

## **Past and present African citizenships of slave descent**

Lessons from Benin

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### Past and present African citizenships of slave descent: lessons from Benin

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## Past and present African citizenships of slave descent: lessons from Benin

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This paper takes up the notion of citizenship and ethnicity as forms of belonging in the context of globalisation. The discussion draws on a case study focusing on a Fulfuldephone servile group from Northern Benin called the *Gando*. Since pre-colonial times, their servile status ascribed by birth has been an argument for placing them at the margins of their society and excluding them from political participation. While still claiming their belonging to the nation-state of Benin and the *Fulbe*'s culture, the *Gando* have progressively built a new social identity that is showing to be a new ethnic group. In the context of the decentralisation reform implemented in 2002–2003, the *Gando* have taken the opportunity to access local power; they conquered municipal power in the 2003 and 2008 local elections. In doing so they opened the gates to a full citizenship that in the context of today's Benin means a clientelistic citizenship. Contrary to recent literature focused on the simultaneous emergence of belonging dynamics and violent conflicts in the context of recent globalisation in developing countries, the author argues that belonging dynamics do not necessarily imply violent conflicts and exclusion dynamics.

**Keywords:** citizenship; slave status; ethnicity; decentralisation; elections; local politics

The concept of citizenship has its history. Notwithstanding its current use as a universal value, citizenship has been a changing notion with various meanings over time and space.<sup>1</sup> Originally, citizenship was defined as membership of small-scale communities of the polis in ancient Greek city-states or the self-governed Roman *municipia* (municipalities). Always referred to as a model of today's Western democracies, these ancient political systems were, nevertheless, inegalitarian and were characterised by the central place occupied by slavery in their political systems. Most citizens were slaves and had no rights, and even free men had more duties than rights.<sup>2</sup> While historians have studied the relations between citizens and the state in ancient times, most scholarly work on citizenship (mainly philosophers and social and political scientists) refers to an idealised and universalised definition of citizenship supposedly taking its roots in ancient Greek and Roman cities. Moreover, citizenship studies have put little focus on empirical research related to slavery and citizenship in the societies of today. Slavery is, of course, supposedly abolished. Nonetheless, in practice people still live in servile conditions in various societies, for example, in Africa. Furthermore, slavery has its legacies: most descendants of slaves still have a servile status, which according to the political culture in stratified social groups is incompatible with political citizenship. Recent democratisation and decentralisation

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processes (that are part of contemporary globalisation processes) bring back this issue. In scattered locations in most developing countries people from slave origins have accessed political representation through local elections for the very first time in their group history. Such a case is presented in this paper.

Citizenship also has a cultural dimension. Over the millennia the idea of citizenship has been closely related to democratic regimes; however, non-democratic forms of citizenship can be imagined, even in contexts where vernacular languages do not provide such a conceptual word. Citizenship may have various meanings according to the society in which it is developed, for example, with regard to its political organisation, and the status of its members (sex, age, social status . . . ) at a certain point of time. While there are many theoretical contributions to the study of citizenship, there are few empirical studies that deal with people's own understandings of this notion (Jones and Gaventa 2002, Desforges *et al.* 2005, Nordberg 2006, Lister 2007). Anthropologists have paid surprisingly little attention to the concept of citizenship (Neveu 1997, pp. 70–71). They rather focused on ethnicity, religion and other forms of belonging. Here, I describe and analyse what citizenship means both conceptually and in practice in a small-scale *Fulbe* community in Northern Benin (West Africa). More specifically, I focus on past and present claims of a marginalised group of slave descendants (called the *Gando*) and their attempts to gain their rights as full members of a community.<sup>3</sup>

The *Gando*'s claims and struggles for citizenship are currently taking place in the context of a democratisation reform promoted by donors and furthered by the more recent decentralisation wave. However, these people's understandings of democracy and citizenship differ somewhat from the universal model, which is discussed briefly in the first part of this article. I argue that the *Gando*'s understanding and practice of citizenship have been built upon previous conceptions that existed before the building of a nation-state in Benin. As in ancient Greece and Rome, lived citizenship in this *Fulbe* group was restricted.<sup>4</sup> Thus until recent times, inequality of status was widely accepted (by both dominant and dominated groups). In most African political cultures, women, young men and people of slave origin do not have the same access to political participation as elder aristocratic or free men. When studying local understandings of citizenship, it is important to consider the political structures and the political culture that constitute the context of these claims. This is analysed in the second section. The third section describes and analyses the political trajectory of the *Gando* since the 1980s, their claims for citizenship of both the nation-state and the *Fulbe* group, and the transformation of the social status of the *Gando* into a new ethnic group. In the last section, I focus on the *Gando*'s political citizenship and citizenship practices. I describe the process of access to municipal power in local elections in 2003 and 2008 and explore the dynamics of citizenship in practice in Kalalé. In Kalalé, being a full citizen is understood in the framework of a patron–client system. It entails an open access to newly elected councillors through personal links with the mayor or with municipal councillors. These councillors are expected to work as intermediaries between the mayor and inhabitants in order to win individual and collective favours. Finally, I oppose recent literature that links ethnicity and violent conflicts and highlight the remaining tensions between inclusion and exclusion in the dynamics of citizenship.

### From global citizenship to local citizenships

In the aid community, there is a general trend of seeing decentralisation as the best way to root democratisation processes in developing countries at the lowest level. The recent wave of decentralisation reforms in Africa has been seen as a further development

of democracy (see Wunsch and Olovu 1995). It is expected that decentralisation will directly affect local politics and governance patterns, as well as the meanings of citizenship for communities and individual actors. The theme of citizenship is often more or less implicitly included in donors' general discourses on democratisation, civil society and good governance in sub-Saharan Africa.

The concept of citizenship gives foundation to aid development agencies' discourses related to democratisation, as well as to human, political and social rights. Citizenship is about treating people as individuals with equal rights under the law. One can see a clear influence of the theory of citizenship-as-rights, which is usually defined as a set of civil, political and social rights that requires a liberal-democratic welfare state (Kymlicka and Norman 1994, p. 354). To go further, some scholars, such as Wunsch and Olovu (1995, p. xi), even called for the rights for 'self-governance' in Africa, i.e. for decentralised forms of power in order to root democracy in people's political conceptions and practices.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, a more implicit acceptance of citizenship-as-duties can be found in Western development ideology and discourses. Citizenship is viewed as a means to good governance and accountability aims. In other words, through decentralisation reforms it would be possible for citizens to call to account their elected rulers. Thus, citizenship takes place in the range of populist concepts such as 'participation', 'empowerment', 'enabled civil society', 'rights of the poor', etc. and, as such, it is part of the 'myths of linear development'.<sup>6</sup> It is also part of the 'democratic imaginary' of Western countries,<sup>7</sup> in which a 'good' citizenship rooted in civil society movements is a pre-condition for the achievement of good governance.

