Resurgent Society or Civil Society?
Reflections on a Case Study from the Republic of Benin

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Introduction

In this paper I address a fundamental and difficult question raised by Africanist political scientist Thomas Callaghy in a 1994 article entitled "Civil Society, Democracy, and Economic Change in Africa: A Dissenting Opinion About Resurgent Societies". As the article's title indicates, Callaghy dissents from the widespread view that the recent surge of new or reinvigorated voluntary associations in Africa constitutes civil society. He opposes defining civil society in terms of autonomous social groups that interact with the state but delimit and constrain its actions. Instead, he argues that the establishment of civil society involves the emergence of norms about the nature and limits of state power, and the creation of a public sphere and political rules that govern that sphere's functioning. In sum, Callaghy argues that Africanists should talk about resurgent societies, evading or engaging the state, rather than civil societies.

In 1994, as Callaghy was publishing his article, I left Baltimore to spend a year in the Republic of Benin, to study the apparent reemergence of civil society in that nation, linked to the remarkable non-violent restoration of democracy in 1990, after 17 years of one-party Marxist rule. Associations of all kinds were springing up in Cotonou, the de facto capitol of Benin, as well as in many of the rural and semi-rural districts where the majority of the population still lives. I decided to focus my ethnographic research and interviews in the district of Sakété, which is in southeastern Benin, along the border with Nigeria, about 20 miles north of Benin's de jure capitol, Porto Novo. At first I had no doubts that civil society was the appropriate concept to describe the initial focus of my research, the Association for the Development of the Sousprefecture of Sakété (the French acronym is ADESS). (I will later describe what I learned about ADESS and other associations in Sakété in more detail.) My question at this point is whether one should assume (as I did) that a voluntary, nonprofit association -- in this case a community development association with the stated mission of revitalizing a particular district -- necessarily constitutes part of an
Callaghy and others would say no, that I imported a trendy Eurocentric theoretical construct when I should have stuck with concepts more rooted in, and appropriate to, the African context. And obviously this criticism would apply to the work of many other scholars currently undertaking research on civil society in Africa, and other non-Western societies. I take this critical line of thought seriously because of the difficulties I have had over the past few years linking the findings from my research in Benin to existing theories of civil society. However, despite these struggles, I argue that we should not give up applying the concept of civil society to certain emerging ideas and institutions in African society-state relations. I do think that we should pay much closer attention to the varied and fluid contexts of African public life, because a particular context can present significant, even overwhelming, obstacles to establishing institutions of civil society. The complexity of African socio-political contexts may mean that African civil society is taking on a surprising (to outsiders) diversity of forms.

**Problems of Definition**

Central to Callaghy's distinction between resurgent societies and civil societies is his definition of civil society as the creation of political norms about the public sphere, as opposed to a web of associations evading or engaging the state. This dichotomy however between norms and institutions is misleading. Essential to a robust civil society is the translation of norms about the public sphere into institutions of civil society. Such institutions can and do exist in Africa, but often struggle (and sometimes sink) in contexts of material scarcity, social tension, and political conflict. First it is necessary to define the concepts of public sphere and civil institutions. Habermas developed the public sphere as a concept in 1962, and he defined it as the sphere in which state authority is monitored through informed and critical discourse by the people. He traced the roots of the public sphere to eighteenth century English coffee houses and French salons, where (at least in principle) the authority of skillful argument could assert itself against social hierarchy, and participants could concern themselves with issues that previously had been monopolized by church and state. Habermas later modified his discussion of the public sphere to focus on the problem of how power generates legitimacy, in a late twentieth-century context of mass media manipulation of desires and preferences. After the fall of the Berlin wall, Habermas (and many others) emphasized that the pacesetters in the overthrow of Marxist regimes in east and central Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s were
voluntary associations and citizen movements. He questioned however whether and to what extent the public sphere in Western Europe, which in his view is dominated by the mass media, provides a realistic chance for ordinary citizens to bring about changes in values -- to screen the public sphere critically, and to open it up in innovative ways.\(^7\)

Habermas's concerns about European society and politics over the last 300 years may seem far from the cities and villages of Africa, but his perspective is valuable in helping us orient our questions about African civil society. In his model, the development of the public sphere is a historical process in which individuals insert themselves into the broad discussion of public policy. Here 'public' means that which is of ongoing concern to all members of a polity -- the citizens of a particular official entity, whether city-state or nation-state. While he argued that the institutional core of civil society is constituted by voluntary associations,\(^8\) more broadly civil society is the voluntary engagement of people in the public sphere.

