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Author: Mangarella, J.N.

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CHAPTER 6. Alternative Approaches to Explaining Political and Development Outcomes in an oil-bearing community

6.1. Introduction

A detailed application of oil rentier theory to a half-century of political-developmental outcomes in the Ndougou reveals that rentierism cannot fully account for the timing of increased social and political anomie. Oil rent dependency could not explain the public accountability deficit of the state before significant fields came onstream in the 1960s and its continuity thereafter. Nor could it explain the seemingly positive experiences of social and political life shared by residents of the Ndougou during the early years of Shell-Gabon's exploitation. Furthermore, the corruptive effects predicted by rentierism did occur, but they did not coincide with the relative dependency of the state. They can instead be most closely associated with the singular event of statewide decentralization. In addition, the legitimacy of the prefectoral state persisted in what may seem an anomaly, contrary to the axiomatic causation of rentier theories. In this vein, and without external validity (see Chapter 7), the impact of rentierism can be safely reduced to the status of an aggravating factor of unwanted political and developmental outcomes.

What, therefore, was the most contributing political process of increasing social and political anomie outlined in Chapter 4? Decentralization emerges as an immediate culprit as it was generally associated with the rise in anomic structures, but mere association falls short of correlation. As introduced in Chapter 1, other dominant perspectives exist to help the analyst of local politics in Africa identify contributory factors of political and development changes. First, we will consider Catherine Boone's elaboration of Mamdani's "bifurcated state" hypothesis, which consists largely of positing a state-local equilibrium whereby local factors inform the state's choice of institutions and by extension political-developmental outcomes. After concluding that this approach also fails to capture the historical realities of the Ndougou, we will turn our attention towards the most internally valid, ethnologically-oriented body of authors commonly referred to as "hybrid governance." Reasoning that the latter can be most accurately applied to the Ndougou's case, the chapter nevertheless concludes with a synthesis of the findings with the aim of qualifying each broader perspective.

6.2. State-Local Equilibrium, or State Strategy

As per Chapter 1, Boone's elaboration of Mamdani's central idea—that decentralized despotism resulted from the state's overarching need to maintain order in the context of a bifurcated state—requires that we define the relative degree of rural social hierarchy in the Ndougou over time. Such may be based on a number of factors, including settlement patterns, land tenure, inheritance regimes, and relations of cooperation, dependence, and coercion, keeping in mind that legitimacy can lower the cost of hierarchical control. Though Boone's application was restricted to cases of taxing agricultural output (specifically in the Senegal River Valley and Asante), Chapters 1 and 2 argued that such an analysis may be applied to non-agricultural forms of extraction, since the fundamentals of her analysis concern the state's desire to persist and maintain order. The qualified status of rural social hierarchy must then determine the state's particular institutional strategies. If the predicted strategies do not reflect the reality, then such an application of Neo-Tillyian theory to spaces of mineral extraction must be amended.

6.2.1. Institutional Choice and Communal Structure Before Oil

Chapter 3 detailed the French colonialists' strategy towards Sette Cama and the Ndougou lagoon, as well as the communal structure in place at the time. In Boone's conception, the presence of a Poste de Control Administratif in Sette Cama with a relatively concentrated "spatial" apparatus indicates a choice of institutions roughly between that of "non-incorporation" and "administrative occupation." The lagoon's primary interest to the French was the facilitation of lumber and palm exports from the interior and forced labor needed to carry out these activities. In this scheme, Sette Cama was a district which reported to the subdivision Bongo, which itself was deemed a more important export hub. Little evidence exists that the administration in Sette Cama exceeded much more than a handful of appointees.

The choice of institutions therefore follows a rough Neo-Tillyian logic. Chapter 3 also detailed the social structure prevalent in the Ndougou prior to oil extraction, one which suggests a fair degree of hierarchy based almost exclusively on political legitimacy, yet one which was not

derived from concentration of the kind of resources Boone had in mind. Unlike the cases provided by Boone, the Ndougou elite did not enjoy indigenously-derived economic resources such as cash crops. Chapter 3 demonstrates how the region—and its elite—had been habituated to extractive commerce since the arrival of the Portuguese, from slaving to the felling of elephants and trees for the coastal *factoreries*. At the same time, however, social hierarchy persisted, and though the growing trading class (*fumu-si*) gradually usurped both the autochthonal Varama and the Bouvandji lineage chiefs (*fumu*) who could boast familial links with the Loango Kingdom, the *fumu-si* became adept at appropriating symbolic manifestations of political power (such as bells) and oral tradition to their advantage. When the French followed their particular institutional blend of non-incorporation and administrative occupation, they thus had a reasonably stable rural hierarchy on which they could depend, and one which was further reinforced by missionary schools and evangelists.

At independence, the latent power of lineage chiefs and *chefs de terre* were supported by the moderately insurgent POUNGA party led by Sousatte. This demonstrated, in part, that ancestral political legitimacy was yet present within various conglomerations, especially among POUNGA's base of supporters in the south. At the same time, the fledgling independent nation embarked upon a program of modernization and *regroupement* in an effort to cradle a more productive agricultural sector. In Boone's conception, this would have qualified as a minor shift towards powersharing in the Ndougou, as both the M'ba and Bongo administrations relied on legitimate chiefs whenever possible. Moderated powersharing was also witnessed via the newly created rural collectivities which were answerable to sous-prefects. The Neo-Tillyian logic of this approach is confirmed in the disparate approach the state used in the Fang-dominated north, which relied more on a mix of usurpation and administrative occupation through the installment of state agents, so as to temper less pronounced hierarchies which were also less dependent on the state and held out real possibilities for agricultural development. In both cases, I have used the qualifier "moderated" in application to powersharing, because of the centralizing tendencies of the single-party structure. As recounted in Chapter 4, the local government reforms of 1975 only succeeded in further centralization. With the attendant deconcentration provided by the expansion of local collectivities, this meant that state strategies towards local groups alternated between powersharing and usurpation.