Considering with Marshall (1965) that citizenship is not only rights and responsibilities but also the expression of a 'shared identity', citizenship is then not only a static universal value narrowly related to democratic regimes but also a volatile notion related to the dynamics of belonging. It is about being a member, or not, of a political community, irrespective of whether this community is democratic. I use the term 'citizenship identity' to differentiate it from the previous, more law-oriented meaning. Referring to Elwert's (1989) work on 'we groups', it is important to note that all communities are imagined and that the imagined boundaries of a community are always related to the constitutive image of what 'others' are (or are not) (see also Barth 1975, Anderson 1983). These considerations open the notion of citizenship to different conceptions that are culturally, spatially and temporally situated. This implies that belonging dynamics can be shaped under different idiomatic forms: religion, ethnicity, autochthony, social class, and so forth, according to the conjuncture. The understanding of these conceptions and practices of citizenship must be contextualised in time and space. It also means that the structure of a given society and its political culture matter.

### **Pre-national citizenships, political structures and political culture**

For different historical reasons, certain groups in Africa have put themselves at the margins of dominant groups or institutions (such as the state), while others have benefited by participating in the process of domination (Azarya 1988, 1996). The *Fulbe* of Kalalé in Northern Benin (of which the *Gando* form a part) is such a marginalised group, both included in the dominant *Baatonu* society and excluded from participating in power.<sup>8</sup> To understand further developments, I briefly describe below the political structures and political culture that characterise this group.

Kalalé is situated in the department of Borgou, in the Sudano-Sahelian region that borders Nigeria. The population of pre-colonial Borgou is generally described as composed

essentially of *Baatombu* groups (often called Bariba), *Boo* (or *Boko*) and *Fulbe* (see Lombard 1965). This society was dominated by the *Baatombu*. Other sociolinguistic groups (such as *Dendi*, *Zarma*, *Yoruba*, *Hausa*, etc.) in this region played a very marginal political role. The *Boo* and *Baatombu* are known as hunters, cultivators and craftsmen. They cleared this vast forested area to cultivate food crops. Northern Benin's *Fulbe* are traditionally identified with semi-nomadic herding. Scattered in small groups and often without herds, the *Fulbe* provided herding labour to the *Baatombu* and the *Boo* from seventeenth century. Gradually, by establishing patron–client relations with the *Baatonu/Boo* peasants and the *Wasangari* (warriors), they gained access to land and formed their own herds of cattle. This socio-economic specialisation and the historical trajectory as strangers have been an important part of the *Fulbe*'s identity and the 'naturalisation' of the frontier between the *Fulbe* and 'others'. The *Fulbe* are herders, milk is their food, *Pullaku* and *goja* rituals are central elements of their culture, *Fulfulde* is both their language and their way of life... (for a non-essentialist analysis of the *Fulbe*'s identity construction, see Bierschenk 1995).<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the *Fulbe*'s citizenship identity is encompassed in a larger community: the multiethnic *Baatonu* society in which they are given very few rights and little consideration.

The *Baatombu* created a feudal-like kingdom composed of different chiefdoms related to the central power. The society was hierarchically organised. Only free men had the right to participate in the political system (Lombard 1965, p. 57). In a context of perpetually changing alliances between various groups of warriors, the *Fulbe* were both raided and protected by the *Wasangari*. Although the *Fulbe* had to pay tributes, their rights to be protected were temporary and insecure. The *Fulbe* herders and the slaves (*Gando*) played a very marginal role in *Baatombu*'s politics (Lombard 1965, p. 57). The *Fulbe* of Borgou remained dominated and exploited until the arrival of French colonialists (Bierschenk 1999, p. 207).

Furthermore, like the *Baatombu* and the *Boo*, the *Fulbe* of Northern Benin is a hierarchical and stratified group. In all three groups, free men could own slaves, usually called *Gando*. According to Baldus (1977, p. 438), *gando* initially indicated a place, a settlement in the bush where slaves lived close to the seat of their *Wasangari* masters. Before colonial times, these slaves were captured during wars and raids, constituting the main source of income for warriors (Baldus 1977, p. 438). The slaves were used for domestic work (collecting wood and water, and for all types of heavy manual labour) or as messengers and played an important part in the production of food crops as long as slavery was the major characteristic of the organisation of this society (see Lombard 1957, 1965). The slaves were kept in *gando* (settlements) to serve their masters or to be sold later to free *Baatombu* or *Boo*. By amalgamation, *gando* has come to designate all the people of slave origin or slave status living in settlements or villages close to the villages or settlements of free peasants, herders or hunters.<sup>10</sup> The *Fulbe* acquired slaves by two means: they purchased slaves (in exchange for cattle) from the *Wasangari* or *Baatonu* and *Boo* peasants; and they obtained slaves by fosterage of sorcerer children.

This inter ethnic fostering is a particularity of slave production in the Borgou. The sorcerer child (called *Yonobu*) is the genetic offspring of *Boo* or *Baatonu* parents who had rejected him/her and who had been given to the *Fulbe* at an early age because the child was suspected of being a sorcerer. The child is adopted, cured of the witchcraft powers and enslaved by the *Fulbe*. The child then becomes a *Machube* (see Baldus 1977, pp. 439–441) or *Gannunkeebe* in *Fulfulde* (Hardung 1997, pp. 109–111). He carries out the commands of his/her master.

A Pullo ranks higher than a Machudo because he has taken over the task of raising the Machudo. Their origin is that a Batomba child has its first teeth grow in the upper jaw. The Batomba can abandon it and the Pullo can take it, or the Batomba can give it to the Pullo

as a gift. He cannot keep the child. The Pullo raises it and provides nourishment until the child has reached an age where it is reasonable one carries out his commands. The Machube do everything that the Fulbe demand because they have grown up with the Fulbe, and already their ancestors have always been Machube for the Fulbe. The Fulbe own us, therefore one works for them. The Machube always carried out the commands, even if it was night and the Pullo woke up to ask for something. One carried it out. (Quotation from Baldus 1977, p. 444)

In the Kalalé area, the *Machube* are also included under the umbrella term *Gando*. As in *Boo* and *Baatonu* villages, *Fulbe*'s slaves were used as domestics, in food crop production and in herding. Placed at the margins of the master's encampment, the *Gando* were not fully integrated in the community. Ascribed by others as 'neither truly Peul nor truly *Baatombu*' (Hardung 1997), the *Gando* placed themselves somewhere in between these two identities.

