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**States at Work in West Africa:  
Sedimentation, Fragmentation and Normative Double-Binds**

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### **Abstract**

The often low productivity of African public services is not the expression of a single and uniform logic, but the result of numerous cumulated micro-differences. Like all social phenomena, African statehood is path-dependent. The sedimentation of colonial and post-colonial experiences (in particular, the projection of a despotic model of state under colonial rule, the fragmentation caused by the post-colonial development regimes and its spiral of incomplete and contradictory reforms, as well as the political *mise en dependence* of administrations by politicians) have resulted in highly disintegrated bureaucracies which resemble never-finishing “building sites”. Two organizational responses are the production of a large range of informal rules within these bureaucracies themselves, and the co-production of public services by public and private actors. For the public servants, these bureaucracies are highly complex, and to a large extent opaque moral orders which are shot through by hypocrisy and numerous double-binds. The paper summarizes ethnographic studies of state bureaucracies “at work” (in particular in the justice and the education sector) in four West African countries (Benin, Mali, Ghana, Niger) by 20 African and European researchers.

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**States at Work in West Africa:  
Sedimentation, Fragmentation and Normative Double-Binds<sup>1</sup>**

*Thomas Bierschenk*

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<sup>1</sup> Revised version of my contribution to the conference „States at Work in Africa“, LASDEL, Niamey, 7. – 12. December 2009. I would like to thank the participants at the seminar for their useful comments, and David Booth, Jan Budniok, Sarah Fichtner and Carola Lentz for a particular close reading of the manuscript.

## Introduction

Our research project on “States at Work” – for which the final symposium is taking place here – emerged around five years ago from an idea many of us had in mind for years: we proposed to study states in West Africa from an anthropological perspective – e.g., by means of ethnography. We had first discovered the state in the context of anthropological research on local politics and decentralization in Francophone West and Central Africa (see for example Banégas, Mayrargue & Leclerc-Olive 1999; Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1997, 2003, 1998).<sup>2</sup> The immediate predecessor of our project was a research project on everyday corruption in three West African countries, of which two, Benin and Niger, are also the object of the current study. The earlier project was carried out by several of those present, including, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, Mahaman Tidjani Alou and Giorgio Blundo (Bierschenk 2008; Blundo et al. 2006).

This predecessor project explored the state exclusively from the perspective of corruption, however. Having completed this work, we felt it would be interesting and timely to consider the everyday practices of the state “apparatuses” (our understanding of this concept was inspired by Althusser) as a whole in a follow-up project, that is to go beyond the complex of corruption, and also consider Anglophone Africa in addition to Francophone Africa.<sup>3</sup>

We selected the expression “at work” – *L’Etat en chantier* – as the key concept for our analysis. In using this term, we wanted to highlight the incomplete nature of state formation processes and the “cobbled together” (*bricolé*) nature of “state”, that is its heterogeneity. It was translated metaphorically into English as “states at work”, through a conscious play on the familiar “men at work” signs used on roads in many Anglophone countries.

However, the use of the term “work” also suggests a second associative field, inspired by the 19<sup>th</sup> century German sociologist Lorenz von Stein. Stein (1943), in an attempt to go beyond the idealism of Hegel, proposed to complement the notion of the “Tat” of the state (e.g., discursive acts like legislation, the ruling of a court, government announcements, by which the *Willen* of the state is expressed) by the notion of *Arbeit* (work), by which he meant the transformation of these discursive acts into the “real life” of the state. This transformation was the task of administration. In other words, Stein anticipated the differentiation between state-idea and state-practices which has recently been proposed (Migdal & Schlichte 2005).

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<sup>2</sup> It would in fact be more appropriate to speak of a rediscovery of the state, as all three of us – Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1987), Mahaman Tidjani Alou (1992) and me (Bierschenk 1984) – had been interested in the state as a topic of empirical research for many years.

<sup>3</sup> We would like to thank the Volkswagen Foundation for having agreed to fund this project in its programme “Knowledge for Tomorrow – Cooperative Research Projects in Sub-Saharan Africa, cf. <http://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/funding/international-focus/knowledge-for-tomorrow-cooperative-research-projects-in-sub-saharan-africa.html?L=1>.

In concrete terms, following Stein, what our project involved was an ethnographic study of state apparatuses in four West African countries. And the main question posed by our research was: What do states do when they are working?

We based our project on the practical premise that statehood in Africa can be studied using the same methodical instruments and theoretical approaches as those adopted elsewhere. In other words: ethnographic studies of statehood in Africa should acknowledge the insights produced by organisational sociology and bureaucracy research in OECD countries. This may sound self-evident but is a premise which in fact sets us apart from much of the contemporary “anthropology of the state” – which strangely ignores empirical organisational and professional sociology.<sup>4</sup> In our view, this leads to a tendency to re-invent the wheel and to exoticise states of the South.

