Reconfiguring Institutions Across Time and Space
Syncretic Responses to Challenges of Political and Economic Transformation

Edited by
Dennis Galvan
and
Rudra Sil
CHAPTER TWO

Syncretism and Local-Level Democracy in Rural Senegal*

Dennis Galvan

Institutional syncretism—a creative process of taking apart component elements of institutions from more than one origin for the purpose of putting together new, recombinant institutional structures—helps account for the relatively rare instances when democratic governance becomes consolidated, legitimate, and effective in postcolonial societies. This chapter follows efforts to syncretically modify local-level democratic institutions in one region of rural Senegal over the last three decades. The analysis proceeds in three steps or layers.

First, the extended time span makes possible a quasi-experiment within this geographically bounded case setting: when local councils were syncretically adapted and were permitted to operate syncretically, they proved more politically legitimate and more effective at land and natural resource management. When efforts at syncretic adaptation of these local councils were cut short, actors found them less legitimate, and became more likely to resist, ignore, or sabotage the efforts of these councils to manage land and other resources. Second, syncretic adaptation has not meant a singular reinterpretation of democratic local councils in light of a unitary historical memory or notion of tradition. Rather, syncretism opens the door to creative, messy, and diverse forms of agency, resulting in the fractal multiplication of various, divergent riffs on the Rural Councils, and riffs on the riffs. Finally, the multiplicity of institutional possibilities leads us to consider how this
diversity of new syncretic institutional forms may eventually yield more widespread and sometimes dominant institutional results via identifiable mechanisms of selection and promulgation.

On Syncretism and Democratization

The syncretic institutional change discussed here is a form of popular response to the sometimes dogmatic promulgation of modern organizations, practices, and social relations in pre-modern settings. It can produce innovative, adapted institutions that meet the demands of rapid change while seeming culturally authentic and worthy of personal sacrifice to ordinary actors. As explored here, institutional syncretism is one possible result of grassroot actors using what Scott (1998) calls practical-experiential or métis knowledge to critique and sometimes resist the institutional designs which flow from projects of high modernist state simplification.

But wait: resist democratization? Should we think of democracy as an institutional imposition designed to make society more legible to state power? In many ex-colonial places and with regard to certain manifestations of third wave democratization, this can indeed be so, although the logic runs against the grain of liberal conventional wisdom. Evoking Scott here makes sense because democratization tends to assume that either democracy will work best in places that are already sociologically individualistic, ontologically materialist, and utilitarian-rationalist in epistemology, or democracy will help refashion these elements of social and cultural infrastructure in the image of Western liberal modernity.

Thus, early comparativist work on the politics of developing areas thought mostly in terms of static congruence between democratic institutions and the values, norms, and informal rules of a society (Almond and Coleman 1960; Almond and Verba 1963; Eckstein 1966). Without the right cultural mix to promote reasonable, interest-based participation, one was stuck in Mexico, or in more recent works, Southern Italy. Later, the literature on transitions became curious about the link between the stability of new democratic regimes and a vibrant civil society (Diamond 1999), tolerant and inclusive political culture (Tessler 2002; Shin and Wells, 2005; Inglehart and Welzel 2002), and bridging social capital (Putnam 2000). Sometimes these have been cast as quasi-primordial outgrowths of slow-moving historical processes (history made you either Tuscany or Sicily, à la Putnam 1993), sometimes the story is that the right rules and incentives can make culture and social structure more congruent with democracy (Sicily can become Tuscany in our lifetimes, if we set the institutional dial right, à la Diamond 1999).

Assuming that change can take place, we find that the story of change, in the democratization literature, is fundamentally deterministic, unilinear, and high modernist—echoing Scott. It is usually framed in terms of one of two models, both of which produce spotty empirical results and cling to a mechanistic and stultifying dualism regarding structure and agency. The first model, in brief, says that the world’s many and diverse Sicilies will eventually be forced to become Tuscanies because Marx, Durkheim, Parsons, and Tom Friedman cannot all be wrong in arguing that there is a structural inevitability and a patterned predictability to how technological change, specialization of labor, and urban mixing break down diverse old ways of life into individualism, materialism, and utilitarianism. Once free market production, secular education, and a spirit of legal rationalism penetrate sufficiently into Senegal, Suriname, and the Central Asian ‘stans, they too will exhibit the cultural bases for polyarchy.

Or it can all be done more quickly, by getting the institutions right because, at heart, people respond in patterned and predictable ways when the incentives are clear and they have the information they need. Under these circumstances, they will see the logic of putting aside old loyalties to patron, kin, or religion, and come together on the basis of fairly uniform understandings of interest, paving the way for the formation of bridging social capital, a strong civil society, and polyarchy. The motor of change here is a foundational assumption that individual materialist rationality is either an underlying human universal, or so intrinsically attractive and transformative that its mere appearance as an organizing social principle is enough to render its many alternatives and competitors plainly obsolete, illegitimate, and instrumentally useless.

Both of these stories would be more appealing if they were empirically accurate in the ex-colonial world, but they are not. We find a number of settings where institutions that embody or promote secularity, legal-rationalism and pluralism have been more or less “right” for some time (Turkey, India, Senegal, for example), but it is simply fantastical to assume that this has engendered widespread transformation of ordinary people in these places into individualistic citizens who calculate political participation and build crosscutting social networks on the basis of material interest. Across the developing world, democratic institutional reforms coexists with a flourishing, rather than a diminishing, of religious politics (Turkey, Indonesia), patron-clientelism (Venezuela, Philippines), strong economies of affection (Senegal, Mexico), reification of neotraditional
notions of ethnic community (BJP in India, ex-Yugoslavia), in part, as a direct reaction against the dark stench of secularism and the cold draft of alienation many sense in the presence of liberal democratic institutions.

Moreover, these models of how democracy can take root (by social “evolution” or by creating the right incentives) are limited by the assumption that institutional structures and principles (a liberal constitutional order, universal human rights) are somehow separate from social practices and culture and, thus, the former can exercise influence over, and transform the latter. Sometimes, in moments of high social scientific ecstasy, this is said to take place through something called penetration. But the two—rules and organizations versus people and their practices, values, and agency—exist separate from one another only in the fantasy of reified social theoretic models. In actual practice, they are mutually constitutive of one another in at least two ways.

