieve sustainability for a post-oil scenario, and as early as 1970 foreign researchers were calling for the de-enclavization of Gamba with a road connecting Gamba to the regional hub to the north, Tchibanga.²⁷² No such road has yet been built, and local politicians perennially adopt the completion of such a road as part of their campaign platforms.

From 1967 to 1968, Shell did achieve the completion of a road from the heart of its exploitation zone (including Gamba) to Mayonami, dozens of kilometers to the southeast on the banks of the Nyanga. Though the road went some way towards connecting Gamba to Gabon's highway network, those traveling to and from Gamba would still need a bush taxi and ferry to access Mayonami from today's N6, which cuts south towards Mayumba once it reaches the coast. In any case, the road was built not to develop the region, a public ambition, but to connect Shell's new harbor for provisions and materials at Mayonami to the heart of the exploitation zone. Shell has since claimed that the construction of this road was philanthropic, despite this evidence to the contrary, but has hinted at possibly linking Mayonami to the N6 with a road extension.²⁷³

By July of 1969, SGAEI had completed the first phase of its development of Gamba, roughly five months behind schedule; delays were attributed to Shell's prioritization of shipping for its own needs, rather than those of SGAEI, as well as to poor management of unskilled laborers. Nevertheless, much of the infrastructure one witnesses today was put in place then, within and outside the exploitation sector. Within the exploitation zone, the newly constructed *cit  des cadres* ("management housing complex") at Lake Yenzi housed mostly Westerners and *assimil s*, who with their families comprised 250 people (150 lived at Yenzi). Shell's permanent employees numbered 250 people, while contractors contributed an additional 200. With foreign Africans rare, non-Western recruits came mostly from Tchibanga and elsewhere in the Nyanga region, as many in Port Gentil declined to make a living in Gamba's seemingly enclaved environment. Shell's employees together operated the tank farm (terminal), maintained the sea-line and platform, operated the two runways (one of which was exclusively used for medical purposes), worked the harbor, and staffed the engineering and administration centers near the terminal. As part of Shell's original plans to provide a livable environment for foreigners and non-locals, there was a medical

²⁷² SMUH, *Gamba*, 11-13.

²⁷³ Interview with Armelle Zabatier, Social Performance, Shell-Gabon, Gamba, July 23, 2015.

clinic at Yenzi (though not at Camp Vembo), a manioc plantation, a supermarket at Yenzi, and a nautical club on the lagoon. Though today many of these services are still utilizable by Shell's employees, the company had apparently lent their usage to non-Shell employees for decades following their implementation.

Outside the exploitation zone in "Plaine 3" of the newly decreed agglomeration of Gamba, SGAEI, funded almost entirely by Shell, built its first wave of housing, the local headquarters of the national gendarmerie, a medication dispensary, a post office, local offices for the Société d'Electricité et d'Energie du Gabon (SEEG), a market, and a school for one group of three classes (including lodging provided by the United States Peace Corps). SGAEI contracted with Shell for its own structures, while the real estate firm contracted with the Gabonese state for all public buildings. Though SEEG's early presence suggests minimal state capacity for providing electricity, it was in fact Shell that laid most cables and provided power. Shell had also supplied potable water to all of Gamba's inhabitants.²⁷⁴

The immediate effects of Shell's arrival and construction in and outside its designated exploitation zone were principally in changing demographics, changed ambitions and expectations, popular concentration, and the emergence of new public authorities. It should be kept in mind that while a new cash nexus was being created upon Shell's arrival, the Ndougou had not been so removed from more global events to shy from seeking out salaried work, not only with fading forester consortiums in the area, but also in regional hubs such as Port Gentil and Mayumba. The thousands of people inhabiting the Ndougou were thus attentive to the perceived advantages of money, even as the majority were engaged in subsistence agriculture. The scale of monetization was less than what would eventually come, permitting the continuation of "tradition" in the broader sense.

Contrary to today's policy, it seemed to have been a government policy in the 1960s to regroup the Ndougou's villagers, perhaps to more efficiently deliver services, tax, and showcase authority. Nevertheless, there is little evidence to support any active attempts by the government to achievement *regroupement*, except perhaps with the relocation of the state authorities to Plaine 3 of Gamba from their original offices in Sette Cama as well as the definitive shifting of the administrative apparatus from Sette Cama to Gamba in the 1970s. One is thus led to conclude,

²⁷⁴ SMUH, *Gamba*.

based on the timing of population movements and the reasons cited, that Shell's arrival was among the primary causes of popular concentration, fueled by a desire to earn money as a means to better one's and one's family's lives following the experiences transmitted from family members in larger population centers.

The conclusion that COSREG/Shell's arrival led to popular concentration is supported by accounts from today's elder villagers, who remember more agreeable times when Shell was actively employing many locals for short-term intervals. Several interlocutors agree that the ex-CEO of Shell-Gabon was active in preventing local autochtones from being "bullied" by the company and its outsiders, going as far as to favor locals for relevant jobs at a rate of an alleged 80%.²⁷⁵ Positive sentiments regarding Shell's earlier recruitment procedures were echoed by several other Ndougou elders, who are in many cases chiefs today. The cantonal chief in Pitonga, who began employment with Shell in 1976 by replacing a "white", went as far as to claim this was the *de facto* end of colonialism.²⁷⁶

The Ndougou village population was reportedly in decline throughout the 1960s, assembling in villages closer to Gamba and even settling outside Gamba in the hopes of finding salaried work. The village of Vera disappeared after its former inhabitants relocated in Ibouka, while was relocated to the larger agglomeration of Mbari-Mossi. To the northwest of Gamba, several outer encampments clustered together on the banks of the Ndougou to form the village of Mougambi, which in Loumbou/Vili means "difficult swamps,"²⁷⁷ an indication that the new village was willing to withstand difficult terrain in order to access what would likely be a lucrative fishing trade. To the southeast, a chiefly succession feud in the village of Mougagara, in 1958, led to the creation of Mayonami on the opposite banks of the Nyanga. Mayonami's founder, Séraphin Pandsou, had promised his followers that the new site with its natural harbor would soon become a regional commercial hub; by all accounts, Shell's provisions dock has proven this to be the case. The leaders of the new village decided to name it "Mayonami," which in Omyené translates

²⁷⁵ J.S. Koumba, July 8

²⁷⁶ Interview with the Ndougou Cantonal Chief, Interviewee's Residence, Pitonga, August 21, 2015. For positive confirmation of Shell's earlier hiring practices: Interview with *Regroupement* Chief of Sette Cama, Sette Cama beaches, July 30, 2015; Interview with Professor Djoumata, high school teacher, Gamba High School, August 18, 2015.

²⁷⁷ S. Blaney, S. Mbouity, J-M Nkombé and M. Thibault, "Caractéristiques Socio-économiques des Populations des Départements de Ndougou et de la Basse-Banio." (WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 1997.Blaney 1997), 9

roughly as “do not mock me because you do not know what I shall become,”²⁷⁸ an indication that family feuds and the prospect of riches may have become more intertwined. Elsewhere, villages such as Sette Cama remained vibrant through the early period of Shell’s arrival.²⁷⁹

As the lagunar-autochtonal population regrouped and moved into strategic trade positions, the newly christened town of Gamba saw a sharp influx of mostly foreign workers, almost all of whom were salaried and working for Shell, SEEG, SGAEI, or one of Shell’s various contractors. The period marking the completion of Plaine 3 in 1969 through the mid-1970s represented the region’s steepest growth in population, a boom not rivaled until the discovery of the gigantic Rabi and Kounga oilfields in 1984 and 1986 respectively. From its inception, Gamba has therefore never been a town of autochtones. Roughly half the population by the 1970s were of foreign or non-autochtonal Gabonese origin. Along with the arrival of European-American management, Gamba began to assume a cosmopolitan disposition out of proportion to its humble population of roughly 6,000. Evidencing this growth was the arrival of several supermarket chains by the late 1960s (autochtonal tradition required no imported food), including Ceca-Gadis in 1966 which served management, and Gaboprix years later which catered to African workers with money to spend. By 1967, the population had already filled the school in Sette Cama to capacity, forcing the government to borrow rooms from the Assemblée Départementale. Two years later, the United States Peace Corps completed its construction of Gamba’s first primary school, still in use today.

As previously mentioned, the Gabonese government had agreed with Shell that a stable community could not be achieved without the demonstrable presence of law enforcement and administration. In the late 1960s, the sous-préfecture was thereby moved to Gamba, and the former District of Sette Cama had become the District of Sette Cama-Gamba. The chieftaincy in Sette Cama did not fully accept this decision, and even agitated against the administrative district redrawing. In fact, it has been reported that the government’s decision to retain the name Sette Cama in the new district was in symbolic deference to Sette Cama’s local chiefs. By 1970, however, the full administrative arm of the state had been moved to Gamba, and Sette Cama, once the economic and political hub of the region, had been re-transformed to a fishing village based on subsistence.

²⁷⁸ C. Mboulou Mve, and Simplicie Mbouitsi, “Raport Mission: Cararacteristiques Socio-Economiques et Culturelles du Village Mayonami (département de Ndougou).” (WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Gamba, Gabon: 2004)

²⁷⁹ Interview with Chef de regroupement of Sette Cama

In 1971, President Omar Bongo formally inaugurated the town of Gamba in what must have been a ceremony charged with pride and pomp; today a humble stone obelisk outside the sous-préfecture marks the occasion. Shell and the Gabonese State had reason to celebrate, as it had only taken approximately 6 years since the discovery of the Gamba well to build a more or less full-functioning town, which by then had included most of the planned housing in Plaine 3 as well as construction sites dedicated to the offices for utility companies, the administrative apparatus including the gendarmerie, a hospital, a cultural center, and an airport which would eventually be serviced in 1978 by the now-defunct Air Gabon. Furthermore, construction on the Yenzi management housing began in 1970. By the time it was finished, it would effectively become a town on its own, secured by private guards and maintained by private contractors.

It is significant that a President with known ties to the French governing class and an affinity for urbane living would visit the region least populated by his own constituents, and which presumably held little to no sway in the determination of electoral success. From 1962 to 1967, foresting occupied the bulk of Gabon's formal, monetized economy. But with the oil boom in 1970, foresting was quickly relegated as the country's primary source of foreign currency. President Bongo, quick to recognize the importance of oil for the continuity of his regime, most likely wanted to lend Shell the regime's full administrative support.

Between 1974 and 1984, the year of the discovery of the Rabi-Kounga field, few changes took place with respect to added infrastructure or services in Gamba, save for the planned interventions of SGEI which were completed in 1977, mentioned above. Estimates suggest that the overall population grew at a slower pace than in the years immediately following the first decade of oil exploitation. Migrants to Gamba in the early 1980s—migrants only very sparsely populate the traditional village sites of the Ndougou lagoon—came in large part from nearby Tchibanga, as well as from other Francophone West African countries such as Mali, Senegal, Benin and Togo.²⁸⁰ The influx of migrants speaks to a sedimentation of new expectations as a result of economic change. Since Shell had already filled its salaried positions, even reducing its short-term demand for unskilled labor following the implementation of necessary logistics and infrastructure, most migrants must have been attracted to the prospect of earning money as shopkeepers in *petit commerce*. Others may have been vaguely optimistic of gaining employment

²⁸⁰ Blaney, *Caractéristiques Gamba*.

with either Shell or one of its contracted firms, despite the downward trend in salaried job offers which had been predicted as early as the 1960s.

As for the local population of autochtones, few historical records exist to sufficiently describe in statistical detail any changes that may have taken place affecting their livelihoods from 1967 to 1984. However, ignoring momentarily the adverse conditions created by the development of wildlife reserves (see below), the collective remembrance of these years seems to be positive. Many autochtones recall a life made easier by certain material benefits in their daily lives. Gradually the traditional reliance on hand-lit torches was replaced by reliance on gas lamps, rowing was being replaced by motorized boats, and wood fires were being replaced by propane (at least in those villages close to Gamba). Shell was also systematically providing anti-malarials, generously transporting non-Shell locals between regional destinations, helping to construct the medical clinic in Gamba, and evacuating ill locals free of charge. These benefits were greatly welcome, and appreciated, by the elders of today's Ndougou.

Material benefits, i.e. technology, may have come to autochtones through the employment of autochtones in Shell's earlier efforts. One sociologist at the UOB remarks that it was autochtonal Shell employees who gradually came to fill the ranks of the chieftaincy and local political class, thanks to the goods they were able to distribute among their village clans.²⁸¹ This subversive process effectively eviscerated one criterion for chiefly succession, *connaissances*, in favor of money, leading to the palpable loss of traditional knowledge and *savoir-faire* one may witness today and which endangers the Ndougou's long-term sustainability in the absence of the oil industry. By and large, however, this period was one where "*tout était tranquille*," according to a local civil servant who is often critical of Shell and laments his parents' and grandparents' lack of consciousness in extracting more benefits from the oil giant.²⁸² Some traditional systems of solidarity during this period (1967-1989) also appeared to remain in place. One measure of monetization and its impact on local change is the cost of dowries, and at least one village recalls the standard bridewealth's past affordability at 10,000-15,000 Fcfa, indicating that the most important elements of bridewealth remained a list of symbolic goods. Additionally, park regulation (see below) was only in its infant stages, allowing the lagunar population to practice its

²⁸¹ Interview with Dimitri Ndombi, UOB, Libreville, July 7, 2015

²⁸² Interview with "Mousse" of Marine Marchand, Gamba, July 24 2015

traditions of slaughtering elephants, monkeys, buffalo, etc. for the purposes of ceremony and communal subsistence. This would later change.

Most documentation obtained for the purposes of historicizing the Ndougou's oil experience clusters around important dates in the oil industry as well as in the development of national parks, both of which have garnered sufficient international attention to be documented in NGO, public and private sector reports. Nevertheless, the preservation of Gabon's forests has been an ambition of the Bongo dynasty since early independence. Furthermore, the Ndougou, which is today located in between vast wildlife reserves, had early on been billed for wildlife protection. The array of laws and interdictions would progressively draw ire and grievances from local communities moderately dependent on fishing and hunting for their sources of protein.

After the creation of the Parc National de Loango in 1956 and its subsequent conversion to a wildlife reserve (the cost of maintenance and enforcement was too high), a host of legal instruments followed aimed at regulating traditional hunting and fishing practices in the Ndougou. It is not certain whether or how the oil industry affected these developments, but rather the preservation of wildlife seems to have been a broader national initiative by the Bongo regime keen on bolstering its public image. The initiatives may have also been born from a desire by the national government to agglomerate the Ndougou's sparse inhabitants. In 1962 and 1966, two decrees created a total of seven protected areas in the *aires d'exploitation rationnelles* of Moukalaba-Dougoua and Sette-Cama. Concurrent with these decrees, and further complicating the analysis of external agency in regulating the Ndougou's wildlife, were the exploits of the locally notorious Maurice Patry, the French hunter-adventurer who has since published various accounts of his travels in Equatorial and Central Africa. After several hinterland journeys in the 1950s, Patry returned to Sette Cama to establish a hunting lodge only hundreds of meters north of Sette Cama, the predecessor of a fishing lodge today. The lodge operated throughout the 1960s and counted many global elite among its clientele. Patry, according to his own and local accounts, established cordial relationships with locals with whom he shared the spoils of his kills. However, today's administrative chief of the Ndougou canton claims that he became somehow less generous over time. There also seem to be complaints of today's successor fishing lodge in Sette Cama disallowing locals from fishing in particular areas, lest they disturb the potential catch of tourists.

Lastly, Patry mentions in *Babiroussa* a successful attempt to have the Ndougou's wildlife preserved for lovers of nature, the details of which are unclear.²⁸³

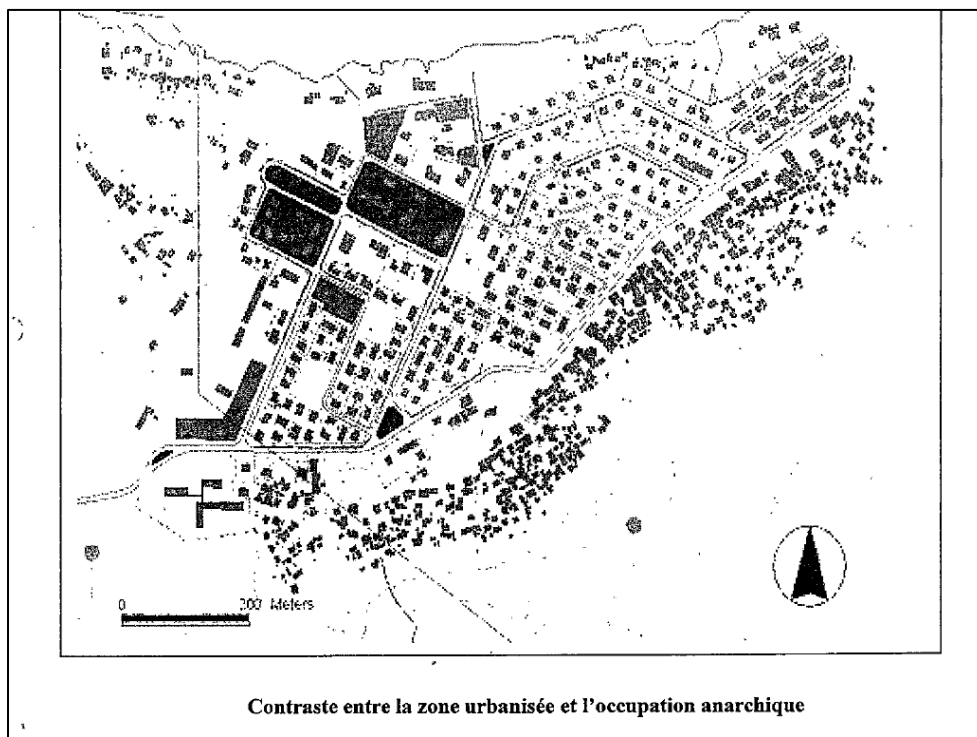
The government's ecological commitments intensified in 1976 with the creation of the Comité National de l'Economie Forestière. As previously mentioned, the harvesting of wood was de-prioritized as oil finds increased, allowing the Bongo regime to save face with an international movement towards preservation. The parliamentary law of 1982, assumingly pursuant to the committee's suggestions, broadened the scope of the formerly defined protected areas, giving their respective fauna *and* flora "absolute protection" where regulated. The law also prohibited in the *aires d'exploitation rationnelles*, of which much of the Ndougou was one, the further establishment of villages, encampments, and public or private roads susceptible to modifying the environment or natural resources. By logical extension, as of July 22, 1982 all oil exploitation in protected areas would thus be prohibited except in cases of declassification. Reports suggest, however, that this prohibition was regularly contravened in the Ndougou as the economic imperative of oil production took precedence.²⁸⁴ In 1983, the Ministry of Waters and Forests was given by presidential decree the nominal capacity to enforce the law of 1982. In doing so, several enforcements agencies, such as the *Brigade des Faunes*, were authorized to arrest anyone caught poaching or disturbing the environment in ways that contravened the law. Thanks to the relative unclarity of the law in zones of "rational use" such as that in Sette Cama, as well as the indigenous traditions of slaughtering for both protein and ceremonial purposes, locals have since regarded the protection laws and their enforcement with skepticism and even vocalized anger. Though the grievances were perhaps moderated by the cited failure to fully enforce the 1982 law's provisions, the held-out possibility of being fined or imprisoned for merely carrying out ones traditions, however defined, breeds much resentment to this day.

²⁸³ Maurice Patry, Anne Gallimard, and François Pédrón, *Babiroussa: une Vie Jusqu'au Bout du Rêve: Récit.* (Fixot, 1990).

²⁸⁴ Blaney, *Caractéristiques Gamba.*

4.3. Peak Oil and *Troublement*: Gamba and the Ndougou, 1989 – c.2003

In the early 1980s, production of the Gamba and nearby wells was in decline, as predicted by earlier geological assessments. Because the town had not been able to diversify its economic activities despite calls to do so, ageing oilfields would most assuredly have led to the degradation of the town itself, as Shell had been responsible for most of its utilities provisions and salaried employment. Nonetheless, between 1984 and 1985, Shell discovered what would together become Gabon's largest oilfield to date: Eschira and Rabi between 1984 and 1985, Kounga in 1986, Moukouti in 1987, and Niongu in 1988.²⁸⁵ The "Rabi-Kounga" sector became the largest reserve



Map 9: Anarchic population growth vs. planned urbanization, c. 1996. (Gamba Cadastral Service)

in the country with 439 million barrels, and by some measures the largest onshore oilfield ever discovered in sub-Saharan Africa.²⁸⁶ The enormous scale of the find allowed Shell to continue its operations in Gamba, where all crude would thereafter be sent via pipeline as before, though at a

²⁸⁵ The discoveries followed two decades of disappointing results and significant improvements in logistical and seismic technologies. See M.G.A. Boeuf, "Rabi-Kounga Field, Southern Gabon." (AAPG Search and Discovery Article #91030©1988 AAPG Annual Convention, Houston, Texas, 20-23 March 1988, <http://www.searchanddiscovery.com/abstracts/html/1988/annual/abstracts/0164a.htm>, accessed December 29, 2018).

²⁸⁶ Blaney, *Caractéristiques Ndougou* ; One interviewee would refer to Rabi-Kounga as "la richesse essentielle du Gabon." (Interview with Georges Mpage, Libreville, July 14, 2015)

much higher volume and rate. By 1993, 50 percent of Gabon's total crude oil production came from Rabi-Kounga,²⁸⁷ located only 95 kilometers north of Gamba. Since Shell had chosen to operate Rabi-Kounga as if it were an offshore platform and forbade employees to live there with their families,²⁸⁸ Gamba saw its second period of industrial and popular growth as Shell reinforced its operations there to accommodate new oilfields to the north. Gamba, in many ways, had quickly become the epicenter of an authoritarian regime's source of foreign currency.

The discovery of Rabi-Kounga led to an intensification of the demographic processes engendered by the oil finds of the 1960s, as both lagunar autochtones and outsiders flooded Gamba and strained its capacities. Between 1981 and 1997, the number of salaried jobs in Gamba increased from 800 to 1,000, the vast majority of which were provided by either Shell or one of its contractors.²⁸⁹ Population data collected by independent studies suggest that by 1993, approximately half of the 7,226 people living in Gamba were non-autochtones, with nearly all new salaried positions going to non-autochtone Gabonese or foreigners. Many of the arrivals from other African countries sought and usually obtained either work in small businesses or in construction. The lagunar village population plunged and then most likely settled into a gradual decline, even after decades of relocations and depopulation. The Mayor's Cabinet Director attributes the beginning of the steepest era of lagunar population decline to the 1990s, and not until the creation of the *commune* of Gamba in 1993/1994 was a plan considered to attempt to halt the lagoon's depopulation. Paradoxically, the creation of the *commune* itself and the array of administrative posts that go with it only served to intensify the rural exodus.²⁹⁰ People moved to Gamba primarily work, but also for public schooling. Villagers of the lagoon, however, attribute the exodus to jealousy and witchcraft.

Two apparent exceptions to economically induced rural exodus were in the relocations of Pitonga and Sounga to their present-day sites. In the former case, a family quarrel in the 1990s led to a death, after which many of the original Pitonga's inhabitants became convinced there was a curse on the village. They then decided to relocate the bulk of today's village closer to the banks

²⁸⁷ Emmanuel Mvé Mebia, "Suivi des Caractéristiques Socioéconomiques des Communautés Rurales des Villages Sounga et Setté-Cama dans le Sud du Parc National de Loango." (WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 2004).

²⁸⁸ SMUH, *Gamba*.

²⁸⁹ Blaney, *Caractéristiques Gamba*.

²⁹⁰ Interview with Mayoral cabinet director, City Hall, August 28, 2015

of the Ndougou lagoon.²⁹¹ In 1994, Gilbert Kinga, the family head of villagers further inland, decided to relocate the village of Inyoungou to the present-day lagunar site of Sounga,²⁹² presumably in a calculated move to take advantage of Sounga's proximity to the lagoon and Sette-Cama.²⁹³ Since the present site had been controlled by the established Bayengui clan of the lagunar area, the incoming members of the Boundombi clan and Kinga had mostly likely obtained the consent of the Minister of National Parks, Mahotès Magouindi.

The phase marking the discovery of Rabi-Kounga in the mid-1980s to 2003, when the first objective reports of diminished expectations as to the benefits of the oil industry were published, is one of relative growth, in not only population but also in the monetization of the Ndougou's local economy, the arrival of several NGOs, the generally positive outlook of the region's residents, and, in some cases, their material lives. Of course, satisfaction with one's livelihood was neither complete nor shared by all classes of the Ndougou's diverse population, and this must also be taken into account.

The lagunar population in particular cannot be said to have substantively enjoyed the second, larger local oil boom. Material changes were little, and perhaps in some cases many people fared worse owing to the germinal stages of a local Dutch Disease. Youth were beginning to seek out salaried employment rather than stay in their ancestral villages and farm. Traditional systems of social solidarity showed signs of breaking down, as in the dispute which split the village of Pitonga. When infrastructural improvements were made, they were neither sustainable nor in tune with centuries-old traditions. The real benefits of oil, that is salaried employment, were disproportionately felt by outsiders. Only marginal contributions by Shell and NGOs seemed to provide a semblance of a buffer against a looming expectation gap that had long been in the making since Shell's arrival.

Most older survey participants and interviewees (aged 40-50 and older) indicated that times were, on the whole, better in the past. Among the reasons given for this impression were the host of benefits provided by Shell for free. These *ad hoc* benefits—for there was no policy dictating these particular benefits—included the use of Shell transportation vehicles such as boats and planes

²⁹¹ Blaney, *Caractéristiques Ndougou*.

²⁹² Anastasie Bilo'o B'Ondo, "Problématique du Zonage dans la Partie Sud du Parc National de Loango : Délimitation Physique et Validation Concertée du Terroir Villageois de Sounga." (Internship report for the Ecole Nationale des Eaux et Forêts. WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 2010).

²⁹³ Blaney, *Ndougou*, 14-15.

to visit family members or seek medical assistance in Port Gentil as well as the use of Shell's medical facilities when the clinic at Gamba did not suffice. Shell also routinely heard petitions by autochtones to be provided with various amenities from more motorized boats to fishing nets, and all interviewees commenting on Shell suggest these requests were often met.

Shell's direct impact on the day-to-day lives of the Ndougou's autochtones, however, was minimal. As the discovery and exploitation of Rabi-Kounga had given jobs mostly to outsiders,²⁹⁴ the vast majority of Baloumbou, Bavarama, and Bavili of the region remained farmers and fishers according to tradition, and enjoyed no large-scale mechanization which might have allowed their produce to compete with the food service contractors, such as Sodexho, operating under Shell. Villagers engaged in farming could expect between 15,000 and 60,000 Fcfa per month,²⁹⁵ which amounted to approximately 26 USD to 105 USD per month in 1998 dollars. While these proceeds from market sales were almost invariably reinvested in primary inputs, the remaining unsold produce was either consumed or distributed to urbanized family members in Gamba, out of necessity.²⁹⁶ Autochtones of the lagoon were thus caught in between traditional modes of social solidarity and a quickly monetizing local economy from which they were often excluded, however visible its manifestations were (Yenzi, Shell's housing for management, was increasing its capacity).

The paradox and resultant strain of heightened expectations versus actuality, fueled by the lure of money and inequality, was reflected in many traditional institutions, which according to various studies were undergoing transition. Here it is advantageous to recall that in the Ndougou and Gabon in general, the terms "tradition" and "village life" are nearly synonymous, as not only are villages still occupied by the spirits of ancestors²⁹⁷ and the charms or "fetishes" meant to conjure them, but also because modern living remains unsustainable in the Ndougou's villages. To remain in the village is thus to at least partially engage in "tradition." Therefore, in order to partially determine the fate of tradition, we can ask whether and why people remained in villages despite the growth of Gamba. Survival, of course, must feature as one of the chief reasons for why people remained in village life, as previously discussed with respect to farming. But survival often

²⁹⁴ Blaney, *Gamba*.

²⁹⁵ *ibid.*

²⁹⁶ *ibid.*

²⁹⁷ For example, all the villages of the lagune have one or several cemeteries grouped according to clan lineage. (Blaney, *Ndougou*)

depends on family bonds in contexts of stark material poverty, and this age-old form of social solidarity began to show signs of breaking down.

In many respects, lineage and family bonds served to tie people to their villages. In addition to providing themselves and urban family with food, people stayed to care for loved ones, ensure their children's education, or even act on a sense of clan affinity or duty. When asked why they had decided to stay in their villages, most middle-aged to elder interviewees and survey participants cited caring for loved ones such as elders who were no longer physically capable of tending to themselves. Some mentioned helping another family member, perhaps a chief, tend to their plantations. It could be that family and clan duties were prominent among the reasons for remaining in a village, rather than a sincere desire to prolong a traditional, prescribed way of living. The villagers of Ibouka during a group discussion indicated that the last real *dibandza*, or *corps de garde*, the focus of a village's traditional and communal life, disappeared around 1995, and that only their grandparents and elder parents were practicing Bwiti and Ndjembe.²⁹⁸

Others, of course, had children who needed to attend school. In 1997/1998, the Ndougou's villages had a total of 49 trained teachers assuring the national curriculum.²⁹⁹ In fact, Blaney (1998) remarks that families with children under the age of 14 were overrepresented in villages where a functioning school was present, such as in Sette Cama, Ibouka, and Mayonami. Uncoincidentally, it was in these three villages where most economic activity (fishing and farming) was taking place.³⁰⁰ The proximity to Gamba's market was highly desirable for the Ndougou's

²⁹⁸ Interview with M. Chambrier, August 9 2015. The majority of villagers indicated that their residence in a village was due to the presence of family a member.

²⁹⁹ Blaney, *Gamba*.

³⁰⁰ These villages had, in 1997, the highest number of houses under construction (Blaney, *Ndougou*).

villagers, thus it made sense for local authorities to locate schools in these seemingly growth-bound villages.



Photograph 2: Shell's Provisions Harbor in Mayonami. Roughly half of Mayonami's shoreline is off limits to non-employees of Shell-Gabon. (taken August, 2015)

On the other hand, the reasons for which parents chose to send their children to school bely a certain abandonment of tradition. Prior to the influx of tax revenue which Shell had allowed, the only school in the Ndougou was in Sette Cama, and parents from villages as far as took up to three days to row their children to the village in time for the school year. The effect was unsurprisingly a lower rate of enrolment, but that parents considered enrolling their children evidences an appreciating of schooling and its benefits for success in the modern economy, even before Shell's arrival. By the 1990s, villages were equipped with motorized boats provided either by Shell or the local authorities, and the compulsory attendance of children in school was near fully respected. This time, however, parents chose to move to the town in which their children were schooling, an indication that 1) they sought to remain closer to their children because clan affinity, and hence substitute parenting, could not be relied upon as in the past, and/or 2) they wished to reap the benefits of proximity to Gamba. In my own surveys, parents expressed their near-unanimous

desire to give their children better lives so they could acquire a well-paying job, a sentiment that clearly marks an abandonment of tradition as a means to live well, and which could be easily traced to Shell's presence. Salaried employment and modern schooling is not consistent with traditional living, and Blaney finds that in 1997, young adults were conspicuously absent from villages where salaried employment was unattainable, such as in Pitonga.³⁰¹

When larger shares of the autochthonal population—not counting those accompanying their enrolled children—did stay in their villages, much of the retention was owed to the presence of a cantonal chief who was able to assemble members of first-comer clans, as in Pitonga.³⁰² The inter- and intra-clan affinities and loyalties, in place since the arrival of the first-comers to the Ndougou, can therefore be said to have persisted, in part. Without the ultimate authority to enforce custom or land tenure, chiefs have had to rely on their *comportement*, or characteristics becoming of a chief, a more difficult task when former employees of Shell were beginning to occupy administrative chief posts. It is perhaps for this reason that the term *doyen politique*, used in contradiction to those who were not real first-comers in local power, made its first appearances in the 1990s.³⁰³ As in the past, chiefs could not be entirely legitimate without the proper characteristics.³⁰⁴ But while chiefs still commanded a degree of respect within their clans, evidence suggests they had difficulties enforcing certain land tenure customs, among the central pillars of a chief's traditional prerogatives. Although custom suggests outsiders must petition chiefs to use their land, poachers and fishers in particular regularly ignored the customary prescription, reportedly angering cantonal chiefs in particular.³⁰⁵

Even the strict matrilinearity of chief succession showed signs of unraveling. While non-Ndougou villages—more distant from the economic activities benefiting from Gamba and Shell's presence—such as Cachimba, Mbissi, Igotchi, and Mbouda, still retained chiefs within their matriclans, none of the Ndougou canton's did so. In Sette Cama for example, the first-comer Gassingua had transmitted the chieftaincy to another first-comer Loumbou clan, the Gavangui.³⁰⁶ Furthermore, while no women were represented in the chieftaincy when Shell arrived, there were

³⁰¹ Blaney, *Ndougou*.

³⁰² Blaney, *Ndougou*, 15.

³⁰³ Interview with Dimitri Ndomi, July 13, 2015

³⁰⁴ According to the daughter of Soungha's village chief, contemporary to this period, he was among the last chiefs to be reciting *contes*, or stories of the past. (Interviewed on July 30, 2015.)

³⁰⁵ Blaney, *Ndougou*.

³⁰⁶ *ibid.*

at least three in the entire *département* by the early 2000s. Lastly, one could speculate whether chiefs were beginning to be chosen according to a new criterion: salaried employment. In the past, spiritual and ancestral knowledge, the legitimacy to command others, and lineage had been the determinants of chiefly succession. By the 1990s, several chiefs were either under Shell's or one of its contractor's employment, and it would not be unwarranted to conclude that the *préfet* in Gamba, looking to satisfy his subjects, recommended the appointment of chiefs to the governor in Port Gentil who could most easily satisfy that respective chief's subjects. The Ndougou was clearly becoming more cosmopolitan and cash-dependent, yet at the cost of age-old bonds of clan solidarity.

In the realm of health, a critical factor in determining material well-being, only marginal positive changes can be recorded. Shell's financial contributions to the *département* and the city of Gamba in the form of corporate taxation, as well as its ad hoc donations, clearly benefited not only the minority of local workers considered fortunate enough to secure salaried labor but also whichever local inhabitants requested medical assistance. The clinic was giving general and pregnancy consultations, laboratory analysis, and radiographical diagnoses. It was staffed by a doctor, a midwife, and a certified nurse, in addition to auxiliary nurses who together cared for patients. A nearby *centre social* supplemented these benefits by providing a range of services for the elderly, physically handicapped, and mothers bearing several children. Charitable organizations provided the center with food and clothing which supplicants could enjoy, but only after a reportedly long and exhaustive application process via the state ministry in charge. In fact, Blaney (1998) remarks that the number of beneficiaries of this service remains quite weak, despite high demand. Furthermore, evidence indicates that even mothers benefiting from a nutritional service for their children which provides free meals often abandon their regular visits after one or two consultations. The center's observations came without a reported explanation by Blaney, but surmisable reasons might include the meals' incongruence with dietary habits, lack of convenience to the mother, or perhaps even unreliable supply provisions by the center.³⁰⁷

Evidence, however, points to a retention of traditional medicine despite the *ad hoc* services provided by companies including Shell as well as the often-unreliable services of state-sponsored clinics. Wagner (1986) remarked an upsurge in all of Gabon of the reliance on traditional

³⁰⁷ Blaney, *Gamba*.

medicine, and the Ndougou offered no exception.³⁰⁸ At the time of Blaney's 1998 study, a medicinal *nganga* worked in every quarter of Gamba, harvesting an array of plants and trees, such as the sacred *muvengui*, for the treatment of several illnesses. The *ngangas* often worked from homebuilt "temples" and were instructed by their grandparents, who in one case were responsible for the *nganga's* ability to identify dozens of plants in nearby forests. The *nganga*, treating both "modern" illnesses and those resulting from witchcraft, had to be initiated in either Djembé or Ilombo and respect specific rituals for the harvesting and application of treatments, demonstrating the vitality of traditional sects.

Patients to the *ngangas* were numerous, and numbered approximately 12 daily in the case of Plaine 3's *nganga*. Adults were mostly treated for stomach ache and fever, while many children received medicines for diarrhea. For curses related to witchcraft, such as vampirism or *fusil nocturne*—typically a violent act perpetrated at night after which the victim remains unaware of the criminal's identity—separate treatments were administered for both the curse and its physical, or "modern," manifestation.³⁰⁹ For these purposes, the rate of adhesion to traditional medicine was a proxy for adhesion to traditional spiritual cosmologies, which evidently remained widespread in the Ndougou. Even the drawbacks of Shell's presence, including the higher rate of alcohol abuse among autochtones³¹⁰ and the depopulation of autochtonal spaces, were understood as spiritual phenomena. Whereas alcohol is sometimes seen as a means to access more unseen dimensions, depopulation has consistently been attributed to the presence of vampires and witches.³¹¹ Reaffirming the endurance of traditional practices, Bwiti and Mwiri were still rituals practiced by autochtones in the Ndougou.³¹²

Another factor influencing the livelihoods of people in both Gamba and the lagoon since the discovery of Rabi-Kounga was the proliferation of NGOs dedicated to wildlife preservation following the attention garnered by the official identification of the Complexe des Aires Protogées de Gamba. In 2000, Shell-Gabon, following an international policy to demonstrate environmental consciousness and respect for biodiversity, offered to finance the staff emplacement and research

³⁰⁸ Alain Wagner, Richard Engoang Nguemas, and Vivian Oël, *Aspects des Médecines Traditionnelles du Gabon*. (Editions universelles, 1986).

³⁰⁹ Blaney, *Gamba*.

³¹⁰ *ibid.*, 46.

³¹¹ For more examples of this phenomenon, see Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*. (Vol. 37. Univ of California Press, 2000).

³¹² Blaney, *Gamba*.

of the Smithsonian Institution, which thereafter occupied former Shell offices at Vembo. Dependent on Shell-Gabon's Social Performance department, Shell has routinely published in its gazettes Smithsonian's studies of elephants and other wildlife. Unfortunately, further environmental consciousness was not among the priorities of the lagunar population, which was unsuccessfully seeking compensation from the government for the crop devastation wrought by elephants, buffalo, and boars since the 1990s.³¹³

First among the Ndougou's NGOs in capacity, importance, and longevity has been the World Wildlife Fund, which arrived in the mid-1990s with the objectives of preserving the Complex's natural resources while promoting access thereto by the local population, and creating strategic partnerships with both lumber and oil companies towards achieving those former goals. In 1995, the WWF devised a plan with the government for the zoning, management, and protection of the Complex as well as for the environmental and rural development of the region in and around the Complex.³¹⁴ In 1997, the WWF began its environmental sustainability studies thanks to financial contributions by USAID's Central African program and the Netherlands' Directorate General for International Cooperation. Based on the depth and breadth of the WWF's studies as well as the consistency of its methods, it can be concluded that the WWF has been highly active within the Ndougou and has ingratiated itself to the local population. Many of its studies have been conducted with the paid assistance of autochtones who are trained in the organization's participatory methods in an effort to garner as much relevant socio-economic data as possible. Though marginal, the WWF's effect on the population seems to have been positive, as it not only employs autochtones but also advises and trains autochtones in sustainable farming and fishing practices.

The population boom in Gamba, engendered by the coming onstream of nearby Rabi-Kounga in 1989, further contributed to the Ndougou's fledgling cosmopolitan character and perhaps the urban development of Gamba itself. Until 1995, no cadastral service existed in Gamba, presumably because the national government had until the late 1980s felt little need to register properties, demarcate land, or conduct urban planning for a town which might cease to exist owing to older, drying wells. It was not until the late 1990s that this service had in place a development plan. However, by then, parts of the town and especially Plaine 5 had been developing in a chaotic

³¹³ Interview with Mireille Johnson, Gamba, July 21, 2015

³¹⁴ Blaney, *Gamba*.

fashion due to foreign immigration, rendering the town's planning efforts somewhat futile. Today, vestiges of poor planning remain, and Plaine 5 closely resembles the typical *bidonvilles* of many African urban spaces, where potable water is only recoverable from communal spouts, and housing is structurally insecure. In fact, Blaney (1998) reports that the detailed codes to be respected by anyone undertaking construction were rarely adhered to, and that developers often bypassed the cadastral service in favor of gaining building approval from Gamba's first-comer chiefs, each of whom were local and represented either one of the three recognized autochtonal groups. The mayoral offices, comprising an autochtonal mayor and two autochtonal vice mayors, sought in vain to improve the town's infrastructure, health and water services,³¹⁵ though it is clear today that their ambitions were not fully realized.

One probable reason for why the local political authorities were late to respond to the pressures of immigration was that the former *collectivités rurales*, of which the Ndougou was one, and *communes* became *départements* under the new decentralization laws of the mid-1990s. Not until perhaps 1997 was the Ndougou free to spend money as it wished. Until then, all decisions on local infrastructure were formally approved from Libreville.

Another undeniable reason for a late response was the rapid pace of immigration following the discovery and production of Rabi-Kounga. With only two years separating the field's highly publicized discovery and its first production in 1989, the local government could do little to meet new demands. Added to the strain was the centralized character of the Gabonese government, which had made local government utterly dependent on national ministers in Libreville for funds and decision-making until 1996.³¹⁶ By 1998, less than half of Gamba's population belonged to the Bavarama, Bavili, or Baloumbou, although their political power outweighed their real numbers. Roughly half of the households surveyed by Blaney (1998) came to Gamba due to a relative working for Shell or one of its contractors. More than 17% came searching for employment, and only 20% had been sent by Shell as employees (to contrast to the majority of family heads encamped at Yenzi—Shells camp for management—who had been sent there by Shell in the early 1990s). Approximately 18% of household heads were unemployed, and of those

³¹⁵ *ibid.*

³¹⁶ It was not until 1996 that Gabon enacted its decentralization laws, largely modeled on those implemented in France. See Chapter 5 for more on this.

70% were engaged in traditional farming and fishing subsistence practices, indicating little economic opportunities beyond the oil industry.

It is also possible to infer from the statistics that autochtones were scarcely represented among the salaried workforce and more often than not resorted to traditional subsistence practices. Firstly, at least 65% of Yenzi arrivals in the early 1990s came from other Gabonese regions, while the rest were most likely of European-American descent. Secondly, Blaney notes that no foreigners in Gamba were engaged in traditional subsistence practices, while we know that approximately 70% of Gamba's unemployed were doing just that, suggesting that foreigners and Gabonese outside the Ndougou were most likely to find jobs. This also makes given that unskilled laborers were only needed during Shell's initial phases of infrastructural building. Shell would rely on recruitment for its management and scientific positions from more urban centers such as Port Gentil.

The concentration of foreign and Gabonese immigrants in Plaine 5 where relatively chaotic urban development had begun was likely the biggest factor in causing local authorities to push for more social services. Plaine 5, as it were, was not part of Gamba's original planning from the 1960s onwards—it was not in any discernible way incorporated in electricity or drainage networks—yet its population rivaled and then exceeded other quarters of the town. Precarious living without the familial solidarity networks enjoyed by autochtones must have been the norm for Plaine 5's residents, as it would remain so in 2015. This explains the creation of the majority of Gamba's foreign African associations in the beginning of the 1990s, composed primarily of Malians, Senegalese, Beninois, and Togolese. The associations, to which members paid a weekly fee of 1,000 Fcfa, served a number of purposes, including helping their members regularize their alien status and the purchase of parade materials during national celebrations—an ostensible means to remind authorities of their existence. Most importantly, perhaps, the associations mutualized funds for the medical evacuation of their members, provided food for newcomers, and also provided a forum for mutual aid within national groupings. It is likely that the aid extended to the provision of employment in construction, electricity, or small retail as well.³¹⁷

The 1990s population boom resulted in not only strained communal resources but also tighter security and government oversight, which seemed to have been prioritized given the

³¹⁷ Blaney, *Gamba*.

relatively quick addition of several services to the Ndougou area. The number of gendarmes operating throughout the region increased throughout the 1990s, and a new control station was planned for Mayonami in late 1998, so as to better supervise incoming and outgoing traffic.³¹⁸ Shell, which had recently moved their Gabon headquarters to Gamba, was providing the gendarmes office supplies, gas, and vehicles free of charge; no such handouts existed for the lagoon's local population. In addition to buttressed security, representatives from the Brigade de Pêche and the Ministry of Agriculture received new local offices, the former charged with enforcing anti-poaching laws. A representative of the Ministry of Labor was also in place since 1994, though that official's effect on work-related security could be doubted. Authorizing all government activities was the *préfet*, who as the Ministry of the Interior's local representative also approved both municipal and departmental budgets.³¹⁹ The Baloumbou prefect therefore wielded considerable power over security forces and local decision-making, despite the recent changes to Gabon's constitution aimed at decentralization.

Nevertheless, thanks in part to the oil boom of the early 2000s and the subsequent spike in tax revenues, the Department of the Ndougou was able to implement building projects in nearly every village of the lagoon in an apparent attempt to encourage villagers to remain, thereby easing the infrastructural pressures on Gamba. In consultation with chiefs and local political representatives, the Department decided to construct medical dispensaries, primary schools, solar panels for street lighting, water pumps, *cases d'écoute* for radio communication and film entertainment, and *cases de passage* for esteemed visitors to the villages.

4.4. "Oil is like a human, it will die." Gamba and the Ndougou, c.2003 – c.2015

As early as 2003, it became more and more clear to Gamba's and the Ndougou's inhabitants that the oilfields at Rabi-Kounga were not only exhaustible but would eventually cease economic production, threatening the region's economic lifeline and the prosperity of its inhabitants. Only one quarter of a representative panel surveyed in 2003 believed oil production would continue beyond 20 years, whereas nearly three-quarters of the panel foresaw an end to production within

³¹⁸ The station, if not completed on time, had been erected by July 2015 when the author had occasion to directly observe a security check in Mayonami.

³¹⁹ Blaney, *Gamba*.

ten years. Interestingly, almost 44% of the same panel believed Shell would be indefinitely active in the region despite drying wells. Bissielo (2003) attempts to explain this seeming paradox as either a reaction to Shell's omnipresence or founded in the belief that the oil giant would somehow diversify its activities away from petroleum.³²⁰ Also interesting was the disproportionate optimism of people aged under 44 vis-à-vis other age categories, i.e. those who came of age after the arrival of Shell and who perhaps could not conceive of Gamba without Shell's presence.

