

(Re)-Naming the Cantons, Re-Exerting Authority: Ambiguous Decentralization Reforms and Nature of Power in Rural Chad

Abstract

In Chad, 1990s decentralization reforms increased the number and importance of customary authorities. Despite the official purpose of these reforms being to decentralize the power, they triggered political competitions among customary authorities and local elites that ended up re-asserting the role and legitimacy of the central state. Examining the renaming of a canton in central Chad, this article analyzes what the reasons are that make state recognition important for customary authorities and the people they represent. It shows how customary authorities need to constantly re-assert their legitimacy in order to secure access to rights and resources for their inhabitants; this need creates a local political arena where customary actors mainly compete between themselves for recognition, rather than critically challenging the authoritarian modalities of governance of the state.

Biography:

Valerio Colosio is Assistant Professor at the African Studies Department of the Social Science University of Ankara. After some experiences in development projects in Chad, he completed a PhD in Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex. His research explored the social legacies left by slavery in the Guéra province, in central Chad and was part of the broader ERC project ‘Shadow of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond’ (Grant ERC 313737), managed by the University of Milan – Bicocca. His main interests are the social legacies of slavery and the impact of development and decentralization policies in Sahelian Africa, which he tackles through an anthropological approach.

Pull quote:

“The Chadian government’s decentralization policies and governance reforms have ended up preventing the emergence of alternative models of governance by boosting local competition and so reproducing the authoritarian and divisive governance inherited from the colonial political system.”

Introduction

On 25th March 2003 an *Arrêté* [decree] by the Chadian Minister of Internal Affairs officially renamed the canton formerly called Yalnas – a Chadian Arabic word meaning “the sons of the people”, often considered as synonymous with slave-descendants - as canton Abbassid¹, the name of the dynasty of the neighboring Wadai sultanate (1635 – 1911).² The decree renaming the canton was published in the *Gazette officielle du Gouvernement du Tchad*, together with the appointment of the new canton chief, Assam, replacing his father Adam³, who had died a few weeks before. From my arrival in Jujube, the main village of contemporary Abbassid canton, local people talked to me about this event as a crucial milestone in their history. Considering the derogatory meaning attached to the label “Yalnas” that hints at a past of slavery, being called “Abbassid” locally indicates a relevant change of status. However, I quickly noticed that the new name is generally ignored by the other groups of Guéra, as decisions taken at the state level are often disregarded locally. However, events like this are frequent in contemporary Chad. Why is it important for local actors to be legally recognized by the central state? What are the actual dynamics behind it? This article tackles these questions by analyzing the functioning of local institutions and their connections in relation to the renaming process of the canton Yalnas, in the Guéra province.

Although the first Chad post-colonial governments tried to limit changes in the name and geographic extensions of customary chiefdom,⁴ since the current President Idriss Déby Itno came to power in December 1990, Chad started on a formal path toward multiparty democracy and decentralized governance. These reforms did not create new locally-elected authorities in rural areas, but since their implementation the central government dramatically increased the appointment of new customary leaders and changes in the names and geographic extensions of existing ones, often after engaging with members of local elites living in the capital. During my fieldwork, both in local media and daily conversations it emerged that the legal recognition or renaming of cantons is a major source of political competition⁵. On the ground, I experienced various struggles between different villages where the formal legitimacy of some cantons was the key to exerting rights over natural resources or to accessing humanitarian and

development aid funding. Events like the renaming of the Yalnas canton are among the few ways in which rural communities get involved in the political life and are creating new forms of competitions on the local level.

Chadian institutions survived a long civil war (1965 – 1990) and, since Déby took the control of the government in 1990 allowing a formal multiparty democracy, an even longer “inter-war” period, which Marielle Debos (2013, 50) defines as “the spaces and times characterized by a violent mode of governance when the next war is expected”. While Debos’ analysis focused on the integration of former rebels into the state machine, through the renaming of former Yalnas canton I aim to show another, twofold process that is happening under the Déby regime: on the one hand, local elites try to secure their rights and capture resources by getting recognition from the central state; on the other hand, the central state maintains the loyalty of customary authorities and increases its control of the territory through recognition within an ambiguous legal framework. In Guéra, the relative stability brought by the Déby government, growing demographic pressure and the climate changes of the last three decades have increased the pressure on resources (Alladjaba, Tchekote 1998) and made recognition by the government as a customary chiefdom an important tool of local politics. At the same time, the uncertainty of that recognition contributes to preserving the system: as customary authorities’ legitimacy is precarious and the government does not really try to reinforce it, customary leaders remain in need of protection from the state. Through this system, local elites are often competing among themselves for recognition, while the central state uses this competition to enroll allies and increase its capacity for action in rural micro political arenas.

In Guéra, the inhabitants of former Yalnas canton thought that by getting rid of a potentially derogatory label they would reinforce their legitimacy, preventing political opponents to use the label Yalnas as a tool to criticize the legitimacy of their political authorities and the ownership of the land. However, I will show that because of some ambiguities in their status since the colonial time and the way the government renamed their canton, their political position remained precarious. Although in this specific case legacies

of slavery play a role, the condition of those labelled as “Yalnas” is not an exception, but rather one of the various forms in which different narratives of legitimization are used by local elites to claim or deny rights in a legally ambiguous context. As customary authorities are the only form of representation in rural areas, their constant uncertainty reduces political debate to a struggle for recognition, preventing radical contestation or alternative to the actual mode of governance exerted by the elites controlling the central state. The article will first present its methodology, then analyze the administration of Chadian territories under the colonial and post-colonial regimes, emphasizing the importance of customary authorities in guaranteeing continuity despite the frequent political turmoil. It will then describe the decentralization reforms implemented by the Déby regime since the 1990s and will subsequently move the focus to the Guéra province, introducing the area and its historical divisions, analyzing the renaming of the canton Yalnas and explaining the social and political impacts of the renaming. Finally, the article will draw some general conclusions about the governance of rural areas in Chad and the political impact of decentralization reforms.