### ***Anthropology and state: an historical review***

Modern western political science was built on the concept of the state: it was viewed by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel and their successors as a necessary solution to the problem of order in modern societies (Bartelson 2001). However, the state was not initially an explicit topic in post-evolutionary anthropology, starting with Malinowski and Boas. The great merit of the latter was to have shown, instead, that – contrary to what the European state theorists believed – political order is also possible without the state. This sensational anthropological discovery was made by Evans-Pritchard (1940) in Africa, in southern Sudan. Therefore, it may be said that the state, while not an explicit object of research, was always present as a major philosophical question in the background of this early political-anthropological research. In this philosophical and indirect sense the state was the midwife of modern political anthropology.

With the shift to “modern” topics from the 1950s, anthropologists also started to show an interest in state phenomena – administrative chiefs, development projects, local government, etc. – without, however, carrying out this research under the heading of an “anthropology of the state”. As evidenced by a series of readers published on the topic, the latter has only existed in an explicit sense for around ten years. Of these publications, I would only like to mention two here as they are indicative to me of two quite different directions adopted by anthropologists in the research of statehood: these are Sharma & Gupta’s (2006) reader “The Anthropology of the State” (note the two definite articles) and Fuller & Benei’s (Fuller & Bénei 2000) anthology “The Everyday State in Modern India”. It will come as no surprise to learn that our project would tend to identify rather with Fuller, Benei and Harriss’

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<sup>4</sup> The seminal reader of Sharma & Gupta (2006) is maybe the most crying, but not the only example of the ignorance of empirical sociology by anthropologists. Among many other examples, see the study of Comaroff & Comaroff (2006a) on the South African police which contains a single reference to the rich body of (mostly ethnographic) work done by sociologists on the police in countries in the North.

empirically more solid anthropology of modern Indian statehood than with Sharma and Gupta's highly, and in my view often erroneously, theorised approaches.

Therefore, our aim is not so much to present an anthropology of the state in Africa than, more modestly, to present an ethnography of public bureaucracies in selected African countries. In this, we differ from most anthropologists who are currently working on "the state". Motivated by a classical anthropological reflex, the latter prefer to study *autour de l'Etat*; they are interested in the "margins" and "interstices" of the state (Das & Poole 2004). This is sometimes justified with a generalised concept of governance, usually with reference to Foucault (see for example Nugent 2001; Roitman 2004). This research is important. However, our focus is different: we are interested in the apparatuses of state themselves and their actors, in Africa, and have a simple and practical reason for this: very little empirical research has been carried out on this topic by either political scientists, sociologists or anthropologists since the early independence period (Copans 2001).

***The sample: interface bureaucrats in the primary education and justice sectors of four small, poor but relatively well-functioning states***

Academics who express views on Africa always do so on the basis of limited empirical experience. They generalise according to the small corner of Africa with which they are familiar to a greater or lesser extent. In fact, nowhere does the temptation to succumb to such continent-wide generalisations appear to be as strong as it is for Africa (Keller 1991).

Therefore it is important to refer explicitly to the empirical basis of our statements. Like any empirical sample, ours is limited. It is, in fact, limited in three respects: first, it incorporates four relatively small, poor states all located in West Africa which, however, also function relatively well in the context of Africa. None of them can be described as failed states – in fact, Ghana, Mali and Benin are viewed as "model" African democracies in the context of international donor discourse. The fourth country in the group is Niger. Second, we were primarily interested in the interface bureaucrats, that is the officials who have direct contact with the citizens, and the organisations they work in.<sup>5</sup> Third and, finally, we only focus on selected state bureaucracies, that is the justice, police and primary education sectors.

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<sup>5</sup> The term „interface bureaucrats“ seems more appropriate for our findings than Lipsky's (1980) „street-level bureaucrats“ by which it is otherwise largely inspired. African low-level bureaucrats are predominantly *guichetiers* (*Schalterbeamte* in German) who most of the time need to be mobilised by citizens to leave their offices. See on this the on-going police research by *Badou, Beek, Göpfert, Peeth* (2009), *Schwarz* (2009) and *Witte* (2009) (references in italics refer to texts published in these proceedings). In fact, the term "street-level (or interface) bureaucrat" has two dimensions: low rank and direct contact with clients. Both criteria are fulfilled by teachers, policemen/gendarmes and court clerks (Scherer 2009), while judges who were also studied in our project – see the work by *Budniok, Fetzner* (2009) *Fomba, Hamani, Imorou* and *Tchantipo* – only conform to the second criterion. *Lentz's* research and that carried out by *Bako-Arifari* represent an exception or, more correctly, a necessary supplement to our project in this regard.

The reasons for this are practical, on the one hand, and arise from the genetic link with the corruption project which I have already mentioned: the health sector was already comprehensively researched as part of that project (Jaffré & Olivier de Sardan 2003). However, we also had systematic reasons for our choice of sectors. Primary school education and justice represent two very different fields of action in relation to statehood. In most African countries, the primary school sector is probably the biggest single apparatus of the state – up to 50 % of all public sector employees are primary school teachers and if an African citizen in a rural area comes into contact with the state, statistically speaking, this is most likely to happen in the school environment. Since the late colonial era, the educational system has been an absolute top priority of African governments; it was and continues to be assigned a central role in the development of state and nation. It is viewed as a crucial element of the development process (Bierschenk 2007).

