



**Entrepôt Politics
Political Struggles over the Dantokpa
Marketplace in Cotonou, Benin**

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The aim of the interdisciplinary research network was to gain a better understanding of the role and significance of informal economic networks and activities on political processes. The research network explored the dynamics of informal economic networks and activities; national, regional and international attempts to regulate informal economic activities; and the ways in which informal economic networks and activities are or are not converted into political influence. The network received funding from the Danish Social Science Research Council (FSE) for three workshops during 2007-2009 with an additional PhD workshop partly funded by the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS).

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the Dantokpa Market in Cotonou – a hub of formal and informal international trade in the sub-region – is an important site for understanding national political struggles in Benin due to its key position in the economy. The lines of conflict at Dantokpa duplicate the general pattern of fluid and opportunistic political alliances between ‘regionally’-based parties around the government and the opposition in Beninese politics. Political networks of non-state and state actors, party leaders, government officials and ‘big men and women’ compete for control over the huge resources generated from the market. This competition is embedded in and has been spurred on by democratisation in 1990 and decentralisation in 2002. Formally, the Beninese state governs the market, but its authority is weak, and public authority is shaped through and by struggles and negotiations between the two competing political networks in a fluid and informal environment of clientelistic politics.

“A reason why Dantokpa does not function like it did in the past is linked to management. The management has become invisible. There are too many struggles between the central government and the mayors of Porto Novo and Cotonou around the question of the authority over Dantokpa. Politically, the mayor (Cotonou) controls the actors at Dantokpa, but the state continues to impose its control over the economy. Therefore, these debates tend to disorganise Dantokpa completely. We see the appearance of contradictory networks that are self-destructive.” (Interview, John Igue, 2008)

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes the struggles over the management of the huge Dantokpa market in Benin on Africa’s west coast, which is a hub of formal and informal international trade in the region. The ongoing process of democratization and decentralization in the country frames the analysis, and the recent attempts to formalize and modernize the market provide the entry point and empirical content of the analysis. The analysis shows how the state governs the overlapping formal and informal economic activities known as *L’état-entrepôt* economy¹ (Igue 1992: 14) through a set of similarly overlapping formal and informal political networks.

Because of the immense transit trade and informal trade flow at the market, Dantokpa generates enormous economic benefits (Igue 1992; interview J. Igue 2008), but it has also become an important site of political competition for votes between interwoven national, regional and local networks. Hence, Dantokpa is a political microcosm, mirroring struggles over national agendas of market access and control – control over the space, trade

flows and, not least, the traders’ associations and unions, which form part of clientelist structures.

The ongoing policy of decentralization is key to this analysis of the political dynamics around Dantokpa. After 12 years of preparation, the first municipal elections marked the onset of the decentralisation reform in 2002/2003. The new legislation transferred authority over local market places to the newly elected municipalities. However, in the case of the Dantokpa market, the state retained its authority, claiming that Dantokpa had national interest due to its international character, size, and strategic economic role in the Beninese economy of informal transit and re-exportation trade.

Therefore, the legal control of Dantokpa has been the object of political contention between 1) shifting governments (of Kérékou, 1996-2006, and Boni since 2006, both representing northern-based parties in shifting alliances with parties from east and west Benin); and 2) the mayor of Cotonou and former president (1991-96), Nichéphore Soglo, representing the southern-based opposition party, *Renaissance du Bénin* (RB). The key stake is the huge amounts of money from different taxes, tolls and other funds generated at the Dantokpa market and accumulated in the “black box of the Ministry of Interior” (interview, Igue 2008). The political majority

¹ John Igue defines the *États-entrepôts* like Gambia, Togo and Benin in West Africa as “(Entrepôts) states living nearly exclusively off the income from trade based on re-exportation. The necessity of capturing these trade-related incomes emerges from the legislations and the port and urban equipments that strengthen transit and warehouse activities” (Igue and Soulé 1992: 14).

running the state has firmly stopped every attempt to transfer control of these resources to the RB party, which runs the municipality, fearing it would use them as patronage to consolidate and increase its power. The government has made several attempts to negotiate a compromise – the so-called *tripartite solution*, providing for shared responsibility between the central state, the municipality and the Chamber of Commerce – without result. The stalemate has created a space for continued political and administrative manoeuvring from all sides.

In its attempt to govern the Dantokpa market, the government established a state management company, SOGEMA (*Société de Gestion des Marchés de Cotonou*), in 1983, but its authority is weak and contested, diluted, and to some extent ignored by groups of actors in the market. SOGEMA has become a political arena for struggles between competing *political networks* over decisions and the enforcement of decisions. By *political networks*, I understand alliances of actor groups, represented by leaders who share strategic interests². They include local and national politicians, state and municipal administrators, as well as organisational leaders and traders, and are organised in fluid networks spurred by opportunistic calculations, which tend to make and unmake the alliances struggling for control over Dantokpa and its resources. Political networks share characteristics with factions, but they have a broader scope in that they link different interest groups of state and non-state actors.

In order to describe and analyze the political dynamics around the market, this paper looks into the development of a concrete conflict between two political networks as they mo-

bilize and manoeuvre around a SOGEMA-led project to formalise and modernize the market. The main elements of the project comprise the introduction of a private security company combined with a micro-credit scheme for informal traders. As the analysis will show, this conflict is connected to a struggle over legal authority as well as the national, political competition between various ‘regionally’-based³ interest groups.

The analysis of the conflict suggests that the Dantokpa market is an excellent location for understanding political struggles and emergent political forms. Taking conceptual work around the notions of clientelism and citizenship as my point of departure, I argue that political mobilisation in general is embedded in a clientelistic political culture. However, some groups of actors tend to struggle for more legal-rational governance of the market, based on rights and duties.

BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

After the Cold War, one-party states in Africa faced political and economic crisis and as a consequence, after pressure from international financial institutions, went through a process of democratic reform. In Benin, the National Conference in 1990 launched a constitutional process leading to a multiparty system and parliamentary elections. The hope was that the process of democratisation would lead to increased transparency and accountability, curtail corruption and political clientelism and empower politically marginalized groups. However, political clientelism continued to be the dominant political culture

² Later, I empirically define the two competing networks.