Methodology

This article is based on nine-months’ ethnographic fieldwork between August 2014 and June 2015 and some shorter visits in 2016 and 2020. During the fieldwork I visited 27 different villages, as well as the main cities of the area, and met with around 60 elders, collecting different narratives of the past. I triangulated the data obtained in the four months I spent in Jujube with other data collected in the provincial capital, Mongo, where I spent five months and I did six interviews with the leaders of the larger local civil society associations, collected local stories from five villages in other cantons in the area surrounding Jujube and observed various interactions between the leadership of the various cantons and the civil society associations working in the area. As there are no written sources about Guéra’s precolonial past, most of the information comes from contemporary oral narratives and from older narratives previously collected by other scholars (Vincent 1975; Fuchs 1997; De Bruijn, Van Dijk 2007; Seli 2013). In addition to this, I found two collection of colonial reports specifically focused on Guéra: an unpublished collection of reports about the period between 1913 and 1938, printed by former governor

Louis Duault (1938); and a recent reprint of a report written by Lieutenant Jean Robert Derendinger (1912), one of the first colonial officials working in Guéra. I also visited the colonial archives at Aix-en-Provence and those at the National Library in N'Djamena, but I found only a few documents related to Guéra. Local informants provided me with the other written documents mentioned in the article.

From *Indigénat* to Decentralization in Chad

I opened this article by quoting a decree renaming a canton in the Guéra province. Indeed, during my fieldwork I realized how in Guéra, the *chef de canton* represents the most important actor at the rural level. Guéra is in the central part of the country and there were no centralized institutions before colonization, nor are there recognized sultanates nowadays. Most of the political discussions I could hear both in formal interviews and informal conversation in Jujube and Mongo were about divisions of existing cantons, transformations of older cantons or creation of new ones. From the beginning of my fieldwork in 2014 until now, there have never been any elections, either for the national parliament or the local city council, but the government created two new cantons and there were continual rumors about reorganization of canton boundaries. Moreover, in the frequent competition for the awarding of development project activities to different villages or decisions about land use, the canton chief was always the crucial authority. Hence, political dynamics at the canton level represented the main hope for change among the people of rural Guéra.

The canton is the only form of local authority that has existed without interruption since the settlement of the colonial state, which maintained some continuity and stability during the wars (Ladiba 2013, 9 – 10). However, there is no legal definition of “cantons” or “customary authorities” in legal texts. Indeed, the colonial government needed customary authorities to collect taxes and guarantee order, but was not interested in building a consistent system of representation and laws, and therefore appointed a variety of chiefs who guaranteed that colonial power was respected but had no clear delimitation of their own power (Gatta 1985, 19 - 38). The more recent law about what the state defines as “*autorités coutumières*” (Loi

organique N° 13/PR/2010) divides them into three levels: 1) the “*sultans*”; 2) the “*chefs de canton*” and “*chefs de tribu*”; 3) the “*chefs de groupement*”, “*chefs de village*” and “*chefs de ferrick*”. These authorities uphold and apply customary laws for civil issues (e.g. marriages or land tenure) and support the state for development projects, management of the territory, tax collection and public order. The “*sultans*” are precolonial authorities who accepted colonial rule to keep their title and prestige in the new institutional system and nowadays are the more important customary authority. On a lower level, there are the “*chefs de canton*”, a form of authority created by the colonial government, who rule over groups of villages speaking a similar language; and the “*chef de tribu*”, who are on the same level as the “*chefs de canton*”, but at the head of nomadic groups. Below them, the “*chef de village*” is under the authority of a specific “*chef de canton*” and the “*chef de ferrick*”⁶ is under a “*chef de tribu*”, while the role of the “*chefs de groupement*” is ambiguous: they represent groups whose members inhabit different villages, but there are no “*chefs de village*” under their authority, nor a *chef de canton* ruling over them. My sources explained to me that while a “*chef de canton*” rules over a specific territory – the land of the villages whose “*chefs de village*” are under his authority – and a “*chef de tribu*” over the mobile social units represented by the *ferricks*, the “*chef de groupement*” represents landless people⁷ who do not have their own villages or *ferricks*, but live as independent minorities among other groups. Since colonial times, all these authorities are under the supervision of a “deconcentrated chief” appointed by the central government (Ouedraogo 2006, 14), generally called “*chef de circonscription*” in colonial times and “*prefet*” since independence. The variety of changes related to deconcentrated and customary authorities under the Déby regime and the ambiguity of the status of the *groupement* are the two main sources of uncertainty about the rights of Jujube people and their need to re-assert the status of the canton and rename it, as I will show in the following section.

In Guéra, the appointment of canton chiefs started in 1923. As there was not a single political unit ruling over the territory, the French mainly created new authorities dividing local groups according to their languages as described by Duault (1938, 23 - 28) in its presentation of the different Guéra groups. The colonial government followed two main policies: the *politique des races* and the *indigénat*. The *politique*

des races stated that the colonial government had to recognize the different “races” and rule them according to their own presumed customs. This was practically achieved through the system of *indigénat*: the colonial government created a variety of “customary chiefdoms”, the basic administrative authority managed by “customary chiefs”, but under the authority of the colonial officials (Conklin 1997, 110 - 115). Although the French government abolished *indigénat* in 1946, the structure of the canton chiefs appointed by the state was never radically changed (Ladiba 2013, 40 – 48). The hierarchies, cleavages and forms of governance created by this system still have a relevant impact all over postcolonial Africa. Mahmood Mamdani (1996, 37 – 63) identifies in the “customary chiefs” the crucial tool of what he defines as “decentralized despotism”: under their rule, the inhabitants of rural areas were not recognized as “citizens” through their elected representatives, but as “subjects” under the authority of their customary leaders. Jean François Bayart, Peter Geschiere and Francis Nyamnjoh (2001) show how the intersection between the decentralization policies implemented in most of the Sahelian countries during the 1990s and the existence of “customary” forms of authority led to what they define as “politics of autochthony” in rural Africa: rural people could exert their citizenship rights according to ethnicity or local belonging and may lose some of them if they move in areas where they are not considered as “autochthonous”. Pauline Peters (2004, 276 – 282) and Carola Lentz (2013, 13 – 18) add a crucial topic on this respect: the role of customary authorities in relation to land, the first emphasizing the commodification of land through “customary” land tenure systems, the latter historicizing the dynamics related to land control and the role of customary authorities on it.