Two objective factors help to explain these decreased expectations of further oil production. First, it must have been widely known that Rabi-Kounga's production had peaked by 1997 at 217,000 bbl/d, in line with original estimates and a significant difference from the reported 23,000 bbl/d in 2010. As the Ndougou's primary source of salaried employment, it is inconceivable that knowledge of these production rates escaped a critical mass of the population. Secondly, the benchmark price of a barrel of Brent Crude had fallen to historic lows of 20-30 USD and had not begun showing signs of recovery until 2005; neither could this fact have escaped the oil-dependent town. The period covering the early 2000s through 2015 can therefore be made qualitatively separate from earlier periods such as the oil boom of the 1990s. If oil booms represent spikes in actual and perceived benefits, then 2003 is the earliest known and documented instance of decline as well as the wider recognition that Gamba might one day have to make do without petroleum. How actual and perceived changes to local oil production translated to material and spiritual well-beings is now of interest.

Diminished expectations of Gamba's industrial vitality may have been either cause or consequence, in part, of a more important trend towards diminished economic morale and sense of security within the Ndougou. Bissielo's survey reveals that half of panelists were pessimistic about future employment opportunities, while nearly a third reported not having sufficient job security. Significantly, the same figures were substantially higher among salaried workers and civil servants, both of whom also enjoyed higher levels of education. Even more critically, administrative personnel in particular claim job prospects and security had deteriorated with respect to the past.³²¹ In the absence of detailed employment statistics, such data suggest fewer actual employment opportunities and lower overall formal employment.

³²⁰ Bissielo, Anaclé and Jean Pierre Ndong Owono, "Enquête sur les besoins et préoccupations des populations de Gamba." (Study conducted by Conjoncture – Observatoire des Organisations (C-O2) of the Département de Sociologie, UOB and Shell-Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: April, 2003)

³²¹ Bissielo, *Populations de Gamba*.

The despair linked to deteriorated job prospects *ipso facto* turns our attention to the breakdown of traditional means of social solidarity. As Bissielo states, “[Labor market integration] increasingly conditions peoples’ survival in young countries like Gabon.”³²² Using the same panel’s responses on the procurement of financial assistance, Bissielo is able to conclude that social solidarity in 2003 had no longer assumed the same function as it once did. In addition to a weak associative life, only 27% of the Ndougou’s inhabitants were receiving financial assistance from a family member. While nearly 60% of the entire panel stated that they would call on family for assistance in urgent cases, the figure dropped to 7% for salaried workers, 66% of whom preferred to call on their bank. (Let us not forget that the same sub-panel were among the most pessimistic with respect to job prospects and security.³²³)

The panel, however, may not have proportionately reflected the views outside Gamba, where autochtones have been predominant and the most prolific participants in subsistence and unsalaried work (unsalaried respondents in the above survey could only count exclusively on family for urgent financial assistance). If conceived as assistance to and from close kin, solidarity extended beyond the immediate family in the lagoon and oftentimes reached beyond the clan. Such had and has been the case with respect to interclan marriages between Sette Cama and Soungha and the consequent “good neighbor” relations between the two villages.³²⁴ There is no reason to believe such cordial relations did not exist between other villages and clans, as several interlocutors indicated they had “no problems” with outsiders; several first-comer clans to the Ndougou typically inhabit a single village.³²⁵

Another hint that intraclan bonds remained relatively strong was the persistence of several collective activities and prohibitions typically associated with “tradition” and clan identity. Although administrative chiefs at the levels of village, *regroupement*, and canton must all be appointed by both the prefect in Gamba and the governor in Port Gentil, the choice of these administrative chiefs always took into account traditional requirements such as lineage and good standing with the villagers, which explains why many village chiefs in 2004 could trace their lineage to founders,³²⁶ and also why there is little evidence of succession disputes. Despite the

³²² *ibid.*

³²³ *ibid.*

³²⁴ Mebia, *Soungha et Sette Cama*.

³²⁵ The cordial atmosphere may also be related to a growing pan-autochtone identity brought on by difficulties related to Shell, judging by the frequent use of “we” by chiefs characterizing the lagoon-Shell relationship.

³²⁶ Mebia, *Soungha et Sette Cama*.

historical intermeshing of traditional chiefs and the state administration, land tenure to a significant degree remained the province of certain *chefs de famille*, some of whom also serve as administrative chiefs. Mve (2004) observes that just as in 1997, the year of Blaney's study, land in the Ndougou consensually belonged to first-comer clans. Even in Mayonami, the site of Shell's provisions harbor, first-comer clans and their chiefs jealously guarded the land and disputed with other occupants who had nevertheless forged historical alliances, thereby legitimizing their right to stay. The shores adjacent to Shell's harbor are not authorized for use by anyone except members of the Bayengui clan. Elsewhere in the lagoon, the clan appropriation of land is demonstrated by the number of sites with economic or spiritual-historical significance, both of which are prohibited to outsiders. These prohibitions were in large part respected.³²⁷

³²⁷ *ibid.*

Map 10: Population, Livelihoods, and Oil in the Ndougou Lagoon (by Joseph Mangarella, 2017, Derived from WWF, Shell Social Performance Plan, and PDL)



Intraclan solidarity was also expressed through patronage and more formal, “nontraditional” arrangements. For instance, Mougambi has enjoyed relatively high-quality construction and communal grounds thanks to the philanthropy of first-comer clan member Mahotès Magouindhi, a former state-level politician who had died in 1997. In Ibouka, villagers formed the *Kuti Mavarama*, an association to provide mutual aid and assistance to its Bavarama members.³²⁸ In terms of traditional expression of solidarity, the practice of spiritual rites and dance evidenced the vitality of deeply communal activities in the lagoon. In Sette Cama, observers noted the presence of old initiation rites such as Ndjembe and Mwiri, as well as dances for several occasions such as Ilombo, Ekounda, Mabanzi, and Mulogho. In Ibouka, there was Mulogho, Nyambi, and Mugulu as well as Bwiti for men. In nearby villages, we note the presence of Bwiti, Nyambi, Mwiri, Ilombo, Mabandzi, Ndjembe, and Mugulu.³²⁹ Rites and secret societies perform several functions, among which is the provision of mutual aid to a widowed clan member. The author had occasion to witness this in 2015.³³⁰

Certain events in Mayonami—strategically placed at the mouth of the Nyanga—stood as a notable exception to traditional bonds of solidarity, others being the noticeable increase in instances of witchcraft, reduced reliance on family members, and the depopulation of the lagoon. In 2004, Mve reported an increase in land speculation from 1997. In that year, only three of 20 houses in the village belonged to outsiders. In 2003, this number increased to ten of 20. The shift was evidently not without conflict, as the proprietor of a fishing company, established in the town since 2000, was harassed by village youth for allegedly confiscating one of their fishing boats or stealing their jobs, depending on one’s particular interpretation of Mve. Perhaps related to the increased presence of outsiders, Mayonami, among the most populated villages at 115 in 2003, featured only one ritual dance, the Ekounda. The debasement of traditional dance, however, may as well be attributed to the appearance after 1999 of several Catholic villagers and *Christianisme Céleste*.³³¹ Elsewhere, in Sette Cama, the author heard the testimony of a bitter chiefly succession

³²⁸ Emmanuel Mvé Mebia, Stéphane Le Duc Yeno, and Simplicie Mbouity, “Caractéristiques socioéconomiques et culturelles sur la haute lagune et le Rembo Bongo (Département de Ndougou).” (WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 2004).

³²⁹ *ibid.*

³³⁰ Ingouéka, September 5, 2015.

³³¹ Mvé Mebia, *Mayonami*; A few years prior to 2004, a Pentecostal church in Sette Cama had also been established (Mvé Mebia, *Soungha et Sette Cama*).

dispute which resulted in the imprisonment of the aggrieved candidate for village chief, though it is unclear as to what period the dispute took place.³³²

In Western society, the shift to more industrial forms of solidarity following monetization and capitalization—or commodification of goods and labor—took generations. It should therefore be unsurprising that by the 2000s, a perceived loss in traditional bonds was not corrected with public provisions, leaving much of the Ndougou’s autochthonal population disinherited. In fact, so heavy was the reliance on Shell that a representative panel was split on whether Shell or local government authorities were responsible for education (82% of the panel was divided evenly), infrastructure (50% of the panel was divided evenly), and road maintenance (36%-26% respectively).³³³ More damning, in terms of progress towards Durkheim’s version of organic solidarity, is the fact that in most of their responses, panelists revealed a biding lack of confidence in the state to provide the necessary components to lead a wholesome life in a monetized economy. The panel’s sentiments are unsurprising, as large majorities of respondents stated they were “dissatisfied” with the provision of health, education, and transportation infrastructure.³³⁴

One corrective to lack of mechanical solidarity (versus Durkheim’s organic solidarity) may have been the crystallization of local associations uniting people of similar vocations and economic destinies (not clans), though in many measures Shell had taken at least partial initiative. One such example was the creation of the Comité de Réflexion sur l’Après Pétrole (CRAP) in the early 2000s, a group of community leaders, administrators, and local politicians with the mission to implement measures to advance sustainable economic development in preparation for Shell’s departure. In 2007, the committee would draft ideas for a local development plan in conjunction with Gamba’s main actors, including Shell. In 2002, Shell in association with FODEX and CRAP sponsored a project to establish market gardens in Yenzi and elsewhere. In 2006, Shell initiated a microcredit scheme with FODEX and sponsored BIGUNU, a small group of 22 adherents attempting to transform their encampment into a village with small enterprises unrelated to petroleum. Just years later it was reported that this initiative had failed owing to microcredit defaults, and only six of the 22 original adherents remained.

³³² Interview with *notable* of Sette Cama, Sette Cama, August 15, 2015

³³³ Bissielo, *Populations de Gamba*.

³³⁴ *ibid.*

Grassroots associations also sprouted. In 2004, a group of men and women in Sette Cama established “Mafubu,” as association to promote and valorize traditional local farming practices.³³⁵ In 2002, small-scale commercial fishers in collaboration with the WWF and the *Brigade de Pêche de Gamba* established the *Association des Pêcheries du Département de Ndougou* (APDN), a trade association committed to sharing inputs such as nets and motorized boats. In 2009, the APDN succeeded in soliciting the support of Sodexho, a multinational food catering corporation, from whom the association requested oceanic fishing materials (fishers in the Ndougou must conduct their business illegally in the lagoon, as many schools of fish congregate in protected areas). Citing problems related to the basic functioning of the organization and the sustainability of such a venture, Sodexho declined to offer assistance in exchange for preferential purchases of fish, offering instead to assist in the creation of an egg farm.³³⁶

Lastly, in 2010, a group of 12 farmers established IMANE NZALE, an association with the mission to fight against poor transportation and crop-destroying fauna (especially elephants), often cited as the most urgent concern among the lagoon’s autochtones and farmers. The association petitioned for Shell microcredit, but was denied in the year of its creation. While the president of IMANE NZALE suspected political reasons since the group was not composed of autochtones, Shell’s management cited the failure of BIGUNU to repay its debts.

Farmers and autochtones subsisting on their agricultural produce faced more challenges in the 2000s related to *Complexe des aires protégées de Gamba* (CAPG) and further delimitation, often resulting in more stringent enforcement of anti-poaching regulations. On August 30, 2002, the former *Réserve de Faune du Petit Loango* became the *Parc National de Loango*, one of thirteen national parks created by law that year as part of the government’s push to advance eco-tourism. In 2007, a law assured locals of their “*droits d’usage coutumier*” within protected areas, and legislation later on further guaranteed the “consultation” of all interested parties, including communities in a park’s “peripheral zones.”³³⁷ Situated between two national parks, much of the Ndougou could therefore be considered a peripheral zone. By law, no decision could be taken which would alter the operations and prohibitions of activities within the parks without taking locals and their subsistence needs into account.

³³⁵ Mvé Mebia, *Sounga et Sette Cama*.

³³⁶ Sodexo Gabon/Gamba, “Rapport de Mission.” (Projets de Développement Durable Sodexo Madagascar. Gamba: November, 2009)

³³⁷ Art. 257, *Code Forestier*

The law 003/007 of September, 2007 established the administrative, technical, and financial management of the parks, led by the Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux (ANPN). In the CAPG (much of the Ndougou), striding the southern portions of Parc National de Loango, the ANPN would supervise the administrative and technical activities of the Brigade de Faune de Sette Cama and the WWF respectively. The ANPN's "*Conservateur*" along with the Brigade had at least 18 agents at their disposal to enforce anti-poaching restrictions.³³⁸ Until 2009, the two enforcement arms of the ANPN had made only a few dozen arrests and seizures, over 90% of which took place outside the formal boundaries of parks.³³⁹ Conscious of Shell's financial and public support for conservation, many residents of the Ndougou have associated the company with increasingly tough restrictions which at times puts farmers and hunters at peril.

In 2008, changing economic conditions led to a meeting of the ANPN's partners who agreed to re-zone the parks and spaces of customary usage with the CAPG. The decision seems to have been prompted by an alignment of interests between the state in Libreville and the Compagnie des Bois Gabonais (CBG); now that the end of oil production was conceivable, the country would refocus on the commercial production of lumber. Though clearly a threat to the Ndougou's conservationist NGOs, including the WWF and Ibonga, the decision to conduct re-zoning studies for the purposes of lumber operations was not met with local resistance.³⁴⁰ In fact, the reconsideration perhaps led to the addition of customary usage spaces and relaxation of certain restrictions, much to the relief of villagers including the village chief of Sounga and the cantonal chief in Pitonga.

³³⁸ Kovic, "Zonage Participatif des activités traditionnelles du village Dighoudou (PNMD)." (Mémoire de fin de cycle, Mofoumat JDD, Elève Ingénieur des techniques des Eaux et Forêts 3ème année. WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 2008).

³³⁹ Louis-Paulin Ndoide "Evaluation du système de surveillance et protection dans le complexe d'aires protégées de Gamba : Cas spécifique du Parc National de Loango (Secteur Sud)." (Internship report for the Ecole Nationale des Eaux et Forêts. WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 2009-2010).

³⁴⁰ *ibid.*

4.5. “Europeans created needs that did not exist.”³⁴¹ Contemporary Ndougou, c.2010 – 2015

4.5.1. At first glance

Compared to other agglomerations in Gabon, such as Libreville or Lambarene, today’s Département de Ndougou *feels* cloistered and sleepy. Its roughly 13,000 inhabitants, 10,000 of which were in Gamba at the time of this study (July-September 2015), are all but removed from the nation’s aerial and road networks. None of Gabon’s small airlines in Libreville were servicing Gamba’s airport at this time unless by prohibitively expensive charter service (upon request, a company rendered a quote of approximately 15,000 euros), and no one was confident that ferry services would continue to Gamba after stopping at Port Gentil. For non-Shell workers, it seemed, the only means of accessing the region was by bush taxi from Tchibanga, a costly four-hour trek through beautiful forest landscapes in questionably maintained pickup trucks. At least one hour of my overland trip to Gamba was spent on no roads at all except sandy beaches, straddling plantations set aflame in preparation for the next sowing season. Approximately one dozen courageous travelers sat amongst a heaping cargo of yams in the back of the standard-sized truck, becoming airborne whenever the truck struck a bump or pothole. Upon arriving at Gamba’s bus station, the passengers were caked in a thick layer of red soot kicked up by hours of oncoming traffic.

Such is the difficulty of accessing Gamba, and therefore the lagoon (apparently, even approaching the giant oilfields of Rabi-Kounga was out of the question due to Shell and state security checkpoints). The vast majority of Ndougou’s population—those who are neither employed by Shell nor its contractors—are therefore enclaved by even the strictest of interpretations. Nonetheless, Gabon’s second-richest department was not without life.

The “wealth” of Gamba is immediately evident in the Western-style, code-abiding housing which remains neatly arranged in rows akin to an American suburb, at least in Plaines 2 and 3 where Shell and SGAEI had originally intended to build. Plaine Bienvenue, where the Departmental Council and City Hall are located, Plaine 1, and Plaine 4 are ostensibly zoned for

³⁴¹ Interview with Dr. Sisso, July 28, 2015.

residential building, observable by the scattered housing and construction sites which dot the landscape. Yenzi, Shell's "camp" for managers, 15 kilometers from central Gamba (Plaine 3), is effectively a residential compound tightly secured at all times by gates, fences, and security guards. It is an impressive system of control for a compound spanning several hectares, at least enough to house hundreds of people with relatively high living standards. Within are contained dozens of high-quality homes—the nicest in Gamba—with garages and well-manicured lawns. A luxuriant clubhouse and restaurant wrap around a swimming pool, 200 meters from the tennis courts and the sandy beaches of Lake Yenzi.

Then there is Plaine 5, the *bidonville* striding the zoned Plaines 2 and 3 which has grown in chaotic fashion since the early 1990s at the latest and which is home to many African foreigners. Many homes here are mere damp and dark rooms, unconnected to water and sewage networks, and often separated from the external world by a simple curtain. Many, if not the vast majority, are engaged in either informal work, taxiing, or in *petit commerce*, clustered along the road which separates Plaine 3 from Plaine 5. This process is not at all unique in an African context of urbanization where migrant inflows are dense in space and time; outdoor kitchens and latrines were just as common in Sekondi-Takoradi. The difference, however, is that the relatively small town of Gamba, for all its meticulous planning in conjunction with a multinational oil and gas giant, failed to react to such a predictable and manageable process of chaotic urbanization. The cadastral service, for instance, did not arrive until after the migrant influx took place.

Known simply as "Plaine 3," the commercialized district adjacent to Plaine 5 is also the hub of Gamba's social life, albeit for Gamba's working classes of Plaine 5. Those residing in Yenzi tend to stay put and engage in social activities within Yenzi's confines. Social mixing rarely takes place between inhabitants of Plaine 5 and Yenzi. When it does, it is typically via work emplacement at Shell or one of its contractors, such as Sodexo, Halliburton, or Engine, a Canadian drilling company. Regular buses operating throughout the day connect Gambian locals to their work destinations either at Vembo, the Shell Terminal, or at Yenzi itself.

Outside Gamba, there is yet further *enclavement*, as access to the rural zones of the Canton Ndougou and the Canton Bas-Nyanga is made difficult by the relative absence of roads. In the Ndougou especially, villages are separated by considerable distances; it can take roughly 45 minutes to arrive at Sette Cama from the *débarcadère* in Gamba with a motorized boat. In fact, the villages of Sounga, Mougambi, and Ingouéka and were only accessible via lagunar

transportation, while the remaining villages were haphazardly connected to former foresting roads. During the daytime, especially during planting season, the villages appear empty and only inhabited by elders, children, and chiefs. At night, those working at plantations return to lend a semblance of life to the otherwise dying and eroded communities. For some villagers, even Gamba represents a veritable urban center.³⁴²

4.5.2. Material well-being

The attempt by the City Hall and Departmental Council in Gamba to halt rural exodus, ever since the *commune*'s inception in 1993/4, has largely failed owing in part to decaying or nonexistent infrastructure and services. The host of buildings constructed by the Department during the early 2000s oil boom largely fell into disrepair. In Mayonami, the school and *case de passage* were gutted and abandoned, while the solar panel lights were inoperable. In Ibouka, villagers enjoy neither electricity nor potable water, and are forced to search out fresh water with rowboats. Their dispensary is without a nurse. In Pitonga, site of the Ndougou's cantonal chief, the medical dispensary has no medication, the water tower has no water, and the solar panels are inoperable. In Ingouéka, paradoxically farthest from the riches of Gamba,³⁴³ everything functions as they should except for the lack of medication, hospital beds, and a charged battery for the *case d'écoute* which would otherwise allow village chiefs to communicate via radio with the prefect in

³⁴² One villager upon hitching a ride on our *pirogue* from Sette Cama to Gamba remarked, "*Ca fait du bien un week-end dans les villages,*" mirroring a sentiment expressed by many metropolitan denizens around the world returning from countryside towns much larger than Gamba.

³⁴³ Interview with Marc Ona Essangui, Libreville, July 15. The poorest villages, he claimed, were near oil installations.

Gamba. It is impossible to note with specificity when these amenities ceased operating, but some have claimed they lasted until only months after implementation.



Photograph 3: Solar Panel in Disrepair. Pitonga. (Taken in August, 2015)

Though desirous of formal employment, the vast majority of the lagunar population are still engaged in “traditional” subsistence activities, which in addition to observation and eyewitness testimony is evidenced by the persistent consumption of manioc—among the Ndougou’s chief crop staples—and its importance to lagunar autochones’ diets. A concerning trend, however, favors imported food from Tchibanga as the pressures of monetization and a local Dutch Disease continue to unfold. To communicate with families, in Gamba or elsewhere, including with children enrolled in school at Gamba who require school materials, technology such as mobile phones and ready access to gas-fueled vehicles are now required, necessitating monetary earnings. Subsistence practices therefore must be modified to earn a surplus. As traditional *connaissances* (mostly lost to many villagers) cannot satisfy large-scale market demands, many farmers and fishers require technologies such as large fishnets, motors, chainsaws, pesticides, or electric fencing to deter crop-devouring fauna. In Ibouka at least, villagers cannot enjoy either of

these niceties and must harvest with traditional machetes, discounting any hope of revenue and capital accumulation and consigning the villagers to subsistence. Plantations are typically disorganized and staffed by elders (many youth have no desire to practice agriculture). Most produce will go to Gamba's Plaine 3 market to be sold and reinvested in plantations, while the remains will be eaten communally by villagers.

In Gamba's market, the Dutch Disease, exacerbated by the remoteness and inaccessibility of the region, has led to sharp price rises in staple foods such as manioc (in 2009 it cost 10,000 Fcfa for a bushel, while in 2015 it rose to 20,000) and potatoes. It has been claimed that Gamba is among the most expensive cities in the world, and if not entirely accurate, it is difficult to dispute. Reports suggest basic goods and services were even more expensive before the semi-complete road to Tchibanga was improved. In 2015, for instance, to print a single page in black-and-white in Plaine 3 cost approximately 50 cents USD, while a decade earlier it was said to have been double. It is unsurprising, then, that most villages still burn woodfires for cooking and forego the privileges of gas—which, ironically, is extracted in at least one location in the lagoon within eyeshot of fish-baiting rowboats.

4.5.3. Social, spiritual, and associative well-being

Such monetary pressures mean that those with sufficient salaries often provide for several families within the same clan, though evidence shows this form of solidarity is increasingly restricted to nuclear families. Mr. Koumba, the Loumbou jurist in Libreville, claims that even in their contemporary culture, it remains the case that “the uncle is practically the slave of his nephew,” and that upon the passing of an uncle, the nephew will incur his debts. Indeed, many members of the middle-aged generation have elected to remain in villages in order to care for an extended family, such as the village chief of Soungba and her little sister. In Ibouka, only four extended families (clans) comprise the village's total population of approximately 180, and there exists an undeniable atmosphere of familial intimacy in the community. In most of the lagoon, and even in Gamba, customary infractions such as adultery and even minor legal offenses such as larceny are still dealt with within clans, before resorting to administrative authorities. In Mougambi, the first-comer Imondo clan still proudly guards its totems and enforces its *interdits*

formels, such as the restriction on eating red fish. Every clan's elders, at least, are able to recall a complete list of such *interdits* and ceremonial *gibiers* to be eaten for spiritual purposes, though this practice is increasingly threatened by stringent national park restrictions.³⁴⁴

Despite the vestiges of clan solidarity, there is a widespread and grudging acceptance among autochthonal parents that they must provide their children with a quality modern education. Every parent interviewed expressed their desire to give their children a schooling which would allow them to obtain formal work, and thus a presumed better life.³⁴⁵ In a group discussion, the villagers of Ibouka, when asked why so many of their relatives have moved to Gamba, responded in consensus that if you do not have financial means, you cannot learn and progress; it is still the practice of many Gamban autochtones to remit money to their relatives in the lagoon. Confirming the recent insistence on schooling, Professor Djoumata, who teaches at the high school, claimed their students habitually tested first or second in the Province, as 81.25% passed the BAC for the 2014/2015 academic year. Gamba's high school, financed by Shell, is known to have a culture of rigor.³⁴⁶

Most middle-aged to elder villagers, however, hint to social anomie, as they frequently disparage the youth who yearn to have money and abandon the villages (Professor Djoumata claims most students want to work at Shell). The village notable of Mougambi lamented a frequent expression deployed by youth whose hopes are ironically in line with their parents': "*Il vaut mieux mourir jeune et riche que mourir vieux et pauvre.*"³⁴⁷ In keeping with the trend, few of the youth aged in their 20s or younger were able to describe the purposes of a *corps de garde*, as many of their parents were not relating traditional stories of the past—such was the occupation of their grandparents and great-grandparents.³⁴⁸ As a former civil servant at City Hall stated, knowledge of the past and traditional know-how "*se transmet des grands aux petits.*" One elder claimed that tradition "has totally disappeared" as a consequence. The youth, as such, are typically chided by

³⁴⁴ Villagers are often wary of discussing these practices for fear of legal retribution.

³⁴⁵ The village chief of Soungha, who makes wood-woven floor mats to finance her children's education, was most succinct: "I want my children to work. That's what it is these days." (Interview with Chef de village of Soungha, Soungha, August 12, 2015)

³⁴⁶ Interview with Professor Djoumata ; Results of the scholastic year 2014/2015 at Lycée Roger Gouteyron were provided to me by Professor Djoumata on August 18, 2015.

³⁴⁷ Interview with *notable* of Mougambi, Mougambi, August 21, 2015.

³⁴⁸ Middle school teachers also claimed that 90-95% of schoolchildren were self-described Christians and Muslims. (Interview with Middle School teachers, Gamba, August 7, 2015)

parents and elders for a lack of respect and knowledge of how to properly receive and interact with others.



Photograph 4: A public plaza in Plaine 3, Gamba (taken in July, 2015)

Money has also been blamed for dividing families³⁴⁹ and creating jealousy, which in the lagoon often leads to instances and accusations of witchcraft.³⁵⁰ A fisherman resting in Soungha claimed to have witches in his own family, while Soungha's chief had been accused of witchcraft in 2005 by the family of her recently deceased boyfriend who had been working for Shell. All villagers, young and old, unanimously believe that their villages' depopulation and exodus to Gamba was caused by a surge in witchcraft decades ago which has since subsided to an extent, closely mirroring the rise and fall of Gamba's job creation. Ngoma Herve, an agent to the prefecture, claims that "phantoms" chase people away. When a bar opens, he says, it can only remain open for two to three months before evil spirits steal the inventory. When a schoolteacher had been sent to Sette Cama earlier in 2015, he had taught for only months before spirits murdered

³⁴⁹ Interview with Tax Collector (*percepteur*), Gamba, August 6, 2015

³⁵⁰ Interview with "Mousse" of Marine Marchand, Gamba, July 24, 2015

him.³⁵¹ Unfortunately for villagers, protection from evil spirits and witches can only come from *ngangas*, who according to one account “have all left with the knowledge in their heads.”³⁵² Few if any *corps de garde* exist in the villages today, and the Sounga chief, though she would like to build one, stated that doing so without a *nganga* might lead to her getting “yelled at.” Neither do many people of the Ndougou consult healer *ngangas* to treat diseases as they once did, resorting more often than not to Western medicine to cure maladies and spiritual curses such as *SIDA* (AIDS) *mystique*.³⁵³

The pervasive belief in witchcraft among both Gambans and the lagunar population often collides and/or intermixes with the growing monotheistic presence, which appears to replace the spiritual needs fulfilled by abandoned tradition. The precise number of Christian churches is unknown, given the definition one ascribes to a church, but it is most likely anywhere from ten to 21. In any case, an explosion in Christian piety has been observed, and villagers often seek protection from a Christian God against witchcraft, much to the incredulity of Gamba’s Pastor Boudika of the Alliance Chrétienne, who insists witches and God cannot co-exist and aims to rid his congregation of such pagan beliefs.³⁵⁴ Pastor Boudika leads a congregation of 300-500 thanks to a recent “reawakening,” and spends much of his time hearing confessions and counseling congregation members on a common set of concerns ranging from marriage difficulties and work problems to diseases. Through these examples it is clear that at the level of politics and social interaction, ancient cosmologies are no longer salient. At the level of personal interpretation of life and all its complexity, however, ancient cosmology remains. The atomization of ancient cosmologies, it should be noted, mirrors that of social solidarity and can be associated with the intensified monetization of the Ndougou’s local economy.

With the absence of *corps de garde* and traditional knowledge meant to define a clan and its identity, it is unsurprising that, as an NGO worker with Ibonga claims, “there is no community spirit.”³⁵⁵ Village, *regroupement*, and cantonal chiefs who would otherwise function as receptacles of protocol, respect for the past, and spokespersons for their people now only act out their

³⁵¹ Interview with Ngoma Herve, my boat captain, Sette Cama, July 30, 2015

³⁵² Interview with Robert Moundanga

³⁵³ Interview with Dr. Sisso

³⁵⁴ The Senator of Gamba is a case in point, for he claimed “*Les sorciers ne sont pas au-dessus de Dieu.*” (Interview with Senator of Gamba)

³⁵⁵ Dr. Sisso also claims that the Ndougou’s inhabitants are not *solidaire* like people in Mali or Senegal. (Interview with Dr. Sisso)

administrative responsibilities. Many are former Shell employees,³⁵⁶ as with the *regroupement* chief in Sette Cama or the cantonal chief in Pitonga, while a few hardly set foot in their villages more than twice a year.³⁵⁷ Almost all chiefs describe their role as that of resolving conflicts and assuring the good, lawful behavior of their villages.³⁵⁸ In one case, the cantonal chief in Pitonga freely admitted that cantonal chiefs no longer know the former functions of a *chef de terre*, the last true one having died 15 years earlier. Jean Churley, the Ibonga NGO worker, claims that *chefs de terre*, whose powers derived from lineage, are no longer powerful as they fell out of favor with Shell.

If respect for local chiefs is a gauge of community spirit, then that spirit has waned. Reflecting the views that many lagunar chiefs have come to feel about their cantonal chief in Pitonga, one interviewee claimed many chiefs were simply “thieves.”³⁵⁹ Such accounts accord with what one opposition member and NGO leader claimed was the scourge of chiefs “bought” by the state for the purpose of controlling the population.³⁶⁰ Thirdly, strict matrilinearity, whose past purpose was partly to provide a framework of succession in case of an errant or wanted chief, has been observed as disappearing. In addition, dowries meant to symbolically bind two families are increasingly composed of money at amounts rivaling those exchanged among the wealthier classes in Libreville.³⁶¹ Lastly and more damning, the jurist and university Professor Nambo claims that in Gamba, oil money became a means to politically position oneself.

Though there is little action at the local level to reverse what most believe to be a dire situation, frequent mention has been made of a budding political consciousness,³⁶² thanks in no small part to the evolution of mindsets brought about by modern schooling.³⁶³ The chief of

³⁵⁶ Professor Mouvoungu claims that chiefs in the Ndougou today are both *nobles par excellence* as well as *propriétaires*. (Interview with Professor Mouvoungu)

³⁵⁷ Such was the case in Ibouka, where the village chief prefers to live at her plantation despite the criticism of her villagers. (Interview with villagers of Ibouka)

³⁵⁸ Mousse, the Marine Marchand agent, claims 80% of people respect the law (Interview with “Mousse”), and Chambrier, former civil servant, claims only 60% are able to read and understand the laws, after which they must transmit new regulations to their friends and relatives. (Interview with Chambrier, Gamba, August 9, 2015). It should be noted that an administrative qualification for becoming a chief is the ability to read and write.

³⁵⁹ “*brigands*”

³⁶⁰ Interview with Georges Mpage

³⁶¹ One interviewee has claimed, however, that this is merely an example of modern means being employed towards traditional ends. There still remains a vague sentiment that “*un chef qui ne partage pas n’est pas un chef*.” (Interview with Middle School teachers)

³⁶² Interview with Mousse ; Interview with Ndomi

³⁶³ Most middle-aged to elder villagers have not received schooling beyond CM2 (middle school), while almost all youth today at least attend *lycée*.

Sounga, among the most vocal of the chieftaincy, claims that little contestation existed in the past, but that today's youth feel freer to express their minds. This is confirmed in interviews among many young adults, who remain convinced that politicians are pocketing all the oil proceeds. Whether they have the resources to galvanize themselves and make direct claims on natural resources, however, is another question.³⁶⁴ With multipartyism, journalists now have the ability to openly criticize, within limits, the Presidency, yet journals and free information are scarce among the lagunar population.

4.5.4. Ambivalent authorities: The state, Shell, and clientelism

In 2013, The City Council and the Departmental Council, partnering with the United Nations Development Program and CRAP,³⁶⁵ published the *Plan de Développement Local du Département du Ndougou et de la Commune de Gamba* (PDL), the first development plan of its kind in Gabon. The PDL subsumes itself within the overall strategic vision of Plan Stratégique Gabon Emergent, Gabon's national development plan set out in the early 1990s. 86 pages long, the PDL is comprehensive and requested more than 76bn Fcfa to carry out seven "strategic axes" by the end of 2017, the costliest of which was the long-desired *désenclavement* of the town principally through the completion of the road to Tchibanga, estimated at approximately 50bn Fcfa. Other lofty goals include, in order of presumptive priority, the reinforcement of local governance, the promotion of human development, improving urban living conditions, developing *grands projets*, the promotion of economic diversification, and the promotion of tourism. Concerning the reinforcement of local governance, no explicit mention is made of corruption, patronage, or clientelism, but it implicitly recognizes the need to address management issues as a priority: "*Amélioration des procédures de gestion, d'affectation des ressources humaines et d'utilisation du patrimoine des collectivités.*"³⁶⁶

³⁶⁴ The taxi union, agitating for fair taxation and clemency from prohibitive licensing fees, is disallowed from organized protest until it formally registers as an association. To date, the effort to register has met roadblocks in the bureaucracy. (Interview with Cédric Mangala, Taxi Union Boss, Gamba, August 31, 2015)

³⁶⁵ CRAP, created in 1999 by community leaders, is noted in the plan as being instrumental in bringing its publication to fruition. (PDL)

³⁶⁶ PDL, 56.

The PDL estimated that it could finance up to 30% of the projected costs through the Department's primary source of revenue, the reputed IRPP, or corporate/individual income tax, which comprised almost 94% of the Departmental budget and which was almost entirely dependent on Shell and its contractors.³⁶⁷ Among the risks to the multifaceted projects, PDL listed economic crisis. Given that the Ndougou's economy was almost entirely dependent on the oil industry, many local civil servants (not elected politicians) expressed skepticism as to whether the PDL's lofty ambitions would ever be realized.³⁶⁸ Furthermore, although the departmental and communal budgets since the decentralization of 1996/1997 were autonomously spent (the National Assembly also legislates their budgets), revenue was first sent to the Treasury in Libreville before being distributed to Departments and Communes. This rendered the continued reimbursement of the Ndougou's budgetary coffers rather precarious, as it was well known the state had difficulties funding its master plans.³⁶⁹

The PDL is comprehensive in listing the concerns which were shared by many elected officials and civil servants in "the richest *département* outside Libreville"³⁷⁰, who during interviews more or less converged upon the seven strategic axes listed above. It is a point of interest, however, that no elected officials, or those adhering to the ruling PDG or the nominal opposition Alliance Démocratique et Républicaine (ADERE), cited reinforcing local governance. Civil servants and academics, on the other hand, made routine mention of patronage and abuse of official office through the awarding of public contracts to friends and the distribution of jobs.³⁷¹ Another frequently mentioned issue of contention was the increasingly money-dependent character of national and local elections, which were driven by parties (primarily the PDG). Several villagers, academics, and civil servants described how achieving votes was a matter of simple cash handouts to resource-starved villagers.³⁷² Guy Kassa Koumba, head of Shell's Government Relations Office, went as far as to say that "politics is the biggest factor influencing our decisions," and that it was simply inescapable when attempting to achieve anything substantive

³⁶⁷ 2015 Budget and Revenues provided by Tax Collector, Gamba, August 19, 2015

³⁶⁸ Indeed, many skeptics have pointed out that no tangible progress has been made at the time of this study.

³⁶⁹ Interview with Francis Bivigou, head of Gabon-Oregon, Libreville, July 13, 2015

³⁷⁰ Interview with Mr. Ossendo, SG of Département de Ndougou, Gamba, July 26. The Department enjoyed a total tax revenue of 6bn Fcfa in 2015.

³⁷¹ *ibid.*; Interview with Ndomi ; Interview with Marc Ona Essangui ; Interview with Mpage

³⁷² The notable of Mougambi, in particular, decries this practice. (Interviews with *notable* of Mougambi, July 31 and August 21, 2015)

in Gabon, not to mention the Ndougou. He also mentioned rampant corruption within the PDG, a reason for why Shell had recently taken to firmly suppressing unethical behavior in its ranks, and why the company had also begun more meticulously monitoring of its cash accounting.³⁷³

The latter development may explain why elected officials claim they shared a strained relationship with Shell. It may also be due to varying instances of pollution³⁷⁴ or the threat of Shell's (now-complete, as of 2016) partial departure from the Ndougou.³⁷⁵ Or, perhaps, it can be explained by Shell's downsizing of its own charitable efforts in the face of a global decline in revenue. Whatever the case, it is clear that elected officials, often criticized by various groups of people, do not particularly enjoy having public responsibility imposed upon them. Villagers, despite the fact that they scarcely pay any taxes,³⁷⁶ were more likely to deride the state for corruption and money-pocketing than they were to lambast Shell for increasingly ignoring their persistent demands for help in transportation or medical care. One interviewee, fearful for his life should his name be mentioned in the press, ridiculed the state, and especially Ali Bongo whom he termed "*un grand oiseau*," as opposed to his father, "*un petit ours*." The cantonal chief of Pitonga complained that the PDG "controlled everything" and that if a visiting minister suspected you were not supportive of the party, all his promises to deliver would be made in vain.

Nevertheless, the system of patronage does not seem to have been entirely absent from the non-political class. Dieudonné, a radio host, admitted that he was expected to give cash payments not only to his boss but other civil servants as well who had helped him obtain his job. When asked why, he simply replied that it was "normal." It may indeed be the case that modern means are utilized towards traditional ends.

³⁷³ Televised interview with Guy Kassa Koumba, Shell Terminal outside Gamba, August 10, 2015

³⁷⁴ Mr. Ossendo mentioned the blackening of the Vembo River and their efforts to prevent villagers from swimming or fishing in polluted waters. (Interview with Mr. Ossendo, SG of Departmental Council, Gamba, August 19

³⁷⁵ Ghislain, a manager of housing at Shell, lamented the recent "downsizing" and discontinuance of certain benefits accorded to Shell staff. (Interview with Ghislain Pither, Shell management, Gamba, July 20, 2015)

³⁷⁶ The Ndougou Tax Collector admitted that the payment of fishing licenses, e.g. was by and large based on good faith. (Interview with Tax Collector, Gamba, August 19, 2015)

4.6. Conclusion: The Microcosm Embodied by the “Man-Fauna” Conflict

Above all concerns related by the Ndougou’s autochtones was the crop-devastation wrought by elephants, a national issue at the time of fieldwork which led to a series of conferences in Libreville. Whenever one travels among plantations of the Ndougou, villagers will readily point out a large swath of harvest ruined overnight, either trampled or devoured by elephants, buffalos, wild boars, or even gazelles. The cantonal chief in Pitonga, though satisfied by a recent legal instrument relaxing anti-poaching laws, alluded as well to fishing restrictions, pointing at his *pirogue* and uttering “if we can’t fish, we can’t eat.” Later on, on a tour his plantation, he added that “we lay [illegal] elephant traps because we cannot buy guns.”³⁷⁷

The *notable* of Mougambi, in line to succeed as chief, explained that it was not only villagers who were ignorant as to the law, but the ANPN as well, ironically charged with enforcing it. He carefully related an episode where his brother had been imprisoned for killing an elephant outside of his plantation, and then promptly recited from memory the letter of the law, which stated that one has the right to *battre* an elephant within 1.5 kilometers of one’s plantation. The ANPN, during a group interview, did not repeat this recitation, but only agreed after a few minutes of pondering that one has the right to kill an elephant if their plantation is “threatened,” and that a plantation proprietor cannot actively hunt them “far away.”³⁷⁸

This issue is the one which most easily stirs the passion of the lagoon’s autochtones, as even the autochtonal *Maire adjointe*, Madame Panga, did not hesitate to say that elephants accentuate unemployment. When asked about their concerns and hopes for the future, villagers scarcely articulated “pulling down” oil rents or chasing away predatorial oil companies. That the people of a region home to sub-Saharan Africa’s largest onshore oil reserve to date exhibited none of the physical violence, contestation, or popular agitation found in the war-torn regions of Chad, Angola, or the Niger Delta is impossible to ignore. It does not mean, however, that other forms of violence, the debasement of tradition and the devolution of time-honored means to subsist, for one, were not committed. An unsettling pall of anguish hangs over the Ndougou, and a destructive peace simmers on. The next chapter is dedicated to analyzing, rather than empirically describing, the interactions and processes which led to the outcomes described above.

³⁷⁷ Interview with Chef de canton of Pitonga, Pitonga, July 29, 2015

³⁷⁸ Interview with ANPN agents, Gamba, August 14, 2015

CHAPTER 5. Rentierism

The purpose of this chapter is to attempt a rentier theory analysis of how and why spiritual and material well-being changed and morphed into anomic structures throughout Gamba and the Ndougou region since the first oil wells began producing in the 1960s. The chapter begins by identifying via Chapter 4 critical junctures of change in the spiritual and material lives of the region's autochthons. In Chapters 5 and 6, these junctures are subjected to a selection of ontological paradigms—realist, internally realist, and relative—purporting to explain how public authorities effect change in peri-urban spaces in sub-Saharan Africa. Through this method, reified concepts such as “state,” “institutions,” “oil companies,” “indigenous,” and “grievances” are introduced, re-visited, and re-worked to accommodate a single case.

5.1. Critical junctures in Gamba and the Ndougou

The following is a synthesis—derived from Chapter 4—of observed junctures, or points of change, in the material, social, spiritual, and associative well-beings of the inhabitants of Gamba and the Ndougou. Since well-being is a highly subjective concept, I have chosen to take contemporary expectations by the Ndougou's inhabitants at face value. Though this approach has its drawbacks, such as observer bias and anachronism, it is quite unethical to externally attribute to interlocutors needs, desires, and levels of satisfaction that were not expressly stated or observed in detail and with a sufficient degree of accuracy.

The first critical juncture in the lives of the Ndougou's inhabitants occurred not when COSREG (Shell-Gabon) arrived for prospecting in 1960, but during the 1970s when infrastructure to support an oil town had been gradually put in place. Shell's earlier employment of local manpower for basic infrastructure to support prospecting was only minimal, and formal labor supply did not change drastically from the days of lumbering. Throughout the 1970s, however, contractors in Gamba gradually completed construction of worker housing, a market, a school, and a medical clinic, as well a supermarket, a manioc plantation, and another medical clinic at Yenzi. Interviewees recall this time with nostalgia and regard it as prosperous. Shell was financing medical assistance to non-employee locals, evacuating those in need of urgent medical attention,

and transporting locals free of charge. Autochtons from the lagoon welcomed the unskilled jobs provided by Shell, and many describe the niceties of replacing wood fires with propane, torches with electrical lamps, and rowboats with motorized boats. It may have been Shell's generosity that acclimated locals towards foreigners of all kinds. Finally, no one recalls anything quite resembling a Dutch disease, as costs and dowries were reported to have remained quite low.

Whereas most chiefs seem to have procured gainful employment and were quite satisfied with Shell's arrival, the succession dispute in Mougagara and the subsequent settling of Mayonami—the site of Shell's provisions harbor—suggests commercial opportunism and competition. In addition, the relocation of the seat of the sous-prefecture to Gamba is recalled bitterly by today's chiefs in Sette-Cama. Nevertheless, the 70s were regarded as prosperous and peaceful, and harmony was the norm among and between most people in Gamba and the Ndougou.

The second critical juncture coincides with the peak production of Rabi-Kounga and the population growth of Gamba during the 1990s. Third-party surveys and interviewees reveal that material, associative, social, and spiritual well-beings were under strain, despite the presumed advantages of higher employment thanks to the Rabi-Kounga installations and Shell's contractors. For many, access to "modern" amenities continued, but for those mostly foreign migrants lodged in Plaine 5, access to fresh water, electricity, and proper sanitation was scarce. In the lagunar villages, youth and those with children often moved to Gamba to earn money or accompany their children to school. Many villagers speak of an increased instance of witchcraft, jealousy, and generalized ill will as rural exodus proceeded apace. Despite the job growth in Gamba (most of which went to non-autochtons), most autochtons in the lagoon remained subsistence farmers and hunters, often against their wishes.

Deteriorating conditions in parts of Gamba were counteracted by continued Shell assistance and handouts ad hoc, while the Gamban clinic continued its work. In addition, charitable organizations, mutual assistance among foreigners, and a *centre social* serviced those in need, while *ngangas* were still marginally preferred by many autochtons for spiritual and modern healing. To stop the rural exodus, the Departmental Council in the early 2000s built medicine dispensaries, travelers' lodging, media centers, water pumps, and solar panels in most villages, which were greatly appreciated by autochtons.

During this time, evidence points to decreased dissatisfaction within the chieftaincy, such as a succession dispute in Pitonga which led to a relocation and another in Sette-Cama which led to

accusations of wrongdoing. Furthermore, chiefs were reported having had difficulty enforcing their custodianship of customary land, especially with respect to wildlife poachers. Nevertheless, they retained the confidence of their villagers and were critical in keeping them in the villages themselves. This second juncture, extending from the 1990s through the early 2000s, thus represents the first generalized expression of dissatisfaction with the direction of life in Gamba and in the Ndougou.

The third juncture has no definitive time stamp, but crystallized in the mid-2000s. Rather than associated with any particular event, this period represents generalized complacency, despair, and even anguish among many locals and autochtons. Most facilities built by the Departmental Council to discourage rural exodus were in disrepair, which meant only sporadic access to medicine, clean water, electricity, or media outlets. Most inhabitants of the Department (including Gamba) were dissatisfied with the level of public service provision, as well as with the ambiguous national park laws enacted in 2007, which invited fierce criticism and even resistance. Furthermore, waning oil production at Rabi-Kounga meant fewer jobs, which nearly all villagers and Gambans sought so as to improve their own and childrens' livelihoods in an increasingly expensive enclave. Unemployment then translated to subsistence farming and fishing with few resources to cultivate surpluses, leading to a sense of hopelessness and sometimes antipathy and jealousy.