6.2.2. Institutional Choice and Communal Structure During the First Oil Booms

Communal structure did not immediately change in a substantive way once COSREG/Shell-Gabon arrived, nor could one have expected it to in accordance with a singular event. What did change in a rather dramatic way was the particular state “strategy” employed in the Ndougou—the region where the vast Gamba and Ivinda wells had just been discovered. First, the transfer of the seat of local administration from Sette Cama to Gamba was a clear attempt at facilitating and controlling the work of the exploitation zones. It can be taken for granted that the promise of sustained and substantial cash flows to the regime—whether for the regime’s political sustenance, the development of the country, or both—motivated this decision. It is also clear that such potential would supersede the trivial concerns of the old rural hierarchy, whose political clout vis-à-vis the center was proven (through the relocation) to rely more and more on *administrative* legitimacy and less and less on lineage and agrarian structures. The state therefore did not need to usurp a strong hierarchy that was relatively independent. Centralization persisted.

The more difficult problem to address for Neo-Tillyian approaches is the major role Shell-Gabon played in local governance at the outset of the exploitation zone. Both enforcer within its concessions and provider of public services, the company also enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the central state in Libreville as demonstrated early on by the administrative relocation to Gamba. While one could classify this as a sort of “devolution” to rural “elites,” Shell-Gabon represented an external actor and not an integral part of Gabonese territory. As explained in Chapter 3, its upper management and technical staff were entirely foreign, while shorter-term work contracts belonged to local laborers. Critics of Neo-Tillyian approaches, such as Will Jones, readily point out this failure to integrate the real influence of nonstate and international actors.⁴⁹⁸ Such capital-intensive and profitable ventures such as oil production often entail proxy measures to ensure smooth operations. The limit of Neo-Tillyian approaches is the premise upon which its theories of state formation are based: the need to tax and capture the country’s resources. What rentier theories in particular contribute here is an explanation of how a state can both

⁴⁹⁸ “Attempts to integrate Tilly’s insights into an understanding of contemporary Africa have had results which are patchy at best: contemporary African wars do not appear to promote statehood in general” (Will Jones. “Murder and Create: State Reconstruction in Rwanda Since 1994.” PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2014), 43.

administratively occupy a rural region such as the Ndougou without “incorporating” it. Extractive industries relieve the state from the need to tax, but not necessarily the need to administer.

6.2.3. Communal Structure after Rabi-Kounga

In 1989, Shell-Gabon vastly expanded its operations with the onstream production of Rabi-Kounga. Chapter 4 reviewed much of the socioeconomic impact the expansion had on Gamba and its environs, concluding that there was a net positive effect on the community in terms of service provisions and employment, before a general decline (increase in social and political anomie) set in, coincident with the 1996 decentralization reforms and most likely co-related (see Chapter 5). Over time, communal structure in and around Gamba and the lagoon underwent dramatic changes. Chapter 4 touches upon many of them which have bearing on the strength and relative independence of rural hierarchy:

First, immigration and local village clustering nearer to Gamba defined settlement patterns which favored Gamban elites (administration, *chefs de quartier*, clergy, Shell employees, etc.) and introduced populations whose ancestral loyalties were elsewhere, but who were also making money. Similar processes intensified after the first production of Rabi-Kounga. With the growth of Gamba and the promises of new goods and technologies, settlement patterns helped undermine the older agrarian forms of political legitimacy which had hitherto allowed the state in Libreville and Port Gentil to administer cheaply but effectively.

Second, the gradual usurpation of land tenure from the *chefs de terre* and chiefs by the state-Shell enforcement tandem also militated against the old aristocracy’s ability to control their subjects via legitimacy. As of the 1990s, land chiefs ceased to exist throughout the lagoon. Shell’s annual tribute to the Boukosso clan near Gamba can be regarded as merely ceremonial, as in most instances Shell had been effectual in obtaining desired land, whether it be for pipelines, harbors, or lagunar gas installations. If anything proved the loss of land tenure—and thus part of legitimacy—by the old aristocracy, it was the relative ease with which village consolidations and regrouping took place (before the decentralized electoral apparatus attempted to halt it). Whether by force of law or free will, movement by subjects in and around the lagoon was not nearly as contested as in other locales, such as the Nyanga or the Woleu-Ntem. For those who chose to

remain in older villages such as Sette Cama or Soungha, familial concerns were paramount, while loyalty to the chieftaincy (which had become almost purely administrative) was invoked much more sparingly. Formal legal constraints, such as the state's ownership of most "customary" land, had always been present, but only after oil did they become an administrative tool for land grabs. (See Chapter 4.)

