

THE POLITICS OF THE DECENTRALISATION REFORM IN MALI

Democratisation, state-society relations and local
governance

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Preface

In its most basic form, the dissertation has been written as a collection of papers. Each of the three papers is to be considered as an independent work situated within the overall purpose of the dissertation. Since the paper format only offers limited space for substantial discussions of theoretical and methodological considerations, the function of this introduction is to locate them within the overall agenda of the dissertation. The papers have been submitted for review to academic journals and are presented in the order they have been written. Minor changes of typographical character have been made to the papers to make them fit the overall layout of the dissertation.

The papers have been submitted for consideration to different academic journals:

- Paper one, “The historicity of political institutions and practices – democratic consolidation and political continuity in Mali”, has been submitted to the *Review of African Political Economy*
- Paper two, “The politics of decentralisation in Mali: the democratic potential of decentralisation”, has been published in *Forum for Development Studies* no. 1-2007, p. 91-119. The title of the paper has been changed to: “The politics of decentralisation in Mali: the prospects for local democracy”
- Paper three, “Decentralisation and territorial reorganisation in Mali: power and the institutionalisation of local politics” has been accepted for publication in *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift*

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List of acronyms

ADEMA	Alliance pour la démocratie au Mali
ANICT	Agence Nationale d’Investissement des Collectivités Locales
CCC	Centre de Conseil Communal
CMLN	Comité Militaire de Libération National
CNID	Congrès national d’initiative démocratique
CT	Collectivité Territoriale
CTSP	Comité de Transition pour le Salut du Peuple
MATCL	Ministère de l’Administration Territoriale et des Collectivités Locales
MDRI	Mission de Décentralisation et Réformes Institutionnelles
MFUA	Mouvements et Fronts Unifiés de l’Azawad
NRM	Natural Resource Management
PARENA	Parti pour le renouveau national
PNACT	Programme National d’Appui aux Collectivités Territoriales
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
PSP	Parti Soudanais Progressiste
RPM	Rassemblement pour le Mali
SAP	Structural Adjustment Program
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SLCN	Service local de conservation de la nature
UDPM	Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien
UNCDF	The United Nations Capital Development Fund
US-RDA	Union Soudanais – Rassemblement Démocratique Africain

Introduction

Decentralisation became increasingly popular in many developing countries during the 1990s. According to Work (2002), it has been estimated that 80 % of developing countries are involved in some kind of decentralisation.¹ The rise in decentralisation initiatives coincides in time with the democratic wave of the 1990s and the increased interest in local democratic governance within the international development community. The UNCDF's Local Development Programmes for instance states the potential of democratic governance like this:

There is a growing consensus that democratic governance creates the conditions for sustainable development and poverty reduction. Local governments can play a major role in this effort by ensuring more effective and accountable local infrastructure and service delivery for the poor and by improving the dialogue between the state, citizens and their communities, and the private sector²

According to Samoff (1990), decentralisation represented a new turn in development thinking in the 1990s. Centralisation of political power had since the 1960s focused on the efficient use of limited resources as well as fears that decentralisation would lead to ethnic, religious and regional cleavages. The belief in decentralisation as a mechanism to promote democratisation and to foster development broke with earlier decades' focus on state-led development. Even though local government reforms have been undertaken in Africa since early colonialism, it was not until the 1990s that the association between decentralisation and democratisation became explicit. Since colonialism, the relative shift between decentralisation and centralisation may be divided into four phases (Olowu 2001). A policy shift caused by increased focus on decolonisation during the first phase

¹ Ninety-six out of 126 countries included in the World Development Report in 1999 had at least one elected sub-national level of government (Work 2002). The numbers also include Eastern and Central Europe.

² http://www.uncdf.org/english/local_development/LDBrochure_English.pdf. Downloaded 5 December 2006.

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(1945 – early 1960s) led to the establishment of local government systems with elected councils, local tax systems and the involvement of local government in infrastructure services. During the early post-colonial second phase (early 1960s – late 1970s), local autonomy was reduced in favour of increased centralisation due to new development strategies based on socialist ideas. Attempts to consolidate the nation state within the one-party state also made local governments into instruments of control. During the third phase (late 1970s – late 1980s), caused by the economic crises and the adoption of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), decentralisation came to be seen as a means to reduce state expenditure. These reforms did however not pay much attention to the nature of the decentralised system and local governments often remained under central national control. It was not until the start of the democratic era in Africa in phase four (1990s – present) that decentralisation was associated with democratisation.

The dissertation is first and foremost concerned with the association between decentralisation and democratisation in Olowu's (2001) phase four. It is written as a collection of three papers that each discusses the Malian experience in decentralisation and democratisation from a particular perspective. The papers are presented in the order they have been written. Since the paper format only offers limited space for substantial discussions of theoretical and methodological considerations, the function of this introduction is to locate them within the overall agenda of the dissertation. Therefore, in the next chapter, I discuss the research questions upon which the papers are based and how they relate to the overall purpose of the dissertation and to each other with regard to analytical focus. In the following chapter, I elaborate on the research design and methodological approach that has guided the study as well as methodological challenges related to conducting fieldwork in Mali. This is followed by a presentation of the overall theoretical framework upon which the dissertation is based. In the last chapter, I outline the main case-based conclusions and the theoretical implications of the dissertation. In short, the introduction seeks to discuss three main themes; *The analytical focus* of the dissertation (the remainder of this chapter and chapter 2); *The analytical approach* upon which the dissertation is based (chapter 3 and 4); and *The analytical findings* learned from the Malian case (chapter 5).

State crisis, democratisation and decentralisation

The current decentralisation wave is often associated with the economic crises many African states encountered from the late 1980s. In a recent review of the factors that contributed to a renewed interest in decentralisation in Africa, Olowu (2001) points to the increased demands from both non-state domestic actors and from external donors for institutional and political reforms that surfaced after the economic and political crises of the state in the 1980s. Thus, the recent interest in decentralisation is in many ways linked to the increased critique raised against the African state since the beginning of the 1980s by development agencies, NGOs, international financial institutions, and from researchers (Degnbol 1999).

In more general terms, Harriss, Stokke and Törnquist (2004) points to how glocalisation, i.e. simultaneous processes of globalisation and localisation, has reconfigured politics and turned the local into a prime site of development. This has reduced state power in favour of the market and supranational organisations, but also increased localisation of state power. It has among other things brought about institutional reforms based on good governance principles (such as decentralisation) articulated through development discourses on participation and civil society that aim to strengthen democratisation locally. But even though increased focus on decentralisation and democratisation enters what Gaudusson and Médard (2001) calls a global ideological movement, they are also compatible with local dynamics and demands. Rather than being in opposition to each other, the global and the local interact and the global is present in the local. It is in this regard they state that “decentralisation...correspond at the same time to both local demands... and to global ideological representations” (Gaudusson and Médard 2001, p. 5, my translation). Furthermore, they argue that the global is transformed by the local and that the state has the capacity to instrumentalise both global and local pressure to its own benefit. It is this line of reasoning that allow de Sardan to claim that participatory development is neither a “miracle solution nor a neo-liberal complot” (2001, p. 146). The focus on civil society and local democracy is not solely the result of the ideology of the World Bank, but also caused by the crisis of the African state. Thus, democratic

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decentralisation has at the same time become both a key element in the good governance agenda of donors (Olowu 2001) and a possible strategy for African regimes to solve their political and economic crises (Mback 2001).

According to some authors, the reconfiguration of politics has presented particular challenges for the post-colonial state in Africa. Gaudusson and Médard (2001) for instance, argue that while it has brought about a crisis in the welfare state in Western countries, it has led to a double crises in an African context. The first crisis is that of the neo-patrimonial state.³ Based on redistribution as a mode of governance, the neo-patrimonial state constituted an economically efficient mechanism to uphold political control. As a result of the economic crises in the 1980s, the fundament of the neo-patrimonial state was undermined because there were not enough resources to redistribute. The second crisis is caused by the conditionalities for political reforms, and in particular the good governance agenda, emanating from institutions like the World Bank. These reforms seek to dismantle the neo-patrimonial state (depatrimonialisation) and to reinforce the state's capacity to act through the implementation of principles based on good governance, rule of law and democracy. Increased focus on NGOs, privatisation, decentralisation and reforms of public management are all supposed to make the state more efficient.

Democratic good governance was at the core of the new orthodoxy that dominated Western aid policy in the early 1990s (Leftwich 1993). This represented a new turn in development thinking because democracy came to be seen as a precondition for development and not, as modernisation theorists argued, an outcome of it. The concept of good governance is closely connected to the World Bank and refers to the

minimum institutional, legal and political conditions of liberal democracy [that] from a narrow administrative point of view... means an efficient, open, accountable and audited public service which has the bureaucratic competence to

³ In a neo-patrimonial state, a formal separation between the private and the public spheres exists, but it is to a low degree internalised and respected (Médard 1997). Access to the state is the most important factor for accumulation of economic resources and political power. As a result, political competition is not solely about political power, but also for the access to wealth. The concept will be discussed more in more detail in the theoretical framework.

help design and implement appropriate policies and manage whatever public sector there is (Leftwich 1993, p. 165).

Even though decentralisation has been popular in Africa since the 1990s, a large body of literature that is more critical to its potential benefits is emerging. The good governance concept has been criticised for employing a narrow technocratic definition of governance that presupposes that there are institutions present to implement and sustain it (Leftwich 1993). As such, good governance is based on underlying assumptions about the nature of the state that does not take questions of power into the account. It is in this line of reasoning that Pierre and Peters' (2000) make the call to go beyond a sterile view of political institutions and their relation to the surrounding society. They argue that the concept of governance should reorient the attention from the formal politico-administrative system at the national level towards informal political processes within the state and in state-society relations at different levels. This position is in line with Harbeson's (2001) general observation that contemporary democratisation theory focuses almost exclusively on horizontal relations at national level at the expense of local political processes. Furthermore, Mohan and Stokke's (2000) warning against the "dangers of localism" points to a tendency to romanticise the local and downplay local social inequalities and power relations within development theory and practice. Rather than isolating the local from broader economic and political structures, focus should be directed to the politics of the local and how the local is produced and understood. As mentioned in the 3rd paper, there are, according to Harriss et al. (2004), few critical studies that focus on the outcome of decentralisation, and when they do, local politics is often downplayed. It is based on this line of argument that I in this dissertation seek to conduct an intensive qualitative case-study of decentralisation and democratisation in Mali that is sensitive to both national and context-specific local level political processes. The focus on decentralisation merges elements of development geography and political geography and is such placed within an agenda of studies on politics and development in human geography.

Democratisation and decentralisation in Mali

The Malian experience in decentralisation and democratisation represents an interesting case in an African context. Since the democratic transition in 1991-92 and the establishment of the multi-party democratic system Mali is, as mentioned in the 2nd paper, only one of ten countries in Africa that is classified as free.⁴ In addition to the relative macro-political stability the country has experienced for the last 15 years, decentralisation came to play an important role in the democratic project of the first post-transition regime led by Alpha Oumar Konaré. Constructed as a symbol of the extension of democratisation to the local level, it ultimately resulted in the introduction of a comprehensive decentralised governance structure in 1999 that brought about important reforms of the politico-administrative structures at the local level. Before discussing the purpose of the dissertation, I will briefly describe the major lines in the political and administrative development in Mali in order to contextualise the subsequent discussion.

A brief political history of democratisation and decentralisation

My initial interest for politics in Mali was first directed towards the Tuareg rebellion that broke out in 1990 in Northern Mali. It started as an insurgence against the regime of Traoré, president of the 2nd Malian Republic⁵ from 1968 to 1991, led by Malian Tuaregs that had spent time in Libya. The peace negotiations between the interim regime and the *Mouvements et Fronts Unifiés de l'Azawad* (MFUA), the umbrella organisation of the rebel movements, resulted in the signing of the *Pacte National* on 11 April 1992 (Poulton and ag Youssouf 1998). The Pacte accorded the three northern regions⁶ of the country a

⁴ According to the Freedom House 2005 report, Mali is accorded a rating of 2 in both political rights and civil liberties. The Freedom House “measures freedom according to two broad categories: political rights and civil liberties... Each country is assigned a numerical rating... on a scale of 1 to 7. A rating of 1 indicates the highest degree of freedom and 7 the least amount of freedom” (Source: www.freedomhouse.org – downloaded 18 March 2006).

⁵ The main époques in Malian political history may be divided according to regime change: 1) The 1st Republic under the presidency of Modibo Keita lasted from independence in 1960 to his overthrow in a military coup led by Moussa Traoré in 1968; 2) The 2nd Republic under the presidency of Moussa Traoré lasted from 1968 until his overthrow in a military coup in 1991; 3) The democratic transition lasted for approximately 14 months and was governed by a military-civilian interim regime under the presidency of Amadou Toumani Touré; and 4) The 3rd Malian Republic was installed after the first democratic elections in the country on 8 June 1992.

⁶ Mali is administratively divided into 8 regions; Kayes, Sikasso, Koulikoro, Ségou, Mopti, Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. The last three are usually referred to as the three northern regions.

particular status, which meant, among other things, the establishment of the *Commissariat au Nord*. A parallel informal peace process supported by Norway that took place in the aftermath of the rebellion was the theme for a smaller undergraduate thesis presented at the University of Bergen in 1996 (Hetland 1996).

The rebellion had important impacts upon Malian politics. The combined effect of the rebellion and the pro-democratic movement that emerged in the capital Bamako weakened the regime of Traoré and led, ultimately, to his overthrow in a military coup d'état led by Amadou Toumani Touré on 26 March 1991. The election of Alpha Oumar Konaré, a prominent figure in the pro-democratic movement, as president of the 3rd Malian Republic on 8 June 1992 followed a 14 month long democratic transition that marked the beginning of a new era in the political history of the country. Furthermore, the absolute majority won by Konaré's party ADEMA in the National Assembly in the 1992 legislative elections meant that elements of the opposition had gained control of the state. Since the democratic transition, there have been three rounds of presidential and legislative elections. Alpha Oumar Konaré was re-elected in 1997, but he could not run for the 2002 elections due to Malian law limiting the number of periods of a presidential mandate to two terms. Power was handed over to the 2002 election winner Amadou Toumani Touré. Touré had previously served as interim president during the democratic transition. This was the first time that one elected president replaced another elected president in Mali.

The fall of Traoré prior to the transition made it possible to manage it without the presence of the previous power holders. In addition to the military coup-makers, the interim regime included members from the pro-democratic movement in Bamako and the Tuareg rebel movements in the Northern parts of the country. The interim regime was consequently rooted in a broad-based military-civilian anti-Traoré coalition and was institutionalised in the *Comité de Transition pour le Salut du Peuple* (CTSP). The composition of the CTSP gave both legitimacy to the transition and created the necessary political space for demands for political reforms and decentralisation to emerge. These demands were expressed on numerous arenas during the democratic transition of which

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the National Conference (29 July to 12 August 1991) and the Estates-General of the Rural World (December 1991) were the most important. As a result of the political negotiations during the transition, decentralisation came to be included as a basic principle in the new constitution⁷ elaborated at the National Conference and approved by referendum on 12 January 1992.

After the transition, decentralisation came to constitute a major component in the democratic project of the Konaré regime and has consequently played a significant role in national politics in Mali. The following passage from a speech given by Konaré underlines the importance given to decentralisation as way for the regime to advance democratisation:

I think I may say that for Mali, the last large reform at the end of this century is the decentralisation... [It] remains the greatest political justification of democratisation, [and] the 701 municipalities of Mali [constitute] as many forums and laboratories to the services of democracy and development (MDRI 1998a, p. 12, my translation).

The importance accorded to decentralisation in the democratic project of the Konaré regime emphasises its political character as a symbol of the extension of the democratisation process to the local level. The delegation of the responsibility of the elaboration and implementation of the reform to the *Mission de Décentralisation et Reformes Institutionnelles* (MDRI) was of particular importance in this regard because it assured top political control over the process. The MDRI was set up as a semi-autonomous agency with institutional independence from the traditional state apparatus. It was initially attached to the prime ministers office, but was later placed directly under the presidency. This gave the MDRI the necessary manoeuvring space to fulfil its mandate and it assured that particular interests in the traditional state apparatus could not influence the process.⁸ The MDRI was established in 1993 with the mandate to elaborate, conceptualise and implement the decentralisation reform. Initially, its initial five-member

⁷ Article 97 and 98

⁸ Of particular importance in this regard was its independence from the *Ministère d'Administration Territoriale et Collectivités Locales*, the ministry responsible for state administration on regional, cercle (district) and arrondissement levels.

team was given a one-year mandate to explore the possibilities to carry out such a reform (Diarra 1998, pers. comm.⁹). Its mandate was later prolonged and its area of responsibility was expanded to include institutional reforms in general. The MDRI also played an important role for the regime in the justification of the decentralisation reform as an extension of the democratisation process. According to Sy for instance, the first leader of the MDRI, the democratisation project in Mali:

comprise an ambitious reform program for territorial decentralisation [...] Rising from the recommendations of the National Conference... this reform seek to deepen the multi-party democracy by adapting the administration to the objective of a new development framework based on the preoccupations, resources and know-how of the local population. In order to concretise this political will, the government has instituted an ad hoc structure named Mission de Décentralisation with the overall goal of assisting the implementation of the decentralisation reform by defining the legal framework and determining the conditions of its feasibility (MDRI 1997a, p. 4, my translation).

Ultimately, the reform crystallised into concrete politico-administrative change after the 1999 municipal elections with the establishment of 682 new rural municipalities. For many, it held the promise of a more inclusive and democratic governance system than under the post-colonial one-party regimes.

The decentralisation reform replaced in many ways the *Pacte National* for the northern parts of the country. This directed my field of interest from the Tuareg rebellion to the decentralisation reform in general and became the subject for my M. phil-thesis (Hetland 2000). During the initial phase of the PhD dissertation, the interest turned towards state reform in general and in particular the relation between democratisation and decentralisation. This was inspired by the increased interest in the link between democratisation and decentralisation in Africa, but also the centrality accorded to decentralisation in the democratic project of the Konaré regime. The relative stability of the macro-political democratic regime that was introduced in 1992 and the introduction of the extensive decentralisation reform in 1999 added further to the image of Mali as a successful case in an African context and was an important reason why I wanted to

⁹ Noël Diarra, Deputy manager of the MDRI, interview on 7 September 1998.

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examine this theme more thoroughly. Another reason for the interest in state reform was related to the various power-abuse practices on the part of the state that had characterised the Traoré regime. This ranged from the personal wealth of the president and his family, the Drought Palaces financed through emergency relief funds in Bamako to the corruption within state agencies like the Forest Services at the local level. An important fundamental question that caught my attention concerned the possibilities to overcome these practices through reforms based on decentralisation and democratisation. However, before I outline the purpose of the dissertation and the particular research questions that are asked, it is necessary to outline the institutional characteristics of the new decentralised local government system in Mali.

Local government and decentralisation: the reform

The introduction of the decentralised government system after the 1999 local elections led to an extensive spatial and scalar reconfiguration of the institutional and political landscape in Mali. Of particular importance in this regard was the preparatory work made by the MDRI; the large-scale participatory territorial reorganisation of the political-administrative subdivision of the country that led to the establishment of a new municipal structure; and the elaboration of decentralisation laws that define the institutional design of the local government system.

The large-scale participatory territorial reorganisation carried out in the mid-1990s represented an important innovation when it comes to local government reforms in Mali. Based on the idea that the existing administrative structure was incongruent with local political and social realities, the main objective was to break up the political-administrative boundaries of the former lowest administrative level of the *arrondissement*. The process is best understood as a bottom-up reform controlled from above that started with the creation of the municipality. The territorial reorganisation of the *cercle* and region was carried out in a second phase and was conditioned by the creation of the new municipal structure. To a certain degree, the new municipalities could choose themselves which *cercle* and region they wanted to be part of (if they were located in a border zone). In order to create the new municipalities, village and nomadic

community leaders country-wide were mobilised by the MDRI-initiated support structures to participate in negotiations over the composition of the new municipalities, that is, which villages and fractions that should constitute a new municipality. This meant that it was not territory in itself, but social membership in a village or a fraction that was the point of departure for the process. The new political-administrative system replaced the former three-tier administrative system on regional, cercle and arrondissement level that had been introduced during the 1st Malian Republic (1960-68) under the presidency of Modibo Keita. The territorial reorganisation led to the abolishment of the arrondissement and the construction of the municipality as a local politico-administrative unit that should be based on existing community solidarity. The overall goal was to create municipalities that were homogenous, coherent and functional territorial units of a suitable size for local democracy and the management of local affairs that had legitimacy among those who were to inhabit them (MDRI 1994). It was seen, by the MDRI, as a necessary precondition for the devolution of authority to the decentralised institutions.

Since local government reforms have often coincided with regime change in Mali, it is not possible to understand these reforms without reference to the wider political context in which they were undertaken. The reforms undertaken by Keita led to the abolishment of the colonial cantons as administrative units because the regime sought to marginalise the political opposition that had been supported by the canton chiefs prior to independence and because the regime sought to extend the reach of the state locally. As discussed in the 2nd paper, the post-colonial state sought in a much larger degree than the French colonisers to micro-manage local political process through both the one-party state and the state administration. It is in this context that the three-tier administrative structure in place until the 1999 reform was implemented by the Keita regime. The administrative units on regional, cercle and arrondissement levels were all headed by state appointed bureaucrats that were upwardly accountable to the central state. During the 2nd Republic (1968-1991), under the presidency of Moussa Traoré, there was a large degree of continuity in the basic administrative structures except for the decentralisation reform undertaken in 1977. This reform established partly elected local councils and development committees with civil servants as members (République du Mali 1992). The

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devolution aspect of the reform was however undermined because the local councils, which were supposed to make decisions, were dominated by the development committees and by the state administration representative in the circumscription (who was appointed by central state authority). As a result, this reform did not bring about any new power-sharing arrangements in the form of devolution or increased participation. The introduction of the 1999 decentralisation reform, which corresponds to Olowu's fourth wave, represents a qualitative change compared to these earlier systems. The establishment of elected and partly autonomous decentralised institutions at the local level and the beginning of devolution of authority have generated new relation between the central state and local government institutions based on power-sharing and, at least in theory, the creation of downwardly accountable local decision-making bodies. As such, it has opened up for increased participation locally.

The institutional set-up of the new decentralisation arrangement in Mali is defined in two main decentralisation laws. The first of these is law 93-008 "déterminant les conditions de la libre administration des collectivités territoriales" approved on 11 February 1993. It describes the fundamental principles of the local government system and is the guiding principles for national decentralisation policy (MDRI 1998a). The decentralised units are defined, in French, as "collectivité territoriale" (CT) on four different levels; the region, the *cercle*¹⁰ (district), the municipality (urban and rural) and the *District de Bamako*. The concept of CT refers to a political-administrative entity that is given a juridical personality (as a public corporation) that, under the conditions envisaged by the law, enjoys certain rights and obligations. Among these is the principle of free administration (called *libre administration* in French) by elected assemblies or councils that select its own executive organ. There are no hierarchical relations between the different levels of CT and each of them has their own budget and staff. The law also states another important principle that is supposed to assure the independence and autonomy of the CTs; when the state devolves functions to the CTs, it has to transfer the concomitant

¹⁰ I have throughout the dissertation referred to this administrative and political level with the French denomination *cercle* (rather than the English term district) for two reasons; because it is a widely used term in Mali; and to avoid confusion with the denomination of the *District de Bamako* (which has a particular juridical status within the local government system).

amount of resources and means to fulfil these functions. This was by the MDRI considered as essential to assure that the CTs would be capable to fulfil the functions they are transferred from the state.

The second decentralisation law, no. 95-034 “portant code des collectivités territoriales en République du Mali”, delineates more precisely the jurisdiction of the CTs. Of particular importance in this regard is the possibility of the CT to elaborate its own Economic, Social and Cultural Development Program. The municipal council (which consist of 11 to 45 members depending on the size of the municipality) is furthermore to be elected in universal suffrage. The representatives at the cercle council are selected among the municipal councils within the cercle, while the regional assembly representatives are chosen from the cercle councils. The law also specify the devolution of responsibility to assure specific functions and decision-making power. The MDRI publication “La stratégie des transferts de compétence”, underlines the importance of this principle: “in order to go from a formal decentralisation to a real decentralisation, it is necessary to confer to the local community the concrete prerogatives in matters that concerns local affairs” (MDRI 1997b, p. 4). An important characteristic of the new decentralised governance system in terms of devolution of functions is that the municipality is supposed to fulfil a more important role than the CTs at cercle and regional level. Two types of functions are devolved to the municipalities. The first concerns functions that, because of their nature, were automatically transferred after the local elections in 1999. These included administrative tasks related to marital status, censuses, archives and documentation and public hygiene. The second concerns more complex and important functions that demands extensive preparation on the part of the authorities and that are subject to the principle of progressive transfer. In the above-mentioned MDRI publication, a 32-page list of possible functions to transfer to the municipalities from 6 line ministries was identified.¹¹ Other competencies to be

¹¹ The following ministries were included: Ministry of Health, Solidarity and Old People; Ministry of Public Work and Transport; Ministry of Urbanism and Habitat; Ministry of Rural Development and Environment; Ministry of Mines, Energy and Hydraulics; and the Ministry of Primary Education.

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transferred are extensive and include general functions¹² and sector specific functions within the areas of education¹³, health¹⁴, and transport and public work¹⁵ (MDRI 1998b). This step-by-step approach to devolution is chosen, according to Malian authorities, to assure that decentralised institutions have the necessary capacity to fulfil these functions before the functions are transferred. Following the implementation of the reform in 1999, the devolution of authority and functions to the municipal institutions began. The municipalities took immediately over several functions from the state administration that previously had been the highest administrative and political authority locally. Currently, the transfer of functions from line ministries to the decentralised institutions is a process that still is underway. The limited progress in devolving functions to the CTs, as discussed in the papers, represents one of the most important institutional challenges for the whole decentralised governance system at this moment.

The establishment of the decentralised governance system has been accompanied by the reforms of the state administrative system (MDRI 1998b). At each of the three decentralised levels there will be a state appointee that represent the national interest and that monitor the application of laws, rules, and decisions of the central government. The tutelary role implies that the state is supposed to control the legality of the activities and deliberations taken by the decentralised units (that is, the Municipal council, the Cercle council or the Regional Assembly). In certain cases the control is exercised before the decisions are executed, particularly if the state is implicated (the municipal budget, the establishment of municipal enterprises, town or country planning, fixation of municipal taxes and loans).¹⁶ The system is organised in such a way that the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Local Collectives (MATCL) assures the tutelage on the Regional

¹² Such as the elaboration of the economic, social and cultural development plan, the municipal budget, municipal services, natural resource management, administrative police, socio-economic infrastructure and environment.

¹³ Pre-scholar education, alphabetisation and primary education.

¹⁴ Dispensaries, maternity centres, community health centres and cleansing.

¹⁵ Road infrastructure, municipal communication and public transport, urban and rural hydraulic work as well as sport, art and culture.

¹⁶ In exceptional cases, the tutelage might also be directed towards the deliberating organs themselves. If the Mayor and the municipal council no longer are capable of assuming their responsibilities, measures of suspension, dismissal or dissolution might be necessary. Dissolution of the municipal council is only possible when it is reduced to 2/3 of its origin members. In this case the council is replaced by a special delegation of seven members appointed in Conseil de Ministre.

Assembly, the High Commissionaire (former governor) assure the same functions vis-à-vis the cercle council, while the préfet (former *commandant de cercle*) at the cercle level assure tutelage vis-à-vis the municipal council. The role of the sous-préfet (former *chef d'arrondissement*) is to report irregularities that might occur in the municipality to the préfet. The state representative is also responsible for providing the CTs with support and advice, which means that the state is obliged to put its technical services at the disposition of the CT.

The introduction of the decentralisation reform and the simultaneous reforms of various state agencies has moved the centre of power locally away from state administration towards the elected municipal council. As such it has led to a scalar and spatial reconfiguration of the state in Mali and it has opened up the local political space for participation and political competition. The decentralisation reform introduced in 1999 will be at the centre of analysis in the remainder of the dissertation.

Purpose and research questions

The important role accorded to decentralisation in the democratic project of the Konaré regime constituted the initial motivation for this dissertation. Not only did the commitment to decentralisation represent a rupture with the centralising tendencies of the previous one-party regimes in Mali, but it also reflects current international discourses on democracy and decentralisation. However, as referred to in the 2nd paper, there are often large discrepancies between reform rhetoric and the administrative and political benefits of such reforms (Boone 2003). It is therefore necessary to focus on what she calls “the politics of decentralisation”, that is to say, the events and processes that influence the outcome of the reform rather than reform rhetoric per se. Based on this initial observation, the overall purpose of the dissertation has been formulated as follows;

The main purpose of the dissertation is to examine the politics of the decentralisation reform in Mali and the outcome of decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance

In order to accomplish this purpose, the analysis has been organised in three main papers that discuss decentralisation in Mali from a particular perspective. Each of the papers is placed thematically within the overall purpose of the dissertation, but they are all to be considered as independent works based on their proper research questions. In the following discussion, I will present the rationale upon which the three papers are based, and how they relate to the overall purpose of the dissertation and to each other with regard to analytical focus. The research questions have developed as the theoretical and empirical knowledge of the subject has become more extensive and are related to both the nature of the Malian case and to recent theoretical debates on decentralisation and democratisation in an African context.

Purpose and research questions

The 1st paper is called “The historicity of political institutions and practices – democratic consolidation and political continuity in Mali”. It is concerned with the question of democratic consolidation, a theme that became a central issue regarding the survival of the African regimes that went through democratic transitions in the early 1990s. After several decades of one-party rule in many African countries, the democratic wave raised expectations in terms of development and rising living standards for the many poor on the continent. This was also the case in Mali. After some 30 years of one-party rule, Mali was still one of the poorest countries in the world. The democratic transition brought a lot of enthusiasm to the country due to the prospects for democratic reforms. The implementation of the decentralised governance system in 1999 added to the rising expectations of bringing decision-making power closer to the people. Furthermore, the Malian democratic experience has been applauded internationally and the democratic regime seems to be relatively institutionally and politically stable. But despite the relative stability, the regime faces a wide range of challenges regarding democratic consolidation. Based on these initial observations, the research question that guides the first paper is:

What are the prospects for democratic consolidation in Mali after the democratic transition in the early 1990s?

In this paper I seek to go beyond a simple institutional and cultural approach to consolidation. Although studies of macro-political structures (the institutional perspective) or on whether or not democracy has any meaning to people (the cultural approach) are important, I want in this paper to bring the historicity of and the mutual interdependence between political institutions and political practices into the discussion of democratic consolidation. The main argument in the paper is that a particular focus on the historicity of institutions and practices with particular emphasis on institution-building strategies, state-society relations and informal political processes will allow for a more context-specific analysis of democratic consolidation.

The paper takes the democratic transition and the following democratisation process in Mali as point of departure. The fall of Traoré prior to the transition and the rise to power

of elements of the pro-democratic movement, held the promise of far-reaching democratic reforms. Furthermore, decentralisation was, in the official discourse of the new democratic regime, explicitly forwarded as an important mechanism to obtain both democratisation and development. However, local government reforms have also previously been carried through during regime change in Mali and have played an important strategic role in regime's attempts to build and maintain hegemonic control over the state. Thus, in the first paper, I discuss the role of local government reforms as part of larger national political strategies in order to put the present decentralisation reform, and in particular the prospects for democratic consolidation, in a historical-political context.

The historical and political aspects of local government reforms are of course interweaved but may be separated analytically. The historical aspect refers to already existing local government institutions and previous reforms of these structures, the relative opening and closure of the local political space that result from these reforms and existing state-society relations that have been created and transformed in this process. The political aspects refer to the close connection between regime change and local government reforms as well as transformations of and continuity in political practices that characterises the internal functioning of state institutions. The paper traces the transformation of and mutual interdependence between political institutions and political practices as a result of administrative reforms under French colonial rule, during the post-colonial era and in the post-transition phase.

While the 1st paper is concerned with the democratic consolidation and the historicity of institutions and practices, the 2nd paper directs attention to the democratic transition and the centrality of decentralisation in the democratic project of the Konaré regime. It is called "The politics of decentralisation in Mali: the democratic potential of decentralisation", and is based on the following research questions:

Purpose and research questions

Why and how did decentralisation gain such a pre-dominant place in the democratic project of the Konaré regime and what is the democratic potential of decentralisation?

This question originates from the observation that widespread demands for decentralisation were raised during the democratic transition. The paper examines first why these demands for decentralisation were appropriated and turned into a major component of the democratic project of the Konaré regime. The main argument is that the portrayal of decentralisation as an extension of democratisation to the local level constituted an important strategy for the new regime to consolidate its power. Since the anti-Traoré coalition, of which Konaré was part, had based its opposition on claims for democracy, the portrayal of decentralisation as an extension of the democratisation process served to build legitimacy for the new regime. At the same time it served as an important strategy to maintain its alliances with the other groups from the pro-democratic movement and in particular the rebel movements. The subsequent discussion of how decentralisation came to play an important role in the political project of the Konaré regime directs attention to the nature of democratic transition and in particular the political manoeuvring space created by the absence of the former power holders from the transition. In short, the argument is that the nature of the transition made it possible to set up a semi-autonomous agency that was independent of the traditional state structure, the *Mission de décentralisation et réformes institutionnelles* (MDRI). This establishment of this agency made it possible to elaborate and implement a comprehensive decentralised governance structure that led to extensive spatial and scalar reconfiguration of the state. At the same time, the reform was legitimised through an active construction of decentralisation as a symbol of and a revitalisation of an idealised pre-colonial decentralised Mali that would serve as a mechanism through which to democratise the state.

Secondly, the paper discusses the democratic potential of decentralisation in a long-term perspective based on the observation that it was an important component of the regime's democratic project. The paper discusses major challenges in the spatial and scalar

reconfiguration of the state with particular attention accorded to institutional bottlenecks (lack of devolution) and politicisation of local relations (clientelism and exclusion). In a long term perspective, I argue, these challenges may lead to a dislocation of the centre of power away from the municipal institutions towards a recentralisation in favour of the state administration or an increased informalisation of politics that may shift the centre of power towards groups outside the formal political arena.

The 3rd paper is entitled “Decentralisation and territorial reorganisation in Mali: power and the institutionalisation of local politics” and is based on the following research question:

What is the outcome of decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance?

While the 2nd paper is mostly concerned with decentralisation and its role in national politics, this paper examines the top-down introduction of municipal institutions in local political contexts. The paper discusses first how local political relations and identities influenced the outcome of the large-scale participatory territorial reorganisation carried through in the mid-1990s. Even though the reorganisation sought to establish circumscriptions suitable for local democratic governance, the argument runs, the new municipalities were the result of the reconstruction of the political space from below. Secondly, the paper proceeds to discuss the institutionalisation of the local governance structure from a local point of view with particular emphasis on natural resource management. The main argument is that the institutionalisation is the function of both local struggles over leadership and authority and political processes at national level.

In short, the division of labour between the papers is as follows. In the 1st paper focus is on continuity in political institutions and political practices with particular attention accorded to local government reforms from the colonial era, through the post-colonial one-party state and to the multi-party political era that followed the democratic transition in the early 1990s. In the 2nd paper, focus is directed to the role of decentralisation as a political strategy in the democratic project of the Konaré regime. In the 3rd paper, the

Purpose and research questions

prospect for local democracy as a result of decentralisation is analysed from a local point of view. Thus, the 1st and 2nd papers seek primarily to discuss the first part of the overall purpose of the dissertation, that is, the politics of the decentralisation reform in Mali. The 3rd paper seeks first and foremost to examine the second part of the overall purpose, that is, the outcome of decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance.

Research design and methodology

This chapter outlines the research design and the methodological approach upon which the dissertation is based. In its most basic form, it has been designed as an intensive qualitative single-case study inspired by critical realist methodology. The choice of research design is closely connected to the overall purpose of the dissertation and has made it possible to examine the politics of the decentralisation reform in Mali and the outcome of decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance. In this chapter, I will discuss the qualitative case-study design, methodological challenges related to the use of realist concepts and methodologies in doing research on decentralisation, the collection of primary data during fieldworks, the use of secondary sources of information, and particular challenges related to doing fieldwork in Mali based on theories of positionality.