People began to also suspect their politicians and even chiefs of malfeasance, as the term *doyen politique* emerged with its negative connotations. For spiritual comfort, people shifted from belief in ancestral cosmologies—excepting witchcraft, sorcery, and vampirism—to Christianity, as demonstrated by the dramatic increase in church attendance over this period. Ancient cosmologies persist at the level of individual interpretation, but the use of sorcerers is increasingly thought to be of the destructive type; there was little evidence of successful, communal mechanisms, such as *ngangas*, to defend against witches and vampires other than hybridized forms of Christian piety. Though not evidence of anomie in and of itself, shifts to Christianity—most likely the result of localized urbanization in Gamba—coinciding with other cosmologies has clearly led to forms of ill-adaptation. Pessimistic of the future and oftentimes desperate, many of the Department's inhabitants were noticeably driven to complacency and latent anxiety.

5.2. The analytical framework of Rentier Theory

The following seeks to explain why the sequence of events described above took place. The method chosen is a litmus test of dominant frameworks for understanding political crisis and change in African contexts, using the cases of each critical juncture in Gamba and the Ndougou Department.

As described in Chapter 1, Rentier theories are frameworks which predict a host of political and economic consequences as a result of significant inflows of external oil rent. What distinguishes rentier theories from other perspectives is a chain of causation which begins with the state and ends in consequences for not only macro-economics and macro-political stability but also in local pathologies. Among them are a decline in state legitimacy felt by citizens, limited democratic participation by citizens, inefficiency and corruption at all levels, a reduced role for domestic labour, enclave industrialization, a decline in the rural standard of living which leads to rural-urban dualism, and an economic vulnerability to price shocks.³⁷⁹ All pathologies, with the sole exception of vulnerability to price shocks owing to a decline in non-oil sectors, derive from the financial autonomy of the state and relaxed foreign exchange rates set by the state. The first task, therefore, is to establish Gabon as a rentier state with the tendency to produce such outcomes at each observed juncture, before attempting linking the state to said outcomes in the case of the Ndougou.

As laid out in Chapter 1, Hazem Beblawi proscribes four criteria for classification as a rentier state: a predominantly rent-based economy where more than 40 percent of national income is derived from oil, rents that are derived from foreign sources (such as oil multinationals), a situation whereby only a few receive the rent, and a situation whereby the government, as “the prime mover of economic activity,” is the principal recipient of the rent.³⁸⁰ Based on these criteria, Gabon has been a rentier state during each critical juncture observed above (during the 1970s and the 1990s, as well from the mid-2000s to the present).

Evidence strongly supports the fact that Gabon had already been a quasi-rentier state by the 1960s, when timber, manganese, uranium, and increasingly oil together represented the majority of GNP. The exploiters of these reserves were almost exclusively foreign-owned and operated,

³⁷⁹ Yates, *The Scramble*, 87.

³⁸⁰ Hazem Beblawi (1978) in Yates, *The Scramble*, 82.

with extractions likewise being exported for refinement or as manufacturing inputs in Europe or the United States. After independence, key concessions in forestry and a few extractive assets were nationalized, which amounted to little more than front companies with elite officials occupying lucrative bureaucratic posts. In 1963, agriculture only contributed 30% of the GNP, despite 86% of the population—non-elite—being engaged therein on a subsistence scale.³⁸¹ It wasn't until the late 1960s, however, that Gabon had become a full-fledged *oil-rentier* state.

In the 1970s, Gabon transitioned from a wood enclave to an oil enclave. Although wood extraction doubled from independence in 1960 to 1980, wood's share of total exports fell from 80-90 percent in 1960 to only 10 percent in 1974. Oil production rose dramatically owing to the production of Gamba (40,000 b/d from 1967) and several offshore finds. By 1971, Gabon's total production increased to 100,000 b/d thanks in large part to the Gamba well's increasing returns. The government would benefit from the newly dominant export, having negotiated a 12-percent royalty with both Shell-Gabon and Elf-SPAEF, the country's largest and most productive operators. By 1972, these contributions to the state's budget amounted to 74 million USD and would soon rise further. After "Gabonization" as well as Gabon's accepted membership into OPEC in 1974, skyrocketing oil prices led to state revenues of 654 million USD in 1974. By 1977, oil comprised four-fifths of all export earnings, and by most macro-economic measures, Gabon was no longer a "poor" country,³⁸² despite the fact that Gabonization of oil-sector jobs was limited to an elite cadre and that the vast majority of people remained employed in agriculture.

If Gabon was an undeniable rentier state during the 1970s, it was perhaps quasi-rentier throughout the 1990s, though Douglas Yates suggests Beblawi's criteria for rentierism may be too limited. While OPEC's price hikes brought windfall revenues to the state in the mid-1970s, the combined forces of falling Gabonese production and tumbling oil prices in the 1980s meant oil would contribute much less to GNP. The Rabi-Kounga oilfield, which came onstream in 1989, was in oilmen's jargon an "elephant" at 1.2 billion barrels of recoverable crude oil. As a result, Gabonese total production increased from 158,090 b/d in 1988 to 200,400 b/d in 1989. But although oil prices consistently rose, the crash of 1986 sent the price of a barrel of "Gamba" crude from 33.64 USD on January 1 1986 to a more paltry 14.84 USD on July 1. In turn, oil production fell from 43% of GDP to approximately 31% in June 1991. Nevertheless, as Yates points out,

³⁸¹ French Ministry of Cooperation (1963) in Yates, *The Rentier State*, 64.

³⁸² Yates, *The Rentier State*, 70-80.

exports of crude and refined products still made up 81.6% of total exports, with oil rents contributing to 53.7% of state revenue.³⁸³ In other words, the state according to rentier theory had every incentive to engage in behaviors conducive to rentier pathologies.

It was unlikely that state elites would alter their survival strategies with the knowledge that production at Rabi-Kounga and several offshore fields would not peak until the late 1990s. Total Gabonese production did in fact peak in 1997 at 364,000 b/d and dropped to 230,000 b/d in 2007, still above the 1989 level of 200,400 b/d. Throughout this period, however, benchmark oil prices averaged 20 USD, while Gabonese authorities and industry did not invest significantly in any sectors other than hydrocarbons. This means that the country continued to be a quasi-rentier state extremely dependent on oil and mines, if not an outright rentier state.

Our third juncture—the mid-2000s through September 2015—paints a much more stable picture of slow decline in production, yet more thoroughly qualified rentierism. Though the government did make concrete steps towards diversifying the economy with “Gabon Emergent” upon President Ali Bongo’s election, 2012 still registered a total oil production of approximately 245,000 b/d, with oil rent contributing to government revenue at 58.1 percent, up from 55.8% in 2011. This was due to both new production, new technologies, and unusually high oil prices, and contributed overwhelmingly to net exports of 7.2 billion USD in an economy which grew by 3.2 percent to 14.34 billion USD. Without new finds, however, this would represent the last known peak. With forestry representing the number-one source of formal employment, it was evident that the oil proceeds remained in elite hands. Despite declines in oil prices, in 2015 oil rents represented 40% of GDP, 50% of government revenue, and 85% of total exports. This even with ageing wells and oil strikes. Forestry yet represented 90% of jobs in the formal sector.³⁸⁴ By this time it had been clear that though a rentier state, Gabon was one in ineluctable decline.

³⁸³ Yates, *The Rentier State*.

³⁸⁴ Yates, *Gabon* (2016).

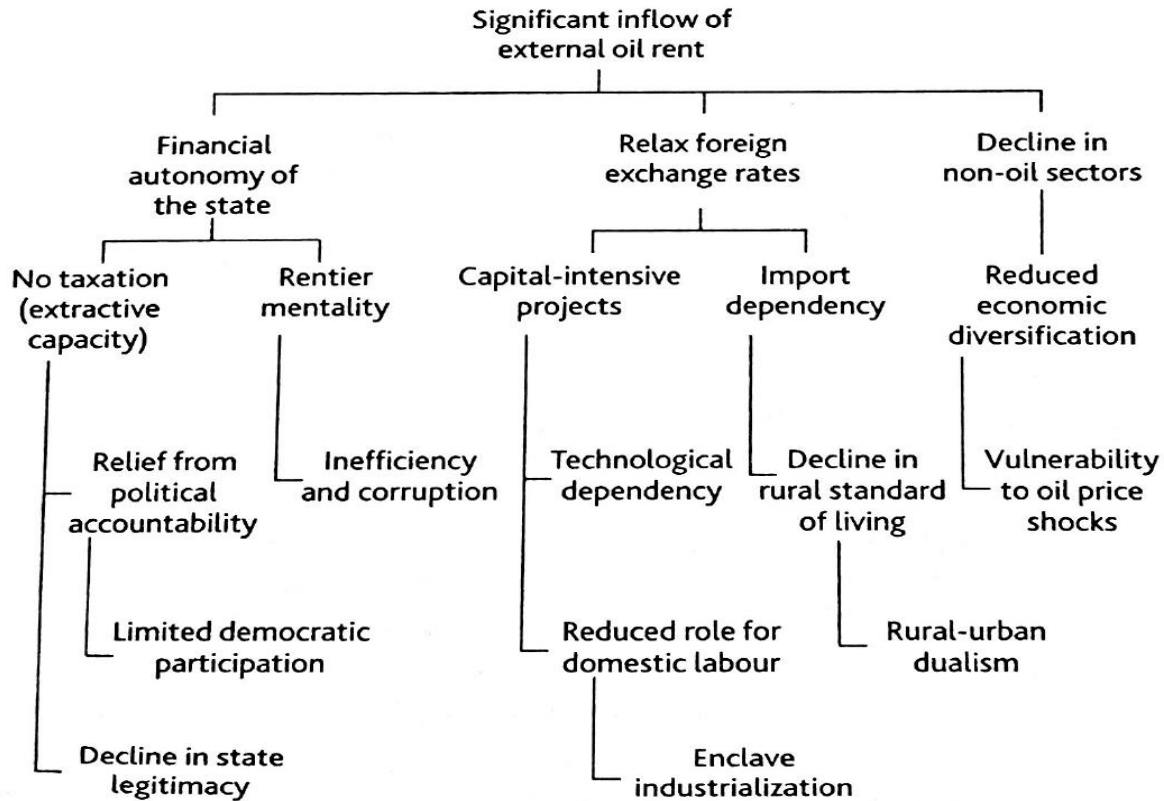


Figure 1: The Processes of Rentierism (Yates, *The Scramble*)

5.3 State Rentierism in Gabon and Rentierism in the Ndougou: 1960-1970s

It has been established that Gabon was increasingly a rentier state in the 1970s, and that critical changes did take place in the Ndougou during this time. To what extent were these changes and evidence of social and political anomie due to rentierism? To what extent can we link, therefore, the financial autonomy of the Gabonese state to conditions prevailing in this early rentier period? The short answer is of course that one cannot, at least satisfactorily.

To begin, oil did in fact contribute to the financial autonomy of the state, a fact easily demonstrated by its share of government revenue. Whether this led to a de-prioritizing of personal taxation on income and other activities, however, is a more difficult question to answer. At least two adult interlocutors in the Ndougou recall their parents being subject to taxation as “workers,”

but no further details were provided. In the absence of onsite archives, one must therefore rely on secondary sources to paint a compelling picture of fiscal realities at the time.

Firstly, although the colonial state succeeded in structuring administration—and even elements of society—to best extract head taxes, taxation of rural denizens remained comparatively low,³⁸⁵ owing not only to the difficulty of census-taking in rural regions, but also the realities of non-salaried, agrarian economies. Secondly, head taxes decreased substantially relative to forestry sector receipts, so much so that by independence, lumber contributed to four-fifths of Gabon’s state budget. By 1960, the head tax had already given way to a *tax vicinale* for rural dwellers, which amounted to a “symbolic” tax of no more than 3,000 F CFA per annum, the contemporary equivalent of 12 bottles of beer.³⁸⁶ In the 1970s, when oil exports eclipsed those of lumber, budgetary reliance on exports only increased. In 1975—a year following Gabon’s petroleum law mandating that the Gabonese state acquire a 25% share of all domestic extractive activities—oil contributed to roughly two-thirds of the state budget. In 1985, just before the crisis, oil comprised roughly 400 billion F CFA of the state’s 620 billion F CFA.³⁸⁷

One can therefore conclude that the forestry sector first began the trend towards state financial autonomy, a trend which was decidedly reinforced by oil. Secondly, the Ndougou was subject to very low taxation, in addition to chefs de village who were leery of taking proper censuses and subjecting villagers to head taxes as was done in colonial times. Alas, it remains unclear whether low taxation was the direct result of state financial autonomy or necessitated by the agrarian/self-subsistence realities existing in the Ndougou where exchange was uncommonly scarce compared with the rest of Gabon. In all likelihood, it seems to be a combination of both factors. Assuming for the purposes of analysis, however, that oil rents were indeed behind the lack of taxation, the question remains whether this led to a relief from political accountability, which in turn delegitimized the state and stifled democratic participation.

Political accountability can be defined and represented/operationalized in many ways, but among the most comprehensive conceptualizations is that used by O’Donnell (1999) in his study of new democracies and polyarchies. Though most of his cases met the preliminary requirements for classification of polyarchies—i.e. they had free and fair elections and a reasonable allowance for

³⁸⁵ Pourtier, Roland. *Le Gabon: Etat et Developpement. Vol. 2.* (l’Harmattan, 1989), 89.

³⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 88.

³⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 196.

free press and association—many outcomes remained authoritarian and public monies were siphoned by corrupt civil servants. O'Donnell reasoned, therefore, that *vertical* public accountability was insufficient to truly polyarchic societies, which must also have *horizontal* public accountability. While the former concerns the civil society-elite duality, the latter emphasizes not only the constitutional division and separation of powers but the ability of a network of authorized state agencies (overseeing agencies, ombudsmen, accounting offices, etc.) to “oversee, control, redress, and/or sanction unlawful actions of other state agencies.”³⁸⁸

Gabon nonetheless suffered weak vertical accountability at the outset of independence in 1960, rendering difficult any attempt at establishing a causal link between oil rents and future instances of weak vertical accountability. The axes upon which much of Gabonese politics turned were forged, like in much of both AEF and AOF, during the post-WWII colonial period. In 1954, M'ba allied with Paul Gondjout who was popular among and financed by the southern foresters, to establish the Bloc Démocratique Gabonaise (BDG). By 1956 and the passage of the *loi cadre*, two dominant political parties had emerged: M'ba's BDG, supported by a coalition of well-endowed foresters, Estuary Fang, southern groups, and the Omyene groups, and Jean-Hilaire Aubame's UDSG, supported by northern Fang, European administrators wary of the *évolués* and M'ba's stylized populism, and missionaries.

Though M'ba had until 1956 consistently lost legislative elections to Aubame's coalition, logistical and financial support from Roland Bru and the foresters helped M'ba gain the mayoral seat of Libreville. In compensation, M'ba and Gondjout added European foresters to the BDG's electoral lists. To assuage the negative publicity this garnered among the BDG's non-European supporters, M'ba adopted an ambivalent political strategy which combined attractive oratory, evocations of the cult of Bwiti, and symbolism with backroom courting of European business interests.³⁸⁹ In addition, M'ba drew upon his penchant for skilled oratory and eloquence, speaking before admiring villagers throughout Gabon with the use of aircraft financed by Roland Bru and the foresters.

The outcome of the 1957 elections and the subsequent consolidation of power by M'ba adds further doubt towards the relative strength of vertical accountability in Gabon prior to

³⁸⁸ G. O'Donnell, “Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies,” in *The self-restraining state: power and accountability in new democracies*, eds. Andreas Schedler, Larry Jay Diamond, and Marc F. Plattner (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999, pp. 29-52), 39.

³⁸⁹ Bernault, *Démocraties ambiguës*, 231.

significant oil finds. Studies suggest that several candidates were bribed by BDG-affiliated foresters, allowing the BDG to eventually overcome a popular majority for the UDSG.³⁹⁰ Later in the month, Leon M'ba was named by the French governor Vice President of the Government Council. Florence Bernault identified this as the moment when “Gabon went from a representative regime, albeit quite imperfect, to a regime of backstage manoeuvring.”³⁹¹

Free and fair elections thus did not take place, as M'ba became a minority Vice President under dubious electoral circumstances. In addition, if free expression was tolerated prior to 1957, it was severely curtailed thereafter. Cognizant of the fragility of his minority coalition, M'ba proceeded to consolidate power with the help of French/forester support, co-optation, “backstage maneuvering,” rhetoric, and brute force. Shortly after the electoral victory in the Territorial Assembly, Roland Bru established a chapter of French political party Union démocratique et socialiste de la Résistance in Libreville and was charged with maintaining communication channels between Paris and M'ba's regime.³⁹² With continued French assistance, this time from elements of the French administration keen to promote De Gaulle's proposal to remain within the newly formed Communauté Française, M'ba successfully targeted breakaway parties opposed to the government's support for a “yes” vote in the 1958 referendum on the Fifth Republic's Constitution. The most prominent of these parties was PUNGA, an acronym standing for Parti d'Union Nationale Gabonaise, but also a term meaning “tornado” in Eshira. The party coalesced a sizable chunk of Eshira-speaking peoples in southern Gabon (such as the Punu, Varama, Loumbou, and Vili of the Ndougou lagoon) who felt disenfranchised by the bipolar dominance of Fang and Omyene in the Gabonese government, and also included labor unionists in the forestry sector militating for better pay and conditions. Sousatte, the party's leader, resisted co-optation, prompting M'ba in 1959 to sign legislation³⁹³ which dramatically increased his personal police power. In March 1960, after the government failed to retain a departmental status within France and Gabon became independent, the Gabonese Council of Ministers banned PUNGA and issued an arrest warrant for Sousatte under the pretext of sedition. Days later, Sousatte was apprehended in Paris. Intimidation tactics encouraged three members of the UDSG to switch ranks towards the

³⁹⁰ John Ballard, “The Development of Political Parties in French Equatorial Africa” (Ph.D. dissertation, Fletcher School, 1964), pp. 289-349 ; Yates, *The Rentier State*, 103.

³⁹¹ Bernault, *Démocraties ambiguës*, 262.

³⁹² *ibid.*, 266.

³⁹³ Loi n. 45-49 relative au renforcement du maintien de l'ordre public

BDG, while several PUNGA members, including Sousatte himself, would eventually do the same. A series of laws enacted on May 27 and 28 regulated public gatherings and targeting “subversive” activity were key to opposition party co-optation.³⁹⁴

A digression from our focus on the 1970s is justified because it illustrates the type of state that had emerged with national autonomy and which Omar Bongo eventually inherited in 1967. In effect, M’ba had laid the groundwork for a single-party, authoritarian/despotic political culture before any serious oilfields had been discovered.³⁹⁵ After Gondjout motioned for a censure of M’ba in parliament, M’ba declared a state of emergency, carried out arrests of his opponents (including Gondjout), and dissolved the National Assembly itself. With near impunity and forester backing, M’ba was able to hand-pick the single electoral list of 1961.³⁹⁶ M’ba’s attempted consolidation of power eventually led to the suppressed coup attempt of 1964, in which the French authorities unilaterally invoked the Cooperation Accords, thus inviting French military assistance. M’ba was reinstated and surrounded by French agents led by the infamous Foccart network, and began imprisoning his opponents (including Aubame, whom M’ba had publicly accused of plotting the coup attempt despite a dearth of evidence). The same “Clan des Gabonais” composed of Jacques Foccart’s shadowy network of business associates who suppressed the coup would eventually groom Omar Bongo for succession in 1967.³⁹⁷

Vertical linkages were also established in the countryside throughout this period, and neither could they be considered as based on accountability. The formal political relationship between peasants and government had already been set by colonialism, and many of the notoriously despotic *commandants de cercle* had been more or less reproduced in prefects and local administrators, many of whom remained European at independence.³⁹⁸ Chiefs in particular had not escaped widespread suspicion among villagers that they worked as informants to higher authorities,³⁹⁹ and villagers had plenty of reasons to believe this. Leading up to the 1961 elections, M’ba wrote directives to local functionaries and cantonal chiefs aimed at guaranteeing their loyalty to the BDG.⁴⁰⁰ Since chiefs derived their power from the state—inheriting a colonial practice—

³⁹⁴ Bernault, *Démocraties Ambigues*, 296.

³⁹⁵ It should be noted that this is not unusual for francophone equatorial Africa.

³⁹⁶ Bernault, *Démocraties Ambigues*, 306.

³⁹⁷ Yates, *The Rentier State*, 113-114.

³⁹⁸ Bernault, *Démocraties Ambigues*, 298.

³⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 327.

⁴⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 304.

M'ba could exert influence in case of dissension. On several occasions chiefs from Woleu-Ntem, where Aubame had been dominant, were either replaced or coopted.⁴⁰¹ The same fate befell chiefs in the Nyanga (composed of Eshira-speaking groups) who in 1965 resisted attempts by the regime to forcefully regroup villages.⁴⁰² Chiefs were, in many cases, mere pawns of a single-party structure.

If some chiefs were not strictly agents of the local administration and the local party, they were on occasion manipulated by local subjects. Yet this proved to be the exception on the balance of evidence, which demonstrates the sheer hold over local affairs exacted by the administrative and party authorities. Village rallies for election campaigns were often surveyed by a significant police presence which served to severely restrict free discourse. In the regions most hostile to M'ba's rise to power, such as the Woleu-Ntem, public criticism was met by crowd dispersal and threats of violence. In a way, the attempted regrouping of villages made sense for the regime apart from its broad-based goals of modernization, which saw difficulties meeting the demands of rural peasants as early as 1959. Peasants throughout Gabon were primarily concerned with marketing their agricultural products and avoiding isolation vis-à-vis the urban centers. A lack of public services often led to misery and rural exodus,⁴⁰³ an untenable situation if Gabon was to develop its most productive sectors. The answer for the authorities in Libreville was centralized control via party politics and state structures, with the additional and no-less-important benefit of such structures serving to curtail ethnocentrism and help develop a national consciousness.

Party control was one means with which the M'ba regime guaranteed loyalty from peasants and locals, a practice perhaps mastered by Bongo years later. Regional BDG committees were set up around the country prior to the 1961 elections, and represented the real seats of power despite the creation of rural collectivities in 1960. So important was party affiliation to exerting the slightest influence as well as to the procurement of even the smallest public services that villagers, often coaxed by chiefs, were frequently made to pay 200-500 Fcfa per year as party registration fees to these regional committees.⁴⁰⁴ After the 1964 failed coup, BDG chapters were created in all

⁴⁰¹ *ibid.*, 269.

⁴⁰² *ibid.*, 352.

⁴⁰³ *ibid.*, 350.

⁴⁰⁴ *ibid.*, 326.

villages, oftentimes invoking bitter memories of colonial taxation and census-taking. Henceforth M'ba became known as the “eater” of people.⁴⁰⁵

Vertical accountability at the local level was also undermined by government structures, though the discursive rationale for centralization had always been based on efficiency and sound governance. For lack of particulars regarding the specific case of the Ndougou, an overview of nation-wide structures will first suffice thanks to their uniformity. Before significant reserves had even begun to be exploited, Gabon embarked on incremental, top-down structural reforms which had the overall effect of centralizing power in Libreville. Whereas most of the geo-political structure of colonial government had been left in place, earlier reforms focused on local collectivities. Administration was centralized and direct, with provincial governors representing the prime minister, departmental prefects representing the governor, and district sous-prefects representing the prefect. Presumably as a means to facilitate the transition to self-governance, rural collectivities and representative municipal structures were added as quasi-corporate entities with a degree of financial autonomy. With respect to the municipal councils, only the larger cities benefited from formal republican structures and near-complete autonomy, as mayors were chosen by council members elected via universal suffrage. Smaller cities, *communes de moyen exercice*, had their mayors appointed directly by the President's cabinet in Libreville.

The *collectivités rurales*—the second component of the project to expand local collectivities and that which concerns more directly the Ndougou—were even less bona fide attempts at decentralization. Composed of universally elected representatives from one or several cantons within a district, rural collectivities deliberated on a host of de-politicized issues ranging from public works to culture and minor social instruments. Statutes also authorized the rural collectivities to collect the *tax vicinale* and disburse the proceeds towards their projects. But statutes also provided that the rural collectivities only give advice, and thus did not enjoy executive power. While the district sous-prefect's role was legislated to be purely advisory in his respective collectivities and “enlighten” debates with useful information, the sous-prefect almost unexceptionally set agendas and made the government's opinion known. As a consequence, councilors on rural collectivities normally followed the government's requests. Furthermore,

⁴⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 353.

decisions reached by the rural collectivity were only executed after approval by the Interior Ministry in Libreville, entailing a process which commonly took as long as two months.⁴⁰⁶

Regardless of the executive's grip over local affairs, the rural collectivities suffered from chronically low budgets, leaving them ineffectual, and at times violative of their constituents' basic rights. At least one canton in the Ogooué-Ivindo sought to build roads connecting their villages, but when funds were insufficient rural collectivities simply exacted a form of forced labor upon their constituents; villagers were required to provide both labor and materials.⁴⁰⁷ Even when parliament attempted to correct the enormous budget disparities between the rural collectivities in 1970 by instituting a regional distribution fund, fixed commissions of prefects, sous-prefects, mayors, and rural collectivity presidents rarely if ever granted the needed funds to the worst-off cantons. Such issues were among the many reasons the government adopted a forced village regrouping policy in 1963-1964, one which was enforced with little to no consultation with the very cantons subject to removal or consolidation.⁴⁰⁸

Before significant oil production began in 1967 with the coming onstream of the Gamba well, and before oil rents had eclipsed timber rents in government coffers, Gabon had satisfied none of the requirements for the enjoyment of vertical or horizontal accountability. M'ba not only headed an authoritarian regime with a rarely contested grip on affairs at every level, but he had also become increasingly unpopular in the years leading up to the 1964 coup plot until his death in 1967. What remains to be seen is whether the increasing financial autonomy—or, more accurately, the increasing assurance of financial autonomy based on oil rents and not lumber and non-hydrocarbon minerals—of the state in the 1970s had any discernible effect—for better or worse—on public accountability, from the countryside of the Ndougou lagoon to the capital in Libreville.

Historians of Gabon largely converge on the same ruptures in independent Gabon's earlier political trajectory. The first is the failed coup of 1964, after which M'ba embarked on a program of further centralization and repression. The second extends from 1973 to 1976, when Gabon's state budget increased six-fold thanks to oil production. Leading Gabonese historian Nicolas

⁴⁰⁶ Valéry Garandeau, *La Décentralisation au Gabon : une Réforme Inachevée*. (L'Harmattan, 2010), Kindle E-reader, 5631 locations), 826.

⁴⁰⁸ Garandeau, *La Décentralisation*, 848-872.

Metegue N’nah, for instance, claims Omar Bongo benefited from oil to “confiscate all democratic freedoms,”⁴⁰⁹ while prominent historian James Barnes claims that “Bongo’s policy of amnesty and reconciliation relied extensively on Gabon’s growing wealth.”⁴¹⁰ However, accounts above indicate that a trend towards autocracy had existed until 1964, after which M’ba further consolidated power within an effectively single-party state dominated by the BDG and abetted—as well as financed—by French agents and foresters. A *de facto* single-party regime with extremely limited democratic rights thus preceded Bongo’s *de jure* institution of a single-party state in 1968, several years before state coffers became awash in petrodollars. Although only an exhaustive counter-factual analysis could satisfactorily resolve the true impact of oil, *continuity* seems to have prevailed in terms of public accountability during and after both the leadership and economic transitions.

As President Leon M’ba lay dying of cancer in France in 1967, the *reseau Foccart* convinced the ailing head of state to change the constitution, permitting the accession of Vice President Omar Bongo to the presidency, only shortly after Mba’s inauguration. Relatively unknown to his constituents, Bongo was counseled by his French network as both stable and a negation of the widely unpopular M’ba regime. Succeeding in his legitimating discourse of unity and growth, Bongo ordered on March 13, 1968 that Gabon would henceforth be a single-party state, rendering opposition parties illegal because “the sole enemy of the people was under-development.”⁴¹¹ The Parti Démocratique Gabonais was created, and Bongo immediately named its “*Grand Camarade*.”

The creation of a one-party state, in conjunction with French assistance and generous amounts of petrodollars later on, helped sustain a regime entirely noxious to both formalistic conceptions of vertical and horizontal public accountability. Following the BDG practice, PDG party committees were placed at each level of government, where success in politics depended entirely on being a militant party member. Dialogue and tolerance gave way to cutthroat intraparty competition where people regularly denounced each other to get ahead.⁴¹² The infamous *Garde Republicain*, commanded by French and staffed by Bongo’s fellow Teke, were charged with

⁴⁰⁹ N’nah, *Histoire du Gabon*, 191.

⁴¹⁰ Barnes, *Beyond the Colonial*, 50.

⁴¹¹ N’nah, *Histoire du Gabon*, 195.

⁴¹² *ibid.*, 197.

rooting out political dissidents.⁴¹³ Whereas many political forces and opponents were folded into the PDG, including L'Union des femmes, L'Union de la jeunesse, and the Conference Syndicale Gabonaise (COSYGA) in 1973, many intransigent critics were either intimidated or assassinated. As a ranking member of Libreville's franc-maçonnerie lodge and leader of the *njobi* secret society, Bongo was able to enlist the support of Bob Denard in orchestrating the September 1971 assassination of Germain Mba, leader of the Mouvement National de la Revolution Gabonaise (MNRG).⁴¹⁴ Marxist student groups at the National University of Gabon were arrested in 1972 after creating the Parti Gabonais de Travail and not released until 1976. After their release, some maintained a healthy distance from politics while others joined the PDG.⁴¹⁵ In February 1973, Bongo succeeded in his incumbency (this would be his first election) by winning 99.59% of the vote, nearly a statistical impossibility.

While high oil prices and rising interest rates negatively impacted most of equatorial Africa and ended nearly three decades of growth, the government in Gabon was among the minority to have benefited. As external debt rose, so did oil receipts, allowing the regime to pursue an “anarchic” development plan which focused on constructing hospitals, schools, and even athletic centers in urban centers. The countryside, however, remained practically unchanged, facilitating a rural exodus which would eventually shift the country's geospatial demographics so that Libreville and Port-Gentil would balloon in population while villages were left to decay.⁴¹⁶ As oil prices began showing signs of stagnation and decline in 1976, Gabon was left with soaring external debt (~500 billion Fcfa) as oil receipts were practically squandered and embezzled.⁴¹⁷

Misguided development policies throughout the oil boom (1973-1977) expedited rural exodus and undue pressures on the country's metropolises, leading government officials to continue pushing for village *regroupement* throughout the 1970s. The unintended consequence of this development, however, was the multiplication of districts and the ensuing strain on a bureaucracy struggling to process the multiplication of local issues and requests. With Libreville's ministries pushed to capacity, the first real reforms of Gabon's local government structure since before independence were passed in 1975. Nevertheless, the efforts at decentralization did nothing

⁴¹³ Yates, *The Rentier State*, 121.

⁴¹⁴ Yates, *The Rentier State*, 122 ; N'nah, *Histoire du Gabon*, 208.

⁴¹⁵ N'nah, *Histoire du Gabon*, 208.

⁴¹⁶ *ibid.*, 200.

⁴¹⁷ *ibid.*, 201.

to overturn centralizing tendencies begun during the M'ba years. Added to the intermediary departments were departmental councils composed of elected members enjoying a certain degree of autonomy, but whose presidents remained under the tutelage of prefects and undoubtedly felt pressure to conform to broader government policy. Consultative committees of village chiefs within cantons were also created in order to relieve bureaucratic pressure, but since village chiefs were nominated by sous-prefects (and subject to approval by prefects), they too became politicized. In the end, the multiplication of administrative and elective posts in an atmosphere of single-party control had the further unintended consequence of extending party and administrative control to the lowest geopolitical tiers.⁴¹⁸

Formal horizontal and vertical accountability at the local levels in Gabon had therefore suffered prior to the introduction of oil and stagnated throughout the late 1970s oil boom, and what little information exists on the Ndougou largely reflects the nationwide trend. Despite the creation of the rural collectivities near independence dominated by local elites—such as Remi Magaya Pandzou—the Canton of Sette Cama seating a sous-prefect became the autonomous district of Sette-Cama/Gamba in 1967 after Shell's petitioning of the government. The sous-prefect would thenceforth be lodged in Plaine 3 of Gamba, which was named the lone seat of the newly created Department of the Ndougou in 1975-1976. As recounted in the previous chapter, the relocation of the local administrative apparatus from Sette-Cama to Gamba—near Shell's oil terminal—acted against the interests of the area's notables who agitated to keep their primary source of employment and resources in the centuries-old trading post. Nevertheless, this brand of accountability remained quite informal, and the rural collectivities had not the constitutional power to set district limits and relocate administrative centers, a prerogative exclusively retained by the interior ministry.

Formally speaking, the Ndougou shares much of the evolution faced by the rest of the country as it pertains to accountability of government and electoral structures. The presidents of rural collectivities were subject to the sous-prefect's veto power, as was confirmed by the sitting Secretary-General of the Departmental Council at the time of fieldwork. Furthermore, the BDG and later PDG were utterly dominant, and membership to the single party was a prerequisite for political advancement. In 1968, the Prefect of the Ogooué-Maritime happily reported that “all

⁴¹⁸ Garandeau, *La Décentralisation*, 893-938.

villagers” in the District Autonome de Sette Cama/Gamba were in favor of the BDG.⁴¹⁹ Nevertheless, oil in the Ndougou would not change the basic limits to political accountability within the region. In fact, Shell’s presence throughout the 1970s seems to have exposed other, informal channels of vertical accountability.

The clan was—and remains today—the basis of power in many Gabonese communities and the mechanisms through which many grievances and aspirations are resolved. The reality of political life in much of the countryside, where agrarian economies predominate as was demonstrated in the previous chapter, is such that clans are often the basis of social—and thus political—organization. The Ndougou canton featured as little as five families with whom Shell had to contend, and whose members were prominent in rural collectivities and remain so today; They are therefore important in describing vertical accountability. Whereas the prefects and sous-prefects were often appointed from afar, such as by the governor in Port-Gentil, and were more often hailing from other regions, the cadres of *chefs de terre*, decentralized councils, and even sometimes administrative chiefs were and are often composed of local elites. A degree of state accountability can therefore be acknowledged, as it was the BDG/PDG single-party structure which composed electoral lists, and which clearly had local notables in mind.⁴²⁰ In a space as thinly populated as that of the Ndougou, lines of accountability were therefore short and efficient. Clan heads occupying informal and formal positions in the Ndougou must also therefore retain the allegiance of as many as a fifth of the population for whom they lead or represent.

Based on evidence of behavior of clan heads and local assemblies in the Ndougou in the 1970s, one arrives at an ambiguous conclusion. While elite clan members were often altruistic and extracted concessions from Shell, they could also prove to be opportunistic. As recounted in the previous chapter, most unskilled jobs were given to local laborers. The Boukousso clan chief who had negotiated Shell’s exploration zones near the Gamba terminal had also demanded that Shell provide medical assistance, schooling, and work to members of his family. Today, many of the old cadre of local notables and elite, if not all, had at one time or another been under Shell’s employment. According to one local elite, Shell was financing up to 90% of the lagoon’s medical

⁴¹⁹ Fiche d’Activités du Mois de Janvier, 1968, District Autonome de Gamba by J. Bernard Saulnerond, Le Préfet de l’Ogooué-Maritime, February 8, 1968, Carton 3375, Région de l’Ogooué-Maritime, Fiches mensuelles d’activités, 1968, Archives Nationales du Gabon, Libreville, Gabon

⁴²⁰ Interview with Mr. Ossendo, August 19

fees⁴²¹ during this era. The same notable's family was largely employed with Shell, and her current position was adjunct mayor. The provisions arrangements also allegedly benefited Shell, who could thus write off portions of its allowances to the Gabonese state.⁴²²

It is clear that a Shell-state tandem did indeed exist, which is made apparent in the previous chapter. Not only did the state, along with local notables, urge Shell to hire local manpower, but it had contracted with Shell to build and develop the town of Gamba in conjunction with other state entities. The official visit of President Omar Bongo in 1971 made clear the duopoly, and it seems from most ensuing decisions that Shell was given *carte blanche* to continue with its oil development. In this sense, Shell indeed served as a proxy state in the area and casually responded to local requests for medical and transport assistance. In addition, the sous-prefect of the District Autonome de Sette Cama/Gamba in 1969 reported to Libreville that the breakdown of their government-owned Land Rover forced local administrators to rely on Shell. Despite the repentant tone, however, the sous-prefect was quick to extend gratitude for Shell's hosting of a recent Christmas party.⁴²³ During this time, therefore, it is unsurprising that collective remembrance of early oil development was positive, as both Shell and local elites sought mutually beneficial partnerships.

Sometimes, however, local assemblies and clans were not responsive to popular will, or Shell was unresponsive to clan demands. When the hunter/guide Maurice Patry petitioned the collectivity to exclude fishermen from his touristic hunting sites, the petition was granted, and this is still recalled bitterly by many villagers of Sette Cama who do not benefit personally from the refashioned safari lodge. Shell was also granted exclusive operating rights over the provisions harbor at Mayonami against the wishes of the canton chief and many of the fishers utilizing the harbor. Furthermore, the Secretary General of the Departmental Council has referred in passing to several instances of Shell's noxious environmental impacts and their effects on the local fishermen, but only one photo of a polluted stream was shown to me during my visit. While accountability did not exist through formal channels, Shell's presence revealed informal

⁴²¹ Interview with Mme. Panga, 2nd Maire adjointe, Gamba, August 27, 2015

⁴²² Interview with Professor Ndoutoungu, Ex-advisor at Ministry of Hydrocarbons, Libreville, July 10, 2015

⁴²³ "[P]our mes différents déplacements je suis obligé de me vouer à la Shell—solution inélégante s'agissant de déplacement pour l'administration du District." -Fiche d'Activités du Mois de Décembre, 1969, District Autonome de Sette-Cama/Gamba by Revignet-Ingueza, Le Sous-Préfet du District Autonome de Sette Cama-Gamba, January 1, 1970, Carton 2385, Région de l'Ogooué-Maritime, Fiches mensuelles d'activités du mois de Décembre, 1969, Archives Nationales du Gabon, Libreville, Gabon.

arrangements which were responsive to local concerns. But it appears that as a private operator, Shell's generosity was limited by a calculated program of buffering contestation⁴²⁴ and the minimal and rather vague requirements demanded by the state.

Under rentier theories, such limited state accountability (if one dissociates Shell and the state) should be met with a decline in state legitimacy. If such a decline took place in more contested regions such as the Woleu-Ntem, it clearly did not in much of the Ndougou lagoon. In fact, the legitimacy of the state in the Ndougou may have increased for reasons not necessarily owing to oil production. Interlocutors near-universally expressed appreciation for the policies of Omar Bongo, vis-à-vis both his predecessor Leon M'ba and his successor Ali Bongo. One interlocutor invoked the prevailing national sentiment, which was that Leon M'ba was a continuation of French colonial practices and was thus incapable of overturning said unjust practices such as allowing whites to remain in administrative positions.⁴²⁵ Omar Bongo, on the other hand, ended the "suffering"⁴²⁶ and perhaps even colonial practices by instituting Gabonisation in the 1970s, according to one local notable.⁴²⁷ The chief of Mougagara also described Omar Bongo as a *grand ours*, in comparison with his son whom he disparagingly referred to as a *petit oiseau*.⁴²⁸

In addition to favorable attitudes towards the policies of Omar Bongo, the Gabonese state benefited from a rudimentary form of legitimacy derived from power and force and unmistakably linked to Gabon's pre-colonial and colonial past. A form of administrative legitimacy—a tacit and normative idea⁴²⁹—prevailed in the Ndougou thanks in no small part to the imposition of customary chiefs and the associative power they derived from higher French administration. As under French colonialism, chiefs in the Ndougou enjoyed a conscious follow-up attempt by the Bongo regime to replicate "traditional" legitimacy wherever possible by appointing as chiefs those who descended from customary chiefs and other forms of traditional authority. But Joseph Tonda

⁴²⁴ Interview with Professor Ratanga-Atoz

⁴²⁵ In 1969, the sous-prefect of Sette Cama/Gamba lamented that much of the population believed the country to be "*encore dirigé par les 'BLANCS.'*" (original capitalization) - Fiche d'Activités du Mois de Décembre, 1969, District Autonome de Sette-Cama/Gamba, by Revignet-Ingueza, Le Sous-Préfet du District Autonome de Sette Cama-Gamba, January 1, 1970, Carton 2385, Région de l'Ogooué-Maritime, Fiches mensuelles d'activités du mois de Décembre, 1969, Archives Nationales du Gabon, Libreville, Gabon.

⁴²⁶ Interview with Chef de village of Mougagara

⁴²⁷ Interview with Stéphane Moussavu, Mougambi, August 22, 2015.

⁴²⁸ Interview with Chef de village of Mougagara

⁴²⁹ Michael Schatzberg, *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 1.

also claims that over time these same people acquired the legitimacy of party and state and were thus “representative.”⁴³⁰ Another interlocutor makes the same claim, invoking an “administrative legitimacy” derived from habituation to these forms of representatives and the power they were historically able to wield.⁴³¹ Such was the case in the Ndougou, where administrative chiefs were more often than not clan heads in an area where matrilineal and family hierarchy predominated. In a seeming confirmation of Mamdani’s idea of the bifurcated state, the Ndougou was ruled “cost-effectively” by utilizing natural forms of governance when and wherever possible. The use of natural forms of legitimacy by post-colonial regimes may also be substantiated by reference to an old Loumbou term signifying “chief of state” being developed and modified to designate the “highest authority in the country,” which had not existed until 1960.⁴³² The idea of the state and its right to make decisions was therefore observed in the Ndougou, and represents the weakest link in the schematic of rentier theory.

Political participation should also suffer when formal accountability is lacking, though it is difficult to qualify political participation. If participation means the widespread expression of grievances and making of certain demands, then it existed via the ad-hoc requests forwarded to Shell by many elements in the population. Evidence suggests these requests ranging from transportation to medical services were routinely met. On the other hand, if participation means organized expression of grievances through formal political channels, it would be safe to assume that clan heads in both the civil service and assemblies were minimally representative.

Two components of rentier theory which do in fact resonate in the Ndougou are the oft-remarked “rentier mentality” and consequent corruption, though it is unclear such outcomes derive from oil as such rather than collective feelings of relative scarcity. One prominent opposition figure based in Libreville shared a prevalent opinion among non-southern Gabonese that southerners were “lazy people” and made so that way thanks to the easy riches of oil.⁴³³ But as explained previously, though the Ndougou was enclaved and relatively isolated from transportation networks prior to Shell’s arrival, many local family members had connections in the region’s capital of Port-Gentil, and thus had a self-awareness of their own well-being relative to those inhabiting more urban spaces. It is therefore unsurprising that upon Shell’s arrival, a

⁴³⁰ Interview with Professor Tonda

⁴³¹ Interview with Professor Ratanga-Atoz

⁴³² Interview with Professor Mouvoungu

⁴³³ Interview with Marc Ona Essangui

previously held affinity for money⁴³⁴ was on display as locals agitated for unskilled work and jockeyed for positions within the company or local government. Money it seems was a means towards escaping the kind of isolation from which so many rural Gabonese sought to free themselves at independence. Political clientelism from this perspective becomes a means to escape isolation and aspire to a standard of living sustainable in a monetized economy where jobs and opportunities are often scarce. Though not as efficient a means to redistribution as transparent and state-driven methods, little opposition to political clientelism existed during this time.⁴³⁵

Another explanation for a persistent rentier mentality might be based on deep-rooted culture. As discussed in previous chapters, the southern matriclans of Gabon were by and large tributary extensions of the Loango kingdom based in Pointe Noire. Clientelism in this sense is a pre-existing mode of organizing social and political spaces, and one which easy money from oil might only lubricate. This perspective is perhaps closer to reality. The same opposition figure above admitted that southerners bore “laziness” as a cultural attribute upon further reflection and discussion, referencing his native Fang for a basis of comparison.⁴³⁶ The logic behind a cultural argument is that matriclans of the south, and perhaps the Baloumbou in particular, thrived on greater control over widespread clients whilst utilizing the legitimating influence of the Maloango in Pointe Noire. As a result, social and political advancement came through gathering dependents and clients rather than other forms of materially productive labor. According to a Libreville-based jurist originally from southern Gabon, “those [villagers in the Ndougou lagoon] who don’t have relatives in Gamba become the clients of those who do.”⁴³⁷ Also, village notables choose to go into politics so that “those of his village become his clients,” a process compounded by the inflow of oil money into Gamba.⁴³⁸ With oil, there is then enough money within the state apparatus to keep chiefs as well in the system, while in the south these chiefs retain their legitimacy thanks to the region’s particular history.⁴³⁹ Interpretive models of deference to chiefs and administrative authority most likely lead to comments such as: “If the chief says do something, you do it. If the prefect says do it, you do it. The Loumbou are like that.”⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁴ Interview with Professor Tonda

⁴³⁵ Interview with SG of City Hall, August 31

⁴³⁶ Interview with Marc Ona Essangui

⁴³⁷ Interview with Professor John Nambo, Esq., Libreville, July 9, 2015

⁴³⁸ *ibid.*

⁴³⁹ Interview with Georges Mpage

⁴⁴⁰ Interview with Koumba, July 8

Such arguments support the notion that rather than instigate an exogenously derived form of political clientelism, Shell's arrival ushered in material and symbolic goods which would allow a pre-existing system to perhaps intensify. The inadequacy of this contention, however, lies in the unaddressed determinants of clientelism itself. Cultural aspects have been considered, but explanations based on these run the risks of banality and tautology. Further on in the chapter we will consider more dynamic explanations of political clientelism in the Ndougou.