Unlike Habermas, I do not oppose civil society to the state or marketplace, because people engage in the public sphere, and thus create civil society, in a tremendous number of ways that may or may not involve government and business. A coalition of citizens may spring up around a particular issue, work feverishly to seize a promising opportunity or fend off threatening change, and then either fade away until the next hot issue emerges, or become a permanent organization concerned with a specific group of public issues. One task of both short-lived and long-term civic organizations is to lobby branches of their local, state and even national governments, to pass or block laws that affect the issues of concern to them. In addition, members of civic organizations work with businesses, which may provide direct contributions of time and money, or have a powerful impact on the general economic health (or lack thereof) of community residents and institutions. As Bob Edwards and Michael Foley have written in their criticism of purely association-oriented definitions of civil society, "social initiatives depend crucially on a context set jointly by 'state', 'market' and 'civil society' ",\(^9\) In the framework used in this paper, civil society is constituted by the different channels of citizen participation in the public sphere. Voluntary associations may be the most visible and organized aspect of civil society, but the vital work they accomplish inevitably involves intricate collaboration with other kinds of organizations that operate along very different lines. As political theorist Michael Walzer reminds us, "there is no escape from power and coercion, no possibility of choosing, like the old anarchists, civil society alone."\(^10\)
To return to an earlier question: should one assume, in an African or any other context, that a particular voluntary, nonprofit organization, such as the community development association I studied in Benin, constitutes an institution of civil society? The short answer is no. Critical to interpreting the role of any specific organization is developing a solid understanding of the public sphere, the context of citizen participation in which that organization operates. In much of Africa, the public sphere is not a uniform entity across nations, or even across regions. Local histories and mores still carry great weight, though they rarely are isolated from the wider world. Ethnic and religious traditions as well as national political influences shape people's engagement in the public arena. The job of a researcher is to sort through this intricate web of influences, and to determine the quality and contours of the public sphere. Only then can one interpret to what extent, and to what end, a specific institution constitutes part of an emerging civil society.

Civil Society in Sakété

All well and good, but how does one operationalize these concepts in the field? I will give three answers, though there may be many ways to answer this question. First, pay an enormous amount of attention to local history, particularly to the history of citizen-government relations, and (if appropriate) the history of associational life. As Putnam concluded from his work on democracy in Italy, local history has an enormous influence on how people participate (or do not participate) in public affairs. Second, be inclusive. Putnam's focus on 'autonomous' civic associations in Italy has shaped much of subsequent research on civil society (including my own) but can be limiting and even misleading. Instead, one should look at citizen participation in public affairs both within and outside of the voluntary, nonprofit sector -- in political parties, traditional social and political hierarchies, religious institutions, and informal acts of protest or cooperation. Third, be open to the possibility of setbacks and failures. The very title of the 1998 ISTR conference, "The Contribution of the Third Sector to Social, Economic and Political Change" makes clear that we are looking for evidence of positive change, which may not occur in certain times and places, or in the way we expect it to occur.

In Sakété, I first focused on the Association for Development of the District of Sakété (ADESS), as well as the recently revitalized local kingship, led by the king (or Oba) Adebotemanle. The majority of the population in the district is of the Nago ethnic group, closely related by history, language and culture to the Yoruba peoples of western Nigeria. The development association's full name was ADESS-Adjobi -- in Nago, Adjobi means having the same ancestor, or (more broadly) being of the same
people. A strongly and clearly stated goal of ADESS-Adjobi was to reunite a district riven by political and social conflicts. At the association's founding congress, the organizers stated: "Like a fateful coincidence, internal struggles have long undermined all development, all emancipation. The organization of this congress and the significant participation of numerous participants have helped ward off this unfortunate destiny, and we have unanimously decided to call our association ADJOBI. May our union thus be strengthened." Despite these hope-filled words, this history of 'internal struggles' turned out to be more enduring and influential than I originally had expected.