On the other hand, the justice sector – understood here in a wider sociological sense that includes the police and *gendarmérie* – involves a far smaller group of apparatuses, in which the development function of state action assumes a less prominent role than the claims for sovereignty and the monopoly of violence. Hence, it was our intention to study two very different areas of state action; when we embarked on the research we were not aware of just how different these areas actually were and, at the same time, of how similar some of the actors' practices would nonetheless prove to be.

### *No policy research but policy-relevant research*

Our research does not aim to produce any directly applicable results. Our approach does not take its orientation from a concrete model of a better-functioning state as is the case with the contemporary debate surrounding the developmental state.<sup>6</sup> It is not our aim to develop recipes for reform. Nonetheless, we share with this normative literature on the developmental state the premise that a well-functioning state and a competent public service, in particular, is a necessary precondition for economic development. However, we believe that all normative debate would do well to take its initial orientation from observed reality so as not to slip into pure voluntarism. This voluntarism is the necessary consequence of the utopianism that has formed the ideological basis of the development regime from its inception to

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<sup>6</sup> The interesting literature on the developmental state (Amsden 1994; Leftwich 1995; Tendler 1997; Wade 1996; Woo-Cumings 1999) and in particular on the question whether and under which conditions such a state may exist in Africa (Alence 2004; Kevane & Englebert 1999; Kitching 1985; Mkandawire 2001) suffers, however, from two limitations. First, it is historically and geographically too narrowly focused on relatively recent non-European examples and neglects the fact that all economic development processes, since the British industrial revolution and beyond, are processes of "catching-up" (*nachholend*) development (Chang 2002; Gerschenkron 1966; Moore 1966). Secondly, the focus lies too narrowly on the state. However, the European experience has shown that a developmental state presupposes the existence of an industrial capitalist class in relation to which the development bureaucracy might be said to be embedded (Evans 1995). In particular in the francophone countries of our sample, this class hardly exists. Without claiming any teleology, it might therefore be said that these countries are still in the process of primitive accumulation.

the present day: the frequent change in the development policy paradigm is driven by the firm belief that there must be a magic bullet that will resolve Africa's development problems for once and for all. Accordingly, the research we carry out is not policy research but policy-relevant research. The implementation of its findings as policy recommendations would be the object of a separate process.

## **Findings**

Within the available space, I would like to present four selected findings from our research. I will speak successively about first the historical path dependency of African states, then secondly on structural heterogeneity as one, and , thirdly, the co-production of public services as the other distinctive feature of African statehood, which produces – my fourth point – a highly complex and contradictory normative universe in which African bureaucrats have to operate.

### ***Historicity: the sedimentation of colonial and post-colonial experiences***

Like all societal phenomena, statehood is path-dependent. *Colonial rule: the projection of a despotic model of state*

For Africa, the colonial experience assumes a special significance in this context. With the establishment of colonial rule, a western form of statehood was projected onto African societies. What is involved here, however, was not simply a matter of "the" European state. The colonial administration had few of the attributes required for African states today and in relation to which they are found to be deficient. The colonial state apparatus was remote from society; some authors have even described it as autistic (Spittler 1981; Trotha 1994). It was not at all accountable to its subjects and scarcely accountable to the European metropolitan public. Its main function was that of exploitation and political control, its preferred method the use or threat of physical violence. The colonial state engaged in little division of powers; executive, legislative and judicial powers largely coincided in this state. The lower one penetrated into the hierarchy, the more true this was; office and officer increasingly overlapped here. At the same time, due to its low level of human and fiscal resources, on the one hand, and the special problems of control that confronted it in a peasant society with little market integration, on the other, this repressive colonial state was weak in terms of regulation and policy. As a result it always relied at local level on middle men who were difficult to control and whose practices were perceived by the population as largely arbitrary. Actual bureaucratic characteristics (specific training of the officials, documentary formality, the legality of administrative practice) were only found at the higher levels of the administration. The people who displayed these characteristics had a privileged world view, how-

ever; as expatriates, they expected an all-inclusive package with official residences, personnel and foreign allowances.

This very specific model of statehood was adopted *in toto*, as it were, at independence in Africa (Eckert 2007). Initially, only the staff was replaced at varying speeds. The fact that the African staff often lacked the necessary qualifications for the work was a result of the highly selective colonial educational policy. Hence, the real winners in the decolonisation process were the few well-educated Africans. This bureaucratic elite became the real power elite and saw itself as the avant-garde of the state and nation building processes, developing an “arrogant paternalism” (Eckert 2007) vis-à-vis their fellow citizens (Scott 1998). The safeguarding of the rule of this “political-bureaucratic” class quickly emerged as a matter of priority over the task of development (Bates 2008).