Shell-Gabon's emplacement in the lagoon therefore shifted class structures from those based on ancestral legitimacy and lineage to those based on coercion, enforcement and financial dependence. What chiefs lost in ancestral legitimacy they gained in administrative and moneyed legitimacy, particularly those members of the majority of the chieftainship who had worked for Shell. Villagers in the lagoon therefore respond to the demands of chiefs, but only to the administrative extent of chiefly prerogatives if they have not also become service providers through salary earnings (which itself also became more common). Deference is therefore of the formal kind, and not unlike most industrialized societies. In following the logic of administrative hierarchy based on coercion, chiefs themselves are deferential towards not only the prefect, but his agents and even park rangers. The cantonal chief for the Ndougou canton (not to be confused with the broader department comprising two other cantons) therefore conceals his cache of guns and ammunitions used to butcher crop-devastating elephants, for fear of being fined and/or arrested by an ANPN park agent.⁴⁹⁹

Outside the chieftaincy, now fully formalized under the executive, similar class formations were forming. Among the matrilinear Eshira groups which comprise the Ndougou lagoon, family heads were typically chosen on the maternal side. But as many respondents stated, their family head was the person who earned the most money, whether that individual was a maternal uncle or not. Typically, that person was employed in some technical capacity, either in Gamba or Port Gentil, and unexceptionally for an oil firm or one of its contractors. Remittances from salaried family members working in Gamba are the norm.

In Boone's conception, a rural hierarchy develops with a concentration of resources, thus wielding the capacity to challenge the state if the rural hierarchy is sufficiently resource-independent. Boone does recognize that a hierarchy can lower the cost of controlling dependents through legitimacy if that hierarchy lacks resources, but says little of symbolic goods like prestige

⁴⁹⁹ Interview with Chef de canton of the Ndougou, July 29

and totems. In the Ndougou, material goods were substituted for symbolic goods and thus helped establish a different hierarchy. Today's hierarchy has become more dependent on the state than ever before, since the state is ultimately responsible for all contracts with Shell-Gabon and its contracted affiliates. As shown by the relative wealth and prominence of Papa Yaba, a local *notable*, some of this hierarchy are not members of the old aristocracy. In general, this has produced an elite which is ultimately dependent on the state and Shell-Gabon, and which is fragmented in the sense that there exist several hierarchies and several hierarchical relations. Many chiefs successfully used their administrative positions to secure jobs with the oil industry, and vice versa. School teachers, who were responsible for conveying knowledge useful in the formal workplace, became community leaders. NGO workers, such as Pierre Bryce at the WWF, who had discretion in hiring, remain largely respected despite their intransigent criticism of agrarian hunting practices—even when those practices are employed towards ceremonial means. Section 6.3 below, which applies hybrid governance approaches, can make better logical sense of this fragmentation.

6.2.4. State Institutional “Choice” After Rabi-Kounga

Communal and class structure in the Ndougou gradually fragmented, or shifted to various hierarchies based on new forms of legitimacy and material goods. It was more dependent on the state and the companies it hosted, while the companies enjoyed a “devolved” status in local governance. In a way, this state strategy persisted, as we have seen that Shell continues to finance schools, medical care, and public transportation, yet all the while remaining the primary employer. This development does not fit neatly into the Neo-Tillyian framework. But if the state wished to develop and ensure the access potential of the vast oil reserves (a Neo-Tillyian assumption we will consider justified), it is clear it would have no resistance or indigenization efforts from older hierarchies. The situation had become one of increasing co-dependence, albeit skewed in favor of the Shell-state duopoly.

In this vein, Boone's framework—originally applied to agricultural locales—would suggest a number of strategies depending on how one defines operative terms such as rural hierarchy (or local elite) and relative dependence. If one considers that the new salaried class in

Gamba does indeed constitute a proper hierarchy with a sufficient concentration of resources which would compel deference to it, then we are considering a high degree of hierarchy. If it is merely one hierarchy among many in Gamba—an assertion to which I adhere—then we are considering a lower degree of hierarchy due to fragmentation.

If the former case is correct, that the Ndougou is one-dimensionally hierarchical, then the state could either opt for powersharing or usurpation, depending on whether that hierarchy is reliant on the state for its sustenance or not, respectively. Answering this question is more difficult than at first glance, because it is unclear (within this line of reasoning) whether Shell-Gabon—the primary employer and source of this would-be hierarchy—comprises the rural hierarchy or acts more in conjunction with the relevant ministries, or both. Any sovereign state may void contracts without serious legal repercussions, though the reputational costs of doing so are presumably high. A formalistic approach such as this would have us deduce that Shell, a profiteer, would play a delicate balancing act, weighing the state's clear interest in unabated production against the delimiting grievances of the local population whose cooperation is economically expedient. After all, Shell is listed in many Western stock exchanges such as the London Stock Exchange, Euronext, and the New York Stock Exchange, forums targeted by human rights campaigns that have in the past successfully eroded share prices of several errant corporations. Added to this are both the former president's (Omar Bongo's) Gabonization initiatives as well as the growing ranks of local Gambans working in lower and middle management. Though not a particularly sizable group given Gamba's employment statistics, many of these salaried employees undeniably have in mind the interests of the community. If such is in fact the case, that Shell-Gabon and its local salaried workforce are ultimately dependent on the state, then we should be witnessing efforts by the state to reach powersharing arrangements with the local population. This strategy would seek to maintain order as efficiently as possible, and is also according to Mamdani the most likely to lead to the "decentralized despotism" which ostensibly characterizes many African rural locales.

On the other hand, Shell-Gabon could reasonably be construed as a quasi-independent actor, ultimately more deferent to the Royal Dutch Shell headquarters in The Hague than its contractual obligations to the relevant ministries in Libreville. In its interdependent relationship with the state, Royal Dutch Shell wields finances, technological expertise, and local experience which the state in Libreville would have difficulty replacing with either its own consortium or even an international competitor. One Shell engineer, for instance, gingerly explained that they were

avored to non-Western consortiums due to their technical capacity to extract the more out-of-reach deposits, and that the state was concerned Shell might lease or sell off its concessions to a Chinese group. Historical analysis (see Chapters 3 and 4) also reveals an unmistakable degree of Shell-Gabon initiative without recourse to the central state apparatus. From the layout of Gamba itself and the provision of services to its role as administrative capital of the department, Shell's suggestions or actions were adopted or met with compliance by Libreville at every stage, and no record is available to suggest otherwise. Of all public leaders in the town, the prefectural apparatus, the most direct link to the executive in Libreville, was the most appreciative of Shell and what it had done for the community. In this case, a local elite would be able to develop independent of state imperium, prompting the state to attempt to usurp that elite. In fact, this has already been accomplished via the IRPP income tax levied on salaried workers (the vast majority of salaried workers in Gamba are employed by the oil industry), the state's share of all oil receipts, and the PDG's careful efforts to assure the loyalty of local leaders.