First, to stay with the dominant metaphor, they interpenetrate all the time, in a kind of constant, hermaphroditic (and, perhaps for the analyst, unsatisfying) sexuality in which the ongoing reproduction of the rules and organizations of, say, polyarchy depends on and happens because real people continue to believe in and act according to norms like impersonalism, universal equality, turn taking, and sharing. The reverse of course is true—those norms and associated behaviors become experientially real as practiced in a context of boundaries, rules, and incentives, which in turn do alter the social reproduction of values and habits (Dewey 2002; Bourdieu 1977).

Second, any movement in one arena results in not-necessarily-intended motion in the other arena. Because actors are aware in practical terms that rules and structures influence what they want and think, and that what they want can or could help shape rules beyond them, they invariably evoke the former (rules/structures) when they evaluate or adjust the latter (wants/values) and vice versa. For anyone, elite or not, to seriously consider reforming rules embedded in and constituted through people’s values and preferences they must treat the values and preferences as both usable instruments in the transformation of rules and as objects of potential transformation themselves. The same holds true in reverse. Thus, on one side, to reify organizations and rules as having some agency of their own in an organic or imperative process of changing, on the other side, values, habits, and preferences, is to fundamentally miss the real-world, nondualistic, constitutive nature of agency, which operates on both the experiential manifestation of structure (rules in use) and the organizing architectural schemas of agency (values, norms, habits) in one single, everyday and unitary motion.

This brings us to syncretism as an alternative framework for making sense of institutional change, especially change in the subject at hand in this chapter, new, local-level democratic institutions in non-Western settings. Syncretism is described as the transformations that result from everyday agency in which actors simultaneously tinker with both new and old rules and values as integral steps in practical problem solving. Syncretism opens a conceptual window on new processes and players of interest as we try to follow what happens after elections and participation are introduced in new settings. These new structures and rules enormously multiply the sites for tinkering, for institutional creativity, producing both variations on democracy and variations on political and social norms. Syncretism suggests that local level democratization, even within one small developing country like Senegal, opens hundreds, thousands of laboratories for what Unger (1998) calls “democratic experimentalism.” Seen this way, syncretism dislodges the study of democratization in the developing world from the limbo space in between Parsonian pattern variables. Strengthening democracy need not result from “hardening” the state or other social-theoretic Viagras designed to enhance “transformative penetration.”

The experimental laboratories for syncretism opened by grassroots democratization revitalize theoretically informed, close-to-the-case, fieldwork-based analyses (old “Area Studies” style), designed to make sense of a new (or newly discovered) range of empirical variation. If there are so many sites for reworking and reinventing both democratic structure as well as local social relations and culture, what results from these? Which instances of reworking and reinventing produce outcomes of interest, if we actually agree on what these might be? Which produce stability, legitimacy, empowerment, and effective institutions of local governance designed to authoritatively manage resources in a way that enhances social participation and responsiveness? Put another way, which syncretic adaptations of local democracy finally give the ex-colonial state the social foundations it has congenitally lacked—an ability to command voluntary sacrifice from society, thus addressing the key problem long diagnosed by Hyden (1983), of a state “floating above society?”

The remainder of this chapter draws on an extended analysis of popular responses to democratically elected local councils in one region of Senegal to argue that when institutions operate syncretically, they become more legitimate and developmentally effective. That said, the dynamics of syncretism are complex because they open the door to local level contestation over the nature of tradition and memory, and therefore the possibilities, shape, and direction of adaptive change. As a result, analysts of institutional
change as well as those normatively concerned with the fate of democracy (especially in non-Western postcolonial settings), need to seriously examine the discursive resources of neotraditional claims, the material interests behind them, and the mechanisms and processes through which actors render their preferred versions of meaning, memory, and syncretic adaptation widespread and sometimes dominant. This is relatively ignored research terrain, especially for political scientists. But the more seriously we take the role of agency and local context in institutional change, the more we must develop tools for the systematic analysis of political conflict over cultural memory, and the role of such memory in crafting and recrafting institutional structures.

**Syncretism and Senegal’s Rural Councils**

Senegal’s 1972 Rural Council reform established elected local government bodies intended to manage a host of local governance issues, with special attention, in places like the Siin region, to land tenure relations and land disputes. In places like the Siin region, to land tenure relations and land disputes. Conflicts over land boundaries, inheritance, and land use had ironically expanded in the aftermath of land reform some years earlier. The 1964 Law of the National Domain had sought, in classic African socialist fashion, to “restore” perceived traditional egalitarian access to land by instituting a “land for those who farm it” legal principle. Under this law, regardless of local practices, norms and institutions, if a farmer tilled a field for at least two growing seasons that farmer could lay legal claim to the field. Somewhat unexpectedly, this did not result everywhere in the unproblematic “restoration” of “traditional” tenure regimes, but instead destabilized existing practices rooted in complex local system of tenure control, adjudication, and resource management. In places like the Siin region, the late 1960s saw confusion over use rights and resource management, as well as significant reduction in yield of cash and staple crops (peanuts and millet, respectively). As a result, the Rural Councils were established to address the new complexities of modernizing land use and local governance. (Abelin 1979; Niang 1982).

The hope behind the Rural Councils was that a body of locally elected officials would interpret and apply a broad national legal principle (the land for those who farm it) in locally specific, meaningful, and adapted ways. Inadvertently, the state was raising expectations for democratic institutional syncretism. Left alone, Rural Councils in the Siin region have sometimes fulfilled this promise, blending customary and modern legal principles, treating land use management and adjudication in holistic fashion, and replicating in an altered form the style of governance long associated with customary rain priests/land custodians. However, this is not always the case; more often than not, representatives of the territorial administration centered in the capital city (Dakar) intervene in the work of the Rural Councils, override their “misunderstandings” of the law, “ruto” them in the professional norms of public administration, encourage them to stay out of questions for which they have neither mandate nor technical competence. As the state trains Rural Councilors to be modern, functionally specific, Weberian legal-rational bureaucrats, it truncates the interpretive, creative, institutionally syncretic efforts of the Rural Councils. Local people notice the difference and consider the Rural Councils legitimate and acceptable when they interpret the law and operate syncretically as neotraditional, holistic resource managers. When the Rural Councils interpret the law in narrow terms and work as functionally specific bureaucrats, they lose legitimacy and become less effective.