When considering these elements of the political structure and the dynamics, there is a set of conceptions and unwritten rules that matter for the exercise of politics in the public sphere in this specific context. These rules and ideas shape people's political attitudes towards authority, governance and political institutions. In African political cultures (especially in stratified societies), slaves' descendants are considered as 'eternal [political] outsiders' (Kopytoff and Miers 1977). In the aristocratic ideology, being owned by a master, the slave is denied various roles, for example, the role of participating in public decision-making, and the role of leading and commanding free individuals.<sup>11</sup> Masters and slaves generally shared this ideology. Accordingly, slaves had neither political rights nor political claims. They were barely recognised as full members of the community.

Colonial and post-colonial political developments did little to change the situation.<sup>12</sup> The *Fulbe* and the *Gando* were not considered important in the dynamics of modern state formation.

### **The Fulbe's and the Gando's strategies against their marginalisation in post-colonial times**

Colonialism had temporarily interrupted the dependence and exploitation of the *Fulbe* under the *Baatonu*'s domination. In the process of assigning each group a chief who could serve as an intermediary between the colonial administration and local populations, the French created *ex nihilo* an independent *Fulbe* chieftaincy parallel to the *Baatombu*'s,<sup>13</sup> allowing them to establish direct relations with the colonial state apparatus. This considerably modified the complex hierarchical structure and power relations between the *Baatombu* and the *Fulbe*. The colonial administration was then considering the *Fulbe* on equal footing with their *Baatonu* neighbours and even paid more attention to this economically important group of indigenous people who were always able to pay their taxes because of their cattle stocks (Bierschenk 1993). The *Fulbe* became better integrated in the encompassing colonial state and were more or less treated as other ethnic groups, i.e. as indigenous subjects under the French colonial system of 'Indigénat'.<sup>14</sup>

During the first decade after the independence of the Republic of Dahomey (former name of Benin between 1960 and 1975), the *Fulbe* were considered as other groups. Theoretically, they had the right to participate in politics and decision making. However, the *Fulbe* were relatively deprived of 'intellectuals' capable of representing their interests vis-à-vis the state and other groups<sup>15</sup> that exploited them 'in a political context ruled by clientelist attitudes' (Bierschenk 1999, pp. 208–209). However, they had a chieftaincy, and they acquired a better status than the pre-colonial one.

The suppression of the chieftaincy in 1972 under a Marxist–Leninist regime constituted a step backwards for this politically under-represented group. Whereas they

were exploited by the post-colonial administration; victims of all sorts of extortions by the military, civil servants and corrupt justice; discriminated against in disputes arising from the damage caused by their animals on the fields of the *Baatombu* and the *Boo*;<sup>16</sup> and regularly deceived by unavoidable local intermediaries (the ‘district chiefs’, ‘delegates’ and other ‘village chiefs’), the *Fulbe* remained locked in a stoicism rooted in the *Fulbe* notion of *senteene*.<sup>17</sup> Due to this exploitation, the *Fulbe* decided to stay away from politics for many years. The *Fulbe* accepted the marginalisation and the injustice they suffered. It is not exaggerated to talk of ‘auto-marginalisation’ of the *Fulbe* (Bierschenk 1995, p. 462).

In contrast, the post-1980s change in Benin against the earlier centralising approach offered an opportunity for marginalised groups or ‘socio-professional’ groups to re-integrate into the state. President Kérékou wanted to promote internal diversity of national ethnicities and cultures. The political project was to build a revolutionary multi-national state, i.e. a united nation composed of multiple groups (called ‘nationalities’).<sup>18</sup> These groups were organised under the banner of so-called ‘sous-commissions linguistiques’ (Bierschenk 1995, pp. 462–467). The governmental initiative met the demand of marginalised groups whose intellectuals saw an opportunity for recognition of their specific cultural identity, a better political representation and integration within the nation-state, and a new career as political leaders.

Realising that escaping strategies had resulted in an even more marginalised position of their group and a greater dependence on external agents, the *Fulbe* finally joined this dynamic by organising themselves in a cultural movement. The birth of the ‘Laawol Fulfulde’ movement (lit. ‘The Way of the *Fulbe*’) was the starting point of a collective awakening of the *Fulbe*. At that time and especially under those circumstances, the term *Fulbe* encompassed all *Fulfulde* speaking people including the *Gando*.<sup>19</sup> In December 1987, the *Fulbe* intellectuals organised a massive gathering in Kandi, district-capital of Northern Benin, and expressed their claims for citizenship in the course of a linguistic seminar (see Bierschenk 1989, 1992, 1995, Guichard 1990). This politico-linguistic seminar was initially seized by a small group of *Fulbe* intellectuals who, in the early 1980s, had joined an evangelical priest’s struggle to promote literacy amongst the rural *Fulbe* of Northern Benin (Guichard 1990, pp. 26–27).<sup>20</sup> The huge mobilisation of the *Fulbe* (including the *Gando*) manifested through the support of ‘traditional’ chiefs,<sup>21</sup> massive popular participation, and important material contributions (supplies, livestock, cash...), was determinant in making the event happen. During the seven days of the conference, various panels elaborated different themes such as ‘the origin of the *Fulbe* of Borgou’, ‘the life of a *Pullo* herder’, ‘schooling’... Most activities and discourses were reifying the ethnic particularism of the *Fulbe*.

Beyond *Fulbe* ethnicity, which was clearly the most deeply identity claimed, *Fulbe* political leaders asserted the belonging of their community to the encompassing Popular Republic of Benin:

Popular Republic of Benin is a unified multinational state. All nationalities are equal in terms of rights and duties. It is the State holy duty to reinforce and develop their unification and give each of them a full blossoming in unity through a fair policy of nationalities for an interregional equilibrium. (Rouga Ousseini, President of the organisational committee of the Fulfulde Seminar of Kandi, December 1987, reading an extract of the Fundamental Law)

Contrary to the universal liberal approach of rights (usually applied to individual citizens), the fundamental law of the revolutionary regime of Kérékou declared that all ethnic groups inside the nation-state were equal in terms of rights and duties. Though ethnic belonging was expressed in terms of ‘nationalities’ under a cultural agenda, its popular interpretation clearly brought ethnicity back into the public debate. It also



accentuated the process of differentiation between various ethno-linguistic groups and offered a political scene to marginalised groups.<sup>22</sup>

Through the recognition of their membership of the encompassing nation-state, the *Fulbe* could claim social, cultural and even political rights. The linguistic seminar was not supposed to be political, but it was political (cf. Bierschenk 1995). The critical situation of the *Fulbe* facing everyday interactions with civil servants was clearly denounced during the panels, although the authors of the final report were wary not to be too critical. Instead, the emphasis was placed on solutions for the *Fulbe* to escape marginalisation.