5.4. State Rentierism in Gabon, 1990s – 2015

Having established that Gabon has been an oil rentier economy since the late 1960s and early 1970s (and an extractive economy prior to that), it remains to be seen whether the political anomic structures predicted by rentier theories accord with what transpired in the Ndougou lagoon during this time frame. The first part of the chapter dealt extensively with the transition from a non-oil to an oil-extractive economy for the purposes of revealing patterns of limited transparency common to both eras. From the 1980s onwards, no such large-scale economic restructuring occurred in the Gabonese economy. Instead, the vagaries of fluctuating oil prices combined with austerity led to marginal shifts in the state's capacity for rentierism. Since this subject has been dealt with at length by various researchers, it needs no exhaustive treatment here. What will suffice is a brief overview of the nature of the state which evolved after the first oil boom of the mid-1970s, in order to characterize the relative political accountability of the state (as state financial autonomy leading to the absence of taxation has been sufficiently justified). The section will then proceed by exploring the same factors of anomie within the Ndougou as in the preceding section. In the interest of both brevity and readability, the critical historical junctures of the 1990s and mid-2000s through the present will be included within the same section so as to capture evolutions in a way more satisfactory to the reader.

The 1990s in general were turbulent times in terms of the Omar Bongo regime's adaptation to new circumstances. Those circumstances took shape after the even more turbulent 1980s, when the government fell into a severe debt crisis. After years of waste and mismanagement of generous oil receipts, the regime was forced to conclude an IMF austerity plan towards reimbursement, despite its classification as an intermediate income country. The glaring contradiction between

the country's yearly earnings and its massive debt is likely the reason why civil unrest in the late 1980s was particularly severe. In 1989, two coup attempts were quelled by the Presidential Guard while much of the civil service was shut down by strikers who had had their wages frozen pursuant to the IMF plan. In March, President Bongo proposed a national conference with both the ruling PDG and parliament in attendance. Employing much rhetoric, few carrots were extended by the regime which was perhaps using a delaying strategy. Unfortunately, the tactic did not work, as soon after the conference oil workers at the country's refinery, operated by state-owned SOGARA, shut down production. With the worldwide oil glut already pushing benchmark prices to new lows, the halting production was particularly painful for the regime. But the first massive strike was only a harbinger of things to come.

Things did not improve in the early 1990s, as the regime had not yet satisfactorily appeased the wider population, and more particularly the ailing civil service and the disgruntled oil workers. It was becoming clear that oil production was more highly valued than accountability towards the people it was meant to benefit. A spate of riots took place over the assassination of opposition leader Joseph Rendjambe, who was immensely popular with a substantial portion of the Gabonese electorate. Rioters also targeted the French consulate, burning it to the ground and provoking the French to once again invoke the post-independence defense accords. In September of 1990, assembly elections took place, handing the PDG 62 of 120 seats in parliament and a slim majority, while opposition parties such as Rendjame's PGP and Abessole's MORENA also won seats. Nevertheless, the elections were alleged to have been fraudulent, with reports all over the country of delays and ballot-stuffing.⁴⁴¹

On March 15, 1991, parliament approved a new constitution inaugurating the third republic in Gabon and introducing a host of formal power-sharing arrangements and checks and balances. Prima facie, therefore, the agitation of the late 1980s and 1990 along with the national conference of that year produced what might have been a government structure with both horizontal and vertical forms of accountability. The president would be elected for five years and permitted another term. A free press would also be sanctioned by law, thus permitting a smattering of opposition newspapers including the *Echo du Nord*. Even the much-heralded *multipartisme*, ending nearly a decade of single-party dominance, was approved. Checks and balances were also

⁴⁴¹ Yates, *The Rentier State*.

included through the creation of a constitutional court which would enjoy judicial review and whose decisions bound all administration. And finally, paralleling the French fifth republic, the post of prime minister was created as a veritable head of government—on paper.

It quickly became clear that the new constitution was not being applied in good faith, casting serious doubt as to the accountability of the state. For one, the same politicians who had governed under the second republic were still in place for its successor. Secondly, parliamentarians began boycotting sessions *en masse* in protest over President Bongo's misapplication of the constitution, and more precisely for his perceived control over the prime minister and the legislative process. Strikes soon followed, first by teachers followed by a general strike on June 5, 1991. On June 6, the President was pressured into dismissing the sitting prime minister in favor of one preferred by parliamentarians. The gesture was soon retracted, however, after boycotting assembly members were not present to cast their votes. Yet another coalition of opposition members crystallized, this time calling itself the Coalition de l'opposition démocratique. After Bongo met with them, however, the fledgling coalition mysteriously dissolved and the regime secured a moment of political calm.⁴⁴²

The events from the brief *détente* in 1991 to 1995/1996 offered no respite for either the regime, its opposition, or the degradational trends in the population's standard of living. A strong case can be made that the oil production cut pursuant to OPEC agreements sparked popular discontent for lack of work. But evidence also suggests that the nature of the opposition was not nearly as narrow-minded, and perhaps reacting to the Bongo regime's perceived political and economic mismanagement. If popular discontent had been based purely on material concerns, there should have been no difference between these turbulent years and the relative calm years after 1996. Benchmark oil prices remained low on a historical scale until the year 2000. Furthermore, and even more damning for structuralist explanations of Gabon's turmoil, the disastrous devaluation of the CFA franc did not take place until 1994, just when instances of political instability seemed to decrease.

After the production cut in 1991, Elf-Gabon workers went on strike and put forward a 47-point list of demands, including pay increases. Despite a series of strikes, however, Bongo won the 1993 presidential elections with 51.7% of the vote while avoiding a run-off. Nevertheless,

⁴⁴² N'nah, *Histoire du Gabon*.

Abessole, leader of the opposition parties, declared himself the winner and formed his own government. Supportive unions thereafter went on strike following reports of government-sponsored killings. If oil proceeds were effective, they may have been only marginally so. It is telling that in September of 1994, the executive agreed to carry out negotiations in Paris with the newly-christened opposition coalition, Haut Conseil de la Resistance (HCR).

Known aggregately as the Paris Accords and mediated by the African Union, the stated mission of the negotiations was the achievement of electoral transparency and general peace between the factions, that being between the executive and the HCR. The results of the roundtables were a series of memorandums and ambiguously binding legal instruments which Metegue points out may not have been in good faith. On the one hand, the parties agreed to a new national electoral commission presided over by a magistrate chosen among presidents of the administrative courts, a ministerial team devoted to monitoring and promoting democracy for 18 months, the reorganization of local elections within six months, and the transformation of the Presidential Guard into the Republican Guard. The latter would no longer serve and protect only the executive, but also the entire administrative apparatus.

On the other hand, as Metegue points out, serious contradictions soon came to light. First, there existed a big difference between the precise language of the legal instruments set out to provide all parties and civil servants with electioneering and operating amenities (e.g. vehicles, housing, and funds) and the vague promises of democratic principles meant to serve the people. Secondly, the government back in Libreville did not award more than 6 ministries to the opposition. Despite the shortcomings, however, Metegue states in general terms that the referendum's positive vote on the new laws ultimately amounted to a reaffirmation of the president's legitimacy.⁴⁴³

And it would be difficult to contest Metegue's assertion. Following the ratification of the accords, and despite chronically low oil prices and a sagging standard of living for the general population, and despite an unmistakable accountability deficit, political stability became more or less the norm in Gabon from the mid-1990s to 2015. The 1998 presidential elections returned to Omar Bongo a favorable 66.55% of the popular vote, after which the constitutional court added their "ritual bonus" by proclaiming Bongo 66.88%.⁴⁴⁴ The PDG won similar majorities throughout

⁴⁴³ N'nah, *Histoire du Gabon*.

⁴⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 302.

the period concerned, though not without either large abstention rates, clientelism, riots, and accusations of fraud. The 2005 elections in particular mark something of a turning point in the assured stability of the previous decade, though only in a marginal sense. Perhaps in anticipation of a growing opposition, Bongo spent wildly on electioneering. When returns showed yet another victory for the regime, the leader of the Union du Peuple Gabonais, a primarily Punu-Eshira party, unilaterally declared himself the victor, which help to set off riots and arrests in major cities. Another crack in the foundation was exposed in 2012, just three years after the presidential election of Omar Bongo's son, Ali Bongo in 2009. Riding a wave of optimism around his proposed "Gabon Emergent" national development strategy, "Ali" shook up the old order in 2012 by consolidating his cabinet and limiting the number of ministries. In doing so, many of Omar Bongo's clients were either cast aside or overlooked. The longtime opponent of the dynasty and director of Brainforest, Marc-Ona Essangui, claims that this was a conscious attempt by Ali to create a small inner circle answerable only to him.⁴⁴⁵ The argument for consolidation of power rings truer when considering that many opposition newspapers were censored. But this neglect of constitutional law and principles is not entirely comparable to that of Ali's predecessor. That Gabonese politics were perhaps more open in 2015 than they had ever been leads one to conclude that Ali's intransigence is likely due to desperation, rather than calculated force. Indeed, horizontal accountability was given a boost in 2013 when the constitutional court, pursuant to demands from the opposition, acceded to postponing local elections. Given the benefit of hindsight and considering the events of 2016, when scores of protesters swept Libreville in support of Jean Ping, Ali's officially defeated opponent in the presidential elections, one might conclude that the era of political stability ended.

It is important to note, however, that seeking to attribute the more recent dissension and lack of accountability to declining oil production—and thus less means with which to lubricate political clientelism—remains a dubious venture. As established above, Gabon in 2015 was in the strictest of terms no less a rentier state that it had been in the 1990s. Local events might shed more light as to why social and political tensions have recently flared.

One centerpiece of the negotiations in Paris was the issue of decentralization. For the HCR, the coalition of opposition members present at the Paris Accords negotiations in 1994,

⁴⁴⁵ Douglas Yates, "Gabon." (In *Africa Yearbook 2012*. Eds. Mehler, Andreas, Henning Melber, Klaas Van Walraven Brill, 2013).

decentralization was the key to democratization. The law which followed in 1996 indeed provided *de jure* autonomy to local collectivities. The former rural collectivities became departmental assemblies with universal suffrage, while the number of *communes* multiplied. Veto powers were still retained by prefects, themselves answerable to governors of provinces, but now local collectivities enjoyed a certain degree of financial autonomy. As corporate entities they now had the ability to levy taxes such as the IRPP and excises. In reality, however, the true autonomy of local collectivities remains disputed. Garandeau, following up on Avenot's treatise on Gabonese decentralization, makes a convincing and exhaustive argument that Gabon remained quite centralized in all but name. Agreeing grudgingly to the terms reached in the Paris Accords, Omar Bongo set out to ensure that power remain centralized via other, more informal, means. Indeed, in 2008-2009, the question of "true" decentralization was raised and a conference held to rectify the 1996 law's defaults, many of which centered on the failure to achieve "real" financial autonomy.⁴⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Gaurandeau argues that the second reform did little towards this goal, and that the weight of prefectural overlordship combined with the PDG's electoral dominance effectively eviscerated what may have been concrete steps towards local autonomy and, therefore, the true accountability sought for decades by Gabonese opposition elements.

5.5. Rentierism in the Ndougou lagoon, 1990s to 2015

Chapter 3 established that although Shell-Gabon and its sub-contractors had introduced a modicum of development to the Ndougou, especially through the production of Rabi beginning in the late 1980s and its peak in 1997, the region experienced social and political anomie as well as an abiding dissatisfaction with the direction of the community. As time progressed, a certain apathy or complacency set in as the perceived gains from the 1970s diminished, or as certain expectations were never fulfilled. Though these trends may begun in the 1980s, there was no evidence to suggest they had. Interviewees, WWF documentation, and statistics suggest that no critical changes had taken place until the 1990s. Were these trends caused by rentierism? Before offering a final analysis of the impact of state rentier pathologies in particular, the rudiments of

⁴⁴⁶ Garandeau, *La Décentralisation*, 191.

which were covered in the preceding section, we will review rentier trends within the Ndougou throughout this period and attempt to link these trends to our development outcomes.

Until 1997/1998, when Gabon assumed its present-day decentralized structures, the department of the Ndougou (created in 1976) was governed by the municipality of Gamba (made a commune in 1993), the departmental assembly (1979), and the prefectural apparatus of prefects, sous-prefects, and chiefs. The latter arm of governance was, as in much of Gabon, sovereign in local politics as previously discussed. Until 1997/1998, neither of the two local collectivities were corporate entities fully capable by law of taxing and spending autonomously, and thus were also incapable of awarding contracts or undergoing a local development scheme. As the chief of the local radio station admits, the future of the region was rarely discussed within the region itself until 1997 and decentralization. Before 1997, therefore, one cannot speak of any sort of direct public accountability from within much of the Ndougou as there were not adequate government structures in place for truly representative local collectivities. A minor exception might have been the institution of the municipality of Gamba in 1993, since the *communes* enjoyed slightly more autonomy than the departmental assemblies. Paradoxically, the introduction of decentralization reforms—or more direct links of public accountability—coincides with the growing popular dissatisfaction outlined in the previous chapter, and not necessarily with Shell's productive success. What does seem to coincide with growing dissatisfaction is Shell's ability and willingness to provide jobs and services to the community, a topic for later.

Decentralization is largely celebrated by elected officials in both the Gamba City Hall and the Departmental Assembly as heralding a new era of political autonomy and democratic values. One *maire-adjoint* and several of the mayor's personal assistants personally welcomed it as a means to build roads, schools, hospitals, and maintain the cleanliness of Gamba's streets. Several popular issues have driven the campaign platforms of several of these elected officials, from the *désenclavement* of Gamba to job promotion, local inflation, and basic public services such as water and sanitation for many inhabitants of Plaine 5, exterior to Shell's original housing.

Four years after the institution of the *commune* in 1993, Gamba was granted a City Hall as per the decentralization laws. The Departmental Council was granted at the same time, and its relatively grandiose offices lie adjacent to those of the City Hall. Gamba's first mayor was Dr. Sisso in 1997, whose term lasted 45 days because as a Shell employee (namely a physician) he was indisposed to working full-time at City Hall. As of 2015, Dr. Sisso was serving as the Gamba

hospital's only qualified physician. The second mayor and third mayors, elected in 1997 and 2003 respectively, were also Shell employees. The first, Stephane Fouiti, was also a member of the Senate in Libreville representing Gamba as of 2015, while the second, Stanislas, is a *notable* in his native lagoon village of Mougambi. The fourth and current, is the first mayor of Gamba to have not worked for Shell. That local politicians prove successful if they had worked for Shell-Gabon indicates a certain prestige and legitimacy attached to association with Shell-Gabon, and it is something to be considered in the next chapter. In terms of formal accountability to the population of Gamba, however, things are slightly more ambiguous.

The Departmental Council has been primarily composed of counselors elected among the villagers, and is responsible for the three cantons which surround Gamba. The counselors themselves then elect a president, whose decisions are then subject to veto by the prefect in Gamba. Members of the council have often held posts in the City Hall and vice-versa—unsurprising given local immigration patterns. Nevertheless, several discussions with the Secretary-General of the Departmental Council reveal key information concerning the conduct of councilors.⁴⁴⁷

In conversations public officials and through direct observation, it is unclear whether any systematic relationship of vertical accountability to the local population was established. Assessing the commitment to the electorate of elected officials is no easy task, but several anecdotes paint a variegated picture of how local politicians view their roles. Gamba's first mayor, Dr. Sisso, is both accessible and conscientious, and as the clinic's only certified physician, appears to care deeply for the well-being of patients and the community as a whole.⁴⁴⁸

In contrast, the second mayor (1999?-2003), Stephane Fouiti, sought further political advancement as the contemporary Senator from Gamba. Mr. Fouiti lodged in a mansion on the outskirts of Gamba (*Plaine Bienvenue*) and was surrounded by a cadre of minders and assistants who also doubled as drivers. When discussing his first campaign, he said he proffered a *plan d'action* to lure potential voters, but was unable to recall any specific information regarding his municipal platform. On a second visit to his residence, he was meeting with a sales associate working for a South African construction firm. When asked about his reasons for entering the political arena, he responded by emphasizing his personal "ambition."⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the president of the council was unavailable to be interviewed.

⁴⁴⁸ Interview with Dr. Sisso

⁴⁴⁹ Interview with Senator, August 19

The third mayor, Stanislas (2003-2008), was similar to Dr. Sisso but was also an outspoken critic of the political establishment. The ex-mayor recounted in detail an anecdote from his time as mayor, which at once revealed the nature of accountability of City Hall towards its constituents and the accountability of the state towards its local collectivities. While mayor, Stanislas reached an agreement with a certain company to build a road for the price of 1 billion CFA after several rounds of negotiation. Shortly thereafter, the Minister of the Interior intervened and demanded that the price remain above 1.8 billion CFA. Stanislas left it to interpretation to determine whether or not the minister had an interest in the company, declining to comment further for fear of retribution. In the same discussion he railed against the prevailing “egocentrism” of those in state government and the atmosphere of “*politique du ventre*.”⁴⁵⁰

The fourth and current mayor (2008-2013, 2013-) unfortunately remained unavailable for interview throughout the summer of 2015. Her *directrice du cabinet* and *chargé de mission*, however, as well as one of several *maires adjoints*, were available for comment. Much like the previous mayors, it is impossible to draw a conclusion of how either of them saw their positions. Alfred, ex-Shell employee (also ex-colleague of Stanislas) and the *chargé de mission*, often spoke with platitudes and rehearsed the consensus goals of Gamba’s development (cleanliness, freedom from enclavization, cheaper food, better healthcare, etc.), and also praised Ali Bongo for the changes he wished to bring about.⁴⁵¹ The *directrice du cabinet*, offered much of the same and praised decentralization for having provided financial autonomy and the *lenteur administrative* of the past structures. Like Alfred, she praised the local development plan as a continuation of Ali Bongo’s broader Gabon Emergent initiative.⁴⁵² To the mayor’s credit, the Secretary General of City Hall, an unelected civil servant, claimed that the mayor had organized town hall meetings in the past.⁴⁵³ The *maire adjoint*, Madame Panza, spoke differently. Unlike the previous two elected officials, she was a member of ADERE, and had run against the sitting PDG mayor. She spoke more freely and recounted her efforts at creating women’s political associations. She lamented that people often voted according to their “mood” and typically voted for one candidate in order to sanction another they did not care for. She was more optimistic, however, that they could procure a larger ferry for their constituents which would facilitate crossing the Nyanga river and

⁴⁵⁰ Interview with *notable* of Mougambi, August 21

⁴⁵¹ Interview with Alfred, Chargé de mission to the mayor, Gamba, August 24th

⁴⁵² Interview with mayoral cabinet director

⁴⁵³ Interview with the SG of City Hall, August 27

thus link Gamba to the country's road networks. She was also contented that farmers and fishers were becoming more vocal. Like the others, she was native to the region and praised decentralization.⁴⁵⁴

Members of the departmental council proved just as varied in their approach to governance. A retired member stated during an interview that the council's function was to transmit law between the state and the people. As councilors they did not "take initiatives" and they needed to explain "why the law, how to respect it, how to apply it." When asked if people used electoral pressure to dictate the course of policy, he replied in the negative. "They were accepting because it was the state. It's the intellectuals who analyze... There is no problem. All Gabonese complain... people complain, but it's Shell who hires. They approach the elected... Shell has a community liaison to take grievances."⁴⁵⁵ Paternalism like this was not unusual. One interlocutor stated that when constituents attempted to form associations in the past for the purpose of either siphoning state resources or expressing a list of grievances, local politicians stepped in to "take advantage of it in bad faith,"⁴⁵⁶ evidence that contradicts other assertions that southerners were reticent and passive. On the other hand, plenty of reports suggest that even local politicians found it sufficient to capture the electorate with T-shirts and even cash handouts. Other more civic-minded constituents complained that "we vote and vote and nothing changes"⁴⁵⁷ or that "politicians don't bring anything."⁴⁵⁸

Ignoring for the moment some of the *prima facie* positive initiatives taken by local representatives, much of the accountability deficit may be due to party control emanating from Libreville and/or Port Gentil. It is generally accepted that the PDG often imposes local authorities against the wishes of locals,⁴⁵⁹ in spite of the rhetoric championing multipartism. The brother of the Ndougou's cantonal chief, a certified nurse, claimed that the PDG "controls everything." According to him, a minister will come and assess party affiliation, and if he or she believes they are members of the opposition, said minister will make promises but never deliver anything.⁴⁶⁰ Even members of the nominal opposition such as ADERE (unofficially an allied party to the PDG)

⁴⁵⁴ Interview with the maire adjoint

⁴⁵⁵ Interview with ex-VP of Departmental Council and ex-assemblyman, Gamba, July 27, 2015

⁴⁵⁶ Interview with Igor, Gamba local radio, Gamba, July 22, 2015

⁴⁵⁷ Interview with villager, Ingouéka, September 5, 2015

⁴⁵⁸ Interview with Glen Mbouity, Sette Cama, August 13, 2015

⁴⁵⁹ Interview with Professor Tonda

⁴⁶⁰ Interview with younger brother of Chef de canton of the Ndougou, Pitonga, July 29, 2015

feel pressure to bend to the ruling party. One villager in Ingoueka related a recent story whereby a militant ADERE council member from Ibouka was invited by the PDG “bosses” in Port Gentil to discuss issues of common interest. When the youthful opposition member returned, he was recast as a loyal member of the PDG.⁴⁶¹ The Secretary General of the Departmental Council added that often local politicians will return from trips to the United States or Europe ambitious to change things. But once they are given positions, “they stop militating.” In addition, and in a blow to horizontal accountability, he said that the prefect rarely exercised his veto over decisions of the council because they are the majority party anyway.⁴⁶²

It would be easier to characterize the state of democratic accountability in the Ndougou, however, if it were not for two local initiatives which on the surface appeared to be in good faith: the use of public funds by the Departmental Council to construct village amenities, and the broader effort by an assemblage of public authorities to create the Plan de Développement Local, or PDL (see previous chapter). The construction of the amenities (solar panels, guest housing, etc.) in each of the villages seemed to have been a conscious effort to halt rural exodus and relieve the pressures of migration to Gamba. From 1997 to 2002, the effort to restore village life was reportedly advertised in campaign platforms with moneys managed according to law.⁴⁶³ Many villagers, however, attested to having never been consulted about their construction, even though they appreciated them. And since then, much of the construction has fallen into disrepair, which is behind a palpable tension between the local elected officials and the department’s villagers. According to villagers, public officials did not take the necessary measures to maintain the structures or properly provision them, such as the medical dispensaries and schools. According to the Secretary General of the Departmental Council, the villagers rather were responsible for their maintenance (not mentioning the absence of supplies and staff for schools and dispensaries).⁴⁶⁴

The PDL was largely celebrated by public officials as having been the first of its kind in Gabon. Indeed, the document appears carefully prepared with statistics and meticulous assessments of the current and future state of the department. It was prepared by a consortium of public authorities, corporations, and civil society elements, benefiting from the presence of a more educated class within the department’s borders. Nevertheless, and despite the hype, many public

⁴⁶¹ Interview with villagers of Ingouéka, Ingouéka, September 5, 2015

⁴⁶² Interview with Mr. Ossendo, August 19

⁴⁶³ Interview with Mr. Chambrier, August 9

⁴⁶⁴ Interview with Mr. Ossendo, August 19

officials regretted that they were not in the position to achieve the PDL's goals before its stated deadlines, citing a lack of funds. Though a promising initiative which galvanized much of the community, it risked losing value for lack of adherence to its own benchmarks. As described in the previous chapter, many of the budget allowances were far too generous and did not anticipate the drop in oil revenues which followed (despite all the evidence suggesting this would be the case). Nevertheless, the preparation and creation of the document itself, which calls for economic diversification and more sustainable practices such as commercial fishing and agriculture, demonstrates a degree of good will by those with seats in the collectivities. But if nothing had been done in good faith since its redaction, one might pose questions related to transparency and perhaps corrupt practices.

Local elected officials, given their proximity to their own constituents as well as the kindred links they share with much of the population, do not on the whole appear entirely unaccountable and distant. Indeed, they remain accessible as members of the community, and like any political class are not at all homogenous. The same, however, cannot be said for the senators and assemblymen and women who represent the region in the chambers of Libreville. The historian Ange François Xavier Ratanga-Atoz claims that the regime will refuse to put in place intellectuals as either chiefs or on electoral lists if either they do not belong to party or if they are too intellectual. Intellectuals have "too much knowledge." At the time of the interview, his former student was the minister of the interior and though once his pupil, he could no longer "tell [the minister] anything." Nor does the state regime appreciate personal initiative, according to the historian. Referring to his nephew who was responsible for the construction of a bridge in Mayumba but was not permitted to inaugurate it (in lieu of President Bongo), "If you rise alone, you are bad, you are a sorcerer." Instead, the state prefers candidates who "have been there a while" and who will not ask questions.⁴⁶⁵

According to villagers, the state is also hopelessly distant, which also seems to contribute to a certain fatalism prevalent for the last couple of decades. In a group discussion, the villagers of Ibouka complained that not only is the "state" unhelpful and rarely if ever responds to their communal demands, but their own deputies and senators remained completely inaccessible.⁴⁶⁶ The Senator himself admitted that national politicians only return to Gamba for certain holidays such

⁴⁶⁵ Interview with Professor Ratanga-Atoz

⁴⁶⁶ Interview with villagers of Ibouka, Ibouka, August 22, 2015

as the independence celebration in August, preferring to remain in Libreville most of the time.⁴⁶⁷ Furthermore, there is a consensus among most of the population of the Ndougou that the oil money all goes to “the top,” and that they never see it.

Though clearly more aloof than their local counterparts, national politicians do respect



Photograph 5: Officers and Army Personnel March on Independence Day, taken on August 17, 2015. The occasion marks one of the few instances where the state is able to promote its symbolic value.

some forms of accountability which may not be considered formal. Ingoueka and Mougambi are two cases in point. Ingouéka is the furthest removed from Gamba of all lagunar villages and is located to the north on the river Bongo, yet by many accounts the best provided for. Its media center still operates, its primary school is staffed, its medical dispensary still provisioned, and many houses are fashioned with coveted wooden planks. According to the village notables, including the cantonal chief, this is because their deputy was well-meaning and sensitive to the plight of his constituents, and thus kept getting voted to office.⁴⁶⁸ In Mougambi, the vestiges of

⁴⁶⁷ Interview with Senator of Gamba, August 24

⁴⁶⁸ Interview with villagers of Ingouéka, Ingouéka, August 3, 2015

decent infrastructure remain, including a rare water pump. The village notable insists that this was possible because of a successful national politician who remained true to his native village.⁴⁶⁹ In honor of the late politician, the village erected an impressive mausoleum overlooking the lagoon, and kept his mansion intact and uninhabited. Though perhaps an informal expression of accountability, this variant of “pork-barrel” politics is not unknown to Western democracies, most notably the United States.

Since the “state” in Gabon may also refer to the executive branch, including the provincial governors, prefects, and chiefs, one can also speak of executive accountability, even if the lines of accountability linking the executive to the population are circuitous and indirect.

The Secretary General of the City Hall reaffirmed the state’s commitment to respecting “customary” land ownership, for instance. Although black letter law is clear in that land formally belongs to the state, and that the state reserves the power of exclusion, it almost always assures that land is unoccupied before embarking upon public development schemes. The hesitance to readily confiscate land, even if profitable and even if as a multinational corporation “you get a paper signed by the state”, reveals accountability.⁴⁷⁰ Indeed, villagers in the Ndougou with the help of the WWF have been able to either lift or water down a number of fishing and hunting restrictions since the 1990s. The state’s overarching goal is to promote tourism and thus limit these “traditional” activities, so its willingness to negotiate does speak volumes. The only question is towards whom in this case the state is acting accountable, since the real initiatives in this case were made by representatives of the WWF with the help of its international structure. Yet at the same time, it was the state who had invited the WWF to conduct studies in the early 1990s which might shed light on how best to avoid local agitation against hunting and fishing restrictions.

Other agents of the executive branch include officers working under the ANPN and the Brigades des Faunes, both of whom are responsible for patrolling the two national parks straddling each side of the lagoon, as well as enforcing the confusing array of anti-fishing and anti-hunting regulations in the CAPG. If an elephant or other fauna is reported slain illegally, it is the formal duty of these agents to apprehend suspects and investigate the circumstances of the killing. Since villagers are rather adamant as regards their right to exercise “traditional” activities, the agents find themselves in quite a position of power and responsibility. In one sense, the agents themselves

⁴⁶⁹ Interview with notable of Mougambi, August 21

⁴⁷⁰ Interview with SG of City Hall, August 27

do feel a certain accountability to the locals over whom they exercised authority, and this is readily noticeable at first because they tend to hail from the communities where they operate. Of the dozen or so agents assigned to the CAPG, I was able to secure a discussion with three in a Gamban home of their relatives, who themselves were native to the region. They were affable, transparent, and confessed to having very little problem with the lagunar population's adherence to the laws. Indeed, yearly statistics on arrests show that little enforcement has taken place.⁴⁷¹ On the other hand, neither of the agents were able to explain the precise letter of the law governing butchered wildlife, such as when and where it was possible to slay fauna.⁴⁷² Though this in itself does not necessarily connote a low degree of accountability (but rather inefficiency or incapacity), it reflects the inattention of the state towards a problem which clearly vexes much of the lagunar population who have yet to find a consensus on what constitutes legal and illegal practices.

The direct agents of the executive branch are the prefects and the chiefs they appoint. They are charged with carrying out policies and assuring adherence to them, and in this capacity they are important local actors. In addition, because they are members of the executive branch, people confer upon them more rights and duties than they would with elected officials. The prefect in the Ndougou, for example, wields considerable power over local affairs that extend beyond the legislative veto. As an extension of the governor in Port Gentil, the prefect acts in his trust and enjoys both autonomy and quick lines of communication to the executive in Libreville. He makes regular reports on the state of the department to his superiors and appoints chiefs at will, while keeping in mind the wishes of villagers and *quartier* subjects in Gamba. He controls not only all executive agencies such as the gendarmes, the Brigade de Faune, and the ANPN, but also all ministerial subdivisions present within the department. Such was the influence of the prefect that equipped with a *laisser-passer*, I was able to secure interviews, equipment (including a boat and a boat captain), and access to people and places otherwise off-limits to unauthorized individuals, including the confines of Shell's onshore terminal. When individuals in the Ndougou have an issue needing a quick resolution, the prefect or one of his agents is often the person to which they turn.

The prefect, however, retains accountability despite his seeming omnipotence. This is due to a few factors, not least of which that it is clearly the government's objective to keep the peace

⁴⁷¹ Ndoide, *Surveillance et protection*.

⁴⁷² Interview with ANPN agents

in a region fraught with potential conflict due to natural resource exploitation. The prefect is accountable to the governor, who in turn is held accountable for his actions to the President. Administering a region which provides nearly half of the government's revenue, therefore, necessitates close attention to local dynamics so that stable exploitation can proceed apace. It is not surprising, therefore, that prefects have been and are regarded by the local population as a stop-gap measure in case of difficulty. When Maurice Patry succeeded in petitioning the departmental assembly to exclude fishermen from his touristic hunting areas, it was the prefect at the time who assured the citizens of Sette-Cama that they could quietly continue. When the prefect selects chiefs or settles disputes, it is with local political dynamics in mind and, more specifically, the general opinion of that chief's subjects. Even in Gamba, the process of chief selection is a familiar affair, where *quartier* chiefs are typically family heads.⁴⁷³ Accountability does exist, despite the absence of fiscal or other inter-dependencies.

There do seem to be occasions, however, when the relative power of the prefect subverts formal democratic avenues of accountability. The Government Relations director of Shell-Gabon, based in Libreville, stated during a conference call that they dealt with the prefect regularly before reaching substantive decisions regarding their operations, despite the fact that the local collectivities retain power to conduct negotiations. The prefect, he said, was supposed to be an administrative role, and not political, "but it is political."⁴⁷⁴ Other grievances against the prefect are expressed by chiefs themselves, which demonstrates a degree of horizontal accountability. Chiefs formally depend on the prefect for their statuses, from which they may extract several benefits, including a salary. That they feel free to express themselves in criticism of the prefect's actions, or youthfulness,⁴⁷⁵ reveals informal and structural limits placed on the prefect himself. After all, the prefect is one of the few administrators in the region who cannot claim to be native (either Varama, Loumbou, or Vili) aside from a handful of other civil servants, such as the Secretary General of the Departmental Council.

Completing the hierarchy of executive agents are, from the top down, cantonal chiefs, *regroupement* chiefs, and village chiefs. Among all the levels of executive hierarchy, they are unsurprisingly held to account the most by their "subjects." They also bear many characteristics

⁴⁷³ Interview with fisherman, Soungha, August 12, 2015

⁴⁷⁴ Interview with Guy Kassa Koumba, Shell Government Relations

⁴⁷⁵ "he doesn't know much," speaking in reference to the sitting prefect (Interview with Chef de *regroupement* of Sette Cama, Sette Cama, August 12, 2015)

in common. They are almost exclusively autochtones and members of one of seven of the predominant clans in the Ndougou. They all, nearly without exception, define their roles as preserving the peace of the villages and good faith adherence to the law. And with a few minor exceptions, they nearly all live within the communities over which they exercise their devolved authority. Lastly, nearly all chiefs had at one point been employed by Shell-Gabon. They reconfirm their overall commitments to the communities in which they reside, most villagers will cite their chiefs as the people to whom they would turn if they had any minor problems, whether it be financial or cases of larceny or adultery.⁴⁷⁶

There are, however, exceptions that cast doubt on the executive system's ability to assure accountable chiefs. In Ibouka, for example, the chief is known widely among villagers for being absent and living on her plantation. Villagers attribute their lack of resources and dilapidated structures (including a media center which can no longer function) to her absence, and even feel at liberty to criticize the chief in the presence of the cantonal secretary (one of the prefect's agents who accompanied me during my interviews). Another, more pernicious example is that of the cantonal chief himself who resides in Pitonga. Though present in the community, many villagers and prefectural agents (including the cantonal secretary and boat captain accompanying me) held him in low esteem, saying that he created needless conflicts and often confiscated for personal use resources sent by the department or prefect to benefit the entire community. Sure enough, the *case de passage* was gutted of basic amenities such as oil lamps and mattresses, and a boat was said to have been converted towards personal use by the cantonal chief.⁴⁷⁷

Secondly, it appears that many chiefs in the department, whether they yearn to act for the community or not, are sanctioned by a strict hierarchy which sometimes may not represent the interests of their community. Ratanga-Atoz in a discussion mentioned chiefs as having been vetted according to their capacity for agitation or intellectual pursuits,⁴⁷⁸ while an NGO worker in Sette-Cama warned that chiefs may refrain from open discussion either because they are unsure as to whether their interviewer is a party member or "because of the presence of the cantonal secretary."⁴⁷⁹ At least once, when the cantonal secretary was not within earshot of a discussion, a

⁴⁷⁶ Interview with Igor, Gamba local radio

⁴⁷⁷ Interview with Jeanne-Marie Mboumba, *femme de ménage* of *case de passage* in Pitonga, Pitonga, August 22, 2015

⁴⁷⁸ Interview with Professor Ratanga-Atoz

⁴⁷⁹ Interview with head of Ibonga, conservation NGO in Gamba, Sette Cama, July 31, 2015

chief expressed fear of being “killed” if he continued with his harsh criticism of the government in Libreville.⁴⁸⁰

Also, the most vocal notables tend to be those whose applications for chieftom have gone unanswered, are mired in bureaucracy, or whose aspirations seemed to fall on deaf ears. Such is the case with at least three chiefs in the Ndougou canton, and it is unclear whether their vocalism springs from resentment for having been passed over or ignored by the prefectural apparatus, or whether such was due to their inquisitive dispositions. The chief-elect of Mayonami is heavily preferred by the population, who with the chief are unhappy with Shell’s occupation of the provisions harbor and the restrictions it naturally imposes on their fishing activities. The chief-elect of Mougambi was also the most virulently critical of the regime, and was likewise awaiting confirmation of his chiefly status. Lastly, Ibouka has unsuccessfully appealed for the removal of its current absentee chief, to be replaced by another who is much more critical of the status quo and who readily gave a tour of decaying and neglected infrastructure within the village.

To sum up, public accountability to the inhabitants of the Ndougou is present in many forms, however incomplete. To satisfy the demands of rentierism, though, two questions remain here. First, the relative levels of public accountability must derive from the financial autonomy of the state and its independence from the tax base. Second, the component of social and political anomie dealing with corruption and lack of productivity must derive from a “rentier mentality,” which itself develops as a result of the same financial autonomy of the state.

In rentierism, lines of accountability are severed by the absence of the need to tax as well as by easily acquired rents which can be redistributed via patronage. As for taxation, it is clear that only a very small percentage of either the City Hall’s or the Department’s budget were derived from the local electorate. In successive interviews with the Tax Collector, who shares an office building with the prefect, it was established that four forms of personal tax existed: the *licence*, *IRPP*, *patente*, and *complementaire*. While the first and third are imposed on vendors and those engaged in other business practices, the second, the IRPP, is the income tax leveraged on salaried individuals working for Shell and their contractors. The Commune de Gamba’s provisional budget for 2015 stood at 1,283,755,686 (approximately 2,280,000 USD). Of this, 41% was derived from the IRPP, and 39% from subsidies extended by the department. The third largest source of

⁴⁸⁰ Interview with Chef de village of Mougagara

revenue was not state subsidies or sales taxes, but public concessions and real estate taxes at roughly 5%, much of which (10,000,000 CFA) came from telecommunications lessees. Only 2.6% of the commune's budget came from *patentes* and licenses. The figures for the department paint a more dramatic picture, and they are much better endowed at 6,172,126,358 CFA (roughly 11 million USD), thanks to the high number of Shell and Total employees working and residing near Rabi. In 2015 the IRPP made up 94% of total tax revenues at 5,784,505,740 CFA, while *patentes* and *licences* went unreported. Compared with the population statistics, it should be apparent that the IRPP is derived almost exclusively from oil industry salaries. While the *commune* is estimated to have a population roughly twice that of its outlying department, its budgetary provisions are nearly five times less, mostly because few of Shell's onshore installations are located within the limits of the municipality itself. Lastly, it should be noted that although few taxes are extracted from much of the local population, it does not necessarily mean the Tax Collector has not attempted to do so in good faith. Given the limited resources with which his office goes about collecting taxes, he mostly relies on good faith adherence to the law. Sometimes, however, and with the help of the gendarmes, they will attempt to enforce registration of local businesses without much success. Enforcing registration, he admitted, was a chronic problem.⁴⁸¹

Generally speaking, the local population considers the relative absence of taxation a good thing, and does not associate the large-scale absence of taxation with public accountability. This is not surprising, not only because populations all over the world tend to resent taxation, but also because the colonial head tax, and even the post-colonial *tax vicinale*, provoke sour memories. But what separates the residents of the Ndougou is a prevailing sentiment that "taxes don't bring us anything,"⁴⁸² a reaffirmation of a palpable loss of confidence in the state to provide goods and services. The utterer of the last comment, which was reproduced in various forms by other locals, even claims to have refused payment.

There exists therefore a relative absence of taxation, but has it caused the waning public accountability described above? It is impossible to establish a direct link, because that would presuppose the knowledge of how the Ndougou's local politicians think. Furthermore, this particular assertion in rentier theory is based on a longitudinal, structural-sociological effect which cannot be manifested in limited space and time. But even treating it as such does not yield a

⁴⁸¹ Interview with Tax Collector, August 19

⁴⁸² Interview with Pegiza, commercial fisherman, Gamba, September 1, 2015

convincing conclusion in the affirmative. The first issue the data above reveals is the ambiguity of public authority as it applies in the Ndougou. If we consider a broader definition which invokes the unelected civil servants and prefectural apparatus, we might conclude that public accountability is unrelated to taxation altogether, since the executive in local arenas is not dependent on local taxation. But more analysis will proceed at the conclusion of the chapter.

What has been the level of democratic participation in the Ndougou, and has it been affected by the relative degree of public accountability? In the previous chapter, it was established that social anomie set in from the 1990s to the present, with a diminishing degree of associative strength and well-being. Democratic participation differs in that it concerns express attempts by citizens to affect the course of the collective, whether it be through voting and electoral politics, discourse, or political mobilization. In rentierism, democratic participation is not a worthwhile pursuit if one hopes to extract certain gains.

In the Ndougou, there is admittedly very little evidence of grassroots participation in politics, though some recent events might suggest a growing consciousness and willingness to act. For most people, politics is a realm reserved exclusively for politicians, and they either feel it does not concern them or that they should not be concerned by it anyway. The feeling one gets after dozens of conversations is that passivity is and has been the norm, and that for the average denizen of the lagoon, the state is indeed far away. This does not mean, however, that people refrain from expressing grievances. A few representative examples suffice to paint a general picture:

- 1) The Smithsonian foundation, whom Shell had invited in the 2000s to conduct wildlife and environmental impact studies, regularly consults with the local population to obtain data. As part of their consultation, they organize meetings where people may come to express any grievances or make their opinions heard as to the activities of Smithsonian, namely involving their protection of wildlife which the population feels devastates their crop production. Mireille, one of the foundation's permanent staff and top researchers, claims that the announced meetings result in disappointingly low turnouts. She stated that this came from a feeling of frustration, that they felt there was never any "follow-up." They do, however, ask her to represent them with the authorities, which she must politely decline. Interestingly, she also claimed that a recommendation had been made to

create an association advocating for farmers, but that farmers were unable to organize themselves and overcome feelings of fatalism with regard to power structures. The failure to associate and advocate politically in an effort to address one of the most pressing issues in the lagoon speaks volumes.⁴⁸³

- 2) Correctly perceiving that Shell-Gabon possesses the resources to ameliorate the economic crisis in the region, many locals directly petition Shell as a proxy government. According to the Shell's Social Performance department, they receive around 20 letters per week requesting certain services, with 80-90% of the requests having to do with transportation. Petitions were not restricted to individual requests, however, as a Social Performance representative complained of "strikers" and unionists organizing sporadically.⁴⁸⁴
- 3) In early 2015, an informal taxicab union was created as previously mentioned. Its leader claimed that it was an enormous effort to get people to act in concert for a common interest, but that lately people had begun to grow a certain political consciousness. Indeed, during the Independence Day celebrations on August 18th, taxicabs created a motorcade and blew their horns in unison to attract attention and make a collective, unmistakable statement of solidarity.⁴⁸⁵

These are only a few of the examples of democratic participation, or attempts at such. A case could certainly be made that participatory channels work through chiefs or elected bodies, but it has already been shown that whereas the former channels are made difficult by chiefly reluctance to endeavor into political affairs, the latter are perhaps the least accountable of all public authorities.

Relief from political accountability in rentier theory is also said to produce a "decline in state legitimacy." It is perhaps here that rentier theories most clearly fail to account for events in

⁴⁸³ Interview with Mireille Johnson, elephant expert at the Smithsonian, Gamba, July 21, 2015

⁴⁸⁴ Interview with Armelle Zabatier, Social Performance, Shell, Gamba, August 4, 2015

⁴⁸⁵ Interview with Cédric Mangala

the Ndougou from the 1990s to the present, as it can be convincingly shown that the legitimacy of the Gabonese state in and around Gamba does not rise and fall with strict political accountability as much as it may with other factors. Since political stability cannot be achieved without political legitimacy, or “thinkability” as it pertains to the status quo, legitimacy turns out to be a pivotal element in rentier theory. If rentier states are inherently unstable, it is partially due to a state apparatus’s failure to convince the population of the rightness of its very existence. The cracks in the foundation ultimately lead to serious opposition and extreme vulnerability to civil conflict.

But the legitimacy of the “state” in the Ndougou must be disaggregated. Regarding the newly decentralized collectivities, evidence above already points to waning legitimacy. Unlike the prefectural arm of the state, the Mairie and the Departmental Council are relatively new bodies with relatively limited resources at their disposal. In discussions with their electorate, it becomes apparent that a consensus has emerged that the decentralized elected officials do not truly represent them, and that the same officials accomplish little. In this particular case, it could very well be that a lack of direct accountability by local elected officials and their reputation for confiscation (see below) has indeed led to an attitude of dismissiveness by the electorate. In this sense, legitimacy would spring from an ability to provide and react to concerns.

In another sense, the legitimacy of the prefectural state (the executive arm) seems comparatively unaffected. As already mentioned, the prefect is widely acknowledged as the rightful decider to whom people can turn in times of desperation. This may be because the prefectural arm is justifiably regarded as the true sovereign, with direct links to the regime in Libreville. The August 17th, 2015 Independence Day celebrations in Gamba were quite revealing in this regard. Seated in the grandstands overlooking the parade processions were the prefect and chiefs, whom were given pride of place. Marching were gendarmes and contingents of the army, proudly displaying the Gabonese flag to a cheering crowd. The mood reflected what many interlocutors felt about their state in private discussions, which was a certain pride linked to having just been born within Gabon’s territorial boundaries. The chief of Mougagara excused himself for meeting me at his son’s house, because normally in his official capacity he convened meetings “at my house, because that’s where the Gabonese flag is.”⁴⁸⁶ In Ingoueka, north on the river Bongo, the cantonal chief proudly displayed a picture commemorating his first appointment as chief, with

⁴⁸⁶ Interview with Chef de village of Mougagara

Omar Bongo at his side. This despite his critiques of the state during a group discussion that same day. And in the Shell cafeteria which feeds Shell-Gabon's interns in Plaine 3 of Gamba, a characteristic portrait of Ali Bongo hangs overhead, which all interns, including those who could be described as politically conscious, considered entirely justified. An "administrative legitimacy" indeed exists and accords with the verbal analysis of Joseph Tonda.⁴⁸⁷ Electoral legitimacy, however, is woefully lacking in comparison.

The final factor of analysis in testing rentierism in late/contemporary Ndougou is the all-important "rentier mentality," or a "break in the work-reward causation" where "reward becomes a windfall gain, an isolated fact."⁴⁸⁸ It is a "serious blow to the ethics of work"⁴⁸⁹ which emphasizes rent-seeking and breeds corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency. Under this approach, we would expect the financial autonomy of the prefectural and electoral states in the Ndougou to be linked to a rentier class and other rent-seeking pathologies.

By their very nature, the related concepts of rentier mentality, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiency are hard to prove with anything other than anecdotal and hearsay evidence. But an abundance of such evidence, including perceptions by "experts" or those acquainted with the day-to-day business in and around Gamba can lead to a plausible conclusion—it is in fact the method adopted by Transparency International in composing their Corruption Perceptions Index.⁴⁹⁰ Using this simple but effective method, one can conclude that a rentier mentality does indeed exist in the Ndougou, but that directly linking it to external oil rents presents other analytical difficulties which rentierism may not be equipped to deal with.

