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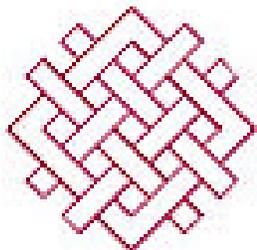
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**Participatory Management and Democratic Decentralization**  
**Management of the Samori Forest in Babye Commune, Mopti**  
**Region, Mali**

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## **Introduction**

The present article is based on a case study<sup>1</sup> of participatory forest management in a setting where decentralization is planned but not yet operative. It is intended as a methodological critique of the theories and practices of decentralization as applied to environmental management, beginning with an analysis of field research results and proposing a new conceptual approach to the issue of environmental management. The central theme of this study builds around the principle of participation that has become the cornerstone of environmental management the world over. Born of a number of preceding theories (populism, the theory of public and economic choice, the democratic theory, etc.), participation of local populations in the management of local resources is viewed as a prerequisite for good management.<sup>2</sup> For some theoreticians (Ostrom, 1990; Ribot 2001), local populations can be good managers. But under what conditions? According to Agrawal and Ribot (1999), when local managers are endowed with real decision-making power and are representative of and accountable to the population, they can manage effectively. In other words, democratic decentralization is an indispensable condition for good participation because, as an institutionalized form of the participatory approach, it reinforces the participation of local populations in the decision-making process by increasing decision-makers' accountability and representativity. Thus Agrawal and Ribot (1999) characterize democratic decentralization in terms of three variables: actors, powers, and accountability. In a scenario that combines these three variables, democratic participation can occur if the central power effects a real transfer of control to local institutions and increases their local accountability.<sup>3</sup> Within this set of changes, relationships must be established between local institutions and local populations that are grounded in representation and accountability. Changes thus effected in the realm of participatory action will have an impact at the societal level, on environmental practices, and on general equity.

Participatory management of the Baye forest was initiated by the British NGO in 1992, SOS Sahel, to promote traditional management by the community. In fact, however, forest management in Baye has been and remains subject to several institutional systems that bring into play several categories of actors possessing different levels of prerogative. Our inquiry concerned these different actors, the source and nature of the powers associated with each of them, the factors that determined the referral of authority, and the legal principles regulating the exercise of that authority, as well as the effects of its exercise at the societal and environmental levels.

The results presented in this study are based on this three-pronged analysis schema of actors, authority and responsibility, representing a major innovation in environmental studies undertaken in the new context of decentralization.

### **1. Research site description**

#### 1.1. Baye Commune

Baye Commune is located in Bankass Circle in Mopti, the Fifth Administrative District of Mali, in the center of Mali. The Mopti's capital, also called Mopti, is 650 kilometers northeast of Bamako, the national capital. Bankass Circle, one of seven circles comprising the administrative district of Mopti, is situated in the geographic zone of Séno in the east of the region, bordering the Sourou province of Burkina Faso. The Circle's capital town, also called

Bankass, is 120 kilometers from the district capital, Mopti. The settlement of Baye serves Baye Commune headquarters. The Commune came into being during the territorial redistricting of 1996 which initially created 701 decentralized territorial regions in Mali. Baye Commune constitutes a regrouping of 33 former villages which made up the former arrondissement, and is one of twelve Communes constituting Bankass Circle. Baye Commune covers 21,142 square kilometers in the southern part of the country and has a population that varies from 23,000 to 26,000 (about 11 percent of the Circle's total inhabitants) composed mainly of *Dafing* and minority ethnic groups such as the *Dogons* and *Samogo* (settled populations), plus nomadic *Peul*, *Bellah*, and *Bozo*. Agriculture, livestock farming and fishing are the primary economy-sustaining activities in this essentially rural zone.

The Commune benefits from state-operated programs and state funding allocations to rural regions (4,800,000 CFA francs in the last two years), as well as assistance from various development partners such as SOS Sahel, the GTZ, the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), the European Development Fund, the World Bank's Project for Natural Resource Management (PGRN), etc. Baye Commune also receives funding, through the program for the support of decentralized regions, from Aid for Basic Initiatives as well as from the National Investment Agency. Tax revenues brought twenty-three million CFA francs into the Commune in 2000, or 80% of the communal budget, a boon to Baye's economic development.