The dynamics of competition for land are crucial in most of the conflicts I observed in Guéra and are related to broader political issues widespread all over the Sahel. Hubert Ouedraogo (2006, 15) noticed how behind those labelled as customary authorities by colonial and postcolonial state there are a variety of institutions. He divides them between political chiefdoms of various origin (military conquest, Islam origin, etc.) and land chiefdoms generally related to animist forms of control of local natural resources in some areas. In Chad successive governments never formally recognized the “land chiefs” that oversaw land management in animist areas like Guéra. Although Laws 23 and 24 approved in 1967 recognized customary authorities as being responsible for the land tenure system in rural areas (where the land

formally belongs to communities and cannot be privately owned), the customary authorities in charge of it were the canton chiefs. With the slow diffusion of market-oriented economy and the use of land for profit, the canton chief progressively became a sort of land-owner even in areas where there was not much pressure on agriculture, such as Central or Northern Chad (Brachet, Scheele 2018; 134 - 171; Alladjaba, Tcheckhote 2018). Interestingly, both from my observation in Guéra and from the analysis of the Guéra land tenure system by local scholars Moussa Alladjaba and Hervé Tcheckote (2018), the gradual establishment of relative stability in Guéra since the 1980s marked the beginning of a new wave of competition for local resources in a context of growing demography and shrinking availability of resources, often in the form of struggles between different customary authorities.

Although, as I will show through describing the tensions between Jujube and their neighboring canton, Bidio, land is a crucial issue in these dynamics, my argument is that it is more useful to focus on the connection between the central state and its peripheries, and how the dynamics triggered by the decentralization reforms of the 1990s impact local actors in terms of their political legitimacy and access to resources. International donors pushed for decentralization reforms as a path to creating good governance in most Francophone Sahel countries, leading to a wave of institutional reforms (Hibou, Banegas 2000; Boone 2003). Decentralization needs to be framed in terms of a broader wave of changes in the governance of African states that Jean and John Comaroff (2006, 22) describe as a “fetishization of law”: following these reforms and a growing role of civil society, the law “has become the medium in which politics are played out, in which conflicts are dealt with across otherwise incommensurable axes of difference, in which the workings of the “free” market are assured, in which social order is ostensibly erected and the substance of citizenship made manifest” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006, 22).

Moving on from Robert Buijtenhuijs (1998, 347) critique of Chad’s 1990s reforms as an “authoritarian restoration”, this article argues that these reforms in Chad ended up reshaping and reproducing the existing authoritarian governance of rural areas, albeit through new strategies. In this respect, Juan Obarrio’s (2010) analysis of decentralization in Mozambique raises an interesting point, also developed by Mutasim Bashir Ali Hadi’s (2014) study of post-conflict Dar Fur: decentralization helped the central

state to renegotiate its presence with local forms of power – often “customary authorities” dating back to colonial times – that guaranteed some order and cohesion despite a long period of turmoil. Interestingly, these two contexts’ experiences were similar to those of Chad in the civil war period (Ladiba 2013, 9 - 10), where the state was long virtually absent from some of its peripheries, including Guéra. I will interpret the dynamics I observed in Guéra through this framework, showing how the role of central government, absent from local political life for a long period, is nowadays growing in importance through formal recognition and the possibilities this guarantees in terms of access to resources.

Political Transformations Under the Déby regime

Although his formal commitment to create a democratic and decentralized state, President Déby used existing cleavages and political reforms as a tool to stabilize his regime. Commenting the outcome of the revision of the constitution and the first multiparty elections in 1996, Buijtenhuijs (1998, 347) noticed that the new formally democratic rules just covered the continuation of the previous, authoritarian system of governance. Indeed, Chad’s 1996 constitution formally recognized a multiparty system and decentralized authorities, a framework confirmed by the 2018 constitutional reform. The actual constitution recognizes two levels of local authorities (2018 Constitution, Article 2): the *circonscriptions administratives* and the *collectivités territoriales*. The *circonscriptions administratives* are “deconcentrated authorities”: they are not locally elected but appointed by the central government and have to supervise the conformity of the activities of local authorities to the national laws. The *collectivités territoriales* are decentralized authorities elected at provincial and city level and in charge of administration. They are called “collectivities” as they aim to represent the different local groups; however, while the government regularly appointed the heads of the *circonscriptions administratives*, the *collectivités territoriales* were never enforced or elected, apart from 95 city councils and mayors, elected in 2012.

While the 1996 and 2018 constitutions formally brought in a radical reform of decentralized authorities, their actions regarding customary authorities were formally limited. As I explained, the customary

authorities were invented and appointed during the *indigénat*, and they never had a clearly defined status: there has never been a full list of the cantons that exist in Chad, nor a map of their boundaries. Even today, the number of existing cantons is unclear, as they are appointed through governmental decrees and not instituted by law like the decentralized authorities; hence their number is not reported in any law. The problem of the boundaries is also important: on the ground, the land is divided between different villages and, therefore, a canton chief controls the land of the villages that recognize his authority. However, in Guéra the boundaries between different villages are rarely clear and often there are different groups living in the same village and recognizing different canton chiefs, hence making the legitimate control over land unclear.