³ Region is here loosely understood as ‘province’, but not in the administrative-territorial sense.

in Benin (Le Meur 1998; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 1998; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Bierschenk 2004, 2006; Blundo et al. 2003; Banégas 1998; Wantchekon 2003).

African state-society relations have often been seen as predominantly neo-patrimonial in character, building on political clientelism and patronage (Médard 1991, 1996; Bratton and van de Walle 1997; van de Walle (2001, 2003) and Chabal and Daloz 1999). However, the transitional aspect from neo-patrimonial rule towards a possible legal-rational bureaucratic form of government has increasingly been debated (Boissevain 1977; Amundsen 2001; Braathen and Orre 2001; van de Walle 2001).

In the Latin American context, Fox (1994), Lazar (2004) and Taylor (2004) analyse the borderland between clientelism and citizenship. Citizenship endows citizens 'belonging' to the nation with specific rights and basic duties. Being a client means that rewards are based "not on rights but on favours" (Taylor and Wilson 2004: 155, 161). Taylor focuses on 'political agency' and 'clientship' and avoids seeing clients as only passive subjects of political patrons (Taylor and Wilson 2004: 155; Taylor 2004: 214). In the Beninese case, Banégas (1998) shows that people use the right to vote to renegotiate political clientelist relationships and capture the patronage. Poor voters approach party candidates, manipulating and changing power relations between political patrons and clients to their benefit (Banégas, 2003; Prag 2004: 235ff), creating in turn a fluid, opportunistic and turbulent political environment where factional struggles make politics fairly unpredictable. Local patrons and brokers rapidly change allegiance from one party to another and create new alliances due to "*transhumance politique*" or floor-crossing (Prag 2004: 149).

Van de Walle (2009: 14) argues that "political clientelism in one form or another is likely to be an important dimension of any modern political system". In Benin, this seems to be the case as well. Democratic elections have induced more stability since 1990, but political clientelism, nepotism and fraud in state institutions continue to provoke popular contestation. One example is the peaceful mobilisation of civil society organisations between 2003 and 2006, which removed the Kérékou government in 2006 and brought President Yayi Boni to power (Adjovi 2006).

The possibility of using the vote to gain leverage to patronage is a characteristic of political transformation in many African countries, including Benin. The expression of citizenship through clientelistic mobilisation appears to be the dominant political culture. However, there are also groups mobilising on the basis of collective political interests and goals at Dantokpa – signs of more open critique of political clientelistic practices. This working paper indicates examples of *active citizenship* where some leaders and members of market associations claim rights as citizens, and publicly insist on transparent, legal-rational bureaucratic rules of governance.

I start by presenting the field site of Dantokpa and discussing the conflict between the central state and the municipality of Cotonou, which set against each other two political networks struggling for political and economic control of the marketplace. I examine part of the conflict around the modernisation and formalisation of the market more closely to reveal the informal political manoeuvring as the interests of the two networks of regionally based associations and traders collide.

Then follows an analysis of the political and historical background of the struggle around the management of Dantokpa, which focus-

es on continuities and changes in the way the political system in Benin has been structured from the colonial period until today. The final section concentrates on the actual links that exist between Dantokpa and national-level politics. The intention is to demonstrate that the “micro-regionalist” environment created by the political networks mirrors the larger pattern of shifting national alliances.

DANTOKPA MARKET – AN OVERVIEW

Benin’s economy is based on two main sources of income: cotton production and the re-export and transit of imported commodities from the world market to neighbouring countries⁴. Since the collapse of the cotton sector, Dantokpa Market has been one of the most important sources of income for the state, with an average monthly earning of about EUR 1.5 million (Kamalan 2006). This figure is probably vastly underestimated, because official statistics do not account for the huge informal transit trade to surrounding countries. The re-exportation of commodities has largely been based on smuggling and other ways of avoiding state regulations (Flynn 1997) and the port of Cotonou and Dantokpa Market have been the entry points of a huge quantity of commodities designated for the informal trade in the sub-region. With hundreds of thousands of daily clients, 20,000 vendors renting permanent shops and stalls and between 20,000 and 25,000 itinerant vendors (mainly women) (Kamalan 2006), Dantokpa is Benin’s largest workplace. It is located in

the centre of Cotonou delimited by the bank of the *lagune* at one side and a four-lane road at another. The hallmark of Dantokpa is a three-floor building called *les Étages*, where a rich “aristocracy” of women Dutch Wax textile traders, the famous “Mama Benz”, run their business. Next to this building, we find the “Divers” section, a pulsating labyrinth of stalls where all sorts of commodities are sold: spare parts, electronics, office articles, jewellery, food items and plastic buckets. Dantokpa also has huge wholesale and retail areas for vegetables, meat and fish, second-hand bottles and exchange.

More than 20 recognized professional associations including the two unions SYNAVAMAB (Syndicat National des Vendeurs et Vendeuses et Assimilés des Marchés du Bénin) and USYNVEPID (Union Syndicale des Vendeuses et Vendeurs de Pièces Détachées et Divers du Marché de Dantokpa) in the Divers section of the market organise the traders and other professional groups. The associations constitute a political epicentre where traders in the informal sector can be mobilised quickly and either cause serious trouble or generate support for the government. This explains the presence of several police units, intelligence services and private security groups guarding the market (interview, Igue 2008).

Thus, politically the market is the most important site in Benin. The market population constitutes a political reservoir playing a critical role in terms of the actions and the votes they are able to mobilise. This means that the market is a battleground for politicians, state employees and leaders of different market associations. Conflicts evolve around key questions of who controls the distribution of vacant market stalls, the price of stalls and shops and control of financial subventions from the ministries and donors. The manage-

⁴ EIU Country Report Benin 2007 (p. 4) Principal exports 2005: Cotton and textiles 30.4 % of total GDP Re-exports 40.5 % of total GDP.

ment company SOGEMA formally administers Dantokpa and two other important marketplaces in Cotonou. The company is state-owned and under the tutelage of the Ministry of Interior.

The growing number of poorer informal traders and street vendors suffocate the market's ageing infrastructure, and clients have for many years been abandoning the market. Since the 1990s, there have been many attempts to develop large renovation and modernisation plans, but they have been in vain due to resistance from large segments of market vendors, who fear being ousted if their stalls are torn down.