### 1.2 Samori Forest

Baye Commune is almost entirely covered by the Samori Forest which extends over an area of between 210,000 hectares (Diakit ,1993) and 244,000 hectares (Diallo, 2001), or 37 percent of the land surface of Bankass Circle. The Samori ignores national borders, stretching from the cliffs of Dogon country to the Burkina Faso interior, trespassing communal borders as well: Baye Commune is 90.52 % covered by the Samori, as is 65.7% of Ouenkoro and 37.7% of Sokoura. In terms of spatial distribution, bush savannah is the dominant floral composition. There is also considerable Sudanian-type growth, occurring in concentrations of between 50 and 80 cubic meters per hectare along the Sourou River. Herbaceous cover of the forest expanse is total. The Samori's resources have been subject to several exploitative approaches, including participatory management, the focus of this study.

## **2. Institutional management approaches**

In examining the different modes of management, we find several categories of actors that continually intervene.

### 2.1. Traditional management in the pre-colonial era

According to the oral tradition, management of the forest during the pre-colonial era was based on customary rules, generally aimed to protect nature. Groups of young people were constituted as associations called *ton*. The *ton* were charged with forest protection and with controlling infringements (the cutting of fruit trees or the gathering of unripe fruits). They were accountable for their activities to the village authorities supported by the land chiefs in resolving conflicts. They brought before the land chiefs accused individuals who were punished in a manner not to exceed their means. The receipts generated by these fines were earmarked for collective interest expenditures (Diakit  1993:2).

Under colonization, the French authorities replaced the *massaké* with functionaries charged with managing the forest. Access was strictly regulated, and use rights of local populations were severely restricted. Locals were completely excluded from the management of their own resources and from all control of their exploitation.

From the colonial period to the present day, the local populations have never ceased to try to reclaim their participation in forest management. The idyllic *massaké*-led system, relevant to another age, corresponded appealingly with the populist philosophy of SOS Sahel, which focused on identifying the needs of the people and on their desire to participate in the management of natural resources. SOS Sahel appropriated the traditional approach in order to legitimize its intervention in the area of environmental management, and to more effectively lobby the Central State administration for recognition.

## 2.2. Contemporary neo-traditional management

The oral record corroborates what SOS Sahel studies have said about traditional forest management, citing the existence of several former socio-proprietary entities. These socio-proprietary entities were made up of village units grouped around a central hub village, identified as a "mother village" by SOS Sahel. The NGO reconstituted six socio-proprietary entities comprised of six "mother villages" -- Dien, Zéréma, Oula, Sogué, Tiondou et Woro -- among which were divided twenty-two satellite villages. The territory thus organized had been controlled through an hereditary system, and is now scattered with the descendents of founding chiefs who retain the hereditary role, passed down by custom, of the guardianship of the land and water as sacred objects of worship.

Each entity comprised of a mother village and satellites is overseen by a directing committee of twelve members, put in place by the entity assembly on recommendation of the NGO. In each individual village unit, a watch committee is created whose operational arm is the "watch brigade". This brigade is composed of 12 to 15 participants including some women.<sup>5</sup> Designated members of each village's council are associated with the brigade, directing its activities. The brigades tend to the forest, establishing watch schedules and reporting their activities to the directing committee of the mother-village entity as part of regular meetings. Individual village councils may serve as interface between individual villages and the 12-member directing committee at the mother-village group entity level.

## 2.3. Management by the State

Forest administration by the State is achieved through Environment Ministry which develops nature conservation policy, delegating power implementation and enforcement of environmental law to the National Department of Nature Conservation (the State Conservation Service). Local conservation agents are empowered by the State to act throughout the State-operated structure right down to the Communal level. These local agents are charged with managing the forest and with the redistribution of profits made through exploitation of forest resources. They hold the unique authority to grant permits for clearing forest areas and for the cutting and transport of wood. They act as wardens, fining offenders and setting penalties according to the damage inflicted. Any development project touching on the forest must pass their review. Agreements signed by these State conservation

agents and village-level authorities set up by SOS Sahel specify that surveillance of the forest is the only activity of the *alamodiou* and their supervisors. They have no other powers.