Research design: qualitative case-study

Designing the dissertation as an intensive qualitative case-study has been necessary to examine the complexity of the relation between democratisation and decentralisation. As such it complies with Ragin's definition of qualitative research:

Almost all qualitative research seeks to construct representations based on in-depth, detailed knowledge of cases, often to correct misrepresentations or to offer new representations of the research subject. Thus, qualitative researchers share an interest in procedures that clarify key aspects of research subjects – procedures that make it possible to see aspects of cases that might otherwise be missed (Ragin 1994, p. 92).

Combined with a case-study approach, the qualitative research design allows for a detailed examination of the complex ways in which decentralisation and democratisation are knit together. Case-studies are generally the preferred strategy when “how” and “why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin 1994). As a consequence, the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not always distinguishable. When it comes to decentralisation in Mali, several aspects of the reform have changed during the course of

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the study. This is for instance the case with regard to the institutionalisation of the reform in local political contexts and political processes within ministries that affect the transfer of functions to the municipalities. Because there is a range of factors that influence the reform in a long-term perspective, and that it is not always the same factors that dominate, it is difficult to differentiate between the reform in itself and contextual influence. This has, along the development of a more profound understanding of the case as the project has moved forward, allowed reinterpretations of both the reform itself as well as the relative importance of changes in contextual factors. Therefore, the study has been designed in order to make it possible to examine changes that influence the reform over time. In addition, a case-study also has to cope with situations when there will be more new leads to follow than there will be available data, and, as result, findings have to rely on multiple sources that need to converge in what Yin (1994) calls a triangulation fashion. This is for instance the reason why fieldwork has been conducted both at national, regional and local level over a long period of time.

Theory has also played a part in the development of the research design. In particular two roles identified by Yin (1994) as relevant within a case-study approach have been important. Firstly, theories have contributed to the design of the research strategy that took place prior to fieldwork. The intensive case-study approach to studying decentralisation in an African context is inspired by Bilgin and Morton's (2002) focus on the historical and contemporary factors that influence state formation, and Bayart's (1991) call to take into account the political trajectory of the state over a *long durée*. This has in turn directed attention to the historicity of the post-colonial state, the state's institution-building strategies and transformation of state-society relations over time. The lack of focus on local politics in studies of decentralisation, identified by Harriss et al. (2004), has inspired the analysis of the outcome of decentralisation in different localities in Mali (these localities are presented in the next section). Focus on local level politics is furthermore legitimised by the observation that decentralisation in itself involves the introduction of local government institutions. Thus, the selection of multiple cases within the overarching single case has made it possible to compare the outcome of decentralisation in different local contexts.

Secondly, theory has been used to elaborate analytical generalisations based on the case. It is important to underline that these generalisations should not be confused with statistical generalisations that seek to draw conclusions from empirical data collected from a population. Rather, theory serves as a point of reference for the analysis of the findings that emerge from

the case-study. As such, the single-case study is complementary to what Ragin (1994) calls analytical induction. Analytical induction is a research strategy that points to information that challenges the image a researcher is constructing of a case and as such is concerned with the refinement and elaboration of the research subject. Conceptual refinement that provides deeper understanding of the subject will make it possible to develop an in-depth understanding of the case. Another important methodological question to consider in this regard is what can be said on the basis of a single case. At one level, the dissertation seeks to oppose a too simplified vision of the relation between democratisation and decentralisation by entering a detailed study of one case. At a more theoretical level, the findings from this case may inform wider debates within political geography concerning themes such as the transformation of the post-colonial African state, state-society relations, state formation, and democratisation. In order to contextualise these questions more thoroughly I will, in the next section, present the methodological considerations that have influenced this case-study.

Critical realism – methodological considerations

At the beginning of this project I became inspired by elements of critical realist methodology. This was partly the result of a PhD course I attended at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Oslo called the “Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences”. The course led to the presentation of a paper called “Neo-Kantianism, Weber’s ideal type and critical realism - some methodological implications for studying decentralisation” (Hetland 2002). The paper constitutes the point of departure for the presentation of critical realism in this chapter, but has been modified during the course of the study.

My interest in critical realism has also been influenced by the attention it has received within human geography. Since the early 1980s, realism came to serve as a philosophical guide to research in human geography (Cloke, Philo and Sadler 1991). The reason for this popularity has been ascribed to different factors; it offered a philosophy of science for an anti-positivist post-quantitative geography; it was possible to combine with calls for research on local specificities; and it was a way to connect geography closer to general social theory (Mäki and Oinas 2004). In particular the point about research on local specificities has had an important influence on this project and is closely connected to the case-study argument made above. Critical realism has in addition offered a conceptual framework that has facilitated reflection upon the subject of the dissertation and it has offered methodological tools with regard to how

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I have approached my field of study. However, before I elaborate in more detail how it has influenced this dissertation, I will outline some of the main characteristics of critical realism as a philosophy of science.

In short, critical realism can be described as a “philosophy of science based on the use of abstraction to identify the (necessary) *causal powers and liabilities* of specific *structures*, which are realised under specific (contingent) conditions” (Gregory 1986 in Cloke et al. 1991). According to Bhaskar, realism should be a mix of a non-atomistic ontology (allowing for the existence of structures, processes and mechanisms that can be revealed at different levels of reality), and a non-empiricist epistemology (it challenges the empiricist conception of causality). Following Bhaskar (1975), it may be useful to position critical realism as part of three main positions identified within the history of the philosophy of sciences. In *classical empiricism*, the objects of knowledge are, in the last instance, no more than singular events. The other position attained its classical formulation in Kant’s *transcendental idealism*. Within this position, the objects of scientific knowledge are, for instance, models and patterns of the natural order. These objects are artificial constructions, and even though they may be independent of particular human beings, they are not independent of human activity generally. The third position, which is that of Bhaskar, may be labelled *transcendental realism*. The objects of knowledge are considered to be the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena, as well as knowledge produced within scientific communities. These objects are neither phenomena (empiricism) nor human constructs placed on the phenomena (idealism), but real structures that endures over time and operates without our knowledge of them, independent of our experiences as well as the conditions that gives us access to them. Thus, in opposition to empiricism, the objects of knowledge are seen as structures and not events, and in contrast to idealism, they are intransitive.¹⁷

One of the basic ideas of critical realism is that the world exists largely independent of thought, and our knowledge of it is always theory-laden (Sayer 1992). The idealist asks the question: “What are the conditions of possibility of experience?”, and the answer is that people use mental constructs to organise complex evidence, to give it shape and to identify connections and patterns (Smith 1998). Realists also accept that we organise our experience

¹⁷ Intransitive objects of knowledge are independent of human activity (for instance, the weight of a particular metal) (Bhaskar 1975). Transitive objects of knowledge are the raw material of science – the artificial objects that the science in question has formed to be objects of analysis. This includes recognized facts and theories, paradigms and models, research methods and techniques available to a scientific community.

imaginatively, but asks another transcendental question: “What are the conditions of possibility of science (or rather the scientific method)”. Therefore, the transcendental realism of Bhaskar is different from Kant’s transcendental idealism in two ways (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen and Karlsson 1997, p. 153); 1. Bhaskar disagrees with idealism, and argues that our knowledge about the reality is possible only because the reality is constituted in a certain way. He suggests that we should seek the transcendental preconditions not in the mind (as idealists do) but in reality as it exists independent of our search for knowledge (the intransitive domain); and 2. Bhaskar does not, as Kant, seek to describe universal preconditions for our knowledge about reality. The transcendental knowledge is, as all knowledge, fallible. This is because the structures we try to understand through a transcendental argumentation are themselves in transformation. It is useful to contrast these perspectives by introducing their view of causality.

Causality

Within empiricism, causal laws are identified as empirical regularities¹⁸ between two or more variables that take place at the same time (Smith 1998). Hence, the perceptions we have of events and the events themselves are not distinguished within empiricism. Consequently, a scientific explanation can be based upon two or more things happening in a regular way. Empiricists also assume that facts and values are separate, observation is separate from theory, and those explanations are symmetrical with predictions. This is often referred to as *regularity determinism*. Idealists have a different conception of causality. An empirical regularity is a useful starting point and a necessary part of any causal explanation, but is not itself sufficient for establishing a causal law (Smith 1998). This acknowledges the complexity of causal factors in any empirical situation but raises problems in terms of making accurate predictions. This view of causality is labelled *intelligibility determinism*. The neo-Kantian branch of idealism has a different view of the relationship between theory and observation than empiricism. For them, theoretical statements identify relationships between variables and organise complex empirical evidence in ideal types as devices for comparison.

The realist view of causality is labelled *ubiquity determinism* (Smith 1998). It is argued that an empirical regularity is neither sufficient nor necessary for establishing a causal law. The realist view of causality is closely linked to their ontology. For a realist, reality consists of three levels (empirical, actual and real or deep), which are to be distinguished if we are to

¹⁸ A constant conjunction of events between two variables; that is: if x then y .

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understand how things work. The empirical level of perceptions, impressions and sensations is distinguished from the actual level of events and states of affairs, which are the products of the imaginative practices of people making sense of the world. Realists accept that the empirical and actual levels are out of phase with each other, but they also pose the existence of a third deeper level upon which the other two levels are based, that is, the empirical and the actual are not possible without the underlying realm of structures, mechanisms and powers/liabilities. *Structures*, which exist independently of our knowledge of them, are defined as relations between the parts of an object and give the objects their characteristic properties. *Mechanisms* portray the way in which the structure of an object can, within definite conditions, generate an observable event. The *powers/liabilities* of the structure of an object will ensure that the object has the capacity to do certain things in certain conditions and that it is susceptible to effects from the same or different conditions; these conditions are themselves made up of other structures and their mechanisms.

Therefore, the core of realist epistemology is the search for causal mechanisms rather than empirical regularities. This conception of causality differs from that of positivism (Cloke et al. 1991). In realism, causality (the real) does not necessarily follow pattern (the actual), nor does it necessarily follow experience (the empirical). The positivist conception of causality on the other hand collapses the real, the actual and the empirical into one level. In consequence, an empirical regularity is neither sufficient nor necessary for establishing a causal law for realists (Smith 1998). The structures at work in a given situation, which can generate mechanisms in certain conditions, are not always producing events for us to experience. Sayer (1992) distinguishes subsequently between necessary causal relations and contingent conditions. The necessary causal powers are mutually constituted internal relations of an object. Contingent conditions refer to the time- and place-specific context within which the necessary relations operate. These conditions determine whether and how the necessary causal relations are activated. Hence, the causal powers are activated under specific contingent conditions and manifested in concrete events.

The use of critical realism in human geography has however recently been debated (in a series of four articles in *Environment and Planning A*, volume 36, 2004). In particular the article written by Mäki and Oinas (2004) provide the most general criticism. Their critic refers first and foremost to the gap between realism as it has been conceptualised in human geography (or GeoRealism as they call it) and how philosophers of science have used it (which they label

CoreRealism). In short, they state, GeoRealism has moved away from CoreRealism in two respects. First, GeoRealism has ignored many conceptual and argumentative resources of CoreRealism resulting in what they call resource narrowness.¹⁹ Secondly, GeoRealism has added three components that have resulted in what they call domain narrowness, that is, the use of a smaller domain of theories and methodologies than CoreRealism.²⁰ Their argument is however not that GeoRealism is incompatible with CoreRealism, but that it “represents specific and narrow conceptualisations that appear to rule out other views that are equally consistent with realism” (Mäki and Oinas 2004). In his answer to the criticism, Sayer (2004) points out that the thin version (i.e. CoreRealism) that Mäki and Oinas (2004) favours does not much to help social scientists. Although he agrees that the thin version of realism is necessary, thicker versions (GeoRealism) are more helpful:

Minimalist realism therefore fails to offer the critical insight which thicker versions provide – about causation, closed and open systems, stratification and emergence, interpretative understanding, critique, and so on (Sayer 2004, p. 1781).

With this criticism in mind, I will in the next section develop in more detail some elements of critical realism based on Sayer (1992) that are relevant for the methodology and research strategies that have influenced this study.

Critical realism and decentralisation: research questions and strategies

Critical realism has inspired the dissertation when it comes to the type of questions that have been asked as well as research strategies. One central question that has guided the study is whether or not it is possible to identify any general underlying structures and mechanisms that influence the outcome of decentralisation in terms of democratisation in the Malian case. This question may refer to whether it is possible to identify variations or similarities in the underlying structures between localities that may affect spatial variations with regard to the outcome of decentralisation in different local contexts. In more concrete terms this may refer

¹⁹ GeoRealism has ignored three key questions in CoreRealism which include: 1) A too strong focus on the nature of existents rather than the nature of existence (their particular view on necessary and contingent conditions); 2) It has dropped the nonepistemic view of truth (the view that truth is not dependent on how we recognise it) by either ignoring questions or truth or, as Sayer does, introducing the concept of practical adequacy; and 3) It has ignored aspects of epistemological realism (underdetermination is an example Mäki and Oinas (2004) give).

²⁰ It has adopted a particular understanding of causation (the conceptualisation of necessary and contingent conditions for instance) which is only one form of causal realism); 2) It adheres often to a particular view of society (structuration theory); and 3) The employment of a particular realist methodology of research (their critic of critical realist methodology is first and foremost directed towards the identification of necessary relations (through abstract research) and contingent relations (through concrete research)).

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to, as discussed in the 3rd paper, questions of identity based on autochthony or the influence of existing natural resource management systems. This type of questions may not be possible to answer fully, but it has nevertheless served as a guide for the examination of the purpose of the thesis and the research questions that are posed in the papers. Even though it is not likely that it is possible to find one overall explanatory factor, the attempt to identify structures through abstraction has served as a guide to identify tendencies regarding the relation between decentralisation and democratisation.

In research inspired by critical realism, events are, according to Sayer (1992), causally explained by retroducting and confirming the existence of mechanisms. The existence of mechanisms is in turn explained with reference to the structure and constitution of the objects that possess them. Social science is often concerned with explaining complex social phenomena as wars, or, as in my case, the relation between decentralisation and democratisation. The different kinds of research strategies identified within critical realism constitute guidelines for dealing with complex phenomena and have been employed at different stages throughout the study. They are composed of a different mix of theoretical and empirical research on one side and abstract and concrete research on the other. *Abstract theoretical research* is concerned “with the constitution and possible ways of acting of social objects” (Sayer 1992, p. 236). It is concerned with the structures and mechanisms of objects, while events are only considered as possible outcomes. It implies the isolation in thought of a one-sided or partial aspect of an object and refers to a particular relationship between causal powers and an object of study. *Concrete practical research* deals with actual events and objects, treating them as phenomena that have been brought about by specific mechanisms and structures (each of which will have been identified and examined through abstract research). As such, concrete research implies the empirical study of contingent relations and is required in order to discover the actual time- and place-specific conditions under which the causal mechanisms of interest are triggered. This must be contrasted with *empirical generalisation*, which merely seeks regularities at the level of events. *Synthesis* implies research that attempts to explain major parts of whole systems by combining abstract and concrete research findings with analytical generalisations. Figure 1 provides a summary of the relationship between the different types of research that may be conducted within a realist approach identified by Sayer (1992).

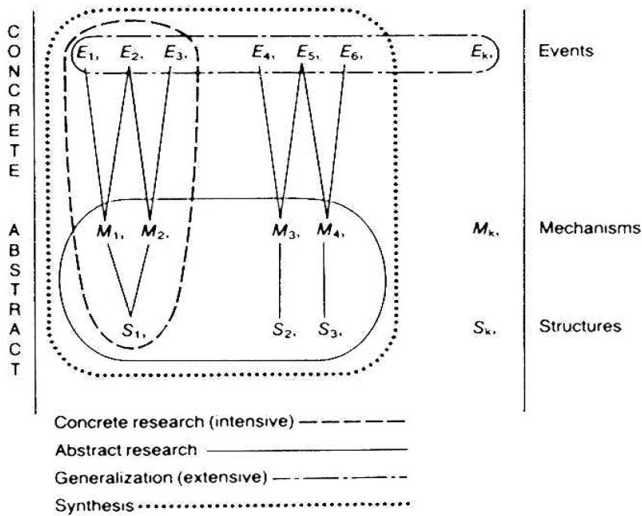


Figure 1. Types of research (Sayer 1992).

Abstract theoretical research has been employed in this study to examine the theories and concepts presented in the next chapter. This includes, for instance, theoretical discussions of the concept of decentralisation, theories about the state, state-society-relations, and institution-building strategies. Based on concrete practical research during fieldworks (discussed below), I have sought to explore events related to decentralisation and democratisation in Mali both at national and local level. With regard to questions about the outcome of decentralisation, a guiding principle has been to identify contingent conditions that in some way influence decentralisation in a long-term perspective. Relating to political processes at national level, it has been important to consider the influence of the MDRI and its close connection to top political authorities during the initial years of the 3rd Malian Republic, the long-term influence of ministries on the future of the decentralised governance system (regarding devolution for instance), the influence of the existing institutional structures and political practices, and shifting political constellations that take after elections. With regard to local level processes, it has been important to examine the influence of political struggles over authority, political relations based on identity, and natural resource management systems on the functioning of the decentralised institutions in a local political context. The writing of the three papers as well as this introduction may be seen as an attempt to form a synthesis that take into account the relation between decentralisation and democratisation based on both the abstract theoretical research as well as the concrete practical research done during fieldwork.

Methods in critical realism

The distinction Sayer (1992) makes between extensive and intensive research designs may further inform the research strategy and methods employed in this dissertation. The two types of design ask different sorts of questions, use different techniques and define their objects of inquiry differently. Extensive research is concerned with discovering some of the common properties and general patterns of a population as a whole. In intensive research, which has been most suitable to use within my project, the primary questions concern how causal processes work out in a particular case or in a limited number of cases. Intensive research uses mainly qualitative methods such as participant observation and informal and interactive interviews.

In addition to the reflections concerning abstract/concrete and intensive/extensive research, other authors have suggested different methodological options that may be used within a critical realist framework. The propositions of Yeung (1997, p. 56) are interesting in this regard. He begins by arguing “that method in critical realism is underdeveloped and misunderstood, resulting in a methodologically handicapped philosophy”. Even though the importance of abstraction of causal powers and generative mechanisms of objects in explanations is understood, he claims that some basic methodological questions remain; how can things be abstracted? What is the starting point of abstraction in the first place? Realist philosophers provide no readily answers to these questions, because critical realism originates from a philosophical concern with transcendental ontology.

Even though a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative research techniques has been advocated, Yeung (1997) does not contend with such methodological pragmatism by arguing that in practise of critical realism, certain methodological guidelines are more relevant and useful than others. The ways in which these guidelines are employed are dependent upon, but not necessarily determined by, different research topics and contexts. Qualitative methods such as interactive interviews and ethnography are necessary to abstract the causal mechanisms of which quantitative methods are unaware. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, are particularly useful to establish the empirical regularities between objects. Although these regularities are not causal relations, they can inform the abstraction of causal mechanisms. Furthermore, Yeung (1997) argues that the realist method is a posteriori in that given the social reproduction of knowledge, a critical realist seeks to reconstruct causal structures and their properties. Therefore, causal mechanisms are seen to be both historical

and contextual in their realisation. He identifies three possible methodological avenues within a critical realist framework that in varying degrees have informed the work presented in this dissertation.

Iterative abstraction is used in critical realism in order to discover and conceptualise generative mechanisms (Yeung 1997). As Sayer argues,

knowledge must grasp the differentiation of the world; we need a way of individuating objects; and of characterizing their attributes and relationships. To be adequate for a particular purpose, it must “abstract” from particular conditions, excluding those which have no significant effect in order to focus on those which do (1992, p. 86).

Abstraction means the isolation in thought of a one-sided or partial aspect of an object and involves a double movement from the concrete to the abstract and from the abstract to the concrete (Sayer 1992). Thus, a realist starts an empirical problem and proceeds to abstract the necessary relation between the concrete phenomenon and deeper causal structures to form generative mechanisms. This implies moving from the abstract and simple (defining the internally necessary relations of the structures involved), towards building a more concrete and complex view of reality. As more empirical evidence is collected, it is possible to revise and reaffirm the abstraction. The process of iteration continues until a point where theoretical saturation is reached. This occurs when further abstraction brings no significant additional theoretical rigour to the generative mechanism and when the empirical evidence is strong enough to support the practical adequacy of the postulated mechanism in explaining a concrete phenomenon. Thus, as a research strategy, iterative abstraction corresponds to what Ragin (1994) calls analytical induction in case-studies. The broader realist method in which iterative abstraction is embedded is known as *retroduction* in which an argument moves from a description of some phenomenon to a description of something that produces it or is a condition for it (Yeung 1997). The use of iterative abstraction has been useful with regard to the pursuit of information about different aspects related to decentralisation during fieldwork. It has for instance helped to determine when the exploration of certain aspects of decentralisation reached a point when it was no longer necessary to pursue it because it would not add any new information. Interviewing high-level bureaucrats in the capital Bamako about the most important challenges related to the implementation of a decentralised governance structure for instance reached such a point after not so long time because most presented quite similar views about the theme. Thinking in terms of iterative abstraction has

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also served to interpret information in periods between fieldworks, in particular with regard to existing theories on the field.

Another contribution to critical realism identified by Yeung (1997) has to some degree informed the research strategy in the dissertation. *Grounded theory* is a mode of doing analysis for generating and testing theory: “a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (Strauss and Corbin 1990, in Yeung 1997). This method has been particularly useful with regard to pursuing ideas that have occurred during fieldworks. When new interesting information about a phenomenon that concerns decentralisation has come about, it has contributed to decide the next step in the process of data collection. It may for instance be that a new informant has had to be contacted or that a new fieldwork location has to be visited. Since I have conducted multiple fieldworks in Mali, this way of thinking has also informed the process that has taken place between fieldworks as well as the planning of a new fieldwork. Grounded theory may reinforce the iterative abstraction in realist research by grounding abstract causal mechanisms in empirical data (Yeung 1997).²¹ However, it is important to be cautious in applying the grounded theory method because it may simply lead to another form of empiricism hidden behind a qualitative mask. One possible way to avoid falling into such a trap is to use the method in close connection with iterative abstraction. In applying both methods, it should be possible to reveal the causal mechanisms of concrete phenomena through empirical research in its intensive and extensive variants.

The *triangulation* method is a third methodological path identified by Yeung (1997). Triangulation is inherently a call for multi-method in social scientific research, and is based on the conviction that there is no fundamental opposition between the purposes and capacities of qualitative and quantitative methods or data. One of the strengths of employing a case-study approach is the use of multiple sources of evidence (Yin 1994). This may include different types of documentation, like administrative documents or other studies of the same case, archival records, direct observations or participant observations. The use of multiple

²¹ Certain pitfalls exist in employing grounded theory within a critical realist framework (Yeung 1997). First, grounded theory is essentially inductive and of phenomenological character, and therefore antithetical to realism. This may lead to a tendency of eclectic empiricism in which too many empirical categories are combined in an atheoretical framework. Causal relations between the referents of these categories and the phenomenon at hand are thus lost. The realist method for theory construction on the other hand is neither purely deductive nor inductive, but operates in a deductive-inductive dialectic. Secondly, grounded theory method relies too much on the subject’s narrative of concrete social phenomena, postulating that both substantive and formal theories can be generated directly from concrete data, implying that generative mechanisms can also emerge directly from data.

sources of evidence makes it possible to gather different kinds of information that may be put together in order to achieve a higher degree of precision in exploring a phenomenon. Different forms of triangulation may be employed in order to assure this. Within data triangulation for instance, both interviews (open-ended and focused interviews) and different kinds of documentation (official government reports or academic studies) may be used. Investigator triangulation may corroborate statements made by different actors through the use of several independent informants and interview objects. Combining different sources of information in a triangular fashion may contribute to improve the validity and reliability of the information collected (Yeung 1997). This contribution is based on the assumptions that different data complement each other in revealing different facets of the object of study. The use of triangulation and iterative abstraction has constituted an important guideline for the collection of information during fieldwork and the use of secondary sources.

Employing critical realism – an illustration

An illustrative example of a realist approach to decentralisation is presented in figure 2. It presents a idealised analysis of the possible transformation of patron-client structures that may result from the introduction of municipal institutions in a local political context. It is meant to give an idea of how an approach based on abstract theoretical research may be combined with concrete practical research based on experiences from fieldwork in Mali. It is not the intention to create an explanatory model used to fit a complex reality into. Rather, it is meant to exemplify how a critical realist methodology may provide thinking tools for research on decentralisation. The patron-client relation can be considered to be a structure that is similar to the example given by Sayer (1992, p. 92) of the landlord-tenant relation. The patron and the client may be said to constitute internally related elements of a structure, that is to say that one could not exist without the other. Furthermore, in a Malian context, this relation could not exist without the existence of for instance a common property system (which also is part of the structure).

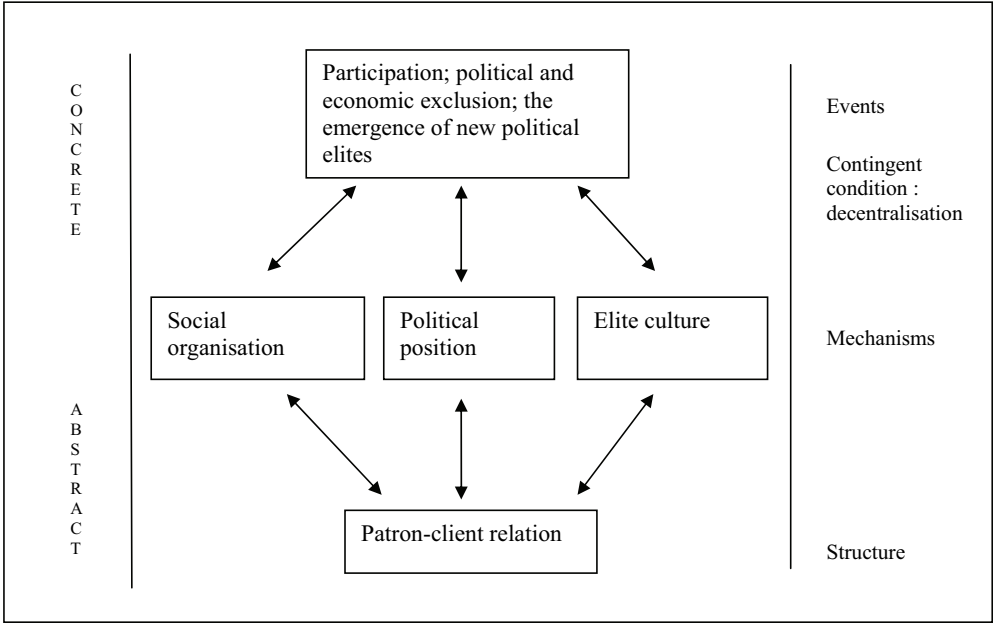


Figure 2. A realist approach to decentralisation and patron-client relations.

A patron-client relation may exist on an intra-village level. A village chief may be responsible for the distribution of land rights and as such considered to be a patron. Other families in the village may depend upon him to get access to land for agriculture and may thus be considered as the clients. The necessary internal relations of this patron-client structure may produce different events because they are mediated through different practices at the level of mechanisms. This may for instance be social organisation (who can marry who, what are the social obligations of patrons and clients respectively), political position (who may participate in decision-making) and elite culture (the naturalisation of this relationship through common ancestral history for instance). The implementation of a municipality that includes several villages opens up for the renegotiation of the patron-client relations that exist within each of these villages. The municipality should in this regard be seen as a contingent external relation because the existence of a patron-client relation is not dependent on the existence of this institution. However, this does not mean that the municipality is without influence on the patron-client relation. It may contribute to new forms of patron-client relations through the creation of new political positions within the municipality. The implementation of municipal

institutions may in this case be interpreted as a contingent condition triggering the particular necessary relations of the patron-client structure through the mechanisms of social organisation, political positions and elite culture, and generate events such as political and economic exclusion or the rise to power of new political elites (social transformation in more general terms).

Figure 2 provides an illustration of how to analyse structures within the research project. However, it is important to underline that it is a very simplified representation of patron-client relations. A range of other contingent conditions, which themselves are made up of structures, is also at work within the context of local politics and decentralisation in Mali, for instance within both central and local state agencies. The intrinsic properties of the structure of these objects also influence the outcome of decentralisation in a local context.

This methodological approach may be better understood if contrasted to a hypothetical alternative approach based on empirical generalisations. In order to illustrate, it may be useful to consider how the two approaches would explain the number of problems related to the implementation of the decentralisation reform after the local elections in 1999. A point of departure for an empirical generalisation could be to gather information about all the cases and try to identify one or more common denominators that would produce an explanation. A common explanation from state bureaucrats in Bamako for instance built on this kind of approach and refers most often to institutional problems related to the implementation phase, the lack of understanding of the process among the municipal actors or more generally to an immature political culture. A case-study approach inspired by critical realism that focuses on an intensive research strategy would concentrate on one or more cases and try to identify the causal mechanisms and underlying structures that would explain each case. The explanation of one case, referred to in the 3rd paper, identified the historical competition between two villages within a municipality as the cause of the political impasse. The result was that the municipality had one formal elected mayor and an informal mayor that was not recognised by the state authorities. In other cases, political impasse may be explained with reference to political competition between different elite groups within the same village, or the co-optation of all formal political positions by one elite group. This kind of approach reveals another explanation of the problem than approaches based on empirical generalisations. Designing the study as an intensive qualitative case-study inspired by critical realism has constituted the

guiding principle for the collection of information during fieldwork as well as the collection of secondary sources of information.

Fieldwork and secondary sources of information

The study is primarily based on the collection of primary information collected during fieldworks in Mali. The main fieldwork, carried out in 2003 in the Koro and Bankass cercles in the Mopti region, complements a previous fieldwork carried out in 1998-1999 and has been followed up during other missions to Mali. The primary information is to a large degree collected during interviews, but the collection of written primary information, as official government reports, law texts and policy documents, has also been a part of this process. The collection of secondary sources has been based on the idea that it should complement the information obtained during fieldwork. This may be academic articles and studies, conference proceedings or evaluation reports prepared by NGOs.

Fieldwork over time

As mentioned in the introduction, the implementation of the decentralised governance system in 1999 led to the establishment of new decision-making institutions at the local level and it brought about both a scalar and spatial reconfiguration of the state. The institutional design of the reform was conditioned by national level political processes and the outcome of the reform has had important effects upon local level political relations. Since decentralisation is related to political processes and structures at multiple scales, it has been necessary to conduct fieldwork both on national, regional and local level.

The main fieldwork for the dissertation was conducted during two months in 2003 in the Koro and Bankass cercles in the Mopti region in collaboration with the NGO CARE Mali. The main purpose of this fieldwork was to gain insight into various aspects related to the implementation of and political practices surrounding the decentralised governance institutions in a local context. The choice of this area was partly based on a short visit to the village of Koro in 2001 when I worked for CARE Mali in the Diré cercle in the Timbuktu region. CARE had since 1999 run a project in the Koro and Bankass cercles, the *Programme d'Accompagnement des Communes Rurales dans le Cercle de Koro et Bankass* (PACKOB). The project, designed to support and consolidate the implementation of the decentralisation reform, sought to strengthen the relation between three main groups of actors in the municipal

space (CARE International au Mali 1999). As a result, particular programmes were established to strengthen the capacity of the municipal councillors, civil society organisations and the private sector in selected municipalities. In addition to the PACKOB project, CARE has been delegated by the Malian government to run the *Centre de Conseil Communal (CCC)* in the Bankass cercle. The CCC is one of two axes in the *Programme National d'Appui aux Collectivités Territoriales (PNACT)*²², a scheme set up by the Malian government to support the decentralised governance institutions. While the *Agence Nationale d'Investissement des Collectivités Locales (ANICT)* provides the municipalities with financial support, the CCCs are set up to provide them with technical support²³ (République du Mali 2002). The establishment of the CCC represents an innovative structure for development assistance in Mali; institutionally it is part of the state apparatus²⁴, but its operation is delegated to an NGO²⁵ in each of the 42 cercles in Mali. The CCCs are among other things supposed to provide the municipalities the necessary assistance so that they can apply for financing from the ANICT. The experience of the CARE staff within the field of decentralisation in general and the study area in particular was particularly helpful for me during the fieldwork. In addition to providing information as informants on certain matters, they also assisted in the establishment of contact with other interview subjects. Among these were the mayor in the city of Koro, state civil servants and forest dwellers.

The choice of Koro and Bankass as site for fieldwork was furthermore made in order to complement experience, information and knowledge acquired during a fieldwork conducted in 1998-99 (6 months) as part of the writing of my M.Phil.-thesis. This fieldwork was carried out in the capital Bamako, the regional capital Timbuktu and in the *Arrondissement de Gossi* located in the *Cercle de Gourma Rharous* in the Timbuktu region (which now is the Municipality of Gossi). In Bamako, I conducted a series of interviews with high ranked officials within the MDRI and ministries as well as with various politicians, researchers and other informants with particular know-how about themes related to decentralisation. The

²² The most important laws and conventions are: Law no. 00-042 of July 7 2000 on the creation of ANICT, decree no. 00-386/P-R M of August 10 2000 on the organisation and functioning of the ANICT as well as conventions signed with the program partners (the European Union, the Fonds d'Equippement des Nations Unies and the Agence Francais de Développement).

²³ The ANICT support primarily the municipalities, but also the CT at cercle and regional levels. The CCC only supports the municipalities.

²⁴ The ANICT is a permanent institution defined as a National Public Establishment (Etablissement Public National) with financial and administrative autonomy placed under the authority of the *Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale et des Collectivités Locales (MATCL)*.

²⁵ The NGOs have been chosen, among other factors, on the basis of the period they have been present in the area, as well as on their experience of working within the domain of decentralisation.

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overall purpose was to provide information about the democratic transition, the role of decentralisation in national political processes, as well as the elaboration and implementation of the reform. In Timbuktu, interviews were conducted with public servants, politicians and local leaders. It provided information about the territorial reorganisation and the preparation for the implementation of the reform in a regional and a local context. In the village of Gossi, interviews were conducted with informants with intimate local political knowledge, as well as political actors that had engaged themselves politically in the period running up to the 1999 local elections. The most important findings from the visit to Gossi concerned the local political processes that emerged as part of political strategies to control the future municipal institutions. The information from Gossi has also served as case against which it has been possible to compare the findings obtained during the 2003 fieldwork.

The 2003 fieldwork, in addition to the time spent in Koro and Bankass, was also used to follow up and complement information collected during the 1998-99 fieldwork. Of particular interest in this regard was information about the progress in the implementation of the reform (the reform was implemented after the 1998-99 fieldwork). Follow-up was also conducted during other missions to Mali: in 2001 as part of an internship for CARE Mali in the Cercle de Diré in the Timbuktu region, and in 2002 and 2005 as part of consultancy work for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). During the SIDA consultancy missions, interviews were conducted in Bamako and served to bring me up to date on issues concerning the democratic process and the political landscape on national level as well as the political and institutional processes at work regarding the transfer of functions to the decentralised governance institutions. The CARE internship was carried out before I started to work on this dissertation, but has nevertheless provided background information on for instance how an NGO support decentralisation locally. The combined effect of multiple fieldworks and working experience over a long period of time offer an additional benefit to the dissertation because it has given the necessary time to develop a more profound understanding of various aspects of the Malian case. This has not only provided contextual knowledge that has been important to interpret findings, but it has also functioned as a guide concerning strategic choices that has been made as part of the dissertation. It has furthermore provided cultural and practical knowledge that has been beneficial with regard to fieldwork organisation and challenges met during fieldwork (discussed in more detail below). In order to complement information gained during interviews, I have, whenever possible, sought to find written primary material as well as secondary sources of information.

Documents and secondary sources of information

The collection of various kind of official documents as well as secondary sources of information has been an important aspect of the fieldworks because much of the written material concerning decentralisation in Mali is scarcely available outside the country (law texts, evaluations, public journals and official strategy documents for instance). Strategy documents published by the MDRI have been an important source for the analysis of the role of decentralisation in the democratic project of the Konaré regime in the 2nd paper. Furthermore, secondary sources in the form of academic journal articles published during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s have been crucial for the historical analysis of local government structures in Mali in the 1st paper. The use of journal articles in this paper presents some methodological challenges because the empirical information available from these sources has already been interpreted into a theoretical framework that is different from the one relied on in this dissertation. To the extent that it has been possible, I have sought to overcome this challenge by way of triangulation of different sources. Recent case-studies on decentralisation in Mali has for the last few years grown in number and has proven to be a valuable addition to the analysis of decentralisation and local politics in the 3rd paper.

Doing multiple fieldworks in Mali has offered a number of advantages for this study in terms of collection of information. But it also presents a series of challenges that goes beyond questions of data collection. In the next section I will discuss some of these from a perspective of positionality.