At a preliminary level, the Rural Council story offers a quasi-experimental series of “cases” which show that the more they govern using the logic of syncretic adaptation, the more constituents find them legitimate (worthy of material sacrifice) and the more effective their decision making. But there is more to the story than this preliminary and positivist interpretation reveals. Syncretic transformation of the Rural Councils is not unitary but fractal; the democratic nature of the councils multiplies possibilities for stakeholders to conceive and foster branching, divergent, sometimes incompatible interpretations of how to render these institutions locally meaningful and adapted. Thus, a second layer of analysis tracks the most significant of these fractal versions of syncretic possibility. Finally, given the multiplicity of adaptive possibilities and the state’s intervention in the name of the ordered clarity of _technne_, against the messiness of _mètis_, the final outcome with regard to the Rural Councils remains unclear. This suggests a third layer; when, how, and under what circumstances might a syncretic institutional adaptation take hold, and achieve a degree of social promulgation through which the syncretic form emerges as a new institutionalized order.

**First Layer: Syncretism, Legitimacy and Effectiveness**

The history of the Siin’s Rural Councils provides a series of quasi-cases of syncretic adaptation and truncation by the centralized state. The cases
do not represent temporal phases, but rather constitute a series of sometimes contemporaneous episodes differentiated by the degree to which the Rural Councils function as holistic land and resource managers evocative of their historic predecessors or as functionally specific implementers of uniform state policy. Given the ubiquity of syncretic adaptation (see discussion of second and third layers below), this depends on the degree to which representatives of the centralized state grant autonomy to, or neglect and ignore, the Rural Councils. Efforts to resolve two local land use conflicts reveal this contrast clearly.

The first conflict, Ndokh v. Njujuf, concerned a large group of fields historically shared by farmers from two communities, Njujuf (a neighborhood of a large and historically dominant village, Tukar) and the smaller, satellite community Ndokh (established about a century earlier by migrants from Tukar). For many decades prior to independence, access to the fields between these two communities had been managed by a customary political leader/resource manager/shaman/adjudicatory authority from Njujuf known as a laman (sometimes referred to by an older title, “master of fire”). These masters of fire once managed access to land, determined how much space would be planted in subsistence and cash crops (millet and peanuts, respectively), controlled field rotation, and set aside fallow areas. During the growing season, they coordinated the pasturing of livestock on fallow fields to both keep cows and goats from trampling crops, and made sure that livestock manure helped re-fertilize the soil.

This system was destabilized and slowly collapsed after the 1964 land reform whose explicit tenure rule (two years use equals title) replaced the locally adapted, authoritative system of resource management of the Sin, personified by the masters of fire. The Ndokh vs Njujuf conflict underscored the resulting coordination dilemmas. As masters of fire no longer set aside fallow space and pasture land for use by both communities, the more numerous and higher-status Njujuf farmers (with access to pasture land elsewhere) planted as much millet as possible in the area once shared with Ndokh. Ndokh farmers (who did not have access to pasture elsewhere) depended on the area once shared with Njujuf for pasturing their animals during the growing season. Tensions grew over many years.

If the Rural Councils really were to replace the old masters of fire in form and function, this was precisely the kind of dilemma they needed to be able to address. They proved unable to deal with the problem, and in the end, violence broke out between the two communities, and the gendarmerie had to be called in from a distant administrative center to jail some of the combatants.

SYNCRETISM AND LOCAL-LEVEL DEMOCRACY IN SENEGAL

Directed by the Sub-Prefect (state-appointed local representative of the central territorial administration), Rural Councilors tackled this problem as functionally specific bureaucrats. Over several growing seasons, they ensured that farmers from Ndokh and Njujuf had proper title to the lands they were using. They asked the state agricultural extension agent to place picket-style fences around the small and dispersed pasture lands controlled by the Ndokh farmers. But these microplots were so small that Ndokh livestock wandered onto Njujuf millet fields, trampling some plants. In the worst year of the conflict Njujuf farmers tore out all the fences, attacked their Ndokh kinsmen, restrained only by the arrival of the police.

The case suggests that, regardless of democratic election and alleged local legitimation, the Rural Councils fail when they cannot replicate, at least in part, the kind of holistic resource management characteristic of the masters of fire. In circumstances in which the Rural Councils have no chance to syncretically incorporate elements of their institutional predecessor, they are severely constrained in their ability to meaningfully address local conflicts, intervene substantively in local tenure issues, and thus, garner legitimacy and the capacity to function authoritatively.

By contrast, a second conflict shows the Rural Councils operating more syncretically, with a much more effective outcome. The conflict emanated from the unexpected death of LF, a prominent farmer in the Tukar neighborhood of Ngangarame. LF left behind several children, none of them old enough to farm their father’s fields. His widow moved with the youngsters back to the house of her father, MM, who claimed LF’s fields on behalf of the children. But LF’s nephew, DF, asserted that he and his brother should inherit the fields in question, because for many years they had helped farm them alongside the deceased LF (DF 1993). It is a rather frequent kind of land conflict in this region, and in rural Africa as a whole (Berry 1993), in which a variety of distinct rule-systems regarding the inheritance of property overlap, enabling claimants to evoke local customary, Islamic, or official state rules for who should control property after the death of the owner.

By the strict rules of the 1964 land law, DF and his brothers, having farmed the fields in question for more than two years, could make a reasonable claim to take control of them. Yet local inheritance practice makes plain that the fields of the father should pass to the sons, and since the sons in question were too young, someone should hold the field “in trust” for the children until they became old enough to use them. Since the children had moved with their mother to their grandfather MM’s household, MM could reasonably argue that he should be the
trustee of the fields. Although, as MM was quick to point out, if he became the trustee, after two years of farming the fields held for the children, he could legally lay claim to them as his own under state law.

A local member of the Rural Council, DN, eventually intervened to broker a solution, whereby a portion of the fields deemed sufficient to provide for the subsistence of the children and their mother was entrusted to MM, with the remainder going to DF. All parties voluntarily consented to this decision, while grumbling about results they all considered suboptimal. More importantly, there was consensus that the problem had been resolved in a procedurally correct way; the Rural Councilor, DN, who was also a relative of the parties (no one could say exactly how he was anyone’s relative, but this did not seem to matter) had stepped in and struck “the right balance between the law of the land reform law and the law of cosaan [local custom, practice and religion].”