#### 2.4. The Commune Council

At this time the process of administrative decentralization is accomplished, at least in terms of organizational structuring, in that the executive functions of decentralized regions, including the elected governing bodies, the Commune Council, the Regional Assembly and the High Council of Regions, have been set up. Law No. 96-050 outlines how territorial units are to be constituted and managed. The State recognizes two types of environmental domains: there can be private and public entities in the areas of forestry, agriculture, pastoralism, fauna, fishing, mining and habitat. The new laws classify these areas into “non-controlled,” “oriented,” and “controlled zones. The forest of Bayeit is classified as “non-controlled” since it is not delimited or managed. It remains State property for which use-tax revenues are shared by the State Conservation Service and conservation agents, awaiting transfer of management responsibility to the Commune (article 8 of Decree No. 98-402/P-RM). The State is required to classify the forest and then to transfer its control to the Commune (article 51, Law No. 95-004). Once transferred, the commune would then be able to receive a five percent of the forest tax if the forest is classed as *oriented*, and 10 percent if it is “controlled,” according to the terms of the tax allotment code from the central government. The “oriented” zones are delimited and under light management. The “controlled” zones are managed following elaborate management plans. If the transfer actually occurs, it is the Communal Council that will have to guarantee the forest’s management. For now, this Council plays no role in management of the forest, partly because internal division has weakened the body, but also because of the State’s reticence to give over environmental management to the Councils. There is no collaboration between the Communal Council and conservation agents, who report only to their superiors in the State administrative hierarchy.

### **3. Power and Accountability**

We have identified the actors in the various forest management systems which are in play in Baye Commune; let us now examine the nature of their authority and accountability.

Looking at the participatory management structure initiated by SOS Sahel, the NGO remains its major actor in terms of both authority and responsibility. The creation of neo-traditional groups reflects the organization’s populist philosophy of development in the area of environmental management, focusing on the participatory approach. SOS Sahel benefits from the implicit support of the State; the NGO is recommended to the State by international funding groups, and the State recognizes SOS Sahel’s practical and financial contributions to decentralized populations and regions.<sup>6</sup> An “outside” actor by definition, SOS Sahel created the village association, finances all its operations, and supervises the setup of various action groups that report back to this NGO. This type of upward accountability extends throughout the entire association system. The watch brigades report to the directing committees of the hub-village assemblies who in turn report to SOS Sahel. Individual village councils can play a role of mediation between the hub-village assembly and SOS Sahel. The NGO is not accountable to the State administrative system, with which it competes, in a limited way, at the local level. SOS Sahel has no real accountability downward to the community, although participants in local decision-making structures are chosen by the community.

Is the neo-traditional association representative and does it have real social legitimacy? To answer this question requires a comparison of the original traditional structure and the modern model. Historically the *alamodiou* would have enjoyed a degree of social legitimacy and authority. Sponsored by traditional authorities, their legitimacy would have been rooted: 1) in the traditional wisdom regarding the relationship of man to nature, and 2) in public perception of the usefulness of their work. Consequently, they likely enjoyed an authority conferred on them by the society and held the monopoly on their function under the control of the community.<sup>7</sup>

What has become of the *alamodiou* today?

The village-based social configuration has changed a lot since pre-colonial times, due to nationalization which has given the State managerial control of property and natural resources, removing this role from the people. Further, the authority of today's traditional chiefs is not what it once was. Community leadership at the village level has become collective: By law the village chief is designated by a council which is elected by the citizens of the village. The selection, however, is often contested by claimants who share the same lineage as the council's choice and who compete with him for control of the chieftom. The council's choice, furthermore, is subject to approval by a State supervisor who has the power to reject him. Officially, the village council is considered an auxiliary of the State administration; therefore, in the public's eyes, this council appears to exist to execute the will of the State, possessing little real decision-making power.