POLITICAL NETWORKS IN DANTOKPA

The analysis of the ongoing conflicts around the Dantokpa market has shown that two opposing networks tend to dominate the political cleavages, mobilization and negotiations in the marketplace. This section will take a look at how these networks have emerged, who participates in them, and what interests keep them together. For analytical purposes, as explained below, I characterize the two networks as the “political network of *accumulation*” and the “political network of *survival*”.⁵ Even though the two networks are different in terms of gender, class, ethnicity⁶, regional backgrounds and religious affiliation, both cut across these categories, and both incorporate linkages to actors in state institutions, political parties and national market associations.

⁵ Paraphrasing Ilda Lourenço-Lindell (2004: 90)

⁶ Distribution of ethnic groups: *Fon*: 66%, *Somba*: 5%, *Bariba*: 10%, *Fulani*: 4%, *Yoruba*: 9%, *Other*: 6%, (http://www.gouv.bj/af-fiche_presentation.php?id_srub=131#geo5)

The political network of accumulation

This network shares ethnic and kin-based origins and forms what is known as the Adja network⁷ in the *Divers* section of the market. The male leaders have close relations to the Chamber of Commerce, which is controlled by wealthy and influential Yoruba traders from Porto Novo in the south-east. Until 2007, leaders of the Adja network worked closely with three shifting female chief executives from the SOGEMA. Two of them were politically appointed members of the northern party *Fard Alafia*⁸. The network has supported increased government and state control and favours “formalisation and modernisation”, because it may lead to concentration of capital and accumulation, which will benefit the network members.

The Adja network is built on ethnic solidarity and kinship ties. First, let us take a step back in time to understand the core of this network.

In the late 1980s, when Benin's economy and Kérékou's Marxist government were in crisis, men from the south-western ethnic group, the Adja, migrated to Cotonou to work at Dantokpa. Some became apprentices in shops of Yoruba businessmen, who traded in spare parts for cars and motorcycles in the *Divers* section. The Yoruba controlled the spare parts sector at that time.⁹ However, the first young Adja men learned successfully from their masters. As apprentices they

⁷ Adja is the name of several ethnic sub-groups from south-western Benin and Togo.

⁸ They were appointed by the former Minister of Interior, Daniel Tawéma, also from *Fard Alafia* (Minister of the Interior, Security, and Territorial Administration from 1998 to 2001, and Minister of the Interior, Security, and Decentralization from 2001 to 2005, according to Wikipedia)

⁹ Interviews I. Rajack; El Hadj Assane; and: Codjo, William K.H. www.entrepreneuriat.com/fileadmin/ressources/actes02/CODJ.pdf

gained access to the business networks of the Yoruba in Nigeria, and soon after some Adja people opened their own shops at the market in competition with their former Yoruba masters¹⁰. The successful Adja entrepreneurs employed younger brothers and relatives as apprentices, who learned the business over a few years. Often, a brother and employer would help an apprentice with capital to establish his own business, a common practice in the informal sector in Africa (Tripp 2001: 3; Meagher 2006: 566).

Between 1985 and 2000, the male Adja network succeeded in taking control of the spare parts and hardware sector in the *Divers* area from the Yoruba networks. This development explains the composition of the Adja-led political network of accumulation. Its objective has been to take control of the associational environment at Dantokpa, which was until recently in the hands of the women-led associations in the opposing political network described below.

Two figures have played a key role in the construction of this network. They are Daniel Fangbédji and Miwoto Gossou, who goes by the nickname Azangli. They are both associational leaders from the *Divers* section and Adja from the Mono region. Daniel Fangbédji is the executive secretary of the federation of market associations at Dantokpa called the FAOMAB (*Fédération Nationale des Organisations et Associations des Marchés du Bénin*). Until recently, he held a seat in the Chamber of Commerce (*Chambre de Commerce et de l'Industrie du Bénin, CCIB*) and is the vice-president of the market association ASMAB (*Association pour la Solidarité des Marchés du Bénin*). Fangbédji runs an import-export business and works as a broker, helping clients to solve problems with the tax and custom authorities (*Transi-*

taire). Politically, he has crossed the floor from former President Kérékou's bloc to the current President Boni's party coalition FCBE (*Forces Cauris pour un Bénin Emergent*).¹¹

The other key figure, Azangli, is the president of the union USYNVEPID and was a local broker for the rich and influential Adja politician and minister in the Kérékou government, Bruno Amoussou from the Mono-based party PSD (*Parti Social-Démocrate*)¹². Fangbédji and Azangli Gossou share a past as apprentices of Yoruba traders, and have close commercial ties in Nigeria with Yoruba traders at the market and in the Chamber of Commerce. They were important players behind the foundation of the federation of market associations at Dantokpa (FAOMAB) in 2001 – an organisation that more or less embodies this political network.

However, according to Augustine Codjia¹³, leader of the women's market association UNACOBÉ (*Union Nationale des Commerçantes du Bénin*)¹⁴, the initiative to form FAOMAB came from Veronique Gbèdo, the chief executive of the government management organization SOGEMA. Codjia cooperated directly with Gbèdo and Fangbédji around the creation of the new federation. As Codjia has explained, Gbèdo was looking for a negotiating partner with a 'strong voice', but also an organisation that she could control. Fangbédji, Azangli, Gbèdo and Codjia all supported the alliance of political parties participating in President Kérékou's government. The chief executive encouraged the creation of new government-friendly associations at Dantok-

¹⁰ See also: den Ouden 1995.

¹¹ www.gouv.bj/legislatives2007/candidatures/11eme_CE.PDF
www.fcbe2007.org/

¹² Kérékou's successor in the 2006 presidential election.

¹³ Chodaton's rival from the Mono-based party PRD.

¹⁴ For UNACOBÉ and Codjia's history, see Heilbrunn 1997a, 1997b.

pa that could join the federation and weaken the opposition network, which was associated with the mayor of Cotonou. Consequently, Fangbédji and Azangli were instrumental in taking control of the federation. Furthermore, we observe how this political network at Dantokpa follows the lines of the regional party alliance behind the Kérékou government: PRD – *Parti du renouveau démocratique* (East: Porto Novo/Ouémè), PSD (South-west, Mono/Couffo) and Fard Alafia (Northern based: Parakou, Nikki).