### *Fragmentation by the post-colonial development regimes*

Further historical experiences were added to this historical legacy – a despotic model of state, badly prepared elites – which is a particularly difficult one, even compared to other post-colonial states (Young 1994). No other continent was such an intensive focus of development-policy intervention and social-policy experiments in the post-colonial period than Africa (Cooper 1997). The paradigms of intervention and reform followed on from each other in rapid succession: funding of infrastructure projects, structural adaptation, the fight against poverty, good governance, decentralisation, participation. As a general rule, these paradigms of development were not created through internal political debates in the African post-colonial states themselves. They were almost always generated from outside and did not, therefore, represent tailor-made responses to specific problems of African states but, to paraphrase Naudet (Naudet 1999) the importation of “solutions that sought their problems locally”. Hence the development regimes promoted systematised political irresponsibility: failures can be attributed to the donors by African governments and to the governments by the donors (van de Walle 2001).

These reforms were also distinctly top-down in nature, even within the national context. Like the different rounds of civil service reform, for example, they were usually imposed from above and barely discussed with the stakeholders; if discussions took place they were extremely ritualised. Many administrative reforms in Africa can, indeed, be studied as examples of how not to implement reforms.

The “products” of these historical developments have deposited as sediment in the African bureaucracies which we studied: the effects of a certain reform do not usually displace the results of the previous one – at least not completely. Instead, each institutional reform and each round of development policy intervention leaves behind an institutional legacy which slots into the group of existing institutional arrangements. More than 50 years of development policy have not led to the homogenisation of these institutional arrangements; instead they became more and more complex. And governments tended to respond to new chal-

lenges by creating new institutions parallel to the existing ones. If one considers the individual elements of the bureaucracies – personnel, official rules, practical norms, normative discourses – they paint a picture of the accretions of time (*Zeitschichten*, cf. Koselleck 2000) that have accumulated side by side.

The *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* (simultaneity of the non-simultaneous or contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous) is, of course, an attribute of all bureaucracies; however it appears to be a particularly prominent feature of the African bureaucracies we studied. Public bureaucracies in Africa can unite elements of an ancient colonial state with the very latest trends in administrative reform: for example, forestry officials are still very influenced by the repressive paramilitary colonial style of operation but at the same time support the principles of participative community forestry; teachers follow themselves on an authoritarian teaching style that goes back to the 1950s but are expected to profess to the latest pedagogical fashions, such as pupil-centred teaching, which, as everyone knows, is impossible to practice in the reality of an African school day; Benin's penal law originates in part from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however its commercial law was recently modernised.

This tendency towards the proliferation of institutions was reinforced by other tendencies: first, development policy interventions often tend not to work through the existing state apparatuses but through projects, consultants and NGOs. As a result, islands of efficiency are created which, however, are dependent on external funding. If "projects" are integrated into the state apparatus, they tie up the resources of national bureaucracies for months if not years into the future and deflect the energies of the officials working there from all other tasks. The state apparatuses were also weakened from within, however: in the course of their Africanisation, the internal sanction and control mechanisms were systematically hollowed out. A transfer to the *suivi et évaluation* department of any ministry today effectively means being politically sidelined (*mise au placard*). The motives behind this weakening process were political: they allowed the heads of state to implement a clientelist personnel policy. This also undermined the legitimacy of sanctions in the long term which were usually understood as politically motivated and therefore eroded the control capacities of the leadership.

### *The disintegration of the state apparatuses*

The state apparatuses then declined as a result of the crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Salaries decreased, dramatically in some cases, and the number of public service employees, which had risen continuously up to then, decreased. Despite statements frequently presented to the contrary African state apparatuses are in no way "inflated" in terms of personnel (Förster 2007; Goldsmith 1999). Correlated with the size of its population, Benin has only just over one third of the number of police officers found in Germany and only 40% of the number employed in France, and only five percent of the number of judges and state prosecutors in Germany (Bierschenk 2008; Fetzner 2009; Witte 2009).

Even more dramatic, however, was the decline in working resources: many local officials today have *de facto* no budget whatsoever at their disposal. If they want to maintain a minimal state service, they have to use private resources: Benin street-level officials almost only ever use their own mobile telephones for communication with colleagues and superiors; when a Beninese gendarme goes to a local appointment or takes a prisoner to a remand prison some distance away, he will have to do it on his own motorbike; if a prisoner in a police or gendarme cell has no relatives to come and feed him, it will have to be on the policemen's or gendarmes' own private means; etc. This is the other face of the creeping privatisation of public services, which is otherwise only viewed exclusively from the perspective of corruption. If the payment of a regular salary that is sufficient to cover living costs and access to an office and the necessary working resources constitute the minimum requirements for the existence of a state bureaucracy, it would have to be said that state bureaucracy does not exist in many parts of rural West Africa (Hahonou 2006). The state is clearly unravelling at these edges; it is "dissolving", as Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2000) put it.

However, not all areas of the state bureaucracies have been equally affected by this decline. Some managed to withstand the crisis better than others. It may be plausibly assumed, with Niklas van de Walle (2001), that the higher levels of the bureaucracy basically withstood the crisis better than the small interface officials.