Before the reforms of the 1990s, customary authorities were only mentioned in the laws regarding land tenure system (*Loi 23 and 24/1967*). Title XII of the 1996 constitution and two *ordonnances* in 2008 and 2010⁸ recognized customary authorities as local auxiliaries of the state. In the 2018 constitution, Chapter Two lists the limits of their authority, Title XIV defines them as the “guarantor of uses and customs” and Title VII created the *Haut Conseil des Collectivités Autonomes et des Chefferies Traditionnelles* as a consulting body for issues about decentralization reforms and local development. The government has not implemented other reforms in this area but was very active in modifying existing cantons or creating new ones, triggering a twofold dynamic: on one hand, the central government increased its ability to control the peripheries through the appointments of loyal chiefs; on the other hand, local elites aimed to increase their ability to access international aid and be involved in political decisions by getting their own cantons or reinforcing their status. The practical effect was a boost on the institutions on the ground. I could calculate the growing amount of decentralized institution by checking the different laws: the number of departments increased from 47 in 2003 to 112 in 2019 and that of city councils from 199 to 414 in the same period.⁹ For the number of “customary authorities”, local scholar Bandoumal Ouagadjio (1996) calculated 446 cantons in 1996, while nowadays the Minister of Internal Affairs recognizes 719 cantons.¹⁰

The main impact of this strategy was a boost to political struggles around customary authorities, either for recognition of new ones, divisions or renaming of existing ones. During the fieldwork, local sources confirmed to me the impressive burgeoning of new cantons indicated by the data, mentioning that this dynamic affected most the northern provinces, such as Batha or Ennedi. Although I do not have data about renaming or transformations of cantons, I both heard on the ground or found on local media various cases. The Chadian national press gave some emphasis to a canton called *Haddad* which got a new name in 2010¹¹ to escape the traditional marginalization of this group (Ndjalamava 2010). Julien Brachet and Judith Scheele (2016, 128) mentioned the recognition of a canton in Faya, with a name intended to hide the mostly servile origin of its members. In the Fitri lake area, a local canton has been transformed into a sultanate, under whom seven new cantons have been created¹², while in 2018, the government tried to appoint a “Sultan” in the district of Sarh, in the Christian and animist south of the country, triggering outrage in the area to the point that it had to backtrack on its decision¹³.

Ali Hadi (2014) described similar dynamics in post-conflict Dar Fur: local elites manipulated the model of local governance developed to cope with the aftermath of civil war to secure political representation and land control. While in Dar Fur the institutional transformations were triggered by the implementation of humanitarian models of governance, in most Francophone Sahel countries, it was the pressure of international donors following the end of the cold war that pushed for these models (Hibou, Banegas 2000; Boone 2003). In Chad, this operation coincided with an effort on the part of the central state to re-impose control over previously neglected areas, intersecting its agendas with those of the newly appointed customary authorities. A consequence of this model is that in rural areas political struggles are fought at the very local level and push local actors to aim for recognition and consolidation of fragmented authorities. These tensions generate what civil society defines as *conflits communautaires* between different communities, which rarely end up connecting lack of resources with weaknesses of the state governance or challenging politically the central government, as is increasingly happening in urban centers;¹⁴ and confirm the difficulties for civil society to include rural people in their political actions, already denounced by Ladiba (2013, 56 – 60).

Rather than empowering rural people and fostering grassroots participation, Chadian decentralization reforms increased the competition between different customary authorities for access to international aid and the management of local resources. Scholars already described dynamics of competition in Chad in areas where there are important resources, such as the oil in the Logone Oriental province (Leonard 2016). However, even in a province without major resources like Guéra the control of the territory is becoming more important in the last two decades because of a variety of issues, such as the growing importance of development funding in rural areas and the shrinking availability of land and other local resources (Alladjabah, Tcheckote 2018). I consider this to be the rationale behind the increased appointments of customary authorities in the last two decades: the relative stability brought by Déby regime triggered new dynamics of competitions for local resources. In rural Guéra, these dynamics are mainly involving canton chiefs, because of their role in guaranteeing access to these resources to the people under their authority. These are the reasons why, nowadays, cantons' legitimacy matters and in an area like rural Guéra events such as the renaming of the Yalnas canton are politically relevant.

Law, Ethnicity and Power in Guéra

The former Yalnas canton and its capital, Jujube, are located in the department of Mongo, in the Guéra province, a mountainous area across the Sahelian and the Sudanese climatic belt of Chad. Nowadays the department is made up of seven cantons: Bidio, Dadjo I, Dadjo II, Migami, Abbassid, Koffa and Oyo, plus one *groupement*, the Haddad. Since the 17th century, this area sheltered scattered groups of animists fleeing from the neighboring Wadai sultanate raids to capture slaves (Fuchs 1997, 14 - 18). Guéra's first colonial administration, since 1906, acted to block Wadai raids and force local people to abandon the mountains and settle on the plain, where the French could more easily control and divide them. The main criteria to gain recognition as a canton were similarities between various local languages and an ancestral attachment to animist worship sites in the mountains or a common ancestor, for the groups who had not such an attachment. Duault (1938) reports the chaotic creation of the Guéra cantons: the colonial government divided local groups between *Kirdi* [animist] and Muslim. The first were mainly farmers who

resisted the raids. They were speaking (and still speak) a variety of Chadic languages and were finally reunited in the cantons of Migami, Bidio and Koffa. The latter were mainly groups of nomadic Arabs, nowadays united under the canton Oyo. The only settled groups already Islamized were the Dadjo (since 2019 divided in the cantons Dadjo I and Dadjo II), designating a group who arrived in Guéra in the late 18th century and speak a Nilo-Saharan language spread across various areas between Eastern Chad and Sudan; the people labelled as Yalnas by the colonial government; and the Haddad, meaning “blacksmith” in Chadian Arabic, a label used to indicate a group of people mainly working with iron and generally socially marginalized across Central and Northern Chad (Ndjalamava 2010). Yalnas and Haddad both speak Chadian Arabic as their mother tongue, like the nomadic Arabs. Since colonial times, and more decisively in the rebellion period (1970s – 1980s), Islam became the dominant religion and Chadian Arabic has emerged as the common lingua franca. In such a context, the canton chiefs progressively started emphasizing their origin as a mixture of autochthonous groups – represented by the connection with worship sites – and migrants “from the east” who brought Islam to Guéra (Fuchs 1997, 241 - 246).