But there are several issues regarding the theory that the Gabonese state would usurp the Ndougou elite (assuming for the moment a hegemonic hierarchy exists) either for want of territorial integrity or of resources. For one, the population of the Ndougou remains among the most sparse in the country, with roughly 12,000-14,000 inhabitants versus a countrywide 2,000,000 (most of whom reside in larger cities). Second, the resources such a small group could potentially wield in non-beneficial ways (from the state's perspective) are slim, and amount to a relatively small group of dependents, limited real estate holdings, and other unsubstantial assets. Lastly, this salaried group connected to the oil industry, if not dependent on the state, is absolutely dependent on Shell-Gabon's continued activities in the region. So much so that this class of middle managers, technicians, decentralized public servants, and entrepreneurs felt compelled to draft the PDL (see previous chapters) as well as lobby Shell-Gabon's executives to remain on site. If usurpation did take place, *it was because the state has sought to legitimize itself as the sole and sovereign public authority among many competing public authorities.*

This leads to the other possible interpretation of the Ndougou's communal structure and its relationship to the "state," assuming for the moment that the "state" refers to the prefectural apparatus connected to the political elite of Libreville. It is entirely probable that the monetization—and then capitalization—of the Ndougou's communal structure fragmented a once more structured, more integral hierarchy. Counter-intuitively, a concentration of resources which

would permit stricter hierarchies never took shape, given the specific vectors of the limited capitalization seen in the Ndougou. Though the introduction of the oil industry in the region did allow the proliferation of rent-seeking, such as public corruption, prostitution, and services catering to a salaried class (both Western and local), the locals in the Ndougou do not own the means or modes of production, seriously limiting the scope of any resource accrual. Furthermore, the Ndougou has not experienced the “bunkering” and other techniques used by local elites in the Niger Delta to further their subnational ambitions, owing in large part to a relatively tiny population.

Again we are confronted with the anomalous participation of Shell-Gabon in the local communal structure and what it means for state institutional strategies. Do the more substantive beneficiaries of extraction—of whom few if any are locals—count as local elite, given their moderate insertion into local political and cultural life? The answer must be no, since the real beneficiaries have no embedded interests in the community, such as family or citizenship. The typical engineer, American or European, posted for four years will accrue hundreds of thousands USD, yet largely confines him or herself within the highly secured Yenzi compound, terminal, and Vembo installations. With the exception of those working for the Smithsonian, some of whom resided in Plaine 3 with other non-local Gabonese Shell interns, Westerners by and large are not active in Gamba’s civic life and cultural diversions. The real contribution of Shell’s highly skilled workforce and executives is through the face-saving generosity of Shell-Gabon’s Social Performance Department and the host of other cash handouts to a number of institutions. Nevertheless, Shell-Gabon behaves like a local elite in that it has discretionary power in the provision of public services and employment. For this reason, Shell-Gabon, in rapport with Gamba since the 1960s, is neither the rural hierarchy in Boone’s imagination, nor the state.

In a region with both low social hierarchy, which the Ndougou has arguably become, and resources upon which the state is heavily reliant, the logical Neo-Tillyian strategy would be administrative occupation, which Boone defines as a mix of concentrated authorities (without many subsidiary links penetrating the territory) and centralized authority (state agents). But in the Ndougou, deconcentration appears to have been the trend. State agents in the region have proliferated, beginning with the first sous-prefecture in the 1970s and evolving to a host of ministerial outposts and offices, minders, advisers, and security agents. Furthermore, at least some of the pre-1996 centralized authority (the prefectural state) has been diluted by the decentralized

institutions of the departmental and municipal councils, at a time when older hierarchies had been fragmenting, and engaging in “sedimentation,” (see Section 6.3) at a faster rate. Boone’s logic, however, is sound if one accepts the premises. In a cash crop zone inhabited by communities with a low degree of hierarchy, made up of an elite dependent on the state for its privileged position, it is wasteful to expend so many resources attempting to control the flow of resources. A few outposts and a show of authority should be sufficient to establish a hierarchy capable of capturing and taxing. But for the Ndougou, an oil and gas extraction zone, a mix of strategies took place, namely executive deconcentration (usurpation) and limited devolution (powersharing). Section 3 below aims to explain the contradiction using hybrid governance approaches.

6.2.5. Perversion of Civil Society

Boone’s extrapolation of Mamdani’s insights does not discuss at length the causes of anomie and underdevelopment at the local level. Her contribution was to theorize state responses to local changes, thus inverting the more conventional understandings of how sub-Saharan African states operate. Nevertheless, her extrapolation is an operationalization of one of Mamdani’s key insights: that “decentralized despotism” has become the cheapest means with which the African state maintains order in a bifurcated state. Decentralized despotism then leads to clientelism/patrimonialism, perverting civil society both in the cities and hinterland, and leaving communities at the mercy of both good-willed or corrupt leadership. Boone set this idea up for falsification, positing that this state of affairs was more likely to arise under regimes of non-incorporation or powersharing, where local elites were either dependent on the state for their privileges but did not inhabit a cash crop zone (non-incorporation), or where strong but dependent elites did inhabit such a zone (powersharing). Usurpation and administrative occupation would produce a similar hinterland despotism if state agents were not bound, or did not feel themselves bound, by formal legal processes and sanctions, as was the case in many colonies.