### ***Fragmented bureaucracies***

In view of these historical developments, it is unsurprising that African public bureaucracies do not present a uniform image but are, instead, highly fragmented. I would like to examine five interconnected dimensions of this structural heterogeneity:

1. Obvious differences arise due to the different colonial pre-histories. The difference between former Anglophone and Francophone colonies is of relevance to us here. However, these differences do not affect all state sectors to the same extent; the colonial heritage is far more visible in some state bureaucracies than in others. Thus, the justice sector in Ghana is clearly influenced by the British traditions while those in Benin, Niger and Mali are influenced by the French one. Similar differences also exist in the education sector: the normative model of the teacher as a state official is clearly inspired by the French system (Bierschenk 2007). However, in general, national structures in the education sector have moved significantly closer together than in the justice sector. Whereas the justice sector presents a professional culture with strong national characteristics, the language of the educational sector today is far more international.
2. Another dimension of the heterogeneity, often within the same sector but also between sectors, arises from the influence of development policy interventions. These often create "two-speed bureaucracies" (*bureaucraties à deux vitesses*, Blundo, oral communication): a state bureaucracy which is completely under-resourced and condemned to inactivity is faced with a "project bureaucracy" with far better working conditions and higher

salaries. The creation of parastatal agencies for the fulfilment of public tasks has a similarly differentiating effect.

3. Different state bureaucracies vary significantly in their efficiency – not only but also – because of these differences in their material resources. Just as “islands of inefficiency” can be found in otherwise seemingly well-functioning state apparatuses (e.g., public works in Japan, cf. Woodall 1996), “islands of efficiency” (also referred to as “pockets of effectiveness” in the literature, cf. Roll 2009) can be found, even within the state bureaucracies which were generally characterized by a low level of productivity in the countries we researched.
4. The working conditions of different categories of public sector employees can vary significantly. Overall, the vertical spread of salaries is far more extreme in Africa than elsewhere. Whereas the ratio between the lowest and highest salaries paid in the German public services is around 1 to 9 and the World Bank recommends a ratio of 13 to 1 (Lentz), in Benin the corresponding ratio is 16 to 1: in Uganda it seems to be 50 to 1 (Therkildsen 2006). These figures only refer to the basic salaries of the employees, however, and therefore conceal a far higher spread in real terms: first, the privatisation of public tasks, e.g. in primary school education as a result of the introduction of various contract teacher models, has led to the reduction of salaries among lower-ranking positions which no longer feature in the public service salary tables. Second, various allowances and the differential possibilities for acquiring additional income carry far greater weight in Africa than in Europe. In some African countries these amount to more than the basic salary (Förster 2007). The spread of these allowances is even wider than that of basic income: e.g. at FCFA 30,000, a high ranking official from the Beninese education ministries on an official mission to a rural area, for which he does not actually incur any accommodation or food costs as he will be lodged and fed by the teachers he visits, receives a daily per diem that is twice the monthly salary of a community teacher. As we shall see, these material differences between the higher and lower ranks correlate with differences in the normative relationships with the state.
5. These general differences between higher and lower ranks of public servants are thwarted, however, by the extensive and growing internal heterogeneity of the individual professional groups (*corps*). These differences can also be seen as sedimented products of the history of the individual bureaucracies. Different eras leave behind different categories of personnel with the result that the internal composition of a professional group becomes increasingly differentiated: “*On ne sait plus qui est qui*” is the view expressed in relation to the many categories of teachers who can end up working together today at one and the same school in Benin: teachers with the status of civil servants, contract teachers, community teachers, unofficially employed assistants (on the same situation among police officers, cf. *Badou*). A feature of this differentiation is the very unequal salaries paid for the same work. Thus, for example, employees in public agencies or development projects in Uganda earn up to 60 % more than their professional colleagues in the central government apparatus; some drivers in these agencies earn between 50 and 150 % more than economists working in the ministries (Therkildsen 2006:

6). (A similar situation exists among teachers in Benin, see above.) In addition to this there are remarkable differences in the availability of working resources within one and the same apparatus: for example some courts of the first instance in Benin have two computers per judge and others have none at all (Fetzner 2009).

To conclude this point: our thesis is not that European bureaucracies are homogenous formations and African bureaucracies, in contrast, are heterogeneous ensembles. All bureaucracies are characterised by sedimentation and structural heterogeneity. The difference between European and African bureaucracies lies in their specific combination of heterogeneous elements and in the resulting degree of heterogeneity.

### ***Co-productions of public services***

The notion of what constitutes a public good or service is historically situated. Furthermore, whether a public service is delivered by a public authority, or private actors, varies over space and time. This is obvious, e.g., in education: the fact that we view primary school education today as a public task is an historically comparatively recent product of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, linked to the rise of the modern nation-state. And even the fact that education is viewed as a public responsibility does not prescribe who should be running schools, the government, or private actors, or both. In fact, many “public” services, beyond education, are co-produced by state agencies together with private actors. In our research programme, this concerned in particular security (by the police, the gendarmerie and private security forces, see *Göpfert*) and justice, in particular on a local level (see the research by *Tchantipo*, Hofferberth (2009) and Schütz (2009)).