What made this “correct” was not that it went through the normal processes of review and decision making of the Rural Council as a whole—this never happened. Rather, in the words of litigant MM, “we decided this among ourselves, informally.” As DF noted in agreement, “it is always better to solve things like this in a friendly way without bringing the ‘king’ into matters” (DF 1993). Rural Councilor DN underscored this point, even though he himself is a state official; “I am a Rural Councilor, but when there’s a problem in the village, I prefer to fix it as a traditional authority, not as a Rural Councilor. This is because people prefer that problems should be solved in friendship, between them, and that both sides should be satisfied” (DN 1993).

Whereas in the case of Ndokh v Njuju, the Rural Council followed instructions from above and behaved as a procedurally narrow, functionally specific, land title-granting agency, in DF v. MM, a single Rural Councilor acted in a more syncretic fashion, taking it upon himself to imagine, create, and apply a blend of new state law and the law of cosaan, or local custom. In doing so, the Rural Councilor acted like a neo-master of fire, a socially proximate, embedded local authority who broadened rather than narrowed disputes. In so doing, this Rural Councilor incrementally recrafted his office. He did not limit himself to the narrow and technical details of the 1964 land reform legislation, which, importantly, is mute on what should be done about inheritance, let alone what should be done about heirs too young to use their inheritance. DN, recrafting his office as neo-master of fire, stepped into the heart of the problem, and arranged a compromise that reconciled claims under two essentially competing legal orders.

Second Layer: The Fractal Nature of Syncretism

Syncretism makes a difference in terms of the effectiveness of the Rural Councils in their primary resource management and adjudicatory functions. But there are many syncretic interpretations of what the Rural Councils are, how they ought to function, what rules they should follow, and how these bodies might use syncretism to deepen their legitimacy. Syncretism, fundamentally about creativity, also results in a degree of unpredictability. Syncretic interpretation and adaptation of the Rural Councils does not follow one linear, unitary pattern of reconfiguring or local sense-making, because local notions of tradition do not conform to one static, idealized historical memory, and because material interests of those who direct syncretic adaptation are not themselves uniform. The multiplicity of notions of traditionality and the diversity of interests render syncretism a fractal process of transformation. As more actors do the imaginative reconfiguring of the bricoleur, more variants and riffs on the Rural Council model emerge, some branching off the core, initial Rural Council structure and goals, others branching off the branches. Syncretism, then, is the process for “digesting” Scott’s techne, the tool with which local actors exercise the revenge and restoration of the unmanageable complexity of métis.

One can read the tension between holistic and functionally specific understandings of the Rural Councils as a starting point for this discussion of multiplicity. Rural Councils in the Siiin often interpret the law and
their mandate in fairly narrow and literal terms, meeting with a very limited but identifiable degree of popular support from a small fraction of the population. This represents a zero point, an interpretation of these new institutions devoid of syncretic adaptation, but a distinct interpretation, a variant among the many variants, nonetheless.

In most circumstances, the vast majority of those who deal with work in, or comment on the Rural Councils in the Sii region, have some type of syncretic vision of how they should operate. Typically, respondents expect local democracy to mean that their representatives will think and act holistically about land use, agro-pastoral practice, spirituality, the dynamics of family expansion and contraction, and most critically, the webbing of social relations among extended families and communities, of which land tenure relations are a material expression. Sometimes this takes the form of a direct appeal for the Rural Councilors to be neo-masters of fire. A great many agree with the observation of PG who notes “the new system [land reform and Rural Councils] has ruined human relations. We would be better off if the new king, you know the Rural Councilors, would conform to the old ways of the laman [master of fire]” (PG, interview, 2003).

For many, the central expectation for a syncretic version of the Rural Councils is that they should uphold a local practice known as land pawning, just as masters of fire did in their time. A brief sketch of land pawning, itself a syncretic institution that emerged in the early twentieth century, provides helpful background. The colonial regime saw individuation of property relations and a free market in alienable land as essential to making the Serer efficient peanut producers. Serer farmers resisted privatization and alienability largely because these changes would break the tie between masters of fire and the crucial ancestral spirits, with devastating results, many still believe, for agricultural productivity.

Rather than accept what outsiders considered land tenure modernization or reactively defend local tradition, Serer farmers in the early twentieth century concocted land pawning, a new, syncretic institution of exchange. Someone who controlled a field (master of fire or his designate) would grant revocable use rights in a piece of land to an individual who needed the space in exchange for a one-time lump sum cash payment. When the original field proprietor (or his heir) wanted to reclaim the field, the field taker would accept back the cash payment, without interest, and return the field. Pawning blended the free market’s flexibility and on-demand reallocation of the crucial element of agricultural capital (land) with a Serer ontology of “traditional” property relations. Pawning worked, permitting the Serer to intensify their agricultural system when they needed to grow peanuts for cash. In spite of commodification and pressures for individuation, pawning also ensured (and depended on) the economic, political, and social centrality of the institution of the master of fire.

Thus, the first and most widespread syncretic variant on the Rural Councils—be the new master of fire—centers on the Rural Councils upholding the right to pawn land. This required a high level of social proximity and meant that Rural Councilors would have to interpret the land reform law of 1964 loosely and imaginatively. Pawning as an institution was fundamentally inimical to the law’s insistence that anyone who farmed a field for two or more growing seasons should have title to it.

So Rural Councils in the Sii, as neo-masters of fire, sometimes chose to highlight another emphasis in the land reform law: “putting land to maximum productive use” (this language appears in the law’s preamble). On this basis, they would uphold a long-term pawn as long as the pawned land was not left idle for more than one growing season. This represented a clever subversion of the “two years of use equals title” principle, pitting this syncretic move against the “productive use” theme, and turned inside out to let the Rural Councils claim they upheld the land reform law if they made sure land did not lie idle for two growing seasons. This is a clear process of syncretism; actors assess the elements of the institution, decompose, or take apart the elements, and rearrange them in a new way that addresses their particular needs and can solve particular problems in a way that results in the emergence of a new version of the institution itself.

A second fractal version of syncretic adaptation of the Rural Councils emphasizes holism less and simply seeks to understand and incorporate the Rural Councils within existing patterns of familial authority and social reciprocity. For example, litigant NT, in an inheritance dispute with his uncle AKN, reports that he went to Rural Councilor MK only because MK is a relative. Unlike the case of DF v. MM above, neither litigant NT nor Rural Councilor MK expects MK to balance local custom and national law. MK and the Rural Councils are useful to NT simply because of kinship ties.

