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 autochtons. 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).

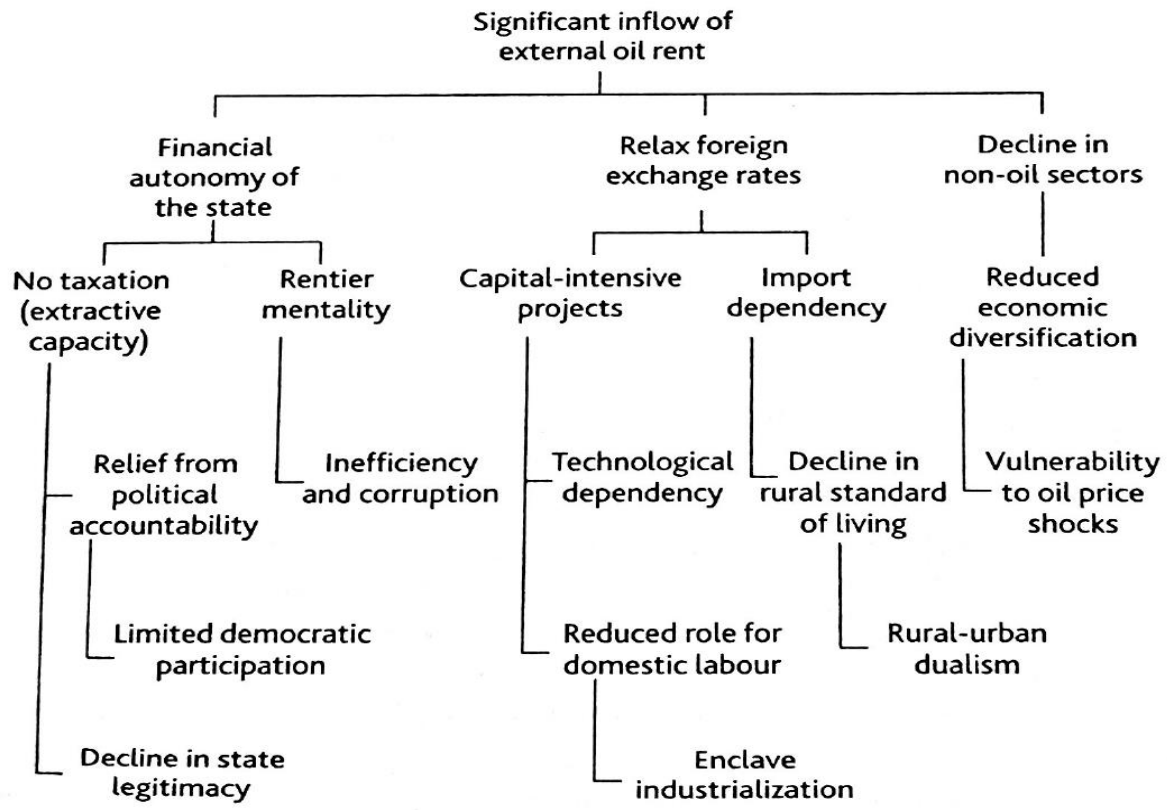

Figure 1: The Processes of Rentierism (Yates, The Scramble)

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 likeliness, 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 classication 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 ambigues*, 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 manoeuvering."[391]

Free and fair elections thus did not take place, as M'ba become 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 legislation[393] 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 ambigues,* 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 reinstalled 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 procuration 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 exercise*, 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 Decentralisation 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-maconnerie 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

fees[421] 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-owend Land Rover forced local adminsitrators 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 differents déplacements je suis obligé de me vouer à la Shell—solution inélégante s'agissante de déplacement pour l'adminisration 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 contestation[424] 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 idea[429]—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

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[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 matriclans 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 terms signififying "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 money[434] 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 Mpaga
[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 transparence 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 prefectoral 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 prefectoral 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 prefectoral 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 chiefdom 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 prefectoral 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] Inteview 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 prefectoral 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 prefectoral 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 prefectoral 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 prefectoral 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 prefectoral 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 Mpaga
[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