

Klaus Grütjen (2011), *Lokale Selbstverwaltung im Spannungsfeld von afrikanischer Tradition und europäischer Moderne: Dezentralisierung und Dekonzentration in den frankophonen Staaten Westafrikas am Beispiel Burkina Fasos*, Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag (Recht in Afrika, 3), ISBN 978-3-89645-623-6 (hardcover), XXXVIII + 822 pp.

The current process of decentralization in Africa is an element of development policies supported by multilateral organizations such as the IMF and World Bank. Democratization and the decentralization of public administration is supposed to bring about greater accountability and transparency, sustainable economic development, the empowerment of women and minorities, etc. – in other words, good governance on the local level. A number of empirical studies in various African countries have shown that decentralization can have counterproductive effects such as, for instance, the revitalization of “traditional” authorities.

Klaus Grütjen’s book is not another empirical study; rather, it approaches decentralization from the perspective of administrative sciences. He reconstructs the history of public administration in Francophone West Africa from 1819 to 2008. In 800 pages, he presents an impressive number of documents collected from archives in Senegal, Niger and Burkina Faso that often had to be rescued from rodents and insects. Grütjen sees decentralization as one element in a history of administrative policies and reforms that have been taking place for almost 200 years. This history has always involved conflicting ideas about territoriality, state, government and administration. The author was himself an actor in these processes as a “technical advisor” to the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization in Burkina Faso for four years. One of his motives for undertaking the arduous task of collecting these historical sources was his astonishment at the many self-assured “experts” in the field who aim to bring about very ambitious reforms, but whose time frames for such reforms rarely exceed a few years (the duration of a typical development project).

The book is divided into four parts: The first introduces the subject and methods. The second part reconstructs the historical development of European-style state and administrative design in Francophone West Africa. In the third section, Grütjen discusses the various goals of the current process of decentralization and related reforms such as poverty reduction, good governance, and land rights reforms. This part also includes an example of the relationship between decentralization and sector policies – in this case, the provision of drinking water in Burkina Faso. The fourth part contains conclusions and recommendations, and discusses opportunities for future research.

The book contains a detailed account of political and administrative structures and reforms from the foundation of the colony of Upper Volta in 1919 to 2008. One element that distinguished Upper Volta from other colonies in French West Africa was the introduction of local *postes administratifs* as an intermediate level between subdivisions and cantons. They were staffed with Voltaic employees and were meant to bring the administration closer to the local populations. Therefore, they were a precursor to present-day local governments. Grütjen notes that there were a number of changes in the administrative framework but no comprehensive reforms until independence in 1960. Even in post-independence Burkina Faso, the colonial territorial division into districts, subdivisions, *postes administratifs*, cantons and villages was retained until 1974. Although there had been decentralized administrative units since independence, administrators were not locally elected but appointed by the government. These “special delegations” had been designed for exceptional cases, but they ended up becoming a permanent institution that was in place for almost 30 years and served to constrain the local political opposition. Like other countries, Burkina Faso still has a deconcentrated level of administration (the *préfectures*), whose office-holders – the *préfets* – are appointed by the state, which frequently leads to confusion or competition over competences between the various units and local representatives. In addition, the *secrétaires générales* within the local governments (*communes*), who are appointed by the government, enable the state to keep a foothold in the decentralized units.

Decisive steps toward the current reform process were the adoption of laws concerning decentralization in 1998 (Textes d’Orientation de la Décentralisation, TOD) and the creation of a decentralization ministry (Ministère de l’Administration Territoriale et de la Décentralisation) in 2000. The author notes that the communication and coordination between this and other ministries does not always work well, partly as an effect of the intervention of donors in particular ministries.

Grütjen concludes that looking at these reform issues from a historical perspective will help us to understand the emergence of an administrative system with both European and African characteristics in Francophone West Africa. The “Africanness” refers to precolonial political traditions that were not based on territoriality but on personal allegiance to rulers. In the case of Burkina Faso, Grütjen notes a tendency to increase deconcentrated administrative units. At the same time, he observes recurring cycles: After each cycle, the number of administrative units at the top level always “evens out” to about a dozen, independent of the respective government. Grütjen thinks that the persistence of *préfectures* is dysfunctional, but he also believes that they will not be abolished because they serve as sinecures.

Even though this is not an empirical study, the author makes some interesting ethnographic observations. The texts of laws, decrees and other administrative regulations are often not circulated within ministries, not only due to technical problems but also because “knowledge is power”. The communication and cooperation between state functionaries and representatives from local governments is still hampered by the latter’s fundamental distrust of the former. Development projects that organize separate training sessions for each group do not contribute to narrowing this distance.

This book presents current reform processes in West Africa from a historical perspective that can help us to reflect on and perhaps revise time frames and the established criteria for the “success” of development policies. It contains many valuable sources for researchers who are interested in the political and administrative history of Burkina Faso. Unfortunately, the book is written in German. For both the administration and the general public in Burkina Faso, a French translation of the book would obviously be useful.

■ Katja Werthmann