Rural Councilor AG, who worked on the Njufuf-Ndokh conflict described above, reflects this sense of how embedded norms of reciprocity are the key to the effectiveness of his office:

You must follow what people ask you to do. I’m beginning to get old, like the elders. If I refuse what they ask me to do, they may refuse me when I need something, and that would ruin society. (AG, 2003 interview)
Rural Councilors, in this second syncretic variant, are not understood in terms of procedure, upholding impersonal law, or impartiality. Nor are they precisely framed in terms of the law of *cosan* (Serer custom) or the principles and practices associated with masters of fire. This syncretic variant in some sense reflects a "post-master of fire" social and institutional reality, in which the older authorities, long displaced, are no longer a basis for comparison or place to look for usable institutional raw materials in the reconstitution of the Rural Councils. For some, the new Rural Councils should be understood not as neo-masters of fire, but as quasi-kin with whom one might engage in reciprocal and personalistic long-term exchange.

But familialism and embeddedness themselves are not understood in a singular and unitary fashion in the Sii. A third syncretic variant regarding the Rural Councils centers on gerontocracy—on the importance of the new authorities taking on the socially proximate style of "the elders." Whereas many respondents idealize the old master of fire system, some, perhaps with less precise historical memories, focus on "elders" as an alternate, local, familiar category of legitimate authority. A number of litigants on both sides of the Njujuf v. Ndokh conflict, mentioned above, hold this view. LD, from Njujuf argues:

The Rural Council needed to do things as the elders did... The elders from here would have regrouped everyone and would have come up with a solution, would have found a way to help them out: we're all relatives here. (LD, 1993 interview)

His distant relative from Ndokh, BY, hold similar views:

In the past, it would have been the elders of the village who would have divided up the land and settled the conflict. The way the ancestors did things in the past would have been preferable to how it was handled now. (BY, 1993 interview)

FF, a litigant in a different conflict who actually used the land reform law to gain control of pawned fields, echoes the same point: "Yes, it would have been better to take this to the elders or some other 'friendly' authority, and not take it to the Rural Council." (FF, 1993 interview)

Idealization of elders resembles nostalgia for the masters of fire: they are seen as proximate, embedded in social relations, cognizant of the family dynamics and personal needs of interested parties. As MG notes "the elders, we live together with them, they are relatives of mine. But the Rural Councilor, he does not live here. He may not even be a relative of mine, he may live here, yet he asks me to do things for him." (MG, 2003 interview).

In this "Rural Councils as generic elders" syncretic variant, there is some evidence of decreased proceduralism and increased arbitrariness. For example, in the village of Mem, upon the death of one NT, the village chief and several of his relations took control of fields that were left behind for his young children and widow, AG (same problem, different outcome as in DF v. MM, above). Hearing of this, the President of the Rural Council and several other Rural Councilors intervened in the case, declaring that the village chief had no authority to make this arrangement without Rural Council approval. The conflict was eventually settled in an informal agreement among the Rural Council officials and the local leaders of Mem by allocating a few of the fields in question to the President of the Rural Council and his allies on the Council on the grounds that "they too are community elders, and the elders should be responsible for the fields of orphans" (DS 1993).

A sub-branch of the syncretic variant "Rural Councils as elders" makes the definition of "elder" a bit more precise. In the Sii, veterans of World War II have occupied distinctive social positions, in part because they came back alive after being "taken" by Europeans. They also returned speaking better French than most (including many of their children), and returned versed in "matters of keit." From the Arabic word for paper (*keitun*), in the Sii *keit* refers to the functioning of bureaucracy, the world of paperwork, reports, of the official state. In part, because the World War II veterans were moving into "elder's" status at about the same time that the Rural Councils were set up, they occupied many of the first seats on these Councils.

Most observers had originally expected that members of master of fire lineages would move into Rural Council positions, thus facilitating the first syncretic variant discussed above, "Rural Councils as masters of fire." But it has been more common for World War II veterans, few of them of master of fire or other aristocratic background, to take these positions. While few explicitly designate these individuals as more legitimate or appropriate candidates for positions of authority because they are veterans, there is much discussion of their literacy, ability to work with the administration, and familiarity with "matters of keit." In this syncretic variant, Rural Council legitimacy depends on a combination of deference to generic elders and meritocratic criteria (administrative competence) personified in the form of a small cluster of veterans from World War II. While this variant (Rural Councils as elders with
administrative skills) is helpful in making sense of who has come to dominate these bodies, social response to them is more a function of the other variants mentioned above: the expectation that the Councils will behave as neo-masters of fire, as kin embedded in relations of reciprocity, or as socially proximate generic elders.

The final syncretic variant, "Rural Councils as kin representatives" centers on nonliberal notions of representation and thus has the most direct relevance beyond Senegal for the syncretic adaptation of democracy itself in non-Western societies. As democratically elected officials, Rural Councilors should, in theory, represent the interests of all their constituents, regardless of familial or other relationships. This is not how the Rural Councils actually work in practice. As we have seen, syncretic adaptation of the Councils centers on drawing them "down," on making them more socially proximate and embedded. In a part of the world where social organization is built around extended family networks, where practices of generalized reciprocity still play an explicit role in cementing social relations, making the Rural Councils more local, more Serer, means making them more personalistic in a way that directly contradicts principles of impersonal and egalitarian citizenship so important to liberal democratic representation. Syncretically adapted Rural Councils cannot effectively represent everyone in the same fair, even, and identity-blind way because these Councils in fact function as repositories of personal connection with the state, and of hope that benefits might flow from the state through personalistic networks of kinship.

The Rural Council proves responsive and useful for litigant NT, in the example above, because his uncle is a Councilor, not in spite of this fact. Liberal impersonalism, while a lofty ideal, is not how Serer peasants relate to the Rural Councils, nor how most people in Senegal relate to the state on an everyday basis. One can access the state and have hope in its effectiveness, usefulness, fairness and possibilities for "good governance" not because the state is impersonalistic and treats everyone the same way (it does not; does it consistently do that anywhere?). Rather, what makes the Rural Councils and the state accessible, useful, and legitimate is the fact that someone I know, who might be a relative (note that they do not have to be a relative) occupies an office I can access through a personalistic bond.