Next it was decided to organise a committee office of Laawol Fulfulde, which would represent the *Fulbe*'s interests in the dialogue with the state. Not only did the *Fulbe* officially claim equal rights, they also wanted to get protectors inside the state apparatus (though it was not explicitly expressed in discourses). In the everyday life of Revolutionary Benin, the universal and equal protection and access to public resources from the state could only be achieved through brokerage and patron–client mechanisms.<sup>23</sup> This is known as an unwritten rule. That is why *Fulbe* leaders offered themselves as patrons of their ethnic group to replace non-*Fulbe* patrons and brokers.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, the committee office of Laawol Fulfulde was supposed to embody the democratic principle of '*Fulbe* people ruled by *Fulbe* people in a *Fulbe* manner'. It was also supposed to apply the many resolutions of the seminar, including the fight against illiteracy and ignorance. Literacy and education were then established as the 'key to the emancipation of nationality' (i.e. of the *Fulbe* group)<sup>25</sup> within the nation-state. According to the speakers of the seminar, education would contribute to the reduction of the marginalisation, harassment and exploitation suffered by the *Fulbe* for decades: '*The uneducated man is a blind man*'. The promotion of literacy was viewed as a shortcut to school education and as a way to be able to control intermediaries in the cotton sector.<sup>26</sup> Today, education and literacy remain crucial issues for the *Fulbe*. This is, especially, notable in the *Gando* group, the members of which are known as by far the most assiduous users of literacy courses among Northern Benin ethno-linguistic groups. Although the state wanted to promote national languages, there was (and still is) a particular interest in learning French, the language of the administration, the language of the access to rights and development projects, the language of domination.

This point gives an initial insight into the understanding of the notion of citizenship under the revolutionary regime of Kérékou that is both citizenship-as-ethnic-identity and citizenship-as-rights in a law-oriented universalistic socialist approach, where all ethnic groups are equal in the multicultural nation-state of Benin. Thus, the enactment of citizenship in a clientelistic political system required intermediary institutions and actors such as Laawol Fulfulde and its *Fulbe* leaders.

Nonetheless, in practice the great *Fulbe* movement of Northern Benin that initially reflected a reaction against domination and exploitation by the *HaaBe* (the 'others', the 'non-Peuls') and a claim for more integration in the state apparatus finally turned out to reproduce former patterns of governance. It gave birth to the exploitation of the *Fulbe* by the *Fulbe* against which the *Gando* leaders fought through a political emancipation of 'their' group.

### The process of the ethnicisation of the *Gando*

The *Gando* group, of which Hardung said in the late 1990s that internal status differences constituted 'factors hindering group cohesion and the emergence of a collective identity' (1997, p. 117), can be categorised as a 'quasi-group' in Ginsberg's sense. Quasi-groups are

a kind of portion of the community that is not organised in a collective structure. Its members share common interests and behaviours. They can eventually constitute or crystallise themselves as real groups (Ginsberg 1934).

For the *Gando* of Northern Benin, the shift from a quasi-group to a real group has been a process of identity construction over about two decades. This process was initiated under the umbrella of the Laawol Fulfulde seminar during which the problem of differentiation was present but hidden. Although official discourses pointed out the equality of communities in the nation-state, a more subversive idea of equality between individuals who compose the community was also diffusing.<sup>27</sup> As mentioned by Bierschenk (1995, pp. 462–467), most discourses of the *Fulbe* leaders as well as the official report of the seminar insisted on the *Fulbe* nation (*lenyol Fulbe*). In order to keep a unitary picture, *Fulbe* leaders tried to erase as much as possible any kind of differentiation within the *Fulbe* group (*Fulbe siire/Fulbe ladde*<sup>28</sup>/*Gando* . . .). In particular, little place was made for the *Gando* to claim their specific identity and history. The *Gando* were recognised in discourses as part of the *Fulbe* community. However, in practice, they were still marginalised and excluded.<sup>29</sup>

Three years after the first seminar, disenchantment and growing disagreements were brewing, especially among the *Gando*:

They evoke *Fulbe*'s origins and they don't talk about the *Gando*. They call us to finance meetings and conferences, but that's all! They cheat us and still dominate us . . . (Interview of a former *Gando* member of Laawol Fulfulde, Kalalé, June 2006)

First, the 'bureau' (committee office) of Laawol Fulfulde was dominated by the 'red Peuls' to the detriment of the 'Blacks'. *Gando* intellectuals realised that the *Fulbe* did not consider them full members of their group and that their integration in the Laawol Fulfulde was merely a façade of unity, behind which profound divisions remained. Second, the funds of the bureau derived from various contributions (gifts of livestock, membership fees and donations, state-funded grants, etc.) had been embezzled by various members of this bureau. Third, the committee office established a sort of traditional tribunal, which 'settled family disputes over wife stealing and the like, rather than the problem of *Fulbe*'s access to education' (Interview, June 2006). Finally, the same ills listed in 1987 still existed. Literacy and education barely advanced as a result of the bureau's inertia or changing policy orientations.

In the aftermath of the death of Laawol Fulfulde's president, a restricted meeting between *Gando* and *Fulbe* leaders took place in Parakou (administration centre of the Borgou prefecture, where intellectuals work and live) in 2000–2001 to ensure *Gando* representation in the committee office of Laawol Fulfulde. However, it was another *Pullo* who took the leadership of the organisation. Despite an agreement following the meeting, soon after most *Gando* detached themselves from the unified movement and formed their own organisations. The split followed the factionalist model that is common to the dynamics of most political parties, associative movements, NGOs and other kinds of so-called 'civil society' in Africa. More generally, the birth of these new associations was built upon a model characteristic of the history of the African inhabitation process, where individuals found new communities on the basis of social and political fractions by rupture with their community of origin (see Kopytoff 1987). The partition did not follow the lines of a generational division (elders vs. youngsters) as one might expect; instead it followed patron–client lines and kinship ties behind an ideological struggle ('it's time to cut the rope of slavery',<sup>30</sup>). A few *Gando* remained loyal to their aristocratic patrons and stayed in the Laawol Fulfulde movement. However, most *Gando* joined the *Gando* intellectuals (often civil servants as the case related below). Accordingly, the Idi Waadi association

(‘what we want has taken place’) was formed by a few *Gando* leaders from Nikki. A number of twin organisations that opposed the old order also emerged at the local level: Djanati (‘peace has finally come’) in Kandi, Semmee Allah (‘the force of God’) in Kalalé . . .