This institutional set-up remained relatively stable until the 2000s, but a variety of issues emerged about customary chiefdom divisions in the last two decades. Despite the importance of precolonial and colonial divisions in creating controversies, the governance reforms under the Déby regime had a crucial role in making these nowadays so critical controversies, a conclusion I reached in interactions with my local informants. During one of my first days in Mongo in August 2014, I had a conversation with a local historian, Fathi. He warned me not to focus my research too much on the presumed past of the Yalnas being a source of conflict, but rather to analyze the variety of *conflits communautaires* in the area and the specific development or state project which caused them. This advice was consistent with the data of Alladjaba and Tcheckote (2018), who analyzed land tenure issues and connected the increase of disputes for land to the wave of local governance reforms and the growing pressure on resources. Although I realized during my fieldwork that land tenure and development projects are arenas where the participation of people labelled as Yalnas is potentially problematic, I progressively acknowledged that their condition was not an exception due to their presumed slave ancestry, but a situation most of the Guéra groups may

potentially face; and that also the other cantons had to struggle for both their rights and recognition. Despite the use of different arguments according to the different case, the dynamics were similar and tended to mix ambiguities and issues dating back colonial decisions with contemporary appetite for land or other resources. A summary of some of the main controversies in Mongo department may better clarify this point.

The canton Yalnas with Jujube as its capital was among the first cantons to be recognized in April 1923 (Duault 1938, 28), when the Guéra administrative system was set up; however, in the two bordering cantons – Migami and Bidio – local leaders claim that Yalnas was a *groupement* until the renaming of 2003. The official documents do not enable a final answer about the status of Jujube chief between 1923 and 2003. I will explore the narratives related to this problem in the next section, here it is important to underline that local political actors used this uncertainty since the late 1980s, when there were some tensions in the area between the Abbassid, Bidio and Migami cantons. Local people described me two major conflicts for land between villages in the Bidio and Abbassid cantons in the late 1980s and a controversy over the construction of a telephone antenna in the early 2010s; moreover, a development project assigned to Abbassid canton chief triggered a major crisis among the three cantons during my research, in April 2015, and another village under the authority of the Abbassid canton chief was threatened to eviction in the south of the province. The root of these issues was always the legitimacy of the Abbassid canton over the land, related to its presumed original status as *groupement*, a form of customary authorities that do not own land.

Despite the importance of the label “Yalnas” as tool to delegitimize the inhabitants of Jujube, I found similar issues also among groups who have not such a presumed past. In the Migami canton, I met with the elders of three villages that used to be part of the former Dogangue canton. This canton was erased in 1927 because of the behavior of their chief (Duault 1938, 36-37) and its inhabitants came under the authority of the Migami or the then Yalnas and nowadays Abbassid canton. The Dogangue elders emphasized with me how they deserve their own canton. They lost it because of “the mistake” of some

men in the past and now they are deprived of their rights as citizens: they live under other chiefs' authority and they have not a real voice about most of the political decision on local levels. They told me they are aware that the government is nowadays revising old decisions and they sent a petition to the Ministry of Internal Affairs to re-state their canton. In a conversation with a social worker from the Migami canton, this request was dismissed as "some politicians" being interested in "having more power" by creating a new canton (Ali, Mongo, May 2015); and being built on overemphasized differences between Migami and Dogangue, whose languages are very similar. Five years after my first visit, in January 2020, the government did not modify the status of any Migami village and there were not rumors about imminent changes in that area.

Another problematic local issue is the division of the Haddad from the Arab *Missirie* group. These groups were united in the same canton because of their common language until a clash broke them up in the 1970s. It is not clear what was their status after the division, and I could not find any official documents about these events. In 2006, Oyo was recognized as a canton for the Arab Missirie (previously a *groupement*), but its status is contested: its neighbors (Dadjo I and Migami) define it as a "nomadic canton", therefore entitled to have a chief, but not land. However, the law does not recognize "nomadic cantons", there are either *groupements* or cantons. The Arabs Missirie leaders I met claim effective ownership of all the land around the Oyo hill, which is also used by groups of Dadjo and Migami inhabiting the area. So far there has never been major conflicts regarding this land, but the inhabitants of the Migami villages I met in April 2015 were worried that the recognition of the Oyo canton could affect their access to land, if they would need to extend their farming activities.

While Oyo's status is ambiguous, there is little doubt that the Haddad *groupement* cannot be a canton as they are blacksmiths and, therefore, not entitled to own land. The Haddad chief admits to being a "chief of a *groupement*" and personally showed me a petition he signed, together with the Dadjo I canton chief (at that time the only Dadjo canton) to be recognized as a canton chief, under the new, bigger "Dadjo sultanate". Interestingly, the stamp he put on this document reads "Haddad canton chief" and, despite

admitting to be the head of a groupement, he initially introduced himself as a “canton chief”, claiming that there is not an actual difference between the two roles.. At my last visit to Chad in January 2020, the project of a Haddad canton seems to have failed: rather than recognizing the “Dadjo sultanate” wanted by the canton’s head family and the Haddad canton as part of it, the government split the canton in two (Dadjo 1 and Dadjo 2) following the request of another Dadjo family seeking a separate canton for itself and without changing the status of the Haddad groupement.

These stories combine in different ways issues related to both colonial and postcolonial struggles between local groups, but there is a common point in them: most of the relevant actions (most of the tensions for land, the renaming of former Yalnas canton, the request of the Dogangue and Haddad groups) happened in the last thirty years, when local leaders perceived it as easier to present these kinds of requests to the government and felt that they are more likely to get recognition. But why does the “fetish” of recognition from a state unwilling or unable to deliver services constitute the core of political life in rural areas? I have mentioned access to resources and political representation as the key to these struggles; exploring in detail the renaming of the Yalnas canton may give us some clue to answer these questions.

From Yalnas to Abbassid: the “Fetish” of Formal Recognition in Jujube

Lieutenant Derendinger report (1912) was the first document that used the term Yalnas. He describes a group of former captives who made an agreement with their previous owners, a group of nomadic Arabs who regularly settled in the area. The Arabs recognized the Yalnas’ freedom in exchange for a seasonal tribute and a guarantee that they would not accept any new runaway slaves in their group. This description became a blueprint used by the French to define the few groups of Muslim farmers who were speaking Chadian Arabic when they colonized Guéra, presuming they were all runaway or liberated slaves. Duault (1938, 28) mentions a “*canton Yalnas*” with Jujube as capital,¹⁵ composed of “runaway slaves who had three villages where they could settle without fear of an aggressive return by their former masters” among those recognized in April 1923; and explains how it was awarded to the first chief because of his collaborative attitude to the colonial authorities. The inhabitants of the canton nowadays

claim that Yalnas was a strategic label they invented to develop good relationships with the French. In their story, they had a tie with the Wadai sultanate, which was resisting French colonization. Therefore, they found it convenient to hide their origin and accept an apparently pejorative label. However, according to most of their neighbors, they acquired that label as they have no common origin, and therefore could only be called “sons of the people”.