In the West, we call this corruption, or more precisely nepotism, an appellation that makes at least rhetorical sense when liberal norms of impersonalism and egalitarianism permeate political ideology, political culture, and the official discourse of public institutions (this may seem a bit idealized, however, if one is African-American in the United States, or Muslim in France). Setting Western liberal sincerity/hypocrisy aside for the moment, in the Siin, Senegal and many non-Western settings, public rhetoric and institutional practice are marked less fully and univocally by liberal-individualism. As Ekeh (1975) and many others have observed, liberal or "civic" rhetoric, rules, and norms coexist alongside those that emphasize the social priority of extended family networks, surname, matrilineal family affiliation, caste and other purportedly asccriptive characteristics. Clearly in the non-West, and to an important degree in the West, there is a gap between social practice that can be decidedly nonliberal, and liberal institutional rhetoric and rules.

Nepotism—uncles helping their nephews before they help their nonnephews—is an analytically useful concept if the only institutional possibilities one is willing to imagine entail the smooth functioning of liberal democratic structures serving fully individuated and egalitarian societies. Yet we know we can do better than this lack of analytic imagination.

In the Siin region, social reality includes this final variant of syncretic adaptation: Rural Councilors function not as the elected representatives of a body of rights-equal citizens united only by the geographical accident of administrative boundary drawing. They often function as quasi-corporatist representatives of amorphous extended kinship blocs. They function according to the principle "nephews first, nonkin get what's left." This is a significant part of what is politically moral in the region, and so no one should be surprised that no amount of ranting or excoriation from administrative agents (Prefects and Sub-Prefects, or in wider terms, Ministers of Interior or World Bank officials) does much to change this reality. But this "kin representation" syncretic variant opens possibilities for achieving the functional goals, if not the institutional formalities, of liberal democracy because the definition of kinship itself in this zone is fluid and subject to reinterpretation.

As we have seen above, litigants are often comfortable working with a particular Rural Councilor whom they claim as a kinsman, even though neither the litigant, nor the official can explain or seems to know how they are related to each other. Given the complexities of overlapping patrilineal and matrilineal descent systems, the degree of internmarriage, and the ambiguity of use of concepts like cousin, uncle, or aunt, the key to rendering this syncretic variant more representative is not to eradicate nepotism, but to make sure that those who might be locked out of kin representation have access to the symbolic resources they might need to make credible claims of kinship toward their elected local representatives. As Amselle (1990) has shown for the social
construction and fluidity of ethnicity in West Africa, Tamari (1997) has demonstrated for caste, and Fouéré (2005) suggests for joking kinships, African social categories deemed “hard,” extant, primordial, and objectively given in reality are quite fluid and subject to everyday negotiation and transformation. Political scientists need to pay attention to, and make use of this poststructuralist anthropological insight in thinking about institutions like democracy.

Understandings of what it means to be kin are loose, metaphorical and malleable enough that making credible claims to be a “nephew,” “cousin,” or other kind of relative of a public official are not difficult to imagine. From another point of view, a low status caste like griots (praise singers/musicians/oral historians), especially likely to be marginalized by kin representation, might re-present the historic sense of mutual obligation and duty that once bound those of low and high caste in the old order. Griots and others of low caste (blacksmiths, potters, weavers, woodworkers), willing to “come out” regarding their status, would be able to make kin-like claims against Rural Councilors to fulfill their duties as members of a high status group, who could be *shamed* into addressing the needs of those of lower caste in addition to addressing the needs of their nephews. Here again, meaningful bonds of kinship could be mobilized as a basis for widening the circle of “constituents” who can make representational claims on the basis of kinship imagery and norms, rather than on the basis of impersonalistic citizenship norms.

In practice in the Siin, this syncretic variant operates as part of a fusion of multiple logics of representation, clearing multiple pathways for ordinary citizens to access and make demands of their elected representatives: both the ideal of impersonal egalitarian citizenship embedded in liberal representation and the expectation that a public servant has obligations to kin (however metaphorical) and to kin-like subordinates in a status hierarchy. Rural Councilors in the Siin understand both of these discourses, and respond to each of them depending on the circumstances.

These five versions of syncretically adapted Rural Councils—as neo-masters of fire, as kin in reciprocity networks, as generic elders, as elders with administrative skills (WWII veterans), and as corporatist kin-representatives—emerge, submerge, proliferate, and dissipate as ordinary people in the Siin try to make sense of and engage the Rural Councils for practical purposes. The various adaptations do not make for phases or an evolution of responses, underscoring the messy, nonlinear nature of the creativity behind syncretism. Various actors engaged in particular struggles and conflicts at distinct moments imagine, interpret, and sometimes alter the Rural Councils in ways that can, at times, advance their specific and practical goals.

The transformations underscore the fluidity of creative adaptation: even as the state tries, in its haphazard, ill-funded, unsustained manner to rein in the Rural Councils, people find ways to decompose them, to play with them, sometimes to make them into something else, however ephemerally. Along the way, this entails the decomposition of local institutions and culture, or perhaps more precisely, actors rummaging through the rubble of already dislocated and dismembered local histories, rules, norms, and expectations, long displaced by colonialism, commodification, and the pressures of the postcolonial political economy and partial nation-building project. It is true that the Serer of Siin live in the very debris field of Walter Benjamin’s “Angel of History” with all sorts of progressive “developmental” initiatives erected like tent cities or tilt-up prefabs on the ruins. But it is also true that in the midst of this apparent mess, we find creative agency, we find people rummaging through the detritus and refashioning the tents and tilt-ups to construct, in however ramshackle a form, new institutional arrangements to address on-the-spot needs and problems. Thus, what the story of syncretic adaptation of the Rural Councils lacks in narrative direction or closure it makes up for as a rich site for the unfolding of creative and transformative agency.

**Third Layer: Which Syncretism, if any? Selection Mechanisms and Promulgation**

And then what? Clearly, the final outcome with regard to the Rural Councils remains uncertain and ambivalent. Serer farmers have come up with at least five versions of a syncretically transformed Rural Council. As an analyst concerned with the *fact* of institutional decomposability and the *nature and possibilities* of creative agency, these alone are important observations, critical to the extent that the literature on institutional change is underemphasized in its handling of agency.  