Semmee Allah is a branch of the Laawol Fulfulde created by Ourou Sé Guéné, a college professor from Kalalé. Although the name evokes the accomplishment of the will of God, the group is not a religious one. It identifies itself with physical strength (*semmee*) and work (*golle*), which are the positive values emphasised by the *Gando* to distinguish themselves from other groups, as noted by Hardung (1997, pp. 129–135). These values constitute a key element in the contemporary construction of *Gando* identity. After the abolition of slavery by colonial power, former slaves used their physical labour to further emancipate themselves. The *Gando* of Borgou quickly became wealthier than their former masters. But it is above all education and intellectual work that allowed the *Gando* to progressively achieve a reversal of power relations. Through education, some *Gando* gradually achieved state functions (Hardung 1997, p. 137). Through knowledge of the past, they were able to build a collective identity until then defined essentially by the discourses of other groups and by the exclusion practiced by others (*Boo*, *Baatombu* and *Fulbe*). *Gando* intellectuals used their individual experience, their charisma, their knowledge of the past and their understanding of the situation to help the whole group (and manipulate it with its consent) to emancipate itself and re-appropriate an ethnic identity. In this particular process of ethnicisation, the ideological dimension of the struggle has played a crucial role.

History has shown that when some people are stronger than others, the former enslaves the latter. This means that there is no ethnic group that is servile by nature (‘une ethnique d’esclaves’). Thus at a certain time in history a group of people is dominated by another one. You can be born aristocrat, but as soon as some people come to enslave your dad, who is king . . . he becomes a slave. When you realise that, from that moment, it does not make any sense that you take someone as a slave in an era where there is no more slavery. [ . . . ] It is your intellectual capacities that make you a slave or not, because there are no more inter-tribes wars. The only battle field is the school. The new social norms to estimate one’s value can be seen at school. (BB, *Gando* school teacher and political leader, Parakou, 2007)

The *Gando* community first emancipated itself from the *Baatombu* and the *Boo* by joining the *Fulbe* in their ethnicisation process; secondly the *Gando* community emancipated itself from its *Fulbe* masters.

It is currently common in Northern Benin to speak about the *Gando* as an ethnic group. They are recognised as such by themselves and by others, including the state. The ‘*Gando*’ group is presented as a small minority of 1.4% of the all population of Benin against 5.5% for ‘Peulh Fulfuldé’ (national general census 2002). By contrast, in Kalalé the *Gando* form the majority. According to the census of 1992, ‘*Gando*’ and ‘*Peul*’ together composed 68% of the population of Kalalé<sup>31</sup> (about 100,000 inhabitants at that time). Though the proportion of *Fulbe* and *Gando* is not given in detail, it is well known that the *Fulbe* represent a small minority and the *Gando* are by far the most numerous ethnic group in Kalalé. This gave the *Gando* group a great advantage by confirming its political importance locally when the decentralisation reform was implemented in Benin in 2002.

### Access to power, citizenship and the dynamics of exclusion/inclusion

Through associationism the *Gando* began their process of political emancipation. After a decade of the Beninese democratic transition, the communal elections held in 2002–2003 appeared as an unprecedented possibility for the *Gando* to access local power.

According to the demographic domination of the *Gando* in Kalalé (estimated to 2/3 of the population of Kalalé), they occupied 9 of 17 municipal seats of Kalalé's municipal council in 2002. Baatombu and Boo occupied other seats. Not a single *Pullo* was elected. The leader of Semme Allah and local head of the RUND party,<sup>32</sup> Orou Sé Guéné,<sup>33</sup> became the first elected mayor in the Kalalé municipality at the beginning of 2003. He fought his electoral campaign under the banner of the political emancipation of the *Gando*, the struggle against the mismanagement of the cotton business, the protection offered against the oppression and iniquities of the *HaaBe*, etc. His party won seven seats and he made a coalition with the delegates of two minor parties that had four seats in all in order to form a political majority in the municipal council. Though the election of Orou Sé Guéné did not depend merely on the electoral weight of the *Gando*, but also on his capacity to recruit voters from other political groups, there was a clear tendency for 'voting ethnically'.

The composition of the communal council reflected the demographic preponderance of the *Gando* and their political emancipation from former masters. From the perspective of the external promoters of decentralisation reform and citizenship-as-civil and political rights, this shift of power could be seen as a success story. Thanks to decentralisation reform, the *Gando*, who until then were a dominated minority in the nation-state of Benin, exploited and ruled by 'others', have been able to participate in the local power.<sup>34</sup>

The political victory of slave descendents on their masters had the taste of revenge, not only on symbolic or ideological levels but on a political level as well. Not so surprisingly the first two years of daily municipal governance under the rule of a *Gando* mayor was marked by the tendency to return exclusion procedures against and mistreatments of former masters and people from other groups (the *Baatombu* and the *Boo*, but especially the *Fulbe*). The mayor was also in perpetual conflict with the police, the customs and the environment service in as much as he was trying to protect his electors from their predation and abuses of power.

This situation did not last, however. In 2005, Orou Sé Guéné was deposed from his functions following a *vote de défiance* (or 'vote of non-confidence') by a large majority of the municipal council (14 votes against 3).<sup>35</sup> He was replaced by a non-*Gando*. As a number of other mayors of Borgou, the first mayor of Kalalé was blamed officially for his 'individualistic management' (*gestion solitaire*) that is a Beninese euphemistic turn of phrase to point out his tendency to act as a 'Commandant',<sup>36</sup> to abuse his power and to keep for himself the benefits of his dominant position. For example, the mayor had to account for the use of a 53 million F CFA amount (about 80,000 euro) that represented a subvention to the municipal budget by the Communal Union of Cotton Producers. He was also blamed for his biased involvement in various local cases from the attribution of a public market to his friends to the non-application of the decisions taken by the municipal council. Unofficially, however, the real reasons for his dismissal were somewhat oriented towards the 'politics of the bell', where councillors expected to have a greater share:<sup>37</sup> 'the mayor is binging alone!' (*le maire bouffe tout seul*). Here, as in most of Benin, the 'accountability' of the mayor is defined in terms of his capability to redistribute advantages to other elected councillors, as well as to his electors.

