

Introduction

The world's emergent political economies include many regions where multiple organisational forms, pathways, and temporalities meet and intersect. By bringing ethnographic attention to experiential dynamics in the lives of participants in these economies, and politico-legal attention to different groups and their material and ideological bases in changing economic sectors, we can track organisational emergence. Northern Cameroon in the 1990s and 2000s witnessed many innovations, including those resulting from the construction of the Chad–Cameroon oil pipeline, while the region's agropastoral and trading economy retained its vitality. The chapters of this book explore these processes. I start this Introduction with an example of a person and an organisation of the kind that I will draw on later. The chapters then trace in detail the many intersecting dynamics, concluding with inferences about the place of vulnerable economic actors within the framework of legality. I introduce the reader, first of all, to one of the actors, or analysts, in this scenario.

Dressed in an immaculate khaki suit, Sanda Maliki spoke with the confidence of a seasoned professional. Over the more than three decades that had followed his return from studies in Belgium, he had undertaken many roles in the transport business. On this occasion, he had chosen to introduce himself as president of the North Province chapter of the national truckers' association. Yet most of his energy was in fact spent working for an international freight forwarder, a job he made compatible with the management of his own small trucking firm. Sanda was addressing participants in a seminar on the formal and informal dimensions of business activities in Cameroon.¹ As his remarks came to an end and he delivered his punchline, his studied seriousness gave way to a playful grin: 'They are unavoidable. It is them who try to regulate transport. Without the safe conduct they issue, no loaded truck can go anywhere.'

¹ 'Le Formel et l'Informel dans les Activités des Opérateurs Economiques Camerounais', a seminar sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council at the University of Ngaoundéré, 24 September 2004. As a rule, proper names of my interlocutors have been changed to pseudonyms.

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You will find they have offices everywhere. They are the informal arm of the state.’ He was talking about the Cameroonian Bureau de Gestion du Fret Terrestre (Road Freight Management Bureau or BGFT). The notion that the state apparatus might be actively engaged in maintaining informality struck a chord with the audience.

The BGFT is indeed a formidable actor. It presides over a sector that in 2004, the year the seminar took place, handled more than 6 million tons of freight that went through the port of Douala. That year, however, trucking firms began to feel a drop in turnover as the boost generated by the Chad–Cameroon oil pipeline project fizzled out with the completion of the construction phase. In spite of encouraging growth figures, the country’s broader economic outlook was not particularly bright either. Only three weeks before Sanda uttered those words, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), on whose assistance Cameroon had depended since 1988, had declared the country ‘off-track’ in its implementation of the *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper*. This meant that the substantial debt relief expected under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative would have to wait another two years. Among other factors, this decision had been justified by the lack of fiscal discipline shown by the government in the run-up to the presidential elections of October 2004. With the elections less than a month away, the chances of a change in power were broadly seen as very slim. The united front of opposition parties had just collapsed, thus paving the way for another victory for Paul Biya, who had been head of state since 1982. Another seven years of governmental inertia seemed to lie ahead.²

Established in 1993 in the context of what for about two decades was known as *la crise* (the crisis), the BGFT’s beginnings had been characterised by instability. In the 1980s, Cameroon had gone from oil euphoria to enduring recession. Between 1986 and 1993, the country’s real gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was estimated to have fallen by 42 per cent. In this period, the regime was unable to quell popular unrest. In 1991, it faced the challenge of a series of nationwide general strikes known as the *villes mortes* (ghost towns). The regime weathered these massive protests with a combination of repression, liberal rhetoric, and control of the electoral timetable leading to multiparty politics. In the

² For recent official statistics on transport and on the port of Douala specifically, see INS (2013: 288). The country’s official GDP growth rate for 2004 was 4.8 per cent. The *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* was approved and published in 2003 (Republic of Cameroon 2003). On the delay of the HIPC initiative’s completion point, see Batongué et al. (2004) and Charlier and N’Cho-Oguie (2009: 58–9). For an interpretation of the collapse of the opposition front focused on party finances, see Arriola (2013: 187–94). Inertia was singled out by President Biya as ‘our main enemy’ in his New Year’s speech for 2004. For a journalistic example of the centrality of inertia in representations of the country’s public administration, see Monda Bakoa (2008).