Positionality, local knowledge and fieldwork

Apart from the practical problems related to conducting fieldwork in a country with limited financial services, poor infrastructure and long distances, doing research in another social, political and cultural setting have presented particular challenges. During both informal social meetings and fieldwork interactions in Mali, I have become increasingly aware of what Skelton (2001) refers to as the role of positionality in research. The interest in a reflexive social science that acknowledges positionality has generated two different strands of thought (Allen 2005). Inter-subjective approaches focus on the positionality of the researcher within the field and “how qualitative data are the product of a series of social interactions between the fieldwork self and the subjects of investigation *in the field*” (Allen 2005, p. 992). The objectivist approaches on the other hand directs attention to the positionality that the

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researcher bring *into the field*, that is, the background thinking of researchers that result from social position as gender and class and the subsequent consequences for knowledge production. In this section I want to draw attention to some aspects of positionality raised by an inter-subjectivist approach in order to discuss challenges in doing fieldwork in another cultural context.

Positionality, local knowledge and fieldwork

The influence of positionality in this research project is to a large degree shaped by my own personal history in Mali. As a child, I lived two years in the country (1986-1988 from the age of 13). My parents worked in a Norwegian Church Aid project in the village of Gossi in the Timbuktu region in the northern parts of the country where I attended a Norwegian school. During this period, I got several Malian friends that I would meet again during fieldwork for the M. Phil.-thesis in 1998-99. It was during this fieldwork that the question of positionality first became evident for me. The major parts of this fieldwork were carried out in the capital Bamako where I lived with the childhood friends from the Northern parts of the country in a small rented house. On many occasions, people arrived at the house to live there for a day or two; it could be distant relatives of some of my friends, villagers from Northern Mali on missions to Bamako, or university student colleges of my friends. When these people arrived, they were always placed into an existing social hierarchy, sometimes in quite explicit terms, in relation to the other people living there according to criteria as family ties, ethnic background, age, education and wealth. As part of micro-scale social interaction, this was important for defining roles and responsibilities within the group and made up quite a large part of everyday conversation. As I was both white, had high education and was relatively wealthy (compared to several of my friends who had barely gone to school and were unemployed), I was placed at the top of the hierarchy and given the nickname "le Boss". I was not allowed to do domestic tasks such as shopping, cleaning, making tea, and so on. In return, I was supposed to provide them with the most basic things, such as food and shelter. Organising fieldwork in this manner made it possible to gain social, political and cultural knowledge that is important for understanding the field of study.

The kind of social interaction described above may be seen as the continuation of the codes and rules that surround the extended family and is part of continuous negotiation of social relations and hierarchy that is an integrated part of daily life. Since there is little state social infrastructure in Mali, the extended family (which may also include non-relatives from the

same village or area in the country) constitutes an important informal safety network that imply providing services and favours if someone are in trouble. This system is also manifested in non-family encounters and may extend into the work-place, political life and state-society relations. One example could illustrate this. The father of a friend of mine, who had worked as a teacher, had reached the age of retirement. In order to arrange his pension, he had to get in touch with the agency responsible for pensions in order to arrange the necessary formalities. He resided normally in the village of Gossi in Northern Mali some 1000 km from Bamako, but had to go the capital in order to do this. After trying 6 months without success, he finally got in touch with some distant relatives working in a completely different state agency that could speed up the process through channels based on informal friendship. This is not a singular case when it comes to the day-to-day functioning of the state in Mali. I often asked people what they would do if they needed for example official papers. Most people answered that they would first get in touch with people they knew from before (a distant relative or a person from the same part of the country for instance) in order to get access to the relevant state agency through informal channels. A common explanation was that this would speed up the process and it was a manner to avoid paying too much bribery.

This knowledge has made it easier to understand things observed during fieldwork and that was said during interviews. It also made it possible to interpret the concrete context in which the fieldwork was conducted and it provided background knowledge that made it possible to understand politics in general, particularly with regard to informal political relations. It was most practically useful with regard to the collection of information in the 3rd paper. Knowledge about the distinction between first-comers and late-comers (autochthones vs. allochthones) was in this regard an insight it was important to examine further during local-level fieldwork. As discussed in the 3rd paper, the notion of autochthony is an important dimension of belonging in Africa (Geschière 2005). It implies claims that the first-settled people in an area have superior rights based on rootedness to the territory. In a West African context, claims of belonging from the first-comers groups is the most wide-spread strategy to legitimate land rights (Lentz 2006). The fear of being outnumbered in local elections on the part of the first-comers is real in many areas, and the discourse of autochthony may be used to legitimise control over natural resources. In an interview with the Mayor of the municipality of Koro, referred to in the 3rd paper, social relations based on autochthony was clearly a part of local politics; in explaining the reason why people do not pay taxes, he refers to parental relations: “The people say that ‘the mayor, he is our cousin, our parent. We are not afraid of

him, so we do not pay the taxes”” (Anaye Niangaly, Mayor of Koro, interview on 30 October 2003).

A particular important and widespread system of identity formation in Mali is joking relationships (in French called *parenté à plaisanterie* or *cousinage*). According to Diallo (Diallo 2001), joking relationships constitute certain social rules between community members, neighbouring clans and ethnic groups. This system applies, for instance, in the relations between Dogons (farmers, mainly living in the Mopti region) and Bozos (fishers mainly living along the Niger River). A friend of mine, Dogon of origin, while living in the Niger River town of Diré, experienced this every day while going to market place to buy fish from Bozo women. They could for instance charge him extra money for the fish, because the rules of the joking relationship prohibited him from refusing this. In joking relationships, certain rules for behaviour exist. It is for instance allowed to throw jokes about the members of a group you are in joking relationship with, no matter how old or powerful they might be. There are also taboos related to offend or hurt one's cousin. If taboos are broken, it is necessary to apologise and compensate the damage in order to avoid a disaster in the community of the taboo violator. In everyday social interaction among Malians, joking relationships are often subject of communication and discussion, and as such an important part of defining social relations. Knowledge about this particular system of social relations may in certain situations serve as a door opener. On one occasion, while doing fieldwork for my M. Phil.-thesis, I tried for almost a week to get an appointment with representatives of the World Bank in Bamako. But every time I showed up for an interview, it was postponed for some reason. This took place at least 4 or 5 times, and was becoming more and more frustrating. But when the receptionist asked me for my Malian name (foreigners are often asked for their Malian name), and realised that we were in fact in a joking relationship (theoretically at least), he was more than willing to fix me an appointment on the spot. Even more important, this knowledge is important in everyday social meetings and informal social and fieldwork interactions because it offers a way to get to know people. In addition to be a door opener, it serves as a reference point for informal discussions on political issues of both local and national range. These discussions are most of the time of little importance with regard to the overall purpose of the fieldwork, but may in certain circumstances make it possible to comprehend and interpret events that are not often easily understandable. It may also give indications of new topics that may be of interest for further exploration.

An advantage in doing fieldwork over a long period of time with close connection with Malians has been the possibility to get in touch with informants through informal and personal channels. Of particular importance as a door opener in this regard has been a childhood friend of mine from northern Mali. He has himself been a student at the university in Bamako and has a large network of connection both in the capital Bamako and in northern Mali. He arranged for instance an interview with one of his teachers at the university that for a long time has been a prominent politician in Bamako and that today is minister of education. Our neighbour in Bamako was also a well-known politician that provided useful information for the fieldwork. Another neighbour had himself written a PhD on decentralisation in Mali in France in 1986 and was of very much help both as an informant, but also as an adviser during fieldwork. Furthermore, while doing fieldwork in Timbuktu in 1998-99, I was assisted with transportation to the city by a close relative of his who worked in a local office of a ministry in Timbuktu that often travelled to Bamako on missions. I was also provided accommodation during my visit at the guest house of the *Commissariat du Nord*, where her husband worked. He also became an important informant because the agency was implemented as part of the Pact National and it was delegated a key role in the territorial reorganisation in the region by the MDRI.

Positionality and fieldwork interactions

Local social and political knowledge made it possible to a certain degree to influence and understand the relations in which I as a researcher entered during fieldwork. In fieldwork interaction, I was to a certain degree defined in relation to the social and political hierarchy in which I participated. The way in which this influenced the fieldwork varied however quite much depending upon the setting in which interviews were conducted as well as who was interviewed. Because the fieldwork involved interviews on multiple scales, my positionality may be considered to be relative with regard to each particular setting. Interviews with high-level politicians and bureaucrats in the capital Bamako was not so much influenced because these informants were used to this kind of situations and because I was often seen as a student. The result was that it was often difficult to get beyond the official version of themes related to decentralisation (as described in the laws). I experienced for instance more than once that interviewees consciously did not answer my questions, even though they knew I understood this. The reasons for this may have been different. One explanation may have been insecurity on the part of the official about what could be said or the need to adhere to a particular version of the story because of the political role of the institution. In some of the

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interviews conducted with officials in the MDRI this was clearly the case. Since the MDRI was the institution responsible for the elaboration of the decentralisation reform, the interviewees were not willing to talk about possible problems related to the institutional design of the reform and referred mostly to law texts and strategy documents when answering. In another interview, conducted with a leading politician from the transition period, answers were also to a large degree flavoured by political rhetoric supporting the reform. The refusal to talk about potential problems may be explained by the fact that the politician had spotted me on a television news broadcast the night before about a decentralisation conference organised by a leader of another political party. Scepticism about my relation with this politician may have led to caution with regard to the interview situation. Another example is from the period when I was working as an intern for CARE in the village of Diré in the Timbuktu region and had made an appointment for an interview with a highly placed official in the state in the city of Timbuktu. Once he learned that I was “only an intern”, as he said, he refused categorically to take any of my questions seriously. He answered with one-sentence words, made phone-calls during the interview and refused to answer some questions altogether. This example is in clear contrast to interviews carried out in Timbuktu during the 1998-99 fieldwork. Before leaving Bamako for Timbuktu, I was able to get a letter of recommendation from the political advisor of the Ministry of territorial administration who I interviewed not so long after arriving in Mali. The letter of recommendation had been faxed to the governor of the region before my arrival, and appointments had already been done with several state officials in the city, among these the official occupying the same position as I later should interview as a CARE intern in 2001. This gave me status as a researcher approved by the political leadership in Bamako, and facilitated my program in Timbuktu to a very large degree. The officials spared ample time for the interviews and went into great detail in the answers. Also during other missions in Mali, the positionality explanation seems at least to account for some of the outcome. During missions to Bamako carried through for the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), I experienced that it was not only much easier to make appointments, but also that it was easier to openly discuss political controversial themes related to decentralisation. In an interview with a leader of one of the most influential parties in Bamako, corruption in the state apparatus and the legal system was a theme that the leader talked about in great detail.

However, when conducting interviews in rural areas, identity factors were more predominant. It was not unusual to be met by suspicion and hesitation from possible interviewees and

informants. This may be explained in several ways. Since the introduction of municipal institutions in many cases was subject to struggles over authority, it was considered by several informants not politically wise to discuss political events, strategies or goals with an outsider. Sharing information about political issues and relations about a locality may furthermore be difficult because local politics is in some regards transparent and it could be quite easy to identify the source of information. Since sources of information in general is scarce in rural areas (no newspapers for instance), knowledge constitutes an important political asset that may be used actively as part of political strategies. I experienced myself several times that information obtained during interviews was very much biased, and in many cases incorrect, to the advantage of certain views and to the detriment of others. To avoid being trapped in this “web of confusion” it was not only necessary to interview different groups of actors but also to engage in long-term relations with people that did not have any particular political engagement or interest in the matters and that through informal conversations could function as discussion partners. While doing fieldwork in Gossi, it was unproblematic to corroborate information since I had well established relations that date back a long time with people with thorough local knowledge. In other situations, in Koro and Bankass for instance, this was more difficult. But after spending some time in the area, it was possible to engage in a certain number of informal conversations that made it possible to assure, at least with a relatively large degree of certainty, the quality of information. Furthermore, it is also easier to get in touch with people that are in some kind of political or social inferior position. On one occasion, in Gossi, I was approached in covert by a local nomadic fraction leader that previously did not openly wanted to discuss the problems their group met as a result of the decentralisation reform. This was a person I had known since childhood, and it was clear for me that he wanted to convey the message that he feared that the decentralisation reform would lead to political tensions and problems in the area.

A part of doing fieldwork in a local context also means that many people in the area know about your presence and the reason why you are there. This may have influenced the kind of information that I obtained during interviews, but it also affected the whole fieldwork situation. I was often confronted with the observation that I am a white male with high education and other aspects commonly associated with these characteristics in Mali, such as wealth and the ability to solve problems. This was sometimes a theme that surfaced after an interview or in other fieldwork interactions, and materialised often in questions for economic support or provision of luxury goods like digital cameras or computers. These requests have

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to be understood in light of the discussion above about the extended family network. As such, as a researcher but also as an outsider with financial means, I was to a certain degree integrated in these social networks and was seen as a potential source of assistance. The fact that the demands and requests to a large degree exceed my economic resources is one thing, but more importantly, it makes fieldwork relations difficult to handle.

Conclusion

The dissertation has been designed as an intensive qualitative single case-study inspired by critical realism methodology. Critical realism has inspired the underlying methodology used in the dissertation and the issue of positionality has allowed for a critical discussion of the fieldwork. The research design has developed dialectally in relation to the nature of the purpose of the dissertation, the research questions upon which the three papers are based and the theoretical framework presented in the next chapter. It is to the theoretical framework that the discussion now turns.

Theoretical framework

This chapter expands the theoretical framework upon which the dissertation is based. Its main role will be to locate each of the three papers within a more coherent theoretical framework, to contextualise the findings and conclusions from the papers and allow for a final detailed discussion of the main purpose of the dissertation in the next chapter. It takes as point of departure the normative assumption that often motivates decentralisation and the main types of institutional change that may result from such reforms. This initial discussion is followed by an elaboration of two idealised theoretical views on what decentralisation is and should be. The administrative and political decentralisation perspectives are discussed with regard to how they differ in their views on the nature of the state and state reform, politics, policy reforms, governance, democracy and institution-building strategies. This distinction is then brought into the discussion of state-society relations in Africa. It constitutes the basis for the elaboration of an analytical framework that focuses on context-specific analyses of decentralisation and state-society relations. It will allow for an analysis of the politics of decentralisation and the outcome in terms of local democratic governance as mediated by political processes within the state, within society and in state-society interaction. The final discussion of the geography of decentralisation brings the concepts of space, place and scale into the analytical framework.

Deconstructing decentralisation: normative assumptions and institutional reforms

Decentralisation is a complex phenomenon both to design and to study (Smoke 2003). This is so because there are great variations between countries when it comes to institutional decentralisation arrangements and because it takes a lot of time to implement. To enter the discussion of the concept, it may be useful to take as point of departure Olowu's definition of decentralisation as a "*relative, complex and multidimensional process*" (2001, p. 2, italics in original). Its *relativity* is linked to the normative distribution of state resources between institutional actors within both state and society. The *complexity* of decentralisation relates to

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its simultaneous incorporation of and impact upon political, economic, institutional and cultural relations. The *multidimensional* aspect of decentralisation refers to the distribution of power and resources within the state (between the executive and other branches of the government; between central government and their field administration as well as local governments) and between state and non-governmental entities. Based on this definition, it is difficult to identify any criteria against which it is possible to assess the success of decentralisation. To initiate a conceptual discussion of decentralisation, it may be useful to distinguish between the assumptions on which decisions to decentralise are made on one side and decentralisation as an institutional reform on the other. In short, the latter refers to the concrete institutional changes that decentralisation bring about. They may be described with regard to the division of labour within the state apparatus (intra-government relations), between the state and local government (inter-government relations) and between the state and non-state actors (state-society relations). The assumptions on which decisions to decentralise are made are of very different origin and is to a large degree based on the assumed positive benefits of decentralisation. There are not necessarily any apparent links between these assumptions and the actual institutional changes that results from a decentralisation reform.

The benefits of decentralisation

Decisions to decentralise are often based on assumptions about the potential benefits of such reforms. Kulipossa (2004) for instance identifies three broad categories of decentralisation benefits: *political values* (decentralisation is a mechanism to spread political power among the population and thereby increase their influence); *governance values* (decentralisation increase responsiveness, accountability and political participation); and *efficiency values* (economic arguments related to provision of public goods, revenue mobilisation and size of jurisdiction). In addition to improved efficiency and governance as a potential advantage of decentralisation, Smoke (2003) also points to the possibility that decentralisation may improve equity. This advantage is related to the argument that local governments have local knowledge and therefore are in a position to distribute resources and target poverty.

Decentralisation as an institutional reform

The concept of decentralisation is used to describe a variety of institutional reforms including delegation, deconcentration, devolution, privatisation, deregulation and market decentralisation (Olowu 2001). According to Børhaug (1994), the classification developed by

Rondinelli is most common. It differs between deconcentration, devolution, delegation and privatisation. In a general way, these concepts are used to describe the transfer of planning, decision-making power or administrative tasks from central government to its organisations in the regions, districts or municipalities (deconcentration), to semi-autonomous or state-controlled organisations (delegation) or local governments (devolution) (Adamolekun 1999, Cheema and Rondinelli 1983).

Deconcentration implies the redistribution of administrative tasks within central government (Adamolekun 1999, Cheema and Rondinelli 1983). This normally involves the strengthening of central state institutions at lower levels of the administrative echelon (Crook and Manor 1998). A certain degree of deconcentration may be achieved through the establishment of a system of *field administration* (Cheema and Rondinelli 1983). This implies the transfer of some decision-making power regarding routine administration to lower levels in the administrative hierarchy. A useful distinction may also be made between field administration and *local administration*. The local administration system constitutes a certain form of deconcentration where the civil servants at all subordinate levels are central government agents. Executive officers, appointed by and responsible vis-à-vis central government, normally the ministry of internal affairs, govern regions, districts and municipalities. Two systems of local administration exist in most developing countries. *Integrated local administration* is a form of deconcentration where field officers work under the auspices of the highest administrative leader of their jurisdiction. In some countries, the central government representative has the power to coordinate the work of central ministries within the given jurisdiction. *Un-integrated local administration* means that central ministry staff and administrative staff are working independently of each other. Everyone is responsible to central government, but they have no or little formal control over each other. Coordination, if it exists, is often informal.

Another form of decentralisation involves the *delegation* of decision-making power and management responsibility to organisations outside central government structures which are not directly responsible to central government (Adamolekun 1999, Cheema and Rondinelli 1983). This is a more far-reaching form of decentralisation than deconcentration because important functions are transferred and executed without the direct control of a higher administrative level. Sometimes, decentralisation also refers to *privatisation*, that is, the transfer of functions from state institutions to the private sector (Manor 1995). It is argued

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that this implies decentralisation (power is transferred from central government to private enterprises) and democratisation (the choice of customers is increased). However, this use of the concept has been strongly criticised, partly because private sector enterprises may themselves be big and powerful. Instead of decentralising, power is transferred from one power centre to another.

Devolution implies the transfer of the responsibility of executive organs to political actors and institutions on a lower administrative level (Adamolekun 1999, Crook and Manor 1998). According to Manor (1995), this involves the transfer of resources, functions and decision-making power from central government to local authorities that are a) partly or entirely independent of central government, and b) democratically elected. Local authorities often consist of regional or local executive offices or municipalities (Adamolekun 1999). In the last case, they are given a juridical personality, and juridical defined areas of competence with autonomy to tax and elaborate budgets. The concept of juridical personality implies the right to make decisions with a relatively important autonomy, and the right to govern its own resources (MDRI 1998b). In the French literature, the concept of *collectivité territoriale* is used to denominate the units that are at the receiving end of devolution (for instance the new municipalities in Mali). These units are localised on a well-defined fraction of a country's territory, they are given a juridical personality by the state, and have the financial autonomy to be governed by locally elected authorities. The *free administration* (libre administration) of the *collectivités* implies an administration free from hierarchical bonds to the central government or other authorities on a superior level, and is as such in theory directly accountable towards the population.

Cheema and Rondinelli (1983) have elaborated some basic characteristics that define devolution: 1. The executive organs are autonomous and independent units, perceived as separate levels, with little or no direct control from central government structures; 2. Local government have undisputed and juridical defined geographical limits within which they can exercise authority; 3. Local authority have the necessary power to raise resources for the execution of their functions; 4. Local governments have to be developed as institutions in the sense that they are perceived by the population as a service provider, and that the population feel they may influence the decisions-making process; and 5. An organisation form with mutual strengthening and coordinating relations between central and local authorities, i.e. that local government may interact with other parts of the system. The basic characteristics of

decentralisation are often less rigorous in most developing countries. Devolution is most often seen as a form of decentralisation where local governments are given the responsibility for some functions, but where central government establishes control mechanisms and continue to play an important financial role.

Two schools: administrative and political decentralisation

According to Smoke(2003), decentralisation seems to be popular among policy makers even though there is limited evidence that support positive effects. The interest in decentralisation as a solution to the crisis of the African state in the 1990s may, according to Mohan and Stokke (2000), be explained by a convergence between the political right (revisionist neoliberalism) and the political left (postmarxism). However, the apparent consensus conceals important differences between them. This is for instance evident in their view on the role civil society may play. For neo-liberalists, civil society may put organised pressure on the state and in this way support democratic stability and good governance. Civil society may also assure participation in development programmes and empower target groups of poor people. For post-marxists on the other hand, empowerment of civil society involves the mobilisation of marginalised groups against disempowering actions of both the state and the market. So while neo-liberalists have a top-down view on institutional reform with the aim at making institutions more efficient, post-marxists advocate bottom-up mobilisation to challenge the interests of the state.

This division between the political right and left is echoed in the decentralisation literature. It was clearly reflected in a debate on decentralisation in the journal *Development & Change* in the early 1990s between Rondinelli (Rondinelli 1990, Rondinelli, McCullough and Johnson 1989), Slater (1989, 1990) and Samoff (1990).²⁶ Samoff's distinction between administrative

²⁶ 1. Rondinelli, D. 1990. Decentralisation, territorial power and the state: A critical response. *Development and Change*, vol. 21, pp. 491-500.

2. Rondinelli, D., J. S. McCullough and R. W. Johnson 1989. Analysing decentralisation policies in developing countries: a political-economy framework. *Development and Change*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 57-88.

3. Samoff, J. 1990. Decentralisation: the politics of interventionism. *Development and Change*, vol. 21, pp. 513-530.

4. Slater, D. 1989. Territorial power and the peripheral state: the issue of decentralisation. *Development and Change*, vol. 20, pp. 501-531.

5. Slater, D. 1990. Debating decentralisation - a reply to Rondinelli. *Development and Change*, vol. 21, pp. 501-512.

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and political decentralisation sums up two idealised perspectives on decentralisation that correspond to the division between the political right and left. This distinction helps to reveal important divergences in the apparent consensus on the need to decentralise the state. While the first stresses the relation between institutional reforms and state performance, the second underlines the necessity to empower the civil society (Degnbol 1999). Administrative decentralisation is often the position taken by central government (Samoff 1990). Starting with existing institutional organisation, new decentralisation solutions are developed with focus on organisational or administrative aspects. Most often, central government initiates the implementation of decentralisation, and it seeks to control its course. Within this approach, decentralisation may lead to the transfer of authority. Even though the immediate political questions linked to decentralisation are important, they are not studied systematically. Consequently, politics remains a secondary theme. Success is measured in terms of implementation, and not, for instance, in terms of increased political mobilisation of the local population. A problem with this approach is that institutional reforms are described and understood in narrow technocratic and administrative terms (Degnbol 1999). The focus on making institutions work the right way does not take into account processes and structures in society that influence the way in which these institutions work in the first place.

The political decentralisation perspective holds that decentralisation must begin with an increased role for civil society vis-à-vis the state. In practical terms, this means the transfer of decision-making power to previously underrepresented and marginalised groups (Samoff 1990). Empowerment is a key notion within this perspective. It is normally used to describe an ideal situation where individuals may gain control of their everyday life, such as work, reproduction and access to resources (Hewitt and Smyth 1992). If decentralisation does not bring about empowerment or transfer of decision-making power, it is impossible to conclude that there has been any real decentralisation. Thus, administrative decentralisation without empowerment may be seen as no more than a façade to maintain or strengthen the power of central government.

The analytical distinction between administrative and political decentralisation may clarify some elements of the decentralisation debate (Samoff 1990). But as will become clear in the following discussion, they represent two idealised perspectives on how to understand decentralisation that also raises questions about how to understand politics and how to understand the state. While it may be argued that the administrative decentralisation

perspective usually focuses on formal political institutions at national level and what is usually referred to as government, the political administration perspective sees politics as much broader processes and is generally more concerned with questions of governance.

Politics, policy and governance

In discussing how explanations differ in relation to the underlying conceptualisation of politics, Leftwich (2004) points to the difference between the concepts of government, governing and governance. While the concept of government only includes the formal institutions of government, the concept of governing incorporate a wider understanding of politics that take account of institutions other than the government that somehow are involved in governing (business organisations and civil society associations for instance). The governance notion is even wider and refers to:

the general patterns and interlocking systems of governing across *both* public and private spheres by which the overall social, economic and political life of a society is organised and managed, whether democratically or not, whether there are formal institutions or not and whether done by national, international or transnational agencies and institutions. In short, in its broadest sense – and it is broad – *governance* refers to the web of formal and informal institutions, rules, norms and expectations which govern behaviour in societies and without which the very idea of human society is impossible (Leftwich 2004, p. 10, italics in original).

Studies that understand politics as governing are associated with an institutional approach that holds that institutions are important in shaping politics (Leftwich 2004). Institutions may be both formal and informal. While the first includes the rules and regulations governing organisations (companies, associations, bureaucracies), the latter refers to customs and unwritten rules in a broader sense. The distinction between formal and informal institutions is similar to that made by Painter (1995) between formal and informal politics: while formal politics means the “operation of the constitutional system of government and its publicly defined institutions and procedures” (p. 8), informal politics is considered to be everywhere. This correspond to Leftwich’s (2004) distinction between arena and process. Politics understood in terms of arena have a narrow focus (the state, government institutions and local government for instance) and is primarily concerned with formal politics. On the contrary, the process perspective on politics does not confine it to particular institutional arenas, but see it as a much wider phenomenon that in addition to the formal institutions also occur in “much wider range of institutions, activities and groups...beyond or below the state or formal institutions of government, and wherever questions of power, control, decision-making and

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resource allocation between two or more people occur in human society, past or present” (Leftwich 2004, p. 14). Consequently, the process perspective focuses mainly on informal politics that also occur outside the formal institutions of the state.

Within more policy-oriented studies, this distinction is summed up in Mackintosh’ (1992) distinction between *policy as prescription* and *policy as social process*. In the first, which corresponds to the administrative decentralisation view, development policies in general are considered to be made up of government actions alone. The study of these policies includes analyses of government programs and focuses on what the government should and should not do (what services to provide for instance). This perspective on public reforms is based on a set of assumptions about states’ willingness to undertake changes and that the bureaucracy actually seeks to promote development for the population. This approach to policy is largely ahistorical because it does not take into account that the government and the state in history not always have acted in the public interest. The policy as social process perspective, which corresponds to the political decentralisation view, on the other hand, does not take it for granted that the state and public institutions a priori act in the interest of the population, but focuses rather on the effect of public institution actions in different historical contexts as results of social processes. This approach holds that the nature of the policy-making institutions matters when it comes to the conceptualisation and implementation of policies. This is so because these institutions may themselves develop interests on their own and that they may be influenced by other groups in society (lobbying for instance). It is therefore necessary to comprehend specific development actions in their context: in a country, a region or in a particular historical period. Analysing political actions and public institutions in a historical context will facilitate the identification of cumulative patterns of change implemented or sustained by central authorities.

The administrative decentralisation perspective is often the perspective of central governments in their elaboration of decentralisation reforms (Samoff 1990). Most attention is usually accorded to the institutional aspects of the reform and it is usually anchored within a *policy as prescription* framework. Decentralisation solutions are usually developed on the basis of the existing institutional organisation and the main aim is to identify new administrative structures. This perspective is misleading according to the political decentralisation approach. It is not sufficient to analyse and conceptualise decentralisation purely based on administrative and technocratic terms. This is, in my view, relevant in several

respects. An important first aspect to consider in this regard is who made the decision to decentralise in the first place: was international pressure the most important deciding factor, was it the result of domestic popular demand or was central government leading the process? This may say something about the legitimacy of the reform. Secondly, it is important to determine how the reform was elaborated and who was responsible for this process. If it was delegated to a small group of people directly responsible to top national political leaders, the result of the process, it is likely to believe, would have been different to a process run through the traditional state apparatus (because they may have vested interests in the outcome of the reform). This brings up a third important aspect that is related to the overall aim of decentralisation: whether there are real power-sharing mechanisms with other political actors built into the system or if it is designed to strengthen the control of central political authorities is important to consider to see the possible long-term potential and outcome of such a reform. It also says something about the possibility of civil society organisations to influence the process and the possibility to develop local service delivery and participatory systems. Fourthly, the interaction between the decentralised institutions and other social and political processes in a local political context is important. Local elite capture for instance will undermine any democratic goals the reform may have had and further strengthen the already powerful. Finally, processes at national level may also influence the way in which the decentralised institutions work in the long run. The transfer of decision-making power and economic resources from ministries to municipal institutions (within health and education for instance) may be disrupted by powerful interests within ministries that face the possibility losing power.

Both the administrative and political perspectives treat these problems, but they differ fundamentally on how to interpret them. Within the administrative perspective success is measured as a function of implementation and problems are interpreted as barriers to change. These may be, according to Samoff (1990), social and cultural practises, attitudes, lack of knowledge or lack of financial resources. Within the political perspective, the main problems related to decentralisation are questions of power. Decentralisation cannot be understood as implemented by central government without any kind of influence from other societal forces. Existing social relations, power structures, and actors' social, political and economic resources are all factors that influence the outcome of such a reform. Different groups in society will have different objectives in engaging themselves in the opportunities offered by decentralisation and these objectives may be in conflict and seriously alter the intended results

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of the reform. Rather than being barriers that may be overcome, these problems are possible inherent features of any decentralisation reform. As a consequence, the political aspect is considered to be more important within the political perspective than within the administrative perspective.

Democratisation and decentralisation

The distinction between administrative and political decentralisation is also echoed in debates on democratisation. Within political studies, two disputing positions on democratisation have been identified (Grugel 2002). The minimalist definition sees democratisation as the holding of elections, a set of procedures for government, and, in a more inclusive variant, the introduction of liberal individual rights. Since this definition does not take into account power relations, the author favours a substantive definition;

democratisation is the introduction and extension of citizenship rights and the creation of a democratic state. Another way to think of this is as rights-based or 'substantive' democratisation, in contrast to 'formal' democratisation. The litmus-test for democracy is not whether rights exist on paper but, rather, whether they have real meaning for people (Grugel 2002, s. 5).

The minimalist understanding of democracy was the normative assumption that guided studies of democratisation until the mid-1990s (Grugel 2002). Proponents of a substantive definition of democracy however, hold that a state cannot be fully democratic unless it has legitimacy among the population and that it has real meaning for people. The minimalist definition of democratisation may be associated with the administrative decentralisation perspective because the main focus is on the formal aspects of democratisation and decentralisation respectively. Within this line of argument, it may be said that democratisation is attained when there are regular elections, and that decentralisation is successful when local government institutions are in place. Within a substantive approach however, which may be said to correspond to the political decentralisation view, elections are not enough. This is the argument that is made in the 1st paper when discussing democratic consolidation, a central theme regarding the survival of the regimes that went through democratic transitions in Africa in the early 1990s. Although the institutional approach (focus on formal macro-political structures) and the cultural approach (whether or not democracy has any meaning to people) are important, they do not fully take into account the historicity of and the mutual interdependence between political institutions and political practices that are necessary to fully analyse the complexity of democratic consolidation in Africa. In order to avoid the

“fallacy of electoralism”, Bratton and van de Walle (1997) draw a distinction between the consolidation of democratic rule and the survival of democratic regimes. Their argument is that the longer democracy survives (the regular convening of multiparty elections and respect of political rights), the likelier is consolidation (institutionalisation of democratic practices). This does however not say much about the particular processes and mechanisms that make consolidation possible. Likewise, it does not account for cases where consolidation does not take place even though the formal democratic macro-political institutions are upheld. Rather, it will be more useful to take the distinction between democratic institutions and democratic politics made by Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor (2003) as point of departure. Their main argument is that the establishment of democratic institutions not necessarily implies the spread of democratic politics. In addition, in order to allow for a context-specific analysis of democratic consolidation, it is in my view important to focus on the historicity of institutions and practices with particular emphasis on institution-building strategies and informal political processes.

The following figure summarises the administrative and political decentralisation perspectives outlined in this section:

	Mainstream approach	Alternative approach
Decentralisation	Administrative decentralisation	Political decentralisation
Theoretical position	Revisionist neo-liberalism	Post-Marxism
Policy	As prescription	As process
Politics and institutions	Formal/arena; Government/governing (narrow)	Informal/process; Governing/governance (broad)
State	Neutral actor; Seeks the benefit for all citizens	As social relation; Disempowering
Focus	National level; Central government; The implementation phase	Local level; Civil society; Empowerment
Measure of success	The implementation phase; Installation of efficient institutions	Empowerment of civil society through democratic local governance
Main problems	Barriers to change; Social and cultural practices; Attitudes	Relations of power; Power concentration; Exclusion
Democracy	Minimalist	Substantial

Figure 3. Mainstream and alternative approaches to decentralisation.

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The distinction between administrative and political decentralisation reveals two different idealised views on decentralisation. The observation that the administrative perspective focuses more on institutional aspects and the political perspective is preoccupied with political considerations does however not mean that one or the other should be excluded from the analysis. A framework that incorporates both the administrative and political aspects is therefore developed in the next section.

Centralisation and decentralisation within the administrative and political sphere: institution-building strategies

In order to overcome the gap between the administrative-political dichotomy, Hutchcroft (2001) calls for a framework that integrates analyses of administrative and political structures. While the focus on formal administrative structures within public administration approaches ignore informal networks of power and the internal functioning of bureaucracies, the proponents of political analyses tend to overlook the territorial dimensions of power and authority. Taking the distinction between authority (the formal roles conferred to individuals in their official capacities) and power (informal means that diverge from the formal structures of authority) as point of departure, he seeks to overcome this gap in two steps. First, he builds two separate continua from centralisation to decentralisation within respectively the administrative and political spheres. Secondly, he combines these into a matrix that may be used to compare different states or variations within states over time (see figure 4 below).

The centralisation-decentralisation continuum within the administrative sphere builds on the traditions of public administration and state formation (Hutchcroft 2001). On the centralisation end of the continuum are prefectural administrative systems that dominated under colonial rule, but that may also be found in post-colonial authoritarian regimes. Within this system a portion of a country's territory is delegated to a prefect who represents the government and is responsible for field agents in the area. On the decentralised end are administrative systems based on strong and autonomous local power centres.

Attempts to describe centralisation and decentralisation within the political sphere is, according to Hutchcroft (2001), to be found in the democratic decentralisation literatures' inclusion of public administration concepts like devolution and deconcentration. However, this literature tends to focus on local level democracy to the detriment of the national political

system in which local governments are part, and they suppose a strong association between decentralisation and democracy. Rather, in a preliminary attempt to describe the political structures that are associated with centralisation and decentralisation respectively, he poses a series of questions that may be used to place political systems along a continuum. The first groups of questions are related to the nature of local politics and local political structures.²⁷ In addition to the attention given to local politics, he states, it is equally important to ask a second groups of questions related to the territorial character of national politics.²⁸ These questions may be used to place political systems along a centralisation-decentralisation axis.

The second step in Hutchcroft's framework is the combination of the two continua within the administrative and political spheres respectively. Furthermore, the approach developed by Hutchcroft may be combined with Boone's framework for classifying institution-building strategies (developed in paper 1) along two axes: the spatial concentration/deconcentration of the state apparatus; and the centralisation/devolution of political and economic authority. This make it possible not only to describe the relative centralisation and decentralisation within the administrative and political spheres respectively, but it also directs attention to the way in which political regimes may seek to control local political processes by way of introducing administrative and political reforms. To recap Boone's argument, four different institution-building strategies may be identified (Boone 2003, p. 360):

- *Power-sharing* within a deconcentrated institutional structure where authority is devolved. A dense network of state and party-state institutions in rural areas provide the infrastructure for devolution of control over state resources and prerogatives to rural elites (de facto or de jure);
- *Usurpation* within a deconcentrated institutional structure where authority is centralised. A dense network of state institutions in rural areas provide infrastructure for state agents to micromanage local political processes. It aims at disrupting established local political processes and the displacement of rural elites;

²⁷ The questions he asks are: 1. Are local executives appointed by the centre or elected by popular vote? 2. Are there effective mechanisms for popular participation at the local level?; 3. Are there municipal, provincial, state, and/or regional legislative bodies with substantial decision-making authority?; and 4. Is there a concentration of socioeconomic and/or coercive power in local patrons and bosses?