Was the changing communal structure of the Ndougou therefore responsible (via state strategies) for increasing instances of clientelistic behavior (a form of anomie)? Was the dearth of goods and services due to arbitrary decision-making from local leaders? Chapters 4 and 5 hint at the association between the decentralized institutions and informalization, with a consensus

reached among those in the Ndougou that corruption was both coincident with the introduction of the assemblies and inextricably linked to them. But as we have seen, decentralization (a form of powersharing) was constitutionally imposed after a nationwide conference and political dialogue following the turbulent 1980s, a process instigated chiefly by militants based in Port Gentil and Libreville, not in the rural Ndougou. Even if we consider that Shell-Gabon forms a legitimate local elite on whom the state can depend, there is little evidence to suggest that the state made a deliberate and unique plan to share power with the Ndougou's local hierarchy.

Unfortunately, the Neo-Tillyian logic of state maintenance is not supported by the Ndougou unless definitions like local elite (Does Shell-Gabon comprise the local elite?) and "the state" (Is Shell-Gabon the state?) are relaxed and expanded, which itself runs the risk of collapsing the theory with contradictory logics. While powersharing is indeed linked to the forms of anomie and material stagnation witnessed in Chapter 2, buttressing Mamdani's assertion that in a bifurcated state the success of reforms is largely based on arbitrary elites due to civil society perversion, Neo-Tillyian logic becomes unwieldy under the weight of large, foreign, non-state actors.

6.3. Hybrid Governance

6.3.1. The Non-Hegemonic State

The introduction of oil exploitation presents many challenges for particularly small communities in much of the formerly colonized world. The most strident examples are cases in violence and wanton rent-seeking behavior, where the vectors of underdevelopment come through severed lines of elite public accountability (both vertical and horizontal) as well as through a society-wide clamoring for a portion of the oil rent. The Ndougou, despite its envelopment of one of the continent's largest onshore oilfields, is not one of those cases. It refutes much of the stereotypical representation of oil communities in the developing world, not only because violence is non-existent but because rent-seeking behavior and informalization are not coincident with the rate of oil production. They are instead with the process of decentralization in 1997/1998. And yet compared to the rest of the country's similar processes of decentralization, Gamba and the

lagoon reportedly fare worse in terms of factors of anomie, including petty corruption, prostitution, political opportunism, disinherited older elites, vampirism, and sorcery.⁵⁰⁰ The Ndougou is an example of how particular local circumstances shape social, economic, and political outcomes, even when confronted with large and powerful external actors such as Shell-Gabon. It may be that the operative ingredient is not oil production (Chapter 5) or bifurcation and the state’s preoccupation with order (see above) *per se* which lead to undesirable conditions, but rather an abiding lack of state hegemony and the resultant hybridity which thereafter arises. The anomic structures which began their development in the Ndougou throughout the 1990s—unmet expectations of material comforts and employment, increased mistrust in the form of witchcraft, and, later on, political disaffection—may have their origins in the incongruent proliferation of institutions of public authority.

By making more inclusive the definitions of “state,” “governance,” and “public authority,” and expanding their meanings to encompass non-state actors, Lund, Bierschenk, Olivier de Sardan et al. shatter conventional notions of local governance and invite explanations of anomie based on an institutional framework which breeds fragmentation, unpredictability, and consequently informalization, unaccountability, and lack of resources. In doing so, they also resolve the most glaring drawbacks of rentier theory and Neo-Tillyian state formation, i.e. the inability to



Figure 2: Cover Page of the Plan de Développement Local. As many as 6 institutions—among them the local assemblies—were involved with its conception and drafting.

⁵⁰⁰ Interview with Jean Churley, Ibonga conservationist, Gamba, July 23, 2015

conceptualize obfuscated boundaries between state and private entities and between state and local forms of public authority.

What conditions fragmentation and institutional incongruity is a state with limited capacity and which lacks hegemony. States with high capacity, and which are the dominant public authorities wielding legitimacy and force, are able to direct the myriad agencies and quasi-agencies towards singular goals. In other words, high-capacity, hegemonic states can get everyone “on the same page.” Under such circumstances, a proliferation of institutions of public authority does not necessarily lead to incongruence and unpredictability, which then feed anomic structures. Nor is a high-capacity, hegemonic state a euphemism for a developed country commonly associated with the West. Poorer developing countries have proven more than capable of marshaling state resources towards prescribed goals. In Gabon, however, as in many sparsely populated Francophone African states, state bureaucratic hegemony may only extend as far as the nearest outpost, as applying the mechanisms of enforcement to lagoon and forest villages may prove too costly. In these cases, state legitimacy and ideational hegemony can often serve to lower the cost of rural control, as pointed out by Boone above. But in the context of not only recently created by small and sparsely populated regions, one can foresee the difficulties.

Gabon makes no exception. Although the state over the course of history may have been legitimate (see Chapter 5) where it concerns the executive, prefectural arm, other spheres of statehood have not enjoyed the same “thinkability.” In other words and from a Weberian perspective, the Gabonese state has not throughout its independent history exhibited the *monopolization* of the legitimate use of force. Recurrent French military interventions clearly demonstrated to the Gabonese citizenry, and to the bureaucratic state itself, that pure hegemony remained as elusive as ever. In this vacuum have always been several institutions occupying several state-like policy areas. In addition to enforcement, the relative internal weakness of the Gabonese state, like many of its neighbors, has also been on display through its inability to extend social services such as health or any kind of social safety net. Despite enjoying among the highest literacy rates in the region, we have seen through examples in the Ndougou that even education is neither provided wholly nor equally. Considering all of this, state capacity and hegemony are indeed elusive concepts, and it is not difficult to fathom how policy cohesiveness could quickly unravel.