The village assemblies of which the membership is diverse, could have the same degree of representativeness as the traditional managers. Note that the choice of members on these committees and of oversight brigades is often saddled with the weight of tradition, which already gives a certain gerontocratic character to their exercise of power. SOS Sahel must have proposed a compromise solution for establishing these democratic structures. The traditional authorities were given honorary positions (honorary president), while the other posts were assigned according to the capacity of individuals. In this manner the treasurer had to be chosen based on trust, and the administrative secretary had to be literate. A young person could have a responsible position if he was capable of executing his obligations. Peul herders and hunters were assigned to forest protection posts due to their experience and practices in forestry. In addition, it was necessary to respect the protocols for renewing these committees in order to conform with the private rights recognized by law in the Associations Statute.

The council, then, enjoys only a limited social legitimacy in regard to forest management, when operating under imposed official regulations. Besides, it must be noted that it was the traditional authorities who collectively supervised the *alamodiou*, which must have reinforced their legitimacy. The governing committee members are of various origins, and cannot be as representative as were their equivalents in former times. Controlling bodies set up from outside the community and subject to external control necessarily lack the autonomy to assure their own representativity in the eyes of the people. The effort by SOS Sahel at re-traditionalization appears ultimately as an effort to justify, ideologically and politically, the programs of the NGO, even though, in fact, the socio-cultural context has undergone many transformations since the pre-colonial period and may not support the former system.

The methods adopted by SOS Sahel seem to lack analytical rigor, since former homogeneous socio-cultural structures would have little pertinence today. Even if still in existence, they would have neither the same relevance nor the same meaning in a system of popular representation. Reorganizing of territories into national geo-administrative and political districts by various dominant groups succeeding one another over time has not taken into account the location of ethnic, cultural and economic entities, but rather has been conducted in ways to assure the political, economic and strategic interests of those in power. Over time, medieval provinces gave way to cantons, cantons to subdivisions, then to circles, then to arrondissements and, finally, to the communes of today. We ought not forget that the communes of today are merely the result of an integral redrafting of the old arrondissement system, itself the result of a preceding administrative districting program, and are far from constituting an organic socio-cultural unit. The nature and the location of power has changed throughout space and time as a result of all these political upsets, not to mention disruption of socio-cultural patterns due to inter-mixing of ethnic groups.

Managerial authority held by the association is particularly defined by what this body lacks rather than by what may be in its favor:

- The association has no legal status with the State in matters of environmental management. The State sanctions the association simply as a non-profit body under the law of 1901 governing Malian organizations. Officially it has no ability to enact or enforce rules of forest management, nor to receive tax proceeds, nor to amend or change laws. Further, as conservation has become the watchword in government policy on ecosystem preservation, the association's role in protecting forest resources makes it appear as a valued auxiliary of the State administration, while in reality the State only tolerates the association.
- It is the NGO that not only initiates programs but also assures their financial support. Those responsible locally do not participate in decisions made by NGO officers, and the association has no financial autonomy.

The association is not representative in the eyes of the local communities because the NGO has failed to empower its local agents with discretionary authority. Neither does the association have a profile at the communal level where environmental management is a matter for the communal council.

Only the hands-on aspects of forest management and development have been conferred on association-level actors by the supervisory institution. These actors are involved in environmental protection projects, such as:

- Forest development (for instance, 39,000 hectares of forest at Zéremendougou have been made a reserve, with the agreement of the State Conservation Service),
- Reforestation, including establishment of nurseries,
- Tentative establishment of systems to manage forest groves in two pilot villages in Baye Commune, Losogon and Songoré,
- Management of small waterways,

- Environmental education in the form of technical training in methods of forest management and development, snf
- Rural activism aimed at educating and mobilizing the populace.

These activities have strengthened the technical, organizational and managerial capabilities of members of the association, to the credit of the NGO. But they should be viewed as activities that strengthen the functioning of the NGO, and not at all as a transfer of power or the delegation of decision-making prerogatives to local actors who have sufficient autonomy or the real means to exercise authority. Participatory management with upward accountability and a system of discretionary powers at the local level does not qualify as democratic. Certainly it cannot guarantee the perpetuity of Baye Commune's natural resources.