²⁸ The questions asked are: 1. Is there a national legislature with significant decision-making authority?; 2. If there are effective legislative bodies, do they function within a parliamentary or a presidential system?; 3. Are national legislators elected or appointed?; 4. To what extent does the electoral system provide for representation of local or regional interests in the national legislature?; 5. Are political parties organised along national or local/regional lines, and what is their level of internal cohesion?; and 6. To what extent are administrative structures insulated from party patronage?

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- *Administrative occupation* within a concentrated institutional structure where authority is centralised. State agents govern localities from strategic outposts and are not influenced by local elites;
- *Non-incorporation* within a concentrated institutional structure where authority is devolved. State agents are as distant from rural localities as in the previous strategy, but they do not seek to exercise authority locally. Localities are left to their own devices, and the state does not seek neither to engage nor impose

Figure 4 combines the frameworks developed by Hutchcroft and Boone into a single matrix.

	Relatively more centralised/ concentrated	Administration	Relatively more decentralised/ deconcentrated
Relatively more centralised	Administrative occupation		Usurpation
P o l i t i c s			
Relatively more decentralised/ devolved	Non-incorporation		Power-sharing

Figure 4. Centralisation and decentralisation within administration and politics combined with institution-building strategies.

The schematic summary over institution-building strategies within both the administrative and political spheres in figure 4 constitutes the foundation for the analysis of the historicity of

political institutions and practices in Mali in the 1st paper. It directs attention to the changing institution-building strategies pursued by the different regimes that have governed in Mali with particular focus on local government reforms. As such, it is in line with Hutchcroft's call to carry out comparative historical analysis to place administrative and political systems along these continua that also takes into account the capacity of the central government to impose their administrative authority. A general analytical note of warning regarding the possibility of promoting democratisation by means of decentralisation from Hutchcroft (2001) is to be found in regimes that either are found in the bottom right corner of the matrix (it is not possible to decentralise without prior centralisation) or where local bosses have considerable power. The last point about local power struggles is of particular relevance in the Malian case and is discussed in the 3rd paper.

At a more general level, the distinction between administrative and political decentralisation is echoed in the debate on state-society relations in Africa. This debate has traditionally been dominated by state-centred and society-centred views but in recent years the state-in-society approach has gained popularity. In the next section an analytical framework for the study of decentralisation in Africa from a state-in-society angle is presented. This perspective runs to a certain degree through all the three papers and provides the necessary analytical tools to discuss the main purpose of the dissertation.

State, society and politics in Africa – analytical approach

The institution-building strategies discussed above provide tools to discuss the role of the state and the rationale state action in relation to local government and local political actors. But as mentioned in the 1st paper, when referring to Bratton and van de Walle's (1997) politico-institutional approach, the formal-legal characteristics of institutions are less important than informal political networks and clientelistic relations within political institutions in an African context. In particular in times of transition, political actors engage themselves in the struggle over the design of institutions and the content of policies to create authoritative precedents that institutionalise the rules of the game. It is in this context that the neo-patrimonial argument about the internal functioning and the key institutional characteristic of the state in Africa comes in. The observation that political institutions and practices in Africa have evolved within a neo-patrimonial context directs the focus of analysis away from formal political institutions towards informal political relations and state-society

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interaction. An analytical implication of this observation is that it is necessary to develop an approach that focuses on context-specific analyses of state-society relations in Africa.

Society-centred and state-centred approaches

The state-in-society approach developed as a response to earlier theories about state-society relations. While society-centred approaches explain the functioning of the state as a result of social and economic processes, state-centred approaches argue that the state has the necessary autonomy and capacity to guide the development of society (Stokke 1999). The two dominating paradigms within development literature, modernisation theories and dependency theories, even though in opposition to each other, may both be classified as society-centred (Vikan 1998). Both explain the form and function of the state from processes in society.

In the early 1980s, Marxist analyses of postcolonial states and politics were criticised (Stokke 1999). Firstly, the neo-liberal tendency criticised the state-led development strategy dominating many developing countries in the 1960s and 1970s did not bring about economic development. The economic crisis in the 3rd World in the 1980s was explained as a result of state intervention in the market. The need to minimise the role of the state in economic processes was underlined. Secondly, society-centred analyses were criticised for reducing the state and politics to no more than reflections of economic relations in society. Instead of seeking economic and structural explanations for underdevelopment, attention was now turned to state institutions, especially the bureaucracy (Degnbol 1999). Common to state-centred perspectives is that the state is seen as the driving force in social and economic processes. The state has a large degree of autonomy vis-à-vis forces in the society, and it has the capacity to guide the development of society (Stokke 1999). The increased focus on institutions is usually associated with historical institutionalism (Peters 2005). The concept of path dependency is central to this approach, and is based on the “idea that once institutions are formed, they take on a life of their own and drive political processes” (Lecours 2005, p. 9). The main argument is that choices taken at the time when policies are initiated will have a long-term influence over that policy (Peters 2005). Path dependency is, according to Thelen (1999), based on two analytical claims. The concept of *critical junctures* refers to how countries come to follow different development paths as a result of the founding moments of institutional formation, while the concept of *development pathways* describe how the involvement of institutions are constrained by past trajectories. Even though historical

institutionalism may explain how institutions persist, the focus on path dependency has been criticised for not being able to explain institutional change (Peters 2005).

While society-centred approaches underlined the role of social forces in shaping and influencing state structures, the state-centred approaches underlined the need to understand internal dynamic processes of the state. However, Degnbol (1999) considers both of these perspectives as insufficient: it is not possible to engage an either-or approach to the understanding of state-society relations. Many of these theories postulate general, context-independent relations between the variables in question. Critic is raised against the supposition that state or society, a priori, is dominated by the other. For this reason, the following discussion will present theories that focus on arenas on state-society interaction. The *state-in-society approach*, developed by Migdal, Kohli and Shue (1994) is an important contribution in this regard.

The state-in-society approach

While Migdal et al. (1994) agree with historical institutionalism that the state has important influence of socioeconomic change, they claim that too much emphasis has been accorded the state:

Once the state's importance has been emphasised, therefore, the intellectual attention immediately shifts to issues of why states do what they do, under what circumstances states are effective, and why states differ in their respective roles and effectiveness. These issues, in turn, cannot be discussed satisfactorily without looking at society, at the socioeconomic determinants of politics. So, although the important point that "states matters" has now been made – and, to repeat, it needed to be made – there is no getting around the mutuality of state-society interactions: Societies affect states as much as, or possibly more than, states affect societies (Migdal et al. 1994, p. 2).

As mentioned in the 3rd paper, the state-in-society approach provides a useful theoretical framework for the analysis of the local politics of decentralisation. This is so because the relative degree of centralisation and decentralisation is not a priori disadvantageous. The outcome of decentralisation is, as Samoff (1990) writes, dependent on the situational specificity. Consequently, it has to be analysed in its context because it is subject to contestations within the state as well as different societal movements, networks, as well as formal and informal organisations and institutions (Degnbol 1999, Migdal 1994). Patterns of dominance, maintenance of status quo and changes that result from decentralisation have, within this

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approach, to be understood as processes that result from state-society interaction. Migdal et al. (1994) specify four central assumption that help to specify the possible processes at work.

First, the possibilities of states to undertake changes depend on their relations to society. States are seldom the only central actors, and are rarely completely autonomous. Their relative efficiency has to be understood as the function of the different forms of connections in state-society relations. The second point underlines the necessity to disaggregate the state, that is, one should not only study central organisations and institutions in the capital and socially important groups, but also state-society relations in the periphery. The role of the state in society as a whole depends on its contact with other social organisations. The focus on the lower levels of the state outside the capital, Kohli and Shue (1994) adds, is useful in understanding the distribution of power within the state, and their capacity to define and implement policy reforms. Thirdly, not only states, but also social forces, are historical contingent (Migdal et al. 1994). Their political capacity is not predetermined, but dependent on their position in the social structure. For example, the proletariat or the peasantry cannot be said to have predetermined roles. Likewise, civil society does not come into existence in its own terms, but is the result of social and political processes. The last assumption underlines that state and society might be mutually empowering. Interaction between segments of the state and segments of the society may increase the power of both. Even though this is not always the case, it illustrates the necessity to avoid the state-society dichotomy and to consider the complexity that exists in the relations between them.

The elaboration of these basic assumptions leads the authors to the definition of an anthropological approach to analyse the state. Many common definitions of the state, according to Migdal (1994), have a tendency to focus on its bureaucratic characteristics. Central questions asked are concerned with its ability to achieve given objectives and to implement policy reforms (refer the administrative decentralisation perspective). A dimension rarely included in these definitions, is the process leading to the modification of the initial objectives of a particular policy. The formulation of state policy is as much the product of its relation with groups in society, as it is the result of decisions made by top leaders or the legislative process. All this may modify the initial state agenda. This concerns not only its social fundament, but also its ability to implement policy reforms. As such, the state-in-society approach is in line with the policy-as-process argument made by Mackintosh (1992) and the political decentralisation perspective.

In order to study the policy implementation process, it is important to take into account the different levels of the state. An anthropological approach may be undertaken in order to achieve this (Migdal 1994). This will direct attention towards the lower levels of the state hierarchy, where direct contact with social groups takes place. The political outcome does not always need to correspond to the overall interest of the state, but may rather be the result of the complex interaction between different state levels and the social pressure experienced on each of these levels.

Theories about state-society relations are well suited for the study of the decentralisation. However, they have certain weaknesses. Their level of explanation is thought to be too general because they do not take into account the dynamic relations between state and society in Africa and everyday political practises are not analysed. The next section expands the state-in-society framework by incorporating theories about state-society relations in Africa.

State-society relations in the post-colonial African state

As pointed out in the 1st paper, Bilgin and Morton (2002) go beyond the state-in-society approach when they direct attention to historical and contemporary factors that influences state formation. Bayart's (1991) call for an approach that take into account the political trajectory of the state over a *longue durée* falls within this logic and directs attention to the historicity of the state and state-society relations. The explicit focus on state formation in an African context in Bayart's theories complements the theories about state-building strategies offered by Hutchcroft and Boone and makes it possible to interpret decentralisation as a part of institution-building strategies. Furthermore, the politics-of-the-belly paradigm developed by Bayart seeks to shed light on the internal functioning of the African state and the state's relation to and dependence on society. But before discussing Bayart's theories, it may be useful to briefly discuss the concept of neo-patrimonialism.

The neo-patrimonial state and patrimonial practise

The concept of the neo-patrimonial state originates from Weber's notion of patrimonialism (Médard 1997). It serves as an analytical tool that may clarify some aspects of the internal dynamics of the post-colonial state in Africa. Patrimonialism is defined as a form of mix-up between the private and public spheres where power is personified rather than institutionalised (no division between public servants and their positions). There is

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furthermore no separation between the political and economic spheres and economic and political resources are convertible units and may be traded with each other. Patrimonialism is covering a wide range of practises characterising African political life, among these nepotism, clientelism, patronage and corruption. According to Médard (1997), however, the African state is not patrimonial but patrimonialised and should be labelled neo-patrimonial. The concept of patrimonialism describes an ideal model of the state, while the neo-patrimonial state is a hybrid form that has developed in a particular context. The prefix *neo* indicates a modern, political hybrid form, and should not be confused with Weber's ideal type of patrimonialism. Within pure patrimonialism, there is no formal separation between the private and the public. This separation is formally established within a neo-patrimonial state, but it is to a low degree internalised or respected. After independence in Africa, bureaucratic organisations grew in number and scope, and were patrimonialised through a *de facto* appropriation by civil servants and politicians. Through these processes, the neo-patrimonial state emerged, a hybrid form of patrimonialism and bureaucracy. The formal structures of the state are bureaucratic, laws exist and civil servants are recruited on the basis of their performance. However, the states are not based on rule of law, but following a neo-patrimonial logic.

Within a neo-patrimonial logic, public positions are used as personal property. The lack of division between the political, the economic and the social implies that the search for wealth, power and prestige is governed by the same logic. In a neo-patrimonial state, the access to the state is the most important factor for accumulation of economic resources, wealth, and political power. As a result, political competition is not solely about political power, but also for the access to wealth. Clientelism and patronage are two forms of patrimonial mechanisms for economic redistribution and political control (Médard 1997). A client relationship may be seen as a relation of personal dependence based on the reciprocal exchange of goods between two persons, patron and client, which control different resources. While clientelism is based on personal loyalty bonds, patronage is less personified. It can be characterised as a certain form of distribution of public resources in exchange of political support. This is a central mechanism for African big men to establish and maintain political loyalty bonds. While the concept of neo-patrimonialism offers tools to analyse the internal functioning of the state, it does not say so much about the mechanisms through which political actors seek to control the state. Bayart (1993) offers a more comprehensive framework that locate the struggle for

hegemonic control of the state and state-society relations as part of post-colonial state formation.

The politics of the belly and reciprocal assimilation of elites

Based on criticism of the ahistorical approaches within the dependency and modernisation paradigms, Bayart (1993) seeks to reintroduce the historical dynamic of African societies by changing the focus of analysis from the state and elites to political actions undertaken by the dominated groups. He seeks to clarify the internal functioning of the African state and the mutual dependence between the state and the society.

Bayart's (1993) notion of the *reciprocal assimilation of elites* is a scenario that describes the construction of the modern African state. The crisis of the African state has intensified the struggle for hegemony between social groups. The ideal type scenarios regarding the outcome of this struggle are that of conservative modernisation (the already established dominant groups maintain their power) and that of social revolution (which brings about the downfall of the dominant group and the rise of at least a section of the subordinated group). The scenario of the reciprocal assimilation of elites is a compromise between the two ideal types and refers to a process where the struggle for political power is due to negotiation, and where compromises between regional, political, economic and cultural segments of the elites are made (Stokke 1994).

The central dynamic aspects of the reciprocal assimilation of elite groups, with the incorporation of subordinate social groups, are located within political networks.²⁹ Large parts of subordinate social groups as well as the political leadership in Africa belong to such networks. The solidarity is based on both a horizontal and a vertical axis: "They link the 'lowest of the low' with the 'highest of the high' through the agencies of continuous news, requests, gifts and far from disinterested symbolic celebrations" (Bayart 1993, p. 219). This system of struggle between different factions is at the heart of postcolonial politics, and is a central dynamic aspect that links society to the postcolonial state. A central mechanism characterising this linking process is captured in Bayart's notion of the *politics of the belly* (*la*

²⁹ The foundation for the reciprocal assimilation of elites is going on both in civil society and in the political society (Bayart 1993). The assimilation is taking place on a number of arenas in the elites' everyday life; funerals, marriages, education institutions, churches, Islamic brotherhoods, and pilgrimage to Mecca. The personal relations established in these situations are important for the forming of dominant classes. Within the political sphere as well, there exist arenas for assimilation, like political parties, the bureaucracy and through elections.

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politique du ventre). According to Tag (1994), this is an attempt from Bayart to create a new paradigm for political analysis in Africa. The concept sheds light on the internal functioning of the African state and the state's relation to and dependence on society. It describes a process of resource accumulation that takes place through straddling between employment in the state and private investments (Bayart 1993). Income generated as a consequence of the position in the state is used to finance housing, nourish an extensive social clientele and buy luxury goods. The economic fundament of the social division in African states is conditioned by the tertiary sector, and its origins can be traced back to the transition between the colonial and postcolonial period when the elite in African states gained access to state institutions. The conclusion is, according to Bayart (1993, p. 3), that "we now can take it for granted that it is their relation to the State which largely enables actors to get rich and dominate the social scene". Thus, the most important source of accumulation of resources for individuals has been their relation to the state. Forms of clientelism and patronage are then used to distribute public resources in exchange of political support to establish and maintain political loyalty bonds. According to Bilgin and Morton (2002, p. 74), the politics of the belly constitutes an historicised representation of the post-colonial state, that is "the predatory pursuit ... of wealth and power that, as a mode of governance, takes historically specific forms appropriate to the post-colonial state in Africa".

Political actors undertake different strategies in the struggle for hegemony (Bayart 1993). There are, however, several reasons to doubt that the struggle will ever reach a stage where one group control the state completely. This is linked to the existence of political actions at the grass root level that influence the state. Hence, the state is not only an institution that can be used by elites to reach their objectives, but is also influenced by the rest of the population. The actions of the elites are, however, the most important when it comes to the forming of the system as a whole. Furthermore, the most important sources of conflict in Africa are not class relations, but rather the struggle between factions that has dominated the political scene since independence;

Whether of socialist or capitalist persuasion, dominated by a party or by the army, pluralistic or monolithic, all these constitutional formulae – whose attributes are furthermore uncertain and changeable – rest upon one common denominator: at bottom, the actors organise themselves in factions in order to win or conserve power at the various echelons of the social pyramid, and this competition is the very stuff of political life (Bayart 1993, p. 211).

The struggle between factions is played out within the framework of the state in accordance with the logic of the reciprocal assimilation of elites on an everyday basis. Political entrepreneurs are hence given the opportunity as leaders of political networks (Stokke 1994). Bayart (1993) underlines the flexibility of these networks; they are not based on absolute identities, and are constantly changing in time and space.

Theories about neo-patrimonialism and Bayart's theory about the assimilation of elite groups provide analytical tools that make it possible to consider the role of decentralisation as part of wider political projects and processes. Rather than considering only the institutional aspects of decentralisation, as is the case within the administrative decentralisation perspective, decentralisation is seen as part of hegemonic struggles to control the state. In this way, Bayart's theories complement Hutchcroft and Boone. It allows interpreting the administrative and political aspects of decentralisation with particular focus on informal political networks and clientelistic relations within political institutions and in state-society relations.

The geography of decentralisation and state-society relations: space, place and scale

As discussed in the 2nd paper, the elaboration of the decentralisation reform in Mali was based on a certain number of underlying assumptions related to both earlier administrative systems in Mali as well as local communities. The territorial reorganisation for instance was based on the assumption that the administrative structures established during colonialism and later reformed during the 1st and 2nd Republic was incongruent with existing local political realities and not suited to promote democratic and development. The idea was to replace the existing administrative system with viable local spaces rooted in existing social, economic, political, cultural and demographic relations that should assure community solidarity and create appropriate systems for the decentralised management of local affairs. The notion of local community, as understood by the MDRI, constituted the basic building block in the new decentralised governance system in Mali.

This line of argument, forwarded by the MDRI, resembles very much the emergence of the community concept in local state restructuring in Britain. According to Raco and Flint (2001), local governance reforms under the New Labour government sought to merge traditional local democratic representative systems with participative structures based on active citizens and

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communities. These reforms were based on the observation that the congruence of state institutions with particular places and communities were flawed. This was in part caused by the undermining of place-based activities by wider spatial economic, social and political processes and administrative reforms that focussed on the functionalism of local state structures rather than congruence with particular places. Raco and Flint (2001) attribute the problems related to community participation to what Taylor calls *place-space tensions*:

Everywhere, in fact, has the potential for being both place and space; this is what I will call *place-space tension* between the producers of space and the makers of place. This concept is the key to using place and space in political geography. When place and space constitute a single entity they define a geographically focused contested politics. The questions of who defines an institution in spatial terms and who sees it as a place opens up a politics of space and place (Taylor 1999, p. 12).

The distinction between space and place adds a new dimension to the study of decentralisation. Taylor's (1999) thinking about spaces as disabling and places as enabling echoes the distinction between administrative and political decentralisation and opens up for political geographies that goes beyond the traditional focus on the state. The notion of space is more abstract than that of place and is related to rationality, bureaucracy and the state. States as space-producers imposes space on place through top-down political strategies while places may constitute centres for bottom-up opposition. Thus, the use of decentralisation as a political strategy by regimes to build and maintain hegemonic control over the state is, in the terminology of Taylor, a strategy to impose space on place. Administrative spatial state organisations and administrative systems are established to assure administrative efficiency and the imposition of state authority over places (Raco and Flint 2001). Decentralisation is in this regard the result of the creation of functional administrative spaces for service delivery and policy-making in which "community interests are identified, defined and institutionalised by policy makers in ways that facilitate particular types of decision-making or policy implementation" (Raco and Flint 2001, p. 591). Consequently, the concept of community represents a way to create place-space relations and spaces of state action through which the state may govern the population.

However, places and communities, which are constructed through social relations over time, have particular dynamics that are difficult to capture when focus is directed towards spatial functionality:

A focus on spatial functionality may be unable to capture the particular dynamics of places, thereby making their effective governance more difficult... The construction of institutional spaces of local governance is therefore a contestable process, central to any examination of the relation between the local state and local communities (Raco and Flint 2001, p. 592)

Based on these observations, the authors conclude that it is the degree of congruence between the spaces of governance and the structures that exist within particular places that is decisive regarding the tensions in the democratic system and the development of democratic practices. In this discussion of space capturing of places, the authors are in line with Mohan and Stokke's (2000) warning against the danger of localism. The lack of focus on local social inequalities and power relations do not account for how the local is produced and how it is to be understood. This is, in my view, one of the most important critics of reforms based on the administrative decentralisation perspective. Administrative decentralisation falls within what Taylor (1999) labels traditional state-centred political geography. The conversion of places into spaces is inherent to the bureaucratic nature of state practices and is the only way to achieve administrative efficiency. Furthermore, this line of argument demonstrates the limitations on the part of the state to create local governance structures that are adjusted to local political relations.

Taylor advocates a political geography that develops from the tensions between space and place on different geographical scales where all tensions have influence on other scales because "*the same location can be both place or space depending on whose perspective is involved*" (Taylor 1999, p. 12, italics in original). This brings attention over to the concept of scale, and in particular what Delany and Leitner (1997) calls the "political construction of scale". Geographical scale has traditionally been associated with size or level (Mamadouh, Kramsch and Van der Velde 2004). *Scale as size* refers to the scope of any given scale and include on one side the global (as the largest) and the home or body on the other side (as the smallest). The underlying assumption is that size matters and that the similar processes that take place on different scales differ qualitatively. It is however difficult to delineate the boundaries between different scales. *Scale as level* implies a hierarchical ordering between scales that usually distinguishes between the local as the lowest and the global as the highest. However, both as size and as level, "scale is seen as social organisation in a bounded area" (Mamadouh et al. 2004, p. 457). In contrast to these two understandings, *scale as relation* sees scale as mutually constitutive and co-existing:

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No analysis can be limited to one scale: scales are constructed in relation to each other. The material and discursive production and reproduction of different scales are mutually constitutive and need to be analysed to understand scale as a process... Extra-local relations define the local. The global is part of the local as much as the local is part of the global (Mamadouh et al. 2004, p. 457).

Research employing this understanding of scale is based on the assumption that:

geographical scale is conceptualised as socially constructed rather than ontologically pre-given, and that geographical scales constructed are themselves implicated in the construction of social, economic and political processes (Delany and Leitner 1997, p. 93).

Thus, scale is nothing predetermined that awaits discovery, but is subject to different and conflicting ways of framing and defining reality. The political construction of scale is an on-going and open-ended process that involves more than formal state power. Acknowledging the significance of intra-state relations, the authors also direct attention to power, practices and scale of action among non-state actors. Thus, a constructivist view draws attention to the political construction of scale and actors' scalar strategies (Mamadouh et al. 2004). In the case of decentralisation, focus on scalar strategies directs attention to the construction of new levels of governance (the creation of the municipality in Mali for instance), or the reconstruction of existing levels (deconcentration within the state for instance). Studies of scalar strategies may furthermore be centred on either the construction of a particular scale or the scale strategies of an actor. Combined with a particular focus on place, the study of the construction of a particular scale may shed light on the processes that take place within a limited geographical area and how actors in these areas respond to spatial and scalar strategies from above.

Conclusion

The concepts of space, place and scale bring new dimensions into the discussion of decentralisation, institution-building and state-society relations. The combination of Taylor's concept of place-space tensions with the state-in-society approach integrates analytical geographical concepts in the study of decentralisation. From the point of view of the state, decentralisation constitutes a means to impose spatial functionality on different places through the establishment of uniform local government structures based on an administrative

decentralisation perspective. However, the degree of space-place conversion is dependent upon the institution-building strategy that is chosen. In the case of usurpation, the state micro-manages local political processes through a dense network of deconcentrated state institutions in order to impose its logic locally. If, on the contrary, it is based on non-incorporation, place-based local political actors are more likely to dominate the local political scene because the state is a distant actor that does not seek to impose itself. In the latter cases, place becomes more important and may lead to greater spatial variations in local governance structures between localities. Place is the variable that influence the outcome of general processes in a local context and may, from the point of view of non-state actors, constitute an arena for opposition to state imposition of spatial functionality.

Scale understood as a political construction complements theoretically the anthropology of the state approach developed within the state-in-society perspective, and helps analyse decentralisation as the result of interacting processes at different scales. The identification of the processes leading to the decision to decentralise, as well as the institutions responsible for the elaboration of the reform, normally takes place at national level and may provide information about the underlying assumptions on which the reform is based and why a reform came to be attributed particular institutional characteristics. This allows furthermore to see decentralisation as a result of political strategies at a particular scale and as a process that involves scalar strategies from above. Furthermore, decentralisation involves, in the form of devolution or deconcentration, a reformation of the administrative and political system at multiple scales. When these reforms take place, political actors of different origin and at different levels engage themselves actively in order to assure an institutionalisation of the system that suits them. An analysis of the outcome of decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance directs furthermore attention to the interaction between different levels of the state hierarchy and social pressure experienced on each of these levels as a result of state-society interaction. This may give insight into the alteration of the initial intentions of the reform as conceived by top national political leaders and directs attention to the creation and transformation of place-based political processes. Bayart's notion of political networks, the politics of the belly and reciprocal assimilation of elite groups also entail implicit assumptions about political processes that take place at different scales and how these processes affect each other. Bayart formulates informal mechanisms through which both the conversion of places into spaces occurs (assimilation of elite groups) as well as bottom-up opposition (revolution).

Theoretical framework

Theoretically, place-based politics is furthermore conditioned by political decisions and processes at other scales. Decentralisation reforms based on devolution and deconcentration imply the implementation of an institutional framework that affect the nature of place-based politics by offering opportunities for certain actors while obstructing those of others. Therefore, analysing decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance will necessitate the inclusion of the mutual interdependence between political strategies and processes at multiple scales. The institution-building strategies discussed by Boone are most concerned with states' institution-building strategies and the nature of the state's presence locally. It is however important to be aware that processes of spatial functionality also occur within local administrative units (like a municipality) and is an important part of local politics. The question of autochthony discussed in the 3rd paper is important in many African societies in relation to access to natural resources. In the case of devolution of authority to municipalities, conflicts over natural resources may be created or revitalised and become important stakes over which local groups and villages seek to institutionalise their authority.

The overall objective of this chapter has been to develop a theoretical framework that will facilitate the discussion of the politics of decentralisation and the outcome of decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance. As such, it has contributed to expand the theoretical foundation on which the papers are based and it will help to frame the discussion of the main case-base conclusions and the theoretical implications of the dissertation in the next chapter.

Main conclusions: the politics of decentralisation

The theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter constitutes the point of departure for the current discussion of the main conclusions of the dissertation. After a brief discussion of the division of labour between the papers with regard to research questions and focus of analysis, I draw up the main case-based conclusions based on the analysis in the papers. This will be followed by a final discussion of theoretical and analytical implications that may be of interest outside the Malian case.

Research questions and focus of analysis

The overall purpose of the dissertation has been to examine the politics of the decentralisation reform in Mali and the outcome of decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance. All three papers put the decentralisation reform at the centre of analysis, but they differ with regard to main research questions, focus of analysis and theoretical foundation. At the most elementary level, the division of labour between the three papers may be illustrated schematically as in figure 5.

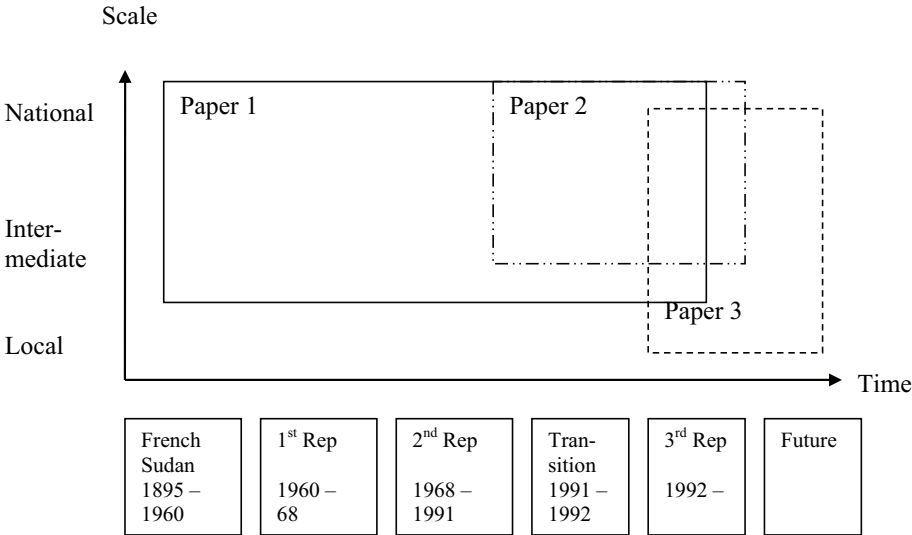


Figure 5. Simplified schematic division of labour between papers.

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The *time axis* refers to the major époques in Malian political history and is consequently divided into a relative time line that corresponds to regime change. It is divided in this way because, as discussed in the 1st paper, local government reforms in Mali correspond by and large to regime change and attempts to build and maintain hegemonic control of the state. The *scale axis* is meant to distinguish between political actors and processes at three broadly defined levels; national, intermediate and local. This way of defining scale is based on the conventional *scale as size* and *scale as level* discussed in the previous section and serves to descriptively distinguish between the main focus of analysis within each of the papers. But, as will be discussed later, it is of more interest for the purpose of the dissertation how decentralisation has led to a reconstruction of different governance scales both nationally and locally.

The 1st paper is concerned with the historicity of political institutions and practices and how changing institution-building strategies is related to a regime's attempt to build and maintain hegemonic control of the state. As such it covers the whole time line from colonialism until the implementation of the 3rd Republic. All levels are brought into the analysis, but it is mainly concerned with the national and intermediate level. The 2nd paper directs attention to the democratic transition and why decentralisation gained such a predominant place in the nation-building strategy of the Konaré regime. It is limited in time to the immediate pre-transition period, the transition itself and the first years of the 3rd Republic. It focuses primarily on the intermediate and national level because it is at these levels that the processes that led to the fall of Traoré are to be found and it is among these groups that the demands for decentralisation was most clearly expressed (from tuareg rebellion and pro-democratic movement). The fact that the new regime of the 3rd Republic originated in the pro-democratic movement that contributed to the fall of Traoré meant furthermore that it brought the new discourse based on anti-Traoré sentiments from an intermediate level in political opposition to the centre of national level politics. The gap between the boxes representing the 1st and 2nd paper in the figure (under the 2nd paper box) indicates a slightly greater concern with local political processes in the 1st paper. Paper 3 is first and foremost concerned with decentralisation and democratisation in local political contexts and the factors that influence the municipality as a governance scale. In time it is limited to the 3rd Republic but discussions concerning the future of decentralisation in Mali are also treated. The gap between the boxes that represent the 1st and 3rd paper (over the 3rd paper box) indicate that political processes at

the national level is of less concern in the latter paper although the influence of national level politics on local politics is discussed

The geography of decentralisation in Mali – case-based conclusions

The politics of decentralisation: democratic transition, institution-building and hegemony

As discussed in the papers, the overthrow of Moussa Traoré in 1991 instigated a political transition that was characterised by political negotiations over the future political system in the country. The transition was managed by a broad-based coalition made up by the military coup-makers, the pro-democratic movement in Bamako and representatives from the Tuareg rebel movements in northern Mali. The absence of the largely discredited former power holders during the transition made it possible to carve out a new political system that was based on demands raised during the democratic transition as well as the rebel movements. In the vocabulary of Bayart, the overthrow of Traoré and the subsequent transition may be labelled a social revolution because parts of the opposition gained hegemonic control over the state. The political project of the Konaré regime came to be based on a new ideological foundation that centred on democratisation and decentralisation. The demands for decentralisation were expressed on numerous arenas during the transition (the National Conference and the Estate-General were the most important in this regard) from a wide range of actors (civil society organisations, farmer's organisations, Tuareg rebel movements). The nature of the political transition brought opposition and regional demands to the centre of national politics and led subsequently to the implementation of multi-party democracy and the adoption of the decentralised governance structure. Therefore, the first conclusion based on the Malian case is:

- 1) Decentralisation came on the political agenda as a result of the particular nature of the democratic transition in Mali. Consequently, it has to be understood as the result of political processes that took place at a particular time in the political history of the country

This conclusion directs the primary analysis towards the political processes that led to the adoption of the decentralisation reform. As discussed in the 2nd paper, the popular demands for decentralisation raised during the transition were captured by the Konaré regime and came

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to be an important component in his post-transition democratisation project. The way in which decentralisation was framed within the wider political discourse on democratisation by the regime was a strategy to legitimise the reform. The active construction of the reform as a symbol of an idealised pre-colonial decentralised Mali should bridge the gap between state and society that had been created under colonialism and during the 1st and 2nd Republic. By transferring power to the municipality, which represents continuity with the pre-colonial Mali, decentralisation represents the mechanism through which state and society are to be reunited. As such,

- 2) Decentralisation represented in the official discourse of the Konaré regime the extension of democratisation to the entire country

But as discussed in the 1st paper, local government reforms in Mali have since colonial times been an important tool in a regime's institution-building strategy. The abolishment of the canton as an administrative structure by the US-RDA was a strategic choice made by the leaders of the 1st Republic (1960-68) to marginalise competing political networks (the *chefs de canton* had supported the rival political party PSP) in order to secure their hegemonic control of the state. The establishment of a three-tier administrative system governed by appointed bureaucrats contributed to expand the state presence locally and was an important tool in the regime's attempt to consolidate its hegemony. Even though the Keita regime based their institution-building on usurpation, there are certain continuities with the power-sharing model on which the 1999 decentralisation reform is based. The proliferation of political practices based on the reciprocal assimilation of elites that developed during both the 1st and 2nd Republic represents continuity:

- 3) The hierarchical redistribution of state resources through political networks based on the logic of the reciprocal assimilation of elite groups still represents, although within a multi-party context, a basic strategy to build and maintain hegemonic control of the state

Local government institution-building represent a mechanism through which regimes have sought to build and maintain hegemonic control of the state. Within this line of arguments it is clear that a narrow focus on the formal-legal characteristics of decentralisation (which is usually the focus of attention within a perspective based on administrative decentralisation) do not provide an adequate framework to examine the outcome of decentralisation in terms of

democratisation. Rather, as has become clear above, it is more fruitful to focus on the wider political context in which decentralisation take place, that is, the “politics of decentralisation”.

The construction of the municipality as scale of governance – spatial functionality

As mentioned previously, the delegation of the elaboration of the decentralisation reform to the MDRI and its attachment directly to the President’s Office assured political control of the process from above, and limited the influence on the process from the traditional state apparatus. This gave the MDRI quite a large manoeuvring space when it came to the elaboration of the institutional design of the reform. The strategy employed by the MDRI, discussed most thoroughly in the 2nd paper, may be divided into two main phase that resulted in a spatial and scalar reconfiguration of the state.