Within Gabon, the Ndougou lagoon in particular is also unique in that roughly half of its residents trace clan ties and heritage to outside present-day Gabonese borders. The Baloumoubou/Bavili have arguably more linguistically and culturally in common with their distant (and sometimes close) relatives in neighboring Congo than with other Gabonese Eshira groups, casting the Gabonese state in an ambiguous light in terms of social cohesion. Reverence for the Maloango in Point Noire (Congo) is symbolically important for even ambitious Gabonese politicians. Furthermore, maps show French colonial boundaries clearly shifting and placing much of the Ndougou lagoon itself in either one of several administrative zones, while the French did not effectively administer the region until the beginning of the 20th century. Instead of political boundaries imposed by states, cognitive and social boundaries appear just as salient. The first-comer Bavarama who populate the northern lagoon tend to distinguish themselves from the southern Baloumbou/Bavili. When transitioning from the lagoon to the River Bongo, Bavarama custom dictates that travelers pay symbolic tribute to the water god for safe passage by dousing one's head in the water. Reference to the idea of being Gabonese therefore has relatively limited impact in marshaling the collective energies of individuals and institutions in the service of common tasks and achievements. Identities are fragmented, and with that so is state hegemony.

The most glaring demonstration of the state's limited hegemony is, of course, Shell's physical and symbolic omnipresence in Gamba and the Ndougou. There had been little symbolic representation of the state outside the former sous-prefecture in Sette Cama. Once Gamba was erected, there would be more symbols, including a flag in Plaine 3 and the new prefecture. With Shell-Gabon came public radio and further state representations in various ministerial outposts and agencies, to add to administrative chieftaincy. But with Shell-Gabon came also direct challenges to the state's already flimsy hegemony of public authority. The population was well aware that the early material comforts were due exclusively to Shell, and Shell's employees were granted privileges which reaffirmed a higher state of citizenship, including state-of-the-art medical care and the community's esteem. Shell's contracted security firms proved effective in controlling its areas of operations and rarely if ever sought bribes, while the gendarmes have ritually been involved in such informal behavior. Many people today regard the "state" with suspicion and often contempt, while others declare their pride in being Gabonese while praising the state's provision of jobs. The state is not hegemonic, but its relative hegemony never quite broke down to the point of legitimating violence and theft as has been witnessed in other tragic cases.

Nevertheless, where the state ignored certain policy areas, other institutions of public policy have filled the vacuum.

6.3.2. Reforms, Situational Adjustments, and Anomie

The advantage of hybrid governance approaches is that they disambiguate loaded terms such as the “state,” allowing for the analytical recognition of other actors which perform public functions. Rentierism could not account for the relatively legitimate activities of the prefectural state vis-à-vis the local assemblies. Neo-Tillyian approaches could neither account such differences, not to mention the state-like functions performed by Shell-Gabon. Furthermore, the central state in Libreville did enact decentralization reforms in the 1990s, but the policy was applied countrywide and could not have been in response to any Neo-Tillyian impulses such as resource-capture with respect to the Ndougou lagoon; local anomie in the 1990s coincides with decentralization, but was not an effect of Neo-Tillyian logic. It will be shown here that the failure of both rentierism and Neo-Tillyian approaches to account for the timing and (non-) existence of certain anomic structures can be addressed using the broader concept of hybrid governance.

More than oil production and despotic, devolved elites left to their own designs, anomie in the Ndougou is co-related with a proliferation of institutions which in some way or another have exercised a degree of public authority. According to Bierschenk and Sardan, an already-fragile state which institutes reforms (including decentralization and democratization) reinforces hybrid forms of local governance and fragments local political arenas. For the Ndougou, that proverbial straw which broke the camel’s back was decentralization. It has been established that prior to decentralization, and despite projections by rentier theories, oil extraction in the Ndougou led to neither social nor political anomie, in part since growth and social adjustments were able to keep pace with the structural changes taking place. Through a hybrid governance lens, we can reasons for why this was the case. Chapter 3 established that the Ndougou throughout its pre-colonial and colonial existence had been habituated to foreign-driven commerce, from the moderately-sized slave depot in Sette-Cama to the French lumber concerns. COSREG’s arrival after independence fit this interpretive model neatly, as local interaction with foreign commerce had already become

regularized. The benefits that came with Shell-Gabon were known to the local population, who had had time to evolve social and political institutions to the existence of both foreign MNCs and a central state. This also explains the relative subservience of the region's chiefs to the prefectural state to whom they owed their positions, as well as the diminished authority of *chefs de terre* which had taken place well before the decentralization reforms.

Decentralization introduced institutions competing for public authority with Shell and the prefectural state. Concurrent with the addition of two local assemblies in the mid-1990s, new forms of rent and monetization through decades of MNC presence created new forms of legitimation, detracting further from any semblance of a "hegemonic constellation of power"⁵⁰¹ by the state or any other institution. What resulted was a perfect storm of institutional proliferation, leading to the evidence of rising anomie outlined in Chapter 4.