At the State level, there is a contradiction between official statements and environmental practices. We have an impressive legal arsenal theoretically constituting real progress in the field of democratic management. Yet, in the development of accountability and power transfers, we remain in the arena of the Second Republic (before democratization), a good part of whose legislation is still in effect due to the lack of enforcement of new laws. For instance, the new forest code adopted by the National Assembly cannot be legally enforced in the local regions because the nature and extent of the regions' responsibilities in this domain have not yet been defined. In spite of frequent lofty pronouncements about the democratic ideal, forest resource management remains in the hands of the State, which dispatches its functions in an autocratic manner. Management of the forest in Baye Commune is given to agents of the Conservation Service who report only to the State and benefit by taxes extracted from the rural populations. They even utilize informers who sometimes drive out offenders and turn them in to the agents, receiving part of the take for their efforts. To date no commune has had the benefit of decision-making power in matters of the environment, and the State remains the sole official manager of environmental resources. The State delegates power to its agents through decisions and decrees by various administrative and technical organisms from the top to the bottom of the State hierarchy. The structures of upward accountability do not render the agents responsible to local populations whom they continue to ignore, but make them instead answerable only to their administrative superiors.

#### **4. Social and Environmental Effects**

In the absence of downward accountability between the State and decentralized entities, between SOS Sahel and the neo-traditional managers, and between these managers and the local populations, we cannot describe the current state of environmental management as democratic decentralization. It would be injudicious, furthermore, to try to formulate a statement on the social and environmental consequences of these different institutional systems, given that democratic decentralization is not yet off the ground in Mali. We have, however, taken the step of surveying the various actors for their opinions regarding the state of natural resources management.

Sentiment varies widely between the participants in the survey regarding performance evaluations of each category of actor and the consequences of their management of the environment.

SOS Sahel: “Institution of the neo-traditional association contributed to safeguarding the ecosystem. It strengthened the population’s abilities in management, development techniques and conservation of natural resources .... The local populace has a very poor perception of conservation agents. For instance, in the inquest we conducted among the people, the conservation agents took last place in assessment of popularity and of performance, whereas we earned the highest points in these two areas,” a SOS Sahel officer told us.

Government representative (former arrondissement chief): “Our services get the job done, whereas the association set up by SOS Sahel is plagued by division resulting from conflicts among their members over whose job is whose .... Further, there are frequent conflicts between the association representatives and users stemming from favors granted to some individuals, for reasons of family ties or friendship, to the disfavor of others, and also when a recalcitrant person refuses to abide by a decision that doesn’t go his way. They have few rights and the State doesn’t permit them to be the real forest police, which is the privilege of our sworn agents alone.”

For the Conservation Service, roles are clearly distinct: “The NGO works to sensitize the populace. We use the force of authority to make them respect the law!”

The communal council: “Managing the forest is a big problem. There are too few State agents to efficiently control such a large area; the Service lacks the means necessary to do the job ... In recent years we have recorded more than a hundred cases of clearings in wild areas to create new fields, leading to the degradation of our forest .... As for us, in the absence of a change in status for the forest, and the fact that it has been removed from our sphere of responsibility by the State, we have no prerogative over forest resources. We are spectators, concerned but powerless.”

Time does not permit objective verification of what has been said; these remarks are strongly biased and marked by subjectivity. These comments are significant, however, as the only expression of perceptions of the consequences to the environment of the actions and interactions of current structures, while environmental decentralization remains unrealized in Mali.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Our principal observation is that none of the management modes currently in play can be called “democratic,” as defined in the introduction to this study. None of these systems is structured on the principle of downward accountability and attendant responsibility for the actors. None of these systems awards authority to local institutions adequate to support a discretionary prerogative, thereby taking away their ability to represent. The intervention of SOS Sahel, patterned on the traditional approach whose shortcomings have been abundantly illustrated elsewhere (see FENU, 2000; Kassibo, 2001), cannot assure true participation by local populations in the management of natural resources because of its characteristic “provoked participation,” as it is termed by Meister (1977).

Finally, the most important point is the residual existence of a repressive regulatory and legislative system which still sanctions the monopoly of the State in environmental management to the disadvantage of other actors, in spite of the end of nationalization touted in new texts. The elaboration of a democratic legislation able to assure a true participation by the populace in environmental management will remain as a pious wish of the Third Republic which will not come to fruition. The Malian State has the duty of accelerating the process of transferring functions and responsibilities to the decentralized regions to allow the emergence of a veritable decentralized democracy.