Although all the earlier ethnographies on Guéra (Pouillon 1964; Vincent 1975; Vandame 1975; Fuchs 1997) confirm the existence of the “*canton Yalnas*” mentioned by Duault (1938, 28), among my local sources it is unclear if it was effectively a *canton* or only a *groupement* before the renaming. In a conversation we had in May 2015, Bidio elders in Zola and Nevio, the two villages closer to Jujube, claimed that until the renaming, Yalnas was a *groupement*, as “Yalnas means dispersed people, therefore they cannot be recognized as a *canton*” (Zola village chief, Zola, April 2015). Moreover, they told me that former Jujube Chief, Adam, was arrested in the 1970s because of his support for the rebels. Afterwards, he was reinstalled still as *groupement* chief, and his successor, Assam, became a *canton* chief only when the renaming took place, in 2003. In Jujube they told me that Bidio’s fake allegations provoked Adam’s arrest in the late 1970s and were aimed at disestablishing the *canton*. At that time, changes were rare, but allegations of having supported the rebels could have been powerful enough to lead to the destitution of a *canton*. However, according to Jujube people, Adam was released with no charge and confirmed as *canton* chief. In their version, the only legal threat to their *canton* came from a Bidio Prefect who downgraded Jujube’s status sometime in the second half of the 1980s, but his actions were unlawful and were rejected by the Ministry of Internal Affairs following Adam’s protests and the general resistance to administrative changes under Habré regime.

I could not find any documents about the story of this prefect, which is also not recalled at all in the Bidio villages I visited, as in their opinion there was no Yalnas *canton* at that time. However, its timing overlaps with two major conflicts for land between the Bidio and the people of Jujube, when local people were looking for more arable land and the central state will or capacity to act in these conflicts was weaker.

The renaming process started a few years after this, in the new institutional context set by the Déby regime. My sources in Jujube did not connect the conflicts of the 1980s with the renaming of the canton, but I found among them a widespread idea that once their new name was formally recognized, the Bidio would have less tools to attack the legitimacy of their canton. Abdel, an older cousin of the canton chief who used to work as state official, told me: “Already in the 1940s our enemies tried to erase our canton: they said to the French we should not be there, but French defended us as we are the sons of the [Wadai] sultan” (Abdel, Mitele, November 2014), adding that thanks to the formal recognition of this nowadays it would be harder for them to launch new attacks. I often heard similar statements, confirming the general feeling that Jujube’s legitimacy as a canton is under a long-standing threat from their neighbors, who do not see them as legitimate political actors; and that being able to prove their origin as Abbassid, and not Yalnas, is a key to protect them.

In the stories I collected, the trigger of the renaming process is a written genealogy they have found among the objects belonging to Adam’s father in the early 1990s that connects their family to that of the Sultan of Wadai. A letter of the old chief Adam dated 1st April 1990 reports the outcome of a journey to Abeche, when some elders of the Sultan’s family recognized their written genealogy. The presence of this genealogy in Jujube and the fact that Jujube elders can relate their ancestors to the Wadai royal family was considered enough for them to demand the renaming of the canton. They then sent the formal request for the name change to the Minister of Internal Affairs in September 1999. In the request, the “original people of Jujube” state that their ancestors settled in the Guéra province at the time of the wars between the main Chadian sultanates. They argue that when the colonial government set up a new administrative system, this group was classified as Yalnas, a word with “pejorative and offensive connotations”. Therefore, they asked the government, “within the framework of the changes they are implementing, to rectify this historical anomaly”¹⁶, changing the name from canton Yal-Nass to canton Abbassid. It is not clear when and how the claim was considered, as the government recognized the new name only when the new chief was enthroned, almost four years after Jujube elders sent the letter.

Although Jujube elders' interest was more in the recognition by the Sultan's family than in the bureaucratic process of renaming, the documents show that they were aware of the changes in governance related to the Déby government. In their request, they mention the "framework of the changes" the new government was implementing in the local administration and Abdel told me that they knew that under the previous political regimes they could have not got such recognition, as any changes looked "suspicious" (Abdel, Mitele, November 2014). Chief Adam and his elders did not manage this claim alone but got support from a Chadian NGO, the *Association Abbassie et Hashemite pour le Développement et l'Entraide Social* (ADES). Some members of the Wadai sultan's family, in cooperation with allies and friends who previously worked in international NGOs, created this association in 2002 with the aim to "regroup the Abbassid and their descendants" and to "strengthen their unity and well-being"¹⁷. Jujube people joined ADES in its first year of activity and this facilitated their contacts with lawyers and politicians active in supporting the administrative quest of their allies in the changing institutional setting under the Déby regime. In March 2015, I met the president of ADES, who emphasized the legal advice they gave to Jujube, and the pressure that members of the association connected to the Wadai royal family could exert on the government. He framed the whole issue as a problem of social status: once people knew that Jujube people were members of the Abbassid family, and not Yalnas, they would treat them with more respect. He did not directly mention the risk of losing recognition as a canton because of an ambiguous name but assumed that the name of a strong family would protect its legitimacy in a context of growing competition among customary authorities.

An association like ADES was important for Jujube both for helping to enlarge the social ties of the group and for providing specific legal competences whose importance is increasing in a context of "fetishization of law" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006, 22). When I explained this story in two different workshops in N'Djamena in January 2020¹⁸ the audiences – mainly composed of Chadian scholars – quickly connected the issue to the policies implemented by the Déby regime: social status and political recognition are connected at the local level and the frequent interventions of the central government among customary authorities fostered political dynamics such as the renaming of cantons; and empowered political actors

such as ADES, who can reinforce political legitimacy by extending new political ties under the patronage of a powerful family.