ensuing legislative and presidential elections of 1992, which were marked by widespread irregularities and fraud, Biya and his party managed to hold on to power. A year later, in the context of the regime's reassertion of authority, the Ministry of Transport gave its stamp of approval to the creation of the BGFT. This was an attempt to bring under control the *désordre inventif* (inventive disorder) that had taken hold of freight transport as well as many other sectors after the economic slump of 1987. In June 1992, the World Bank conducted an evaluation of road transport in Cameroon aimed at advancing a liberalising agenda. The establishment of a freight bureau was a way of foreclosing some of the most drastic implications of the Bank's designs.³

The BGFT offers an apt illustration of the complexities and ambiguities of economic governance that are the focus of this book. For all its power, the bureau was created (and has since been ruled) by a minister's decision, the flimsiest of legal bases. Although formally included in the Ministry of Transport's organigram, it operates with considerable autonomy. Only one of the five members of its management committee represents the government. The other four are representatives of the railway company, shippers, truckers, and forwarding agents. Neither its accounts nor its statistics on transport are publicly available. It was probably the combination of the bureau's questionable legal status, its autonomy, and its opacity that Sanda Maliki wanted to underscore with his remark about it being an informal arm of the state. The round-table conversation that followed Sanda's presentation triggered an intriguing response from another of the seminar participants, a representative of the country's Chamber of Commerce: 'Then, the BGFT is truly *une organisation patronale* [an employers' organisation].' 'Yes, of course!', replied Sanda, embracing the paradox with apparent glee. This was more than the idiosyncratic position of a veteran trucker; it is a position that the bureau itself has advanced repeatedly. In 2012, its *coordinateur général* (managing director) was categorical in this regard: 'The BGFT has never been a

³ On the onset of the Cameroonian crisis as a macro-economic phenomenon, see Hugon (1996) and Aerts et al. (2000). On crisis as a structuring idiom in the country, see Mbembe and Roitman (1995), Johnson-Hanks (2005), and Roitman (2016). The World Bank's country assistance evaluation of 2001 contains the GDP figures relating to the reversal of the country's fortunes. Equally significant is the document's critical assessment of the World Bank's programme, which is deemed 'uneven and poorly adapted to changing needs and sharp policy turning points' (World Bank 2001: 1). On the *villes mortes* and their aftermath, see Courade and Sindjoun (1996), Takougang and Krieger (1998), Saïbou Issa (2006), and Roitman (2005). 'Désordre inventif' is part of the title of an article by Luc Sindjoun (1996a) on the political transformations of the 1990s. 'Le désarroi camerounais' (Cameroonian disarray) is the title of another academic volume on the economic transformations of this period (Courade 2000). Disorder and disarray are prominent words in my interlocutors' accounts of the transport sector in the late 1980s and the 1990s. For a chronicle of the World Bank's attempts to reshape this sector in the 1990s, see Meyo-Soua (1999).

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governmental structure. There is neither an act of parliament nor a decree that creates the bureau. We created the bureau and its internal management is our responsibility' (CONAC 2013: 129).

To any informed observer of political and economic processes in West and Central Africa, this is in many ways a familiar story. Organisations that straddle the public–private divide and whose informal dimensions are decisive in shaping the range of what is possible offer illustrations of what Jean-François Bayart famously termed the 'rhizome state'. Indeed, inspired by the elaboration of the rhizome that frames Deleuze and Guattari's 'infectious' *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Bayart's notion grew out of his earlier account of state formation in Cameroon. The creation of the BGFT could thus be seen as a moment in the state's 'infinitely variable multiplicity of networks whose underground branches join together the scattered points of society' (Bayart 1993: 218). Similarly, the proliferation of organisations such as the BGFT with vague but expansive mandates that overlap and compete with those of other authorities resonates with the insights of a number of authors who have underscored the fragmented, plural, and composite nature of public authority in different African contexts.⁴

This book goes beyond those characterisations by drawing readers' attention to the specific practices through which the economy is governed. How does the BGFT regulate international freight transport? Exploring this sort of question involves stepping away from round-table discussions, legal texts, and policy reports. For one thing, it calls for venturing into places such as the BGFT offices, where on an everyday basis *offres de fret* (freight offers) from forwarding agents are received, national quotas are calculated and assigned, documents are issued to truckers, fees are collected, and statistics are compiled. For document verification purposes, the BGFT also makes its presence felt at designated checkpoints along international transport corridors. In any case, the interactions that take place at those offices and checkpoints are only part of a broader configuration that creates the conditions under which trucks and goods circulate.