Experts and activists, many of whom are based in Libreville, are largely convinced that a rentier mentality is unique to southern Gabon, though there is no consensus as to whether this is due to oil rents or not. George Mpaga of the opposition NGO, ROLBG, explains that it's a familial system of governance run by a strict hierarchy, and this hierarchy is reproduced among even the lowest levels, such as the Ndougou. It is for Mpaga a means of "controlling the population," which

⁴⁸⁷ Interview with Professor Ratanga-Atoz

⁴⁸⁸ Beblawi and Luciani, *The Rentier State*, 52.

⁴⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁹⁰ Transparency International Secretariat. "Explanation of how individual country scores of the corruption perceptions index are calculated." (January 27, 2017). https://www.transparency.org/news/pressrelease/explanation_of_how_individual_country_scores_of_the_corruption_perceptions. Accessed December 30, 2018)

themselves are neither informed nor conscious of their citizenship.⁴⁹¹ A discussion with Regina at the US Embassy touched upon a “I scratch your back you scratch mine” mentality, which extended as well to the intelligentsia. The system of patronage mastered by Omar Bongo, however, was being undermined by Ali’s reforms, which threatened “political stability.”⁴⁹² But the Secretary General of Gamba’s Mairie on two separate occasions railed against chronic “political clientelism” and the clan being at the base of the local power structure. The Secretary General of the Departmental Conseil, in turn, mentioned that in just a few short years he had already witnessed first-hand the nepotism which prevails in the system of awarding public contracts. Elected officials use their positions, he said, to extract benefits for members of their family, while voters were swayed by mere T-shirts and cash handouts.⁴⁹³ Shell’s Government Relations Director also bemoaned a culture of corruption in Gabonese politics, offering that “somewhere along the way it gets corrupt.”⁴⁹⁴

Thus, there is no consensus as to whether the corruption within government derives from the dominance of political families, echoing the assertion that although “there aren’t traditional means... there may be traditional ends” in a “progressive adaptation,”⁴⁹⁵ or whether corruption sprang first from oil rents and quick monetization of the local economy. A clue is thankfully given by the interpersonal relations which characterize the non-rentier class of individuals in the Ndougou. First, the few elected politicians—mostly national—who remit goods and services to their native villages are the most celebrated, and unsurprisingly are the least likely to attract criticism. Secondly, some chiefs, though not uniform in behavior, do in fact display rent-seeking behavior, most exemplified by the Ndougou cantonal chief described above, who at one point suggested he “needed” me to “rise more easily,” since he had already surpassed the optimal age for “success”: “If you were not here,” he added, “what would I do?”⁴⁹⁶ Rent-seeking was rampant amongst many of the population as well. Dieudonné, an employee at the local radio station, admitted to having contributed part of his salary to the Senator who had helped secure him his job.

⁴⁹¹ Interview with Georges Mpage

⁴⁹² Interview with Shana Sherry, Political and Economic Advisor, US Embassy, Libreville, July 16, 2015

⁴⁹³ Interview with Mr. Ossendo, August 19

⁴⁹⁴ Interview with Guy Kassa Koumba, Shell Government Relations

⁴⁹⁵ Interview with Professor John Nambo

⁴⁹⁶ Interview with Chef de canton of the Ndougou, Pitonga, August 13, 2015

This, he contended, was “fair.”⁴⁹⁷ Agents of the prefect also regularly requested “tips” to complement their salaries, explaining in curt terms that it was simply the way things were done.

Third, it is almost always the case that locals who are not employed as gardeners, caterers, cleaners, or as manual labor by Shell or one of its contractors, are officially or unofficially employed by one of the state’s agencies or decentralized institutions. The prefecture was among these sources of local employment, as at any hour of the day there were self-described drivers, security guards, and other assistants loitering outside the prefecture and the prefect’s spacious home just next door. The same phenomenon was a regular occurrence at both decentralized institutions. Common to all institutions was a prevailing atmosphere of inactivity and inertness, despite the lavishly furnished buildings replete with leather sofas and mahogany tables and desks. One could reasonably conclude that a bloated bureaucracy was the culprit.

Added to a bloated bureaucracy were several local ministerial divisions present in Gamba, but by all observable accounts inoperative. Gabon Emergent occupies a small building next to the high school, and on most days seemed unoccupied (though they marched in the Independence Day celebrations, they were unable to describe in detail any accomplishments towards local development in the area). A government-sponsored AIDS clinic, located in Plaine Bienvenue, was likewise unoccupied. A local branch of Gabon Telecom, the national provider with a substantial office building next to the radio station in Plaine 3, never responded to Shell’s requests to improve its internet bandwidth capacity.

Lastly, the most convincing way to trace an evolution in rentier mentality is to compare the modalities and opinions of youth to older generations. From this perspective at least, one might conclude that a “rentier mentality” among the population itself has become more pronounced. Older generations in the Ndougou—even those who had been formerly employed by Shell—are in large numbers still active on their respective communal plantations, while the youth prefer to seek out well-paid jobs in the oil industry.

⁴⁹⁷ Interview with Dieudonné, Radio news reporter, Gamba, August 26, 2015

CHAPTER 6. Alternative Approaches to Explaining Political and Development Outcomes in an oil-bearing community

6.1. Introduction

A detailed application of oil rentier theory to a half-century of political-developmental outcomes in the Ndougou reveals that rentierism cannot fully account for the timing of increased social and political anomie. Oil rent dependency could not explain the public accountability deficit of the state before significant fields came onstream in the 1960s and its continuity thereafter. Nor could it explain the seemingly positive experiences of social and political life shared by residents of the Ndougou during the early years of Shell-Gabon's exploitation. Furthermore, the corruptive effects predicted by rentierism did occur, but they did not coincide with the relative dependency of the state. They can instead be most closely associated with the singular event of statewide decentralization. In addition, the legitimacy of the prefectoral state persisted in what may seem an anomaly, contrary to the axiomatic causation of rentier theories. In this vein, and without external validity (see Chapter 7), the impact of rentierism can be safely reduced to the status of an aggravating factor of unwanted political and developmental outcomes.

What, therefore, was the most contributing political process of increasing social and political anomie outlined in Chapter 4? Decentralization emerges as an immediate culprit as it was generally associated with the rise in anomic structures, but mere association falls short of correlation. As introduced in Chapter 1, other dominant perspectives exist to help the analyst of local politics in Africa identify contributory factors of political and development changes. First, we will consider Catherine Boone's elaboration of Mamdani's "bifurcated state" hypothesis, which consists largely of positing a state-local equilibrium whereby local factors inform the state's choice of institutions and by extension political-developmental outcomes. After concluding that this approach also fails to capture the historical realities of the Ndougou, we will turn our attention towards the most internally valid, ethnologically-oriented body of authors commonly referred to as "hybrid governance." Reasoning that the latter can be most accurately applied to the Ndougou's case, the chapter nevertheless concludes with a synthesis of the findings with the aim of qualifying each broader perspective.

6.2. State-Local Equilibrium, or State Strategy

As per Chapter 1, Boone's elaboration of Mamdani's central idea—that decentralized despotism resulted from the state's overarching need to maintain order in the context of a bifurcated state—requires that we define the relative degree of rural social hierarchy in the Ndougou over time. Such may be based on a number of factors, including settlement patterns, land tenure, inheritance regimes, and relations of cooperation, dependence, and coercion, keeping in mind that legitimacy can lower the cost of hierarchical control. Though Boone's application was restricted to cases of taxing agricultural output (specifically in the Senegal River Valley and Asante), Chapters 1 and 2 argued that such an analysis may be applied to non-agricultural forms of extraction, since the fundamentals of her analysis concern the state's desire to persist and maintain order. The qualified status of rural social hierarchy must then determine the state's particular institutional strategies. If the predicted strategies do not reflect the reality, then such an application of Neo-Tillyian theory to spaces of mineral extraction must be amended.

6.2.1. Institutional Choice and Communal Structure Before Oil

Chapter 3 detailed the French colonialists' strategy towards Sette Cama and the Ndougou lagoon, as well as the communal structure in place at the time. In Boone's conception, the presence of a Poste de Control Administratif in Sette Cama with a relatively concentrated "spatial" apparatus indicates a choice of institutions roughly between that of "non-incorporation" and "administrative occupation." The lagoon's primary interest to the French was the facilitation of lumber and palm exports from the interior and forced labor needed to carry out these activities. In this scheme, Sette Cama was a district which reported to the subdivision Bongo, which itself was deemed a more important export hub. Little evidence exists that the administration in Sette Cama exceeded much more than a handful of appointees.

The choice of institutions therefore follows a rough Neo-Tillyian logic. Chapter 3 also detailed the social structure prevalent in the Ndougou prior to oil extraction, one which suggests a fair degree of hierarchy based almost exclusively on political legitimacy, yet one which was not

derived from concentration of the kind of resources Boone had in mind. Unlike the cases provided by Boone, the Ndougou elite did not enjoy indigenously-derived economic resources such as cash crops. Chapter 3 demonstrates how the region—and its elite—had been habituated to extractive commerce since the arrival of the Portuguese, from slaving to the felling of elephants and trees for the coastal *factoreries*. At the same time, however, social hierarchy persisted, and though the growing trading class (*fumu-si*) gradually usurped both the autochthonal Varama and the Bouvandji lineage chiefs (*fumu*) who could boast familial links with the Loango Kingdom, the *fumu-si* became adept at appropriating symbolic manifestations of political power (such as bells) and oral tradition to their advantage. When the French followed their particular institutional blend of non-incorporation and administrative occupation, they thus had a reasonably stable rural hierarchy on which they could depend, and one which was further reinforced by missionary schools and evangelists.

At independence, the latent power of lineage chiefs and *chefs de terre* were supported by the moderately insurgent POUNGA party led by Sousatte. This demonstrated, in part, that ancestral political legitimacy was yet present within various conglomerations, especially among POUNGA's base of supporters in the south. At the same time, the fledgling independent nation embarked upon a program of modernization and *regroupement* in an effort to cradle a more productive agricultural sector. In Boone's conception, this would have qualified as a minor shift towards powersharing in the Ndougou, as both the M'ba and Bongo administrations relied on legitimate chiefs whenever possible. Moderated powersharing was also witnessed via the newly created rural collectivities which were answerable to sous-prefects. The Neo-Tillyian logic of this approach is confirmed in the disparate approach the state used in the Fang-dominated north, which relied more on a mix of usurpation and administrative occupation through the installment of state agents, so as to temper less pronounced hierarchies which were also less dependent on the state and held out real possibilities for agricultural development. In both cases, I have used the qualifier "moderated" in application to powersharing, because of the centralizing tendencies of the single-party structure. As recounted in Chapter 4, the local government reforms of 1975 only succeeded in further centralization. With the attendant deconcentration provided by the expansion of local collectivities, this meant that state strategies towards local groups alternated between powersharing and usurpation.

6.2.2. Institutional Choice and Communal Structure During the First Oil Booms

Communal structure did not immediately change in a substantive way once COSREG/Shell-Gabon arrived, nor could one have expected it to in accordance with a singular event. What did change in a rather dramatic way was the particular state “strategy” employed in the Ndougou—the region where the vast Gamba and Ivinda wells had just been discovered. First, the transfer of the seat of local administration from Sette Cama to Gamba was a clear attempt at facilitating and controlling the work of the exploitation zones. It can be taken for granted that the promise of sustained and substantial cash flows to the regime—whether for the regime’s political sustenance, the development of the country, or both—motivated this decision. It is also clear that such potential would supersede the trivial concerns of the old rural hierarchy, whose political clout vis-à-vis the center was proven (through the relocation) to rely more and more on *administrative* legitimacy and less and less on lineage and agrarian structures. The state therefore did not need to usurp a strong hierarchy that was relatively independent. Centralization persisted.

The more difficult problem to address for Neo-Tillyian approaches is the major role Shell-Gabon played in local governance at the outset of the exploitation zone. Both enforcer within its concessions and provider of public services, the company also enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the central state in Libreville as demonstrated early on by the administrative relocation to Gamba. While one could classify this as a sort of “devolution” to rural “elites,” Shell-Gabon represented an external actor and not an integral part of Gabonese territory. As explained in Chapter 3, its upper management and technical staff were entirely foreign, while shorter-term work contracts belonged to local laborers. Critics of Neo-Tillyian approaches, such as Will Jones, readily point out this failure to integrate the real influence of nonstate and international actors.⁴⁹⁸ Such capital-intensive and profitable ventures such as oil production often entail proxy measures to ensure smooth operations. The limit of Neo-Tillyian approaches is the premise upon which its theories of state formation are based: the need to tax and capture the country’s resources. What rentier theories in particular contribute here is an explanation of how a state can both

⁴⁹⁸ “Attempts to integrate Tilly’s insights into an understanding of contemporary Africa have had results which are patchy at best: contemporary African wars do not appear to promote statehood in general” (Will Jones. “Murder and Create: State Reconstruction in Rwanda Since 1994.” PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2014), 43.

administratively occupy a rural region such as the Ndougou without “incorporating” it. Extractive industries relieve the state from the need to tax, but not necessarily the need to administer.

6.2.3. Communal Structure after Rabi-Kounga

In 1989, Shell-Gabon vastly expanded its operations with the onstream production of Rabi-Kounga. Chapter 4 reviewed much of the socioeconomic impact the expansion had on Gamba and its environs, concluding that there was a net positive effect on the community in terms of service provisions and employment, before a general decline (increase in social and political anomie) set in, coincident with the 1996 decentralization reforms and most likely co-related (see Chapter 5). Over time, communal structure in and around Gamba and the lagoon underwent dramatic changes. Chapter 4 touches upon many of them which have bearing on the strength and relative independence of rural hierarchy:

First, immigration and local village clustering nearer to Gamba defined settlement patterns which favored Gamban elites (administration, *chefs de quartier*, clergy, Shell employees, etc.) and introduced populations whose ancestral loyalties were elsewhere, but who were also making money. Similar processes intensified after the first production of Rabi-Kounga. With the growth of Gamba and the promises of new goods and technologies, settlement patterns helped undermine the older agrarian forms of political legitimacy which had hitherto allowed the state in Libreville and Port Gentil to administer cheaply but effectively.

Second, the gradual usurpation of land tenure from the *chefs de terre* and chiefs by the state-Shell enforcement tandem also militated against the old aristocracy’s ability to control their subjects via legitimacy. As of the 1990s, land chiefs ceased to exist throughout the lagoon. Shell’s annual tribute to the Boukosso clan near Gamba can be regarded as merely ceremonial, as in most instances Shell had been effectual in obtaining desired land, whether it be for pipelines, harbors, or lagunar gas installations. If anything proved the loss of land tenure—and thus part of legitimacy—by the old aristocracy, it was the relative ease with which village consolidations and regrouping took place (before the decentralized electoral apparatus attempted to halt it). Whether by force of law or free will, movement by subjects in and around the lagoon was not nearly as contested as in other locales, such as the Nyanga or the Woleu-Ntem. For those who chose to

remain in older villages such as Sette Cama or Soungha, familial concerns were paramount, while loyalty to the chieftaincy (which had become almost purely administrative) was invoked much more sparingly. Formal legal constraints, such as the state's ownership of most "customary" land, had always been present, but only after oil did they become an administrative tool for land grabs. (See Chapter 4.)

Shell-Gabon's emplacement in the lagoon therefore shifted class structures from those based on ancestral legitimacy and lineage to those based on coercion, enforcement and financial dependence. What chiefs lost in ancestral legitimacy they gained in administrative and moneyed legitimacy, particularly those members of the majority of the chieftainship who had worked for Shell. Villagers in the lagoon therefore respond to the demands of chiefs, but only to the administrative extent of chiefly prerogatives if they have not also become service providers through salary earnings (which itself also became more common). Deference is therefore of the formal kind, and not unlike most industrialized societies. In following the logic of administrative hierarchy based on coercion, chiefs themselves are deferential towards not only the prefect, but his agents and even park rangers. The cantonal chief for the Ndougou canton (not to be confused with the broader department comprising two other cantons) therefore conceals his cache of guns and ammunitions used to butcher crop-devastating elephants, for fear of being fined and/or arrested by an ANPN park agent.⁴⁹⁹

Outside the chieftaincy, now fully formalized under the executive, similar class formations were forming. Among the matrilinear Eshira groups which comprise the Ndougou lagoon, family heads were typically chosen on the maternal side. But as many respondents stated, their family head was the person who earned the most money, whether that individual was a maternal uncle or not. Typically, that person was employed in some technical capacity, either in Gamba or Port Gentil, and unexceptionally for an oil firm or one of its contractors. Remittances from salaried family members working in Gamba are the norm.

In Boone's conception, a rural hierarchy develops with a concentration of resources, thus wielding the capacity to challenge the state if the rural hierarchy is sufficiently resource-independent. Boone does recognize that a hierarchy can lower the cost of controlling dependents through legitimacy if that hierarchy lacks resources, but says little of symbolic goods like prestige

⁴⁹⁹ Interview with Chef de canton of the Ndougou, July 29

and totems. In the Ndougou, material goods were substituted for symbolic goods and thus helped establish a different hierarchy. Today's hierarchy has become more dependent on the state than ever before, since the state is ultimately responsible for all contracts with Shell-Gabon and its contracted affiliates. As shown by the relative wealth and prominence of Papa Yaba, a local *notable*, some of this hierarchy are not members of the old aristocracy. In general, this has produced an elite which is ultimately dependent on the state and Shell-Gabon, and which is fragmented in the sense that there exist several hierarchies and several hierarchical relations. Many chiefs successfully used their administrative positions to secure jobs with the oil industry, and vice versa. School teachers, who were responsible for conveying knowledge useful in the formal workplace, became community leaders. NGO workers, such as Pierre Bryce at the WWF, who had discretion in hiring, remain largely respected despite their intransigent criticism of agrarian hunting practices—even when those practices are employed towards ceremonial means. Section 6.3 below, which applies hybrid governance approaches, can make better logical sense of this fragmentation.

6.2.4. State Institutional “Choice” After Rabi-Kounga

Communal and class structure in the Ndougou gradually fragmented, or shifted to various hierarchies based on new forms of legitimacy and material goods. It was more dependent on the state and the companies it hosted, while the companies enjoyed a “devolved” status in local governance. In a way, this state strategy persisted, as we have seen that Shell continues to finance schools, medical care, and public transportation, yet all the while remaining the primary employer. This development does not fit neatly into the Neo-Tillyian framework. But if the state wished to develop and ensure the access potential of the vast oil reserves (a Neo-Tillyian assumption we will consider justified), it is clear it would have no resistance or indigenization efforts from older hierarchies. The situation had become one of increasing co-dependence, albeit skewed in favor of the Shell-state duopoly.

In this vein, Boone's framework—originally applied to agricultural locales—would suggest a number of strategies depending on how one defines operative terms such as rural hierarchy (or local elite) and relative dependence. If one considers that the new salaried class in

Gamba does indeed constitute a proper hierarchy with a sufficient concentration of resources which would compel deference to it, then we are considering a high degree of hierarchy. If it is merely one hierarchy among many in Gamba—an assertion to which I adhere—then we are considering a lower degree of hierarchy due to fragmentation.

If the former case is correct, that the Ndougou is one-dimensionally hierarchical, then the state could either opt for powersharing or usurpation, depending on whether that hierarchy is reliant on the state for its sustenance or not, respectively. Answering this question is more difficult than at first glance, because it is unclear (within this line of reasoning) whether Shell-Gabon—the primary employer and source of this would-be hierarchy—comprises the rural hierarchy or acts more in conjunction with the relevant ministries, or both. Any sovereign state may void contracts without serious legal repercussions, though the reputational costs of doing so are presumably high. A formalistic approach such as this would have us deduce that Shell, a profiteer, would play a delicate balancing act, weighing the state’s clear interest in unabated production against the delimiting grievances of the local population whose cooperation is economically expedient. After all, Shell is listed in many Western stock exchanges such as the London Stock Exchange, Euronext, and the New York Stock Exchange, forums targeted by human rights campaigns that have in the past successfully eroded share prices of several errant corporations. Added to this are both the former president’s (Omar Bongo’s) Gabonization initiatives as well as the growing ranks of local Gambans working in lower and middle management. Though not a particularly sizable group given Gamba’s employment statistics, many of these salaried employees undeniably have in mind the interests of the community. If such is in fact the case, that Shell-Gabon and its local salaried workforce are ultimately dependent on the state, then we should be witnessing efforts by the state to reach powersharing arrangements with the local population. This strategy would seek to maintain order as efficiently as possible, and is also according to Mamdani the most likely to lead to the “decentralized despotism” which ostensibly characterizes many African rural locales.

On the other hand, Shell-Gabon could reasonably be construed as a quasi-independent actor, ultimately more deferent to the Royal Dutch Shell headquarters in The Hague than its contractual obligations to the relevant ministries in Libreville. In its interdependent relationship with the state, Royal Dutch Shell wields finances, technological expertise, and local experience which the state in Libreville would have difficulty replacing with either its own consortium or even an international competitor. One Shell engineer, for instance, gingerly explained that they were

avored to non-Western consortiums due to their technical capacity to extract the more out-of-reach deposits, and that the state was concerned Shell might lease or sell off its concessions to a Chinese group. Historical analysis (see Chapters 3 and 4) also reveals an unmistakable degree of Shell-Gabon initiative without recourse to the central state apparatus. From the layout of Gamba itself and the provision of services to its role as administrative capital of the department, Shell's suggestions or actions were adopted or met with compliance by Libreville at every stage, and no record is available to suggest otherwise. Of all public leaders in the town, the prefectural apparatus, the most direct link to the executive in Libreville, was the most appreciative of Shell and what it had done for the community. In this case, a local elite would be able to develop independent of state imperium, prompting the state to attempt to usurp that elite. In fact, this has already been accomplished via the IRPP income tax levied on salaried workers (the vast majority of salaried workers in Gamba are employed by the oil industry), the state's share of all oil receipts, and the PDG's careful efforts to assure the loyalty of local leaders.

But there are several issues regarding the theory that the Gabonese state would usurp the Ndougou elite (assuming for the moment a hegemonic hierarchy exists) either for want of territorial integrity or of resources. For one, the population of the Ndougou remains among the most sparse in the country, with roughly 12,000-14,000 inhabitants versus a countrywide 2,000,000 (most of whom reside in larger cities). Second, the resources such a small group could potentially wield in non-beneficial ways (from the state's perspective) are slim, and amount to a relatively small group of dependents, limited real estate holdings, and other unsubstantial assets. Lastly, this salaried group connected to the oil industry, if not dependent on the state, is absolutely dependent on Shell-Gabon's continued activities in the region. So much so that this class of middle managers, technicians, decentralized public servants, and entrepreneurs felt compelled to draft the PDL (see previous chapters) as well as lobby Shell-Gabon's executives to remain on site. If usurpation did take place, *it was because the state has sought to legitimize itself as the sole and sovereign public authority among many competing public authorities.*

This leads to the other possible interpretation of the Ndougou's communal structure and its relationship to the "state," assuming for the moment that the "state" refers to the prefectural apparatus connected to the political elite of Libreville. It is entirely probable that the monetization—and then capitalization—of the Ndougou's communal structure fragmented a once more structured, more integral hierarchy. Counter-intuitively, a concentration of resources which

would permit stricter hierarchies never took shape, given the specific vectors of the limited capitalization seen in the Ndougou. Though the introduction of the oil industry in the region did allow the proliferation of rent-seeking, such as public corruption, prostitution, and services catering to a salaried class (both Western and local), the locals in the Ndougou do not own the means or modes of production, seriously limiting the scope of any resource accrual. Furthermore, the Ndougou has not experienced the “bunkering” and other techniques used by local elites in the Niger Delta to further their subnational ambitions, owing in large part to a relatively tiny population.

Again we are confronted with the anomalous participation of Shell-Gabon in the local communal structure and what it means for state institutional strategies. Do the more substantive beneficiaries of extraction—of whom few if any are locals—count as local elite, given their moderate insertion into local political and cultural life? The answer must be no, since the real beneficiaries have no embedded interests in the community, such as family or citizenship. The typical engineer, American or European, posted for four years will accrue hundreds of thousands USD, yet largely confines him or herself within the highly secured Yenzi compound, terminal, and Vembo installations. With the exception of those working for the Smithsonian, some of whom resided in Plaine 3 with other non-local Gabonese Shell interns, Westerners by and large are not active in Gamba’s civic life and cultural diversions. The real contribution of Shell’s highly skilled workforce and executives is through the face-saving generosity of Shell-Gabon’s Social Performance Department and the host of other cash handouts to a number of institutions. Nevertheless, Shell-Gabon behaves like a local elite in that it has discretionary power in the provision of public services and employment. For this reason, Shell-Gabon, in rapport with Gamba since the 1960s, is neither the rural hierarchy in Boone’s imagination, nor the state.

In a region with both low social hierarchy, which the Ndougou has arguably become, and resources upon which the state is heavily reliant, the logical Neo-Tillyian strategy would be administrative occupation, which Boone defines as a mix of concentrated authorities (without many subsidiary links penetrating the territory) and centralized authority (state agents). But in the Ndougou, deconcentration appears to have been the trend. State agents in the region have proliferated, beginning with the first sous-prefecture in the 1970s and evolving to a host of ministerial outposts and offices, minders, advisers, and security agents. Furthermore, at least some of the pre-1996 centralized authority (the prefectural state) has been diluted by the decentralized

institutions of the departmental and municipal councils, at a time when older hierarchies had been fragmenting, and engaging in “sedimentation,” (see Section 6.3) at a faster rate. Boone’s logic, however, is sound if one accepts the premises. In a cash crop zone inhabited by communities with a low degree of hierarchy, made up of an elite dependent on the state for its privileged position, it is wasteful to expend so many resources attempting to control the flow of resources. A few outposts and a show of authority should be sufficient to establish a hierarchy capable of capturing and taxing. But for the Ndougou, an oil and gas extraction zone, a mix of strategies took place, namely executive deconcentration (usurpation) and limited devolution (powersharing). Section 3 below aims to explain the contradiction using hybrid governance approaches.

6.2.5. Perversion of Civil Society

Boone’s extrapolation of Mamdani’s insights does not discuss at length the causes of anomie and underdevelopment at the local level. Her contribution was to theorize state responses to local changes, thus inverting the more conventional understandings of how sub-Saharan African states operate. Nevertheless, her extrapolation is an operationalization of one of Mamdani’s key insights: that “decentralized despotism” has become the cheapest means with which the African state maintains order in a bifurcated state. Decentralized despotism then leads to clientelism/patrimonialism, perverting civil society both in the cities and hinterland, and leaving communities at the mercy of both good-willed or corrupt leadership. Boone set this idea up for falsification, positing that this state of affairs was more likely to arise under regimes of non-incorporation or powersharing, where local elites were either dependent on the state for their privileges but did not inhabit a cash crop zone (non-incorporation), or where strong but dependent elites did inhabit such a zone (powersharing). Usurpation and administrative occupation would produce a similar hinterland despotism if state agents were not bound, or did not feel themselves bound, by formal legal processes and sanctions, as was the case in many colonies.

Was the changing communal structure of the Ndougou therefore responsible (via state strategies) for increasing instances of clientelistic behavior (a form of anomie)? Was the dearth of goods and services due to arbitrary decision-making from local leaders? Chapters 4 and 5 hint at the association between the decentralized institutions and informalization, with a consensus

reached among those in the Ndougou that corruption was both coincident with the introduction of the assemblies and inextricably linked to them. But as we have seen, decentralization (a form of powersharing) was constitutionally imposed after a nationwide conference and political dialogue following the turbulent 1980s, a process instigated chiefly by militants based in Port Gentil and Libreville, not in the rural Ndougou. Even if we consider that Shell-Gabon forms a legitimate local elite on whom the state can depend, there is little evidence to suggest that the state made a deliberate and unique plan to share power with the Ndougou's local hierarchy.

Unfortunately, the Neo-Tillyian logic of state maintenance is not supported by the Ndougou unless definitions like local elite (Does Shell-Gabon comprise the local elite?) and "the state" (Is Shell-Gabon the state?) are relaxed and expanded, which itself runs the risk of collapsing the theory with contradictory logics. While powersharing is indeed linked to the forms of anomie and material stagnation witnessed in Chapter 2, buttressing Mamdani's assertion that in a bifurcated state the success of reforms is largely based on arbitrary elites due to civil society perversion, Neo-Tillyian logic becomes unwieldy under the weight of large, foreign, non-state actors.

6.3. Hybrid Governance

6.3.1. The Non-Hegemonic State

The introduction of oil exploitation presents many challenges for particularly small communities in much of the formerly colonized world. The most strident examples are cases in violence and wanton rent-seeking behavior, where the vectors of underdevelopment come through severed lines of elite public accountability (both vertical and horizontal) as well as through a society-wide clamoring for a portion of the oil rent. The Ndougou, despite its envelopment of one of the continent's largest onshore oilfields, is not one of those cases. It refutes much of the stereotypical representation of oil communities in the developing world, not only because violence is non-existent but because rent-seeking behavior and informalization are not coincident with the rate of oil production. They are instead with the process of decentralization in 1997/1998. And yet compared to the rest of the country's similar processes of decentralization, Gamba and the

lagoon reportedly fare worse in terms of factors of anomie, including petty corruption, prostitution, political opportunism, disinherited older elites, vampirism, and sorcery.⁵⁰⁰ The Ndougou is an example of how particular local circumstances shape social, economic, and political outcomes, even when confronted with large and powerful external actors such as Shell-Gabon. It may be that the operative ingredient is not oil production (Chapter 5) or bifurcation and the state’s preoccupation with order (see above) *per se* which lead to undesirable conditions, but rather an abiding lack of state hegemony and the resultant hybridity which thereafter arises. The anomic structures which began their development in the Ndougou throughout the 1990s—unmet expectations of material comforts and employment, increased mistrust in the form of witchcraft, and, later on, political disaffection—may have their origins in the incongruent proliferation of institutions of public authority.

By making more inclusive the definitions of “state,” “governance,” and “public authority,” and expanding their meanings to encompass non-state actors, Lund, Bierschenk, Olivier de Sardan et al. shatter conventional notions of local governance and invite explanations of anomie based on an institutional framework which breeds fragmentation, unpredictability, and consequently informalization, unaccountability, and lack of resources. In doing so, they also resolve the most glaring drawbacks of rentier theory and Neo-Tillyian state formation, i.e. the inability to



Figure 2: Cover Page of the Plan de Développement Local. As many as 6 institutions—among them the local assemblies—were involved with its conception and drafting.

⁵⁰⁰ Interview with Jean Churley, Ibonga conservationist, Gamba, July 23, 2015

conceptualize obfuscated boundaries between state and private entities and between state and local forms of public authority.

What conditions fragmentation and institutional incongruity is a state with limited capacity and which lacks hegemony. States with high capacity, and which are the dominant public authorities wielding legitimacy and force, are able to direct the myriad agencies and quasi-agencies towards singular goals. In other words, high-capacity, hegemonic states can get everyone “on the same page.” Under such circumstances, a proliferation of institutions of public authority does not necessarily lead to incongruence and unpredictability, which then feed anomic structures. Nor is a high-capacity, hegemonic state a euphemism for a developed country commonly associated with the West. Poorer developing countries have proven more than capable of marshaling state resources towards prescribed goals. In Gabon, however, as in many sparsely populated Francophone African states, state bureaucratic hegemony may only extend as far as the nearest outpost, as applying the mechanisms of enforcement to lagoon and forest villages may prove too costly. In these cases, state legitimacy and ideational hegemony can often serve to lower the cost of rural control, as pointed out by Boone above. But in the context of not only recently created by small and sparsely populated regions, one can foresee the difficulties.

Gabon makes no exception. Although the state over the course of history may have been legitimate (see Chapter 5) where it concerns the executive, prefectural arm, other spheres of statehood have not enjoyed the same “thinkability.” In other words and from a Weberian perspective, the Gabonese state has not throughout its independent history exhibited the *monopolization* of the legitimate use of force. Recurrent French military interventions clearly demonstrated to the Gabonese citizenry, and to the bureaucratic state itself, that pure hegemony remained as elusive as ever. In this vacuum have always been several institutions occupying several state-like policy areas. In addition to enforcement, the relative internal weakness of the Gabonese state, like many of its neighbors, has also been on display through its inability to extend social services such as health or any kind of social safety net. Despite enjoying among the highest literacy rates in the region, we have seen through examples in the Ndougou that even education is neither provided wholly nor equally. Considering all of this, state capacity and hegemony are indeed elusive concepts, and it is not difficult to fathom how policy cohesiveness could quickly unravel.

Within Gabon, the Ndougou lagoon in particular is also unique in that roughly half of its residents trace clan ties and heritage to outside present-day Gabonese borders. The Baloumoubou/Bavili have arguably more linguistically and culturally in common with their distant (and sometimes close) relatives in neighboring Congo than with other Gabonese Eshira groups, casting the Gabonese state in an ambiguous light in terms of social cohesion. Reverence for the Maloango in Point Noire (Congo) is symbolically important for even ambitious Gabonese politicians. Furthermore, maps show French colonial boundaries clearly shifting and placing much of the Ndougou lagoon itself in either one of several administrative zones, while the French did not effectively administer the region until the beginning of the 20th century. Instead of political boundaries imposed by states, cognitive and social boundaries appear just as salient. The first-comer Bavarama who populate the northern lagoon tend to distinguish themselves from the southern Baloumbou/Bavili. When transitioning from the lagoon to the River Bongo, Bavarama custom dictates that travelers pay symbolic tribute to the water god for safe passage by dousing one's head in the water. Reference to the idea of being Gabonese therefore has relatively limited impact in marshaling the collective energies of individuals and institutions in the service of common tasks and achievements. Identities are fragmented, and with that so is state hegemony.

The most glaring demonstration of the state's limited hegemony is, of course, Shell's physical and symbolic omnipresence in Gamba and the Ndougou. There had been little symbolic representation of the state outside the former sous-prefecture in Sette Cama. Once Gamba was erected, there would be more symbols, including a flag in Plaine 3 and the new prefecture. With Shell-Gabon came public radio and further state representations in various ministerial outposts and agencies, to add to administrative chieftaincy. But with Shell-Gabon came also direct challenges to the state's already flimsy hegemony of public authority. The population was well aware that the early material comforts were due exclusively to Shell, and Shell's employees were granted privileges which reaffirmed a higher state of citizenship, including state-of-the-art medical care and the community's esteem. Shell's contracted security firms proved effective in controlling its areas of operations and rarely if ever sought bribes, while the gendarmes have ritually been involved in such informal behavior. Many people today regard the "state" with suspicion and often contempt, while others declare their pride in being Gabonese while praising the state's provision of jobs. The state is not hegemonic, but its relative hegemony never quite broke down to the point of legitimating violence and theft as has been witnessed in other tragic cases.

Nevertheless, where the state ignored certain policy areas, other institutions of public policy have filled the vacuum.

6.3.2. Reforms, Situational Adjustments, and Anomie

The advantage of hybrid governance approaches is that they disambiguate loaded terms such as the “state,” allowing for the analytical recognition of other actors which perform public functions. Rentierism could not account for the relatively legitimate activities of the prefectural state vis-à-vis the local assemblies. Neo-Tillyian approaches could neither account such differences, not to mention the state-like functions performed by Shell-Gabon. Furthermore, the central state in Libreville did enact decentralization reforms in the 1990s, but the policy was applied countrywide and could not have been in response to any Neo-Tillyian impulses such as resource-capture with respect to the Ndougou lagoon; local anomie in the 1990s coincides with decentralization, but was not an effect of Neo-Tillyian logic. It will be shown here that the failure of both rentierism and Neo-Tillyian approaches to account for the timing and (non-) existence of certain anomic structures can be addressed using the broader concept of hybrid governance.

More than oil production and despotic, devolved elites left to their own designs, anomie in the Ndougou is co-related with a proliferation of institutions which in some way or another have exercised a degree of public authority. According to Bierschenk and Sardan, an already-fragile state which institutes reforms (including decentralization and democratization) reinforces hybrid forms of local governance and fragments local political arenas. For the Ndougou, that proverbial straw which broke the camel’s back was decentralization. It has been established that prior to decentralization, and despite projections by rentier theories, oil extraction in the Ndougou led to neither social nor political anomie, in part since growth and social adjustments were able to keep pace with the structural changes taking place. Through a hybrid governance lens, we can reasons for why this was the case. Chapter 3 established that the Ndougou throughout its pre-colonial and colonial existence had been habituated to foreign-driven commerce, from the moderately-sized slave depot in Sette-Cama to the French lumber concerns. COSREG’s arrival after independence fit this interpretive model neatly, as local interaction with foreign commerce had already become

regularized. The benefits that came with Shell-Gabon were known to the local population, who had had time to evolve social and political institutions to the existence of both foreign MNCs and a central state. This also explains the relative subservience of the region's chiefs to the prefectural state to whom they owed their positions, as well as the diminished authority of *chefs de terre* which had taken place well before the decentralization reforms.

Decentralization introduced institutions competing for public authority with Shell and the prefectural state. Concurrent with the addition of two local assemblies in the mid-1990s, new forms of rent and monetization through decades of MNC presence created new forms of legitimation, detracting further from any semblance of a "hegemonic constellation of power"⁵⁰¹ by the state or any other institution. What resulted was a perfect storm of institutional proliferation, leading to the evidence of rising anomie outlined in Chapter 4.

The dazzling array of institutions active in the Ndougou's community governance are both interlocking and often competing. The rules governing their interactions are from an outsider's perspective either incomprehensible or vague. To begin, the prefect himself has the legal capacity to command and veto virtually any policy decision taken by either of the local assemblies in his administrative district (the Department of the Ndougou). Yet he has rarely if ever done so, according to the Secretary General of the Departmental Council. The same goes for the prefect's relationship with Shell, with whom he shares a distant but cordial relationship. The *gendarmes*, the Brigade des Faunes, and the park rangers who operate under the prefect all appear moderately deferential towards Shell and respectful of its autonomy. The *gendarmerie* checkpoint, for instance, is established beyond the Yenzi management camp as one enters the town of Gamba itself, allowing Shell personnel to move frequently between Yenzi and the terminal without the hassle of occasional bribing. When a Shell employee is stopped, an ID card is often sufficient to avoid harassment.

These examples prove a degree of "regularization" of processes⁵⁰² which hint at predictability and often lead to institutional congruence, desirable if a community wants to avoid the constant negotiating which opens the door to opportunistic big men. Other forms of regularization between institutions of public authority include the relationship between the state's cadastral service, the park rangers, the Brigade des Faunes and the WWF, whose studies since the

⁵⁰¹ Lund, *Twilight Institutions*, 698.

⁵⁰² S. F. Moore, *Law as Process* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

early 1990s have identified zones of customary usage. The congruence so far has benefited (albeit partially) villages previously unsure of their fishing and hunting rights.

On the other hand, competition between institutions has also led to processes of situational adjustment⁵⁰³ and ultimately institutional incongruence. One notable example is the tension between Shell-Gabon and the local assemblies, reflecting as well a tension between formalization and informalization. According to Shell's Social Performance Department, ever sensitive to its international image, they have clamped down on corruption within their ranks, making sure that every expense is well documented. They also remain adamant that they do not become a proxy government with long-term obligations to the community, since such a pursuit has been, and would remain, very costly with the productive decline of Rabi-Kounga. That is ostensibly why Shell took the opportunity to formalize and scale down its community assistance, limiting itself to three main projects set to terminate at precise dates. For the local assemblies, Shell's insistence on formal relations restricts their ability to rent-see and develop mutual projects with Shell which would benefit their political careers.

The local assemblies themselves are also in competition with the administrative chieftaincy, some of whom (particularly in Mougambi, Sette Cama, and Pitonga) openly deride the Council's failure to maintain the village amenities constructed in the early 2000s. For chiefs, the ability to remain chiefs often depends on the villagers' esteem for them and their capacity to improve village life. These examples of situational adjustment forestall any series of predictable encounters between the institutions involved. If a community spirit has not developed in the Ndougou, and associations have been uncommonly few and halting, it is because such unpredictability has led to apathy and fatalism among the population.

But most noxious in terms of political anomie is the fact that no interpretive models of decentralized governance existed in the Ndougou prior to 1993 (City Hall) and 1996/1997 (Departmental Council). Shell followed in the footsteps of several foreign-owned concerns, while centralization had been the norm since Loango and the French Empire. All of the sudden, local assemblies arrived, composed of councilors chosen by universal suffrage, most of whom belonged to the first-comer Baloumbou, Bavili, or Bavarama. They had precisely the same social and economic missions as Shell-Gabon, which was always obligated by law to provide social and

⁵⁰³ *ibid.*

economic assistance to communities impacted by its exploitation.⁵⁰⁴ For roughly 20 years, the two local assemblies represent the only prominent structures—after passing by the Yenzi management camp—upon entering Gamba. They therefore have a visible and symbolic impact on any passers-by, and without further information, one could not be faulted for believing in their importance to the community.

But a huge gulf separates the symbolic importance of the assemblies from their practical importance. Political legitimacy, as recounted in Chapter 5 (Rentierism) rests largely on the efficient provision of goods and services. Shell-Gabon's annual Social Performance budgets are \$1.6 million (2014) to \$2.5 million (2015-2017) per annum, which excludes the PID/PIH outlay for the road projects. Precise expenditures are reported in the Social Performance Plan, which includes an estimated \$1.2 million to be spent on Gamba Hospital over three years, \$700,000 to be spent on the Gamba Secondary School over two years, while \$2.8 million is allocated to a long-term entrepreneurial development scheme.⁵⁰⁵ On the other hand, the Departmental Council reports in their Local Development Plan that they typically have roughly \$9 million at their disposal annually, while information on expenditures remains practically unobtainable and, more damning, *evidence* of the results of expenditures remains few and far between. As previously discussed, the village amenities have been in utter disrepair, and the unelected Secretary-General of the Departmental Council attested to corruption without providing any specifics. Furthermore, almost all unelected interviewees with an interest in local development were confident that the lofty objectives of the PDL would go unmet. Through these examples, Shell's relative legitimacy is brought to the fore.

The local assemblies and Shell also operate incongruently. While the councils openly protest Shell's hesitance to commit further funds to the local assemblies, Shell-Gabon has a clear policy of avoiding enmeshment in local governance. The last unbudgeted donation was in 2014, when Shell Gabon provided the University of Masuku with biochemistry materials and equipment totaling \$129,000. They have since discontinued such disbursements, leaving the local assemblies without a stable partner for their specific aims, which go above and beyond Shell's axes of social and economic support by including funds for things like tourism promotion in their plans.

⁵⁰⁴ The *PID/PIH* obliges Shell-Gabon to spend a certain percentage of its budget on development projects. Such money has been used to fund road projects, for example. See Shell-Gabon, "Social Performance Plan" (Shell Upstream, 2012), 11.

⁵⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 22.

The result from the perspective of anomie is discordant signals of goods and services provision and the widespread impression of corruption shared by locals, leading to profound political disaffection. When Gambans and villagers express their disdain for local politicians, it is with their relative ineffectiveness in mind. Before decentralization, there were fewer avenues to exclusionary clientelism available to local elites, whereas today it appears that public funds are rerouted to support a political class and their friends, as was demonstrated in the case of road-building negotiations carried out by a hapless former mayor. Such instances of malfeasance were easier to hide when Shell was performing the legitimate role of local government. But with recent rumors of Shell's downsizing and departure, the activities of local assemblies are being laid bare. Where locals could once rely on Shell to support their needs, they are now weary of being left with an ineffectual and potentially corrupt set of institutions. Even if Shell-Gabon employs a grievance mechanism, decisions are finalized thousands of miles away in The Hague. The situation is an untenable one, and leaves locals with minimal confidence in public institutions, the formally proper depositories of their grievances. The lesson here is that reliance on the private sector to achieve public aims can only be done incongruently. In such a situation, more integrity is required from elected officials than is realistic, leading to what hybridists warned was a space for opportunism.

Competition between Western thought processes and ancestral cosmologies⁵⁰⁶ has also derailed any efforts to create communal harmony, and thus serious associative attempts to improve the collective lot. Religion is paramount in the Ndougou, with nearly every individual either adherent to Christianity, ancestral cosmologies, or a syncretic variant of either two. As a mode of local governance, religion operates subtly in the psychosocial dimension, reinforcing and creating norms which limit and expand the possibility of particular undertakings. Among the undertakings decried by ancestral cosmologies is unchecked personal accumulation and the abandonment of communities of ancestors. As recounted in Chapter 3, social anomie in the Ndougou is largely represented in the pervasive belief that sorcerers have chased most of the population to Gamba out of pure jealousy. The potent fear of witchcraft and sorcery constrains and conditions villagers who remain in an agrarian mode of existence. For example, upon departing Soungha en route to Sette Cama, an elderly woman burst into loud sobs and convulsions. When I asked the boat captain why,

⁵⁰⁶ Olivier de Sardan acknowledges that religions themselves are often modes of local governance. See J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, "The Eight Modes of Local Governance in West Africa." *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (2011): 22-31.

he explained that she rarely abandons her native village and family. She was clearly afraid, frightful of what her ancestors might think, even if only due to the objectively harmless contravention of traversing the lagoon to meet a family member. On an overnight visit to Ingouéka, I had the opportunity to witness a funeral service. An eternal fire was lit and several fetishes kept to keep the deceased happy with afterlife in the village. A special wood was digested by the dancers (one of whom was an *nganga*), which was hallucinogenic and allowed them to see and speak with the deceased, wishing him a pleasant journey to the other world. Ancestral cosmologies persist.

But the arrival of heavy industry in 1960 brought a population boom, and with it the proliferation of not only non-agrarian means of subsistence but also religious observance. The pastor of the local Alliance Chrétienne speaks vociferously against such pagan beliefs and commands a church (one of at least a dozen) of more than 200 congregation members. The twin reforms of industrialization and Christianity serve to encourage village exodus and relieve the resultant cognitive dissonance respectively. But for those without salaries or work related to the oil industry, remaining in the village is one of the few remaining options. In effect, social cohesion at the cosmological level appears to be breaking down, and mutual accusations of witchcraft are not at all uncommon. Incongruent worldviews have also spilled over to local government, doing nothing to improve the local assemblies' reputation with villagers. Albert, the attaché to the mayor (an elected position), claims the mayor's office works closely with the community's churches on several initiatives, a means to remain close with churchgoing Gambans. At the same time, City Hall is the keenest to halt village exodus, and they therefore have a vital interest in supporting and encouraging ancestral cosmologies so as to reduce pressure on Gamban infrastructure.