The first phase represents an important innovation when it comes to local government reforms in Mali because the MDRI sought through this process to design a new politico-administrative structure at the local level. The large-scale participatory territorial reorganisation was based on the idea that the existing administrative structure was incongruent with the local political and social reality. The new system, rooted on community solidarity, should therefore assure the creation of homogenous, coherent and functional spaces suitable for local democracy and a governance structure that should assure access to services. Nevertheless, the reform sought to implement the same institutional structure country-wide with no adaptation to local variations. The devolution of authority to the municipalities as well as the deconcentration of state agencies during the second phase of the reform followed the same schema country-wide. Thus, it may be concluded that

- 4) Even though the territorial reorganisation was an attempt to include the dynamics of particular places in the construction of the municipality as a scale of governance, the institutional design of the decentralised governance structure sought to impose spatial functionality

Using geographical terminology, it may be said that the MDRI was the most important space-producer since it was responsible for the elaboration and the implementation of the reform. Nevertheless, the decentralisation reform has, in conjunction with institutional reforms of other state agencies, resulted in a scalar reconfiguration of the state in Mali (as discussed in

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2nd paper). Decentralisation represents a power-sharing model for local governance that has marginalised the state as local decision-maker and opened up the local political space for a range of new actors to participate. However, as discussed in the 3rd paper, the implementation and consolidation of the decentralised governance system has not run as smoothly as anticipated by the MDRI. This reveals one of the fundamental problems regarding decentralisation in Mali and is related to the way the local political context has been taken into account in the design of the reform. This again is caused by a top-down strategy that is based on an administrative decentralisation perspective. In short, the imposition of space does not match local political logics and has created place-space tensions.

Decentralisation and local politics: place-space tensions

The discussion of decentralisation and local politics in the 3rd paper reveals a fundamental problem related to the implementation of decentralisation in Mali. The concept of place-space tension developed by Taylor (1999) may be used to contextualise some of these challenges. The construction of the municipality as a governance scale means that it has become a geographically specific entity where space and place meet. The producers of space (those who define institutions) are however different from what Taylor (1999) labels the makers of place. An analysis of decentralisation from a local point of view (from the makers of place) reveals another story than when it is seen from above because it redirects the attention towards politics from below and how the municipality has become an arena of contested politics. It has become subject to political contestations around the quest for authority and there are many actors that are interested in a particular institutionalisation of the municipality. The lack of coherence between the institutional design of the reform and local political logics indicates that the reform, elaborated and implemented from above (which is difficult to avoid), is based on incorrect premises. Consequently, it may be concluded that

- 5) The decentralised governance institutions have become embedded in existing local political relations and are as such arenas for local struggles over authority and institutionalisation

From this point of view, the MDRI has failed to achieve the goal it set out to fulfil during the territorial reorganisation. The discussion in the 3rd paper shows that it has not been possible to create municipalities that are based on community solidarity. This is so because the MDRI failed to realise that community solidarity only exist on the drawing table and that questions

of identity and power have been more important for the implementation and consolidation of the reform (the question of autochthony for instance).

Decentralisation and democratisation: state-society relations and politics from below

Even though decentralisation in Mali has led to a significant restructuring of the formal institutional landscape in the country, it is not possible to discuss the main purpose of the dissertation without referring to its political dimensions. The answer to the questions related to both *why* decentralisation was carried through in Mali and *how* decentralisation took the form it has taken can not be separated from the particular political situation in the country after the overthrow of Traoré in 1991. However, the political dimensions of decentralisation are not only related to the political situation at national level, but constitute an important factor to take into account in the discussion of the outcome of decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance. It is important to distinguish between processes at different levels, how they interact and the consequences for the outcome of the reform in terms of democratisation.

Democratisation on national level should therefore be interpreted as part of wider political and institutional strategies employed to build and maintain hegemonic control of the state. The expansion of redistributive and clientelistic practices during the 1st and 2nd Republic within the logic of the reciprocal assimilation of elites groups were integral parts of the functioning of the state and have been reproduced and transformed during the 3rd Republic. Therefore, there is a certain degree of continuity in political practices even though the macro-political regime now is based on formal democratic principles. As such it may be concluded that:

- 6) The reproduction of neo-patrimonial practices and redistribution through political networks is not so much a threat to the survival of the formal democratic institutions as it is to the democratic content of these institutions

This means furthermore that as long as there are enough resources, redistribution will strengthen the legitimacy of the formal democracy and assure political stability at the national level. A crisis in the redistributive system may however undermine the legitimacy of the democratic regime. The introduction of macro-political democratic institutions in the early

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1990s and increased power-sharing through decentralisation should therefore be understood as part of and circumscribed by a broader strategy of national political leaders to build and maintain political hegemony. This means that decentralisation may be seen as a strategy of assimilation by way of granting local and national political networks access to political power and resources. This was particularly important with regard to meeting the demands for more autonomy raised by the Tuareg rebel movements in Northern Mali.

The strong link between democracy and decentralisation within the political discourse of the Konaré regime represented an ideological break with previous one-party traditions and made possible the introduction of a decentralised governance structure. The implementation of the municipality after the local elections in 1999 represented the manifestation of the expansion of the democratisation process to the local level and it shifted the balance of power locally away from state appointed bureaucrats towards elected municipal councillors. But as discussed in the 3rd paper, the creation of the municipality as a politico-administrative unit during the territorial reorganisation was largely a product of local power struggles rooted in local political constellations and identities. Local actors engaged themselves actively during this process because it was seen as an opportunity to get access to economic resources and political power. In terms of democratisation it may be said that:

- 7) Even though national level democratisation has opened up the local political space for a range of new actors to participate on a formal basis and influence local decision-making, the municipality has in many cases become an arena for political struggle over authority and the institutionalisation of local politics

The reconstruction of the local political space based on existing social and political relations and identities may in a long-term perspective undermine the democratic potential of decentralisation. Local elite capture may undermine formal participation and lead to a situation where influence is canalised through clientelistic networks that may lead to exclusion of certain groups. In addition to the politics-from-below arguments presented in the 3rd paper, the impact of the state on local democratisation is highlighted as important throughout the papers. One of the fundamental problems in the conceptualisation of the reform on the part of the MDRI is related to the underlying principles on which the territorial reorganisation was based. As discussed in the 2nd paper, the overall objective of the territorial reorganisation was the creation of municipalities of suitable sizes for the management of local

affairs that had legitimacy among those who were to inhabit them. However, the focus on “community solidarity” and the creation of “viable local spaces” based on existing social, cultural and political relations failed to realise the conflicting nature of political relations at the local level (discussed in paper 3). Rather than assuring local community solidarity the reform has in many cases intensified and catalysed political tensions locally. Another important threat to the future of the municipalities in Mali is the lack of any real devolution from the central state. This may undermine local democracy and lead to a dislocation of the centre of power away from the municipal institutions towards the state administration (recentralisation) or to groups outside the formal political arena (informalisation). Both of these processes threaten to undermine the democratic potential of decentralisation in a local context in a long-term perspective. Furthermore, this means that formal democratic structures may be maintained at the national level (in its minimalist form) at the same time as the state undermines democratisation at the local level

The politics of decentralisation: theoretical implications

As discussed at the beginning of the theoretical framework, a major assumption within international discourses on decentralisation is that it promises (theoretically) to promote democratisation and advance development. And the Malian case shows that decentralisation has to a certain extent brought about positive changes locally in terms of democratisation. Nevertheless, based on the conclusions above, it is clear that an assumed positive link between democratisation and decentralisation is too simple. Rather, one of the conclusions learned from the Malian case that should constitute the point of departure for any study of decentralisation is that:

- 1) The outcome of decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance should be analysed as a function of state-society relations

The theoretical framework elaborated in the previous section has been fruitful with regard to the examination of the outcome of decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance. The theories developed by Boone and Hutchcroft have served to analyse changes in institution-building strategies over time within both the administrative and political sphere. This has helped to shed light on the mechanisms through which the state has sought to structure and control state-society relations. Bayart’s theory about state formation has added a

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further dimension to the theories about institution-building in an African context. His contribution to the analysis of decentralisation is related to his conceptualisation of the internal functioning of the African state and how the state seeks to assimilate political networks and link the “highest of the high with the lowest of the low”. Bayart’s theories frame institution-building strategies within a broader context of state formation and hegemonic struggles to control the state in an African context. In this light,

- 2) Studies of decentralisation should consider the manner in which decentralisation is part of institution-building strategies that are employed to build and maintain hegemonic control of the state

This implies that the primary focus of the analysis of decentralisation should be moved away from what Bratton and van de Walle (1997) calls the formal-legalistic characteristics of institutions toward informal political networks within and around formal political institutions. The observation made by Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor (2003) that the establishment of democratic institutions not necessarily implies the spread of democratic politics, means furthermore that state-society relations based on elite assimilation may well exist within a formal macro-democratic regime. Therefore, redistribution through political networks may assure the survival of formal democratic regimes because it contributes to political stability. However, lack of resources may undermine the legitimacy of the formal-democratic regime and as such constitute a threat to democratic consolidation in a long-term perspective. Therefore, during periods of changing institution-building strategies, it is necessary to pay attention to the ways in which political institutions develop and how political practices are transformed and reproduced.

Democratic consolidation is however not only a question about the functioning of national political institutions. The state-in-society approach contributes to an increased understanding of democratisation by directing attention to the different levels of the state where social pressure is felt and to processes that take place in the periphery (in local contexts). As the Malian case shows, the state has a certain autonomy and capacity to impose reforms from above. By disaggregating the state, the state-in-society approach however directs the focus of attention to the outcome of policy reforms in local political contexts as the function of state-society relations. This implies that the capacity of the state to undertake change through policy reforms is dependent on its relation to society. In local political contexts there are

several relations that may alter the initial intentions of a reform. As discussed in the 3rd paper, the creation of the municipalities in Mali was based on existing social and political relations and what I called “reconstruction from below”. Local identities rooted in the dichotomy between new-comers and late-comers were particularly important in this regard. As a result, the decentralised institutions have in many areas become embedded in local political relations and turned into arenas on which local political struggle over authority take place. This has in turn undermined the democratic potential of decentralisation and made the municipality an arena for the creation and transformation of patron-client relations. On a more general level, this means that non-state actors have considerable influence on the outcome of policy reforms. This influence is however uncoordinated and dependent on contextual local political and social relations. All in all it may be said that

- 3) Decentralisation from above may bring about positive changes locally in terms of democratisation, but the outcome of the reform is mediated by state-society relations and place-specific conditions

The observation that the outcome of decentralisation is partly the result of state-society relations and the particularity of the local political context means furthermore that there will be spatial variations in local governance structures. So even though the formal decentralised institutions that are established are the same, the outcome of the reform is mediated by place-specific characteristics.

While the state-in-society approach directs attention to the relation between the state and non-state actors, focus on intra-governmental relations points to how process within the state threatens to undermine local democratic governance in a long-term perspective in several respects. Opposition to devolution from ministries and the lack of transfer of economic resources to the municipalities may render the decentralised institutions empty of any significant functions at all. This may lead to both a relative transfer of power locally towards the administration (recentralisation) and new informal arenas of decision-making that marginalise the role of the municipality (informalisation). The proliferation of clientelistic practices locally originating from state-sponsored development schemes may furthermore undermine democratisation locally. An implication for other studies of decentralisation based on this line of argument is that:

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- 4) It is important to consider how processes within the state both at national and local level influence the functioning of local government institutions both formally and informally

In addition to this it is in my view equally important to analyse the relation between decentralisation and democratisation from a local point of view. As discussed in the 3rd paper, the decentralisation reform has opened up the local political space for a range of new actors to engage themselves in local politics. This was the case during the territorial reorganisation but still, several years after the implementation of the reform, there are continuous political struggles over authority and the institutionalisation of the local political arena. The outcome of this process will depend on the social and political place-specific particularities in any given context, but there are indications that the process has not generated the desired outcome in terms of local democracy and participation. This indicate that

- 5) An analysis of the outcome of decentralisation in terms of local democratic governance should be sensitive to the transformation of place-specific social and political relations

The above discussion indicates that the idea of an assumed positive correlation between decentralisation and democratisation is too simple. The reason why such an idea has developed, in my view, is that it is based on an underlying administrative decentralisation perspective. Within this perspective, both decentralisation and democratisation are understood in narrow technocratic and institutional terms. Rather, as the title of the dissertation indicates, it is more fruitful to choose a political angle in the examination of decentralisation in terms of democratisation. A political decentralisation perspective directs attention to informal political relations, broadly defined governance structures, political processes at multiple scales, the political construction of governance scale, institution-building strategies, the internal functioning of the African state, and state-society relations.

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Paper 1 The historicity of political institutions and practices – democratic consolidation and political continuity in Mali

Democratic consolidation has been at the heart of discussions regarding the survival of the regimes that went through democratic transitions in Africa in the early 1990s. Two dominant theoretical approaches within the consolidation debate, the institutional and the cultural tradition, have made substantive contributions to the understanding of democratic consolidation as a “mutually reinforcing processes of *institutionalisation* (at a macro level) and *legitimation* (at a micro level)” (Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi 2005, p. 27, italics in original). Although this focus on the rules and implementation of macro-political structures (the institutional perspective) and on whether or not democracy has any meaning to people (the cultural approach) is important, this article will argue that these perspectives do not fully take into account the historicity of and the mutual interdependence between political institutions and political practices that are necessary to fully analyse the complexity of democratic consolidation in Africa. The main argument is that a focus on the historicity of institutions and practices with particular emphasis on institution-building strategies and informal political processes will allow for a more context-specific analysis of democratic consolidation.

Mali constitutes an interesting case when discussing democratic consolidation in an African context. The country has come a long way in establishing macro-political democratic institutions after its transition to a multiparty political system in 1992. The organisation of three legislative and presidential elections (1992, 1997 and 2002) and the implementation of a comprehensive decentralisation reform in 1999 have contributed to the portrayal of Mali as a democratic success-story both by academics, politicians, NGOs, and international development aid donors. The democratisation efforts have been strengthened by continuous political commitment to reforms at top national level during the successive regimes since 1992. Various political reforms have opened up the political space for new actors at both national and local level and have reduced state intervention and the abusive powers of state

agencies. The country has also experienced a political stability that is qualitatively different from its neighbouring countries. Interpreted within the institutional perspective, the conclusion that Mali has come quite far in regard to democratic consolidation is thus not very controversial.

This article presents an alternative analysis of the democratisation process in Mali. The overall argument is that even though Mali has made major achievements in the implementation of macro-political democratic structures, continuities in political practices undermine the consolidation of these institutions. The article highlights the historicity of and the interdependence between political institutions and political practices, starting from the French colonial administrative and municipal policies and their effects on the independence struggle and indirectly on the development of post-colonial institutions and practices. This analysis of the interdependent development of institutions and practices builds the foundation for a critical evaluation of current democratic consolidation in Mali.

Democratic institutions and democratic practices

Debates on democratic consolidation are, according to Bratton and van de Walle (1997) first and foremost about the durability of democracy. Studies of democratic transitions have commonly focused on electoral turnovers as a test of democratic consolidation. In order to avoid this “fallacy of electoralism”, Bratton and van de Walle (1997) draw a distinction between the consolidation of democratic rule and the survival of democratic regimes. Their argument is that the longer democracy survives (the regular convening of multiparty elections and respect of political rights), the likelier is consolidation (institutionalisation of democratic practices). However, the observation that consolidation is likelier the longer a democracy survives does not say much about the particular processes and mechanisms that make consolidation possible. Likewise, it does not account for cases where consolidation does not take place even though the formal democratic macro-political institutions are upheld. This position is in line with Harbeson’s (2001) general observation that contemporary democratisation theory focuses almost exclusively on horizontal relations at national level. His view that local political processes are excluded as important in themselves is echoed in Pierre and Peters’ (2000) call to go beyond a sterile view of political institutions and their relation to the surrounding society. They argue that the concept of governance should reorient

the attention from the formal politico-administrative system at the national level towards more informal political processes within the state and in state-society relations at different levels.

A useful point of departure for such contextual analyses of consolidation is the distinction made by Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor (2003) between democratic institutions and democratic politics. Their main argument is that the establishment of democratic institutions not necessarily implies the spread of democratic politics. This means, for instance, that even though democratic political institutions are put in place, as they are in Mali, it does not automatically mean that the actual politics and functioning of these institutions are becoming more democratic. Reforms of political institutions may affect the range of possible political practices that may occur at any time (opening up or closing political space for certain political practices) while political practices may influence the internal functioning of the political institutions. The spread of undemocratic political practices within formally democratic institutions may thus undermine the prospects for consolidation. Bringing informal political processes at different levels into the analysis directs attention towards this mutual interdependence between political institutions and political practices.

The democratic transitions in Africa in the early 1990s resulted in the most far-reaching transformation of the political organisation of African states since independence. In their politico-institutional approach to transition, Bratton and van de Walle (1997) state that they are less concerned with the formal-legal characteristics of the institutions as such. Rather, they focus on the existence of informal political networks within formal political institutions, which they see as particularly relevant where clan and clientelistic relations influence to a large degree the bureaucratic functioning of formal-legal institutions. Particularly in phases of transition, it is important to focus on political actors that are struggling over the content of policies and the design of institutions. They engage in the creation and redesign of institutions because they know that “institutions create authoritative precedents that can relieve them of the burden of constantly fighting the same old political battles over and over again” (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 42). The authors thus draw attention to the processes and institutions internal to existing political regimes and base themselves on the observation that a “country’s political prospects derive directly from its own inherited practices” (Bratton and van de Walle 1997, p. 41). In considering the contribution of these domestic political factors to regime transition they direct attention to the “intermediate institutions that shape political strategies, the ways institutions structure relations of power among contending groups in society, and

especially the focus on the *process* of politics and policy-making within given institutional parameters” (Thelen and Steinmo 1992, p. 7, in Bratton and van de Walle 1997, p. 42, emphasis in original).

This is why, according to Bratton and van de Walle (1997), focus on formal political institutions within countries where rule of law is weak or non-existent is not very relevant. Routine procedures for politics exist, but the most important rules are informal: the “real institutions of politics in Africa are the informal relations of loyalty and patronage established between “big men” and their personal followers” (Bratton and van de Walle 1997, p. 43-44). Neopatrimonialism is thus seen as the key institutional characteristic of African regimes: the chief executive maintains authority through personal patronage rather than through ideology or class. Relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade the formal political and administrative system and leaders occupy bureaucratic offices less to perform public service than to acquire personal wealth and status. It is within such neopatrimonial regimes that political institutions have evolved in Africa and this shapes both politics and political transitions. This leads them to a quite pessimistic conclusion about the prospects for democratic consolidation since “current political situations are national permutations on a theme of regime change in a context of neopatrimonial continuity” (Bratton and van de Walle 1997, p. 278).

The approach advocated by Bratton and van de Walle offers an important framework within which to analyse regime transitions in Africa, but their preoccupation with national level political institutions and practices downplay other levels of governance. Fortunately, alternative studies of institution-building strategies and local responses to these direct attentions to other levels of governance than the national.

Institution-building strategies

Echoing Bratton and van de Walle’s (1997) concern with the design of institutions, Boone (2003) draws attention to administrative and municipal reforms as political tools in a regime’s strategy for political control. Thus, any analysis of institution-building strategies and the introduction of new governance institutions at the local level pay close attention to the rulers’ attempts to build and maintain their political hegemony (Boone 2003). This does not mean that ordinary people and rural areas may not benefit from such reforms, but that these benefits

largely have to be seen as by-products of broader political processes in which rulers seek to assure their political survival.

The central question in Boone's analytical framework is the variations that exist in strategies vis-à-vis rural societies and the explanatory factors behind these variations. Emphasising the degree of centralisation of state political and administrative structures, the willingness of regimes to accommodate rural elites and the degree of interventionism, Boone (2003) sets up a two-dimensional framework to compare institutional links between core and periphery. The *spatial* dimension, on the one hand, pays attention to how state agencies and institutions are arranged within the national space, understood in terms of concentration and deconcentration of the governmental apparatus. Within the *processural* dimension, on the other hand, the de facto distribution of authority between central and local actors is subject to closer scrutiny, i.e. the degree of devolution.

Institution-building strategies may therefore be classified along two dimensions: the spatial concentration/deconcentration of the state apparatus; and the centralisation/devolution of political and economic authority. Four different institution-building strategies may be derived from this (Boone 2003, p. 360):

- *Power-sharing* within a deconcentrated institutional structure where authority is devolved. A dense network of state and party-state institutions in rural areas provide the infrastructure for devolution of control over state resources and prerogatives to rural elites (de facto or de jure);
- *Usurpation* within a deconcentrated institutional structure where authority is centralised. A dense network of state institutions in rural areas provide infrastructure for state agents to micromanage local political processes. It aims at disrupting established local political processes and the displacement of rural elites;
- *Administrative occupation* within a concentrated institutional structure where authority is centralised. State agents govern localities from strategic outposts and are not influenced by local elites;
- *Non-incorporation* within a concentrated institutional structure where authority is devolved. State agents are as distant from rural localities as in the previous strategy, but they do not seek to exercise authority locally. Localities are left to their own devices, and the state does not seek neither to engage nor impose

Boone's (2003) main argument is based on the observation that differences in power between social actors in rural areas to a large degree offers explanations for differences in institution-building strategies. Reforms of institutions in the African countryside are thus based on political rather than administrative considerations. The results are shaped by struggles within rural societies and between rural actors and the state. In a broader sense, the effectiveness of reforms is determined largely by the politico-economic context in which the reforms are carried out. And this is to a large degree linked to the disjuncture between the functioning of formal institution and the real politics of how state agencies and institutions work.

In addition to these spatial and processural dimensions, I will argue that the addition of a *temporal* dimension will bring added value to the analysis of institution-building strategies. As will be elaborated in the Malian case, institutional reforms, which may take place in periods of transition, draws attention to the historical legacy of previous institutions and the internal practices of these institutions.

The historicity of political practices

Bayart's (1991) calls for a focus on political historicity in Africa and the need to analyse the political trajectory of the state over a *longue durée*. While Bratton and van de Walle provide valuable analyses of political actors at the national level and Boone draws attention to the institution-building strategies pursued by political regimes and how the result depends on power differences among rural actors, none of them are explicit on the historicity of the relation between national and local actors and institutions. Likewise, it can be observed that the general state-in-society approach directs attention towards the interaction between the state and different segments of society in explaining patterns of dominance, maintenance of status quo and political changes (Degnbol 1999; Migdal 1994). However, it is necessary to go beyond this state-in-society approach to include a "*generative* conception of the formation of state structures in relation to specific historical conditions and contemporary influences" (Bilgin and Morton 2002, p. 73, italics in original). Building on Gramsci's concept of the pursuit of hegemony, Bilgin and Morton (2002) thus advocates an approach that focuses on its social basis and how social forces relate to the development of states. This underlines the necessity of employing a historicised approach that takes into account the particularities of a state formation.

Bayart (1993) proposes such a method that takes into account the historicity of the modern African state by identifying different scenarios of its construction. As a point of departure Bayart “formulates the hypothesis that the postcolonial African state is characterised by a hegemonic crises and hence, an intensified struggle for hegemony by different social groups” (Stokke 1994, p. 126, italics in original). This hegemonic struggle seeks a relatively stable balance of power between these groups and their regional or ethnic counterparts and can follow different scenarios. Two ideal types exist according to Bayart (1993, p. 119): “firstly that of conservative modernisation whereby already established groups maintain their power... - and secondly, that of social revolution, which brings about the downfall of the dominant group and the rise of at least a section of the subordinated group”. In actual historical situations however, compromises are made between these two ideal types. An intermediate scenario is thus identified as the *reciprocal assimilation of elites*. It refers to a process where political power is negotiated and achieved through compromises between regional, political, economical and cultural segments of the elites (Stokke 1994). The struggle between factions is played out within the framework of the state in accordance with the logic of the reciprocal assimilation of elites. Within this system, political entrepreneurs are given the opportunity as leaders of political networks (Bayart 1991; Stokke 1994).

The central dynamic aspects of the reciprocal assimilation of elite groups, with the incorporation of subordinate social groups, are located within political networks. Large parts of subordinate social groups as well as the political leadership in Africa belong to such networks. The solidarity is based on both a horizontal and a vertical axis: “They link the ‘lowest of the low’ with the ‘highest of the high’ through the agencies of continuous news, requests, gifts and far from disinterested symbolic celebrations” (Bayart 1989, p. 211). This system of struggle between different factions is at the heart of postcolonial politics, and is a central dynamic aspect that links society to the postcolonial state. A central mechanism characterising this linking process is captured in Bayart’s notion of the *politics of the belly*. This concept sheds light on the internal functioning of the African state and the state’s relation to and dependence on society. The politics of the belly describe a process of resource accumulation which takes place through straddling between employment in the state and private investments (Hetland 2000). Forms of clientelism and patronage are then used to distribute public resources in exchange of political support used in order to establish and maintain political loyalty bonds. According to Bilgin and Morton (2002, p. 74), the politics of the belly constitute thus the historicised representation of the post-colonial state, i.e. “the

predatory pursuit ... of wealth and power that, as a mode of governance, takes historically specific forms appropriate to the post-colonial state in Africa”.

Based on these brief theoretical remarks, the remaining sections of the article examine the democratisation process in Mali. The main argument here is that political institutions and practices are the result of particular historical trajectories. The historicity of the mutual interdependence between institutions and practices provide the basic framework within which to interpret current efforts of democratisation. Here it can be observed that institution-building based on usurpation has constituted the basic hegemonic strategy to control the postcolonial state in Mali until the democratic transition in the early 1990s. Through reforms of administrative and municipal structures, political leaders have sought to extend state control locally and to build support from political networks based on the reciprocal assimilation of elites. The administrative reforms based on usurpation undertaken by the leaders of the 1st Republic for instance, were rooted in hegemonic struggles to control the postcolonial state and were conditioned by French colonial administrative policy. These institution-building strategies opened up the political space for the expansion of corrupt and clientelistic practices that influenced the internal functioning of the post-colonial state. Within the current multiparty and decentralised context, the reproduction and transformation of these practices do not pose so much a threat to the maintenance of a minimalist democracy as to the democratic content of these institutions.

Colonialism and the rise of political networks

Administrative and municipal institutions have played an important role in the political history of independent Mali as national political leaders have sought to build and maintain their hegemony. The struggle to control state power was institutionalised before independence through the political parties *Union Soudanais – Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (US-RDA), backed by bureaucrats and merchants, and *Parti Soudanais Progressiste* (PSP), mainly supported by rural elites rising to power during the colonial period. US-RDA established itself as the dominant political party and gained control over the Malian state at independence under the presidency of Modibo Keita. The administrative and municipal reforms undertaken by US-RDA during late colonialism and the 1st Republic (1960-68) sought to marginalise rural elites by abolishing the local administrative structure set up by French colonial authorities. The canton and the tribus on which France had based their indirect rule were replaced by a

three-tier administrative system giving more power to the representatives of the central state. The tendency after independence was thus, in Boone's terminology, a move away from a system mainly based on non-incorporation to a larger degree of usurpation. The struggle between US-RDA and the PSP and the subsequent development of post-colonial institutions and practices was to a large degree pre-conditioned by French colonial policy.

French colonial authorities in West Africa built their rule in rural areas to a large degree on various forms of pre-existing political structures. Among these were successive feudal empires in the immediate pre-colonial period that, according to Lange (2000), was the result of large invasions from the 17th to the 19th century. Other less state-like political structures during the pre-colonial period included, according to Meillassoux (1970), independent villages loosely assembled into chiefdoms. French indirect rule in both chiefdoms and empires was gradually institutionalised through the creation of administrative units named *cantons*. As leaders of these structures they either reinstated local aristocratic families marginalised as a result of the conquest of the Muslim reformer El Haj Umar in the middle of the 19th century or handed power to soldiers that had served in the French armies. In areas predominantly inhabited by nomads, the *tribus* was the equivalent administrative structure to the *canton* in sedentary areas (Sow 1989). While the *canton* was subdivided into villages, the *tribus* was composed of nomadic fractions based on kinship. On a higher administrative level, the *canton* and the *tribus* were regrouped in subdivisions or in administrative posts, which on their side made up the *cercle*, the highest administrative level during colonialism.

The policy of *assimilation* during early colonisation led, according to Conklin (1997), to a concentration of power in French hands and the reduction of the power of rural elites. A policy shift during the 1920s towards *association* meant that French colonial power put more weight on working through indigenous political structures. This change from administrative occupation to non-incorporation as institution-building strategy was rooted in calls for equality with French citizens by African soldiers serving during World War I as well as French civilising ideas. The policy of association offered local elites new opportunities for accumulation of power and wealth (Conklin 1997). They were for insistence granted access to agricultural technology and capital resources with the aim of introducing new farming methods. Corruption and excessive labour demands became widespread among the 2200 *canton* chiefs in French West Africa. But as long as they collected taxes and delivered labour demanded by the local French commandant, they operated quite independently.

In contrast to rural areas, French authorities established a range of new municipal institutions in the largest urban settlements, of which there were only 13 at independence and 19 in 1991 (Sow, pers. comm.³⁰). Through the successive establishment of these urban institutions, the autonomy of locally elected authorities increased (Traoré 1991), and hence also the degree of power-sharing. Consultative organs played a certain role in the *commune mixte* (1918-1947) and the *commune de moyen exercice* (1947-1960). With the establishment of the *commune de plein exercice* after the municipal reform in 1955, the municipal council was accorded increased autonomy vis-à-vis the colonial administration particularly in budgeting and in tax-raising activities.

Although the French policy of association involved the transfer of a limited portion of authority, the administrative and municipal system established during colonialism reflected the colonial authorities' aim of maintaining political control (Sow 1989; Conklin 1997). This colonial administrative and municipal policy altered the existing local power structures, but existing pre-colonial clientelistic relations continued, according to Lange (2000), to form the underlying networks of political relations. Particularly in rural areas, French policy gave opportunities to certain groups (the canton and tribus chiefs) at the expense of others (Meillassoux 1970). At the time of independence the social structures in rural areas were divided into competing local families: those who held canton chieftaincy and served as instruments of the colonial power and those excluded from such power. French administrative policy based on non-incorporation thus created the necessary political space for local political networks to maintain a certain degree of autonomy to uphold their power base. In the towns, particularly in Bamako, the merchants and the bureaucracy (government employees, business clerks, medical personnel, and trade unionists recruited) gained strength. These urban groups later came to play an important role in national-regional coalition-building as part of the struggle to gain political hegemony.

Usurpation and assimilation: the redistributive quest for hegemony during the 1st Republic

The hegemonic struggle between US-RDA and PSP to control the postcolonial state thus reflected transformations taking place during the colonial period. The US-RDA strategy was

³⁰ National Director, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Security, 18 September 1998.

based on assimilation through coalition-building as well as administrative and municipal reforms that at the same time sought to marginalise competing networks while extending state control locally.

PSP, enjoying the support of both the colonial administration and the canton chiefs in French Sudan, had been the dominant political party until the elections in 1957 (Diarrah 1986; Conklin 1997). The non-intervention strategy of the colonial administration during the 1957 elections was an important factor in determining the decline of the PSP. US-RDA, on the other hand, given its hostility to the French administration, had been active in forging extensive support networks, among others with merchants and bureaucrats (Martin 1976). Furthermore, the success of US-RDA also has to be attributed to its efforts to incorporate existing regional coalitions in core areas of the country that already had long traditions of state-building based on cultural assimilation of other ethnic groups. Zolberg's (1967) observation that the growth of the party was linked to its successful integration of historical regions centred on towns such as Segou, Timbuktu and Mopti underlined the important assimilation strategy that underpinned the post-colonial state. The post-colonial state thus took the form of a "confederacy of regions represented by ambassadors at the centre" (Zolberg 1967: 460). In Bamako, for instance, the 11 local branches of the US-RDA were organised around wards that used to be ethnically homogenous, underlining the territorial basis of political life in these neighbourhoods. The nation-building strategy of the 1st republic combined the territorial federalism aspect with the ancient tradition of previous nation-building experiences and the urban traditions of old cities, within a Marxist-Leninist discourse emphasising assimilation of ethnic groups. According to Wolpin (1975), the success of Keita was thus based on the fact that they managed to incorporate occupational and trade unions as well as ethnic and regional power-brokers into their party to a larger degree than did PSP.

After its electoral victory in 1957, US-RDA sought the double objective of marginalising competing political networks and extending the reach of the state (Diarrah, 1986). On national level this led to the creation of a nationalised economic sector and the strengthening of the administration's planning capacity (Meillassoux 1970; Hall, Magassa, Ba and Hodsén 1991). The steps taken to marginalise competing networks were particularly visible in the party's administrative reforms. After the disappearance of French West Africa as a political entity between 1956 and 1960, US-RDA gained control over the Territorial Assembly (Diarrah 1986). While French colonial policy to a large degree was based on non-incorporation, the

US-RDA based itself on usurpation as their main institution-building strategy. This led to the abolishment of the canton and tribus as administrative units, which consequently, led to the marginalisation of the political supporters of PSP.

The colonial administrative structure was replaced by a three-tier administrative system; 6 *regions* (Kayes, Bamako, Sikasso, Ségou, Mopti and Gao) were organised into 42 *cercles* which, on their part, were further subdivided into *arrondissements* (Sécréteriat général de la présidence de la république 1987; Imperato 1987; Sow 1989). The replacement of the canton /tribus chiefs with state appointed bureaucrats within the *arrondissement* led, according to Sow (1989), to an extension of the presence of state structures locally and to a reduction in the influence of local elites on the state apparatus. This three-tier system, with certain modifications, constituted the basic administrative structure until the implementation of the decentralisation reform in 1999.

The institutional set-up in rural areas was designed to extend the state presence locally and was an important tool in the regime's attempt to consolidate its hegemony. The function of the leader of the circumscription (at all three levels; the *gouverneur de région*, the *commandant de cercle* and the *chef d'arrondissement*) represented, generally, an extension of a system based on maintenance of public order, the resolution of conflicts and tax collection (Sow 1989). In the urban municipalities on the other hand, redistributive and clientelistic practices rooted in the institutional set-up of the state increased as the result of the regime's need to maintain its political hegemony. The strong political support for the Keita regime in urban areas led to the inclusion of the mayors into the dominant political network at national level through patron-client relations (Wolpin 1975; Traoré, pers. comm.³¹). In addition to holding the position as mayors, they were also members of the National Assembly and secretary-generals of the local sections of the party. Throughout the 1st Republic, patronage was redistributed both regionally and ethnically in order to uphold political support. Economic resources were canalised to local power brokers and further down to large parts of the urban population. Corruption among public servants, in the form of speculation in real estate, investments in taxi enterprises, and illegal activities in foreign and domestic trade as well as other forms of corruption related to their administrative occupancy, was accepted by the regime based on its need for political support to uphold its hegemony.

³¹ Association Avenir – Espace – Sociétés, Observatoire de Foncier au Mali, 27 September 1998 and 4 February 1999.

The marginalisation of competing political networks through administrative reforms and the assimilation of elite groups through redistribution of state resources in exchange for political support led to the development of a regime where clientelistic practices within the formal institutions of the state came to be dominant. This strategy to consolidate the regime's hegemony was successful as long as there were enough resources to redistribute. But as soon as the regime ran into economic problems, hegemonic challenges from competing networks came to the surface. This provided the basis for the military takeover on November 19 1968, which enjoyed widespread popular support (Smith 1998). While being a dramatic regime change, there was a large degree of continuity between the regime of Keita and that of Moussa Traoré (1968-1991) regarding institution-building strategies and redistributive practices.

The 2nd republic – reciprocal assimilation and cooptation within the one-party state

Usurpation constituted an important institution-building to maintain political hegemony during the Traoré regime, as the regime sought to enhance its influence locally by strengthening the role of existing administrative structures, through party structures and by co-opting other organisations. Redistribution of resources through political networks constituted a prime strategy to maintain political hegemony.

In the first phase of his regime, lasting until 1979, Traoré ruled through the military committee *Comité Militaire de Libération Nationale* (CMLN) (Makalou and Diarrah 1995; Smith 1998). The regime sought to control other political forces by banning political parties and by seizing control over organisations in society (e.g. women's, student's, farmer's organisations). During this phase, and later also during the 2nd phase (from 1979), when a gradual transition to civilian rule started with the creation of the political party *Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien* (UDPM), the regime assured its domination at all administrative levels through the party structure; in the villages (committees), the arrondissement (sub-section), the district (section), and at the national level (the Central Executive Bureau).

According to Fay (1995), the nature and mode of power exercise from independence to 1979 was based on the principles of redistribution of state controlled resources at the expense of merchants and the peasantry. This systematic pillaging of the state sector, in Fay's words (1995), formed the basis for hierarchical redistribution through political networks targeting important segments of the population and religious groups. Overlapping administrative, political, religious and commercial clientelistic networks stretched from the national to the local level and structured large parts of society around personalised power and wealth. Of particular importance in strengthening the clientelistic networks of CMLN members was, according to Smith (1998), the diversions of international aid that took place in relation to the droughts in the early 1970s. Important funds were diverted for personal and political use, symbolised by the "Palaces of drought" built in Bamako during this period.