The dazzling array of institutions active in the Ndougou's community governance are both interlocking and often competing. The rules governing their interactions are from an outsider's perspective either incomprehensible or vague. To begin, the prefect himself has the legal capacity to command and veto virtually any policy decision taken by either of the local assemblies in his administrative district (the Department of the Ndougou). Yet he has rarely if ever done so, according to the Secretary General of the Departmental Council. The same goes for the prefect's relationship with Shell, with whom he shares a distant but cordial relationship. The *gendarmes*, the Brigade des Faunes, and the park rangers who operate under the prefect all appear moderately deferential towards Shell and respectful of its autonomy. The *gendarmerie* checkpoint, for instance, is established beyond the Yenzi management camp as one enters the town of Gamba itself, allowing Shell personnel to move frequently between Yenzi and the terminal without the hassle of occasional bribing. When a Shell employee is stopped, an ID card is often sufficient to avoid harassment.

These examples prove a degree of "regularization" of processes⁵⁰² which hint at predictability and often lead to institutional congruence, desirable if a community wants to avoid the constant negotiating which opens the door to opportunistic big men. Other forms of regularization between institutions of public authority include the relationship between the state's cadastral service, the park rangers, the Brigade des Faunes and the WWF, whose studies since the

⁵⁰¹ Lund, *Twilight Institutions*, 698.

⁵⁰² S. F. Moore, *Law as Process* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

early 1990s have identified zones of customary usage. The congruence so far has benefited (albeit partially) villages previously unsure of their fishing and hunting rights.

On the other hand, competition between institutions has also led to processes of situational adjustment⁵⁰³ and ultimately institutional incongruence. One notable example is the tension between Shell-Gabon and the local assemblies, reflecting as well a tension between formalization and informalization. According to Shell's Social Performance Department, ever sensitive to its international image, they have clamped down on corruption within their ranks, making sure that every expense is well documented. They also remain adamant that they do not become a proxy government with long-term obligations to the community, since such a pursuit has been, and would remain, very costly with the productive decline of Rabi-Kounga. That is ostensibly why Shell took the opportunity to formalize and scale down its community assistance, limiting itself to three main projects set to terminate at precise dates. For the local assemblies, Shell's insistence on formal relations restricts their ability to rent-see and develop mutual projects with Shell which would benefit their political careers.

The local assemblies themselves are also in competition with the administrative chieftaincy, some of whom (particularly in Mougambi, Sette Cama, and Pitonga) openly deride the Council's failure to maintain the village amenities constructed in the early 2000s. For chiefs, the ability to remain chiefs often depends on the villagers' esteem for them and their capacity to improve village life. These examples of situational adjustment forestall any series of predictable encounters between the institutions involved. If a community spirit has not developed in the Ndougou, and associations have been uncommonly few and halting, it is because such unpredictability has led to apathy and fatalism among the population.

But most noxious in terms of political anomie is the fact that no interpretive models of decentralized governance existed in the Ndougou prior to 1993 (City Hall) and 1996/1997 (Departmental Council). Shell followed in the footsteps of several foreign-owned concerns, while centralization had been the norm since Loango and the French Empire. All of the sudden, local assemblies arrived, composed of councilors chosen by universal suffrage, most of whom belonged to the first-comer Baloumbou, Bavili, or Bavarama. They had precisely the same social and economic missions as Shell-Gabon, which was always obligated by law to provide social and

⁵⁰³ *ibid.*

economic assistance to communities impacted by its exploitation.⁵⁰⁴ For roughly 20 years, the two local assemblies represent the only prominent structures—after passing by the Yenzi management camp—upon entering Gamba. They therefore have a visible and symbolic impact on any passers-by, and without further information, one could not be faulted for believing in their importance to the community.

But a huge gulf separates the symbolic importance of the assemblies from their practical importance. Political legitimacy, as recounted in Chapter 5 (Rentierism) rests largely on the efficient provision of goods and services. Shell-Gabon's annual Social Performance budgets are \$1.6 million (2014) to \$2.5 million (2015-2017) per annum, which excludes the PID/PIH outlay for the road projects. Precise expenditures are reported in the Social Performance Plan, which includes an estimated \$1.2 million to be spent on Gamba Hospital over three years, \$700,000 to be spent on the Gamba Secondary School over two years, while \$2.8 million is allocated to a long-term entrepreneurial development scheme.⁵⁰⁵ On the other hand, the Departmental Council reports in their Local Development Plan that they typically have roughly \$9 million at their disposal annually, while information on expenditures remains practically unobtainable and, more damning, *evidence* of the results of expenditures remains few and far between. As previously discussed, the village amenities have been in utter disrepair, and the unelected Secretary-General of the Departmental Council attested to corruption without providing any specifics. Furthermore, almost all unelected interviewees with an interest in local development were confident that the lofty objectives of the PDL would go unmet. Through these examples, Shell's relative legitimacy is brought to the fore.

The local assemblies and Shell also operate incongruently. While the councils openly protest Shell's hesitance to commit further funds to the local assemblies, Shell-Gabon has a clear policy of avoiding enmeshment in local governance. The last unbudgeted donation was in 2014, when Shell Gabon provided the University of Masuku with biochemistry materials and equipment totaling \$129,000. They have since discontinued such disbursements, leaving the local assemblies without a stable partner for their specific aims, which go above and beyond Shell's axes of social and economic support by including funds for things like tourism promotion in their plans.

⁵⁰⁴ The *PID/PIH* obliges Shell-Gabon to spend a certain percentage of its budget on development projects. Such money has been used to fund road projects, for example. See Shell-Gabon, "Social Performance Plan" (Shell Upstream, 2012), 11.

⁵⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 22.