Lastly, the governance of law and order is occupied by one of several agencies, private contractors, and chiefs, so much so that no consensus had been reached at the time of the study on whom to turn to in case of theft. Though all respondents to a structured interview acknowledged that murder was the jurisdiction of the gendarmerie, and adultery that of the chiefs, few agreed on the proper bureaucratic avenues in case of theft. While some acknowledged the gendarmerie (the formal agency with the legal capacity to enforce criminal laws), others suggested the chiefs or the prefect, the cantonal secretary, or even one of the local assemblies. As a result, this has left several executive agencies competing for either jurisdiction or relief from jurisdiction in cases where disputes are not easily resolved. Where the lines of competence are not clearly drawn, it is impossible to fully streamline the maintenance of law and order, allowing law-breakers plenty of

space to maneuver. The highly contentious “homme-faune” conflict represents this quite well. Since supporting the ecology and vitality of crop-devastating elephants is highly unpopular with villagers, no agency appears keen to respond to reports of elephant-slaying or trapping. Even the prefect who oversees park rangers is verbally sympathetic to villagers facing crop-devastating fauna. As a result, there is an implicit understanding that the illegal activity can be carried out with impunity if one is careful enough. Yet again, incongruent institutions are made to face off with another, to the detriment of long-term regularization and certainty in public affairs.

It is easy to see how these instances of unpredictability, derived from a non-hegemonic state and bred by a proliferation of incongruous institutions, short-circuits communal and congruous efforts to improve the livelihoods of the Ndougou’s inhabitants. Though many authors of the self-described newer generation of rentier theorists readily point out that strong institutions are what separates many Western oil-dependent states from those in the global South, they do not delve deeper into the determinants of strong and weak institutions. Hybrid governance approaches demonstrate that the relative strength and weakness of institutions at the local level is often a matter of congruity. Particularly in oil-bearing communities where a proliferation of institutions is likely to unfold, such congruity can be notoriously hard to achieve.

CHAPTER 7. Searching for external validity: The case of the coastal Western Region in Ghana

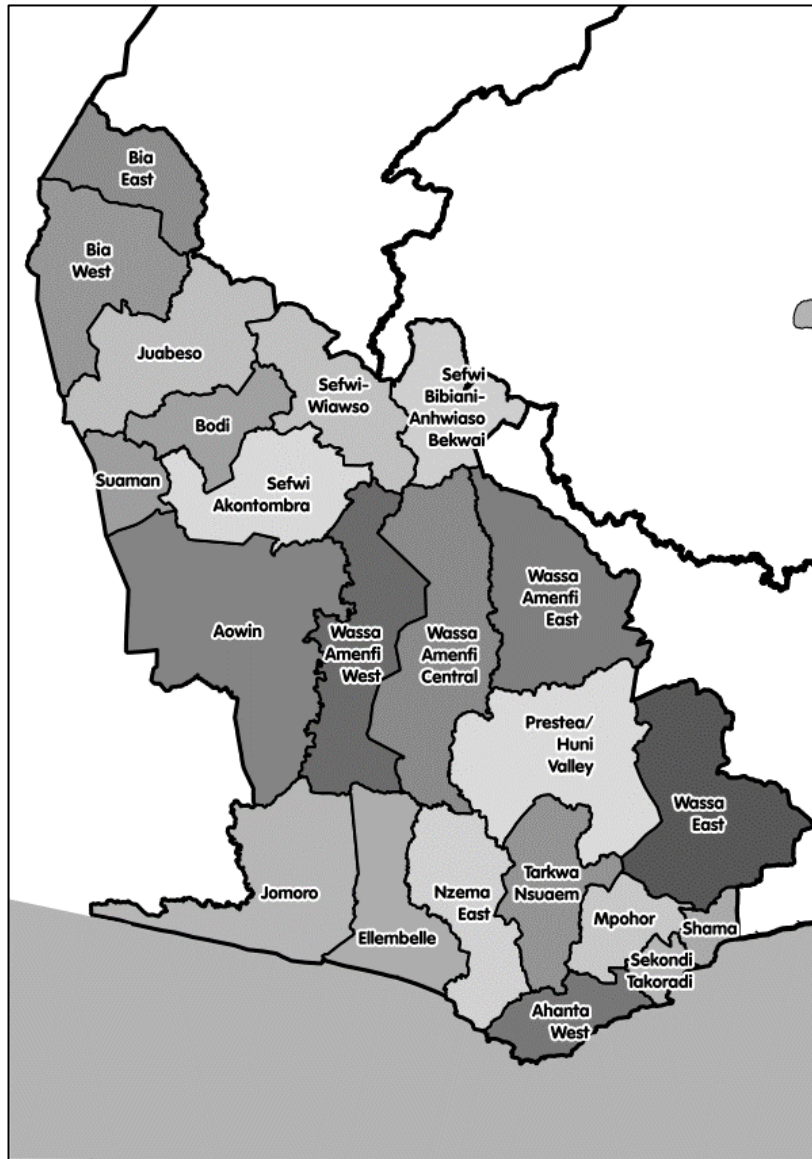
In this chapter, I will compare the case of the Western Region in Ghana to the Ndougou lagoon. If the conceptual conclusions reached in Chapter 4 are to be considered valid, they must be at least loosely applicable to the Western Region. Although Sekondi-Takoradi and the six coastal districts under investigation bare few contextual similarities to the Ndougou lagoon in Gabon, the local developmental outcomes and appearance of anomic structures are arguably identical, if one adjusts for scale. In this sense, the following study can be regarded as a Most Different Systems Design in the tradition of Theda Skocpol, in which the objective is to look for a sufficiently common explanatory factor of shared anomie and livelihood changes in different socio-economic and political contexts. Section 7.1 is therefore dedicated to establishing these differences with a method similar to that used in Chapter 3, where the Western Region is diachronically historicized so as to trace local institutions.

7.1. Institutions and Livelihoods in the Western Region, 1300s – 2007

The following section attempts to reconstruct a history of political institutions in the Western Region of Ghana, with emphasis placed on the region's administrative capital of Sekondi-Takoradi. For historical information and evidence predating the discovery of offshore oil (the Jubilee Field) in 2007, this section relies extensively on secondary sources, of which there are many owing to the relative accessibility to researchers of oral tradition and archives. For historical indices after 2007, I have relied on both secondary and original field research. The conclusions reached, therefore, are based on the state of knowledge as it existed at the time of fieldwork.

To adequately trace the evolutionary factors of change of political institutions in the Western Region of Ghana—that is, the region the most affected by and with the most claims on the proceeds derived from offshore oil deposits—it is necessary to focus on the region's present-day inhabitants: the Fante, the Ahanta, the Wassa, and the Nzema. Indeed, the objective is not to characterize a geographical territory but a group of people to the extent that they may be a self-

described group. Luckily for the ease of description, the groups mentioned share similar migratory histories and even common origins.



Map 11: Districts of the Western Region, Ghana.

The coastal shores of Ghana before the Atlantic slave trade were scarcely inhabited owing to low crop productivity along the Guinean littoral. The story of the Western Region's inhabitants, therefore, begins inland, from whence immigrated the Fante, whose present-day boundaries now extend across practically the entire coastline, with the highest concentrations between the littoral towns of Agona in the west and Winneba in the east. The Fante are of Akani origin, and therefore

share a common lineage with dozens of Akan groups—including the Wassa, Ahanta, and in fewer numbers the Nzema—through the migrations beginning in the 15th century. Better said, these groups were indistinguishable when they were dependents of the kingdom of Bonoman, which as early as the 12th century was established, prospering from a booming trade in gold thanks in large part to Muslim traders in the north. Over time, however, both internal and external forces led to migrations and resettlements over centuries which led to the formation of diverging identities, making possible the existence of “Fante” and “Asante” monikers. Newer historiography is yielding an emerging consensus that despite past efforts to conceptualize a pan-Akani identity, important differences exist between Akan sub-groups.

Akan groups do, however, share important cultural characteristics not limited to common linguistic roots. Akan peoples are matrilineal and more importantly exogamous, the consequences of which for political formations were discussed in previous chapters. Marriage, for instance, was banned within clans since all the members could be said to have descended from a single female. As with Gabon’s southern ethnic groups, it may be hypothesized that this system of inheritance yielded more centralized political formations to come, the Bonoman kingdom being one such example. Chiefs could, and still do, largely command the loyalties of those belonging to the same clan and inhabiting the land to which chiefly first-comers could lay claim. It is in the kingdom of Bonoman that the use of stools as symbols of power began, a tradition almost universally adhered to today. But how the Fante and their counterparts in the Western Region emerged cannot be explained by internal forces alone, but through internal forces within Bonoman reacting to external forces.

Consensus reveals that continuous migrations southwards from Bonoman led to separate groups forging separate identities. One of these groups was the Fante, whose name loosely means “the half that left.” In the midst of a 13th-century war with the Asante, these Bono Akan peoples, henceforth named “Borbor” Fante, departed (“left”) present-day Takyiman and founded the town of Mankessim. From the mid-15th century through the mid-18th century—when Mankessim and Bonoman came under Asante domination—Borbor Fante dispersed towards the coast and expanded in both easterly and westerly directions, though precise dates within this timeframe remain uncertain.⁵⁰⁷ During the time immediately following migrations, Borbor Fante institutions

⁵⁰⁷ James Robert Sanders, “The Political Development of the Fante in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: a Study of a West African Merchant Society” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1980), 66.

consisted of paramountcies with chiefs serving as the primary foci of power under the *Omanhene*, or king, in Mankessim. Agriculture was the primary means of subsistence. Throughout the 17th century, however, trade gradually replaced agriculture as European coastal forts, notably constructed by the Dutch and Portuguese, allowed Borbor Fante hopefuls to establish import-export operations with indiscriminating Europeans. At this time, a merchant class arose which, though subordinate to the relatively weak king in Mankessim, managed to use their wealth to increase their number of dependents, slave and free. Settlements and resettlements of dependents were increasingly carried out, further encouraging the expansion of Borbor Fante along the coast. In each merchant's new domain, territories and administrative units would eventually crystallize into full-scale paramountcies, eroding the powers of the king in Mankessim. The emerging power of merchants was such that they even commanded local *asafo*'s, small military organizations relying on newly arrived immigrants for manpower.⁵⁰⁸ Thus, the opportunities afforded to the Borbor Fante to act as middlemen in the trade of gold and slaves between Europeans and hinterland Akani gave way to two interrelated processes directly affecting the political institutions of the 17th century Fante: the emergence of a new merchant class and its attendant territorialization as well as the decentralization of the Borbor Fante as one political unit. This process of decentralization, in fact, is comparable to the Loango kingdom's experience, where the burgeoning merchant class of Point Noire gradually eroded the territorial empire of Kongo.

By 1700, European observers on the coast were able to describe in more detail the political organization of what they called the "Fante." Willem Bosman, a merchant working for the Dutch West India Company in the "Gold Coast," likened the government of Fanteland to "the English parliament." "No king has sovereignty here, but in the same place a distinguished chief, which they call a Braffo... 'He is the first man in the whole Country and has the greatest authority;' but is stout-heartedly held in restraint by a group of Patriarchs" who "do what they want to without caring about the Braffo."⁵⁰⁹ The sentiments were later echoed by Jean Barbot, who considered the Braffo as a "chief governor" bearing "only an empty title without any power" due to a relatively

⁵⁰⁸ Ray A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), Chapters V-VI.

⁵⁰⁹ Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts* (Sir Alfred Jones, 1705), 58-59.

independent “parliament.”⁵¹⁰ James Sanders compares these descriptions to those of other Akan groups descended towards the coast, including the neighbouring Fetu who bore a “monarchical” structure compared to the Fante’s “commonwealth.”⁵¹¹ Before the Asante invasion from the north, therefore, relatively independent paramountcies had already begun to take place by 1700, even if the nobles and merchants still owed tribute to the king in Mankessim (known as the “Braffo” to Europeans), and even if traditional political institutions in smaller units remained intact; several reports by European observers suggest that merchants owed precise taxes and tribute to local chiefs acting as custodians of the land. As in Gabon during the Atlantic period, the accrual of wealth allowed chiefs to increase their respective numbers of dependents, even though symbolic importance was given to traditional structures. Whatever territory the Fante seized in migrating or warring southwards and along the coast, the autochthonal chiefs remained paramount in their respective territories, as was the case with the Etsi. Respect for first-comers and oral tradition persisted.

From 1700 to 1806, two external forces shaped Fanteland’s political geography: the inexorable rise of the Asante kingdom to the north and the proliferation of European forts trading in gold and slaves to the south. Both processes would serve to forge a Fante identity from common economic interests, i.e. the need to maintain a favorable coastal position in the European trade. Indeed, the aforementioned chiefs relied on duties and taxation emanating from trade routes in order to preserve their paramountcies, and, furthermore, lucrative trade had long replaced subsistence farming for local economic sustenance. Asante influence over the coastal trade was recognized as early as 1701, when both the British and then the Dutch saw opportunities to actively court the Asantahene. By this time, slaves were beginning to surpass gold in the overall volume of trade at the ports, and competition between the British and Dutch forts and spheres of influence raised prices all along the coast. The Asante therefore launched several military campaigns to bypass the Fante middlemen on their way to the coast, prompting the Fante to conduct preemptive territorial acquisitions east and west of their traditionally inhabited land in the region surrounding Cape Coast. By 1724, the Fante would control territories as far west as Elmina and as far east as Akwamu.

⁵¹⁰ Jean Barbot, *A Supplement to the Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* (Henry Lintot and John Osborn, 1746), 175.

⁵¹¹ Sanders, *Political Development of the Fante*, 100-101.

At this time, evidence suggests that present-day Sekondi-Takoradi and much of the Western Region was part of the Wassa “kingdom,” while the nearest confirmed Fante paramountcy lay to the east at Komenda, in close proximity to the Eguafo paramountcy to the north. Little if any precise information exists on the history of whom we call today the “Ahanta,” except that they were most certainly an offshoot of the westward Fante migrations in the 15th century and that they had probably become small tributary villages to larger political formations—such as the Wassa, Asante, and Fante—at varying intervals. While oral tradition indicates that the Ahanta are simply Borbor Fante who crossed the river Pra, Bosman observed in the early 18th-century rites and dances in Axim that were identical to those along the Fante coast. Dutch maps from that time also indicate the dominance of Wassa in the Western Region, with whom the Fante were said to have frequent contact.

Though not formally grouped with Fante, perhaps due to the difficulties of maintaining polities across natural barriers such as the river Pra, there is no reason to believe the Ahanta—whose chiefs occupy the majority of paramountcies in the Western Region today—were substantially different from Fante in culture or economy. In terms of political organization, the Wassa kingdom was a typical Akan proto-state, akin to its neighboring Fante paramountcies which themselves had never truly united along the lines of the Asante. In this regard the Wassa kingdom could neither have been acephalous nor centralized. With respect to economy, there is little reason to doubt the Wassa/Ahanta were not fully engaged in the coastal trade. Not only was the Dutch fort at Butri close,⁵¹² but in the 18th century Wassa became the target of both Fante and Asante territorial ambitions precisely for its advantageous proximity to the trading coast.

Wassa’s unfortunate position in the midst of a regional power struggle was not unique; throughout the 18th century, the Fante would shift diplomatic stances from appeasement and/or preemption of an ever-strengthening Asante empire to building alliances in order to directly meet what would become an increasingly serious economic threat. The Fante therefore reacted to Asante encroachment by calling on *asafos* to conquer as many neighboring coastal states as possible and thereby preventing Asante merchants from reaching the coast. Wassa was one exception, having been invaded by Asante in 1726, after which its king, Ntsiful, fled to the Fante paramountcies for protection. By 1750, Wassa and several neighboring states, some the victims

⁵¹² Kwamina B. Dickson, *A Historical Geography of Ghana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 57-58.

of past Fante invasions, formed a “Grand Alliance”⁵¹³ with the Fante which lasted until the successful Asante invasion of the Fante coast in 1806. What is interesting is that, as James Sanders points out, Fante political life had remained throughout in the form of a “commonwealth,” never crystallizing a vaster, more united kingdom as the Asante had done in the north.⁵¹⁴ Why this had not taken place despite shared interests and cultures among the several Fante and coastal Akan paramountcies is important for the present study, the objective of which is to outline the evolution of political institutions.

From the mid-18th century to 1806, the Fante responded to the Asante threat by coalescing with regional neighbours, as stated. This Grand Alliance, or “Coastal Coalition,” while contributing to a sense of Fante identity, did not lead to centralization along the lines of otherwise similar Akan states. The reasons for this are not certain, but Sanders is able to conclude through a study of Anomabo’s political institutions that paramountcy development was stunted primarily due to economic factors, as well as key institutional differences between the matrilineal Fante and the largely patrilineal autochtones they had conquered. Wealth was an important source of power for Fante chiefs who rivaled even each other, having migrated from various quarters of Mankessim owing allegiance to at least four different chiefs. Therefore, while the need to access trading routes unified chiefs in Anamoba, Cape Coast, Winneba, and beyond, against Asante encroachment, the relative ease of generating wealth for any particular chief and/or merchant stunted incipient political formation. In Asante, for instance, mining for gold required many capital and labor inputs which could only be marshalled by centralized authorities. In Fanteland, chiefs relied not on gold but on taxation of trade with the Europeans and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the sale of foodstuffs produced via small-scale agriculture. Neither required much labor input.

Until 1844, when the British sought more direct control over their coastal holdings in order to meet the Asante threat, an active policy of allying with the Fante was carried out, a process that further militarized the Fante and may have contributed to their expanded influence through piecemeal conquest of their neighbors. With the Anglo-Fante treaty in 1817, it was the explicit policy of the British to assign the Fante a “protectorate” status, and, in so doing, secure vital trade arrangements which they had good reason to believe would be threatened by Asante overlordship

⁵¹³ A. Adu Boahen, “Fante Diplomacy in the Eighteenth Century.” In *Foreign Relations of African States* (Ed. K. Ingham. London), 40.

⁵¹⁴ Sanders, *Political Development of the Fang*, 137.

of the coast.⁵¹⁵ This could only strengthen the asafos, which by this time had become a veritable institution, rivaling worship of the shrine of Nananom Mpow as the defining characteristic of Fante culture where no other national attributes can be said to have existed. Prior to more direct forms of British intervention on the coast, however, Fante political institutions remained difficult to characterize in concrete terms. This was not only due to the lack of centralization but also the co-existence of patrilineal asafos military organizations and matrilineal chiefs, which often became an issue in times of chiefly succession. In a pattern begun earlier in the 18th century, prominent men with either wealth or military prowess—who could also establish a royal lineage—succeeded in becoming enstooled.

Although Fanteland’s decentralized institutions experienced few disruptions prior to 1844, the groundwork was being laid for significant change in the future, reaffirming what Gocking termed as the uniquely “gradual and adaptive”⁵¹⁶ subjection of coastal Akani (primarily Fante) to British designs. Pursuant to intelligence that the Asante were planning coastal incursions, the British crown in 1821 decreed the direct administration of coastal forts and settlements. According to Gocking, this had the direct effect of empowering coastal chiefs at the expense of those further inland, while also concentrating merchants and commoners in those secured spaces.⁵¹⁷ While these developments helped to align the interests of local and British authorities, Wesleyan Methodists had established the first Christian mission in Cape Coast by 1838, boosting the European population and spreading Christianity to the general population.⁵¹⁸ Lastly, the British drafted and signed the Bond of 1844 in a preemptive response to further Asante threats. The Bond, which established a “protocolonial” relationship⁵¹⁹ between the British and the Fante, allowed British officials, in cooperation with “chiefs of the district,” to try serious crimes, a first of what was to become many intrusions into traditional chiefly prerogatives. Together with missionary activities, these developments led to the “creolization”⁵²⁰ of many Fante elites who would form the backbone of a wealthy, educated class of “natives.” This came roughly thirty years prior to the formal establishment of the Gold Coast colony, promising that the central coast of present-day Ghana

⁵¹⁵ Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Vol. 52.* (Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 11.

⁵¹⁶ Roger Gocking, *Facing Two Ways: Ghana's Coastal Communities under Colonial Rule.* (Univ Pr of Amer, 1999), 3.

⁵¹⁷ *ibid.*, 37-38.

⁵¹⁸ *ibid.*, 41.

⁵¹⁹ Shumway, *The Fante*, 12.

⁵²⁰ Gocking, *Ghana's Coastal Communities.*

would become quite powerful and, by West African standards, quite unique. As Gocking points out, the Fante creoles were quite close to their places of origin, ensuring that matrilineal traditions and modes of succession would still persist and creating mostly legitimate local rulers who were also members of the wealthy, educated elite. Such was not the case in places like Sierra Leone or Senegal.⁵²¹

As is well known in Ghanaian historiography, the British colonial administration was insistent on streamlining local governments under their domain, since officers neither had the expertise nor the resources to effectively govern at local levels. This necessitated a reduction in the severity and frequency of succession disputes between candidates for chiefly office. It appears as no coincidence, then, that dynastic rule among the coastal Akan began after the Bond of 1844. An example of British intervention towards these ends occurred in 1866, when King Aggrey of Cape Coast was successfully deposed for attempting to raise his own police force and administer his own justice. Taking advantage of the latent “confusion” between matrilineal Akan traditions and patrilineal asafos, the British replaced King Aggrey with the matrilineal incumbent Kwesi Atta.⁵²² Chiefs on the coast, closely watching these dispute outcomes and increasingly dependent on British trade and “protection,” vied for listing on the administration’s published gazette, the records of which began to betray more linear, descent-based patterns of succession, which arguably had never been the overriding norm among the Fante. Sanders’ analysis of stool chronologies in Anomabo indicates that its own paramountcy had not developed until the mid-19th century, confirming the general trend. Prior to the Bond of 1844, war chiefs propped up by asafos tended to dominate chronologies. After British interventions, royal paramountcies became prominent. Sanders, however—and in what Shumway considered to be an oversimplified dichotomy—seeks to distinguish the external influences on Fante political institutions from those which are internal, and in so doing marshals convincing evidence, including oral tradition, to support the idea that the development of Fante paramountcies “correlated with the wars which were fought during [the 19th century].”⁵²³ The “confused” nature of Fante political institutions seemed to remain salient.

By the time of the official crown declaration of the Gold Coast Colony in 1874, the coastal Fante had become very different from their Asante and northern territorial counterparts. Many

⁵²¹ *ibid.*, 9.

⁵²² Gocking, *Ghana’s Coastal Communities*, 40.

⁵²³ Sanders, *Political Development of the Fante*, 308.

successful merchants and literates saw themselves as go-betweens between the indigenous population and the British, as the power of non-merchant traditional chiefs was successively curtailed by missionaries, colonial administration of criminal justice, the progressive abolition of internal slavery, and the increasing importance of wealth and military might. It has also been well-documented that the Fante formed the core of a fledgling elite social class, one which would lead to the abortive Fante Confederation which lasted from 1868-1871; it also signaled among the first unambiguous gestures of Fante nationality. The intelligentsia and “creoles” were already establishing themselves as a powerful voice in the Gold Coast, and even felt themselves so aligned with British interests that they would support colonial expansion into the hinterland, undoubtedly to preempt further Asante attacks as well as to take advantage of what conquest had to offer in terms of trade. It is important to note, however, that the basic structure of matrilinearity and affiliation to the stool was not usurped. Rather, as some argue, its inherent flexibility allowed it to absorb commercial and cultural shocks.⁵²⁴

Between the establishments of the Gold Coast in 1874 and the Ashanti protectorate in 1897, paramountcies in Fanteland crystallized as the slave trade’s abolition unleashed legitimate commerce. More than ever, the means to wealth and political relevance in the Gold Coast became Christianity and schooling, as chiefs sought to have themselves as well as their children instructed in the English language and European mores in order to win the approval of colonial officials. The dominance of trade in Fanteland (Cape Coast), where agents of commercial kings, capitalists, and petty traders comprised an estimated 30.29% of the population, was apparent compared to Accra, where the same figures stood at 24.04%.⁵²⁵ From 1867 to 1897, the number of civil service employees increased tenfold, where most natives securing employment from the administration were Fante.⁵²⁶ In terms of traditional powers secured by the chiefs, not much had changed. Although the Supreme Court was established in 1878 which would follow common law jurisprudence on the English model, many facets of what was deemed “customary” law were upheld and woven into the colony’s legal fabric. Lastly, property and the transfer of wealth were largely managed within the confines of matrilinearity, which was showing signs of replacing the

⁵²⁴ Gocking, *Ghana’s Coastal Communities*, 63.

⁵²⁵ *ibid.*, 58.

⁵²⁶ *ibid.*, 60.

patrilineal modes of succession among the asafo militias—by 1888 an asafo commander had been chosen through matrilineal lines.

Most historians, including Gocking, argue that the years prior to the imposition of indirect rule in 1898 represented the low-point of traditional chief rule in Fanteland and the wider Gold Coast, given the inroads made by merchant elites. With the Native Administration Bill, a process of taking away “the power of the traditional rulers and [giving] them authority in local government”⁵²⁷ would last until the 1940s. With respect to the Fante coast, and, more specifically, Sekondi-Takoradi, the degree of changes to political institutions must have been doubly severe. According to G.K. Nukunya, change in institutions “depends on the length and intensity of exposure to the factors [listed above].”⁵²⁸ A social anthropologist well-regarded by students of Ghanaian history, Nukunya lists four main factors of institutional change throughout Ghana’s history: the impact of colonialism, Christianity, classroom education, and a “money-using economy,” which served to reinforce one another and culminated in the peculiar political position chiefs occupy in Ghana today. Fanteland was arguably exposed to these four factors for longer and, perhaps, at a more intense degree than the eastern Gold Coast, Ashanti, or the Northern Territories.

Beginning with the Native Administration Bill of 1898, the British actively empowered chiefs at the level of local government, applying the same governance structure—deemed “native”—to all three of its otherwise distinct territories. After the forced submission of the Asantahene and his subjects, colonial officials found it expedient to apply an “Akan” model to what was now the entire Gold Coast, ignoring the fact that this model was more precisely Asante. Other Akans, like the Fante and Ahanta who had decentralized forms of governance, would have to adapt. From the turn of the century through the interwar period, the empowerment of chiefs at the expense of now-disempowered merchant elites would have repercussions through the postcolonial era. The empowerment of chiefs and the insistence on “custom” and tradition by the British was not a model of colonial governance shared by the French in southwestern Gabon, where populations were sparse and where traditions of centralized governance lent relatively easily to the emplacement of *chefs de village*, who more often than not were hereditary chiefs tracing lineages

⁵²⁷ Kwamina B. Dickson, *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. (CUP Archive, 1969, p. 108) in Rathbone, Richard. *Nkrumah and the Chiefs*. (Ohio State University Press, 2000), 11.

⁵²⁸ Godwin Kwaku Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana: An Introduction to Sociology*. (Ghana Universities Press, 2003), 139.

to ancestors in the Loango kingdom. A different vertical relationship of power existed in Gabon which will necessitate further analysis as to how it may have contributed to institutional development under oil extraction.

Chiefly *authority* in the southern Gold Coast largely exceeded chiefly *power*, endogenously derived, in precolonial Fanteland and much of Ahanta, and this succeeded in breeding much discontent from merchant elites. The accrual of authority by chiefs came about in a succession of bills and ordinances intended to carry out the efficient governance of local communities in accordance with colonial dictates; the Native Jurisdiction Bill of 1896, the Lands Bill of 1897, the 1904 Chiefs Ordinance, the 1904 Stool Property Detention Ordinance, the Towns Ordinances, the amended 1910 Native Jurisdiction Bill, etc. The legislative instruments together coalesced in giving chiefs near-despotic powers within their allotted jurisdictions, so long as they courted the favor of colonial overlords who, since the 1904 Chiefs Ordinance, retained the power to destool and enstool individuals at will. The powers to try crimes excluding the most serious felonies, to alienate land, and to pass a number of bylaws led to the intense competition for stools, whose qualifications gradually shifted from religion, wealth, and military prowess to literacy and education.

The new legislation required that most regions enstool a Head Chief occupying a Paramountcy, generating conflict in Ahanta where no Head Chief had occupied the Stool since 1838, when the Dutch abolished the position for insubordination. The most convincing claim to the Stool came from a descendant of the Head Chief at Busua (or Bushua) who had been deposed. But it was not apparent that eastern Ahanta, that which encompasses Sekondi-Takoradi, had ever been subservient to pre-Dutch Busua. Instead it was “common practice... to entrust the care of the smaller villages to an officer of the Asafo or company, known as an Asafo-asafohene,”⁵²⁹ confirming the claim that the Ahanta were relatives of the Fante. Nevertheless, in 1911 the Commissioner of the Western Province held an inquiry into the matter due to the proliferation of the region’s quasi-independent stools, leading to the reconstitution of the Busua Paramountcy in 1912.

By 1919, the new head chief, Baidu Bonso X was deposed by sub-chiefs unhabituated to central control and arbitrary powers. According to an account by a former Secretary for Native

⁵²⁹ Charles Wellesley Welman, *The Native States of the Gold Coast: Ahanta*. (London: Dawson, 1969 [1925]), 13.

Affairs on the Gold Coast, the head chief “abused the confidence and trust reposed in him”⁵³⁰ by appropriating land and lease holdings for himself and his family. Grown accustomed to independence, the sub-chiefs successfully petitioned the Government for a reelection, which was duly granted. In the imbroglio which transpired, another family surfaced with its own claims on the Stool, and proceeded to campaign with a series of eloquent letters and antiquated documents sent to the Commissioner. After years of litigation, it was decided that the claims by Francis Commey and Amba Alumoa were unfounded, despite the quick and ostensible support they had gathered amongst many of the sub-chiefs. Baidu Bonso XI was confirmed in 1924 amidst near-open rebellion by sub-chiefs and select families aligned with Commey and Alumoa. The retired Secretary suggested that order was in part restored due to the application of the Peace Preservation Ordinance 1921, which authorized visitation troops and arms confiscation until March, 1926. Reflecting on the dispute, Welman wrote the following:

Land provides a strong motive with the African at all times, and very often in his natural state a wholesome one but it is particularly strong, not to say violent and dangerous, in conditions such as existed in Ahanta, where there had been a considerable demand for land for some time by various European enterprises and the value of the land was suddenly being still further enhanced by the developments connected with Takoradi Harbour.⁵³¹

Despite its display of casual bigotry common among colonial officers of the time, Welman’s statement reflects an intensification of coastal institutional trends begun long ago, whereby proto-states were unable to crystallize into Asante-like kingdoms due to the character of contact with coastal Europeans (among other reasons), this time the British colonial state. This was so much the case that even the state had difficulty imposing a paramountcy with all its coercive prerogatives. As Welman points out, this trend fared little chance of abating with the construction of the artificial Takoradi Harbor in 1928, the first of its kind in all of West Africa. The reasons for why the British under Colonial Governor Sir Gordon Guggisberg would choose Takoradi for its

⁵³⁰ *ibid.*, 59.

⁵³¹ *ibid.*, 76.

harbor are based on several factors, including proximity to gold mines in nearby Tarkwa as well as to the railway depot in Sekondi. The massive investment—the most expensive in the British colonies in the 1920s⁵³²—coincided with the incorporation of the Town of Takoradi in 1926, and the years following were met with relatively large-scale immigration into the region and a general economic boom.

The construction of the harbor in Takoradi set in motion processes which gradually displaced the former role of Sekondi, which had been the political, economic, and clan fulcrum of the region since 1894 when it had been recognized as a town.⁵³³ Since 1898, Sekondi was the headquarters of the Railway organization, which was moved to Takoradi in 1934 after lines were extended to Takoradi in 1928. Already by 1927 the Railway and Harbor Administration was created as a merger of their former components, signaling the intention of colonial authorities to route most exports through the newly-built harbor. By 1946, the Sekondi-Takoradi Town Council replaced the former Sekondi Town Council which had governed the municipality since 1904.

Takoradi's population swelled with immigrants from the surrounding region, overtaking the Ahanta in numbers while contributing to farming, fishing, and more specifically cocoa production. K.A. Busia (1950), Officer-in-Charge of a survey conducted on behalf of the Government of the Gold Coast, recorded a population of just over 44,000 in 1948, just two decades after Takoradi had been incorporated. The new harbor and rail facilities led to the exponential



⁵³² Nate Plageman, "Colonial Ambition, Common Sense Thinking, and the Making of Takoradi hHarbor, Gold Coast." *History in Africa* 40, no. 1 (2013): 317-352.

⁵³³ Franklin Obeng-Odoom, *Oiling the Urban Economy: Land, Labour, Capital, and the State in Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana*. (Routledge, 2014), 79.

growth of the local economy, demonstrated by the fact that between 1938 and 1939 exports from Takoradi Harbor had increased by 186 percent. Imports likewise grew by approximately one third.⁵³⁴

The new demographic pressures not only shifted the balance of local power from Sekondi to Takoradi but also intensified the proliferation and complexity of local public authorities. Busia lists those partaking in “municipal government” as the Native Authorities, The Town Council, “tribal associations,” and the Central Government, all of which derived their duties and powers in ordinances passed in 1944 and 1945.⁵³⁵ One key distinction to be made with the experience of Gamba, Gabon is the popular antipathy towards Sekondi-Takoradi’s Native Authority. As in Gamba, the Native Authority (consisting of chiefs in British Sekondi, Dutch Sekondi, Ahanta, and the Ahanta Confederacy) personified by a chief had traditionally exercised executive, legislative, religious, and military functions, and was answerable to the District Commissioner. But in a minor difference with their counterparts in the Ndougou, chiefs in Ahanta had already been restricted to administrative functions by 1950. At the same time, “administration” was much broader than in Gamba, and consisted not only of the maintenance of law and order but also judicial powers (Native Courts), policing (Police Force), and the provision of a few social services with the help of a Treasury.⁵³⁶ Vis-à-vis their counterparts in Gamba, Ahanta chiefs were likewise agents of the Central Government, yet with considerably more prerogatives. In another key distinction, “persons of African descent,” or those subject to the chiefs, expressed more antipathy towards their Native Authority chiefs than in Gamba. Through their powers to levy taxes and duties, chiefs typically charged 4s per man and 2s per woman, despite widespread complaints that chiefs “do not provide any services for the townspeople.”⁵³⁷ In the pre-oil Ndougou, there is no evidence that such antipathy was either as pervasive or acutely felt.

Garnering much more respect was the Town Council, composed of elected, property-holding locals. Established by the 1945 Sekondi-Takoradi Town Council Ordinance, it was vested with the powers to draw up estimates, tax and spend, and enact bye-laws and regulations in the

⁵³⁴ *ibid.*, 80.

⁵³⁵ Kofi Abrefa Busia, *Report on a Social Survey of Sekondi-Takoradi*. (Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1951), 64-76.

⁵³⁶ *ibid.*, 65.

⁵³⁷ *ibid.*, 67.

fields of health, building, and transportation.⁵³⁸ In its estimates for the fiscal year 1950-1951, revenues collected primarily from bus services (53,808 pounds sterling), a loan (50,000) and other taxes such as licensing and real estate (25,443) would be spent on primarily health and sanitation (43,926), municipal works such as electricity (74,102), and bussing and other transportation services (54,859)⁵³⁹. For these reasons, the Council was generally regarded as a more efficient provider of services than the Native Authority. But, as Busia noted, the townspeople were rather apathetic towards the Council as a governing, political institution, and voter turnout in December, 1946 was roughly 20-25%.⁵⁴⁰ Noting that the Council was “remarkable” in that it was composed entirely of Ahanta in a very heterogeneous town, Busia explains that immigrants to the town had “other loyalties.”⁵⁴¹ Another conclusion drawn from Busia’s survey was that Ahantas were “cliquey,” in the words of one interviewee, and that newcomers (as members of outside clans) did not feel sufficiently tied to the future of Sekondi-Takoradi. According to Busia, “there is some truth in both explanations; the fact is that old tribal loyalties persist in the new situation of urban life, and put a brake on the development of Municipal Government along Western lines.”⁵⁴² The sentiments of alienation were, however, tempered by the multiplicity of “tribal” associations, which despite hindering a broader civic identity served to promote “law and order.”⁵⁴³

Busia lists the last municipal government institution as the Central Government in Accra, represented by the local District Commissioner who, as with the prefect in the Ndougou, enjoys supervisory capacity over the Council in addition to that over the Native Authority. Formally speaking, “the services which these Native Authorities provide in the town are, in fact, ancillary to those provided by the Central Government.”⁵⁴⁴ In this way, colonial Sekondi-Takoradi bears similarities to the relative centralization which persists in Gamba.

Though not included in the chapter on municipal government, Busia listed in Chapter VI of his study associations which were active in the town and which had clear implications for public authority. More numerous and prominent than at any point in Gamba’s history, those active in

⁵³⁸ Public Relations Department, “Know Your Council: A Brief Account of the Sekondi-Tekoradi Town Council.” (Accra, 1950), 11.

⁵³⁹ *ibid.*, 8-9.

⁵⁴⁰ Busia, *Report*, 69.

⁵⁴¹ (*ibid.*, 73).

⁵⁴² *ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁴³ *ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 76.

Sekondi-Takoradi included churches (70% of the population attended services of either denominational or inter-denominational churches regularly), a “rival” religious association Tigare which had made its appearance one year prior to Busia’s publication and which was composed of believers in all kinds of world faiths, the Ratepayers’ Association “designed to meet the new urban situation where the population include many more than the indigenous Ahanta,”⁵⁴⁵ the local branch of the United Gold Coast Convention militating for independence as soon as possible (with 1,500 members in town), and the Asafo companies among the Ahanta. By 1950, the asafo companies had been stripped of their former military functions, yet “every Ahanta belongs to one” through the patrilineal line.⁵⁴⁶ As they were influential in electing, installing, and even deposing chiefs, they “served as a political organ through which the popular will found expression.”⁵⁴⁷ Neither the richness, rate of participation in, nor complexity of, associations had ever existed in pre-oil Gamba, and this fact proves to be one of the prevailing differences between the two public arenas. Gamba was, of course, almost purely agrarian with a small minority of the sparse population being employed by loggers, thus it would make sense that few associations developed. But even after Shell-Gabon’s arrival, when the population rose above a few thousand to roughly 10,000, we have seen that the only viable association has been a civic cleanliness group. Because of this fact, Gamba’s lower population (both before and after oil) cannot fully account for the difference in the number of associations. Gamba also faced a less permissible bureaucracy (as was shown with the taxi association’s failure to gain legal status) and a culture of deference.

Though the initial boom from the harbor seemed to have given Takoradi a vibrant and dynamic feel, already by 1950 the city had begun to show signs of anomie, mirroring quite accurately the social pathologies which afflicted Gamba in the 1990s (pathologies which could just as easily be attributed to oil rentierism). On the one hand, the harbor and the industry it supported brought new employment opportunities to the town. In total, the government (Gold Coast Railways, Medical Department, Public Works Department, Takoradi Harbour, etc.) employed 5,523 people, whose wages ranged from 85 pounds to 1000 per year, depending on their seniority. Private firms (General Engineer 28ing and Construction Company, Takoradi Coaling and Lighterage Company, United Africa Company, etc.) for their part employed 3,050 workers

⁵⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁴⁶ *ibid.* 82.

⁵⁴⁷ *ibid.*

with wide-ranging wages (the highest private-sector employee salary recorded in the survey was 420 pounds per year). Others were engaged in street commerce, and to lesser degrees fishing and farming. Occupational associations and trade unions also served collective interest purposes, whether for pooling resources to purchase fishing nets, securing burial funds when native villages were distant, or negotiating with employers for better pay and conditions. Busia's survey indicated that at least 10,000 townspeople were members of one of a dozen unions, such as the Gold Coast Railway Employees Union or the Union of the Public Works Departments.⁵⁴⁸

On the other hand, much of the survey in its exquisite detail painted a dim picture of social degradation, during a time which is often referenced for being the "heyday" of Sekondi-Takoradi. A majority of townspeople were renters in dilapidated conditions, with densities exceeding 500 persons per acre in Anafo, while only 32 of 193 dwellings surveyed had private latrines.⁵⁴⁹ Groups of workers routinely complained of having to "make ends meet," with a significant number living in "primary and secondary poverty."⁵⁵⁰ Prices had risen significantly, and most respondents were purchasing food imports with fewer nutrients. Bridegrooms among the Ahanta could scarcely afford customary presents such as cloth and soaps, which had risen twofold in real prices from the 1860s to the 1940s. Schoolchildren were being trained in skills applicable to the Railways,⁵⁵¹ even as those jobs were becoming scarcer and scarcer. Youth unemployment and dissatisfaction was such an issue that juvenile delinquency was given its own chapter in Busia's study (VII). "Maladjustment to urban life" was cited as a cause for crime, collapse of "sexual morality," and even bribery and corruption. Even though Sekondi-Takoradi could not be described as a rentier space, there was "convincing evidence of corrupt practices in certain Government Departments," black-marketing, and other practices which were "evidence of the unbridled acquisitiveness which was a marked response of the community to the opportunities presented by the new economic system." Loosely mirroring the experience of Gamba as industrial presence grew, "stealing, burglary, fighting, quarreling, prostitution, and gambling" became more

⁵⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 28 ; 136.

⁵⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 19 ; For Busia, people in primary poverty are those who have insufficient means of existence, while those in secondary poverty are those who live precariously on a day-to-day basis and risk falling into primary poverty.

⁵⁵¹ *ibid.*, 62.

pronounced.⁵⁵² It is notable that in Sekondi, an older town with less industrial presence, these indices were much fewer.

From the leadup to independence to the discovery of the Jubilee field in 2007, Sekondi-Takoradi paralleled the rest of the country in experiencing a post-independence economic boom, followed by the onset of decline in the 1960s. As one of the nation's most important industrial hubs, the twin city's unions contributed to the anti-colonial bent of Sekondi-Takoradi, with a breakaway party from the UGCC calling for a more radical break with the UK. In addition, the post-war antagonisms created by discrimination within the military were doubly felt in Takoradi, where the Anglo-American alliance had established an airbase to combat Vichy forces in West Africa. Social activism continued as the city's population ballooned to nearly 200,000 by the 1970s. Many leading members of the militant nationalist Convention People's Party (CPP) were residents of the twin city, and the Railway Workers Union was regarded as the country's most powerful union.

Some argue that perpetual decline set in with the construction of the rival Tema harbor (just east of Accra) in 1962, realized as part of Kwame Nkrumah's "scientific socialism" scheme. Other cited contributing factors were the construction of a national road network, the decoupling of port and railways administration, and the institution of parallel government unions (such as the Ghana Trades Union Congress) in competition with existing structures. Finally, Ghana's general recession from 1966 to 1982 had a severe impact on port activity, even if Takoradi's unloading rate remained the second-highest in West Africa.⁵⁵³

Though the 1980s are generally regarded as a time of economic recovery for Ghana as a whole, the same cannot be said of Sekondi-Takoradi. Beginning in 1983, Bretton Woods institutions began devising neoliberal, market-led programs for economic revitalization. The net effect, however, was to concentrate capital in the country's largest urban areas of Accra and Kumasi, while secondary agglomerations like Sekondi-Takoradi and Tamale were virtually ignored.⁵⁵⁴ Furthermore, the 1987 Rehabilitation Programme—part of Ghana's own IMF-led structural adjustment, the Economic Recovery Program—targeted the lagging Railways for

⁵⁵² *ibid.*, 106-110.

⁵⁵³ Obeng-Odoom, *Sekondi-Takoradi*, 88.