To return to citizenship as rights and duties, one can witness these aspects in everyday practices of citizenship. The first two years in Kalalé were characterised by a remarkable change in civic behaviour. Institutions and individual actors wanted to support their patrons through the payment of taxes and even subventions to the municipality (as mentioned earlier about the 53 million F CFA amount). However, the dismissal of Orou Sé Guéné by his colleagues in 2005 was promptly followed by a period of popular reprobation

of councillors' behaviour and fiscal incivism so that the new mayor had to face real financial difficulties during his mandate.

Conversely, in Kalalé citizenship-as-rights is interpreted as an access to privileges and favours. What was impossible for the larger part of the population before decentralisation then became possible via clientelistic relationships with municipal councillors or the mayor.

In the past, we don't even try to speak to the Commandant! But now we have MM in the municipal council. He is like us. We can see him and he will do something for us or talk to the mayor, so that we can be satisfied! (Interview with a Gando peasant, Bouca, village of Kalalé Municipality, February 2008)

Since 2003, the inhabitants of the municipality go to their elected bodies to claim for all kinds of concrete and immediate problems. They ask money for a wedding or a birth ceremony; they claim intervention and protection in case of conflicts with the police, the customs or the environmental service; they want to change the official age of their son on his identity card; they hope they can get a job ('somewhere to eat'); they wish for a road or a well in their village or camp; and so forth. Electors consider it their legitimate right to claim individual and collective favours from the elected patrons they have '*put in businesses*'.<sup>38</sup> Citizenship-as-rights is not understood as related to the law but to an informal set of implicit rules. It is interpreted into the matrix of patron–client relationships that implies personal negotiations. These relations between the elected patron of the municipality and his supporters are partly based on the new ethnic group but are not limited to it. Being a native of the same village or sharing kinship can be as good an argument as belonging to the same ethnic group when it is about building a social link that can be extended to clientelistic relations with 'the' patron or a simple councillor of the municipality. Mayors and councillors are seen as big men, protectors, facilitators, 'development brokers', etc.

Orou Sé Guéné's propaganda campaigns during parliamentary election in March 2007 and during the more recent municipal elections in March 2008 particularly underline both the role of protector, expected by citizens–clients in rural areas, and the role of broker in bringing development infrastructures to the villages/camps (schools, wells, medical dispensaries...).<sup>39</sup> Despite the municipal council having dismissed him two years earlier, in the 2007 parliamentary elections Sé Guéné was elected as a national deputy by a large portion of the population of Kalalé. Thus, the electoral list (G13) he supported during the municipal election in April 2008 won a large number of *Gando* votes.

Nonetheless, the ruling party (FCBE<sup>40</sup>) that was able to 'get people' from various ethnic groups (*Boo*, *Baatombu*, *Peuls*, *Gando*) won the municipal elections. These elections confirmed once again the unambiguous political weight of the *Gando* ethnic group in Kalalé. Of 25 municipal councillors, 18 are *Gando*. As expected by most protagonists, a *Gando* was chosen as mayor beyond political party divisions (G13 vs. FCBE). However, the newly elected mayor (FCBE) is a moderate one:

Gando and Fulbe are together! We are numerous, they are few. But we are cooperating with them; we will integrate them in![...] In politics one makes the 'plus' [more by the addition] not the 'minus' [less by the subtraction]. (Current mayor, Kalalé, February 2008)

The time for revenge, exclusion and marginalisation of former masters, so to speak, seems over. After a first mandate (2003–2008) marked by intensive and unproductive struggles<sup>41</sup> between rulers and the opposition in the municipal council, the newly elected mayor seems willing to promote a more inclusive form of governance. The current mayor of Kalalé furthers the coalition strategy used during the electoral struggle. He enables

clientelistic citizenship to surpass the delimitation of ethnic boundaries, which was a central element in successive electoral campaigns. However, ethnic boundaries are not erased but re-asserted. Interestingly, politicians from minority groups such as the *Boo* or the *Baatombu* have begun marrying *Gando* women in order to capture *Gando* electorate.

At present the *Baatombu* want to marry our women because they understood that the *Gando* – who came out of them – became wealthy. It is this wealth they are seeking. But we prefer not to give them our women. We have to preserve ourselves. We should maintain our culture by speaking *Fulfulde* – that is the house that welcomed us. We should not leave this house behind us and speak only *Baatonu*. (A *Gando* political leader, Kalalé, February 2008)

Nowadays, being a *Gando* in Northern Benin is no longer an argument to be politically disqualified and marginalised as a citizen; on the contrary, it is a strategic advantage for accessing wealth, political representation and citizenship rights.<sup>42</sup>

Interestingly, this case study also offers a contrasting picture of the use of ethnic identity. Drawing on the peaceful processes through which the *Gando* emerged as an ethnic group and accessed political representation, I oppose recent literature focused on the simultaneous emergence of belonging dynamics (ethnicity, autochthony, religious belonging . . .) and violent conflicts in the context of recent globalisation in developing countries (see Bayart *et al.* 2001, Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005, Geschiere and Jackson 2006). Firstly, prognoses and speculation about the tendency towards violent conflicts are more a matter of the authors' pessimism than the output of scientific considerations (social sciences are not predictive). As I show in this case study, the dynamics of exclusion (1) can be non-violent and (2) can turn rapidly into inclusion. Secondly, most of the studies that highlight the concomitance of violence, belonging politics and global reforms have conflicts in common as a key entrance to fieldwork. This approach is relevant to the study of local politics<sup>43</sup> and has proven to be an effective way of penetrating local societies and revealing the norms, codes and structures of local politics (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 1998). However, it has its bias. In considering only violent conflicts (and exclusion dynamics) rather than non-violent (though conflictual) situations, one tends to disregard the inclusive dynamics; belonging dynamics invariably produce inclusion and exclusion: the two faces of the same coin.