In addition to the above-mentioned strategies, another important institutional reform sought to increase state control at the local level. The decentralisation reform of 1977 was institutionalised at the local level through the establishment of two distinct structures (Sow 1989; République du Mali 1992; ag Hairy, pers. comm.³²). The partly elected *village/fraction councils* were formally responsible for the development plan of their circumscription while appointed state employees from various technical services and other relevant public instances made up the *development committees*, with the responsibility of planning and implementing development projects. Even though this reform was a step towards institutionalising the participation of the population in local affairs, the political situation during Traoré's regime did not favour any real power-sharing mechanisms with actors outside the state apparatus (Sow 1989; Diarra, pers. comm.³³; Traoré, pers. comm.;ould Ganfou, pers. comm.³⁴). The public servants in the development committees exercised considerable influence over the councils based on their thorough knowledge of the administrative system and their loyalty to central state authorities (ag Hairy, pers. comm.). In addition, the councils were presided over and strongly influenced by the chef d'arrondissement (Hall et al. 1991). Rather than increasing participation the reform thus led to an extension of the role of state institutions locally.

³² Former chef d'arrondissement, commandant de cercle, gouverneur de région and ambassador, 25 November 1998.

³³ Deputy manager, Mission de Décentralisation et Reformes Institutionnelles, 7 Septembre 1998.

³⁴ Head of Provisional Municipal Office, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Security, 11 February 1999. He is currently minister in the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Local Communities.

As a result of the redistribution strategy, particularly to urban-based elites, the Traoré regime managed initially to maintain a certain degree of political stability. This is why the democratic changes of the 1990s could not stem from other causes than the crisis in the redistributive clientelistic system itself. According to Makalou and Diarra (1995) the economic crises led to the growth of a broad pro-democratic movement in the capital Bamako from the late 1980s.

Hegemonic crisis, transition and democratisation

The redistribution crises of the Traoré regime spurred counter-hegemonic mobilisation on two fronts. The pro-democratic movement in Bamako based its opposition to Traoré on demands for democracy while the rebel movements in Northern Mali based themselves on accusations of negligence of these regions and demands for increased self-government. After several days of popular upheavals in Bamako, the crises culminated in the coup d'état led by the lieutenant Amadou Toumani Touré on March 26 1991. ADEMA (Alliance pour la démocratie au Mali), one of the key organisations in the pro-democratic movement, gained an absolute majority in the National Assembly, and its leader, Alpha Oumar Konaré, was elected president. The extensive democratic reforms that were undertaken in Mali after the legislative and presidential elections on June 8 1992 can to a large degree be attributed to the nature of this transition.

First, according to Nzouankeu (1993), Mali is the only country in Africa where a violent upheaval led to the downfall of the regime prior to the democratic transition period. Thus there was no firm opposition to reforms from the old elite of the previous regime. This created the necessary political space for a new political discourse negating the old regime and made it possible to embark upon extensive reforms of the macro-political structures (Vengroff 1993). Secondly, the broad-based composition of the interim regime provided legitimacy to the transition period. Most notably, the anti-Traoré coalition integrated the coup-makers in collaboration with the pro-democratic and rebel movements, assured the interim government during the political transition.

The anti-Traoré character of the interim government made it politically necessary and possible to elaborate a new political course in Mali. The National Conference organised in August 1991 was the most important arena in this regard. It was a forum for negotiation between a range of political groups that included national and regional representatives of

political parties, religious interests, student and worker organisations and other civil society organisations. The recommendations for increased democratisation in the final document of the conference resulted in the elaboration of a new electoral code and the adoption of a new constitution (République du Mali 1991). Decentralisation, forwarded as a demand during the conference, became the single most important element in the political project of ADEMA and Konaré in the early 1990s. It came to be seen not only as the extension of democratisation to the local level, but also as the basic building bloc in the new approach to development. This led to a number of macro-political reforms that included the introduction of a multi-party system, reforms of state institutions and the implementation of a decentralised government system. The implementation of the decentralisation reform in 1999 implied a change in institution-building strategy from usurpation during the Keita and Traoré regime towards a system based on larger degrees of power-sharing during the 3rd Republic.

In addition to the above-mentioned internal political events in Mali, the international political context was favourable for democratisation. International discourses emanating from financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF stressing political reforms and good governance provided the context in which the transition in Mali developed (Berramdane 1999). For Mali in particular, and West Africa in general, alterations in French foreign policy in the early 1990s marked the beginning of this new era. This was clearly expressed by demands for democratisation made by François Mitterrand in his speech at the 16th Franco-African Summit at la Baule in 1990.

The democratic transition thus led to reforms of the institutional macro-structures at both national and local level. But even though the rules of the game have changed, there are signs that political practices embedded in previous regimes are reproduced. Assimilation of competing political networks at the national level for instance still plays an important role in maintaining hegemony. And even though decentralisation has led to power-sharing, the reform may be interpreted as an attempt to co-opt local political networks. My main argument, however, is that network politics do not so much threaten the survival of the democratic institutions as the democratic content of these institutions. As long as there are enough resources to distribute, redistribution will provide legitimacy to the formal democratic system. It is in period of redistributive crises that the democratic system will be endangered.

Reciprocal assimilation in a multiparty context

During the 1992 elections, ADEMA won a clear majority in the National Assembly (73 of 115 seats) while their leader, Alpha Oumar Konaré, won the second round of the presidential elections with 69 % of the votes (Clark 2000). Konaré was re-elected in 1997 while ADEMA again gained a majority in the National Assembly (129 of 147 seats) (Sveinall and Hardeberg 1997). The overthrow of Traoré and the ADEMA electoral victory in 1992 can, in Bayart's terminology, be interpreted as the rise to power of a competing political network. The ADEMA, which was one of the core organisations in the pro-democratic movement and a leading force in the transition period, was based on an anti-Traoré platform and gained legitimacy as a result of the National Conference. The ADEMA mobilised widespread support in both rural and urban areas even before it became a political party (Clark 2000), which implies that the strength of the National Conference and ADEMA was rooted in a broad-based political coalition that came to dominate politics in the 1990s. A main strategy to maintain this hegemony was the inclusion of various interest groups into government. This was an active policy even though ADEMA was a majority party during the first 10 years of the 3rd Republic.

The strategy of assimilation pursued by ADEMA resulted in a broad-based composition of the first government in 1992. In addition to ADEMA, ministers from three other parties as well as three independent candidates made up the government (Sveinall and Hardeberg 1997). This active assimilation of other parties was also evident in the second government formed after student rebellions in 1993. In addition to the 10 ministers from ADEMA, 9 ministers came from other parties and two were independent. This assimilation strategy has of course not been unproblematic. After the creation of the government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in 1994, opposition parties withdrew from government. In this new government 8 ministers were chosen from ADEMA, while 8 were independent. According to Sveinall and Hardeberg (1997), the opposition boycott of the 1997 elections was rooted in conflicts over the biased balance of power between the branches of government in favour of the prime minister. The inauguration of the Ibrahim Boubacar Keita government in February 1994 was interpreted as a strategy that sought the marginalisation of opposition parties, particularly since Keita also was the leader of ADEMA. The opposition parties withdrew their ministers leading to a government composed of 8 ministers from ADEMA and 8 independent ministers. During a

seminar³⁵ organised in February 1995 with participants from the ten leading parties and the entire National Assembly, the composition of the Keita government led to criticism of centralisation of power as a strategy to strengthen the power base of the party and Konaré.

A closer analysis of the relation between the executive (the presidency and the government), legislative (the National Assembly) and judiciary branches of the state underline the democratic deficit of these institutions. Formally, the constitutional system in Mali is semi-presidential, meaning that the prime minister, who is head of government, is accountable to the 147-member National Assembly (Economist Intelligent Unit 2002). The president, restricted to two consecutive terms, nominates the prime minister and can dissolve the parliament. But according to Amundsen (2000), the parliament and judiciary system are dominated by a highly centralised political executive. This asymmetric power relation is reinforced by the president's dominance within the executive and these institutions' lack of capacity to fulfil their democratic functions (Smith 1998; Smith 2001).

The changes brought about by the 2002 legislative and presidential elections led some authors to argue that the balance of power between the National Assembly and the Presidency became more balanced (Economist Intelligent Union, 2002). The reason was that ADEMA's dominance in the National Assembly ended due to an internal split up. In addition, Amadou Toumani Touré, the interim president during the transition in 1991-92, was elected president as an independent candidate. However, according to Issa N'Diaye (pers. comm.³⁶), the National Assembly remains weak since it has not been possible to establish a majority coalition between the three main political groups. The lack of a functioning opposition to the president in the National Assembly may, according to Issa N'Diaye, be explained by the incompatibilities between the main parliamentary parties. RPM (Rassemblement pour le Mali) for instance was created by the former Prime Minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keita after he broke out of ADEMA, while PARENA (Parti pour le renouveau national) was created as a spin-off party from CNID (Congrès national d'initiative démocratique), one of the key parties in the pro-democratic movements. In more analytical terms, Amundsen (2000) points to serious weaknesses in the very nature of the party system in Mali. His general conclusion that the political parties in Mali are inadequately organised and characterised by internal divisions

³⁵ Seminar named "days of reflections" organised by Centre for Research on Democracy and Development (CERDES) on 4 and 5 February.

³⁶ Forum Civique, 10 April 2003.

are symptomatic of parties dominated by people with strong political ambitions. In general, he states, the political parties are characterised by a weak social basis, strong personal ambitions and organisations dependent on individual party presidents. The 72 political parties in Mali (as of 2000) are largely characterised by informal mechanisms of neo-patrimonialism and clientelism, rent-seeking and personalised politics, endangering the institutionalisation of distinct party programmes and consolidated party organisations.

Furthermore, according to a study made by Koni Expertise (2001), the lack of capacity of the National Assembly to govern itself undermines its parliamentary role³⁷ as a control instance vis-à-vis the government³⁸. In addition to the executive dominance over the judiciary, there have been, according to US Department of State (US Department of State 2002), several reports of corruption in the courts. Issa N'Diaye (pers. comm.) explains this by widespread clientelistic practices within the judiciary system. A politician interviewed in 2003 for instance revealed that he had been approached by high-ranking members in the judiciary system and offered the opportunity to influence the 2002 election results fraudulently.

Decentralisation, cooptation and local politics

The importance accorded to decentralisation within the political project of the Konaré regime represents on the one hand an institutional rupture with the 1st and 2nd Republic. On the other hand, however, this change from usurpation to power-sharing also represents continuity in the sense that it is part of an attempt to build and maintain political hegemony.

From an institutional perspective the reform has led to transformations of the local political arena. After the 1999 local elections, 682 new rural municipalities were established. Some basic administrative functions, like birth and death certificates and election registration, were automatically transferred to the municipalities. Elaborate plans are also made for the transfer of more substantial functions and decision-making power, but only limited deliberation within

³⁷ Few legislative initiatives come from the National Assembly; insubstantial plenary debates caused by deficiencies in the functionality of the permanent commissions supposed to review law propositions (lack of appropriate rules of functioning for instance); feeble routines for assuring the quality of documents adopted by the National Assembly (laws are not systematically followed by publications in the *Journal Officiel du Compte Rendu*; there are examples that laws adopted by the National Assembly are very late for promulgation).

³⁸ Do not pose written questions to members of government because they will be published in the *Journal Officiel*; commissions established for controlling the administration do not have sufficient resources to carry out their functions, and their recommendations are seldom applied in a systematic manner; the National Assembly do not have resources to verify if adopted laws are applied.

the health, education and rural development sectors are currently placed within the prerogative of the municipality. However, the extensive financial and technical support structures that are established have made it possible for most municipalities to elaborate their own budgets and development plans. The conclusions from a study on “Popular views of the legitimacy of the state in Mali” carried out by Bratton, Coulibaly and Machado (2002) show that Malians in general find it easier to get access to municipal councillors than the former state-appointed administrators to solve problems strengthens the observation that decentralisation has led to increased democratisation locally.

Parallel to the implementation of the decentralised government system, reforms of various state agencies have been carried out in order to make them institutionally compatible to the decentralised units. The transformation of the three-tier administrative structure set up during the Keita regime into a control and support structure at municipal, district and regional level, has moved decision-making power away from the state towards the decentralised units. The role of the previous *chef d'arrondissement*, now renamed *sous-prefet*, has been reduced to an assisting function of the previous *commandant de cercle*. The *commandant*, now labelled *prefet*, fulfil the most important function in the administrative structure. Located at the district level the *prefet* is responsible for both controlling the budgets and development plans of the municipalities as well as coordinating requested support from the state technical service to the municipalities.

The conclusion that decentralisation has led to increased local democracy is however problematic. First, even though the shift to power-sharing as institution-building strategy was conditioned by the political nature of the transition, the control functions accorded to the administration for instance may in the long run re-establish the state as prime centre for decision-making. Likewise, political processes at the national level threaten to undermine the content of decentralisation. This is particularly related to the lack of transfer of decision-making power and resources from the state to the municipal level. Even though the functions that are to be transferred are in theory very extensive, only a limited range of decision-making power and resources have been transferred. This is clearly demonstrated by the problems at the national political level regarding the reforms in the health and education sectors. The only prerogative of the mayor is, according to Anaye Niangaly³⁹, the mayor of Koro in the Mopti

³⁹ Interviewed on 30 October 2003.

region, limited to signing contracts with teachers and health staff. Furthermore, the limited reforms of the deconcentrated units of the finance ministry represent one of the most important bottlenecks in the functioning of the decentralised system in the sense that it threatens the revenue potential of the decentralised units⁴⁰. The finance ministry, responsible for tax collection, payment of wages to both state and municipal employees, has by no means the necessary capacity to fulfil their role due to limited resources and inefficient organisation. In the cercle of Koro in the Mopti region for instance there are only two employees that are responsible for all these operations.

Secondly, the extension of the local political space does not automatically assure democratisation locally. The experiences from the first 5 years of decentralisation revealed tendencies of increased politicisation of local relations particularly in election time⁴¹. In northern Mali for instance, local elites have to a large degree captured the municipal councils and in this process marginalised the state administration. Prior to the 1999 local elections, there were examples of political mobilisation carried out by local elites. One common strategy to mobilise was based on exchange of economic benefits (payment of taxes for instance) for votes. There were also examples that conflicts over natural resources became an integrated part of municipal politics. In one case, two *chefs de fraction* in one municipality, although in conflict with each other over the management of forest resources, were elected as municipal councillors for the same political party. In other municipalities the reform has been interpreted as a restoration of the power of the elites that were marginalised by the Keita and Traoré regimes, i.e. the old canton chiefs. The importance of getting access to the decentralised institutions, and hence to political power and economic resources, from the point of view of local elites, has thus in certain areas led to the cementation and extension of already existing clientelistic power structures and the exclusion of the poorest segments of the society. Based on the above description it is clear that decentralisation has to be analysed as part of a political strategy to maintain hegemony from national political leaders. Power-sharing as institution-building strategy may open up the political space locally but is also a part of a wider political project to maintain political hegemony based on assimilation of local political networks by granting them access to political and economic resources. Rather than increased democratisation, the result of decentralisation may be increased clientelism and corruption

⁴⁰ Issoutiana Abdoulaye Maïga, 1st Assistant of the préfet in the Koro cercle, interviewed 29 October 2003.

⁴¹ These observations are based on fieldwork in the Gourma district in 1998 and in the Koro and Bankass districts in 2003.

locally. It is this reproduction of political practices, although within a new institutional framework, that represents continuity with the 1st and 2nd Republic. In the long run this development threatens to undermine the content of democratisation.

Conclusion: democratic transition but politics as usual?

The democratic transition in Mali in the early 1990s resulted in extensive political and institutional reforms. Today, more than a decade after the transition, there are tendencies that the democratic content of these institutions and the decentralised government system are undermined by the reproduction of clientelistic and redistributive practices. These practices were embedded in the de facto functioning of state institutions of the 1st and 2nd Republic and are ultimately the result of strategies to build and maintain political hegemony. These strategies date back to the hegemonic struggle between US-RDA and PSP in the immediate pre-independent era. The US-RDA hegemonic strategy sought to both marginalise and assimilate competing networks and extend state presence locally based on usurpation as institution-building strategy. The need for political support led to redistribution through political networks to maintain hegemony. Despite the introduction of macro-political democratic institution in the early 1990s, the basic mechanisms to build and maintain hegemony based on redistribution and assimilation are reproduced. However, this is not a one-way process. The implementation of democratic institutions has also contributed to a transformation of current political practices by changing the rules of the game. At the national level for instance, the multi-party system has opened up the political space for a wide range of political actors. Locally, in Bayarts' terms, the political space has opened up and given opportunities for more political networks to enter the political arena and participate in struggles for power and influence. But again, these reforms for decentralisation and power-sharing must be understood as part of and circumscribed by a broader strategy of national political leaders to build and maintain political hegemony by way of granting local political networks access to political power and resources.

The survival of the democratic regime at the national level is thus dependent upon political stability based on assimilation of competing political networks and clientelistic redistribution of resources. Based on this conclusion it is clear that consolidation, as understood in the institutional perspective, does not fully take into account the historicity of and the mutual interdependence between political institutions and political practices. The reproduction of

neo-patrimonial practices and redistribution through political networks is not so much a threat to the survival of the formal democratic institutions as it is to the democratic content of these institutions. In fact, as long as there are enough resources within this system, redistribution will strengthen the legitimacy of the formal democracy. A crisis in the redistributive system may, however, as was the case when both the 1st and 2nd Republic was overthrown, undermine the legitimacy of the democratic regime.

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Paper 2 The politics of decentralisation in Mali: the democratic potential of decentralisation

The Malian experience in democratisation has by many been characterised as a success-story. In the Map of Freedom published by the Freedom House from 2005 for instance, Mali is one of only ten countries in Africa that are classified as free.⁴² The 2002 presidential and legislative elections were also regarded by the Freedom House to have been free and fair. These were the third round of elections since 1992 and for the first time in Malian history one elected president replaced another. In addition to the relative stability of the macro-political democratic regime, the decentralisation reform that was introduced in 1999 has brought about extensive reforms of the state. The establishment of new decentralised governance institutions at municipal, cercle (district) and regional level throughout the country has shifted the balance of power locally away from appointed state bureaucrats towards elected councillors. Decentralisation in Mali has thus opened the local political space for a range of new groups to participate in local political affairs and to exercise their influence. It thus seems that the introduction of decentralisation in Mali has initiated processes of democratisation locally. Originally, decentralisation entered the political agenda as a result of popular demands during the democratic transition the country underwent in the early 1990s. Later, it came to form a major pillar in the post-transition democratisation project of the Konaré regime and led ultimately to extensive reforms of the state. Based on these observations, the first question examined in this article is why and how decentralisation became a political project for the Konaré regime. Secondly it is also relevant to ask today, some 15 years after the transition and well into the second mandate of the decentralised institutions, what the democratic potential of decentralisation is in Mali in a long-term perspective.

In order to answer the first question it is necessary to direct attention to the nature of the democratic transition in the early 1990s. Decentralisation came originally on the political agenda as a result of popular demands during the transition that started after Moussa Traoré,

⁴² According to their web-site, the Freedom House “measures freedom according to two broad categories: political rights and civil liberties... Each country is assigned a numerical rating...on a scale of 1 to 7. A rating of 1 indicates the highest degree of freedom and 7 the least amount of freedom”. In their 2005 report, Mali is accorded a rating of 2 in both political rights and civil liberties (Source: www.freedomhouse.org – downloaded 18 March 2006).

president in Mali since 1968, was overthrown in a military coup d'état led by Amadou Toumani Touré on 26 March 1991. The overthrow of Traoré prior to the transition opened the political arena for the anti-Traoré coalition made up by the military coup-makers, the pro-democratic movement in Bamako as well as the Tuareg rebel movements in Northern Mali, to carry out the transition without the presence of previous power-holders. It culminated in the rise to power of the opposition when the political party ADEMA won an absolute majority in the National Assembly and its leader, Alpha Oumar Konaré, was elected president of the 3rd Malian Republic⁴³ on June 8 1992. Decentralisation in Mali thus became an element of a comprehensive political reform during a period of regime transition. In the post-transition political project of the Konaré regime, decentralisation came to constitute a major component in the democratisation process. At the 37th anniversary of independence on 22 September 1997, Konaré expressed the aim of the reform like this:

I think I may say that for Mali, the last large reform at the end of this century is the decentralisation... [It] remains the greatest political justification of democratisation, [and] the 701 municipalities of Mali [constitute] as many forums and laboratories to the services of democracy and development (MDRI, 1998a: 12).

For the Konaré regime decentralisation came to serve two functions. Since it had based its opposition to Traoré on claims for democracy, the portrayal of decentralisation as an extension of the democratisation process served to build legitimacy for the new regime. At the same time it was an important strategy to maintain its alliances with the other groups from the pro-democratic movement and in particular the rebel movements. Decentralisation thus came to be closely connected to democratisation as a strategy for the new regime to consolidate its power. However, the political commitment to decentralisation does not assure enhanced local democracy in the long run. In order to answer the second question it is thus necessary to change the focus to the present and bring into the analysis processes that may undermine the democratic potential of decentralisation. Of particular importance in the Malian case are institutional bottlenecks that undermine any real devolution to the decentralised institutions but also politisation of local relations that lead to the exclusion of the poorest segments of the population and the proliferation of clientelistic relations. But before entering this discussion, let me turn to the democratic transition Mali underwent in the early 1990s.

⁴³ The post-colonial political history of Mali is usually divided according to regime change: the 1st Republic refers to the regime of Modibo Keita (1960 – 1968); the 2nd Republic refers to the regime of Moussa Traoré (1968 – 1991); the 3rd Republic refers to the period following the overthrow of Traoré (1991 –).

Democratic transition and demands for decentralisation

The democratic transition in Mali coincides in time with similar experiences in many other African countries. According to Grugel (2002) it is difficult to establish a common pattern to explain democratic transitions in Africa given the diversity of regime types on the continent. Nevertheless she concludes that “African politics...are in a state of flux, in which elements of locally supported democratisation projects are visible alongside externally driven experiments, chiefly in electoralist democracy, without these succeeding in establishing themselves as the only, or even the dominant, trend” (Grugel 2002, p. 172).

According to Berramdane (1999), the process of democratisation in Africa was the result of the combined effects of external pressure and internal dynamics. For Francophone Africa in particular, Francois Mitterrand’s speech on the need for democratisation in Africa at the 16th Franco-African Summit at la Baule in 1990 marked the beginning of this new era. The end of the cold war undermined the prospects of upholding authoritarian regimes based on socialist ideals and paved the way for demands for democratisation. At the core of this new doctrine were conditionalities based on the World Bank’s “good governance” agenda. Demands for good governance, in which democracy is defined as one of the components, became a conditionality for access to aid by important actors in the international donor community during the 1990s (IMF, European Union, France, Germany, USA and Japan). Geopolitical changes and demands made by international financial institutions thus had a major impact on the transformation of African states from the early 1990s. In several countries this resulted in the introduction of decentralisation reforms that now are, according to Ouedraogo (2003), an integrated part of development policy in Africa. However, explaining decentralisation by only referring to external pressure downplays the importance that internal political processes play for the possible outcomes of such reforms.

In Mali, the demands for decentralisation were expressed on numerous occasions during the transition, and were most clearly expressed at the National Conference in August 1991. According to Nzouankeu (1993), National Conferences played a vital role in the democratic transitions in many African countries. Mali, according to him, was the only country in Africa where a violent upheaval led to the downfall of the regime prior to the transition period. This meant that the interim regime did not have to enter political negotiations with groups presumably interested in maintaining status quo. Traoré had been arrested on March 26 by a

group of army officers led by lieutenant-colonel Amadou Toumani Touré after several days of popular upheavals that were initially met by severe responses from security forces that resulted in several deaths and wounded (Nzouankeu 1993; Djime 1997). Traoré's promise to embark upon political liberalisation within the single party *Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien* (UDPM) did not ease the situation and led him into political isolation that culminated in the coup d'état. The absence of Traoré during the transition thus created the necessary political space for the opposition groups to form an interim regime. In addition to the military coup-makers, this interim regime included what in Mali is usually referred to as the pro-democratic movement in Bamako and members from the Tuareg rebellion movements in the Northern parts of the country. The interim regime was thus rooted in a broad-based military-civilian anti-Traoré coalition and was institutionalised in the *Comité de Transition pour le Salut du Peuple* (CTSP). This composition of the CTSP gave both legitimacy to the transition and created the necessary political space for demands for decentralisation to emerge.

The National Conference organised from July 29 to August 12 1991 was the most important arena for the discussion of the future political course of Mali during the transition period. It is true that the CTSP, responsible for the conference, had limited the formal mandate of the conference to include the elaboration and adoption of a charter for the political parties, a new electoral code and a new constitution (Nzouankeu, 1993). These texts had already been prepared by the transition government prior to the conference and were not subject to much debate. Nevertheless, the National Conference represented an important event for the subsequent democratisation process in Mali. First, according to the proceedings from the conference (République du Mali 1991), the participants represented a wide variety of interests. More than 1800 participants from different institutions and organisations were present. This included representatives of the interim regime, the ministries, ambassadors, governors, the army, Malians living abroad, labour organisations, cooperatives, political parties and civil society organisations (the largest group with 467 participants). Secondly, the conference was an arena where the anti-Traoré discontentment that had developed prior to the coup d'état came to expression. This was evident already in the foreword of the final document from the conference:

In the night between the 25 and 26 Mars 1991 the Malian people... succeeded in liberating itself after 23 years of dictatorship: that of the unique party, the Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien (UDPM), which had become deaf to the transformation

of the Malian society and insensitive to the essential needs of the population (République du Mali, 1991: 7).

Political demands for decentralisation were clearly expressed at the very beginning of the “recommendations for the state of the nation”. Based on a general analysis of the current state of affairs, which revealed a quite critical view on the previous regime⁴⁴, the Conference recommended the abolishment of the current administrative system based on the argument that it was not compatible with the new multiparty democratic Mali⁴⁵. Furthermore, the fundamental principles of decentralisation were also included in the draft constitution elaborated at the conference. In addition to the National Conference, 300 farmers gathered at an Estates-General⁴⁶ organised in December 1991 also raised demands for decentralisation, in particular with regard to land tenure and natural resource management to rural communities (Bingen, 1994). Several of these demands were later incorporated in the governments Rural Development Schema. The Tuareg rebellion in Northern Mali contributed also indirectly to put decentralisation on the agenda. Gaining momentum around the same time as the emergence of the pro-democratic movement in Bamako, the rebellion reduced the possibilities of the Traoré regime to stay in power. The Pacte National⁴⁷, the peace agreement, signed with the rebel movements accorded the Northern parts of the country some autonomy (Poulton and ag Youssouf 1998). It was made politically acceptable in the rest of the country because of the regimes plans to embark upon decentralisation. Later, according to ag Hairy (1998, pers. comm.⁴⁸), decentralisation came to replace elements of the Pacte National since many of the former rebel movements saw a greater interest in this reform. It meant, among other things, the establishment of a new administrative region (the Kidal region) where only local cadres could be employed in the part of the country where the rebellion originated.

⁴⁴ The main arguments were: inefficacy of current administration; the incompetence of administrators and their loyalty towards the party and political leaders; widespread corruption; the necessity to implement decentralised developmental system; the incompatibility between the neo-colonial administrative system and the interests of the population; an administrative system that have only led to increased centralisation of power (République du Mali, 1991: 133).

⁴⁵ Among the concrete recommendations was: the redefinition of the role of the administration; the devolution of competencies to decentralised institutions; a redefinition of the local community concept, the local governance structure and deconcentrated state structures based on the new democratic context (République du Mali, 1991: 133).

⁴⁶ Etats Généraux du Monde Rural.

⁴⁷ The Pacte National was signed 11 April 1992 with the *Mouvements et Front Unifiés de l'Azawad*, the rebel movements umbrella organisation (Poulton and ag Youssouf, 1998).

⁴⁸ Interview with M. ag Hairy 25 November 1998.

The criticism raised against the centralised post-colonial state from a wide range of different political, socio-economic and regional groups in Mali during the democratic transition thus led to a convergence around demands for decentralisation. The absence of the former regime in the transition meant furthermore that the political space was opened up for such demands to gain a pre-dominant place in the discussion of the future political course of Mali. These demands were appropriated by the Konaré regime once in power and came to form a major pillar in the post-transition democratisation project. However, in order to analyse how decentralisation became a political project in Mali it is necessary to direct attention to the politics of decentralisation. This also provides the background to understand the nature of the particular institutional reforms that have been carried through in Mali and to analyse the prospects for the democratic potential of decentralisation in a long-term perspective.

The politics of decentralisation

In a recent review of decentralisation literature, Kulipossa states that the “current appeal of decentralisation has been rooted in its *potential* benefits” (2004, p. 768, italics in original). When it comes to the relation between decentralisation and democracy, the conclusions of the literature on the theme remain uncertain. The idea of a possible positive link between the two is, according to Kulipossa (2004), first and foremost based on the idea that decentralisation has the potential to foster democracy. However, the diversity of regimes that have undertaken decentralisation suggests that there is no immediate link with democracy. According to Manor, decentralisation

is being... attempted in an astonishing diversity of developing and transitional countries...by democracies (both mature and emergent) and autocracies, by regimes making the transition to democracy and by others seeking to avoid that transition (1999, p. 1).

This diversity suggests, according to Manor (1999), that the factors and motives influencing decisions to decentralise varies between countries. In order to explain why regimes seek to engage in decentralisation it is necessary to look “*at the thinking of leaders within the governments of developing countries*” (Manor 1999, p. 30, italics in original). Following these recommendations, it is necessary to ask *why* decentralisation came on the political agenda in the first place and *why* decentralisation came to be so important in the democratic project of the Konaré regime in the post-transition phase. This may clarify the role decentralisation

played in the political project of Konaré, but it does not say anything about the concrete political and administrative reforms that resulted from this. As Boone (2003) states, there are often large discrepancies between reform rhetoric and the administrative and political benefits of such reforms. It is therefore necessary to focus on what she calls “the politics of decentralisation”. This, I will argue, directs attention to *how* the regime managed to carry through these reforms as well as the concrete institutional reforms that resulted from this. In order to analyse the politics of decentralisation in Mali it is necessary to bring the *Mission de décentralisation et réformes institutionnelles* (MDRI) into the analysis. The MDRI was an independent state agency directly attached to the presidency and responsible for the elaboration of the institutional aspects of the reform. More important, it also played a predominant role in framing decentralisation as a part of the democratisation process in Mali.

Olowu (2001) observes that decentralisation policies in Africa, and particularly the relation between democratisation and local government, remain poorly analysed. This is also in line with Kulipossa’s (2004) conclusion that a potential positive link between decentralisation and democracy has to be subject to empirical scrutiny. In order to answer the second question in this article it is thus necessary to change the perspective. Of relevance in this regard are first the inherent weaknesses of the institutional reforms crafted by the MDRI and the effects of national level processes on the decentralised institutions (institutional bottlenecks that undermine any real devolution). Secondly, the interaction between the decentralised institutions and local political processes and the consequences for ordinary people (politisation and proliferation of clientelism and exclusion) is of relevance. To make sense of these potential problems related to the democratic potential of decentralisation it may be useful to take as point of departure Samoff’s (1990) analytical distinction between administrative and political decentralisation.

Within administrative decentralisation, the main preoccupation is the design of institutions. The point of departure is, according to Samoff (1990), normally an analysis of existing institutional organisation, followed by a subsequent search for alternative decentralisation solutions. This approach has been criticised for its ahistorical comprehension of institutions (Boone 1998) because it does not consider how institutions develop in particular contexts and it frames the description of institutional reforms in Africa in narrow technocratic and administrative terms. Administrative decentralisation is often the position taken by central government (Samoff 1990) which initiates the conceptualisation and implementation of

decentralisation reforms, and seeks to control its course. Within this approach, decentralisation may lead to the transfer of some authority. And even though the immediate political questions linked to decentralisation are important, they are not taken into consideration systematically. Success is measured in terms of implementation, and not, for instance, in increased political mobilisation of the local population. Within the perspective of political decentralisation on the other hand, the effects of policy and political reforms are understood as the result of social processes. This approach directs attention towards the importance of understanding institutional changes in its historical, social and political context. Decentralisation cannot be understood as implemented by central government without any kind of influence from other societal forces. In addition to the institutions responsible for policy elaboration and implementation, it is important to consider which factors that led to the particular institutional set-up of a particular reform. Decentralisation in this sense is thus not only about the institutional division of labour between various branches of the state, but as much about the relation to the surrounding society. This approach directs attention to the interaction between the decentralised governance institutions and broader processes of political change.

Popular demands captured

As noted above, the demands for decentralisation that were articulated during the transition came to form the major pillar in the post-transition democratic project of the Konaré regime. In order to go one step further in the analysis of the democratic potential of decentralisation it is necessary to consider how the Konaré regime sought to control the elaboration of the reform. The analysis of this “politics of decentralisation” provides both the necessary background to understand the nature of the institutional reforms that resulted from this process as well as a point of reference for the discussion of the democratic potential of decentralisation. Of central importance in the elaboration and implementation of decentralisation in Mali was the *Mission de décentralisation et réformes institutionnelles* (MDRI).⁴⁹

The MDRI was established in 1993 with the mandate to elaborate, conceptualise and implement the decentralisation reform. Initially, its initial five-member team was given a one-

⁴⁹ The MDRI was originally named *Mission de décentralisation*.

year mandate, and, according to Diarra (1998, pers. comm.)⁵⁰, the first mission was to explore the possibilities to carry out such a reform. Based on its first report, its mandate was prolonged and its area of responsibility was expanded to include institutional reforms in general. In addition to the responsibility for the elaboration of the necessary judicial and technical dispositions for the decentralised governance system, the MDRI was also an important agent for the regime for the justification of the decentralisation reform as an extension of the democratisation process. According to Sy for instance, the first leader of the MDRI, the democratisation project in Mali:

comprise an ambitious reform program for territorial decentralisation [...] Rising from the recommendations of the National Conference...this reform seek to deepen the multi-party democracy by adapting the administration to the objective of a new development framework based on the preoccupations, resources and know-how of the local population. In order to concretise this political will, the government has instituted an ad hoc structure named Mission de Décentralisation with the overall goal of assisting the implementation of the decentralisation reform by defining the legal framework and determining the conditions of its feasibility (MDRI, 1997a: 4, my translation).

The MDRI was set up as a semi-autonomous agency with institutional independence from the traditional state apparatus. It was attached initially to the prime ministers office, but was later placed directly under the presidency. This gave the MDRI the necessary manoeuvring space to fulfil its mandate and it assured that particular interests in the traditional state apparatus could not influence the process.⁵¹ The institutional independence accorded to the MDRI was thus a strategic choice made by the regime leaders to assure that the reform was carried through. It also meant that the elaboration and implementation of the reform was controlled from top national political level. To use the terminology of Samoff (1990), it may be said that decentralisation in Mali was predominantly elaborated within the perspective of administrative decentralisation. The whole process was controlled from central state authorities, and the main concern of the MDRI in the elaboration of the reform was the institutional aspects.

This is evident in the extensive preparatory work made by the MDRI prior to the implementation of the reform in 1999. A large array of judicial and technical dispositions,

⁵⁰ Deputy manager of the MDRI, interview on 7 September 1998.

⁵¹ Of particular importance in this regard was its independence from the *Ministère d'Administration Territoriale*, the ministry responsible for state administration locally. This ministry had wide-spread power locally through its deconcentrated structure within the three-tier administrative systems on regional, cercle (district) and arrondissement levels.

mainly in the form of laws, was developed for the decentralised government system.⁵² A large amount of work on the part of the MDRI also concerned the institutional design of both the decentralised governance institutions as well its institutional relations with both local branches of state agencies and central state authorities. In this process, as will become clearer later, several important political issues were not sufficiently taken into account. This was for instance evident in the large-scale participatory territorial reorganisation of local level politico-administrative boundaries that was carried through by the MDRI in 1995-96. Also when it comes to the functioning of the decentralised institutions important political questions are not resolved within the institutional design of the reform.