But if one cares about the Rural Councils, or democratic governance, or the outcomes of institutional change, one needs to deal with questions of the reproduction of institutional forms and what renders new forms well-known, widely supported and uniform across space and time (in short, the question of institutionalization). From a syncretic point of view, institutionalization happens when a particular syncretic variant becomes widely known, promulgated or adhered to over a particular
geographical space and time span. That promulgated institutional form itself becomes a starting point for future syncretic variation, further decomposition, and recombination, in an ongoing, iterative process. From the range of syncretic variants always in circulation (such as the five versions of the Rural Councils discussed above), some may achieve wider circulation through at least four possible processes that might be understood as selection mechanisms.

First, a syncretic variant may reach a degree of institutionalization through a market-like process that depends on the emergence of “performance track records” over time. The land pawning example of the early twentieth century discussed above might fit this model. A new syncretic institutional variant (pawning) proves useful in solving a particular problem characteristic of a particular conjuncture (pressure to put more land to use to grow cash crops), and its success attracts imitation. This model, characteristic of North’s thinking on institutional change (1981), seems to either beg the question of the actual selection mechanism, or implicitly label it individual level calculation of potential benefit. This mechanism, while theoretically parsimonious, bears little resemblance to observed practice in the Siiin.

A second selection mechanism may be the establishment and maintenance of discursive hegemony that defines and constrains possible choices in such a way that a particular syncretic variant becomes the only natural or right way to think about responding to new circumstances. Thus, land pawning becomes the only reasonable option because the cosmology that legitimates masters of fire (with its emphasis on their unique capacity to commune with the ancestral spirits that ensure soil fertility) is hegemonic. Likewise, it was probably the case with regard to the Rural Councils in their early days that this same hegemony made the first syncretic variant (Rural Councils as neo-masters of fire), the most sensible way of thinking about them in the early years of their existence.

If hegemony might be the process of “selecting” one syncretic variant among many, it opens the door to a third alternative selection process: social dialogue and learning. In some instances, especially when hegemony is weak or breaking down, actors may come together to realize that they are confronted with a multiplicity of options (syncretic variants or possibilities), see their consequences, weigh them together, and in so doing alter their starting positions, interests, or goals, and perhaps generate new syncretic options as a result of talking things through and learning. However, this Habermasian ideal of reflexive, transformative communication is also hard to find in the experience of Serer farmers dealing with the Rural Councils or land tenure change.

However, the Serer experience suggests a fourth possible selection mechanism, a variant on this social dialogue and learning model that emphasizes the cold realities of structure and eschews intentionality. The overriding empirical reality in the story of what happens to the Rural Councils in the Siiin region is intervention of state agents (particularly Prefects and Sub-Prefects) to enforce a narrow interpretation of law and an insistence on functional specificity of the Rural Councils, against the neo-master of fire, more holistic option. If there is dialogue and learning, it has to take place in reaction to and against the state, working to destroy the old discursive hegemony of the master of fire system.

Moreover, if dialogue and learning occur, they do not actually take place in contexts of conscious discussion of alternatives, in meetings, or even at those places and times in this society in which people get together, talk at length and informally conduct “business”—afternoon teas, or baptisms, weddings, and funerals. My own interviews and participant observation suggest this is an overly deliberate and intentional way of thinking about the origins of creativity that suggests more planning and engineering, as well as more agency, than really exists. Instead, the emergence of syncretic variants of the Rural Councils flows from an uncoordinated series of trial and error efforts to make sense of and use the Rural Councils by disparate actors who are themselves nevertheless embedded in reasonably close-knit networks of communication and learning. An example of getting what you want from the Rural Councils by reminding them of their role as kin representatives circulates quickly, and enters the catalog of shared experiences of how to manage these new institutions. Against this backdrop, certain possibilities emerge and become more resonant. Through repeated practice that is never rationally chosen nor discursively enshrined, fairly regular pathways of behavior emerge and come to pattern, for a time and in a limited geographical context, the process of syncretic adaptation of institutions.

There are two key points about institutionalization that flow from this fourth model of selection/promulgation (“structurally constrained, unintentional social learning,” which the classical pragmatists would call deliberation). First, creative agency from below may generate nondurable patterns of behavior for a given time in a given space. These need not endure or be sustainable to be important for the institutionalization of a particular syncretic form. In the case of the Rural Councils, various styles or forms of kinship matter a great deal in responses to the Rural Councils, and might culminate in a notion of kin representation. Second, for real institutionalization to take place, the work of the
Dennis Galvan

planner/policy maker (or institutional “engineer”) and the work done at the grassroots (by the institutional “ramshackle”) must align in some mutually reinforcing manner. Kin representation offers an ideal, unrequisted illustration. For many years, the ramshackers in the Sii region have been building something like kin representation as a new way of interpreting elections and democracy and their interaction with the state. The possibility of promulgation is latent in the dynamics of structurally constrained, unintentional social learning. Yet the next move toward institutionalization has been and remains in the hands of state and international planners and policy makers to recognize and make some engineered institutional use of this latent, grassroots, socially resonant mode of legitimation.

But this brings us right back to the standard tragedy of development schemes and other civilizing missions in Africa and similar ex-colonial regions: engineers and ramshackers, the designers of formal institutions and those who incrementally and syncretically transform them from below, are out of synch, do not or will not communicate. In postcolonial regions marked by a considerable degree of elite Westernization and concomitant shame over things traditional and neotraditional (Senegale is the exemplar; South Korea might be the antiexample), the engineers will not look in the direction of the ramshackers, will not take seriously the institutional reworking and creativity coming from the latter. The tragedy is that this modernist hubris decouples planners and policy makers, the state and international aid organization, from the very dynamics of innovation, creative problem solving, locally adapted solutions—and most critically, legitimation—so urgently needed to render programs of institutional restructuring like development or democratization meaningful, useful, and politically inclusive of those in whose name these transformations are purportedly undertaken.

Conclusion

The implication of this case study, and of the exploration of institutional syncretism in general, is that analysts and policy makers need to accept three fundamental changes in how we design and make sense of institutions that are purported to be vectors of developmental or desirable social change. First, syncretism demands an adjustment of scale. Following the logic of Scott (1998), one-size-fits-all solutions in market reform, governance, or human rights promotion are destined to fail because they do not harness ramshackle, grassroots creative adaptation. Policymakers and analysts must thus develop design, implementation, and tracking tools to see and understand the diversity of new institutional forms that proliferate at the most local of levels.