## Conclusions

Since pre-colonial times, the servile status of the *Gando* has been the main reason for their marginalisation in society. Hardly recognised as members of the political systems they were part of, the *Gando* had experienced an unbalanced situation in which their contribution to the society surpassed the very few rights they had. Oppression from the post-colonial state against the *Fulbe* and the *Gando* and their marginalisation was then perpetuated. Structural changes at the national and regional level in the late 1980s under Kérékou's revolutionary regime provided the space needed for a first experience of an equal status in a law-oriented universalistic socialist and collective approach of citizenship. For the very first time the *Fulbe* ethnic group was officially considered as being equal with other ethnic groups of the multicultural nation-state of Benin. Thus, the *Fulbe* and the *Gando* together could take part in their participation in the linguistic sub-commission created by the state, while following a political agenda under the umbrella of a cultural movement (*Laawol Fulfulde*). Nonetheless, the *Gando*'s servile status was still a handicap to accessing political rights and full citizenship both in the *Fulbe*'s group and in the encompassing nation-state because intermediary positions between the state and the population were monopolised by *Fulbe*. Although, theoretically,

the *Gando* and the *Fulbe* were equal, the *Gando* had no rights to stand for office inside the Laawol Fulfulde movement. The trajectory of the *Gando*'s political emancipation confirms that even the most marginalised possess agency and room to manoeuvre. This emancipation occurred in the global context of the democratisation and decentralisation processes that have affected Africa. Recent decentralisation reforms in West Africa witness several cases in which people of slave status became mayors or influential local political leaders (Leservoisiere 2003, Hahonou 2006); cases were also witnessed where political emancipation did not occur (Hahonou 2009). The historical perspective adopted in this study clearly shows that the process of social and political change started before democratisation and decentralisation reforms (here since the late 1980s), but were revealed only during the process of implementation of decentralisation in 2002–2003. Obviously, these global processes give opportunities to social groups and individual actors already prepared to participate in the conquest for local power. They do not explain the political emergence of marginalised groups.

With reference to citizenship understandings and practice, the present case study offers contrasting aspects. The recent emergence of 'political juniors',<sup>44</sup> such as slave descendants in societies in which political functions are traditionally restricted to senior free men, may appear as a surprise.<sup>45</sup> The political emergence of a group long considered as an underclass represents a breaking from a dominant aristocratic ideology; a deep psychological, moral, cultural, political and social change that may have economic consequences too. At present, being of slave origin in Northern Benin is more an advantage than a criterion for marginalisation. In contrast to these radical changes in the political culture and structure, from *Wassangari* warriors' times to nowadays *Gando* mayors, one could note some continuity vis-à-vis patron–client relationships and the kind of services expected from rulers (protection, security and access to resources) by the ruled. Clientelism is the way through which citizens can access public resources and services. This case is not only representative of current slave descendants' practice of citizenship but also representative of a common pattern of citizenship practice in Benin and elsewhere in Africa. Moreover, clientelistic citizenship practice is not peculiar to Africa; it is common in societies in which economic redistribution is organised along clientelistic lines. For example, other scholars have shown that clientelism is part of citizenship practices in Latin America (see Gay (1998) for Brazil; Auyero (2001) for Argentina; Lazar (2004) in Bolivia). The extension of clientelism in local politics and citizenship practice in Africa should no longer be considered as an exotic matter but instead an original reinterpretation and adaptation of a universal notion. Furthermore, along with Mayrargue (2002) and Banégas (1998), I argue that clientelism is part of the exercise of democracy in the everyday life of African citizens.

Finally, contrary to recent literature focused on the simultaneous emergence of belonging dynamics and violent conflicts in the context of recent globalisation in developing countries, on the basis of a peaceful process of ethnicisation and political emancipation of people of slave origin, I argue that belonging dynamics do not necessarily imply violent conflicts and exclusion dynamics.

## Notes

1. In this article, concept and notion are used synonymously.
2. For a critical perspective of ancient Greece and Republican Rome democracies and citizenship, see respectively, Veyne (2005) and Nicolet (1980).
3. This study is based on recent empirical fieldwork I conducted in Benin 2006–2008. The historical perspective has been possible, thanks to former studies on the *Fulbe* of Northern

- Benin conducted by Bierschenk *et al.* 1987–1997. Citizenship was not the central issue of the research. Instead, it appeared at the crossroad of two research projects. One dealt with political culture and municipal governance in the context of recent decentralisation in Benin; the other focused on the reform of the literacy sector in Benin that seemed to be a major interest for the *Fulbe* and especially for the *Gando*. As already claimed in the late 1980s, education of the *Fulbe* through literacy was expected to promote better integration of the community/individuals into the nation-state of Benin.
4. The *Fulbe* are known as *Fulani* in Anglophone literature and *Peuls* or *Peulhs* in French. While many *Fulbe* groups are hierarchical and stratified, some *Fulbe* societies such as the *Woodabe* of Niger are somewhat acephalous and non-hierarchical. This was also the case of the small groups of *Fulbe* that came to the Borgou region in the seventeenth century. By contact with the stratified groups of Borgou (*Boo* and *Baatombu*), the *Fulbe* adopted part of this hierarchical organisation and became stratified.
  5. According to these authors, former democratisation reforms were superficially implemented by central governments and led to ‘cosmetic democracies’. For this reason, decentralisation strategies that will allow people to rule themselves are a further development of democratisation processes.
  6. These ‘myths of linear development’ in Western aid discourses are discussed and deconstructed by Secher Marcussen and Bergendorff (2004).
  7. Escobar (1995) quoted by Secher Marcussen and Bergendorff (2004, p. 105).
  8. *Baatonu* is the adjective form of the name *Baatonu* (sing.). The plural form of the name is *Baatombu* (Bierschenk 1997a, p. 19).
  9. Though nowadays *Fulbe* also practice subsistence and commercial agriculture, they are not necessarily fulfuldephone and rarely practice *goja* any longer, but they still claim their specific identity.
  10. The umbrella term *Gando* covers different categories (*Tkiriku*, *Gandogibu*, *Yobu*) in the *Baatonu* group (for details see Baldus 1977, pp. 438–439). Similar distinctions are made among the slaves of *Fulbe* (see Hardung 1997, pp. 109–111). The term *Gando* also includes a category of people who are not of slave origin. They belong to *Baatonu* and *Boo* chiefs’ families who decided to settle among the *Machube* in pre-colonial times. They have adopted their way of life and their language (*Fulfulde*) and people consider them as *Gando* (see Hardung 1997, pp. 113–116). Some of the most influential *Gando* political leaders come from this latter group.
  11. For a more detailed description on *Fulbe*’s slaves, see Riesman (1974). For a comparative analysis of the endurance of ‘slavery’ in popular representations, see Hahonou (2009).
  12. As noted by Guichard (1990, pp. 20–21), nowadays *Fulbe* use the same expression (*e mon ñaame taki* = take the food) to describe their exploitation by civil servants and peasants from other ethnic groups as they used in the past to describe the raids operated against them by *Wasangari*.
  13. Village and camp chiefs were designated locally, as well as a superior Peul regional chief (Bierschenk 1993).
  14. Indigénat system recognised an inferior legal status for natives of French Colonies. It was implemented in French West Africa in the 1880s and was abolished in the mid-1940s. Slavery was officially abolished in Dahomey in 1906.
  15. The term ‘intellectual’ is used in francophone West African countries with reference to literate and school-educated people. The lack of intellectuals is due to the *Fulbe*’s reluctance to send their children to the ‘school of Whites’ (*janirde batuure*) during colonial and post-colonial times. The *Fulbe* preferred to send the children of their slaves to school (*Gando*) (see Lombard 1965, p. 451).
  16. *Baatonu* and *Boo* groups of Borgou belong to the same political system and share common cultural characteristics (Lombard 1965, pp. 41–42). *Boo* are less numerous than *Baatombu* and are concentrated in Segbana and Kalalé’s areas. They were closely linked to the kingdom of Nikki. Both groups were able to manipulate the structures of the modern state, revolutionary and post-revolutionary, better than other groups of this area (cf. Elwert 1983, De Haan *et al.* 1990).
  17. The notion of *senteene* or *semteende* (*Fulfulde* of Northern Nigeria) refers to the typical *Pullo* restraint and reserve in manifesting one’s needs, emotions and various physical requirements (eating, urinating, etc.) cf. Brandt (1956, p. 35) and Boesen (1989).