The result from the perspective of anomie is discordant signals of goods and services provision and the widespread impression of corruption shared by locals, leading to profound political disaffection. When Gambans and villagers express their disdain for local politicians, it is with their relative ineffectiveness in mind. Before decentralization, there were fewer avenues to exclusionary clientelism available to local elites, whereas today it appears that public funds are rerouted to support a political class and their friends, as was demonstrated in the case of road-building negotiations carried out by a hapless former mayor. Such instances of malfeasance were easier to hide when Shell was performing the legitimate role of local government. But with recent rumors of Shell's downsizing and departure, the activities of local assemblies are being laid bare. Where locals could once rely on Shell to support their needs, they are now weary of being left with an ineffectual and potentially corrupt set of institutions. Even if Shell-Gabon employs a grievance mechanism, decisions are finalized thousands of miles away in The Hague. The situation is an untenable one, and leaves locals with minimal confidence in public institutions, the formally proper depositories of their grievances. The lesson here is that reliance on the private sector to achieve public aims can only be done incongruently. In such a situation, more integrity is required from elected officials than is realistic, leading to what hybridists warned was a space for opportunism.

Competition between Western thought processes and ancestral cosmologies⁵⁰⁶ has also derailed any efforts to create communal harmony, and thus serious associative attempts to improve the collective lot. Religion is paramount in the Ndougou, with nearly every individual either adherent to Christianity, ancestral cosmologies, or a syncretic variant of either two. As a mode of local governance, religion operates subtly in the psychosocial dimension, reinforcing and creating norms which limit and expand the possibility of particular undertakings. Among the undertakings decried by ancestral cosmologies is unchecked personal accumulation and the abandonment of communities of ancestors. As recounted in Chapter 3, social anomie in the Ndougou is largely represented in the pervasive belief that sorcerers have chased most of the population to Gamba out of pure jealousy. The potent fear of witchcraft and sorcery constrains and conditions villagers who remain in an agrarian mode of existence. For example, upon departing Soungha en route to Sette Cama, an elderly woman burst into loud sobs and convulsions. When I asked the boat captain why,

⁵⁰⁶ Olivier de Sardan acknowledges that religions themselves are often modes of local governance. See J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, "The Eight Modes of Local Governance in West Africa." *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (2011): 22-31.

he explained that she rarely abandons her native village and family. She was clearly afraid, frightful of what her ancestors might think, even if only due to the objectively harmless contravention of traversing the lagoon to meet a family member. On an overnight visit to Ingouéka, I had the opportunity to witness a funeral service. An eternal fire was lit and several fetishes kept to keep the deceased happy with afterlife in the village. A special wood was digested by the dancers (one of whom was an *nganga*), which was hallucinogenic and allowed them to see and speak with the deceased, wishing him a pleasant journey to the other world. Ancestral cosmologies persist.

But the arrival of heavy industry in 1960 brought a population boom, and with it the proliferation of not only non-agrarian means of subsistence but also religious observance. The pastor of the local Alliance Chrétienne speaks vociferously against such pagan beliefs and commands a church (one of at least a dozen) of more than 200 congregation members. The twin reforms of industrialization and Christianity serve to encourage village exodus and relieve the resultant cognitive dissonance respectively. But for those without salaries or work related to the oil industry, remaining in the village is one of the few remaining options. In effect, social cohesion at the cosmological level appears to be breaking down, and mutual accusations of witchcraft are not at all uncommon. Incongruent worldviews have also spilled over to local government, doing nothing to improve the local assemblies' reputation with villagers. Albert, the attaché to the mayor (an elected position), claims the mayor's office works closely with the community's churches on several initiatives, a means to remain close with churchgoing Gambans. At the same time, City Hall is the keenest to halt village exodus, and they therefore have a vital interest in supporting and encouraging ancestral cosmologies so as to reduce pressure on Gamban infrastructure.

Lastly, the governance of law and order is occupied by one of several agencies, private contractors, and chiefs, so much so that no consensus had been reached at the time of the study on whom to turn to in case of theft. Though all respondents to a structured interview acknowledged that murder was the jurisdiction of the gendarmerie, and adultery that of the chiefs, few agreed on the proper bureaucratic avenues in case of theft. While some acknowledged the gendarmerie (the formal agency with the legal capacity to enforce criminal laws), others suggested the chiefs or the prefect, the cantonal secretary, or even one of the local assemblies. As a result, this has left several executive agencies competing for either jurisdiction or relief from jurisdiction in cases where disputes are not easily resolved. Where the lines of competence are not clearly drawn, it is impossible to fully streamline the maintenance of law and order, allowing law-breakers plenty of

space to maneuver. The highly contentious “homme-faune” conflict represents this quite well. Since supporting the ecology and vitality of crop-devastating elephants is highly unpopular with villagers, no agency appears keen to respond to reports of elephant-slaying or trapping. Even the prefect who oversees park rangers is verbally sympathetic to villagers facing crop-devastating fauna. As a result, there is an implicit understanding that the illegal activity can be carried out with impunity if one is careful enough. Yet again, incongruent institutions are made to face off with another, to the detriment of long-term regularization and certainty in public affairs.

It is easy to see how these instances of unpredictability, derived from a non-hegemonic state and bred by a proliferation of incongruous institutions, short-circuits communal and congruous efforts to improve the livelihoods of the Ndougou’s inhabitants. Though many authors of the self-described newer generation of rentier theorists readily point out that strong institutions are what separates many Western oil-dependent states from those in the global South, they do not delve deeper into the determinants of strong and weak institutions. Hybrid governance approaches demonstrate that the relative strength and weakness of institutions at the local level is often a matter of congruity. Particularly in oil-bearing communities where a proliferation of institutions is likely to unfold, such congruity can be notoriously hard to achieve.