The way in which the elaboration of the reform was organised made it possible for the MDRI to carry through extensive reforms. This refers first and foremost to the new division of labour between the newly established decentralised institutions, the local branches of line ministries and central state authorities. It involves both aspects of what in the decentralisation literature is referred to as devolution and deconcentration. Devolution in Mali refers to the transfer of competencies to the decentralised institutions that started after the local elections in 1999, while deconcentration refers to reforms of state institutions, and in particular the local branches of these institutions, to make them institutionally adapted to the basic principles of the decentralised governance structure. The overall result of these reforms has been both a spatial (reform of local political-administrative boundaries) and scalar (new division of labour) reconfiguration of the state in Mali. But in order to discuss the reconfiguration of the state power in Mali and the inherent (political) problems in the decentralised governance structure, it is necessary to first direct attention to the role decentralisation played as a nation-building strategy for the Konaré regime.

Decentralisation as nation-building

The way in which decentralisation was conceptualised and framed within the wider political debate on democratisation in Mali legitimised the institutional reforms that were undertaken. Of particular importance in this regard was the active construction of the decentralisation

⁵² The two most important texts in this regard are first the law 93-008 “déterminant les condition de la libre administration des collectivités territoriales” defining the fundamental principles of the decentralisation reform, and, secondly, the law 95-034 “portant code des collectivités territoriales en République du Mali” delineating more precisely the different aspects of the decentralisation reform, for instance the responsibilities of the municipalities.

reform as a symbol of an idealised pre-colonial decentralised Mali. Through a reinterpretation of Malian political and cultural history, colonialism was portrayed as the beginning of an era that separated state and society. This division was further widened by the post-colonial state during the 1st and 2nd Republic. The main objective of decentralisation, within this logic, has been to initiate a process where the power of the state is reduced and transferred back to society. The transfer of power to the municipality, the incarnation of pre-colonial Mali and the most important arena in the new power-sharing schema, is the mechanism through which the division between state and society introduced by colonialism is to be overcome.

This argument is echoed in de Jorio's (2003) article "Narratives of the nation and democracy in Mali". Her analysis focuses on how Modibo Keita, the first president of Mali (1960-1968), has come to be a major reference point in attempts to construct national narratives of the new democratic Mali around founding fathers and key figures in Malian history. The "valorisation of the national and local cultural heritage" (de Jorio 2003, p. 832) was expressed through both a number of cultural festivals, exhibits and conferences on Mali's cultural heritage as well as the construction of a several monuments. Within this narrative, I will argue, decentralisation is represented as the revitalisation of the values and organisation principles of the pre-colonial Mali and constitutes the fundament on which to build the new democratic Mali. The MDRI has in its strategy actively constructed decentralisation as an extension of democratisation with reference to a historical and idealised decentralised Mali. In the MDRI publication "Framework for a new democratisation and development dynamic"⁵³ (MDRI 1998a), the pre-colonial history of the ancient empires and kingdoms in Mali is presented as the point of reference for the history of the current decentralisation reform. Particularly the cultural continuity between contemporary Mali and the pre-colonial Mali is underlined:

Institutional development thus begins with the society itself and its history [...] It is in this sense that some introductory elements of Malian history, public institutional reforms and decentralisation are presented [...] In brief, to better understand the cultural heritage which give sense to what Mali undertakes and that forms the identity of the nation (MDRI 1998a, p. 7, my translation).

Existing proverbs and metaphors dating back to the Ghana Empire⁵⁴ are interpreted as signs of some of the basic principles of the decentralised administration and power exercise of this

⁵³ Cadre d'une nouvelle dynamique de démocratisation et de développement.

⁵⁴ 8th – 12th century (The Times Concise Atlas of World History, 4th ed., 1992).

empire. Furthermore, the Mali Empire⁵⁵ is presented as the “cultural, social and political foundation of Mali today” (MDRI 1998a, p. 8, my translation). It is interesting to note that the concepts employed in the brief description of the organisation of this empire reflect contemporary democratisation and decentralisation vocabulary: the “constitution” of the Mandé people; “la libre administration” of the independent states within the federation of Manden; “the real participation in general life of all the elements of civil society thanks to its organisation based on lineage, activity and age”. References to other empires, for instance the Songhoï empire (15th to 16th century); the Ségou empire (early 18th century to 1861) and the Toukouleur (1861-1890), also serve as important points of reference for the current decentralisation project.

The representation of the historical empires of Mali as the forerunner to and justification for the current decentralisation reform by the political leaders of the 3rd Republic and the MDRI echoes Rawson’s (2000, p. 266) observation that Malian scholars and policymakers argue that the “empowerment of localities will restore an equilibrium long recognised in Malian administrative patterns”. Among the precedents for decentralisation in Mali are the autonomy given to gold-producing areas by Ghanaian kings, the division of labour within the caste system of Mande society (securing rights and autonomy to customary trade speciality), mechanisms within Sudanic courts limiting autocratic tendencies, as well as the role religious judges and Islam played as a countervailing force against the centralisation of power.

In addition, according to Rawson (2000), the Bambara (or Ségou) empire founded by Biton Coulibaly in the Ségou region in the 16th century is often referred to as a model for the decentralisation of state power. There are however controversies around this aspect of the Biton model. Person see this as the creation of an “egalitarian ideology of the society” (Person in Rawson 2000, p. 267) while Roberts interpret this as a rise of an oppressing authoritarian regime and increased slavery. Of most interest to us here, however, is the way in which this empire is represented as an idealised model for the current decentralisation efforts. According to MDRI (1998), the Bambara Empire is built on the administrative, social and political organisation of both the Ghana and Mali empires. The link to the present is evident both when it comes to the administrative heritage of these empires but also when it comes to the socio-ethnic heritage. The Bambara Empire was composed of micro-states that again were divided

⁵⁵ 12th – 15th century (The Times Concise Atlas of World History, 4th ed., 1992).

into villages (Massadougou) led by elected Massas. These micro-states are the origin of the geo-ethnic composition of Mali today, and correspond, in certain areas, to the arrondissements in place until 1999.

Colonisation is in this historical reinterpretation presented as an interrupting historical force that led to the progressive alienation of traditional mechanisms and references:

[The establishment of a] hierarchical, centralised and bureaucratic administration by the colonial state provoked a serious cultural, social and economic rupture within already weakened societies. Under the colonial administration, citizens [...] became “administrated natives” (MDRI 1998a, p. 9, my translation).

The post-colonial state represents in this line of argument nothing more than the continuation of the colonial authoritative state model. The post-colonial authorities turned the state into an instrument for elite enrichment and the consolidation of their power, a strategy that further deepened the division between the state and the Malian society. In the current decentralisation project it is society that represents continuity with pre-colonial Mali. Increasingly alienated, society has sought to replace the state through the creation of associations, cooperatives and health centres, and by way of developing an important informal economic sector. The “événements” of 26 March 1991, leading to the overthrow of Traoré, and the subsequent political transition, is thus presented as events that liberated society from an oppressing state and ended the “government system built around the unique party and the centralised, authoritarian and corrupt state” (MDRI 1998a, p. 11, my translation). In this context, decentralisation is supposed to be the mechanism through which state and society are to be reunited. Decentralisation thus implies a shift in power away from the state towards a revitalised society that participates in their local communities institutionalised within the municipality. It is along this line of argument that Konaré, at the beginning of the 1992 presidential election campaign, proposed “decentralisation laws creating territorial decentralised communities [that will serve] as living places for the recomposition of the social tissue where local identities will express themselves, negotiate local development projects, and construct new terms for civic participation” (République du Mali 1997, p. 7, my translation). It is based on this logic that the territorial reorganisation was deemed necessary by the MDRI. The creation of legitimate viable local communities should guarantee that the functionality of the decentralised institutions in a long-term perspective.

Decentralisation: the spatial and scalar reconfiguration of the state

The territorial reorganisation initiated in 1993 resulted in the creation of 682 new rural municipalities country-wide in 1996⁵⁶ (MDRI 1998a). It was organised as a large-scale participatory process that, in the words of MDRI (1994), was based on the idea that the creation of homogenous, coherent and functional spaces should lead to a territorial organisation suitable for local governance and access to services. The creation of legitimate viable local communities was seen as a precondition for the successful devolution of authority to the decentralised institutions.

Spatial reconfiguration – viable local communities

The political rationale behind the territorial reorganisation can be traced to the role decentralisation played in the nation-building strategy of the Konaré regime. This led to the conclusion, within the MDRI, that the administrative structures established during colonialism, and later reinforced by the post-colonial state, were incongruent with existing local political realities and the demands implicit in a decentralised governance system established to foster development. This meant that the *arrondissement*, the basic administrative structure instituted by the leaders of the 1st Republic in the immediate pre-independent period, should be replaced by viable local “spaces for the decentralised management of power regarding questions of local interest” (MDRI 1994, p. 5, my translation). The general objective of the creation of these “viable local spaces” was, as written in the MDRI publication “Guide de découpage territorial”, to:

contribute to set up a new governance framework that allows rooting the values and institutions of all democratic societies: the participation of the population in “governance”, democratisation of the administration and the promotion of local development (MDRI 1994, p. 5, my translation).

In order to assure “viability” of the new decentralised units that had legitimacy among those who were to inhabit them, a large-scale participatory territorial reorganisation⁵⁷ was organised. It led to the establishment of new politico-administrative units locally in the form of municipalities.⁵⁸ The basic idea was that villages and nomadic fractions themselves should

⁵⁶ 19 urban municipalities existed at the time of the territorial reorganisation. Since then, two more have been created, leaving the current number of municipalities at 703.

⁵⁷ Also often referred to as the “*découpage*” or “cutting up” in English.

⁵⁸ This resulted in the passing of the law 96-059 in the National Assembly and the creation of 682 municipalities.

engage in a negotiation process and decide the composition of the new municipalities, i.e. which villages and fractions should belong to the municipality. This meant that it was not territory in itself, but social membership in a village or a fraction that was the point of departure for the process. In Mali, outside the family sphere, the village in sedentary areas and the fraction among the nomadic population constitute the basic social and political organisation. In theory, it was the representatives of these units, i.e. the village and fraction chiefs, that should engage in the negotiation process. The boundaries between the municipalities should therefore in general follow the boundaries between villages and fractions.⁵⁹ The territorial composition of the decentralised units at cercle and regional level has, in a later stage, been outlined on the basis of these results. The whole process thus sought, at least in theory, to take local realities as the point of departure. This was reflected in the pre-defined criteria set up by the MDRI.⁶⁰

These criteria were meant to assure that existing social, economic, political, cultural, spatial and demographic variables were taken into account in the delimitation of the municipality. The “community solidarity” and the “geographical and spatial” criteria for instance were meant to assure that the social, cultural and economic affinities between villages that had developed during pre-colonial, colonial and more recently were taken into account. This included the incorporation of demographic variables, such as *genres de vie* (sedentary or nomadic population), population density, and population movement (transhumance). The importance of these affinities was also evident in the criteria regarding the choice of community centre (the *chef-lieu*), the village to be host of the municipal council and other basic social infrastructure. This village should have a certain historical and social status in the municipality in order to assure its legitimacy. For instance, it should be a mother-village (i.e. the first village established in an area and from which other villages have been established) or a village with a long-term established chieftaincy.

In addition to these sociological considerations, a certain number of quantitative criteria were included in order to assure a minimum population size in each municipality (15 to 25 villages and 10 000 to 25 000 inhabitant were indicated), to assure accessibility for the population to

⁵⁹ In fact, the exact boundaries between municipalities have for various reasons still not been defined in the sense that they have been drawn on a map.

⁶⁰ In short, there were five main categories of criteria: 1. Socio-cultural – respect of community solidarity; 2. Demographic – minimum population level; 3. Distance and accessibility to municipal centre; 4. Economic viability and capacity to assure services; and 5. Geographical and spatial criteria.

the municipal centre, to assure economic viability (capacity to provide the necessary economic, social and cultural services and to finance development), estimations of the presence and general level of resources in a future municipality (to guide the regrouping of villages in order to avoid the creation of municipalities without any resources). Furthermore, geographical and spatial criteria should be taken into account. These ranged from the already existing administrative structures and functional entities, agro-ecological systems and the spatial organisations of communities.

The overall goal of the territorial reorganisation was thus the creation of municipalities of a suitable size for the management of local affairs that had legitimacy among those who were to inhabit them. The reform of the politico-administrative boundaries at the local level was thus presented, by the MDRI, as a necessary precondition for the devolution of authority to the decentralised institutions. Devolution was however only one of several politico-administrative reforms undertaken in Mali. Reforms of the role of the local branches of state agencies to make them institutionally adapted to the decentralised governance system were also important in the scalar reconfiguration of state power.

Scalar reconfiguration of the state – devolution and deconcentration

Devolution in Mali refers first and foremost to the transfer of competencies, i.e. the responsibility to assure specific functions and decision-making power, to the decentralised institutions. The MDRI publication “La stratégie des transferts de compétence”, underlines the importance of this principle: “in order to go from a formal decentralisation to a real decentralisation, it is necessary to confer to the local community the concrete prerogatives in matters that concerns local affairs” (MDRI 1997b, p. 4).

Two types of processes are defined by the MDRI regarding the transfer of competencies. The first concerns competencies that, because of their nature, were automatically transferred after the local elections in 1999. These included administrative tasks related to marital status, censuses, archives and documentation and public hygiene. On the other side, the transfer of more complex and important functions are subject to the principle of progressive transfer and demands extensive preparation on the part of the authorities. In the above-mentioned MDRI publication, a 32-page list of possible functions to transfer to the municipalities from 6 line

ministries was identified.⁶¹ Other competencies to be transferred are extensive and include general functions⁶² and sector specific functions within the areas of education⁶³, health⁶⁴, and transport and public work (MDRI 1998b)⁶⁵. This step-by-step approach to devolution is based on the need to assure that decentralised institutions have the necessary capacity to fulfil these functions before the competence is transferred. Another basic principle employed to assure this capacity is related to the transfer of sufficient economic resources to assure that the functions are fulfilled.

In addition to the introduction of local government institutions, reforms of other state agencies have been carried out, or are underway. These reforms concerns most state agencies with a local presence and seek to make them institutionally fit the decentralised system. Of particular importance in this regard has been the reform of the state administration. The three-tier administrative system was implemented as part of the strategy of the leaders of the first Malian Republic (1960-68) to secure their hegemonic control over the post-colonial state. The system sought to marginalise the local elites instituted by French colonial authorities in their system of indirect rule, the canton chiefs, and extend the reach of the state locally. Appointed bureaucrats came to exercise extensive administrative and political power as the representatives of the central state at arrondissement, cercle and regional level in rural areas. This highly centralised system was at the centre of the critic of the post-colonial state that was expressed at the National Conference in 1991, and has consequently been stripped of its previous prerogatives. From being the most important decision-making institution at local level prior to decentralisation reform, the administration has now been assigned a tutelary function vis-à-vis local government. This means, first, that the administration is supposed to control the legality of the activities and deliberations taken by the elected councils at municipal, cercle and regional level (the budget, the establishment of communal enterprises, town or country planning, fixation of communal taxes and loans for instance) (MDRI 1998b). In exceptional cases, the tutelage might also be directed towards the deliberating organs

⁶¹ The following ministries were included: Ministry of Health, Solidarity and Old People; Ministry of Public Work and Transport; Ministry of Urbanism and Habitat; Ministry of Rural Development and Environment; Ministry of Mines, Energy and Hydraulics; and the Ministry of Primary Education.

⁶² Such as the elaboration of the economic, social and cultural development plan, the municipal budget, municipal services, natural resource management, administrative police, socio-economic infrastructure and environment

⁶³ Pre-scholar education, alphabetisation and primary education

⁶⁴ Dispensaries, maternity centres, community health centres and cleansing

⁶⁵ Road infrastructure, municipal communication and public transport, urban and rural hydraulic work as well as sport, art and culture

themselves. If the mayor and the municipal council no longer are capable of assuming their responsibility, measures of suspension, dismissal or dissolution might be undertaken. In this case the council is replaced by a special delegation of seven members appointed in Conseil de Ministre. The system is organised in such a way that the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Local Collectives (MATCL) assures the tutelage on the Regional Assembly, the High Commissioner (former governor) assure the same functions vis-à-vis the cercle councils, while the préfet (former commandant de cercle) at the cercle level assure tutelage vis-à-vis the municipality. The sous-préfet (former chef d'arrondissement) however, does not have any control function. Their role is to report irregularities that might occur in the municipality to the préfet. Secondly, the state is responsible for giving the decentralised units support and advice. This support is organised by the administration, and the responsibility of the delegated representative of the state on each administrative level. The state is hence obliged to put its technical services at the disposition of the local government.

Based on the discussion of the spatial and scalar reconfiguration of the state in Mali it is apparent that the MDRI has sought to take the local political space as point of departure in their elaboration of the decentralisation reform. It may thus be said that their strategy in this respect has been based on a top-down approach to bottom-up decentralisation. Through the territorial reorganisation it sought to create viable local political spaces in the form of municipalities. Based on the results of this process, the politico-administrative boundaries on cercle and regional levels were delineated. Local elections also take the municipality as point of departure. Only municipal councillors are elected by universal suffrage, while the members of the cercle council and the regional assembly are elected indirectly among the municipal councillors. When it comes to devolution, the municipality is, at least in theory, the decentralised unit with most responsibility. But even though the MDRI has sought to take the local political space as point of departure in its elaboration of the decentralisation reform, it now seems that the reform has entered an impasse.

The democratic potential of decentralisation

The conclusion that decentralisation has entered an impasse are based on the observation that the process of devolution to local governments has not come very far. In addition, the reform has in many areas led to increased politisation of local relations and the proliferation of clientelism and exclusion of the poorest segments of the population. This, I will argue, is

partly caused by deficiencies in the institutional design of the reform as it was conceptualised by the MDRI. In several respects the elaboration of the reform in Mali coincides with the administrative decentralisation approach. Even though decentralisation came on the political agenda as a result of popular demands during the democratic transition, the elaboration and implementation of the reform was controlled by the MDRI. While the MDRI sought to take the local political space as their point of departure, the reform was still conceptualised from the centre with a predominant focus on the institutional design. The preoccupation with the institutional aspects of the reform meant that important political considerations related to the functioning of the reform in a long-term perspective have not been sufficiently taken into account. In particular, the way in which the decentralised institutions interact with and influence local political relations are of crucial importance. In combination with institutional bottlenecks at both national and local level the prospects for the democratic potential of decentralisation seem less optimistic now than before.

Institutional bottlenecks – no real devolution

One of the most pressing institutional bottlenecks related to the implementation of the decentralisation reform today is the lack of substantial devolution of authority and functions to the local governments. According to ag Ibrahim (2001, pers. comm.)⁶⁶, the president of the Regional Assembly in the Timbuktu region, devolution had started only timidly in this region in 2001. Within the education sector for instance, the decentralised institutions on municipal, cercle and regional level had only been given the authority to sign contracts with teachers. In addition there has been some very limited devolution in the areas of health and rural development. In an interview with Nyangaly (2003, pers. comm.)⁶⁷, the mayor of the municipality of Koro in the Mopti region, it was stated that the process of devolution had still not come any further since 2001. The government itself summarises the problem in their PRSP report from 2003:

Despite the efforts made to implement this policy [i.e. the decentralisation reform], its true impact on living conditions of the population is not yet evident. This is due to the weak financial and technical capabilities of the communities, the inadequacy of the level of transfers of skills and funds from the State, and the lack of involvement of the people in decision-making processes at the local level (République du Mali 2003, p. 24).

⁶⁶ Interview on 27 June 2001.

⁶⁷ Interview on 30 October 2003.

The lack of devolution may undermine the whole rationale of the reform as it has been conceptualised by the authorities of the 3rd Republic. In a recent report from SNV, a Netherlands-based international development organisation, Hilhorst and Baltissen (2004) attribute the lack of devolution to cautiousness on the part of the ministries responsible for the process. One of the reasons forwarded is uncertainty regarding the capacity of the decentralised institutions to fulfil the functions that are to be devolved. In this situation the dissolution of the MDRI and the delegation of the responsibility of devolution to sector-specific ministries may actually make this process even more difficult. Devolution implies that the ministries will lose power and influence due to reduced budgets, thus providing an impetus for administrative control and recentralisation rather than devolution.

In addition to problems regarding real devolution of power, the limited capacity of the local branches of the finance ministry represents another important bottleneck that may undermine the functioning of the decentralised government system.⁶⁸ Being responsible for tax collection, paying wages to state and municipal employees, book-keeping for the municipalities and a range of other functions, these offices at the cercle level have by no means the capacity to fulfil their role. In the Koro cercle for instance, the local section of the finance ministry only had two employees that should cover all 16 municipalities. In order to pay wages or other expenses (both for the state and the municipalities) they had to travel to the regional capital Mopti to get access to cash, leaving little time to conduct other activities.

This means that although decentralisation occupies an important place in the political project of the 3rd Republic, the actual devolution of power and the lack of capacity of local state agencies represent presently one important challenge for the functioning of the decentralised system.

Politisisation of local relations – clientelism and exclusion

The implementation of new governance institutions locally has in several municipalities led to increased polarisation between groups and politisation of local relations in the form of proliferation of clientelistic relations and exclusion of marginalised groups from the formal political arena. Previously, the local formal political arena was quite narrow in scope, and the local appointed bureaucrats at the arrondissement and cercle level were to a large degree the de facto decision-makers, while the village and fraction leaders only played a minor

⁶⁸ Interview with state employee in the Koro cercle in November 2003.

consultancy role. With the implementation of the decentralisation reform, the local political arena has opened up to a range of new actors that previously did not have access to political institutions. This has led to increased contestation locally and has intensified political struggles around access to the municipal institutions.

Even during the territorial reorganisation there were signs that decentralisation reform introduced new political stakes locally. In Northern Mali for instance, in the municipality of Gossi, the politico-administrative boundaries was not changed during the territorial reorganisation.⁶⁹ This meant that the municipality of Gossi corresponded to the former arrondissement of Gossi in its composition. The reason for this may be attributed to the relative position of the nomadic fractions that traditionally had ownership to the land in the area. These groups had economically been marginalised by outsiders moving to the largest village in the municipality (the village of Gossi). If the arrondissement of Gossi had been divided into several municipalities these groups would lose political access to the most important economic centre in the area. Numerically, however, they outnumber the outsiders. By assuring that the arrondissement was not divided into several municipalities they managed to assure at least access to the municipal council after the elections. Furthermore, prior to the local elections in 1999 several leaders of nomadic fractions sought to increase the size of their nomadic fractions in order to assure votes in the upcoming election. Families were promised that their tax were to be covered if they registered as members of the fraction and voted accordingly.

Being elected to municipal councils have also been seen as a possibility by local elite groups to restore the power they previously possessed (for instance prior to independence). In a municipality in the Mopti region, the *chef de village* in the most influential village in the municipality was elected mayor⁷⁰. The politico-administrative boundary of the new municipality corresponds to the colonial canton in place in the area during French colonial rule where the father of the current mayor was *chef the canton*. The introduction of the decentralisation reform has been used as a strategy to revitalise the power the family previously possessed. Being elected mayor, he has thus strengthened his position vis-à-vis other *chefs de village* in the municipality. In yet other municipalities, conflict between

⁶⁹ These observations are based on fieldwork in 1998-99

⁷⁰ These observations are based on fieldwork in 2003

different villages over for instance the choice of village as *chef-lieu* has led to a political impasse and a non-functioning municipality.

The role of the *chef de village/fraction* in the decentralised governance system is maybe one of the largest political challenges to the reform today. The MDRI defined them as instances to be consulted in the matters of the municipality (for instance in the elaboration of the budget). Normally the *chef de village* or other authorities at village level is responsible for the distribution of access to agricultural land. In the decentralised governance system however, it is the mayor who is formally responsible for the natural resource management. In cases where a *chef de village* is elected mayor in a municipality this may create conflicts with *chefs de village* in other villages over who actually decides in conflict situation. Furthermore, a dividing line in local politics is related to the distinction between what is called autochthonous (first-arrivers) and allochthonous (late-arrivers). This division is of particularly importance in relation to local systems of owner-ship and access to land. In situations of contestation over access to natural resources the tension between these groups may intensify and result in the exclusion of late-comers to natural resources. Rather than assuring increased local democracy, decentralisation may thus lead to increased exclusion of the poorest segments of the populations (remote and marginalised villages, women, youth, and civil society organisations) and the proliferation of clientelism.

Conclusion: empty decentralised units - recentralisation and informalisation

The introduction of the decentralisation reform in Mali shifted the balance of power away from appointed state bureaucrats towards elected municipal councillors and opened up the local political space for a range of new groups to participate in local affairs. Decentralisation came originally on the political agenda as a result of wide-spread popular demands during the democratic transition the country underwent in the early 1990s. The absence of the former Traoré regime from the transition paved the way for a broad-based anti-Traoré interim regime made up by the military coup-makers, the pro-democratic movement in the capital Bamako and the Tuareg rebel movements in Northern Mali. The transition culminated in the rise to power of the opposition when the political party ADEMA won a majority in the National Assembly and its leader, Alpha Oumar Konaré, was elected president. The demands for decentralisation were appropriated by the Konaré regime once in power and came to

constitute a major pillar in his post-transition democratisation project. The reform was actively constructed as a revitalisation of an idealised pre-colonial decentralised Mali and a mechanism through which to overcome the separation of state and society that had started at the onset of colonialism. The institutional autonomy accorded to the *Mission de décentralisation et réformes institutionnelles* (MDRI) by the Konaré regime made it possible to carry through extensive spatial and scalar reconfiguration of the state in Mali.

Today, some 15 years after the democratic transition and well into the second mandate of the decentralised institutions, there are however signs that the reform has entered an impasse and that the democratic potential of decentralisation is undermined. Institutional bottlenecks threaten to undermine any real devolution to local government. Furthermore, increased political struggles and contestations around access to and control over the decentralised institutions locally have led to increased politisation of local relations and the proliferation of clientelism and exclusion of the poorest segments of the population. These developments may lead to a dislocation of the centre of power away from the municipal institutions. There are two possible scenarios. First, recentralisation in favour of the state administration is a likely outcome. The state administration, which has been marginalised as the result of the introduction of the decentralisation reform, may regain some of its former power. Its control function vis-à-vis the decentralised institutions may be used as a strategy to limit the space of action of the elected municipal council, the cercle council and the Regional Assembly. Secondly, the institutional void created by inoperative decentralised institutions may shift the centre of power towards groups outside the formal political arena. This may in turn lead to increased informalisation of politics at the local level and further exclusion of already politically marginalised groups.

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Paper 3 Decentralisation and territorial reorganisation in Mali: power and the institutionalisation of local politics

Decentralisation became increasingly popular in many developing countries in the 1990s. It is often seen as a solution to many of the problems that the public sector in Africa is faced with (Smoke 2003). Even though there is limited evidence that support the actual benefits of decentralisation, it is still popular among policy makers. This is so because discourses on institutional reforms towards decentralisation hold the promise of both substantive democracy and relevant development. However, these discourses have had a tendency to essentialise and romanticise local communities and downplay questions of exploitation, inequality and dominance (Mohan and Stokke 2000). Decentralisation is not a guarantee for participation and power-sharing. It may be used strategically to increase the control of national political authorities or it may lead to local elite capture (Smoke 2003). According to Harriss, Stokke and Törnquist (2004) there are few critical studies that focus on the outcomes of decentralisation, and when they do, local politics is often downplayed. What are needed, they state, are analyses of “the conjunction of discourses and institutions that define political spaces and the political practices of actors operating within these spaces...” (Harriss et al. 2004, p. 3). This is in line with Ouedraogo’s (2003) observation that the local political space is already occupied by a complex institutional structure. The ways in which existing local institutions respond to the new decentralised institutions have so far not been given enough attention in the literature.

In Mali, 682 new municipalities were created when the decentralisation reform was introduced after the local elections in 1999. In an African context it has been described as a successful case. Part of the reason for this may be ascribed to the positive image of the democratic transition the country underwent in the early 1990s and the subsequent democratisation efforts. The overthrow of Moussa Traoré, president since 1968, in the early 1990s led the way for the introduction of a multi-party democratic system that still is relatively stable. Alpha Oumar Konaré, a prominent figure in the pro-democratic movement

that contributed to overthrow Traoré and the first democratically elected president in Malian history, gave decentralisation an important role in the new regime's democratic nation-building project after the 1992 presidential and legislative elections. The commitment to decentralisation from the regime was evident as it delegated the overall responsibility of the conceptualisation and implementation of the reform to the *Mission de décentralisation et réformes institutionnelles* (MDRI). Set up as a semi-independent state agency outside the traditional state apparatus and directly attached to the President's Office, the process run by the MDRI resulted in the establishment of a decentralised governance system that in its design is more inclusive than previous politico-administrative systems in the country. It has transferred decision-making power from the state administration towards the municipality at the local level and reduced the abusive practices of the state towards the population.

However, an explicit focus on the outcome of decentralisation in local political contexts is largely ignored both on a policy level in Mali and within the often positive accounts on decentralisation and democratisation in the country. Based on a case study of the decentralisation reform in Mali, this article examines the introduction of municipal institutions in local political contexts. The discussion follows chronologically the two main phases of the reform. First, I direct attention to the large-scale participatory territorial reorganisation carried through by the MDRI in the mid-1990s. The territorial reorganisation was based on the idea that the politico-administrative structures inherited from previous regimes were inappropriate for the present decentralised context and the objective was to reconstruct the local politico-administrative structure in order to establish functional, legitimate and viable local circumscriptions suitable for local democratic governance. In order to reach this goal, village and nomadic community leaders in an area were mobilised to participate in negotiations over the composition of the new municipalities. Secondly, I discuss the major challenges in the institutionalisation of the decentralised governance structure that began after the implementation of the reform in 1999. Natural resource management serves as an entry point to this discussion. Institutionally, a three-tier governance structure was established on municipal, cercle (district) and regional levels during this phase. Each of these levels is defined as a "collectivité territoriale" and consequently defined as groups of people that are geographically located at a defined part of the national territory (MDRI 1998a). It is, within Malian laws, given a judicial personality (meaning that it may make relatively autonomous decisions), financial autonomy and the power of free administration (it is not attached hierarchically to the central state administration). The design of the "collectivité

territorial” in Mali is thus in line with Manor’s (1995) definition of what is required to achieve devolution, namely that the local government is partly independent of central state authorities and democratically elected.

The article is based on fieldwork in the municipality of Gossi in the Timbuktu region and in the Koro and Bankass cercles in the Mopti region. The first fieldwork was carried out in the capital Bamako, the regional capital Timbuktu and the then future municipality of Gossi in the Timbuktu region in 1998-1999 (6 months). This provided me with information on the democratic transition and the role of decentralisation in national political processes as well as the territorial reorganisation and the preparation for the implementation of the reform in a regional and a local context. It was based on a series of interviews with high ranked officials within the MDRI and government departments, politicians and researchers, as well as public servants, politicians and community leaders in Timbuktu and Gossi. The second fieldwork was carried out with the assistance of CARE Mali in the cercles of Koro and Bankass in the Mopti region in 2003 (2 months) and provided me with observations on the institutionalisation of the decentralisation reform. Interviews have also been conducted as part of other missions to Mali; in 2001 as part of an internship for CARE Mali in the *Cercle de Diré* in the Timbuktu region, and in 2002 and 2005 as part of consultancy for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

The theoretical framework presented in the next section directs attention to the importance of both state-society interactions as well as local political processes for the analysis of the local politics of decentralisation. Since the long-term outcome of decentralisation is dependent on a number of processes that take place on several interlinked levels, focus is first and foremost directed to the interface between the introduction of a politico-administrative reform from above and the responses to the new local decentralised institutions from below.

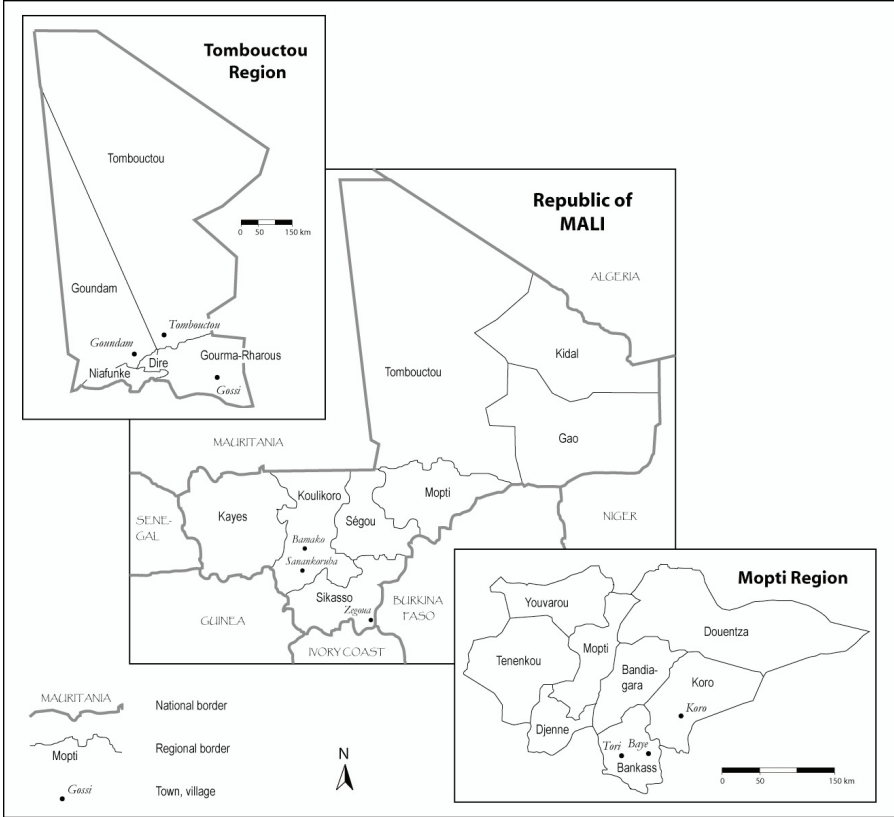


Figure 6. Map of Mali including places referred to in the article.

Local politics and decentralisation

Decentralisation has become a key element in state reforms in West Africa since the 1980s (Ouedraogo 2003). According to Gaudusson and Médard (2001), decentralisation emerged as a response to the crisis of the neopatrimonial African state caused by the economic problems of the 1980s. The neopatrimonial state, founded on particularist distribution (patronage and clientelism), represented an efficient way of political control, but was dependent on enough resources to be distributed. The solution to the crises of the state that emanated from institutions such as the World Bank has sought to depatrimonialise the state by strengthening civil society, and through privatisation, decentralisation, public sector reforms and democratisation. This has resulted in reduced state authority in favour of market liberalisation (de-statisation) and has brought about a scalar reconfiguration of state power in favour of

regionalisation and localisation (de-nationalisation) (Harriss et al. 2004). The increased interest in decentralisation among both academics and within development agencies build furthermore on the “common assumption [...] that mutually enabling relations between decentralised state institutions, local business and civil associations will generate economic growth, poverty alleviation and good governance’ (Harriss et al. 2004, p. 3). The assumptions made by donors have however had a tendency to ignore what Lemarchand (1998, p. 10) calls the “hidden face of decentralisation”. Rather than focussing on the introduction of good governance, attention should be directed to what he calls politics from below, that is that of rural clienteles, brotherhood networks, village authorities, development brokers and intermediaries, because decentralisation has become a part of the local political game.

The institutionalisation of the local political space takes place on several interlinked levels and includes both local and non-local actors. In his analysis of local power in the town of Dori in Burkina Faso, Lund (2001) argues that it is necessary to move beyond the local context in order to understand local politics. Rather than focussing on the vertical dimensions of state and society, attention should be directed to the way in which power is produced and maintained and in particular the processes that connect different geographical levels and zones of authority. The distinction between local and non-local actors may therefore blur important dimensions in an analysis of the local politics of decentralisation. The state for instance may be defined as a non-local actor, but its local agencies and employees often function *de facto* as influential local agents. Likewise, there are many local actors that are part of extra-local networks. This implies that local politics is the result of complex and changing interactions between actors and institutions at different levels. As Samoff writes:

decentralisation is a programme for specifying who is to rule in particular settings. Therefore, to make sense of its forms and consequences in particular settings we need to understand decentralisation as a political initiative, as a fundamental political process, and consequently as a site for political struggle (1990, p. 519).