Specifically, there were few if any examples in the last 100 years of Sakétéan history of district residents establishing effective channels (institutional or otherwise) for shaping public affairs. In part, this is because the French colonial rulers, who took power in 1898, had no interest in the opinions of their Beninese subjects. Sakétéans reacted to the abuse of power by French rulers with hostility. In 1905, when a colonial commander ordered his troops to break up a noisy funeral for a high-ranking Sakétéan chief, residents killed the colonial commander and his wife, and chased the traditional king (Oba) over the border into Nigeria, after accusing him of collaboration with the French. Almost immediately, all the residents of the district's capital (Sakété center) fled, fearing French reprisal, and the town was not reconstituted until 3 years later. From 1908 to 1960, when Benin gained independence from France, the French-appointed Obas of Sakété served primarily as allies of colonial rule, and had a very narrow base of support among district residents. Several were accused of using their supernatural powers to kill and maim residents who opposed them. Thus this potential channel between colonial rulers and colonial subjects offered residents little to no voice in public affairs.

In 1960, with independence from France, and the establishment of democracy in Benin, there was the possibility of new channels of citizen participation, which would not necessarily resemble the European models of civil society described by Habermas and others. Callaghy points out that in the European context civil society eventually assumed a particular form, with country-specific versions inside it, based on the outcomes of historically specific political struggles. He concludes, "One thus could easily and quite appropriately arrive at Africa-specific versions of 'patrimonial' or 'developmental' civil societies...that are quite different from the individualistic and libertarian European version(s)." In Sakété, the state did establish development associations to mediate between government officials and local leaders. These associations existed, in one form or another, until the establishment of one-party rule in Benin in 1973. In theory, the 'big men' -- heads of families, leaders of local
institutions, and wealthy individuals -- chosen by state officials to be officers of the association were supposed to interpret the government to the people, and the people to the government. In practice, however, the national government was a chaotic entity, which suffered numerous coups between 1960 and 1973, and the associations were arenas of intense competition among local leaders fighting for access to the sporadic flow of resources between residents and the state. Accusations of corruption flew fast and furious when outsider groups of local leaders tried to overthrow the insider groups that managed the association's take of residents' taxes. Civil society hardly existed, in that neither the kingship nor the development associations were trusted or effective channels for citizen participation in the public sphere. People learned to respond to the public affairs in other ways -- by disengagement (many left to work in Nigeria and Gabon, or made a living by smuggling goods back and forth over the Nigerian border) or hostility towards state initiatives. For example, in the 1970s, when the one-party regime tried to imprison supposed witches and destroy religious objects, people fled to Nigeria, or punished government officials covertly, with poisons and supernaturally-caused illnesses.¹⁵

What I have tried to sketch is a picture of the local context in which certain individuals and groups were working to establish institutions of civil society in Sakété, after the renouveau (return to democracy) in 1990. At the national level, since the one-party state had started to crumble in the late 1980s, prominent individuals who lived in the larger cities of Benin or abroad had returned (often just temporarily) to their home districts to set up development associations. Leaders of these associations had played an important role in the national conference that led to the peaceful transition from a Marxist regime back to a multi-party democracy. In many districts around the country, traditional kings and chiefs and their supporters (heavily repressed by the one-party state) also were trying to reestablish indigenous forms of political and religious leadership. In Sakété, after a much-disgraced Oba (nicknamed the 'bicycle king' because he had to ride a bicycle out to tend his fields) died in 1988, members of the royal families began to build support for the reinvigoration of the much-maligned kingship. After a lengthy process of negotiation among the different families, and consultation of the Ifa oracle, a new king was chosen. At his inauguration the man chosen to be Oba was given the name Adebotemanle (which means 'the crown that prevents conspiracy', or more loosely 'he who has the power calms all').¹⁶ At the inauguration residents of Sakété celebrated the renewal of the kingship with great joy. Three to four years later, during my months of fieldwork, their enthusiasm for the Oba was tempered by the recognition that there was much that he was not able to accomplish for the district, but many residents did look to the Oba (and his chiefs) for judgement in disputes over land and marriage, and for mediation of indigenous spiritual forces, as well as resolution of supernaturally-
caused crises. He did not effectively address many of the issues (particularly economic) of concern to district residents, but he was available to those residents (and outside officials) concerned about indigenous spiritual matters and public safety. In this way, the Oba and his ministers constituted an institution of civil society, one with deeply patrimonial and religious roots.