TRANSFER OF AUTHORITY OVER DANTOKPA

Véronique Gbèdo and the government (SOGEMA/Ministry of Interior) opposed the idea of transferring authority over Dantokpa to the municipality and negotiated the *tripartite solution* of divided ownership between the Chamber of Commerce, the state and the municipality. Fangbédji negotiated this solution with Gbèdo (interview, DF, November 2006) right up until the SOGEMA claimed the right to administrate the one third of the shares of the new “private-public” company reserved for the Chamber of Commerce. Consequently, Fangbédji briefly aligned himself with Chodaton’s network¹⁵ and Veronique Gbedo was sacked as SOGEMA’s chief executive in April 2005. The government appointed a new administrator¹⁶ who continued the same policy of state ownership. Fangbédji, for his part, strengthened his control within the federation, partly because he was able to get support from a number of female leaders from newly created associations. According

¹⁵ Explanation below: “The political network of survival”.

¹⁶ Member of the party *Fard Alafia* from the north.

to the opposition, he bought support with money from his political patrons in the government.

The participants in the network of accumulation share the interest of formalisation, renovation and a profound restructuring of the market – the tripartite solution. As Fangbédji has explained:

Dantokpa is a market which is open 24 hours out of 24, but it has a security problem, which means that investors, who normally should be attracted, don’t invest at Dantokpa. You have probably seen the “straw huts”. We need to come out of antiquity and create a nice modern market, but as long as there is no security, the investors will run away. (Interview, Daniel Fangbédji, March 2007)

In this network they argue that formalisation of informal trade will attract some of the most competitive informal traders. Furthermore, they hope to reduce the number of street vendors, who complicate business for the richer traders. Thus, their project goes in the direction of liberalisation, privatisation and concentration of ownership, helped by investments of foreign capital as in the case of the Parakou market (Imorou 2000). It is a question of capital accumulation and protection of the interests of the larger wholesale traders. The Chamber of Commerce supports this agenda of liberalization and modernization. For its chief executive, a large-scale renovation of the market is necessary. Small-scale scattered renovation projects tend to end up in a messy situation, where the infrastructure does not function. The Chamber of Commerce fully supports the *tripartite solution* in order to create a representative forum for management of the market (JCA, August, 2007).

The political network of survival

The opposing political network of survival¹⁷ has broad support from the market women. It links wealthy Dutch Wax traders and poorer female and male vendors in the *Divers* and other sections of the market. They share the interest of protecting vulnerable small-scale vendors, mainly women, against non-transparent modernisation and formalisation plans, which they see as threatening their business at Dantokpa. For the wealthy leaders of the Dutch Wax traders, it is first of all a political instrument to maintain influence at the market. This means protecting their 'clients', securing cohesion in the trading networks and finally maintaining the party *Renaissance du Bénin's* political influence, which means they support the municipal authority at Dantokpa.

The key figure in this network is Justine Chodaton, president of the union SYNAVAMAB and the Dutch Wax women's association. She has three times been elected as Member of Parliament from the party *Renaissance du Bénin*. She was born in the Mono province, but married into a Fon family of formerly high-ranking royal employees (Chodaton) from Abomey. Many observers recognize her as the un-official market queen of Dantokpa.

Another important figure is Clarisse Reine Gnahoui, treasurer in the union USYNVEPID and a rival of the union's president, Azangli. She is the leader of an autonomous women's network in the *Divers* part of the market, which forms her support basis. Finally, she is also the vice-president of the international NGO and network of market associations, StreetNet International. Clarisse R. Gnahoui

originates from the coastal town Ouidah, her father was a prominent union leader in colonial times and, critically, she supports President Boni's party.

The women are linked together through the collaboration between the unions. Two male Yoruba board members from another oppositional faction in USYNVEPID also participate in the network of "survival", which has support from a large number of female associations at Dantokpa.

The alliance between the two women seeks to unite the poorer market women in the informal sector with the wealthy and traditionally more political powerful Dutch Wax women led by Chodaton. They share the interest of maintaining the market women's influence at Dantokpa, and both women struggle against the nepotism and corruption that has characterised the state management company over the years. They also promote the idea that poor women traders in the informal sector need cheap and secure access to the market.

In policy terms, they support "social" demands, which means they promote low daily fees for the itinerant street-vendors, denounce the corrupt "parallel ticket networks" selling falsified market tickets, and campaign for low, subsidised rents on market stalls. The politician Chodaton struggles for the interests of her electorate of women and men in Cotonou's 36 marketplaces and neighbourhoods, who have brought her into parliament three times. Both women are opposed to the modernisation and formalisation plans of the male Adja traders' network of accumulation and their strategic interest in controlling the "parallel" market for shops and stalls. Thus, there are elements of a 'class-gender struggle' in the scenario.

¹⁷ The term "survival" indicates that it mobilises women and other vulnerable parts of the market population. Paraphrasing Ilda Lourenço-Lindell (2004: 92)

THE CASE OF THE SECURITY AND MODERNISATION PROJECT

The proposition from the network of accumulation to introduce a formal security company to guard the market at night instead of the informal guards that the vendors usually employ became public in May 2007. The two networks started a struggle around these issues. After Véronique Gbèdo had been dismissed from her position as CE of SOGEMA in 2005, Fangbédji and Azangli had elaborated the plan with the new chief executive of the state management company¹⁸ between 2005 and 2006 and jointly signed a 'protocol of agreement' in November 2006 (*Protocol d'Accord ASMAB-SOGEMA*, 2006). The project had support from the Chamber of Commerce and the Ministry of Interior (JCA, August 2007).

The agreement combined a formalised 24-hour security service with the insurance of stalls and the possibility of micro-credit loans. These micro-credit loans were designated to poorer female vendors at the market – an attempt to build a clientele of small-scale vendors. The private project-makers allied to the state management company promoted the plan as 'development and modernisation'. The project was based on the premise that the rented market stalls were sold for very high market prices. This is caused by the lack of space for new stalls combined with a growing demand for stalls and shops (interview, DF, Cotonou, November 2006)¹⁹.

¹⁸ Madame Carréna Azounhoumon.

¹⁹ The proposal stipulated that the stall-owners had to pay a monthly membership fee, including payment for the security service. This conditioned their access to low-interest micro-credit loans, which were calculated on the basis of the value of the stall (number of clients). If the 'stall-owner' failed to pay her monthly rent to SOGEMA, or repay the loan to the micro-credit institution, the company could annul the lease contract and hand it over to another person. SOGEMA would later reimburse the micro-credit institution, when the stall had been sold (interview, DF, Cotonou, November 2006).