The NGO SOS Sahel initiated a process that reinforced the capacity of rural populations for environmental management, and these local populations have acquired a great deal of experience. This experience could be exploited by the communal council, as soon as managerial responsibility for the Baye forest is placed in their hands. The communal council should work out a cooperative relationship with the neo-traditional association toward co-management of the forest, in which the association would retain control by virtue of the prerogatives which would be conferred upon it by the State.

In the new context of decentralization, the NGO should concentrate its efforts on institutions representing the general interests of the region, and no entity can better play the role of primary development partner than the Commune.

Actors, powers and accountability: These are the factors deemed indispensable in creating a democratic decentralization, whose analysis seems pertinent for characterizing democratic participation. This study is not exhaustive on the topic of accountability, since we would also need to examine other factors of downward accountability beyond democratic elections which could require actors to answer to local population, such as information, transparency, social pressures, and popular civic education (see Ribot, 2001a). This study marks an important step in understanding the process of decentralization through the concept of participation, so hackneyed these days due to overuse.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This case study was prepared as part of the “Joint Research Program on Environmental Decentralization” by Malian researchers from Mandé Bukari University under the auspices of the Institutions and Governance Program of the World Resources Institute (Washington) funded by USAID and the Dutch Government. The present work is derived from the study. “The Problem of Decentralized Management of Wood Products in the Forest of Baye Commune” was researched by team junior researcher Ceick Oumar Diallo, under the supervision of team leader Dr. Kassibo Bréhima. A synthesis of the study and another dealing with the management of pasturage in the region of Youwarou (researched by another junior researcher on the team, Naffet Keïta) appears in an article entitled, “Historical and Political Foundations of Decentralized Management of Natural Resources in Mali: A Synthesis of Two Case Studies.” Research for the two studies was performed between July 2000 and May 2001, and included several phases of field research combining classical methods of anthropological research such as guided interviews, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, etc.

<sup>2</sup> According to studies by Rochette (1988) and ARD (1989), which recommended a village-based approach as appropriate to participatory projects, having these advantages:

- High degree of knowledge and information available in villages for better natural resource management,
- Villagers are the chief consumers of natural resources,
- Responsibility for a durable management is awarded to the most qualified and most interested users, and
- Lowers the cost of management for paying users.

These considerations served to justify instituting the Natural Resource Management Project in Mali, and this approach has been used on a regular basis by NGOs for setting up other environmental management projects nationally.

<sup>3</sup> Democratic decentralization occurs when power and resources are transferred to authorities representative of and responsible to local populations (Manor 1999; Crook and Manor 1998; Agrawal and Ribot 1999).

<sup>4</sup> For more details on the organization of traditional associations, see Konaté 1992 and Konaté et al. 1996, Dembélé 1995, Care Mali 1998.

<sup>5</sup> An innovation contrasting with traditional management based on the custom of separation of tasks, resulting from the NGO’s approach to gender, where women’s participation is a requirement of any development project.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the World Bank had a primordial role in urging the adoption of participatory management by the State of Mali, especially as a means of disengaging the State from public environmental management. Together with the German GTZ, the World Bank supported establishment of the Natural Resource Management Project in Mali. The emphasis on participatory management served to condition political development toward a democratic structure, tending to cast civil institutions as the primary players, above State institutions, in the domain of environmental management: “It would constitute a major political innovation similar in nature and significance to the conditionalities (liberalization and privatization of the economy), accepted as structural adjustments (...) the State would initiate the experiment from behind the scenes, charging the funding organizations and the NGOs with testing it, without effecting the existing legislative corpus.” (Faye 1990:13) For all these developments, see Kassibo, “Historical and Political Foundations of Decentralized Management of Natural Resources in Mali: A Synthesis of Two Case Studies” (in press).

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the traditional associations “Ogokana et Alamodiou” and their social function, see Konaté, A.B. (1992); Diakitè, M. (1993); Dembélé, E. (1995); Konaté, A.B. and Téssoungué, M. (1996).