⁵⁵⁴ Ian EA Yeboah, "Structural Adjustment and Emerging Urban Form in Accra, Ghana." (*Africa Today* (2000): 61-89) ; Ian EA Yeboah, "Demographic and Housing Aspects of Structural Adjustment and Emerging Urban Form in Accra, Ghana." (*Africa Today* (2003): 107-119).

privatization, which also ushered in the secondment of expatriate managerial staff. Though new coaches and other innovations were made, the Railways faltered, and with it its robust contribution to local employment. Since the Railways' incorporation as a listed company in 2001, there has been little investor interest.⁵⁵⁵ Franklin Obeng-Odoom, whose study in part traces the local social economy of Sekondi-Takoradi, analyzes the impact of these trends:

For now, it will suffice to say that the cumulative effect of these political economic processes is that the city is governed by a highly deradicalised local government system, which is poorly funded, poorly resourced, and poorly motivated trying to manage what some, knowing the hey-day of Sekondi-Takoradi, often described as a dead city [...]. Housing conditions deteriorated, as did the state of general infrastructure [...]. Writers familiar with Sekondi in its hey-day could only euphemistically say that it had 'seen better days' [...].⁵⁵⁶

Since the days of the Atlantic Trade, the Fante/Ahanta of Ghana's Western Region have been inserted within global economies, and often depend on chance geographical emplacement for a way of life which can be reasonably described as cosmopolitan, relative to much of the rest of Ghana. The region's luck was given a new lease of life with the construction of the Takoradi Harbour and its coupling with the Railways, but it also set in motion a process of industrialization and monetization with detrimental effects on socio-economic and political development, leading to anomie evidenced in detail by Busia. The Native Authority—and later the Ministry of Chieftaincy—while much more authoritarian and resourced than early colonial Ahanta, often abused its powers of alienation, while the Town Council (and later the Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolitan Assembly) escaped neither charges of corruption nor divisions along ethnic lines. On the other hand, and much more than their counterparts in Gamba, workers of Sekondi-Takoradi were successful in pooling their efforts and grievances, regardless of tribal affiliations. But most remarkable are the similarities in trends (and often factors of anomie) between Takoradi after its harbor construction and Gamba after the first production of Rabi-Kounga: contested moralities following immigration and monetization, reduced confidence in representation bodies, lack of

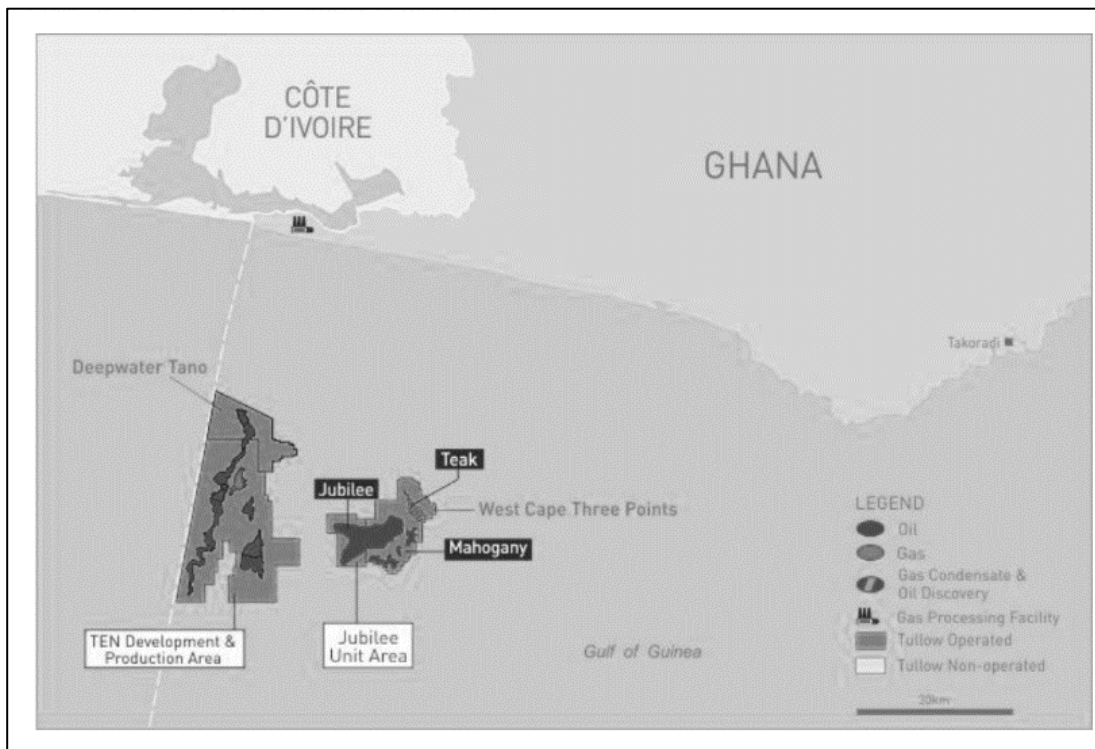
⁵⁵⁵ Obeng-Odoom, *Sekondi-Takoradi*, 89.

⁵⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 89.

respect for chiefs, syncretized religious beliefs, and mistrust. Whether these trends altered their course after the discovery of the Jubilee Field in 2007 is the subject of the next section.

7.2. Institutions and Livelihoods in the Western Region, 2007 – 2015

In June and September of 2007, a consortium of oil companies including Kosmos Energy Ghana, Tullow Ghana Limited, Anadarko Petroleum Corporation, and the Ghana National Petroleum Corporation announced the discovery of oil and gas in commercial quantities. 63 miles



Map 12: The Jubilee Field (tulloil.com)

from Takoradi in the Gulf of Guinea, the offshore find was named the Jubilee Field and was estimated to contain 3 billion barrels of crude oil. With Takoradi already boasting one of West Africa’s largest harbors, it quickly became the natural choice as a base of operations for the consortium.

As the “Unit Operator,” Tullow was responsible for much of the industrial and administrative infrastructure required to export its product. By December 2010, production was underway and most infrastructure put in place. 17 wells had been drilled and developed and a vast network of underwater pipelines laid to support to the Jubilee field’s Floating Production, Storage,

and Offloading vessel. Onshore facilities in Takoradi included the Tullow Logistic Shore Base, as well as the adjacent pipe yard and chemicals storage facilities. In the years following, at least 8 additional wells were drilled and the harbor in Takoradi was expanded to meet the needs of the industry. From 2010 to 2015, production hovered around and intermittently dipped below 150,000 barrels a day.⁵⁵⁷

Unlike in the Ndougou, measures were taken to ensure compliance with relatively new international standards of due diligence in the oil industry. Third-party assessors were hired by Tullow to ensure benchmarks were reached, and that Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) were employed to track the grievances of the population in the 6 coastal districts nominally affected by the extractive activities. At Tullow Ghana Ltd.'s headquarters off of Independence Square, a representative of Social Performance confirmed that the CLOs were chosen among their communities and took their work seriously. In 2011, parliament enacted the Revenue Management Act, which instituted the Public Interest Accountability Committee (PIAC). PIAC since then has regularly acted as a watchdog and brought to light even minor instances of unaccounted oil revenues.⁵⁵⁸ Ghana has, unlike Gabon, remained in good standing with the EITI, and evidence suggests that it will continue to do so.

But as with all major oil finds, a host of ancillary industries and services grew up around the consortium's primary activities. Waste management and food contractors began servicing the members of the consortium, and bars, nightclubs, and supermarkets sprang up to service a wealthier, foreign clientele. Most of these services are located in and around the wealthy area of Beach Road, which has seen luxury real estate development since oil was struck and which is also near the harbor.

In all, the physical and administrative infrastructure of the consortium's implantation as well as its ancillary industries are estimated to have directly contributed not more than hundreds of jobs. Though not insignificant, the oil industry's share of the monetized local economy would pale in comparison to that of the Ndougou.

⁵⁵⁷ Tullow Oil. "Jubilee Field." (<https://www.tulloil.com/operations/west-africa/ghana/jubilee-field>, Accessed December 30, 2018)

⁵⁵⁸ Business Ghana. "Govt has breached Petroleum Act—PIAC." (<https://www.businessghana.com/site/news/general/167544/Govt-has-breached-Petroleum-Act-PIAC>, Accessed December 30, 2018)

Lastly, the indirect societal consequences of the industry's implantation would seem to be disproportionate to the relatively small direct economic consequences. Studies have revealed that the attraction of oil jobs and ancillary work contributed to the population's increase, as 10% of a sample of newcomers attest to have arrived in the area since 2010. Real estate prices have risen dramatically, putting pressure on renters and small businesses. Banks have opened in various locations, as well as higher-end supermarkets catering to wealthier residents. Restaurants, hotels, bars, and nightclubs target similar clientele, contributing to what some have even termed "gentrification."

In Chapter 2's discussion of institutions and livelihoods in Gamba since the advent of the oil industry, particular attention was given to three components of well-being—spiritual, material, and associative—as a means to focus on different aspects of anomie. The same will be done here, but in less detail. This is so for two reasons: First, it is evident that a time-span of roughly ten years is hardly enough to document detailed changes, let alone account for the inter-generational changes outlined in Chapter 2; second, a historicization of Sekondi-Takoradi is not required as was the case for Gamba, where no such thick descriptions previously existed. Thanks to its long-established trade links within Ghana and with the rest of the world, the twin city has enjoyed substantial academic exposure, most notably perhaps in a detailed analysis by Franklin Obeng-Odoom's analysis of the city's land economics.⁵⁵⁹ I will therefore summarize his findings and fill certain gaps with my own observations and data.

7.2.1. Material well-being

This measure of our dependent variables is predictably, with respect to Sekondi-Takoradi, the one with the least observable changes with the timespan identified (2007 – 2016). The best objective and longitudinal source of information concerning the material lives of those in and around Sekondi-Takoradi is given by the Population and Housing Censuses of the Ghana Statistical Service, which conducts these censuses roughly every decade. The most recent were conducted in 1984, 2000, and 2010, enough to provide general trends but whose time intervals are too wide to yield analyses of the oil industry's relative impact. Since the Jubilee field had not

⁵⁵⁹ Obeng-Odoom, *Sekondi-Takoradi*.

become operative until 2010, the real value of these statistics for the present study are in their ability to give us longer-term trends with which to compare with the most contemporary observations.

Despite the more popular conceptions of oil exploitation's impact on local economies, the most dramatic social and demographic changes in Takoradi predated even the discovery of Jubilee. Survey data from 1984 to 2000 betrays the greatest population increase in the Western Region. Most of the increase went to urban areas, and the statistics reveal as well that individuals in urban areas lived in smaller and smaller dwellings. Concurrently, the number of single parents rose, which suggests that the region's urbanization also put pressure on individual livelihoods. The survey statistics confirm what Obeng-Odoom identified as the urbanizing pressure of structural adjustment reforms. Indeed, the rural areas had not seen a significant increase in population vis-à-vis their urban counterparts.

By contrast, the years 2000-2010 suggest trends in the opposite direction, lending more credence to the neoliberal urbanization theory. Population growth slowed, and the proportion of single-parent households stabilized. Of course, it is impossible to tell whether these trends were arrested at the discovery of the Jubilee field (2007), given the ten-year timespan. Nevertheless, Obeng-Odoom, writing in 2014, uses his observations, interviews, and private-sector statistics to provide a thorough (and convincing) account of the half-decade following oil operations. One is led to conclude that the trends of 1984-2000 took new form, if they were not entirely aggravated.

7.2.1.1. Housing

We learn through Obeng-Odoom that the oil industry put considerable stress on a number of quality-of-life indicators. The most poignant among them is housing, where anecdotal and interview evidence tell of increasing rents, food and commodity prices, density, and deteriorating conditions. The link with the arrival of Tullow and ENI in Takoradi is not only coincidental; in the Beach Road neighborhood, roughly two kilometers from Tullow's regional headquarters on Independence Square, once-inhabited property has been sold *en masse* to oil companies looking for temporary worker residences. Meeting at an upscale coffee shop of the same neighborhood, one chief confessed to me that just a few years ago, none of this (gesturing one-handed to the

physical surroundings) was here. He was also referring to the new and renovated hotels and residential lodges springing up in every direction, and whose rooms according to Obeng-Odoom were mostly vacant and on lease to energy companies. The result of the buyouts has ostensibly been to aggravate the already-crowded conditions of Takoradi's older neighborhoods, made worse by the influx of immigrants pursuing scant oil jobs. In the villages of the six coastal districts, by contrast, there does not appear to be a similar surge in population and crowded conditions, but new housing construction can yet be spotted along well-traveled routes.

7.2.1.2. Food and consumer prices

Also affecting material livelihoods are food and consumer prices. Though food has not been produced locally for decades (at the very least since the time of Busia's study), complaints of rising prices appear in Obeng-Odoom's ethnography. In addition, the offshore oil rigs, gas pipelines and other real estate required to operate a booming industry have crowded out former agricultural and fishing zones and helped push up prices.⁵⁶⁰ Land values have risen to such a point that rents have increased, forcing smallholders to push up prices on their produce. Added to this is the "quasi-mercantilist" food services regime used by the energy companies,⁵⁶¹ where contracted catering services source locally. Given the catering services' clientele, preferred suppliers are in a position to raise prices, further limiting supply to local, non-oil-worker consumers. In total, it seems that a local Dutch Disease is in its infant stages, though given the diversity of productive pursuits in the region, such as farming coconuts and palm oil, mining, etc., it is unlikely to rise to the severity seen in Gamba.

7.2.1.3. Employment

Lastly, it has been largely acknowledged that the employment benefits of hosting oil companies are only marginally felt by a region with roughly two million people. Though the

⁵⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 132.

⁵⁶¹ *ibid.*, 157.

central government in Accra passed the Local Content Law 2013, it has been deemed so vaguely written and sparingly enforced that it has had no impact on the Western Region *per se*. Recruitment for the semi-skilled labor on oil rigs is largely conducted in Accra via a handful of agencies, while the numbers of Takoradi natives hired has remained low. In other sectors, as we have seen with agriculture and fishing, the impact on employment has of course been moderately detrimental. One of the most organized trade union movements has come from the largely Fante fishermen, who have popularly expressed their frustration to news media, politicians, and the traditional authorities. Their most central arguments are that catches have dropped (a statistical fact) due to the presence of black seaweed (sargossum), and that oil rig lights attract schools of fish to the rigs, where fishers are forbidden to lay nets.⁵⁶² Because of the diminished catch, fishing as a profession has slumped and livelihoods have been compromised. Since the past few years, however, government, energy, and NGO researchers have made a convincing case that the diminished catch is rather owed to overfishing and other environmental factors, rather than the oil industry.⁵⁶³ According to one NGO which routinely acts on behalf of fishers and farmers, the number of demands for compensation or access by energy companies has died down.

7.2.2. Spiritual well-being and expectations

Changes to the Western Region's material and infrastructural landscape, as well as sensational media reports, contributed to growing expectations shortly after Jubilee's discovery. Kweku of Accra-based Joy FM, which broadcasts locally as Empire Radio and is located near Market Circle in Takoradi, claims that expectations were especially high at the time of Jubilee's discovery. After releasing a 3-part radio documentary on the impact of oil production on the region, Kweku concluded that the media in general were to blame for unreasonably high expectations. According to him, the media were not sufficiently educated on the topic, and thus were unable to properly distill and process information.⁵⁶⁴ High initial expectations among the Western Region's population were confirmed through a number of my interviews. Locals went

⁵⁶² Interview with Chief of fishermen, Baku, Ghana, August 30, 2016 ; Interview with Nana Akosua Gyamfiaba and elders, Shama, August 26, 2016 ; Participation in FON/Peace Corps engagement, Nyankrom, August 28, 2016)

⁵⁶³ Interview with Mores, "The Daily Graphic," Takoradi, January 18, 2016

⁵⁶⁴ Interview with Kweku, Joy FM, Takoradi, January 18, 2016

through stages, beginning with high expectations before essentially losing hope that the oil industry would bring much in terms of employment or living conditions.⁵⁶⁵ Initially confident, local chiefs began a campaign to set aside 10% of oil revenues for the Western Region's development, while some local parliamentarians agitated for a port/harbor to be built between the Atwabo gas plant and Orochi, because the labor-intensive project would lower unemployment (Essien Ghana Aug 30). Lastly, the sudden population boom following the Jubilee discovery remains the most important testament to raised expectations.

During fieldwork, however, it was ascertained that expectations were well tempered by 2016. According to Orei-Akoto of the Community Land and Development Foundation (COLANDEF), who worked with locals on a daily basis, a "majority" had since accepted that nothing much would come of oil. Beginning with the failure of the chiefs to secure a 10% stipend for the region, expectations returned to somewhat realistic. According to a panel of chiefs presided over by a highly respected Queen Mother, there's been "no improvement" in their lives, and "nothing came." This despite the Queen Mother's subtle chastisement of the chiefs' initial excitement: "We got more than 10% through the Atwabo gas plant!"⁵⁶⁶ Others in policy and development agree that people have abandoned high hopes.⁵⁶⁷

Realistic expectations appear to have come about through two processes. First, a relative sense of deprivation could not overcome the promise of improvement. Community centers and health clinics were built,⁵⁶⁸ street lighting added to areas of housing booms, and other minor infrastructural improvements such as drainage ditches have been contributed by Ghana Gas.⁵⁶⁹ Korkor of Tullow's Social Performance adds that they have helped by providing bore holes for drinkable water in areas affected by industrial activity. Tullow has also provided scholarships for a limited number of students attending polytechnical institutes, seeming in part an effort to reach benchmarks set in the Local Content Law.

But when certain expectations were not reached, such as local employment, feelings of relative deprivation surfaced. Richard Acheampong of the Trade Union Congress, who has

⁵⁶⁵ Interviews with Orei-Akoto, COLANDEF, Takoradi, January 13, 2016 ; Matthew, Oswald, and Bernice, WRCF, Takoradi, January 20, 2016 ; Nana Gyiamfiaba and elders ; Joseph Kudjo, Presiding Member, Nzema East District Assembly, Esiama, August 30, 2016

⁵⁶⁶ Interview with Nana Gyiamfiabi and elders

⁵⁶⁷ Interview with Joseph Kudjo ; Interview with Matthew, Oswald, and Bernice

⁵⁶⁸ Interview with Nana Gyiamfiabi and elders

⁵⁶⁹ Interview with elders, Atuabo, August 30, 2016

extensive contacts in the region, claimed that foreigners to the Western Region seemed to be taking all the jobs, in accordance with the companies' desired flexibility and preference for 28-day work/leave cycles.⁵⁷⁰ Field studies by the Western Region Coastal Foundation (WRCF) also support the claim that there is widespread concern that outsiders are taking all the jobs.⁵⁷¹ Even the ancillary industries are being sourced outside.⁵⁷² And despite the lack of local employment, people in the east of the coastal regions complain because they do not get the same onshore infrastructure as the west.⁵⁷³ For the predominantly Ahanta farmers, meager benefits from hosting oil's infrastructure means they are often left only with devastated or compromised farmland. Gas pipelines were built in the Shama District (Atuabo to Aboundze) with little or no consultation of the local farmers, which reportedly affected many crop outputs.⁵⁷⁴ The Volta Aluminum Company acquired vast tracts of land for the construction of a power plant near Ghana Gas' facilities in Atuabo, consulting chiefs in the process but failing to compensate them in time. Farmers' plantations were reportedly destroyed.⁵⁷⁵ Some accused gas flaring for the wilting of coconut trees.⁵⁷⁶ The situation is such that many districts have taken to introducing skills training for women whose lands were taken by force for the construction of hydrocarbons facilities.⁵⁷⁷ In the small village of Nyankrom, one community member decried the abuses of the oil and gas waste-management firm Zeal Environmental Technologies, whose spillages apparently ruined his tree crop.⁵⁷⁸ For the Ahanta of the coastal Western Region, machine-intensive oil exploitation has not been one of the many trades which have fit into their perennial patterns of economic exchange.

Second, expectations were actively tempered by civil society and policy-makers, or even "managed."⁵⁷⁹ The WRCF, which disburses funds to and coordinates the activities of locally-operating NGOs such as the Friends of the Nation (FON), COLANDEF, and the United Civil Society Organisations for National Development (UCSOND). In each project report, local NGOs must demonstrate measures taken to mitigate not only high expectations produced by the offshore

⁵⁷⁰ Interview with Richard Acheampong, Labour Organizer, Accra, January 10, 2016

⁵⁷¹ Interview with Matthew, Oswald, and Bernice

⁵⁷² Interview with Richard Acheampong

⁵⁷³ Interview with Matthew, Oswald, and Bernice

⁵⁷⁴ Interview with Solomon Ampofo, Conversation Manager, FON, Takoradi, August 24, 2016

⁵⁷⁵ Interview with Maxwell Essien, National Assemblyman, Esiama, August 30, 2016

⁵⁷⁶ Interview with Osei Akoto, COLANDEF, Takoradi, August 26, 2016

⁵⁷⁷ Interview with Wisdom, Community Development Officer of Ellembelle, Esiama, August 30, 2016

⁵⁷⁸ Participation in FON/Peace Corps engagement

⁵⁷⁹ Interview with Matthew, Oswald, and Bernice

discoveries, but also high expectations produced by their own community engagements. In UCSOND's 2015 end-of-year project report, the authors defended inter-community "area" meetings as a means to provide "the opportunity for community member [sic] to hear issues in other communities [whereupon] some of them became empathetic with others and this helped to manage expectations since they realised that their concerns are not too peculiar."⁵⁸⁰ The FON assessed one risk of a particular community engagement as the "failure to achieve a representative and credible community conversations and dialogue mechanism leading to increasing community frustration," with its "mitigating measure" being "careful management of expectations together with feedback mechanisms providing evidence that community priorities are acted upon."⁵⁸¹ Colandef in its own report lists the three main challenges to its community dialogue engagements as chieftaincy disputes, poor transportation, and "[h]igh expectations of community members of the oil and gas find."⁵⁸² Since the consortium of NGOs together engages with 117 communities, almost the entirety of the 6 coastal Districts,⁵⁸³ it is safe to assume they have had a moderating impact on the area's previously outsized aspirations for oil-led growth and development.

The WRCF also engages policymakers, notably the planners in each of the 6 coastal districts. It is evident that many civil servants working in the Sekodi Takoradi Metropolitan Assembly (STMA) look upon "high expectations" as a challenge to overcome.⁵⁸⁴ But in the more rural surrounding coastal districts, the WRCF has sought fit to engage the staff of the District Executives in an effort to encourage public-private partnerships in sustainable development unrelated to the hydrocarbons industry. I was able to attend an assembly of district planners hosted by the WRCF in Dixcove on August 25, 2016, where planners and civil servants working for each of the 6 District Executives presented their projects for promoting "viable business" within their jurisdictions. Because the capital-intensive nature of the oil industry is a barrier to entry for common people, Mabel, who helped organized the assembly and direct the proceedings, admitted

⁵⁸⁰ United Civil Society Organisations for National Development – UCSOND. "Annual Progress Report: Community Conversations." (Submitted to the WRCF, November, 2015), 4

⁵⁸¹ Friends of the Nation. "Annual Progress Report: Community Conversations." (Submitted to the WRCF, November, 2015), 14

⁵⁸² COLANDEF, "Annual Progress Report: Community Conversations." (Submitted to the WRCF, November, 2015), 9

⁵⁸³ Interview with Matthew, Oswald, and Bernice

⁵⁸⁴ Interviews with Emmanuel Papa Assan, Regional Youth, Sekondi, August 23, 2016 ; Stephen Blighton, Regional Co-Coordination Councillor, Sekondi, August 23 ; Elizabeth Arthur, Presiding Member, Policy Planner, Takoradi, August 23, 2016

that they prefer to de-emphasize tapping into ancillary hydrocarbons industries. The planners appeared to follow suit in their presentations, with all pursuing development of either their agricultural, fishery, or tourism sectors. The district Jomoro, with 150,107 people of whom approximately 53,000 are rural, had prospects in coconut processing, tourism development, and cassava production, among other things. They boasted taking advantage of the country's Rural Enterprise Program, as 542 enterprises and 222 artisans benefited from the scheme. Challenges to realizing the development of their aims included insufficient funds, lack of youth training centers, and the rising cost of farmland. Planners from Nzema East likewise sought to boost farming and take advantage of the country's Rural Technology Fund to obtain modern equipment. Fishing has always been a primary economic activity in the District, but planners assumed that marketing fish from Nzema East would be futile in the face of competition from larger fisheries in Takoradi. Ahanta West, like Jomoro, sought to promote artisans for tourism, and sponsored 20 students to learn a variety of skills. The STMA was also present, elaborating on a plan to better market palm oil from the metropolitan area, admitting candidly that eliminating fatty acids which were scorned by Western buyers was a difficult task since many of their producers had been stuck in their ways for roughly twenty years. In Ellembelle, the 44.8% of the district's 87,000 inhabitants engaged in agriculture were meeting difficulties obtaining land and even small bodies of water which were being sold to oil and gas companies. Finally, the WRCF concluded the presentation by encouraging each of the districts to think strategically and to consider all risks and opportunities associated with their respective plans. As a suggestion, representatives from the WRCF strongly suggested pursuing fishing, as they pointed out that Ghana produced only half of the fish it consumed. They then re-emphasized the need to "build capacity to follow best practices."⁵⁸⁵

Relative to the Ndougou's experience, what is revealing about the District planners' assembly is the sense of pragmatism policymakers brought to their planning efforts. In none of the proposals did the civil servants attempt to have oil proceeds—whether derived internally or allocated by Accra—bankroll their efforts. Budgeting appeared to be done in accordance with the Accra government's central development programs. In the Ndougou, the *PDL*, which outlined the department's development plan for the near future, grossly overestimated its budget capacity to fulfill medium and long term objectives. Secondly, while both sets of communities sought to boost

⁵⁸⁵ Participation in WRCF Assembly, Dixcove, August 25, 2016

agriculture, fishing, and tourism, the proposals from the Western Region Districts largely took all market metrics into account, assessing risks and rewards along the way. Doubtless this is due at least in part to the engagement of the WRCF.

One institution and set of public authorities which mirrored the general public's (rather than civil society and policymakers) rise and fall of expectations were chiefs. Almost as soon as Tullow made its Jubilee discovery, influential paramount chiefs and sub-chiefs in the region began petitioning Parliament that 10% of all oil proceeds to the government be reserved for the Western Region as the industry's host. Claiming that President Mahama (2012-2017) had promised during his campaigns to secure a stipend for the Western Region, the failure by Parliament to do so has generated considerable acrimony between chiefs and lawmakers. While chiefs interviewed claim the demand for 10% of oil proceeds was meant to be put in a public account, and not in their pockets,⁵⁸⁶ many, especially those interviewed in public service and civil society, have become wary of chiefs' designs and ambitions.

In Ghana, roughly 80% of land is owned by traditional authorities.⁵⁸⁷ While farmers have surface rights, they are almost always tenants, and much of the time the landowner is a chief. As many stools hold allodial interest in the land, oil and gas companies have approached many chiefs, neglecting that farmers might be considered stakeholders as well. Unfortunately for many, "engaging the chief doesn't necessarily mean engaging the community."⁵⁸⁸ This would especially be the case if many claims were true. Planners for the Ellebelle District admitted to working with chiefs in order to prevent the sale of crucial farmland to companies. According to them, chiefs tended to take one-off payments and not consider others or even the future.⁵⁸⁹ Kweku of Joy FM, active in community affairs, claimed the sale of lands has worried citizens from Takoradi to Agona Nkwanta Junction. Chiefs reportedly take company cash and make several purchases, such as police cars and community centers, while the rest is spent at their discretion.⁵⁹⁰

The opportunism of chiefs is exemplified by Ghana Gas' construction of its gas plant in Atuabo, a group of 7 villages in the district of Ellembele. Publicly promised to the adjacent district of Jomoro in 2009, Ghana Gas three years later suddenly decided to relocate construction plans to

⁵⁸⁶ Interview with Osabarima, Kwaw Entsie II, Takoradi, January 19, 2016

⁵⁸⁷ Interview with Nana Ama, COLANDEF, Accra, January 8, 2016

⁵⁸⁸ Interview with Solomon Ampofo

⁵⁸⁹ Ellebelle district representatives (participation in WRCF Assembly) ; Interview with Matthew, Oswald, and Bernice

⁵⁹⁰ Interview with Kweku, Joy FM

Atuabo. Since the MP of Ellembele was at the time serving as the Minister of Petroleum in addition to the chairman of the GNPC being from Atuabo, much speculation ensued among locals that politics had played a role in the relocation.⁵⁹¹ Interviews with elders in Atuabo revealed that chiefs had political influence with Ghana Gas as well and were instrumental in relocating the plant. Others went as far as to claim that Atuabo's chiefs were successful in having their MP become the oil minister.⁵⁹² According to some of the elders, many palm farmers had yet to be compensated by Ghana Gas. While Atuabo's 400-500 years old Paramountcy (a fact of which the elders were immensely proud) benefited from a boost of employment at roughly 8-10%, many are clearly aggrieved.⁵⁹³ When I asked civil society members why people withhold their grievances, a representative of COLANDEF responded that although chiefs do sell land for personal profit, "people don't easily open up on it."⁵⁹⁴

Financial enticements are not the only threat to the enduring legitimacy of chiefs. Urbanization has also been mentioned as a culprit. Since service jobs predominate in urban centers like Takoradi, education and literacy become marketable assets, albeit sometimes at the expense of foregoing ancestral cosmologies. In nearby Winneba, a candidate with a Ph.D. ascended the throne "illegally," and further alienated many of his subjects through ignorance of tradition and history, to the point where police presence was required at certain gatherings.⁵⁹⁵ Also threatening towards established interpretive models of chieftaincy are power-hungry chiefs, such as Nana Eskado of Takoradi, an active and vocal political figure occupying a recently created paramountcy. According to many, involvement in politics diminishes chiefs' legitimacy and sanctity.⁵⁹⁶

It is clear that despite presumed transgressions mentioned above, chiefs are still held in very high esteem. In keeping with the Western Region's interpretive models of tradition and ancestry, the vast majority of chiefs in the coastal districts, as in much of Ghana, obey traditions and thus secure widespread legitimacy.⁵⁹⁷ "The stool resides in the family," one chief told me emphatically.⁵⁹⁸ In the vast majority of cases, a vacant stool sets off an age-old protocol whereby

⁵⁹¹ Francesca Pugliese, "Corporate Social Responsibility and local perceptions: A case study in Western Ghana." (MA Thesis. Leiden University, 2014).

⁵⁹² Interview with Richard Acheampong

⁵⁹³ Interview with elders, Atuabo

⁵⁹⁴ Interview with Osei Akoto, August 26

⁵⁹⁵ Interview with Richard Acheampong

⁵⁹⁶ Interview with Stephen Blighton

⁵⁹⁷ Interview with Kweku, Joy FM

⁵⁹⁸ Interview with chief, member of PIAC, Takoradi, January 19, 2016

elders nominate their preferred candidate for succession for further review by themselves and the Queen Mother. The candidate's background is scrutinized, and he must demonstrate knowledge of tradition, history, and exhibit the proper comportment. After acceptance is "confinement," during which the chief becomes a spirit and the embodiment of tradition.⁵⁹⁹ Many chiefs accept themselves as repositories of tradition. Many disparage the loss of land to other, more opportunistic chiefs, and acknowledge that their popular legitimacy rests in being "neutral" and level-headed in the sense that they discourage violence and/or disruption as an acceptable grievance mechanism.⁶⁰⁰ Chiefs do not even typically seek jobs in the oil industry, for the simple reason that they consider themselves "above" this kind of work.⁶⁰¹ Councils of elders view their roles as supporting chiefs in the maintenance of peace and order, even when the "government" comes to forcibly acquire land.⁶⁰²

The legitimacy of chiefs is such that politicians and other actors can be punished for showing disrespect to the institution. Many chiefs, "always agitated" with respect to competition they get for ownership and custody of the land, act on principle.⁶⁰³ Chief Entsie II claimed that a mining company in 1996 failed to consult chiefs and was told to leave.⁶⁰⁴ One MP campaigned on the platform of pushing through the de-stooling of an unpopular chief, but abandoned the idea once elected after fierce opposition from chiefs.⁶⁰⁵ Most recently, Tullow was forced to change their policy of recruiting CLOs from among the cadres of recent graduates employed by Ghana's civil service. After Nana Kwaa Ogyema lobbied her peers on one of the company's advisory councils, Tullow agreed to hire local community members as CLOs.⁶⁰⁶

Chiefs are also known to act in good faith on behalf of their communities in other ways, for instance in creating a Platform for Coastal Communities in order to preserve languages and customs in the face of mass immigration,⁶⁰⁷ proposing initiatives to assure that land is released to public and private concerns in a way more beneficial to communities,⁶⁰⁸ and serving on the boards

⁵⁹⁹ Interview with Osabarima, Kwaw Entsie II

⁶⁰⁰ Interviews with chief, member of PIAC ; Nana Kwasi Ogyema, Takoradi, January 22, 2016

⁶⁰¹ Interview with Orei Akoto, January 13

⁶⁰² Interview with Nana Akosua Gyamfiaba and elders

⁶⁰³ Interview with Nana Ama

⁶⁰⁴ Interview with Osabarima, Kwaw Entsie II

⁶⁰⁵ Interview with Richard Acheampong

⁶⁰⁶ Interview with Korkor, Social Performance, Tullow, Takoradi, January 22, 2016

⁶⁰⁷ Interview with Matthew, Oswald, and Bernice

⁶⁰⁸ Interview with Ruth Anwuboh, Unit Community Member, Esiama, August 30, 2016

of PIAC and the GNPC. Immigration in particular has shown signs of putting strains on collective identities, which in turn provide platforms for association. While big families still provide mutual aid, and in many instances legal and financial assistance, the Nzema for instance have claimed to be losing their language to the influx of Fante,⁶⁰⁹ something which the Ahanta have suffered for decades. With clothing and diets changing rapidly as well, the agrarian communal bonds risk gradually eroding. For many, chiefs are a source of constancy in a changing social environment.

Yet even with lingering doubts as to chiefly decorum, chiefs in the region (as well as in much of Ghana) enjoy a high social standing unseen in Gamba and the Ndougou. This is of course a legacy of British use of traditional authorities during colonial administration, and interviews suggest the rites and prerogatives surrounding chiefs and succession are taken seriously. One chief, notable for his seat on the PIAC, emphasized that “the stool resides in the family,” while another prominent chief laid out chiefly pre-requisites: candidates for the chieftaincy must be level-headed, know their group’s traditions, and, in a departure from their counterparts in Gabon, become a spirit/embodiment of tradition and ancestry. The communal respect for chiefs and their duties/privileges is confirmed by even those critical of the institution; one interviewee averred that in Ghana you can lose electorally if you oppose chiefs, owing to the fact that they have remained quite legitimate. This system coexists—sometimes in syncretic fashion—with the institution of Christianity, the dominant religion in southern Gabon. At the village level, the hierarchy of traditional authorities seems to give sense and purpose to communities, and might just as well contribute to the associative qualities of the region described below. In another way, chieftaincy represents a sort of constancy to locals who might otherwise feel alienated by the abrupt socio-economic shifts taking place around them.

Lastly, Obeng-Odoom in particular employs his investigation of prostitution to hint at creeping social anomie. In ethnographic detail, Obend-Odoom describes the growing market for prostitution in Takoradi, and the parallel growth in its supply. Young women, some perhaps minors, can indeed be seen stalking international hotels so as to solicit potential customers. Temporary oil workers are known to be fond of their services, and offer more compensation than the locals. Taxi drivers have also integrated themselves by offering to transport prostitutes in

⁶⁰⁹ Interview with Matthew, Oswald, and Bernice

exchange for a cut of their earnings, or for their actual services. Those with a moral stake in Takoradi's daily life disparage the new audacities of solicitation.

7.2.3. Associative well-being

If anomic structures were tamed vis-à-vis the evolution of societal norms, the same can be said of political anomie. Rather than disaffection and cynicism, the coastal districts of the Western Region exhibit a fair degree of active participation in public policy and public interests, further distinguishing their trajectory from that experienced in the Ndougou. While in Gamba these means are mostly limited to religious fora, in the Western Region of Ghana there are governmental, private, and NGO agencies that regularly promote active community participation in self-help projects. For example, the WCRF, which engages six coastal districts (along with their respective District Assemblies), 12 traditional councils, and 117 communities, can boast active members of the organization in almost all communities. In addition, representatives of the WCRF (who oversee several other civil society organizations) attest that community members themselves are “most cooperative.” Much to the contrary, long-term residents of the Ndougou tend to express their frustration at NGOs and civil society for raising expectations which are rarely met. CLOs employed by oil and gas, and public community liaisons, such as those working for District Assemblies and Chief Executives, largely attest to the participatory enthusiasm of the region's citizens. People are especially receptive to engagement, however, if it is an issue affecting them directly, such as small scale mining.⁶¹⁰ As demonstrated by the FON and Peace Corps assembly in the village of Nyankrom (Shama District), people readily express their concerns and partake in problem-solving discussions, even when it concerns how best to address environmental devastation wrought by oil and gas.⁶¹¹ Through such engagements, civil society is able to increase awareness of legal rights, especially as they pertain to land tenure.⁶¹² Fishers will also consult NGOs such as the WRCF to address decreasing catches, even if the intent is to gain leverage in other policy areas.⁶¹³ This strategy extends to making use of the several independent news media

⁶¹⁰ Interview with Wisdom, Community Development Officer

⁶¹¹ Participation in FON/Peace Corps engagement

⁶¹² Interview with Solomon Ampofo

⁶¹³ Interview with Kweku, Joy FM

outlets specializing in local news, such as the Daily Graphic—whose readership nationwide numbers in the millions—and Joy FM, whose 3-part series on oil and gas in Takoradi conveyed the fishers’ grievances.



Map 13: Sekondi-Takoradi (WRCF)

Though locals appear to moderately distrust public institutions and expect relatively little,⁶¹⁴ vehemence towards local assemblies does not approach that seen in the Ndougou. According to the WRCF, locals regularly express their needs to the District Assemblies, which appear to be quite active in their respective communities as was demonstrated by the WRCF's "Viable Business" assembly with District planners, as well as by the presence of several District civil servants at the Ghana Gas conference to discuss the issue of marker buoys.⁶¹⁵ Somewhat akin to the Gabonese Départements, Ghanaian Districts are disbursed government subsidies. The coastal districts receive these on a quarterly basis via the District Assembly Fund. Spending discretion is determined by assemblymen and assemblywomen elected by universal suffrage, who, like the departmental councilors in the Ndougou, are also free to collect taxes on a limited number of services, land and licenses. As in the Ndougou, capacity and effectiveness appear to be minor issues for the Districts, as issues have surfaced regarding the improper valuation of property taxes and its negative impact on the District Assembly Common Funds throughout the Western Region.⁶¹⁶ But that is where similarities end. Each Assembly is presided over by a District Chief Executive (DCE) appointed by the President of Ghana. Though reminiscent of the departmental prefect in Gabon, the DCE must be confirmed by the popularly elected assemblies, and can also be overridden by the assemblies. Furthermore, many DCEs also have ambitions of becoming MPs, which conditions their political decision-making.⁶¹⁷ Lastly, the DCEs are highly sensitive to the will of chiefs and the traditional authority framework in general, as the DCEs are cognizant that opposing a strident chief could lead to electoral disaster.⁶¹⁸ These factors combine to assure that public trust in District government remains viable and that the petitioning of District Assemblies is not considered an exercise in vain.

⁶¹⁴ Interview with Mabel, WRCF, Takoradi, August 22, 2016

⁶¹⁵ Participation in Ghana Gas Workshop, Esiama, August 30, 2016

⁶¹⁶ Interview with Stephen Blighton

⁶¹⁷ *ibid.*

⁶¹⁸ Interview with Nana Ama



Photograph 7: Peace Corps/FON Engagement in Nyankrom, Shama District (taken in August, 2016)

Public and international pressure on state institutions—often in the form of independent local, national, and international media—also serve to limit disaffection and cynicism through the encouragement of transparency. Much of course was made of the dangers of a resource curse upon the Jubilee discovery which might overturn Ghana’s cherished democratic consolidation. In 2011, the Petroleum Revenue Management Act set out to address local and international concerns with the allocation of oil proceeds and taking sufficient measures to ensure transparency in line with the country’s membership in the EITI. Of all oil receipts, the Ghana Revenue Authority would commit 70% to the annual budget to be used at Parliament’s discretion, 21% to an investment fund (Heritage Fund), and the remaining 9% to a stabilization fund. In addition, the Act established PIAC, whose mission was “to monitor and evaluate compliance by government and other relevant institutions in the management and use of the petroleum revenues and investments.”⁶¹⁹ According to Chief Entsie II, the establishment of such a committee, composed of members from such diverse organizations such as the Trade Unions Congress, the Association of Queen Mothers, the National House of Chiefs, the Ghana Journalists Association, and the Ghana EITI, was wholly unprecedented, as “nothing like it” had ever been applied to other extractive industries such as gold mining or timber.⁶²⁰ Companies such as Tullow, ENI, and Hess, all active

⁶¹⁹ Public Interest and Accountability Committee (PIAC), “Simplified Guide to the Petroleum Revenue Management Law in Ghana.” (Accra, June 2017). http://www.piacghana.org/portal/files/downloads/simplified_guide_to_ghana's_petroleum.pdf, Accessed December 31, 2018), 30

⁶²⁰ Interview with Osabarima, Kwawa Entsie II

in the region's extractive industries at the time of fieldwork, would be held accountable by the International Finance Corporation (World Bank).

7.3. Explaining Social and Political Anomie in Sekondi-Takoradi and the Western Region with Political Institutions

A few broader trends can be summarized here, despite the relatively short experience of the Western Region with oil production. First, Tullow's discovery of oil in 2007 did not seem to instigate any dramatic negative trends that were not already present. Social and political anomie were identifiable as early as the 1940s, following the construction of the Takoradi Harbour. The record then suggests that the population boom of the 1980s-1990s contributed to anomie, after a decades-long stagnation following the construction of the rival Tema Harbour in 1962. While many saw the Jubilee field as a chance to restore the declining economic vitality of Sekondi-Takoradi, little evidence suggests that any downward trends have been reversed. Instead, it appears that unrealistic expectations run up against economic realities, while large quantities of foreign exchange help to create contested moralities.

Since Ghana is by no means a rentier state, rentierism cannot account for the observed changes. At the same time, however, these changes bear many similarities to what occurred in Gamba beginning in the late 1990s, when decentralization, immigration and a burgeoning cash nexus helped lead to social and political anomie witnessed by the region's contemporary elders. But it is also the case, as was shown in previous chapters, that rentierism cannot have engendered these processes in Gamba. That we see similar changes in both spaces, and various times, suggests a common denominator, but because Gamba and Takoradi are susceptible to being cast aside as "oil cities" whose fates are pre-determined, underlying factors risk being overlooked.

In Sekondi-Takoradi, the arrival of the oil industry brought with it much attention from the press and researchers alike. One unintended consequence of this attention for academics is to prematurely attribute many societal ills to the industry itself. In reality, and as we have seen, the real material impact of oil has been subdued, thanks to a number of factors. First, the industry in

Sekondi-Takoradi is geographically limited to offshore installations, an industrial park at independence square, and the Beach Road neighborhood which has admittedly been transformed. In nearby Atwaba, the gas plant dominates the cityscape and gas pipelines converge there from several districts. Other than these geographic manifestations of the new energy sector, few signs of environmental adjustment appear to exist. Second, the coastal districts and Sekondi-Takoradi have a long history of exporting, beginning with the Brandenburg and Dutch forts of the 17th century. The twin city is itself a product of market forces thanks in part to its location, ushering slaves, gold, palm oil, and coconuts for external consumption. Oil has merely been, in one way, the latest edition of this trend. Third, the area's population, dwarfing that of the Ndougou's, mediates the relative effects of the oil industry. Though it is undeniable that oil and gas extraction has generated substantial cash flows for the government, it is the national government and the country as a whole that benefit, which is decidedly not the case for Gabon. Aside from the relatively small number of lucky locals who have managed to secure oil jobs, and despite the multiplier effects (particularly where it concerns certain elements of the service sector and hotels) emanating from both those few jobs and better-endowed foreign workers, the impact of the oil industry is diffuse.

In a Most Different Systems Design, a common, underlying factor is sought. In Gamba, rentierism and "neo-Tillyian" approaches were ruled out. Hybrid governance was held to account more for the changes perceived. In Sekondi-Takoradi, the realm of explanatory factors for the changes perceived will now be limited to hybrid governance. In Gamba, the most noxious changes occurred when the introduction of large-scale industry coincided with decentralization in 1996/1997. What resulted was a "perfect storm" of legal and moral ambiguity. It is possible to demonstrate a similar effect with respect to the Western Region. In the years before and after 1928, when the Takoradi Harbour was constructed, during the post-colonial period of decline beginning with the construction of Tema Harbour in 1962 and including the neoliberal reforms, and finally following Tullow's discovery of Jubilee in 2007, incongruity produced social and political anomie, especially where it concerned mal-adjustment to new social structures.

The Ndougou and the Western region do, however, differ in one important respect. Political anomie and corrosive informalization were not apparent in the Western Region, at least not to the extent seen in the Ndougou. A dizzying array of public authorities exist to preempt and deter corrupt practices. Some of these, such as the PIAC (which convenes both traditional

authorities and elected officials), focus on the transparency of oil revenues at the national level and publish in detail how every last dollar is spent. Others, such as the WCRF (subsidized by UKAid), the FON and COLANDEF interface with the region's communities. UNDP selected the region to draft Ghana's first regional human development report. Like Shell in Gamba, Tullow and ENI employ a cadre of community liaison officers who, according to Obeng-Odoom, are quite responsive to local requests, in one case honoring a promise to provide several communities with potable water. Ghana Gas, in joint ventures across the region, hosted a public workshop on August 30th, 2008 to discuss the advantages and pitfalls of installing a special marker buoy on an offshore pipeline. Audience members were invited to ask questions and provide commentary, and I had the occasion to question politicians and energy industry representatives following the closing prayers, indicating that there is to some extent a culture of transparency.

Decentralized Districts were introduced in 1988/1989, which coincides with an era of economic stagnation in Sekondi-Takoradi, which is evidenced by statistics from both the Ghana Statistical Service and the research of Obeng-Odoom. Indeed, interlocutors normally disparaged the local politicians, as they had in Gamba, yet without the same noted vehemence and frequency. Formal public authorities such as the District Assemblies and the STMA are, in fact, quite active in public policy as of 2016, whether the intervention concerns development projects, job training, or encouraging youth to become engaged members of society (according to several chiefs, youth in the coastal districts are largely respectful of their elders, a sentiment not shared by the chiefs and elders of the Ndougou). In a workshop organized by the WCRF, representatives from all six coastal districts of the Western Region shared their plans for and progress towards sustainable businesses promotion, many of which concerned the plight of fishers. All in all, simple observations dictate that little of the apathy and disaffection seen in the Ndougou exists in the Western Region of Ghana.

In both the Western Region of Ghana and the Ndougou of Gabon, industry and reforms brought with them the plurification of institutions, which in turn led to instances of situational adjustment, as well as moral and political ambiguities. In the former, however, the observable instances were contained in space and time, and institutional congruence allowed to take hold. The conclusions of this thesis attempt to explain the disparity.