Had the project been accepted, the two leaders and the SOGEMA probably would have consolidated their control of the market for stalls, because many small-scale traders are unable to service their debt. The project design was perfectly in line with the *tripartite* plan discussed above.

The linked security and micro-credit project was aimed at involving the market women in a process of 'formalisation' of their business. The traders would be officially registered on the basis of the turnover, and Fangbédji estimated that 5000-6000 traders could move from informal to formal status every year – a win-win situation for the traders who got access to credit, for the Chamber of Commerce, who could gain new members, and for the state, which would increase its tax basis (Fangbédji, November 2006).

Fangbédji was closely involved with the SOGEMA, the Ministry of Interior and the Chamber of Commerce when he promoted the initiative. By early 2007, the credit institution had been officially recognised, but the three million USD grant was not yet in place. The initiators allegedly had ongoing discussions with a Saudi Arabian investor, which the Chamber of Commerce solicited (*L'Autre Quotidien*, September 27, 2007, interview JCA/CCIB, August 2007). Registration cards for the loan with SOGEMA's logo and that of Fangbédji's market association ASMAB had been printed, and a detailed map covering all stalls of Dantokpa was drawn. The ASMAB tried to define and enforce collectively binding decisions and act as 'public authority' using SOGEMA's logo²⁰ and the SOGEMA heavily promoted the plan. But despite all this, the majority of vendors did not accept it, because of the economic consequences and

²⁰ Concerning non-state actors's use of public symbols and claim of public authority see Lund 2006: 685.

the non-transparent form of the proposal²¹. The modernisation project clearly favoured the ‘better-off’ traders and would probably have led to a concentration of ownership of market stalls, but resistance from the vendors of the market increased after the corporate credit and security arrangement had been officially presented.

Even before this, at the end of 2006, resistance to the project grew. SOGEMA’s then chief executive, Carréna Azounhoumon, had held talks with the informal security guards, and rumours circulated about the project. Many traders were sceptical and preferred their trusted village kinsmen as security guards. In February 2007, a “parallel ticket” network involving the SOGEMA leader Carréna Azounhoumon was dismantled, and the government removed the chief executive from her position, which was a blow to the project. The removal was the result of a criminal investigation from the Ministry of Interior (Le Matinal, January 29 and February 21, 2007). However, the secret police action was launched because people from the political network of survival informed the minister about the falsified market tickets. They also gave information concerning the executive’s ownership of one of the pre-selected security companies, and about the confiscation of shops and stalls, which had in turn been distributed to the executive’s personal network (communication, NN, March 2007). Finally, a cooperative of shop-owners addressed the Minister of Interior complaining about the confiscation or relocation of their shops (Le Matinal, February 2, 2007).

Despite the change of leadership in the SOGEMA, the third female chief executive

²¹ Many small and middle range traders participate in trade networks, where they get credit without paying interest; or they use ambulant bankers (*tontiniers*) or they are member of other micro-credit institutions.

continued her predecessor’s policy, probably because the modernisation and formalisation plans fitted with the Boni government’s urge for modernisation and “good governance” (Le Conseil des Ministres N° 05/PR/SGG/Com). The outcome was an open conflict between the two political networks. The opposition to Fangbédji organized a press conference on May 11, 2007 where several faction leaders from the union USYNVEPID, including the vice-president and the treasurer Clarisse Gnahoui, expressed their firm opposition to the project, stating that the project had been rejected. Furthermore, they explained that the tax they paid included a payment designated to the market’s security service (*Le Collectif des associations non-signataires des Projets ASMAB*). Daniel Fangbédji counter-attacked in the press, arguing that the project would lead to recruitment of 312 security guards receiving training from the companies, generate opportunities for micro-credit and also increase security and reduce theft at the market (Le Matinal, May 12, 2007).

MOBILISING DANTOKPA AND ACTIVATING THE POLITICAL NETWORK

The four board members from USYNVEPID, who were opposed to the project, mobilised the market population, visiting all sectors of the market and explaining their views. Fangbédji’s network had support from many association leaders (18 associations out of 21), allegedly because he had bribed them. However, many traders returned the membership cards that his credit association had distributed, and contributed with money to call a press conference. Vendors from all parts of the market rejected

the project. From the beginning, Chodaton's union, SYNAVAMAB, supported them, but also Codjia's UNACOBÉ, the rich Yoruba jewellery traders and the Yoruba hardware vendors now joined the opposition. Furthermore, Clarisse Gnahoui, treasurer of UNSYNVEPID, activated her political network to arrange a meeting with the Minister of Interior. Following this consultation, President Yayi Boni intervened and cancelled the project, probably because he understood the lack of broadly-based political support behind the network and the security project (interviews, board members USYNVEPID, August 2007).

The treasurer's networking was crucial to the outcome of the conflict. Two women in key positions from the central administration helped her to contact the Minister, and indirectly to engage President Boni. Their influence inside the Ministry of Interior was the key, because the network of accumulation blocked the way at the lower levels of the ministry. Chodaton and the network of survival's links to the government, the President and his wife were also decisive.

The case shows that open political discussion of the proposition and mobilisation of the various market populations, combined with a strong political alliance between several women-led associations, were vital for the successful – for the opposition, that is – outcome of the conflict. It is an example of how some associational leaders mobilise members around their rights, transparency in public decision-making, and struggle against corrupt practices – consequently invoking citizenship.

The union USYNVEPID officially changed position, and the vice-president declared his opposition to the project. The president, Azangli, who had promoted it, lost influence and the women-led internal oppo-

sition gained ground. Furthermore, the case study shows how fluid the balance of power is between these political networks, as several leaders opportunistically changed camp during the conflict.

Finally, the conflict announced President Boni's growing interest in supporting the women-led network of survival. He saw the potential of dividing the opposition in the municipality of Cotonou. I will return to this macro-political perspective in the last section.

BENINESE POLITICS REVISITED

To understand the links between the micro-political struggle around the management of the Dantokpa market and Beninese macro-level political dynamics indicated in the case discussed above, we need to reconsider the transformation of political power in Benin.