Co-production of public services by public and private actors is not, again, a purely African phenomenon; it is a feature of all public services. But, again, it seems to be particularly marked in Africa. However, there are no clear tendencies across the board, either in the direction of increasing privatisation, nor increasing etatisation, and differences between countries and sectors are considerable. While education was delivered predominantly, if not exclusively by private actors in the African colonies up to 1906, it became a decidedly state affair in the French colonies after that date – with the paradox effect that educational parameters in the British colonies, which continued to rely heavily on private providers of schooling, e.g. Christian missions, have been much better to date than in the French-speaking countries (with Dahomey, where the missions always kept a foothold in education being the exception which proves the rule). Even though there is a strong “private” element in education today, it would be wrong to assume from this a generally diminishing role of the state –in Benin and Mali for example, we rather observe tendencies to re-enlarge the role of the state in education. Nor can the public-private divide simply be projected onto different types of organisations: there are strong “private” elements in public schooling while private schools remain publicly regulated (*Tama*); the same could be said about the production of security, where the work of public police forces always depends on the cooperation of pri-

vate actors, and vice versa (*Beek, Göpfert, Poppe*). In other words, the co-production of public services reposes on complex, and shifting configurations of actors, and boundaries are not stable; they are the object of continuous “work” by the actors.

Two general conclusions may be drawn from the preceding. First, in no way can it be said that African bureaucracies are dominated by a single logic. Just as African agriculture is characterised by high micro-variability, the characteristic feature of African bureaucracies is their enormous heterogeneity (which has statistically been demonstrated for the primary education sector, for example, cf. Suchaut 2003). For the officials who work in these bureaucracies this means, second, that they act in professional contexts that are marked by enormous normative pluralism (Chauveau, Le Pape & Olivier de Sardan 2001). I would now like to turn to the implications of this for the officials.

### ***The public service as a complex normative universe***

Modern bureaucracy has not only a technical side but also an ethical one. Hence, when the modern civil service was developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – by the way, the British civil service was invented in colonial India – it was not merely a matter of creating institutional innovations to replace the patrimonial bureaucracy that had dominated up to then with its abuse of privileges, corruption and high dependency on politics. The creation of an “appropriate bureaucratic persona” and the “fashioning of an appropriate administrative subjectivity” were equally important. The modern civil servant was the product of a “codification of an ethical type that bears particular competence to rule”, he became the bearer of the “ruling habitus” (Osborne 1994: 290). The civil service entrance examination and corresponding preparation were not exclusively focussed on knowledge, therefore, but were primarily seen as character training: “The aim was not, in a negative sense, to create a bureaucracy, but to motivate officials for public service” (ibid.: 306). Ideas about the radical non-ethnic character of the modern bureaucracy, as often ascribed to Max Weber, are, therefore, misleading – both as regards bureaucracy and as regards Max Weber, who spoke of the office as “order of life” (*Lebensordnung*): “bureaucracy ... presupposes an ethical formation on the part of the bureaucrat, a bureaucratic vocation, as opposed to a more or less blind obedience to rules and orders” (ibid.: 309). A corresponding ethical understanding of bureaucratic office is, therefore, the necessary complement to the discretion of the bureaucrat and, specifically, the condition for the limiting of bureaucratic tendencies in the negative sense.

This ideal image of the bureaucrat also exists in Africa and it takes effect there – this should be clearly stressed. It is taught in the teacher training institutes and police schools, its formulations – for example the ethical code of the customs officer or the “ten commandments of the good policeman” – can be read in many state office. This ideal image was repeatedly referred to without prompting by our informants. The extent to which this image of the correct and responsible official is part of the external representation of many state authorities is in fact very striking (Peth 2009; Witte 2009).

In their professional practice, officials must, however, act in complex normative universes for which this ideal image can only present one direction, among many. These moral universes are characterised by intense double tension, first, between the different official norms themselves.<sup>7</sup> These are often contradictory in themselves, in part obsolete and frequently simply not applicable (Bierschenk 2008; Therkildsen 2006). Extensive areas of educational practice, for example, are either not controlled by texts or the texts that exist are contradictory (*Tama*). The permanent intervention of many uncoordinated donors and the resulting stop-go policy, for example in the area of human resources policy, further exacerbate the problem. Moreover, these norms change constantly – as a result of reforms – sometimes from one year to the next (as an example, see the contract teacher programme in Benin). The inadequacy of the official rules and regulations, which are often ill adapted to reality, necessitates the production of informal norms which actually enable the minimal functioning of the apparatuses – albeit, in a negative feedback loop, intensifying its functional problems intensify. As a result, the officials navigate in a context that appears to be fundamentally unpredictable and they frequently deplore this “absence de vision prospective”. They become masters in the selective application of contradictory norms of varying origin, of “organisation improviste” and “bricolage” (*Tama*). This is nicely expressed in the saying familiar to every street-level bureaucrat in Benin: “c’est le terrain qui commande”.