Decentralisation thus raises question about power and about who rules in a particular society. This means that the relative degree of centralisation and decentralisation is not disadvantageous per se but must be determined in any concrete context. This ‘situational specificity’ of decentralisation means that success is specific to each situation and has to refer to its goals (empowerment for instance) and to the transformation of power structures (Samoff, 1990). Since decentralisation is a political process, the decentralised institutions are,

even when relatively institutionalised, likely to be subject to contestations. The outcome of decentralisation is thus not given and may, according to Slater (1989), as well increase the dominance of the already powerful as it may bring about increased democratisation. This is similar to the point made by Cooke and Khotari (2001) when they talk about the “tyranny of participation” and the lack of attention given to the complexity of power relations on the part of participatory development proponents. Even though they do not refer explicitly to decentralisation, their point is relevant since it, at least in the form of devolution, involve some level participation with local government institutions.

The state-in-society approach provides a useful theoretical framework for the analysis of the local politics of decentralisation. Within this approach, patterns of dominance, maintenance of status quo and changes are understood as processes that result from state-society interaction. It directs attention to structures within the state and different societal movements and networks, as well as formal and informal organisations (Migdal 1994; Degnbol 1999). The theory assumes that a state’s possibility to undertake change is dependent on its relation to society (Kohli and Shue 1994). The disaggregation of the state brings the lower levels of the state and state-society relations in peripheral rural areas into the analysis. The approach furthermore assumes that social forces are historically contingent and that their political capacity is not predetermined. The interaction between segments of the state and segments of the society is complex. This implies the possibility that state and society might both be mutually empowering and exclusive. Rather than focussing on the capacity of the state to implement policy it is more fruitful to focus on the process leading to the modification of the initial objectives of a policy reform (Migdal 1994). The formulation of state policy is as much a product of its relation to groups in society as a result of decisions made by top leaders or the legislative process. By directing attention towards the lower levels of the state hierarchy, where direct contact with social groups takes place, it is clear that the political outcome is the result of the complex interaction between the different state levels and the social pressure experienced on each of these levels.

Furthermore, Hagberg’s (2004) call for an analysis of decentralisation in practice points to three particular dimensions relevant for the political state-society analysis of decentralisation in this article. The *power* dimension directs attention to how decentralisation affects the distribution and exercise of power within society. It refers to the degree of devolution to local governments, the legitimacy of local governments and the relation between local governments

and other local institutions. The *livelihood* aspect, and in particular access to and management of natural resources, highlights the decentralised institutions' capacity to support and strengthen access to social infrastructure. A question that rest to be solved in Mali in this regard is the division of labour between the decentralised institutions, the prerogatives of village-based management systems and the role of the state. The *cultural meaning* dimension directs attention to how decentralisation is interpreted locally. Decentralisation may, according to Hagberg "enable a re-appropriation not only of local resources but also of local cultural identities and values" (2004, p. 8). These dimensions will run through the following discussion.

Territorial reorganisation in Mali: the reconstruction of the local political space from below

The result of the territorial reorganisation in Mali should be understood as a function of two overriding processes. First, the strategic decisions made by central authorities in the elaboration of the reform have influenced its outcome. Even though the decision to decentralise grew out of the internal political constellations in Mali at the time of the transition, the decentralisation process has been an exercise in social, political and spatial engineering from above. The process was controlled from the centre through the MDRI, which elaborated the necessary juridical framework, designed the institutional set-up of the decentralised governance system and directed its implementation. Secondly, and most important for the current discussion, the outcome of the territorial reorganisation was to a large degree influenced by particular local political constellation and processes. During the territorial reorganisation, at least from the local perspective, it was unclear what kind of institution the municipality would become in the future. The political competition around the composition of the new decentralised institutions that resulted from the territorial reorganisation may be explained by the anticipation among local actors regarding the transfer of economic resources from the state as well as the possibility to gain political power locally. The positioning is related to the role the state has played since independence as a source of accumulation of capital (Hetland 2000). As a strategy to maintain hegemonic control of the post-colonial state, the political leaders of both the 1st and 2nd Malian Republic sought to assimilate competing political networks through clientelistic redistribution of resources. Even though the centralised one-party state now is replaced by a multi-party system and a decentralised governance structure, redistribution is still a dominant governance mode.

The local responses to the territorial reorganisation differed between localities since it was introduced in very different socio-historical contexts characterised by different forms of solidarity and power relations (Fay 2000). Local power centres range from lineage to village chieftaincies dating back to pre-colonial and colonial times or are of more recent origin. This was particularly evident, according to Fay, in the “diversity in the social, historical and geographical reconstructions on which the different municipalities were created” (2000, p. 123).

First-comers and late-comers

The notion of autochthony has recently become an important dimension in questions of belonging in Africa (Geschiere 2005). Autochthony implies claims that the first-settled people in an area have superior rights based on rootedness to the territory than people that has moved in at a later stage. In a West African context, claims of belonging from the first-comers groups is the most wide-spread strategy to legitimate land rights (Lentz 2006). Furthermore, the division between first and late-comers has in recent years increasingly been brought onto the political, economic and social arena. The fear of being outnumbered in local elections on the part of the first-comers is real in many areas, and the discourse of autochthony may be used to legitimise control over natural resources. On a political level, the support to localist movements has for many regimes become a strategy to divide the opposition in a multi-party context and for development agencies it is a part of the focus on decentralisation and support for NGOs (Geschiere 2005). In a local context, autochthony may entail processes of exclusion of the late-comers. In Mali the question of autochthony was a concern in several areas during the territorial reorganisation and has had an upsurge as a power asset in local politics during the territorial reorganisation and after the introduction of the decentralisation reform. This is however not just a question of first-comers vs. late-comers. As Nijenhuis (2001) shows in her study of increased political conflict in a village in Southern Mali, decentralisation created increased conflict between two autochthonous groups that both used the reform strategically to restore their local power positions (a young educated farmer on one side and village elders on the other). But even though the conflict has led to division in the village around the two groups, the marginalised are the migrants that settled in the area later and that ‘find themselves being chased off their borrowed fields for choosing the wrong side’ (Nijenhuis 2003, p. 69). Decentralisation has in this case increased the level of conflict among the autochthon population in the area. However, the manner in which territorial reorganisation

has influenced local social and political relations differ. This is in line with Lentz' observation that the way in which the "relations between 'autochthons' and immigrants actually develops, depends not only on local configurations of power, but also the larger political context" (2006, p. 20).

Alliances and conflict in Gossi

The division between first and late-comers became a central dimension in the territorial reorganisation in the former *Arrondissement de Gossi*. The leaders of the autochthonous nomadic fractions⁷¹ in the area engaged themselves actively during the process in order to assure that it was transformed entirely into the Municipality of Gossi. The autochthons have from the colonial times been seen as the proprietors of the area around Gossi. These groups have little or no property in the village, which is today dominated by traders. During the territorial reorganisation, several groups in Gossi wanted to split the arrondissement into three municipalities, with municipal centres (*chef-lieu*) in respectively Gossi (the village), N'Daki and Ebang Malane. However, the autochthons of Gossi refused this solution because they feared to lose control and consequently being dominated by the late-comers. The alliance during the territorial reorganisation between the first-comers in the municipality was however relatively fragile and temporary. Prior to the local elections in 1999, there was widespread political mobilisation among various groups in the area to strengthen their political support as part of a strategy to gain access to the future municipal institutions. Because it is necessary to be registered in a municipality in order to vote there, at least two fractions were registered in Gossi, more precisely Kel Antessar-Gossi and Oulad Driss. These fractions had lived there for a long time, but had previously been administratively registered in other places. The leader of the Kel-Antessar fraction, originally coming from the area around Goundam, was actively recruiting new members prior to the 1999 elections by way of entering new patron-client relations with families (paid their taxes) to increase the demographic importance of the fraction as a means to recruit votes. The autochthonous population in Gossi thus initially went into an alliance to impede the break-up of the arrondissement into several municipalities. A conflict between an autochthonous fraction and a fraction that is made up of late-comers illustrate furthermore new conflict lines. Both of these fractions live in the same area of the municipality and have for some time been in a conflict over the use of forest resources. After

⁷¹ A fraction is composed of several families and is led by a *chef de fraction*. The fraction is a flexible social structure and might regroup people of different ethnic origin. The *chef de fraction* have, as the *chef de village*, administrative tasks (in relation to censuses and tax payment for instance) and is to be consulted in important municipal affairs (the elaboration of the development plan and the budget).

the local elections in 1999, this conflict was brought onto the municipal arena as the leaders of both fractions were elected members of the municipal council for the same political party.

Similar patterns are found in other parts of the country. In a municipality⁷² in the *Cercle de Goundam* in the Timbuktu region, Giuffrida (2005) demonstrates how the failure of development projects within the framework of decentralisation has at the same time reproduced poverty and generated conflicts between groups over the control of development aid. Likewise, in his study of the village of Zégoua⁷³, Bérédgo (1998) shows how the creation of the Municipality of Zégoua was subject to intense struggle during the territorial reorganisation and increased the tension between first and late-comers. Historically, different lineages have always combated to gain control over the village of Zégoua. This is also the case now, when the current power holders try to conserve their position based on a strategy consisting of fighting the late-comers.

As a general tendency in Northern Mali, Muphta ag Hairy⁷⁴ observes that the territorial reorganisation in many cases was used strategically to assure that certain people were elected mayor:

During the *découpage* [the term usually used to refer to the territorial reorganisation] there were some inauspicious initiatives. Sometimes I got the impression that the municipalities were created for already known mayors. And in order for a person to be elected mayor, it was necessary that the municipality was comprised exclusively of people that supports him... I think that there are some places that I have not been, but I know that almost everywhere they knew already who would become mayor and the municipality was carved out in order for this person to become mayor

This was, according to ag Hairy, for instance the case in the city of Goundam.⁷⁵ In other municipalities people who have had important positions earlier (*chef de tribus* or *chef de canton* during colonialism) or other political entrepreneurs that have sought power have used the territorial reorganisation strategically to create local power centres to assure control and influence over the municipal institutions. The creation of municipalities based on the

⁷² She does not name the municipality in her article

⁷³ It is located in the *Cercle de Zegoua* in the Sikasso region, some 500 km south of the capital Bamako near the border to Ivory Coast.

⁷⁴ Interview on 25 November 1998, previous Chef d'Arrondissement, Commandant de Cercle, Gouverneur de Koulikoro and Malian ambassador to Egypt.

⁷⁵ Goundam is located in the *Cercle de Goundam* in the Timbuktu region, 100 km west of the city of Timbuktu.

revitalisation of political entities that had been marginalised under previous regimes was the case in several localities in Mali.

Local elite capture and the revitalisation of the canton

The territorial reorganisation opened up the opportunity for groups to revitalise political entities that had been marginalised as a result of politico-administrative reforms during French colonialism or post-colonial one-party rule. Cissé (1999) observed several attempts in the Mopti region to revitalise the *canton* during the territorial reorganisation. The canton was a colonial administrative structure that had been abolished by the leaders of the 1st Malian Republic under the presidency of Modibo Keita.

The creation of the Municipality of Tori in the *Cercle de Bankass* was rooted in the desire by certain groups to revitalise the former canton of Tori. This canton was established during French colonial rule and the father of the current mayor was *chef de canton* until 1960. As the cantons were abolished by the Keita regime the family was deprived of its former power. The territorial reorganisation represented an opportunity to restore its former position. Their success during the territorial reorganisation was based on their position locally. They are considered to be the proprietors of the land (they are the first-comers) and, consequently, people who have moved into the area later are dependent on them to get access to land. Being proprietor of land was an important power asset that governed the territorial reorganisation in this municipality. It was difficult for others to oppose the process because they were dependent on the autochthones to get access to land. Furthermore, the election of the current mayor has resulted in increased local elite capture in other areas. In addition to being mayor, he is also *chef de village* in the village that serves as municipal centre, school director, and president of other local associations. Several of the municipal councillors also occupy central positions in these associations. One of the reasons they have succeeded is that the family has managed to stay united and thus blocked the opportunity for other groups to get access to the municipal arena. Fay (2000) finds the same underlying logic in his study of the territorial reorganisation in the *Cercle de Tenenkou* in the western part of Mopti region. The cercle is composed of nine rural and one urban municipality. Political and territorial legitimacy with roots in pre-colonial or colonial political organisation was the basic principle on which the new municipalities were created in this area. Some of the municipalities resemble the former arrondissements but only in cases when the arrondissements themselves corresponded to

either the pre-colonial *janyeeli*⁷⁶ or to the old cantons. Other municipalities were purely reconstructions of the pre-colonial *jenyeeli*.

Conflicts and fragmentation of political relations

As the discussion above shows, the creation of the municipalities was the result of existing local political relations that in some cases dated back to even the pre-colonial period.

Furthermore, as the Tori example demonstrates, the territorial reorganisation has in some areas given groups the opportunity to gain power and monopolise local political institutions. The opportunities created by the process has furthermore created a manoeuvring space that in many places has increased local conflicts and led to fragmentation of political relations.

One expression of this was conflicts over the location of the *chef-lieu* (municipal centre) that resulted from political competition between different groups during the territorial reorganisation. This became a major conflict line in one municipality in the *Cercle de Koro* in the Mopti region.⁷⁷ In pre-colonial time, village A used to be relatively weak compared to village B. Its position locally was however strengthened when it was made administrative centre under French colonial rule and further when it was made *chef-lieu* during the territorial reorganisation. The mayor elected in 1999 however came from village B and because he saw this as a possibility to restore the position of this village, he refused to move to the *chef-lieu* in village A. The mayor has been removed from his position by the administration, but continues to represent the municipality officially on his own initiative. At the source of this conflict are people that for a period of time have lived elsewhere, often in Bamako, and returned to their home-place (called *resortissants*). According to one informant, tensions between *resortissants* are common in Mali and are often at the source of conflicts. Often, they seek to create a political career with their home-place as point of departure. In this particular case, the conflict has led to a total blockage in the functioning of the municipality. Djiré (2004) find a similar case in his study of local governance in Sanankoroba.⁷⁸ Because of disagreement over the location of the *chef-lieu*, some of the villages chose to become part of another municipality.

⁷⁶ In pre-colonial time the area corresponding to the *Cercle de Tenenkou* was organised in a chieftaincy (called Diallo-Dicko) subdivided into some 20 areas of power in a confederacy (Fay 2000).

⁷⁷ Information based on fieldwork in Koro in 2003.

⁷⁸ Sanankoroba is located some 30 km south of the capital Bamako in the *Cercle de Kati* in the Koulikoro region.

The creation of very small municipalities, as Cissé (1999) observed in the Mopti region, may also be seen as an expression of the fragmentation of local politics. The desire expressed by many villages to create municipalities made up of only a small number of villages was a common difficulty encountered during the territorial reorganisation. As the citation below indicates, this may in certain cases be attributed to economic relations. In an information meeting held prior to the territorial reorganisation, one *chef de village* expressed his concern on the matter:

Here, in Falaco, we have been decentralised for a long time. We are two villages (Falaco and N'Golocorola) and 23 hamlets. Together, we have built three classrooms, a maternity, an animal husbandry, lodging for our teachers, for the midwife and for the nurse... Apart from the husbandry agent, we pay them all without the support from the government represented in Fana [an *arrondissement*] or the *chef d'arrondissement* who only comes to us to collect the taxes of which we benefit nothing. If we join another municipality, they [the other villages] will only benefit for free from the efforts we have generated during many years. All in all, we are sufficient. We, Falaco and N'Golocorola and our 23 hamlets, we do not join anyone. In the union that has always been between us, we will create our own municipality (Diarra, Freyss, de Noray, Sarambounou, Sidibé, Sissoko, Soumaré and Tobéré 1996, p. 154, my translation).

Koné (1997), in his study of the creation of micro-municipalities in the Sikasso region, ascribes this to the political and economic history of the localities in question on one side, and the interpretation of the criteria of reorganisation on the other. According to the demographic criteria set by the MDRI (a minimum of 10 000 inhabitants in each municipality), the *Cercle de Sikasso* should consist of 10 municipalities. At the end of the reorganisation however, the cercle counted 42 new municipalities. He explains this on the basis of solidarity between villages born out of a common recent history as well as present common interests. The micro-municipalities seemed to regenerate former socio-political realities prevailing in the area. With the introduction of colonial administration, and later during the post-colonial period, certain villages were given the status as administrative centres, and were thus considered as villages of supremacy. During the territorial reorganisation in the 1990s, villages saw thus the possibility of regaining some of their independence by establishing themselves as administrative centres. Because of this, several villages refused to be part of a municipality where a neighbouring village was proposed as *chef-lieu* based on historical and economic reasons. In other cases, possible municipalities were split up because villages could not agree on the location of the *chef-lieu*.

To sum up, the outcome of the territorial reorganisation was to a large degree the function of local political struggles. The process has had and will continue to have long-term impact upon the functioning and the institutionalisation of the decentralised governance system because the municipalities have become important new arenas for struggle over local political leadership and authority. This is so despite the limited devolution of formal decision-making power from the state to the municipal authorities. It is to the institutionalisation of the decentralised governance system that the discussion now turns.

Decentralisation: transformation and the institutionalisation of local politics

The introduction of new decentralised governance structures in Mali has brought new stakes onto the local political arena. Even though the new system is currently in the process of institutionalisation, it is not clear what it will look like in the future. As the following discussion will show, it involves both local and non-local actors with different interests and takes place on several interlinked levels. In the official discourse of the authorities, the decentralised governance system in 1999 represents an important arena for local development:

The decentralisation reform launched by the 3rd Republic is a vast societal project. Its administrative and institutional dimensions are not more than supportive of a much more ambitious political 'building site' that seek to deepen the democratisation process to the local level countrywide, to give the parole and the power back to the citizens, to create the favourable framework for the renaissance of local initiatives which are considered as the engine in the new approach to development (MDRIb 1998, p. 14, my translation).

The territorial reorganisation, as it has been conceptualised by the MDRI, was intended to result in the creation of legitimate politico-administrative local units that would serve as arenas for local development. The pre-defined criteria elaborated by the MDRI should assure "community solidarity" within the municipality by including social, political, cultural, spatial and demographic relations and affinities between villages and/or other social groups (MDRI 1994). The MDRI has thus sought to create an arena for local development initiatives and service provision. It is in this regard that the state has devolved the responsibility for the elaboration of local budgets and development programs to the municipality.⁷⁹ Even though

⁷⁹ In article 4 in law no. 93-008 'Regulating the conditions for the free administration of the territorial collectives' (déterminant les conditions de la libre administration des collectivités territoriales), the role of the

limited decision-making power is transferred at this moment, the municipality is in the future supposed to assure a large range of functions that previously was the responsibility of the state.

However, as has already been indicated in the previous section, the territorial reorganisation resulted in many localities in the creation and revitalisation of local conflicts between groups of different origin. This means that the local political space has not yet been institutionalised in line with the explicit goals of the reform as they were expressed by national political authorities and codified by the MDRI. Rather, the local political space is in a process of transformation and is in various degrees filled with local power structures. Within the area of natural resource management, a crucial area in people's everyday life in rural areas, it remains unclear what the role of the municipality, the state and village authorities will be in the future. Not only local social and political relations, but also the state also plays a part in the institutionalisation of local politics. The degree of devolution from central state authorities, the role of the state administration as a control instance vis-à-vis the municipalities and the role of other state agencies locally are furthermore subject to changing political orientations nationally.

The municipality as local political arena – natural resource management

Local management of natural resource has become a crucial issue in contemporary Africa (Bertrand 1998). Historically, natural resource management (NRM) in Mali has been the domain of the state and was prior to 1991 characterised by authoritarian and repressive practices on the part of the state Forest Service (Benjaminsen 1998; Winter 2000). The 1986 forest code only allowed centralised state control of the forest resources. The post-colonial forest policy in Mali is a legacy from French colonial rule, and the centralised state authority over natural resources, designed to benefit the colonisers, continued under post-colonial rule until the 1990s (Becker 2001). In line with the new decentralised context in Mali, a new natural resource management law has opened up for new management systems that break with the previous repressive system. The new forest law adopted in 1995 (law 95-003) was designed as a guiding law that leaves room for local regulations (Winter 2000). But even though the forest law has left room for local management of forest resources, a major problem has been that it does not specify how local management should be organised.

CT in local development is explicitly mentioned: The CT have as mission the conceptualisation, programming and implementation of economic, social and cultural development activities of regional and local interest (Primature de la République du Mali 1996).

Decentralisation has nevertheless opened up the possibility for co-management arrangements that include both local village institutions and the municipality (Benjaminsen 1997).

However, the creation of municipal domains does not solve the judicial problems related to land areas under customary control (Lavigne Delville 2002). Village and fraction councils are for instance supposed to be consulted regarding the use of land but how this is to be done has not been specified. Nonetheless, there is an opening in the law for municipal councils to create local conventions for the management of natural resources.

There have been recent attempts to set up local natural resource management systems in Mali. In the municipality of Koro in the Mopti region, a Local Convention on forest management for the Ségué forest was deliberated in the municipal council in 2002 (Municipality of Koro 2002). The forest of Ségué plays, according to the Convention, an important role in the local economy. It is inhabited by a variety of stakeholders representing different ethnic groups (McLain and Sankaré 1993).⁸⁰ Ownership and use right of the forest among the villages is based on the principle of time of settlement (refer discussion of autochthony above). This means that the village of Gakou, the first village to be established in the forest, has stronger claims than villages that have settled later. Some of the pastoralists groups as well as non-resident gatherers have in addition developed use rights to the forest. However, the exploitation of the forest by commercial wood-cutters has created conflicts. This may partly be caused by the legal status of the forest in Malian laws. The state through the *Forest Service* has had a monopoly of forest management, while the forest users have only enjoyed use rights. The villages have thus not had any means to sanction the use of the forest by the commercial wood-cutters.

The Convention is set up as a co-management scheme that implies that certain aspects of forest management authority are delegated from the mayor to local management associations called Ogotana. The Ogotana used to be an old Dogon village institution, the purpose of which included both the management of natural resources as well as the resolution of social conflicts (Benjaminsen 2000). These institutions were however considerably weakened by the centralisation of forest management by the state. Since 1991 there have been attempts to

⁸⁰ The authors identify multiple groups of forest users: sedentary agriculturalists, sedentary agro-pastoralists, semi-sedentary (agro) pastoralists, transhumant pastoralists, non-resident wood-cutters and non-resident gatherers.

revitalise the Ogokana institutions facilitated by the international NGO CARE. These institutions, of which there are 19 according to the Convention, are among other things responsible for the surveillance of the Ségué forest in cooperation with the state agency *Service local de conservation de la nature*⁸¹ (SLCN) in Koro.

As of late 2003 however, several of the agreements in the Convention were not fulfilled. Meetings between the mayor and the associations that were planned to solve irregularities in forest management had not taken place. According to article 11 in the Convention the mayor should convene the forest users prior to each dry season to determine the movement of animals, but the mayor had not done this. The rural market places for wood should assure income for forest dwellers but has been sabotaged by people from the city of Koro that go elsewhere to collect wood.

The problems related to the convention may be explained by several factors. One explanation is related to lack of representation. Out of the 23 municipal councillors in Koro, only two are from the forest villages. This means that the decisions taken in the council regarding the forest of Ségué have not much legitimacy. Lack of legitimacy is furthermore illustrated by another event. One hamlet in the forest had on its own initiative begun to dig a well and had to hire expensive specialists at their own expense to dig through rock. Normally the digging of wells is the responsibility of the municipality, but the hamlet did not ask the mayor for assistance based on the argument that the budgeting and the elaboration of the municipal development plan would take too long time. Furthermore, they do not pay taxes anymore because they do not see what they can benefit from it. But they also underlined that the decentralisation reform had had positive effects. It is much easier to get in touch with the municipal councillors than the former state appointed administrators since “they are much closer to us than the administration”. The councillors also take on the role as intermediaries when they need to get in touch with the administration or other state agencies.

An explanation related to inter-village relations in the area also seems plausible. It may be argued that the mayor does not intervene in NRM questions involving other villages in the municipality since this is normally the domain of the *chef de village*. Intervening in other village chiefs’ domain may be a source of inter-village conflict that is not open for municipal

⁸¹ The previous State Forest Service.

intervention. The current position of village chiefs has also been subject to transformations since colonialism (Ribot 1999). Under French colonial rule and until the early 1990s chiefs were made part of the state administrations. Their double loyalty towards both the population and to the state has undermined their representativeness. Regular elections of village chiefs by universal suffrage may increase their legitimacy, but their principle role is still as administrative appointees.

The lack of intervention may also be explained by the current political situation within the village of Koro (the *chef-lieu* in the municipality) in which the mayor is himself autochthon. In his account of the history of the city of Koro, the mayor refers explicitly to his family's position as the founders⁸² and, consequently, their customary rights to village land: "We are the autochthones. The proprietors of the land – that is us". However, within the village there are numerous power centres. According to one informant, the *chef de village* is stronger than the mayor and controls him to a certain degree. Furthermore, according to another informant, the *chef de terre* position is more important. Responsible for customary management and distribution of village land in a life-time position, he normally stays outside the political life of the municipality. The *chef de village* on the other side, having administrative responsibilities, involves himself more in politics. He is responsible for "administrative management" and is an "intermediary between the *chef de terre* and the administrative authority".

This analysis points towards the conclusion that municipal politics in Koro is to a certain degree governed by informal political relations (that is political relations outside the formal prerogatives of the municipality). This aspect was also evident in other domains. Social and kinship relations were explicitly referred to as a rationale for political practice in an interview with the mayor of Koro. In the case of taxing for instance people often refuse to pay:

Before, the tax was collected with force. Since June 6 [1999], the municipality has arrived. Now, it is the children of the land that manage [local affairs]. We may not appeal to the security forces to make people pay. We can't put people in prison. We have been elected in the ballots. The people say that 'the mayor, he is our cousin, our parent. We are not afraid of him, so we do not pay the taxes'. The mayor can not be as the state, he may not force the people to pay. People do not pay the taxes – the past has tired them out (Anaye Niangaly, Mayor of Koro, interview on 30 October 2003)

⁸² The village was originally founded by a hunter named Anaye that had four sons. The four families that are considered to be the founders of the city descend from the sons of Anaye.

In the neighbouring *Cercle de Bankass* there has been a similar attempt to that in Koro. In 1992 the NGO SOS Sahel established a participatory forest management system in the Samori forest in the municipality of Baye. One of the main challenges regarding forest management here, according to Kassibo (2005), is that the forest is subject to several institutional systems that make management complex and a potential source of conflict. Among the main actors are the state technical services (the SLCN), the revitalised local management associations (called *ton*) as well as elected municipal councillors. A major problem in the management of the forest is the difficulty to establish fields of discretionary power at the local level. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of delegation of power and transfer of land from the state to the decentralised institutions.

One major obstacle to the establishment of functional co-management structures is the number of different stakeholders in forest management with different interests and the lack of institutionalisation of clearly defined roles. A key challenge in setting up participatory NRM systems is thus, according to Ribot (1999), to make local authorities downwardly accountable and empowered as decision-making bodies. These challenges however only reflect a more fundamental dilemma regarding decentralisation in Mali. Even though it is set up to promote local management of natural resources and thus promote local development, there has hardly been any devolution of authority and participation is very limited. The struggle between stakeholders over the institutionalisation of NRM in a particular local context may rather result in the exclusion of groups with already weak use rights (pastoralists for instance) and the concentration of power with certain groups (groups of autochthones for instance). If this is the case, the municipality becomes an institution that cements or even strengthens local power relations.

The ambivalent role of the state – devolution, clientelism and recentralisation
The implementation of the decentralised governance institutions in Mali is currently at a stage characterised by struggles over the institutionalisation of the municipality as a local political arena. This does however not mean that non-local actors are without influence. The role of the state is of particular importance in this regard. In line with the state-in-society approach it is important to turn the attention to different levels of the state. Decisions at national level, both political and administratively, are of course one aspect that is of interest here. But also the

way in which local branches of the state operates within the local political context affects the institutionalisation of the municipality as local political arena.

Intra-governmental relations still remain to be clearly defined within the new organisation of the state apparatus. The degree of devolution to the decentralised institutions and the degree of control retained at the centre is a particularly important question regarding the future of decentralisation in Mali. On one side, decentralisation was from the onset a strategy to minimise the abusive powers of the state at the local level. But at the same time, there are legitimate concerns from the state that decentralisation may lead to the growth and proliferation of local despotism (as discussed in the previous sections of this article). Finding the balance between the degree of devolution and the degree of central control directs the attention to the ambivalent role of the state in local politics. Reforms of the state apparatus that have accompanied decentralisation in Mali have reduced the abusive practices of the state at the local level. The marginalisation of the state administration vis-à-vis the municipality is of particular importance in this regard. But even though the state is in the process of devolving decision-making power and specific functions to the municipality, the outcome of this process is very uncertain. This is particularly so since the transfer of competencies is subject to a strategy based on progressive devolution. This leaves room for the state agencies, and in particular line ministries, that loose power as a result of devolution to counteract the process.

The state administration was previously the highest administrative and political authority at the local level. It was set up by the leaders of the 1st Malian Republic in the 1960s with the primary goal of extending the reach of the state to the local level and to marginalise the influence of canton chiefs on the state apparatus. The state administration has been reformed and fulfils now principally a tutelary role, that is it functions first and foremost as a control instance vis-à-vis the decentralised institutions. This means that the *préfet* at cercle level is responsible to control the legality of decisions and official documents of the municipal council a posteriori (MDRIa 1998).⁸³ But even though the state administration has been marginalised, it is possible to foresee scenarios that the pendulum will swing back in favour of the administration. A *recentralisation* of this sort will depend on a number of factors. The powers invested in the state administration may be used strategically to limit the space of

⁸³ In certain areas this control is conducted a priori: municipal budget, the creation of municipal enterprises, tax setting and municipal loans (MDRI 1998a).

manoeuvre of the decentralised institutions at municipal, cercle and regional level. During the time of fieldwork in 2003 there were no reports that the administration actually uses its formal power to do this (but it undermines decentralisation in many cases by not fulfilling its obligation in various fields). A change in policy direction at national level may in the future revitalise the strength of the administration at the expense of the decentralised institutions. The *de facto* lack of devolution may from the point of view of the state be legitimised as a strategy to counteract local despotism. But at the same time it contributes to preserve the power of the state and undermine the authority of the municipal council. This may lead to a hollowing out of the decentralised institutions and shift the locus of power locally relatively towards arenas outside the municipal arena. This implies a development towards increased *informalisation* of local political processes and decisions and paves the way for an even larger degree of elite politics and political practices based on clientelism.

Recentralisation may therefore lead to informalisation of local politics. But it is also possible to argue that the state contributes more directly to the proliferation of clientelistic political practices at the local level. After the democratic transition in the early 1990s, decentralisation came to constitute an important element of the political strategy of the Konaré regime to build and maintain hegemonic control of the state. While the regimes of Keita and Traoré sought to control the state and local political coalitions by extending the reach of the state locally, the Konaré regime based its strategy on power-sharing. This has given local actors access to resources they previously were cut off from and thus the possibility for resource accumulation. In its efforts to promote local development the state has, in collaboration with international donors, established a nation-wide fund, the *Agence Nationale d'Investissement des Collectivités Territoriales* (ANICT)⁸⁴, to finance municipal development activities. A major problem that has emerged regarding the ANICT fund is related to the proliferation of certain practices regarding the process of application for development projects. In many cases the municipality does not have the necessary financial means to pay their 20 % share that the ANICT demands. There have been reports that private contractors in many cases have paid the share of the municipality and in return demanded to carry through the projects. This state financed program thus gives local groups the possibility for corruption and the establishment of clientelistic practices. This has clear parallels to the mode of governance that characterised the previous one-party regimes of Keita and Traoré in which the redistribution of resources

⁸⁴ The financing of the ANICT is a joint project of the Malian state and its development partners. Its budget for 2001-2004 was approximately 30 billion FCFA (46 M Euros) of which the Malian state contributed 10 %.

through political networks was the dominant strategy to maintain the hegemonic control of the state. There are some differences however. While the resources previously were redistributed through the party in power, they are now canalised to the municipalities and public-private alliances. The redistribution through political networks thus takes on new forms. Even though it is not an intended strategy, decentralisation has become a mechanism to assimilate local leaders into national political networks. In this way, the current democratic regime represents continuity with the previous regime and demonstrates the state's inability to escape from the neo-patrimonial trap.

This example is symptomatic of an inherent problem in the decentralised governance structure in Mali. The way in which the local political context is taken into account in the design of decentralisation has not solved the fundamental problems that the reform was meant to address in the first place. In commenting on the problems that the decentralisation reform has met (the conflicts discussed above), Noël Diarra, the previous deputy manager of the MDRI, interpreted this as initial implementation problems that will disappear when people have understood what decentralisation is about. This interpretation has two flaws. First, based on a too strong belief in the potential of laws and administrative change from above, it represents a technocratic interpretation of what is required to bring about administrative and political change. Secondly, it treats the local political problems that have surfaced as secondary and reminiscent of a pre-modern political culture that eventually will disappear. Contrary, as the discussion in this article suggest, the municipality is more and more becoming an integrated and embedded part of the local political institutional landscape.

Based on the above discussion, and measured against the objectives of the reform, it is unlikely that the decentralisation reform will become the democratic institution it was meant to be. An important deficit in the participatory model in Mali is, according to Zobel (2004), that participatory structures at the village level have not been taken into account in the elaboration of the reform. The absence of institutionalised forums between village associations and lineage councils undermine the integration of villages in the municipal organs and may lead to a concentration of decision-making at the municipal level.

This does not mean however that it has been a failure. Compared to the previous local governance system led by state appointed bureaucrats with few democratic arenas and characterised by abusive practices from local state agencies, the new decentralised

governance system has opened up the local political space for new groups to participate. The marginalisation of the state administration at the expense of the municipality has furthermore, at least for now, led to a relative strengthening of the decentralised institutions. Furthermore, in a study of the popular views of the legitimacy of the state in Mali, Bratton et al. (2002) find that it is easier for people to get access to municipal councillors than state appointed administrators. This was also expressed by the inhabitants in the Ségué forest in the Koro case referred to above. Interpreted in terms of participation and influence the reform has contributed to positive changes. A question that remains open however is the form of participation that this system supports. Based on the discussion in this article, it is possible to conclude that influence and participation will take place outside the formal democratic channels and rather be canalised through existing informal channels based on clientelistic political relations.

Conclusion: local politics of institutionalisation

The current decentralisation reform is only one in a series of administrative and political reforms that has been carried out since colonialism. All of these reforms have redefined the relative opening or closure of the local political space and hence the possibilities for local groups to participate in decision-making. The establishment of cantons as an administrative structure during French indirect rule ceded relatively much manoeuvring space to local canton chiefs. This space was subject to closure from the post-colonial state and replaced by a three-tier administrative system that was an important tool in the hands of the national political leaders in their strategy to build and maintain hegemonic control of the state. After the democratic transition in the early 1990s and the introduction of the current decentralisation reform, the local political space has again been opened up for political entrepreneurship and competition.

Local actors engaged themselves initially in the territorial reorganisation because there was an opportunity to get access to economic resources and formal power. It gave rise to political competition around the composition of the new municipalities and was ultimately also a struggle about political leadership. Today, several years after the first local elections in 1999, the new decentralised governance structure is still in the process of institutionalisation. Within the area of natural resource management for instance it remains unclear what the role of the municipality, the state and village authorities will be in the future. Some attempts to establish

local management systems have been carried out, but they have not been successful so far. This may to a large degree be explained by the political nature of decentralisation. Rather than being a neutral service delivery agency, the municipality has become an arena for political struggle between various groups over the leadership and the institutionalisation of the local political arena. The decentralised institutions have thus become embedded in already existing political and social relations and have become part of local politics. Tendencies towards the proliferation of informal political relations within these local institutions threaten to undermine the municipality as an arena of development and may further marginalise the already poor.

The institutionalisation of the municipality as a local political arena depends also on national political processes. The degree of devolution from central state authorities and the transfer of economic resources are important factors in this regard. Changes in the prerogatives of the state administration as a control instance vis-à-vis the municipalities may lead to a more important role of the state as a local actor and, in the long term, recentralisation. The marginalisation of the municipality may also bring about increased informalisation of local politics and pave the way for an even larger degree of elite politics and clientelistic practices. The overall outcome of the decentralisation reform in a long-term perspective is however not clear. On one side it points towards an increased institutional complexity at the local level that is filled with power relations. On the other side, it is easier for ordinary people to get access to the municipal institutions than was the case before. The level of participation and influence has augmented, but maybe not in the way that was anticipated. Rather than based on democratic principles, it seems that decentralisation has created new spaces for participation based on clientelistic power relations. Even though this is the case, the municipality is nevertheless more in touch with the needs of citizens than the upwardly accountable administration used to be.

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