In his discussion of local politics in Parakou, Thomas Bierschenk argues that “the current phase of democratisation is not only influenced by the nature of the immediately preceding regime, but that political lines of development are continued, which originate from early independence, colonial rule and even the pre-colonial period” (2004: 4). In his critique of Bratton and van de Walle's (1994) development models, Bierschenk calls for a *longue durée* perspective of local politics and democratic reform in Benin (Bierschenk 2004: 4). This section outlines this continuity of politics, a history that to a large degree determines the complex and changing patterns of alliances between the different regional forces at play in Benin today. Furthermore, based on this understanding, it shows how the struggle over political control of Dantokpa Market is part of the political competition between regional alliances at the national level.

PRE-COLONIAL POLITICAL AND TERRITORIAL ENTITIES

During the 18th and 19th centuries the pre-colonial Dahomey (now Benin) was divided into three mayoral political entities. The Fon-speaking kingdom of Danhomè in Abomey controlled most of the southern coastal stretch, including towns like Alladah and Ouidah, approaching Porto Novo in the east. In Porto Novo the Adjacê kingdom reigned over the Gun population and the Islamized Yoruba (Nako) trading community. In the northern Borgu region, the former kingdoms of Parakou, Kandi and Nikki formed a Bariba-dominated territory (Staniland 1973a: 292; Banégas 2003: 33). Together with the Natitingou area in the northwest it made up the northern zone, creating a north-south division between the Islamized/animist north and the Catholic/animist south.

The French colonial conquest started with the establishment of a trading post in Grand Popo in the southeast in 1857. Rivalries with the British colonial regime over sovereignty in Porto Novo between 1863 and 1965 ended with the declaration of a French protectorate in 1882 and the defeat of the Abomey kingdom in 1894. The construction of a railway line between Cotonou and Parakou began in 1900, extending French control into the north, and in 1904 Dahomey got the status of a colony in French West Africa, AOF (*Afrique Occidentale Française*). The British colonisation of Nigeria, the German colonisation in Togo and the French one in Dahomey led to mutual rivalries over control and undermined the indigenous trading systems and local powerbases of the kingdoms, which instead became subject to the French colonial government (Igue and Soulé 1992: 50). During colonial rule the north-south divide became more visible, with a Catholic, relatively well-

educated, wealthy agricultural and commerce-based south and the poorer, Islamized north where trading routes suffered under colonial control, and trade was directed towards the coastal towns (Staniland 1973a: 291; Banégas 2003: 33).

Politically, the French Fourth Republic in 1946 opened a period of “democratization” in the AOF including French Dahomey, which continued until independence in 1960. In Dahomey it led to a three-party system²² based on shifting rivalries and alliances between regionally based power blocs that to some extent followed the pre-colonial territorial divisions (Staniland 1973a: 291; Banégas 2003: 32 ff).

This pattern of regionalization has been a constant factor in late colonial and post-colonial politics, with smaller changes during Kérékou’s Marxist-Leninist regime between 1972 and 1990 (Creevey et al. 2005: 473ff; Bierschenk 2004: 9; Bako-Arifari 1995; Staniland 1973a, 1973b). As Banégas (2003) and Bierschenk (2004) argue, the political system during the colonial era of the 1950s and the early post-colonial period from 1960 to 1972 was built on a “nearly institutionalised system of political clientelism, which far from favouring the consolidation of power, induced a nearly structural political instability” of rapidly shifting political alliances aiming at controlling the central state (Banégas 2003: 34). Leaders organised their respective regional clientelist networks, mobilising support through distribution of patronage to trade unions, agriculture cooperatives and religious associations. Heilbrunn shows how this regional pattern pertained in the wom-

²² Northern party led by Benin’s first President Hubert Maga, a south-eastern-based party mobilising the Gun and Yoruba population in Porto Novo and the Ouémè region and the southern-central party with support from the southern littoral population of Fon and Adja-Mina.

en's trading associations (Heilbrunn 1997a: 7). Traditional chiefs (kings) and leaders of "hometown associations" linked party leaders and the local population through a type of brokerage which, as Bierschenk (2004) shows, has continued to play an important role in contemporary local politics in Benin's third biggest town, Parakou.

Colonel Mathieu Kérékou temporarily stopped this situation when he took power in 1972 and installed a Marxist regime. Bierschenk emphasises the paradox that "many village inhabitants in Dahomey/Benin (1972-1990) first experienced democratic forms of politics, and elections in particular, in the context of Marxist-Leninist single-party rule" (Bierschenk 2004: 4). During the late colonial period, 'democratic' procedures were introduced in urban areas, which during the post-independence period of 1960-72 were abolished by succeeding military regimes. Bako-Arifari and Banégas argue that the Kérékou regime in the 1970s and 1980s was a reaction to the unstable period of personal and regionalist politics during the first decade of independence. Kérékou introduced a regime with student and popular committees in universities, unions, marketplaces and villages. This did not curtail the regionally based clientelism, but the regime was able to limit the latent tensions between factions through a balanced representation as a form of "provincialisation" (Bako-Arifari 1995: 10; Banégas 1998: 69).

From 1987/88 onwards, prefects were nominated and sent to the areas they originated from, which was a change compared to the previous rotation system. Kérékou also called on intellectuals and civil servants to return to their villages and create village associations for development, and to reanimate the Local Revolutionary Committees (CRL), which signalled a new form of local government based

on the 'sons of the soil'²³ (Le Meur 1998; Bako-Arifari 1995: 11ff). Colonel Kérékou survived for 17 years as dictator, balancing power inside the army hierarchy, and through close relationships with the powerful Yoruba trading networks and southern commercial elite. The state-*entrepôt* system (Igue and Soulé 1992), which Kérékou adopted, based on state-regulated import and informal re-exportation/smuggling of industrial goods to the neighbouring countries, mainly Nigeria, was important for sustaining his power, as it provided the economic resources. The system experienced a major crisis from the middle of the 1980s when Nigeria imposed strict controls on its borders, leading to the collapse of a state bank in 1988, which signalled the end of the Kérékou regime.

DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

Economic and political crises in the late 1980s generated public discontent and broad mobilisation of students, trade unions and market associations. President Kérékou's advisor finally persuaded him that it was urgent to deal with the discontent. He called a National Conference (*La Conférence des Forces Vives de la Nation*) in Cotonou from February 1990, assembling 493 delegates from key institutions and organisations in Benin. The conference suspended the constitution of 1977 and elaborated a new one, which was confirmed in a referendum in December 1990 (Banégas 2003: 139). The peaceful transition from a one-party state to liberal democracy is one of the success stories in Africa. In the presidential election in 1991, Nicéphore Soglo from the RB party became

²³ *terroir* – rural region, province, seen as having an impact on the inhabitants.

the country's first democratically elected president.

Like in other former French colonies, the new constitution favoured the executive powers of the president (presidentialism), who to a large degree has been able to legislate by decree and to control the budget through the ministries of finance and economics (Bierschenk 2004: 6)²⁴, and donors have therefore pushed for parliamentary influence and control of the budgetary process. The decentralisation process, mentioned explicitly in the constitution, was to a large degree donor-driven (Bierschenk 2004: 4). The first municipal elections eventually took place in 2002/2003 after delays in the legal process caused by political groups who feared loss of control.

The first local elections in Benin brought businessmen, representatives of hometown associations, religious associations, trade unions and neighbourhood committees into the political arena, where they competed for office and access to growing external resources. Old schemes of alliances between the regionally based political blocs reappeared and adapted to the new institutional framework. Instead of the regionally based three-party system in Dahomey's late colonial period, the post-1990 development divided Benin into four regions and later six *départements*, which led to a new pattern of four coalition blocs dominating their respective geographical strongholds²⁵.

The most important change was the subdivision into 77 communes, and at the lowest level into villages or city districts ([²⁴ We observe how the actors at the Dantokpa market successfully search for the President's direct intervention in the case of the security proposal discussed above.](http://</p>
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²⁵ The change of the territorial administrative organization due to the Law No. 97-028 from January 15, 1999, theoretically divided Benin into 12 *départements*. However, the six existing administrative centres were maintained and the six planned never implemented.

www.statoids.com/ybj.html). The devolution of power to urban and rural municipalities only reinforced the pattern of regionalism (Bierschenk 2004: 29, 37).

Democratisation and decentralisation have mobilised the electorate in Benin, who recognise the political value of multi-party elections. Participation rates have turned around 60-75%, and many voters are familiar with the candidates and participate in political rallies. However, the "appropriation of democracy" is an adaptation to the existing political culture of personal politics (Bierschenk 2004: 36). In other words, the decentralisation of "rent-seeking" spurred by the transfer of donor resources simply led to the continuation of existing features of political clientelism, but in a new form (Bierschenk 2004: 36; Banégas 2003: 422 ff). Democratisation and decentralisation mean that possibilities of rent-seeking have been extended to the local level, and that it has enlarged the possibilities of negotiations at the local level and between the local and the national political levels, though the national level continues to have the upper hand like Thomas Bierschenk argues (2004: 36).²⁶

COMPETITION BETWEEN THE NATIONAL PARTY ALLIANCES – THE ROLE OF DANTOKPA

I have argued that Dantokpa Market in Cotonou is an important site for understanding national political competition in Benin due to its key position in the economy and because of the powerful market associations and their political mobilisation

²⁶ For a similar argument in the Senegalese case see Blundo 1998: 44.

of the market population. Democratisation and decentralisation have only added new possibilities to an enduring pattern of shifting political alliances between locally-based parties.

Power at the national level has for a long time been in the hands of northern-based presidents (Kérékou and Boni) who have been able to divide the opposition parties from the south. In the equation of power, Dantokpa Market has been a key factor because the opposition party – the *Renaissance du Bénin* – politically controlled the market population and voters in the associations. The government, on the other hand, controlled the market territory at the institutional and legal level.

The government policy has therefore focused on eroding and splitting the RB's political platform at Dantokpa, and shifting governments have tried to strengthen associations near the government through patronage or to attract politicians from the RB to the government side in parliament. Since the last parliamentary elections in 2008, one of the Beninese government's main targets for co-option from the RB has been Justine Chodaton.

Chodaton has always maintained a delicate balance between her party and the government, aiming to avoid political isolation on the one hand and loss of support from her constituency on the other. Therefore she cooperated with former President Kérékou just as she does today with President Boni, which explains her changing political positions and being at the edge of breaking the party solidarity in April/May 2009. She has explained this policy by saying: "As a union leader, you need to be on good terms with the government" (Chodaton, communication March 2006). Chodaton's political secretary pushes her argument further:

It means that you should set up a relationship of 'concubinage' with the government. Then you have the 'green light everywhere' and Madame Chodaton adds in Mina (local language): "If you want to play games with the government, it will mess up your business." On the other hand, she argues that "if the government does something very bad, the union leaders will go in large numbers (form a deputation) to talk to the government". (Interview, 2006)

Apparently, this strategy has continued to guide Chodaton since President Yayi Boni came to power in 2006. She has received the President's wife and Boni himself on several occasions, and her influence on the outcome of the case of the security organisation at the market is clear.

Eight years of female chief executives of the SOGEMA – the result of demands from Dantokpa's women's associations – came to an end in 2007, when the Boni government appointed the politician Joseph Tamègnon in October some months before the municipal elections, partly on Chodaton's initiative. Tamègnon was a municipal politician from the RB, and close to Justine Chodaton. He was probably appointed because it would undermine the opposition. One of his first acts was to visit Dantokpa together with President Boni to launch the construction of a new section of Dantokpa, an investment of EUR 15,3 million over 10 years (Fraternité, November 28, 2007).

The project continued the politics of social investment (patronage) and could be seen as a 'gift' to Chodaton and the political network of survival. Tamègnon's arrival and the pre-municipal election projects were also an invitation to RB politicians like Chodaton to approach the government camp.

Chodaton's latest step has been to break party solidarity and the opposition alliance against the government in a key vote in parliament in May 2009 (*Le Matinal*, April 5, 2009) together with another RB politician. Her positive attitude towards the government was announced during the annual Catholic ceremony in the St. Michel cathedral, which she patronises. In the cathedral, market women from all Cotonou receive blessings for their affairs. Normally, former President Nichéphore Soglo (RB) is at Chodaton's side, but this year, the president's wife was there as well – sending the message of political change. Some hours later, in the nearby conference hall, Chodaton declared her support for Boni's presidential campaign in 2011 (*La Nouvelle Tribune*, February 24, 2009). Her latest move comes in a situation where Tamègnon from the SOGEMA (thus working for the state, but co-opted from the RB) seeks to impose new conditions on contracts on the leaseholders at Dantokpa – a proposition that has divided the market women. By supporting Boni, Chodaton could probably be in a position to negotiate the new lease tariffs. Financial support from the RB is probably also drying up, and this is a strong argument in favour of a political turn.