Therefore a second source of tension exists between these official norms – which, as underlined, are contradictory in themselves and constantly changing – and the practical norms (Olivier de Sardan 2008). This too is not necessarily an African phenomenon. No bureaucracy functions in accordance with the Weberian ideal type (which is, first, an ideal type and, second, limited to the formal aspects of the functioning of a bureaucracy). A bureaucracy is not a machine but a configuration of social processes. As the sociology of organisations has shown in recent decades, all formal organisations require informal rules and practices in addition to formal ones to be able to function. Most individual characteristics that are frequently cited as typical of African organisations can be found, therefore, in “western bureaucracies”. For example, the German civil service has been described by leading organisational sociologists as a “patronage bureaucracy” (Bosetzky 1974: 435). In addition to all of the meritocratic criteria (which are also effective), promotion in the German civil service is largely based on “promotional relationships among the employees” and on the “instrumentalization of the employees by external organisations”, hence largely on the patronage of parties and interest groups (ibid.: 431). Indeed, Bosetzky (1974: 433) concludes that “a completely objective system of promotion liberated from all micropolitics, formalised and mathematicised” would involve considerable losses of efficiency for the public administration and actually cause its collapse into subsystems as the administration is reliant on “a high degree of group cohesion”.

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<sup>7</sup> The notion of “tension” between contradictory repertoires of rules seems more productive than the current term „hybridity“.

Officials in the countries we studied are given little preparation in how to deal with these tensions in their training which provides them (see for example teachers and police officers) with an ideal image of their future profession. They only learn to do deal with reality in a phase of informal professional socialisation which they undergo in the early years of their career. It may be hypothesised from this that the internal motivation of the bureaucrats is even more important in African bureaucracies than in those with greater top-down control, for example the German civil service.

In fact, it emerged very clearly from our interviews that African officials see themselves as having a moral contractual relationship with the state. More senior officials describe this moral relationship as largely intact: “we work for the nation” (*Lentz*), they say, and they consider meritocratic principles as for hiring and promotion as operational (*Willot*, *Therkildsen* 2006). In the opinion of the lower ranks, the interface bureaucrats, however, the state has contravened the terms of this contract: “*l’Etat nous a laissé*”, they say (*Bierschenk* 2009). This situation can be seen as a typical double-bind situation: Low level bureaucrats are exposed to paralyzing, because contradictory messages. Officially, their superiors insist on an ideal of behavior, but, so to speak, with a twinkle in the eye, letting it be known that they, too, realize, that this ideal cannot be followed. In certain circumstances, however, they actually might find it convenient to insist on the ideal being followed to the letter. This possibility to switch between official and practical norms is an important base of power within an organization, together with the more or less deliberate creation of informational opacity. (As an example, cf. the fact that policemen generally do not know the marks which are given to them by their superiors, and also do not master the rules of transfer between different posts, cf. *Peth and Witte*). Subordinates react to this double-bind by pretending, again with a twinkle in the eye, to be following official rules. The result is widespread hypocrisy: the state pretends to pay its officials and give them an operating budget and the officials only pretend to work.<sup>8</sup> A wide range of the behaviours we observed among the street-level bureaucrats can, therefore, be understood as compensation strategies developed in response to this moral double-bind. I do not have the time to go into this in detail; therefore I can only briefly mention some of these strategies, all of which basically involve the principle of the limiting of professional commitment: most of the lower level bureaucrats constantly scan their environment for professional alternatives. They are permanently on the lookout for exit options. In another text, I described this using the expression “doing the state, *en attendant*” (*Bierschenk* 2009).

The limiting of professional commitment means, first, that entry into a profession is very often based on highly random conditions. Many officials told us that they applied for different careers and that they became what they now are because they simply passed one exam and not another. Even when they have embarked on a particular career path, they keep a close eye out for alternatives; exit options are permanently scrutinised. This process of scanning for exit options can take different forms. It can mean the search for professional alter-

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<sup>8</sup> Similar to the development world where the donors pretend to help, and the recipients to develop.

natives within or outside the relevant professional field. The low-level bureaucrats interviewed by us displayed an astonishingly firm belief in the professional significance of knowledge and its sanctioning by qualifications. Many officials spend a great deal of their spare time pursuing further training activities: police officers and gendarmes study law to gain access to the entrance examinations for access to the position of commissioner; teachers enrol for sociology courses for the same reason; contract teachers apply for work with the customs authorities etc. This culture of qualifications (*culture de diplôme*) alone can be interpreted as empirical proof of the efficacy of meritocratic principles at local level. Another strategy involves secondary employment. For example, the majority of younger teachers appear to be employed outside of their official hours of work as tutors.

## **Conclusions**

To round off my presentation, I would like to draw attention to four general conclusions for the understanding of African statehood:

### ***The production of informality within the bureaucratic apparatuses***

The enormous emphasis on informal norms and practices in African bureaucracies should not exclusively be understood as an adaptation to local social contexts; this is not based on the displacement of bureaucratic norms by social ones; it is not, as the most simplistic formulation puts it, an expression of an “African mentality”. Instead, the informal norms are produced, in part at least, within the apparatuses themselves. The cause of this is the lack of reform and steering capacity at the top which, in turn, is also the result of constant interventions by numerous uncoordinated donor organisations.