In Guéra, I discussed this matter with Ibrahim and Mahamat, heads of two different local associations who had worked with the chief Adam since the early 1990s, to understand their point of views about both the previous status of the contemporary Abbassid canton and the renaming process. Although I showed them some official documents defining Yalnas as a canton before 2003, they were both sure that Yalnas was a *groupement*, and that its recognition as a canton was possible thanks to the effort of Adam and the other elders to raise the status of the village, culminating in the renaming in 2003. In their version, the effort of Adam to rename the canton and its attention to attract NGOs to Jujube were both part of his hard work to develop and secure its canton. Even though the canton was officially renamed and nowadays can compete effectively for development funding or to obtain financial compensation for its land, locally their story is generally rejected, and their status remains contested. In the issues I experienced during the fieldwork, the Jujube people won the legal battle in both legal cases involving land but in 2016 they had to give up a development project they were involved in because of the opposition of the Bidio and Migami canton chiefs. The doubts about their status before the renaming were not erased by the renaming: the decree states that the canton states that Assam Adam was “appointed as Abbassid canton chief (previously Yalnas group), replacing his father”¹⁹, without clarifying the previous status of the group, if it was a canton or a *groupement*. The mention in parentheses of the previous “Yalnas group” further complicates the matter: indeed, the decree uses the word “group”, which may support the argument that Yalnas before the renaming used not to be a canton, although, in that case the legal entity would be the “*groupement*”; moreover, when a *groupement* is transformed into a canton, this is explicitly stated in the *arrêté*, whereas a simple mention in parentheses does not resolve the ambiguities about the previous status of the group. Therefore, although the government formally recognized the existence of an Abbassid canton with Jujube as capital, the modality of this recognition did not finally solve the local issue of rights over land and resources, but gave new tools and empowered new actors in an unresolved struggle between different local elites.

Why is the Name Important? Status and Legitimacy in Guéra

The “fetish” of a formal renaming of the canton does not have clear practical effects but is intended to reinforce the story of the group and, therefore, their local claims in terms of legitimacy that state authority seems ineffective in protecting in a stable way. There are two points I want to emphasize. First, although the status of the Yalnas might appear particularly problematic because of their origin and the difficulty of proving a legitimate connection with the territory, their condition is not radically different to that of other groups, as confirmed by the variety of issues – the Dogangues and Haddads requests to have their own cantons, the ambiguities about the Oyo canton, the division of the Dadjo canton – which have emerged in Mongo department in the last two decades. Moreover, the issues Jujube people have with their neighbors are relatively recent and are connected more to political competition than to long-standing stigmatization: in colonial times their recognition was not reported as problematic, and the issues about the legitimacy of their canton only emerge in specific contexts. While a presumed status of slave-descendant may contribute to some forms of political marginalization by some competing neighbors, it is the institutional framework that made their presumed status of “slave-descendants” potentially problematic.

This brings the discussion to my second point: the status of customary authorities in Guéra is often contested mainly because of the contemporary institutional setup; therefore, the need for legitimacy is not just a legacy of a controversial past, as the ambiguity of the label “Yalnas” may suggest. Rather, it is the unclear administrative framework that create a need to continuously reassert legitimacy, as it is for Abbassid (previously Yalnas) and Oyo canton, or to gain it, as it is for the Dogangue and the Haddad. The problem of legitimacy is a structural one and has political roots. Most of the issues left by colonial administrative divisions emerged when Guéra progressively stabilized since the 1980s and the Déby regime used governance reforms as a tool to extend the influence of its government. The ambiguities in the decree renaming the former Yalnas canton, the recognition of a former Arabs groupement with an unclear territory as a canton like Oyo or the negotiations with different Dadjo and Dogangue families

about potential changes are not accidental: they generate both opportunities for some actors and uncertainty for others, forcing local elites to re-assert their authority through state support.

These points have two main consequences. First, social interactions in rural areas are mainly intended to secure rights against potential rivals. ADES' president told me that "Yalnas received many attacks" both physical and verbal, but now nobody could "mock them" (ADES president, N'Djamena, March 2015) any more, while among Jujube people their need for an ally is mainly related to the previously described lack of recognition from other local groups "jealous" of their prestigious past. From both the words of ADES president and those of Jujube elders, it is clear that their networking is aimed mainly at protecting themselves against perceived threats. Alliances emerge in relation to local struggles against other local actors, rather than against the central authority or to propose broader governance changes. Consequently, at the level of the rural elites, there is small room for cooperation among local groups or the drafting of an alternative mood of governance

Second, and crucially, achievement and recognition are always unstable, pushing local elites to constantly re-assert them. Nowadays, Jujube is a middle-sized village, enjoying the same level of infrastructure as other villages of that size in Guéra. Jujube has a primary school, a grain warehouse and fair access to development projects. In the conflicts I previously mentioned, the inhabitants of the canton sometimes achieve their purposes and sometimes were marginalized, according to the balance of power in the specific issue. However, they do not suffer radical marginalization and are not deprived of tools and resources that the other groups can access. Despite the relative success in term of local integration, the stories I collected point to frequent uncertainty about Jujube canton's legitimate status, whether defined as Yalnas or Abbassid. All Guéra groups share similar forms of uncertainty, fueling the political dynamics among customary authorities behind renaming or changing. The elders of Jujube hope that the formal affiliation to a powerful Muslim family implied by their new name will reinforce their position in future but are aware of the need to constantly prove their legitimacy. This need of local groups to re-assert their own status and the rights related to it is what gives crucial importance to legal recognition by the state,

creating the political competition around this need and enabling the central government to keep a strong grip on its peripheries despite the limited amount of services it gives them.