The kingship's relatively narrow approach to civil society contrasted strongly to the approach of the founders of ADESS-Adjobi, who wrote position papers for the association's founding congress about every major issue -- infrastructure, education, economy, health, etc. -- facing people living in Sakété. However, they faced great obstacles putting these position papers into action. When these founders, prominent individuals originally from Sakété (but mostly living and working in Cotonou) organized the congress to launch ADESS-Adjobi, they were operating in a context of disengagement and occasional hostility towards the government, and great skepticism concerning development associations, which in the past had taken residents' tax monies and rarely produced anything of use in the district. To complicate the situation, ADESS-Adjobi, led mostly by successful men in their 40s and 50s, soon was challenged by an association of younger men, in their 20s and 30s, who had found a powerful financial and political backer, a highly educated professional from Sakété working in Senegal.

In this historical context of conflict and corruption within associations, and widespread disengagement and distrust of residents towards associations, one can not assume, however constructive the intentions of a group's founders, that an association would be able to contribute to civil society in the district. In the case of ADESS, they did avoid the kind of corruption that had led to open conflict among earlier associations, and did make some useful contributions of time and money to projects in the district (such as conflict resolution, scholarships, and distribution of medical supplies), but failed to create effective channels of communication with residents. ADESS officers did not meet regularly with village or neighborhood leaders, and the skepticism and distrust on both sides made it difficult for even a patrimonial style of civil society to emerge.

When preparations for the 1995 elections to the national legislature began to heat up, the civil society work of these associations -- never well established -- was put aside, as certain association leaders dove headfirst into the election battles (as candidates, advisors, or foot soldiers) while others stepped aside, wary of engaging in partisan politics. In short, the development and youth associations were paralyzed by the elections. Smaller associations -- which tended to be more focused on agricultural
production and marketing -- did continue to conduct their business, but involved themselves only marginally in issues of broader public concern. What I found fascinating is that -- particularly in the case of the youth association -- many members and allies of the association were well aware that the intense political partisanship of the president and his supporters was dangerous to the association. Yet certain informants also argued that the president of the youth association was a skillful leader, who thought that in order to secure influence he had to pick a backer, and follow that backer's political lead. In their view, he had made a tactically flawed but nonetheless logical choice to engage in political battle with the president of the ADESS-Adjobi, who ended up elected delegate to the national legislature.

Conclusions

Callaghy might claim that this case study proves his point. Civil society, he might argue, is an inappropriate concept to capture the 'big man' political machinations that came to dominate associational life in Sakété. For me, the picture is more complex. True, in certain African contexts (such as Sakété) it is difficult to establish institutions of civil society. Many people view associations with skepticism or mistrust, as arenas for big men (and a few big women) to struggle for access to tax revenues or outside grants, not as channels to enable residents to participate in the public sphere. The actions of certain leaders confirmed these suspicions. Yet other leaders and residents maintained, despite past and present problems, a patrimonial ideal of civil society, rooted in the indigenous ideas about leadership. One local leader said to me: "It is ADESS which ensured that the things [rituals] of our parents did not disappear ... The king now is the leader of our ancestral rituals -- he is like the leader of ADESS ... a village or a town should have a leader who will be the spokesperson for the population."\(^{17}\) Institutions of civil society are stumbling in Sakété, and some (like the highly politicized youth association) may be broken beyond repair, but people are not going to abandon the idea that there should be effective links between residents and the public sphere. The struggle is to find an organizational form -- which may turn out to be a stronger kingship or more durable kind of patrimonial association -- that does not buckle under political or other pressures. Such struggles are continuing in Sakété, and elsewhere in Benin (particularly in Cotonou) -- and the results range from deeply democratic to deeply autocratic. Reflecting the diversity of local histories and cultures, civil society is taking a great variety of forms in Africa, which complicates our efforts as scholars to conceptualize this phenomenon.

Notes


3. The full name in French is *L'Association pour le Développement de la Souspréfecture de Sakété*.


12. 'Autonomous' receives quotation marks here because Edwards and Foley point out that "Putnam's formulation [of the positive value of associations autonomous from political forces] is all the more puzzling in light of his findings, which place the Emilia-Romagna region in the heart of Italy's zone of 'civil engagement.' Putnam fails to note that most of this region's sports clubs, choral societies, cooperatives, and cultural associations had been organized by and for two major political parties, the Communists and the Christian Democrats." Source: Michael W. Foley and Bob Edwards, "The Paradox of Civil Society" *Journal of Democracy* 7:3 (1996) p.42.


15. Everyone in Sakété with whom I discussed this issue believed that certain illnesses (some fatal) could be caused by the manipulation of substances with supernatural qualities. As my research assistants told me, "Il y a des choses" (these things exist).

16. Interview h--1.10.

17. Interview l--4.7.