In many instances reform primarily means the purely rhetorical-opportunistic appropriation of global discourses, for example the anti-corruption discourse. Therefore, it would be possible to refer to collusive informality here: a considerable degree of hypocrisy can also be found in African bureaucracies as, indeed, in all bureaucracies. The management levels are completely aware that many formal rules are not implementable and that informal practices are required if the apparatus is to function at all. For example, school principals have significantly more tasks to fulfil than is officially admitted and yet they are still expected to complete a full teaching load. Many principals solve this problem by appointing private teaching assistants. Strictly speaking this is not allowed. Faced with this situation, management at the ministry officially insists on compliance with the official code but usually tolerates the practice in reality: like a good wife who accepts life as it is, *il faut savoir fermer les yeux*, whereas the subordinate, like a realistic husband, should be able to close his ears. All participants pretend to observe the official rules despite being fully aware that they cannot be implemented. In the emic discourse this is referred to as “*navigation a vue*” or “*organisation improvisée*”. These informal practices should not necessarily – or primarily – be equated with corruption, but they can become the gateway to it. They fundamentally blur the boundaries

between the state and non-state areas. And while the centrally regulated reforms go nowhere, the basis produces many small ad hoc reforms or “*reformes dérivées*” (Blundo).

### ***African statehood not subject to a uniform logic***

Hence, the empirical research of statehood deconstructs the state fiction presented by jurisprudence and the political sciences. It focuses on the heterogeneity, the incompleteness and “omnipresence” of statehood – so that it is impossible to say where exactly the border between state and non-state lies. This is, perhaps, not so surprising as the result of ethnographical research; within the ranks of the social and cultural scientists, anthropologists tend to side more with the splitters than the lumpers. Linear explanations are not allowed from this kind of perspective: it is difficult to ascribe a single cause or consequence to a given factor. Depending on the context and its position in a sequence, the same factor can have very different effects and the same phenomenon be triggered by different factors.

Hence, African statehood is not based on an “essence” of its own; it has no inherent “grain” (Kelsall 2008); it does not represent the exotic “completely other” as compared with western statehood. Contrary to what some authors claim, politics and statehood in Africa are not subject to any uniform moral matrix.

### ***Macro-difference as the result of cumulated micro-differences***

The question arises, however, as to how we should then understand difference – which undoubtedly exists and to a considerable extent. African public bureaucracies are clearly not particularly successful at the production of public goods such as education, justice and social order. If we do not want to explain these differences in terms of a somehow fundamental other “essence” of African states, we must understand them in detail as the accumulated outcome of many small differences. The difference between African and other, let’s say, European bureaucracies does not, therefore, lie in the fact that they work on the basis of completely different criteria. They function largely on the basis of the same criteria, however these are differently characterised and their “mixing ratio” is also different. The impression that major differences ultimately exist between them, e.g. in terms of efficiency, is not the expression of a different “essence” but the result of many small differences which ultimately generate a different quality.

As in a chemical process, macro-difference emerges, therefore, from the interaction of many small different factors and mechanisms. These, in turn, are only loosely linked and cannot be depicted by a single principle, for example neopatrimonialism. Moreover, it is precisely this loose link that brings stability to the difference; the alteration of a single factor does not as a rule change the entire outcome. In other words: attributes of statehood that may appear to be “typically African” – for example widespread corruption – are overdetermined: they are not conditioned by a single factor but by a series of factors.

### ***State or statehood?***

This leads us to a paradoxical reflection: our ethnographic approach to the study of African public services suggests that it may be a misleading ambition to produce an anthropology of “*the*” state. This seems to be as impossible as an anthropology of, let’s say, capitalism, Christianity or culture – that is if we understand these terms to refer to uniform, bounded, real objects. Despite all the fashionable references to Foucault, a considerable proportion of contemporary US-American anthropology of the state suffers precisely from this essentialisation – that is the confusion of ideal types with real types. These essentialisations are basically the almost inevitable outcome of the often relatively weak empirical content of many studies – from those presented by the Comaroffs (Comaroff & Comaroff 2006b, 2006c; 2007) to those by Sharma & Gupta (2006).

So maybe “state” is one of those concepts that anthropologists should only use in the derivational form that refers to the quality or condition of state. Hence, instead of an anthropology of the state, what we should engage in is the anthropology of statehood (or stateness, *étaticité* in French, *Staatlichkeit* in German). Our focus is not a bounded research object but a characteristic of institutions and practices which, however, are not exhaustively described by this aspect of statehood; statehood is, in fact, one of their attributes among others. For example, a school is an organisation in which knowledge is imparted and the class structure of a society is reproduced. Above all, it is one of the key disciplinary instruments of modern societies along with places of work and – with diminishing historical significance – the barracks and the church. In other words, statehood is attributed to certain organisations, actors and practices by the actors themselves. The state – or, more accurately, the state-idea – is, first, an emic category of the social actors (*Pates*). The empirical question for the anthropologist is to find out what kind of impact this “stately” attribute unfolds.

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