Second, syncretism demands a rehabilitation of methods once associated with political ethnography, updated to take into account the dynamics of social constructivism. Operating at very local, microscales, syncretism requires those who design and assess policy to understand myriad local histories, cultures, and memories of institutions. This will entail a massive new undertaking of political ethnographic analysis (which can and should employ large numbers of already trained but underemployed local social scientists). But this new political ethnography cannot be rooted in old fantasies about tribe and “tradition”; it must take into account the understanding—now well developed in most human sciences beyond the study of politics and economics—that what we call tradition, indigeneity, cultural memory, the customs of a people, are all in flux, subject to reinvention, reformulation, and therefore quite meaningful political contestation over the content of memory and its relevance in the present day.

Thus, the political ethnography demanded by the analysis of institutional syncretism cannot look for static, unchanging, or uniform “traditional cultures” into which new institutions become embedded in some organic, transplant-the-seedling-into-new-soil inapt metaphor. It instead requires a dynamic analysis of competing versions of historical memory of culture and tradition, mobilized by actors with identifiable interests and social-structural position, to advance particular claims or goals. This opens the door to a new, microlevel political science of the small-scale forms of contestation over culture, symbol, and myth, the deployments of these structures of neotradition in political struggle, and the ways in which these sometimes coherent systems of meaning enmesh actors and in turn help shape, constrain, and structure actors’ own identities and interests.

Finally, syncretism demands deep and meaningful decentralization. The kinds of reforms associated with the Rural Councils in Senegal beginning in 1972, or with the higher-level Regional Councils inaugurated in the mid-1990s are not enough. Most critically, they fail to devolve real budgetary authority, and real administrative power to the new decentralized structures (Dickovick 2005). Delivering on the real promise of decentralization means giving local-level bodies the power to interpret national legal and policy principles in ways that make cultural sense in local contexts. Only by granting this power to adapt and syncretically transform the institutions of development, governance and representation will Ekeh’s (1975) “official public” bridge the longstanding legitimacy gap that divides it from what he called the “primordial public.” The syncretic transformation of institutions offers the best chance to rebuild a link between postcolonial society and state, and thus tap the much discussed but ever elusive mobilizational potential of “traditional” social relations.
Notes

1. This chapter draws on field research conducted since 1986 in thirty villages in the pre-independence Serer kingdom known as Sinu, now situated in the arrangements of Niahara and Tatangue (Fatick Region).

2. This interpretation extends an earlier presentation of these findings. Galvan (2004) hints at the idea of multiple interpretations of historical memory, and therefore multiple adaptations of new and old institutions, but does not fully develop the relationship among creativity of action, antidismissalism, and the fratricidal nature of syncretism.

3. The original master of fire was, according to dominant local historical memory, a "pioneer" migrant who first settled the area, lighting a brush-clearing fire to open space for building hounos and fanning. He did this, local cosmology insists, with the help of key ancestral and allied spirit-beings (pango), with whom he and his descendants maintain good relations. In return, these pango ensure the fertility of the soil, regularity of rains, and viability of agriculture. For further background, see Galvan (2004), chapters 2 and 4; Lecicollais (1972).


5. In a survey of 727 randomly selected farmers in and around Tukar, 19.4 percent of respondents favored a narrower interpretation of the land law, such that Rural Councils should not permit land breaks.

6. As noted above, 80.6 percent of 727 farmers surveyed in the region would like the Rural Councils to uphold the right to land. Moreover, 71.3 percent of respondents in the same survey would refuse to sell a piece of land if the Rural Council authorized it but authorities associated with the master of fire were opposed to such a sale. In 209 open-ended interviews conducted, as I followed 32 land disputes in the region, only 8 respondents (3.8 percent) could be unequivocally characterized as preferring that the Rural Councils more closely conform to the law as written in Dakar and interpreted by the local representatives of the territorial administration (Prefets and Sous-Prefets).


8. For a complete discussion of this form of land pawning as institutional syncretism, see Galvan (1997).

9. Veterans of both world wars were generally known as traiteurs senegalese, a label originating in the special Senegalese role as footsoldiers of French imperial expansion in Africa (see Lunn 1999). While the observations here might apply to World War I veterans, I encountered none who had survived to the period of my research.

10. The literature on institutions has been characterized by some concern for "founding" periods of openness (Collier and Collier 1991), forms of temporal or structural determinism (Pieno 2000), a kind of overdetermined agency (Bates et al. 1998), or suggestive metaphors like "laying" or "intercourse" (Thelen 2002; Orren and Skowronek 1994). There has been some effort to establish the idea that pathways for change may remain multiple and open to further transformation even after founding periods (Crouch and Farrell 2004), but the literature is dominated by either structuralist sensibilities or versions of agency rooted in exaggerations of omnipotence and omniscience of individual choice. More recent work on post-World War II reconstruction and institutional imposition in Germany and Japan (Zeddin and Herrigel 2000) and on local adaptive responses to the imposition of free market property norms in Eastern Europe (Stark and Bruszt 1998) hint at a more robust theory of agency in ongoing circumstances of potential institutional change. See Berk and Galvan (2006) for a more complete effort to ground institutional change in creative agency.

References

Dennis Galvan


CHAPTER THREE

Institutional Syncretism and the Chinese Armed Forces

THOMAS J. BICKFORD

Introduction

Modern armed forces are, as Weber famously noted, the very essence of rational-legal organization (Weber 1958). They are state institutions, fully financed by the state and exist for a highly specialized purpose: the application of organized violence in defense of the state and in pursuit of the state’s interests. The military represents a formally separate sphere of operations from the more generalized civilian functions performed by the state. Organization, recruitment of personnel, promotion, etc., are primarily determined by the specific tasks assigned to the military. Indeed, military organizations are often viewed as being so driven by the functional requirements of the profession that they do not reflect the internal social or cultural conditions of any particular country (Rosen 1996). This stands in marked contrast to the armies of many preindustrial societies, including that of China, where the ideology, organization, and activities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)—while clearly influenced by models of military organization in the West (and the Soviet Union)—came to reflect distinctive social understandings and practices.

Of particular significance is the fact that military personnel were engaged in many nonmilitary activities including economic pursuits. From its establishment in 1927 until 1998 when it was ordered to divest itself of its enterprises, the PLA consistently had a wide-ranging