Conclusion

This article analyzed the renaming of a canton, a political event that is becoming progressively more important in the Chadian political arena. It asked why, in the Guéra province, where the central state has never offered much services or support to local people, this kind of recognition matters. It noted that customary authorities survived the more intense period of rebellions and civil wars (1965 - 1990) guaranteeing some continuity to the rule of the central state (Ladiba 2013, 9 – 19). The main argument is that the new institutional framework brought by President Déby facilitated the processes of recognition and renaming of customary authorities, so as to increase its control over the peripheries by facilitating access to the state for elites that felt marginalized and vulnerable; and, at the same time, these elites were needing and seeking state recognition to increase their ability to secure their rights, be involved in political decisions and access funding related to international aid. The government provided these recognitions by reproducing the ambiguous framework set by the colonial administration, leaving room for continuous contestation and reassessment of local power relations. This institutional uncertainty makes continuous support from the state necessary, reducing the room for potential contestation or alternative forms of governance.

I made this point by examining the case of the renaming of the former Yalnas canton, in the Guéra province. The article showed that in Guéra the problem of legitimacy emerges among all customary chiefdoms. In the bigger ones – such as Bidio or Migami – there might be contradictions in the ways different villages remember the past. The main issues arise among village chiefs who do not recognize the dominant version and claim a different status for themselves, as it was in the case of the Dogangue, or in the division of the Dadjo canton. The Jujube people were in an ambiguous position because of the connection to slavery and their main problem was the ability to impose their narrative on their neighbors, who have long denied the very existence of the canton. The fear of external attacks led this group to seek

new alliances and re-assert their legitimacy through a new ethnonym, Abbassid. Despite the formal achievement of a new name, such recognition remains a “fetish”: the text of the decree renaming the canton retains the ambiguities about its legitimacy, leaving its inhabitants in the need of protection from external threat. This uncertainty is not just a consequence of Guéra’s historical lack of a central power or multiple sources of local legitimacy, but is how state control works: thanks to the ambiguities of the administrative system, local actors need to keep seeking state support in order to protect their legitimacy.

The Comaroffs’ idea of law as “fetish” emphasizes how, despite the formal intention to create a democratized form of governance, in most of postcolonial Africa political elites used these reforms to reassert their power, making a similar point to that made by other scholars in relation to the decentralization reforms in the Sahel (Hibou, Banegas 2000, 40; Boone 2003). In Chad, this process overlapped with a specific dynamic of increase and transformation of customary authorities, used by the state as a tool to exert power despite a weak capacity to provide services or enforce laws. The lack of alternatives forms of representation for rural citizens is in continuity with the paradigm of “decentralized despotism” described by Mamdani (1996, 37 – 62), which enabled colonial governments to impose their authoritarian power. In Chad, the will of the government to have new loyal local authorities appointed on the ground intersect with those of local powerful families to access the resources that a formal role of “customary authority” can provide. The vague set of laws and customary principles created a variety of local conflicts whose outcome is to reassert the authority of the state as the authority that can give recognition.

Chadian case recall similar dynamics described in other post-conflict contexts, such as Mozambique (Obarrio 2010) and Dar Fur (Ali Hadi 2014): a state replaced or complemented by other forms of authorities during long conflicts is using decentralization reforms to regain ground on its own provinces by recognizing different local elites. This trend seems to be related to post conflict state-building efforts by engaging with existing forms of authorities, a common issue in most of contemporary Sahel. The case of Chad suggests that the long-term impact of these policies may be detrimental to both political

participation and stability. The need for the “fetish” of state recognition to secure rights and resources reinforces the state control of the territory: indeed, the divisions and uncertainty at the customary authority level mobilize local actors’ agencies into competition amongst themselves and prevent the formation of politically structured contestation against the government. The Chadian government’s decentralization policies and governance reforms have ended up preventing the emergence of alternative models of governance by boosting local competition and so reproducing the authoritarian and divisive governance inherited from the colonial political system.

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Notes

¹ *Arrêté* 586/PR/MAT/DG/DIAT/SCT/2003 of 25th March 2003.

² According to their tradition, the current Wadai sultanate was founded by Abdel Karim, a descendant of Al-Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, an uncle of the prophet Muhammad.

³ All the names of persons and villages have been changed to protect the anonymity of the informants.

⁴ I use the term “customary authorities” whenever I mention these political leaders and the term “customary chiefdom” to indicate the institutions – cantons or sultanates – they represent.

⁵ News about these issues are frequent on local websites such as www.alwihdainfo.com, <http://tchadoscopie.over-blog.com> or www.tchadpages.com

⁶ *Ferrick* indicates the temporary camps of nomadic people in Chadian Arabic.

⁷ Although it is not officially framed as such, it is listed together with other institutions dedicated to nomadic groups in the *Ordonnance* 3/PR/08 of February 2008.

⁸ *Ordonnance* 4/PR/08 and *Loi organique* N° 13/PR/2010.

⁹ Based on *Ordonnance* 01/PR/2003, *Ordonnance* n° 002/PR/08, *Ordonnance* 6/PR/08, *Ordonnance* n° 027/PR/2012, *Ordonnance* 37/PR/2018 and *Ordonnance* 1/PR/19.

¹⁰ I had a personal call with a source from the Minister of Internal Affairs

¹¹ <http://tchadoscopie.over-blog.com/article-tchad-pourquoi-le-canton-haddad-change-de-nom-56054274.html>, visited on May 2020.

¹² <http://waldar.over-blog.com/article-20345416.html>, visited on May 2020.

¹³ https://www.alwihdainfo.com/Tchad-le-Sultanat-de-Sarh-supprime-par-decret_a67690.html, visited on May 2020

¹⁴ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/chad/chads-problems-mount-what-role-civil-society>, visited on May 2020.

¹⁵ There were in total three canton Yalnas in Guéra and the neighboring Salamat provinces. I focus on the canton in Mongo department, even though the stories of these cantons have many similarities.

¹⁶ Jujube people’s letter to the Minister of Internal Affairs.

¹⁷ Statute of ADES.

¹⁸ In 2020, I presented my research in N’Djamena on two different occasions: first, at a conference in the local cultural center “Al Mouna”, on January 25, and then at the conference of the research network *Méga-Tchad*, on February 6.

¹⁹ All the documents mentioned in this article were written in French; my translation.

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