18. In these 'revolutionary' times, the term 'nationalities' was the politically correct word to use to designate the various ethno-linguistic groups that composed the Popular Republic of Benin (1974–1990).
19. In other contexts, people of slave origins are designated by the term *HaaBe* or *BaleeBe*, translated as 'blacks' (cf. Botte 1994, p. 116). Here, due to the inclusive categories adopted by Benin's administration and to put the emphasis on group unity that prevailed at the Fulfulde seminar, the *Gando* were considered as *Fulbe*, at least on the front stage.
20. Many *Gando* of Southern Borgou were educated in protestant mission schools of the Soudan Interior Mission. According to Bierschenk (1997b), the *Gando* profited more than the *Fulbe* from modern educational facilities under colonialism and post-colonial regimes.
21. See Bierschenk (1993) a propos the creation ex nihilo of a tradition of chieftaincy among the *Fulbe* by French colonial power.
22. This was especially the case in the northern part of the country because the implementation of literacy policy started earlier in the South.
23. About the notion of brokerage, see Bierschenk *et al.* (2000).
24. Patrons were usually recruited among the *Baatombu* or the *Boo*.
25. Extract from the report of the Conference of the National Sub-Committee of Linguistics (Fulfulde) (Laawol Fulfulde 1987).
26. As most *Fulbe*, especially *Gando*, entered local organisations of cotton producers but had very few people able to read and write, they were usually cheated by intermediaries from other ethnic groups during weighting and payment operations of the cotton delivered to public firms. The cotton sector is highly corrupt (see Gray and Moseley 2008).
27. Subversive in regards to the aristocratic ideology briefly described previously.
28. Analysing the linguistic seminar of Laawol Fulfulde, Guichard (1990, pp. 29–32) insists particularly on the opposition between *Fulbe sire* (intellectuals, sedentarized in towns, villages and chefs-lieux de districts) and *Fulbe ladde* (illiterates, still nomads living in the bush) but pays very little attention to the opposition between *Gando* and *Fulbe*.
29. 'How can they want to be Peuls? These are Je'aaBe (slaves) and that's evident' (citation of Boesen 1997, p. 42). 'A *Gando* is a *Gando*' (quoted by Hardung 1997, p. 112).
30. This metaphor used by some *Gando* leaders has been repeatedly addressed later on during electoral campaigns to enrol followers among *Gando* electorate. Indeed, in pre-colonial times the masters secured the newly bought slaves with ropes around a big tree at their settlement.
31. For a perspective on the confusion between *Gando* and *Fulbe* in national statistics, see Bierschenk (1997b, pp. 80 seq.).
32. RUND is the 'Rassemblement pour l'Unité Nationale et la Démocratie'. The national president of the RUND party (who is not from Kalalé) contributed financially to the creation of the Idi Waadi association. He also funded the electoral campaign of Orou Sé Guéné.
33. Ourou Sé Guéné presided over the Association for the Economic and Social Development of the District of Kalalé (ADESKA) for many years. He was a member of the national bureau of the Laawol Fulfulde (responsible for propaganda and information), of the Idi Waadi association, and possibly other associations. He was always close to organisations of cotton producers, supporting the electoral campaigns of some of their leaders.
34. Nevertheless, the participation of a once marginalized group is not a guarantee for 'good governance' and 'good citizenship' in their normative sense as shown by Hahonou (2009).
35. Another political party distributed money to municipal councillors in order to secure the dismissal of the mayor.
36. Before decentralization, appointed functionaries called 'sous-préfets' incarnated the 'commandant' figure inherited from colonial times. They were authoritative, could act as local despots and were much feared. In Nikki, people gave a nickname to one of them: 'I am going to lock you up [in jail!]!'
37. Expression borrowed from Bayart (1989).
38. The inhabitants of the municipality consider their councillor as a patron or as an intermediary to the mayor (the big patron) in a hierarchical system, where the latter has access to more advantages than the former.
39. 'Vote for me. You will be allowed to come into the protected area of the forest to cultivate and to graze your cattle, you will be free from the payment of tolls for your motorbikes . . .' was the leitmotiv of the former mayor when addressing *Gando* peasants.

40. G13 is a coalition group of 13 deputies elected under various lists in March 2007. FCBE, Force Cauris pour un Bénin Emergeant, is a coalition of political parties that support the President Yayi Boni. In Kalalé FCBE won the municipal election after a much contested vote and a postponed deliberation of the Supreme Court.
41. Out of loyalty to Orou Sé Guéné most of his followers refused to pay taxes to the municipality after his dismissal by municipal councillors in 2005. Thus, the municipality of Kalalé had huge difficulties in paying salaries and making any kind of investment.
42. According to people's cosmology in Northern Borgou, once the child-sorcerer (*Yonobu*) has been cured by the blessing of the *Pullo*, the child's malediction turns into good fortune. That is the explanation usually given to the Gando's prosperity (in comparison with other ethnic groups).
43. I use this approach too.
44. My translation of the French anthropologists' expression 'cadets sociaux'. This notion underlines the differentiation between seniors ('aînés') and juniors ('cadets') in African political systems. Generally, this etic concept encompasses women, young men and slaves. See Meillassoux (1977) and Olivier de Sardan (1994).
45. In the discourses of donors and aid organisations, people of slave origin were never targeted as marginalised groups that might benefit the positive effects on empowerment expected from the implementation of decentralisation reforms. Some scholars, such as Beridogo (1997), were even doubtful whether 'social juniors' could emerge in municipal councils in Mali because of the existing traditional social structures, the weight of status and the electoral practices before decentralisation.

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