CONCLUSION

Journal entry, August 3rd, 2015:

Soon we approached the Rembo (river) Bongo, the mouth of which was dominated by “paille,” the leafy plants which traditionally serve as roofs for village meeting houses, known as “corps de gardes.” These were to become a key focus in my ensuing studies. Before approaching the mouth of the river, Benjamin, the cantonal secretary, rose and said “2 minutes.” He lifted his cap, reached over the boat, and threw sprays of water on his head. Ngoma, my boat captain, did the same, and turned to me: “This is tradition, you can write it in your notebook.” Benjamin added, “This is your first pass down the river, so you have to pay respects to the ancestors.” I reached over the boat and washed my hands with the saltwater. Benjamin calmly corrected me: “On your head.” I patted my head with the water, and they both smiled and nodded affirmatively. If this small gesture didn’t give the atmosphere a profound mystical quality, then everything else did. The river ahead was dark but comforting, like entering a tunnel of dreams if it ever existed. The ecology changed rapidly from lagoon to river, and the flora on both sides was so diverse, and the birds so plentiful, and the sounds of far-away creatures and birdsongs so effervescent that I stood up during the ride. The rainforest canopy almost converged on both sides to block most sunlight, allowing just enough in to recognize it was daytime. Fallen trees of innumerable variety intersected the river, causing Ngoma to abruptly shift direction now and then, but also providing habitats for blue, gray, and red birds of all sizes and sounds. Some would take flight as we crossed paths and hover above us for a hundred meters before taking refuge somewhere in the thickest forest I’d ever seen. Some would land in an eddy and paddle to shore, cocking their necks like chickens with each thrust. It was truly magical, and can hardly be described on paper. [...] ⁶²¹

Journal entry, September 5th, 2015:

So here I was in Ingoueka, the night of the 5th. Up the Rembo Bongo, that river of dreams so lost in the rainforest it’s a wonder humanity existed there. Ingouéka, the most beautiful and

⁶²¹ These personal journal entries and observations were written at the time of fieldwork, and recorded on a Microsoft Word document.

well-maintained village in the Ndougou, and belonging to another canton than those more properly situated in the lagoon. Was that the reason this village was so much better maintained? I'd later asked Benjamin if perhaps it was the differences in leadership between this canton and the lagoon to which the aesthetic differences were owed. He said in vague terms it's the sons and daughters of the village in conjunction with their chiefs which gave it a more pleasant atmosphere, that the people were more invested, communally, in the preservation and upkeep of the village. I'd been told it was the Conseil Départemental which maintained the grass and vegetation (one village notable had told me that), and that one local parliamentarian was responsible for the construction of the plank houses which were both rustic and beautiful. I pressed Benjamin, the cantonal secretary who accompanied me on my visits, on whether it was the differences in leadership, the chef de canton of Ingouéka having been much more welcoming and considerate of his guests than the chef de canton of the lagoon. He didn't seem to agree, shaking his head and questioning my idea that it was a leadership issue. My idea was that since people were so reportedly dependent on chiefs for community life, a change in chieftaincy could make the difference.

I then discussed land tenure with Benjamin and Simplicie, an Eaux et Forêts employee and researcher who was proudly among the first teams of that ministry to be trained in surveying. Having conducted studies of the lagoon with the WWF and Blaney, a Québécoise lady who published a highly detailed and informative socioeconomic study of the region in 1999, her knowledge must have been valid. I asked whether there was private property. Quizzical looks and efforts at explanation. When you come to a village for land you have to ask the village chief, said Simplicie—or any chief for that matter added Benjamin—for the right to establish a residence, and then you can work with the title holders of the property, or the people from whom you'd like to buy the property with the "titre foncier." But they were agreed that it was the state who owned the property of the village and that the villagers have the droit d'usage coutumier, and I was left unsure as to how that related to titles and private property. That there were differences of opinion between Benjamin and Simplicie on these rights was telling of a lack of knowledge of the law, which seemed to me very important. It was agreed, however, that consultation with the village chief or another chief wasn't written into the law, and that it was simply custom which obliged people to

consult with them first. Another example of a clash between tradition and modernity,⁶²² and I thought to myself that that kind of ambiguity of rights couldn't be good for predictability and/or development. It might also leave things open to treachery and opportunism. This led me to ask Simplice later on in the morning of the 6th about Shell's arrival and how that transpired. Were the chief's customary duties respected? Kind of an ambiguous answer, as she mentioned one chief near Sette Cama who'd been in contact with them...

I'd heard from Shell people later the night of the 6th that the way Shell came wasn't done properly, and I wondered what Ann, a petrophysicist, meant by that. Ann responded vaguely, but also discussed the case of Cedrick, one of their Shell colleagues who'd routinely railed against Bongo and his government in an open Shell office with plenty of witnesses. She'd recently asked Cedrick how his vacation went, and he was reportedly sad. She'd heard through the grapevine that 5 or so of his cousins who'd been demonstrating against the government were killed in their homes in the Woleu-Ntem, faces burnt. From my angle, a cause for concern. The deaths were likened to "black magic" and that was that. I asked if I'd be ok doing what I was doing, to which Ann responded, "I can't promise you anything."

These two passages, written a month apart, were taken directly from a daily journal I kept during my fieldwork in the Ndougou, which I scrupulously maintained so as to retain my impressions of an eye-opening journey. I chose to reprint them here for two reasons. Taken together, they serve an allegorical function for some of my conclusions to follow. Secondly, they serve to highlight a few key limitations of data collection—personal and environmental—in the rural agglomerations of an authoritarian African state.

Nothing that I had encountered in the Ndougou lagoon conformed to my initial expectations of an African rentier state, at least the kind referred to by authors such as John Ghazvinian, who in *Untapped* painted vivid scenes of debauchery, warlord violence, and public corruption in several oil-bearing communities.⁶²³ The Ndougou lagoon was something much different, where there existed few signs of overt violence or contestation. It was subdued, sleepy, and beautiful. People were rarely contentious, avoided conflict whenever possible, and generally sought to please. Shell-

⁶²² "Modernity" was a term used by locals to denote Western norms and standards of living.

⁶²³ John Ghazvinian, *Untapped: The Scramble For Africa's Oil*. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).

Gabon's presence was a fact of life, for better or worse, and no one appeared to question the most significant source of structural change to their lives since direct French administration. The only truly excitable issue appeared to be the decades-long *homme-faune* conflict, the mere mention of which was enough to launch farmers into tirades against the animals themselves and those bent on their protection. Other than that, the stale, heavy lagoon with all its natural beauty seemed to absorb whatever tensions may have arisen over the course of decades. My initial encounter with the Rembo Bongo and Ingouéka was therefore two-faced; I saw beauty and tranquillity, and I felt the nagging strain of a doctoral student devoid of theoretically driven facts.

The second passage reveals a process of maturation over the course of fieldwork. The dilemma I faced earlier on forced me to re-evaluate my fieldwork strategy and objectives. I began my stay in Gamba by asking relatively direct questions related to political contestation, somewhat uncaring as to line of questioning, its order, or its register. I was interested in identifying public authorities and the relations between them. Unsurprisingly, this led to plenty of dead ends. There were no explicit confrontations, no obvious power struggles, and no obvious attempts to capture oil rents. What was left unsaid did, however, form an impression as I began to take seriously the ideas of Duval, who suggested that relative silence could indicate the workings of symbolic violence. But as I was not yet ready to concede that the Ndougou had undergone the same process of stateless totalitarianism witnessed by Duval in that small Burkinabé village, I began gaining trust by visiting interviewees two or three times, scheduling a second boat tour of the lagoon and committing myself to long hours of discussion, even building friendships. I also began asking questions altogether unrelated to politics yet wholly relevant to the public sphere. I wanted to know how bonds of matrilinearity had changed and why they had changed. I wanted to know what children pursued as future goals, versus what their parents had in mind for them. I wanted to know about world views, spirits, and life in general. Essentially, and without particularly knowing it at the time, I wanted to know how patterns of interaction were changing, and whether they were caused by forces endogenous or exogenous to local systems. The shift of focus to psycho-social dimensions paid off. It eased the suspicions of many interviewees and even brought to the surface political information that I had previously sought. While I was pleased to gain knowledge on the rule of law by inquiring as to land tenure, for instance, I never expected to learn the apparent and dire fate of certain political opponents.

The shift to observing psycho-social trends was also a reaction to the difficulty of obtaining theoretically driven data. Beginning with the idea of “good governance” instead of anomie, it became readily apparent throughout fieldwork in the Ndougou that what was good and legitimate was not necessarily what the World Bank and others considered good and legitimate. There may be no rule of written law as occurs elsewhere, but there is a certain rule of interaction and a history to inform it. One is simply expected to pay respects to ancestors at the mouth of the Rembo Bongo, which does not conflict or compete with any written law or other customs. The expectation that one should always ask a chief before appropriating land, however, does. Shell-Gabon is a massive stakeholder, and represents the largest private landholder in the area, while at the same time it commits itself to written rule of law so as to avoid negative reputational costs. Conflicts like this could only be revealed through abandoning the normative project of good governance. The new psycho-social approach also held out the possibility of comparing two polities on this universal, value-free basis of societal adaptation to new shocks.

To collapse the “political” and accept the importance of informal power structures is also to invite “anomie” as a useful concept for evaluation. Working with psycho-social evidence and appropriating it so as to inform models of political change is not easy. Lines of questioning in both the Ndougou and the Western Region avoided political opinions and sought opinions on other spheres of life having no apparent link with politics. Since survey questionnaires are typically direct and rely on a consensus of definitions, such a method was impossible, especially with respect to the Ndougou. Nevertheless, the obtained psycho-social data required a framework to make sense of it, and Merton’s anomic structures resonated as capable since anomic structures were theorized to arise with periods of rapid structural change. As explained in Chapter 2, the most difficult aspect of linking periods of social structural change to political structures is determining the extent to which periods of “structural change” were, in fact, due to political processes. Chapters 3, 4, 7.1, and 7.2 took on the laborious process of identifying anomic structures, while Chapters 5, 6, and 7.3 sought to attribute them to political processes whenever possible.

Though both the Ndougou lagoon and the Western Region displayed similar evidence of growing anomic structures as defined by Merton et al. (see Chapters 1 and 2), they occurred at different times and sometimes for different socio-structural reasons, manifested by different patterns of interaction (otherwise known as “interpretive models” or institutions). In neither case

were periods of structural change leading to anomie concurrent with the relative intensity of oil exploitation.

Structural changes were quite rare in the Ndougou until the advent of direct French administration. Before then, the region witnessed changes in the means, methods, and volume of commerce, but neither of these show evidence of having distorted structures at the local level. The centrifugal tendencies of the Loango kingdom only gradually gave way to the growing power of the *Fumu-si* merchant princes from the mid-18th century onwards, before fading to irrelevance with the abolition of slaving in the 19th century. The Maloango in present-day Point Noir retained cognitive importance, however, as the *Fumu-si* continued to legitimize their power by demonstrating matrilineal links to royalty and first-comers. While the growing volumes of trade disintegrated a once-thriving kingdom, it did not ostensibly subvert former structures. Slaving did, however, create an interclan class system which must have had consequences on local populations and which featured as a prelude for things to come. Not until wage labor and direct French administration is it possible to identify evidence of extensive structural change and overturned interpretive models which would lead anomie. In 1875, European concessions began operating on the Loango coast and in Sette Cama, acutely challenging the physical and cognitive integrity of houses, big men (*chefs de terre* and *chefs de famille*), and districts of clans. Passive forms of resistance such as exodus, refusals to work, attacks on the Catholic missions and sometimes violent uprisings were evident until the 1930s, when the first reports of peacefulness and “pacification” were sent to colonial governors. By then, no more reports detailing challenges to administrative chiefs by *chefs de terre* appeared. A significant structural change was complete and a new model was successfully instituted, characterized by the centralized state-company tandem.

Rather than challenged, this model was reinforced by COSREG (Shell-Gabon). All accounts throughout the 1960s indicate that locals sought, received, and appreciated work with the consortium. Expectations were raised with the material benefits that came with a large global company. Things changed, however, when in the years following Rabi-Kounga’s discovery in 1989 it dawned on local individuals that lofty expectations of social and material advancement would not be met. More jobs went to foreigners, even as the lagunar population fled villages for Gamba so as to provide a better life for themselves and their children. While employment with Shell-Gabon or one of its contractors was becoming necessary to flourish, it became more and more difficult to access. Land speculation began spiked in 1997—the year the decentralization

laws were put into effect—and villagers became accusing one another of witchcraft and sorcery. Finally, the 2000s witnessed changes to cognitive models of interpretation themselves. Despair was evident among all interviewees, expectations decreased, trained *ngangas* were exceptionally rare, jealousy was rampant, and Shell-Gabon discontinued its provision of several public services without a state-sponsored alternative.

For the Western Region of Ghana, Busia provides us with a similar experience for Sekondi-Takoradi throughout the 1950s to that which took place in the Ndougou (see previous chapter). In both cases, monetization brought on by industry, foreign and domestic, led to social anomie, while political disaffection and social anomie spiked rapidly for the Ndougou after decentralization. There was little evidence to suggest that the same spike occurred in the coastal Western Region when decentralization reformed were enacted in 1988. Why the difference?

Political and social patterns of interaction were shown to be very different between the Ndougou and the Western Region. Since both are coastal regions, it is unsurprising that coastal colonization during the Atlantic trade unfolded in similar fashion. For the Ndougou, Vili/Loumbou merchants moved westwards from Kongo and Loango to occupy advantageous coastal trade routes, while the Varama descended from the north to the lagoon for similar reasons. The *fumu-si* (merchant princes) gradually replaced the political functions of hereditary chiefs linked to Loango, even as first-comer ideologies persisted. Similarly, the Ahanta descended from Mankessim and fragmented along the coast, with paramount chiefs taking stools thanks to goods acquired through trade. But unlike the Ndougou, trade volumes in slaves and other goods in the former were much larger. This is just as much a consequence of natural geography as it is a consequence of relative proximity to a large and well-endowed state such as the Asante kingdom. The volume and frequency of marketization via European trade routes in Ahantaland therefore led to a powerful class of merchant chiefs, who were able to naturalize themselves via shared analogies to the Asante stools. Though a similar process had occurred in southwest Gabon, chiefs of Ahantaland clearly had more resources at their disposal; there was much less fluidity of meaning, and therefore fewer instances of incongruity.

The British Gold Coast administration further legitimized nascent lineages by devolving considerable local powers (through the Native Ordinances) to paramount chiefs and sub-chiefs, who also acted as representatives of the District Commissioner. The Native Administrative Bill of 1898 empowered these chiefs to maintain law and order, try “customary” crimes in the Native

Courts, and even dispense with a few public services. In the Ndougou, French administrators instead fully incorporated chiefs into the administrative apparatus, which had the unintended effect of distancing lineage heads further from communal and ancestral prerogatives (and which, in turn, diminished the solidarity created by ancestral cosmologies). The Western Region, therefore, had ample time to adjust to a devolved system where native authorities operated legitimately and side-by-side with DCEs.

Third, decentralization reforms in Ghana came both earlier and were in better faith than those introduced in Gabon. Sekondi enjoyed a Town Council as early as 1904, and the evidence suggests that the coastal “creoles” and intelligentsia largely welcomed the devolution of legislative powers, as opposition to despotic chiefs was growing. Industrialization had already commenced in Sekondi-Takoradi with the harbour and railway yards built in the 1920s and later, and by the time Districts were created—itsself a reform which can be associated with situational adjustments and incongruity—the negative impacts of urban-rural dualism had run their course. Busia explicitly informs that that the Sekondi-Takoradi Town Council, instituted in 1946, commanded the respect of the local population. By independence, the advance of industrial society in the Western Region was confirmed by a strong labour movement. In the Ndougou, no such movements were able to crystallize. Village and cantonal chiefs, let alone other potential community leaders, were not able to sufficiently accumulate enough capital or symbolic resources to spearhead or lend support to incipient worker mobilization. When the 1996/1997 decentralization reforms were applied, little to no pre-existing institutions of public authority capable of channeling community interests existed to interface with the newly empowered local assemblies. Early industrialization and creolization in the Western Region, on the other hand, allowed for the success of an interpretive model which would favour devolved assemblies.

These patterns of interaction all coalesced to give Sekondi-Takoradi a “head start” when the supposed resource curse was due. Paramount chiefs held mutually beneficial relationships with elected representatives, even if sometimes illicit. District Executives respected chiefs, and vice-versa. The region’s popularity, combined with Ghana’s favoured status among Western investors, also meant that NGO activity was expected, and a coordinated campaign of information and expectation-management took place. Chiefs, politicians, and NGO workers were all more or less cognizant of the dangers of uncontrolled expectations brought with oil wealth. In Gamba, decentralization was not truly decentralization, and merely added a new layer, or sediment, to the

local public arena. Not only that, but it was one which competed with Shell-Gabon, a losing competition which could only reduce the local assemblies' legitimacy among the public. This was to be extremely devastating to levels of disaffection, because the local assemblies were and have been hailed by their promoters as the true representatives of the local citizenry. This sentiment is not shared by the locals, however, who fear the imminent departure of Shell, the single institution of public authority which has done the most to improve the collective lot.

Oil exploitation has thus had similar effects in both spaces. Social anomie followed limited infusions of foreign currency, a phenomenon known throughout the world. But the resource curse paradigm errs in extending oil's impacts to political anomie and informalization. The starkly different political arenas, with varying degrees of institutional regularization and adjustment, yielded vastly different development outcomes. While the Ndougou suffered incongruence, the Western Region, by contrast, benefited from relative congruence. This relative congruence, though imperfect, owes its fortune to the factors explicated above.

What became clear through both single case study and comparison was that neither rentierism nor Neo-Tillyian approaches could account for anomic trends. That is to say, if political structures were responsible, they did not necessarily follow the logic of either of these frameworks. Corruption in the Ndougou did not coincide with the relative dependence of the state on Shell-Gabon. Even as the state was relieved of its taxation burden and bore little interest in the Ndougou, the *prefectoral state* remained legitimate. Rentier mentalities were aggravated but certainly based on pre-existing norms. Although the decentralized state was entirely illegitimate, its illegitimacy did not coincide with oil production. Likewise, the theoretical application of Boone's Neo-Tillyian state to the Ndougou proved to be unwieldy, as definitions of the "state" and "hierarchy" proved too cumbersome to capture the subtle and fragmented realities of the Ndougou.

Hybrid governance, rather, accurately accounted for anomic structures in the Ndougou, and it likewise accounted for very similar anomic structures in the Western Region, a non-oil-rentier state. But the hybrid governance framework remains unsatisfactory from a positivist perspective, since we do not know in what situations a non-hegemonic/norm-setting state will lead to incongruence, nor do we know when incongruence will be necessarily detrimental and anomic.

This is where a synthesis might be proffered. Though rentierism did not work at the local level, its rationale of self-interest is compelling. Many in the Ndougou are self-interested, but are circumscribed by certain realities which preclude social and economic advancement. At the state

level, therefore, rentierism still applies. In states with extraverted regimes, it is almost by definition that actors in capital cities would be non-hegemonic. There is consequently no need to incorporate populations which have no bearing on the success of elite classes. Classes are self-sustaining and oil is far away from the population. Incongruence, then, is much more likely to take place when the state has no interest or accountability link to local settings, and thus is not creating any norms. In many Western countries, the state may not be visibly present in peri-urban and rural areas, but it is indeed hegemonic. It has no serious competition as the highest public and galvanizing authority, and its efforts to rein in lawless behavior in the hinterland is widely met as legitimate.⁶²⁴ This hegemony is assisted by a long history of institutionalization, war, bureaucratization, etc. Clear lines of authority are drawn such that predictability prevails.

This is decidedly not the case in post-colonial states, which are all disadvantaged and conflicted in this manner. In a relatively short span of time, African states have had to negotiate the introduction of colonial agents, native authorities, new socio-economic classes, NGOs, decentralized assemblies, etc. It is not surprising at first that African states should be so disadvantaged. But what accounts for the differences between post-colonial African states themselves is precisely the lack of competing authorities, as well as the incentive by states to create some form of hegemony which allows congruence and limits sedimentation in local public arenas. Ghana in the 1950s and 1980s (when one can observe anomic structures in Takoradi) was a much more different place than it is today. While in the 1950s Ghana remained under the British Crown, it became extraverted by an IMF austerity plan and reliant on foreign resources; the state felt less accountability to its people.

State-level events in Ghana by the 1990s, however, conspired to allow for more congruence. Democratic transfers of power took place and citizens became proud of their proven “democratic consolidation.” There was a relatively hegemonic discourse of transparency and good governance, while a higher density of people in the Western Region also facilitated the state’s access to rural and peri-urban spaces. In Gabon, however, no such serious attempts have been made. Rentierism is quite right to state that rentier states tend to lack public vertical and horizontal accountability. Indeed, they are aggravating factors in what many post-colonial states have faced.

⁶²⁴ As just one example, one can refer to the many successful attempts by United States federal law enforcement agencies to disband opposing extra-judicial frameworks in rural areas, such as in Waco, Texas (1993), the “Manson Family” (1969), the Ku Klux Klan, Rajneeshpuram (1985), etc.

But since rentierism has not and cannot be proven as an unassailable determiner of surprisingly common social and political ailments, its status as an aggravating factor appears confirmed. Rentierism is therefore much better represented by the catchall term “extraversion,” and extraversion should be considered as a factor of state hegemony in the hybridity framework. This construct satisfies the theoretical drawbacks of both approaches to the politics-anomie link.

In extraverted or rentier states, institutional incongruence is not only the result of an indifferent or uninterested state, but incongruence is also noxious to livelihoods, leading to social and political anomie. It should not be forgotten that incongruence does not necessarily lead to these pathologies. Incongruence merely means ineffectualness, the failure of institutions of public authority to complement each other’s efforts. Those efforts may be deemed objectively immoral or incompetent, leaving citizens and subjects better off than had incongruence not taken place. But in rentier states a rentier mentality can and does indeed permeate all levels of society, and is concordant with older interpretive models in places such as the Ndougou. Though rentier behaviour was found to be only modestly related to oil production in the Ndougou, it cannot be easily refuted that self-interested politicians understand the benefits of political promotions. Energies are therefore more likely turned towards self-aggrandizement and recognition than towards collective projects. This reflects many hybridists’ assertions that uncertainty and a lack of accountability will leave local public arenas dependent on the chance philanthropy or good will of local leaders where no structural incentives are in place. Rentier opportunism tends to pit local institutions of public authority against one another, as was seen between Shell-Gabon and the local assemblies. Thus, there is no incentive for the state in Libreville to positively carry out policy detrimental to and exploitative of local populations, as the power of the rentier class does not depend on these populations.

This thesis demonstrates that local politics are likely to become detrimental to livelihoods in African peri-urban/rural spaces when structural changes take place under a context of both extraverted state elites and local institutional proliferation. If institutional proliferation is absent in rentier states, as it was in the Ndougou before the 1996/1997 decentralization laws, the state will not seek to incorporate the local public arena. As was demonstrated in Chapter 5, the local assemblies were the fruit of the Paris Accords, where Libreville’s rentier class raised no serious objections to the creation of local assemblies. This is because there was nothing to lose; it was a case of relative non-incorporation. Once the local assemblies were exercising new powers, 7 years

after Rabi-Kounga began production, there was little norm-setting by the elites in Libreville. Senator Fouity is a case in point, but also the Secretaries-General of the City Hall and the Departmental Council who appear powerless to rein in informalization of the local public sphere. The prefect as well appears unconcerned. Inversely, if institutional proliferation coincides with a relatively non-extraverted “Neo-Tillyian” state which wields local government strategies so as to maintain itself, objectively good congruence is more likely. The efforts by authorities in the Western Region to control rising expectation linked to the recent oil discoveries was possible due to a pre-existing and popular discourse of transparency and a central state keen to satisfy the populace. In this framework, it should be noted that oil extraction weighs in at the state level, perverting any attempts at state hegemony. In other words, it does affect local politics, but the lines of causation follow a hybrid logic. In turn, hybridity now has a basis for linking state hegemony and norm-setting to relative incongruence and congruence at the local level.

This thesis has hoped to contribute to a program of de-relativizing hybrid governance approaches, to shift them from ontological stasis to explanatory tools of positive evaluation of local political performance. The ontology of resource realism is demonstrably justified when and where units of analysis are state elites operating key ministries, alongside rentier mentality—easily conflatable with past rent-seeking—which makes its way to even the most remote locations. But only relativism and a relaxation of key concepts can reveal a story with internal logic and validity, such as that which unfolded in the Ndougou. Only by spanning ontological planes, or by making use of informed constructs such as hybridity which allow for flexibility in data collection and contextualization, can our understandings of local (and perhaps regional) political change be improved. There is, of course, a danger of *non sequitur* in assuming hybridity was the cause of social and political pathologies in both spaces, but the concluding hybridity was not just arrived at by process of eliminating competing theories. It was arrived at based on a preponderance of evidence, and after identifying the approach as a compelling one grounded in sound sociological conceptualizations.

The Ndougou Department and the Western Region were chosen as case studies due to their experience with oil production, which was for a long time cast in mainstream and academic literature as the paragon catalyst of all forms of anomie. Unfortunately, the premature movement to form a structural understanding of social and political pathologies resulted in shifting academic focus from communities and people to culture-centric abstractions: conflict, greed, corruption,

autocracy, etc. In addition to a lack of consensus as to their precise definitions, they were concepts borne of state-level behaviors (ignoring for the moment what exactly constitutes the “state.”). These approaches indeed had their value in supplying researchers with objectively structural antecedents, but the studies of the interactions of people and groups of people were prematurely aborted. The proverbial horse trailed the cart.

The most important lesson is that oil merely represents quick, easy, and substantial cash flows. It is almost always centrally managed from above, and often easily disrupted from below. This is the chief reason for why analysts paint damning forecasts of state corruption and corporal violence. But what we rarely acknowledge is that topical oil studies are also *de-historicizing*. Other, equally impactful narratives are overshadowed by the dominant discourse of oil as cause and effect, e.g. the existence of overtly peaceful extractive zones and the supposed banality of everyday experience in these localities. These are often overlooked not only because of attention-grabbing media images of gas flaring, bunkering, or profligate ruling families, but also because it is assumed that—absent oil’s visibly negative effects—oil can only be a boon to local and national economies. Unfortunately, such oversimplification and either/or fallacies have helped obscure other forms of violence and anomie which often arise when heavy industry transforms once-agrarian dynamics. Unless history and institutions are taken into account, theorizing the politics of African polities is a perilous venture. Communities behave in a variety of ways and are influenced by a number of factors, even when billions of dollars are at stake.

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Interviews (Gabon)

Date collected	Source of evidence	Author/Interlocutor	Location	Important Contextual Observations
2-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Lionel Ikogou-Renamy, Galwa, Ph.D. in Anthropology	Residence Lea, Libreville, Gabon	Bar, informal, brother present
6-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Professor Mouvongu, Loumbou, UOB Linguist	UOB, Libreville, Gabon	Dictaphone, lab with students working
7-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Professor Joseph Tonda, Gabonese, Anthropology, UOB	UOB, Libreville, Gabon	Dictaphone, students present
7-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Dimitri Ndomi, PhD, Sociology of Work, UOB	UOB, Libreville, Gabon	Dictaphone, students present
8-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Professor Ratanga-Atoz, Gabonese, Historian, UOB	His home, Libreville, Gabon	Dictaphone, others present
8-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	M. Koumba, Jurist, Loumbou, relative of Ratanga-Atoz	His office, Libreville, Gabon	Dictaphone, Lionel present
9-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Professor John Nambo, Law, UOB	His office, Libreville, Gabon	Dictaphone
10-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Prof. Ndoutoungu, ex-Ministry of Hydrocarbons, Geography at UOB	UOB, Libreville, Gabon	Notes
13-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Prof. Cyrille Mickala, Philosophy, UOB	UOB, Libreville, Gabon	Notes, chance encounter
13-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Francis Bivigou, Chief of Gabon-Oregon, UOB	His office, UOB, Libreville, Gabon	Notes
13-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Dimitri Ndomi, PhD, Sociology of Work, UOB	UOB, Libreville, Gabon	Dictaphone/Notes
14-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Georges Mpaga, ROLBG, opposition NGO	Office, Libreville, Gabon	Dictaphone/Notes
14-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Pierre Ndong Aboghe, ROLBG member, Law Ph.D.	ROLBG, Libreville, Gabon	Notes
14-Jul-15	Documentation	Stephane Le Duc Yeno, WWF, et. Al.	WWF, Libreville, Gabon	USB
14-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Stephane Le Duc Yeno, Researcher, WWF Gabon	WWF, Libreville, Gabon	Notes

14-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Professor Wilson Ndombet, Historian, UOB	Bar outside UOB, Libreville, Gabon	assistants present
14-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Gilchrist and Dieu(), Assistants to Ndombet	Bar outside UOB, Libreville, Gabon	Notes, Ndombet present
15-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Marc Ona Essangui, chief of Brainforest, opposition member	Office, Libreville, Gabon	Notes
16-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Shana Sherry, Political and Economic Advisor, US Embassy	US Embassy, Libreville, Gabon	Notes, other advisor present (Regina Manga)
16-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	History department faculty, UOB	UOB, Libreville, Gabon	Notes, plenty present
16-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	M. Wanceslas, Ministry of Hydrocarbons	Ministry, UOB, Libreville, Gabon	Notes
20-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Ghislain Pither, Shell	Gamba, Gabon	Notes
21-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Mireille Johnson, elephant expert, Smithsonian	Office, Gamba, Gabon	Dictaphone, notes
22-Jul-15	Documentation	Pierre Brice, WWF, et. Al.	Smithsonian Institute, Gamba, Gabon	USB
22-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Pierre Brice, Sociologist, WWF	Smithsonian Institute, Gamba, Gabon	notes
22-Jul-05	Open-ended interview	M. Ossendo, Secretary-General of departmental council of ndougou	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
22-Jul-05	Open-ended interview	Igor, Gamba local radio	Soundbooth, Gamba, Gabon	notes
23-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Armelle Zabatier, Social Performance, Shell	Shell Terminal Gamba, Gabon	notes
23-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Jean Churley, Ibonga, conservationist	Home, Gamba, Gabon	notes
24-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Jean Churley, Ibonga, conservationist	My apartment, Gamba, Gabon	notes
24-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	"Mousse," Marine Marchand	My apartment, Gamba, Gabon	notes
27-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Prefect of Ndougou	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
27-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	ex-VP of departmental council, 2008-2013 (name in dictaphone)	see notebook	notes

28-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Dr. Sisso, Medecin at Gamba Hospital, 1st Mayor of Gamba	Hospital, Gamba, Gabon	dictaphone and notes
29-Jul-15	Semi-structured interview	Chef de canton de Ndougou	Pitonga, Ndougou, Gabon	dictaphone, notes, villagers present and contributing
29-Jul-15	Semi-structured interview	Brother of chef de canton de ndougou	Pitonga, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
30-Jul-15	Semi-structured interview	Chef de village de Soungha	Soungha, Ndougou, Gabon	dictaphone, notes, villagers present and contributing
30-Jul-15	Semi-structured interview	Chef de regroupement de Sette-Cama	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	dictaphone, notes, villagers present and contributing
30-Jul-15	Semi-structured interview	Chef de village 1 de sette cama	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	dictaphone, notes, villagers present and contributing
30-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Herve Ngoma, boat captain, Vili	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	notes, cantonal secretary present
31-Jul-15	Semi-structured interview	chef de village 2 de sette cama	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	notes, assistant present
31-Jul-15	Semi-structured interview	"Notable" of Mougambi	Mougambi, Ndougou, Gabon	dictaphone, notes, villagers present and contributing
31-Jul-15	Open-ended interview	Head of Ibonga	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
3-Aug-15	Semi-structured interview	Villagers, chef de canton, chef de regroupement de Ingoueka	Ingoueka, Nougou, Gabon	dictaphone, notes, villagers present and contributing
3-Aug-15	Semi-structured interview	Chef de village de Vara	Vara, Ndougou, Gabon	dictaphone, teachers/villagers present
4-Aug-15	Documentation	Armelle Zabatier, Social Performance, Shell	Shell Terminal Gamba, Gabon	Paper
4-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Armelle Zabatier, Social Performance, Shell	Shell Terminal Gamba, Gabon	notes
5-Aug-15	Semi-structured interview	Alain Mougamba, "notable" de village de Mayonami	Mayonami, Ndougou, Gabon	dictaphone, notes, villagers present and contributing
5-Aug-15	Semi-structured interview	chef de village de mougagara	Mougagara, Ndougou, Gabon	dictaphone, notes, villagers present and contributing
6-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Treasurer (percepteur) of Ndougou	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes

7-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Middle-school teachers, college de Gamba	My apartment, Gamba, Gabon	dictaphone, notes
9-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	M. Chambrier, ex-functionary at City Hall	His home, Gamba, Gabon	notes
10-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Guy Kassa Koumba, head of social performance, Shell	Skype meeting at Shell terminal, Gamba, Gabon	notes, Armelle Zague present
10-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Pierre Brice, Sociologist, WWF	in transit, Gamba, Gabon	notes
12-Aug-15	Structured interview	Chef de village de Soungha	Soungha, Ndougou, Gabon	notes, villagers present
12-Aug-15	Structured interview	Sounga chief's little sister	Soungha, Ndougou, Gabon	notes, villagers present
12-Aug-15	Structured interview	Fisherman, temporarily in Soungha	Soungha, Ndougou, Gabon	notes, villagers present
12-Aug-15	Structured interview	Jean-Louis Louemba, Sette Cama villager	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	notes, villagers present
12-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Chef de regroupement de Sette-Cama	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	notes, villagers present
12-Aug-15	Structured interview	Gracia Tchibinda	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
13-Aug-15	Structured interview	Stephane Fouity	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	notes, villagers present
13-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Jean-Alain Pamba	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
13-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Jean-Marie Ndombe, guide to famous hunter Maurice Patry	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
13-Aug-15	Structured interview	Jean-Alain Pamba	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
13-Aug-15	Structured interview	Glen Mbouity	Sette Cama, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
13-Aug-13	Open-ended interview	Chef de canton de Ndougou	Pitonga, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
13-Aug-15	Structured interview	Etienne Pouebou	Pitonga, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
14-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	M. Chambrier, ex-functionary at City Hall	My apartment, Gamba, Gabon	notes
14-Aug-15	Structured interview	Francis Yaba's sister in Plaine 4, Gamba	Her house, Gamba, Gabon	notes
14-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Francis Yaba, builder	His house, Gamba, Gabon	notes
14-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	ANPN agents, Yaba's house	Yaba house, Gamba, Gabon	notes

18-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Professor Djoumata, high school teacher	High School, Gamba, Gabon	notes
18-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Nazaire Boussouba Yaba, Francis' father, former Shell employee	His home, Gamba, Gabon	notes, many friends present
19-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	M. Ossendo, Secretary-General of departmental council of ndougou	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
19-Aug-15	Documentation	Censeur and Proviseur, High School	Office, Gamba, Gabon	USB
19-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Censeur and Proviseur, High School	High School, Gamba, Gabon	notes
19-Aug-15	Documentation	Treasurer (percepteur) of Ndougou	Office, Gamba, Gabon	Paper
19-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Treasurer (percepteur) of Ndougou	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
19-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Sitting senator from Gamba	His home, Gamba, Gabon	notes
21-Aug-15	Structured interview	"Notable" of Mougambi	Mougambi, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
21-Aug-15	Structured interview	Robert Moundanga	Pitonga, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
21-Aug-15	Structured interview	Jeanne-Marie Mboumba, femme de menage of case de passage	Pitonga, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
22-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Stephane Moussavu	Mougambi, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
22-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Villagers of Ibouka	Ibouka, Ndougou, Gabon	notes
23-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Pastor Daniel Boudika, Alliance Chretienne	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
24-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Prefect of Ndougou	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
24-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Chargee de mission to mayor of Gamba	conference room, City hall, gamba, gabon	notes
24-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Sitting senator from Gamba	His home, Gamba, Gabon	notes
26-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Radio chief Marc Boulondo	Office at Radio Gabon, Gamba, Gabon	notes
26-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Dieudonne, plays news at radio	Radio, Gamba, Gabon	notes

27-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Ex-mayor and sitting 2nd adjoint Panga	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
27-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	secretary general of city hall	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
28-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	cabinet director for mayor	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
31-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	secretary general of city hall	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
31-Aug-15	Open-ended interview	Taxi union boss, Cedric Mangala	My apartment, Gamba, Gabon	notes
1-Sep-15	Semi-structured interview	Poroty, market stand owner	Market, Gamba, Gabon	notes
1-Sep-15	Semi-structured interview	Commercial fisher Pegiza	Market, Gamba, Gabon	notes
1-Sep-15	Open-ended interview	"Serge", from village of Mbouda	Market, Gamba, Gabon	notes
1-Sep-15	Semi-structured interview	Woman at manioc factory	Market, Gamba, Gabon	notes
1-Sep-15	Open-ended interview	M. Chambrier, ex-functionary at City Hall	My apartment, Gamba, Gabon	notes
2-Sep-15	Documentation	Obtained from radio chief, written by city hall and departmental council	Radio, Gamba, Gabon	USB
2-Sep-15	Open-ended interview	Radio chief Marc Boulondo	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
2-Sep-15	Open-ended interview	secretary general of city hall	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
5-Sep-15	Open-ended interview	Ingoueka villagers, funeral rites	Ingoueka, Nougou, Gabon	notes
7-Sep-15	Open-ended interview	secretary general of city hall	Office, Gamba, Gabon	notes
10-Sep-15	Presentation & Focus Group	Elected officials, NGOs, administrators, etc.	City Hall, Gamba, Gabon	Dictaphone

Interviews (Ghana)

Date collected	Source of evidence	Author/Interlocutor	Location
7-Jan-16	open-ended int.	Dorcas Ansah Mark Evans & Samuel	Offices in Accra
8-Jan-16	open-ended int.	Behoe	NRGI, Accra
8-Jan-16	open-ended int.	Nana Ama Richard Acheampong, Labour Organizer	COLANDEF, Accra Labour College / TUC, Accra
10-Jan-16	open-ended int.		COLANDEF, Takoradi
13-Jan-16	open-ended int.	Orei-Akoto	Empire Radio, Takoradi
18-Jan-16	open-ended int.	Bob Gardinier Mores, "The Daily Graphic"	Takoradi Coffee shop, Takoradi
18-Jan-16	open-ended int.		Coffee shop, Takoradi
18-Jan-16	open-ended int.	Kweku, Joy FM	Takoradi
18-Jan-16	open-ended int.	John Blay	Bollore, Takoradi Coffee shop?
19-Jan-16	open-ended int.	Chief, member of PIAC	Takoradi Coffee shop, Takoradi
19-Jan-16	open-ended int.	Joseph, ExIm Tullow Osabarima, Kwaw Entsie II	Takoradi Coffee shop, Takoradi
19-Jan-16	open-ended int.	Matthew, Oswald, Bernice	Takoradi
20-Jan-16	open-ended int.		WRCF, Takoradi Shipper's Council, Takoradi
22-Jan-16	open-ended int.	Nana Kwasi Ogyema	Social Performance, Tullow, Takoradi
22-Jan-16	open-ended int.	Korkor	Tullow, Takoradi
22-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Domnic, Taxi Driver	Taxi, Takoradi
22-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Mabel, WRCF Stephen Blighton, Regional Co- Coordination Councillor	WRCF, Takoradi Regional Co- Coordinating Council, Sekondi Western Regional Youth Authority, Sekondi
23-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Emmanuel Papa Assan, Regional Youth Elizabeth Arthur, Presiding Member, Policy Planner	STMA District, Takoradi
23-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Solomon Ampofo, Conversation Manager	Takoradi
24-Aug-16	open-ended int.		FON, Takoradi

25-Aug-16	Participation	WCRF Assembly	Dixcove COLANDEF,
26-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Osei Akoto, COLANDEF	Takoradi
26-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Nana Akosua Gyamfiaba II, Queen Mother; Elders FON/Peace Corps Community	Palace/Residence, Shama
28-Aug-16	Participation	Engagement/Conference	Nyankrom
		Joseph Kudjo, Presiding Member, Nzema East?	Ghana Gas Workshop,
30-Aug-16	open-ended int.	District Assembly	Esiama Ghana Gas Workshop,
30-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Ruth Anwuboh, Unit Community Member	Esiama Ghana Gas Workshop,
30-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Maxwell Essien, National Assemblyman	Esiama Ghana Gas Workshop,
30-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Wisdom, Community Development Officer, Ellembelle	Esiama
30-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Elders	Atuabo
30-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Chief and elders representing fishermen	Baku
30-Aug-16	open-ended int.	Larry, Fisherman and Student	Baku

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Samenvatting

Politicologische studies van Afrika ten zuiden van de Sahara concentreren zich vooral op staten en negeren daarom vaak lokale krachten en actoren in ontwikkeling en onderontwikkeling. Dit komt deels door de alomtegenwoordigheid van extractieve economieën en van verstedelijkte, naar buiten gerichte *rentier* groepen. Hierdoor richt de academische belangstelling zich vooral op actoren op het statelijke niveau die formeel verantwoordelijk zijn voor publieke goederen, waaronder genationaliseerde bezittingen, en bestuur. Een heel andere combinatie van thema's, samengevat onder de begrippen idiosyncrasie en banaliteit, brengt het risico mee dat men Afrikaanse politieke culturen stereotypeert ter verklaring van verschijnselen als informalisering en corruptie. Dit kan zo ver gaan dat men begrippen als 'het dorp' (*the village*) en zijn 'grote mannen' (*big men*) een universeel karakter toedicht en extrapoleert naar andere situaties. Dit proefschrift problematiseert en verzoent beide benaderingen door etnografisch veldwerk in Gamba, Gabon, een gemeenschap in een olieproducerende regio in een staat die al lang geassocieerd wordt met *rentierism* (inkomsten uit niet-productieve activiteiten). De conclusies worden vervolgens vergeleken met de ontwikkelingen in Takoradi, Ghana, waar offshore oliebronnen pas sinds kort worden geëxploiteerd in een context van een staat die niet direct bekend staat om *rentier*-gedrag.

Oliegemeenschappen figureren zelden als case-studies van lokale politieke arena's in Afrika. Vaker worden ze gebruikt om politieke beeldspraken en concepten op grond van *rent-seeking* en *resource curses* een té concrete realiteit toe te dichten, waarbij dan geldstromen het politieke gedrag van lokale, regionale, nationale en internationale actoren conditioneren. Hoofdstukken 1 en 2 van dit proefschrift gaan in op de bestaande literatuur over politieke veranderingen en effecten in Afrika, waarbij de relatieve causaliteit van internationale en lokale krachten wordt onderzocht. Dit vormt de opmaat voor de onderzoeksopzet zoals besproken in hoofdstuk 2. Dit hoofdstuk voert argumenten aan voor een vergelijking tussen twee gemeenschappen woonachtig in olieproducerende regio's van Gabon en Ghana. Tevens worden drie representatieve benaderingen van lokale politiek en lokale economie (in de zin van systemen van levensonderhoud) in Afrika besproken. Hoofdstukken 3 en 4 beschrijven de geschiedenis en de recente geschiedenis van politieke instituties en systemen van levensonderhoud (*livelihoods*) in Gamba, Gabon, gevolgd door toepassingen van bovengenoemde drie benaderingen in hoofdstukken 5 en 6, ten einde te bepalen wat de beste verklaring vormt voor de politiek beïnvloede veranderingen in de gemeenschap. Hoofdstuk 7 past dezelfde methode van historisering en theoretische applicatie toe op Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana, maar dan op een gecondenseerde manier.

De geschiedenis van extractieve economieën in Afrika bezuiden de Sahara heeft lokale factoren in politieke ontwikkeling versluierd, terwijl het omgekeerde geldt voor essentialistische benaderingen. Mijn onderzoek hoopt deze tegenstelling te verzoenen met behulp van theoretische literatuur die nog nooit is gebruikt voor de studie van extractieve ruimten, alsmede de desbetreffende lokale gemeenschappen 'voor zichzelf te laten spreken'. Het benadrukt de ondergewaardeerde conditie van lokale politiek in Afrika. Oliewinning in dit paradigma is niet langer zowel oorzaak als gevolg van anomie, maar een andere vorm van 'sedimentering'.

Abstract

Political science as applied to sub-Saharan Africa is largely preoccupied with states, and as a consequence often sidesteps local agents of development and underdevelopment. This is partly due to the pervasiveness of extractive economies and extraverted rentier classes in urban spaces, situations which tend to redirect academic interest towards state-level actors who are formally responsible for nationalized assets and governance. Another set of motifs, that of both idiosyncrasy and banality, risks essentializing African political cultures so as to explain informalization and corruption, going as far as to universalize and extrapolate the “village” and its “big men.” This thesis problematizes and reconciles both approaches through ethnographic fieldwork in Gamba, Gabon, an oil-bearing community in a state long associated with state rentierism. The conclusions are then compared to the experiences of Takoradi, Ghana, where offshore deposits have only recently been exploited in a state not especially known for rentier behavior.

Oil communities rarely appear as case studies of local political arenas in Africa. More often, they serve to reify tropes and concepts based on rent-seeking and resource curses where a cash nexus conditions the political behavior of local, regional, national, and international actors. Chapters 1 and 2 begin by reviewing the literature on political changes and impacts in Africa, surveying the relative causality of international and local forces. This sets the stage for the research design in Chapter 2, which justifies a comparison of two oil-bearing communities in Gabon and Ghana, as well as the selection of three representative approaches to local politics and livelihoods in Africa. Chapters 3 and 4 detail the history and recent history of political institutions and livelihoods in Gamba, Gabon, followed by applications of the three approaches in Chapters 5 and 6 to determine what best explains politically-impacted change in the community. Chapter 7 applies the same method of historicization and theoretical application to Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana, but in a condensed manner.

The history of extractive economies in sub-Saharan Africa has obfuscated local contributions to political development, while the inverse is true of essentialist approaches. My research hopes to reconcile this, using a body of literature which has yet to be applied to extractive spaces and which allows communities to “speak for themselves” and acknowledges the understudied condition of local politics in Africa. Oil extraction in this paradigm is no longer both cause and consequence of anomie, but another form of “sedimentation.”

Curriculum Vitae

Joseph Neal Mangarella was born on July 25, 1984 in Rahway, New Jersey (USA). In 2008, Joseph obtained his BA in political science from Earlham College, a Quaker-affiliated liberal arts college in Indiana, USA. He then received his MA in International Relations from the American Graduate School in Paris in 2012, *summa cum laude*, with an area concentration in Africa. In 2014, Joseph entered into a joint doctorate with the African Studies Centre Leiden and the Université Paris 8 (Institut Français de Géopolitique) in anthropology and geopolitics respectively.

Over the course of his doctoral studies, he has contributed to the *Africa Yearbook* and the *Bertelsmann Transformation Index* as a country expert on Equatorial Guinea. Joseph has also contributed to the ViEWS initiative at Uppsala University as a country expert on both Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. In addition to presenting his research at several conferences, Joseph joined the organizing team of a DFG-funded workshop which successfully brought together researchers from several disciplines working on francophone Equatorial Africa. He is now using this expertise to draft a proposal to research the historical trajectories of oil-bearing communities along the entire Loango Coast.

Joseph has taught a wide range of courses to undergraduate and graduate students in writing, language, legal English, and African business and economics at the Université Paris 2, Université Paris 1, INSEEC Paris, and most recently the University of Regensburg. In 2018, he was awarded a Visiting Ph.D. Fellowship at the ASC Leiden, where he was fortunate to share his research and confer with esteemed colleagues.