Despite the new signals, she continues to work with the municipality to improve existing conditions and create new marketplaces in Cotonou together with Léhady Soglo (RB) – the vice-mayor and son of the former president and current mayor (*Le Matinal*, February 27, 2009).

This shows that the Boni government seeks to manipulate political alliances in the local political arena (Dantokpa-Cotonou) with the explicit aim of producing political changes at the national political level to the benefit of President Yayi Boni's coalition. In May 2009 the leader of the RB, Rosine

Soglo, announced the party's support for Boni's new election law – LEPI (*Liste Electorale Permanente Informatisé*), thus splitting the alliance of the opposition (*Aube Nouvelle*, May 5, 2009).

The last case also proves that Justine Chodaton openly used the competition between the government and the opposition. She was not limited by her membership of the RB and seized the right moment to approach the government before the rest of the party to maximise her political profit.

Furthermore, it confirms the argument that Dantokpa Market in Cotonou is an important site for understanding national political struggles in Benin. It illustrates how the macro-level politics of regional alliances is acted out and reproduced in this strategically important arena.

CONCLUSION: STRUGGLE OVER DANTOKPA – BALANCING AND NEGOTIATING POLITICAL POWER IN BENIN

Do you know why the state administration avoids taking a decision in the tripartite dossier? It is because the Dantokpa market is the heart of political mobilisation in Cotonou. Thus it is the nest of the “political patrons” (*grands électeurs*). Everybody realises that the government does its best to keep control of this market, because it knows that if it loses control, the opposition in the municipality will be stronger in this town of more than one million inhabitants... These are the facts. The government emphasises political questions but penalises the economy. (General Secretary JCA; Chambre de Commerce et de l'Industrie du Bénin – CCIB, August, 2007)

The general secretary of the Chamber of Commerce is frustrated when evaluating the situation at Dantokpa and the missing tripartite agreement. The economic restructuring and privatisation have been postponed due to more urgent considerations regarding political power in Cotonou and on the national arena. As the aftermath of the security conflict showed, the government has in several ways preferred to play the “social” card (patronage) soliciting key politicians from the political network of survival, particularly Justine Chodaton, because this network is able to mobilise the broadest support from women (and men) at Dantokpa and other marketplaces in Cotonou. By co-opting several leaders from the RB party, the government increases its majority and divides the opposition. Justine Chodaton has always prioritised good relations with the government in power, vital for her in maintaining her political clientele. In the most recent presidential elections, broad segments of poor people supported Yayi Boni due to his anti-corruption policy and continue to do so. Therefore it makes sense to send a positive signal of support despite the confusion it first aroused in her party.

Besides showing the fluctuating nature of alliances between various groups of actors in the competing networks at the market, the analysis also shows that these networks are important elements in the larger equation of power in Benin through their close contacts with government circles. But it also shows how resistance from the poorer sections of the market can halt modernization and formalization projects because of the electoral power they hold.

The cases of the failed tripartite agreement and security project showed that political rationales prevailed over economical ones. They were part of the key conflict over politi-

cal control of the market population between the government and the opposition.

The decentralisation reform triggered this conflict over political authority, which transcends narrow local interests. Dantokpa is vital to all regional elite groups and local trade networks in Benin, which explains why they participate in the networks struggling for control over the market space.

Even the minor conflict over the security issue covered more fundamental cleavages concerning control of the huge amounts of money generated at Dantokpa in the form of taxes and tolls, the use of space, control over access to stalls and credit and, finally, political control of the traders’ organisations and votes. The leaders of the political network of accumulation hoped to build an organisation integrating large groups of traders in a corporate network, thereby enlisting people in the formal security-credit structure – which was basically a new patron-client network.

The political parties intervene in the associational environment at Dantokpa, where they finance local political brokers. These high-profile leaders build patron-client networks in the associations and capitalize on their relationship with party leaders, employees in the ministries and other state institutions. The cases reveal that political strategies for power at Dantokpa are organised around competing *political networks* linking local brokers from the associations, state employees and politicians.

The lines of conflict at Dantokpa duplicate the general pattern of fluid, opportunistic and “contradictory” (interview, Igue 2008) political alliances between parties around the mainly northern-based government and the wealthy, southern-based opposition in Beninese politics. It mirrors the competition between the regionally based trading networks regarding control over the lucrative informal

trade with Nigeria and the northern Sahel countries, which passes through Dantokpa.

We can conclude that governance at Dantokpa takes place as a negotiation process between competing political networks of state- and non-state actors with different strategic priorities of how and for whom to develop the market. Personal political and economic considerations also guide the actors' positions. A key determinant in this power equation is the alliance with the Presidency and the Ministry of Interior. Thus, it is not that the central state does not play a role in the governance. The state cannot ignore the informal political networks and rather has to manoeuvre through them.

The struggle between the two political networks formally takes place inside a perfectly legal-rational and bureaucratic framework of consultations between state-recognised associations at Dantokpa. The SOGEMA organises these consultations on an *ad hoc* basis, gathering organisations in roundtable talks. However, after the consultations, decisions seem to be negotiated in corridor talks with the allied partners. Or, in another scenario, the opposition – as seen in the security case – mobilises a minister or even the president, using personal political networking and informal channels in order to block an unpopular decision. Thus, politics at Dantokpa continues to work according to clientelist logics. Despite the legal-rational and bureaucratic structure, real decision-making takes place in *informal political networks*.

There are exceptions to this pattern that indicate possible transformations, like the network of women around Clarisse R. Gnahoui, who channel resistance among many traders at Dantokpa against the pervasive 'personal politics', the 'mafia' (emic vocabulary) and the corruption in the SOGEMA. Her intervention in the conflict, and resistance to

tendencies of fraud and abuse of power in the union USYNVEPID, are signs of a new practice of participatory citizenship, which includes members and mobilises 'informal' traders around rights-based demands to public authorities. However, even critical voices like Gnahoui's need to manoeuvre inside the logic of informal network politics.

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