Thus, no matter how influential it might be, an organisation such as the BGFT cannot be the end point for an analysis of economic governance. The task of governing transport is shared with a constellation of other actors and its analysis involves considering a range of interactions (with sundry entangled objects) on and off the road. Offices and checkpoints other than those of the bureau, cargo terminals and parking lots,

⁴ See Bayart (1985; 1993) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987). The claim that the work of Deleuze and Guattari infected contemporary social thought is John Urry's (2000: 27). On the fragmentation of public authority, see Lund (2006), Mbembe (2001), and Roitman (2005).

garages and petrol stations are some of the arenas in which key relationships are constituted, reproduced, and transformed. In them, trucking companies' owners and employees routinely engage with colleagues and intermediaries, with freight forwarders' staff, with trucking associations' representatives and the delegates of drivers' unions, with customs officials, gendarmes, and police. Those ties, which can be cultivated, eroded, reactivated, or severed at any point in the process, loom large in the minds of those active in the trucking business.

An anatomy of economic governance

A word about the book's title. It deliberately echoes 'Doing Business' (DB), a long-term benchmarking exercise launched by the World Bank Group soon after I began conducting fieldwork in Cameroon. Relying on a bold communication strategy, DB developed a set of influential indicators designed to measure the quality of regulatory environments across the world. Invoking Hernando de Soto as a tutelary spirit, its first annual report made two of its key tenets explicit from the outset: 'heavier regulation brings bad outcomes' and 'when it comes to the manner of regulation, one size often fits all' (World Bank 2004: xiv, xviii, 17). Over the years, in response to widespread criticism of the soundness and relevance of its data and tools of analysis, DB has become more explicit about its limitations and more cautious about its claims. Despite this, the World Bank still considers DB one of its flagship 'knowledge products' and its reports and data continue to attract considerable attention from government officials and business leaders across the world. In Cameroon, for example, the national platform for dialogue between the government and the private sector, which has been institutionalised as the Cameroon Business Forum (CBF) since 2009, monitors the country's performance in DB indicators periodically. Many of the CBF recommendations to the government are in fact explicitly aimed at improving the country's DB rankings (with modest success thus far).⁵

⁵ Hernando de Soto is a Peruvian economist turned policy entrepreneur who gained international prominence with the publication of the bestseller *The Other Path* (1989), where he sets out to test empirically the thesis that enterprises choose to comply with the regulatory framework once they reach a point where the costs of informality outweigh their benefits. For a scathing critique of de Soto's work, see Mitchell (2007). Critical responses to DB have included a report from the World Bank's own Independent Evaluation Group (2008), which triggered numerous changes to the initiative. DB also features prominently in the recent wave of research on governance by indicators. Merry, Davis, and Kingsbury (2015) is a good example of this. It is worth pointing out that the CBF's permanent secretary is a representative of the International Financial Corporation. For the CBF's six-month reports assessing the progress made by the government in implementing its recommendations, see www.cbfcameroun.org. Cameroon's rankings have not suffered substantial changes since the DB indicators were launched in 2004.

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That *Doing Business in Cameroon* and the DB project bear little resemblance will hardly come as a surprise, but the contrast will allow me to emphasise this book's intended contribution to scholarship. DB primarily approaches laws and regulations as they are written and not as they are applied. This book pays attention to both law on the books and law in action and explores the relationship between the two. DB is designed to capture information on resorting to or complying with laws and regulations and not on practices that entail only partial reliance on or compliance with those laws and regulations. This book is as interested in partial compliance and non-compliance as it is in compliance. By focusing on hypothetical scenarios that businesses may experience, DB can generate comparable data across all the countries it covers – and it does this affordably, as it relies on local experts to provide answers to questions based on such scenarios. Its much humbler scope allows this book to focus on actual rather than stylised practices. More fundamentally, as lucid analyses of the DB initiative have pointed out (Davis and Kruse 2007: 1104–8), the project's indicators are a poor match for the inherent complexity and uncertainty of legal norms and practices. Shedding light on how both authorities and business actors handle complexity and uncertainty is one of this book's concerns. This is only fitting, as most of the people I met in 2003 when I began my fieldwork were still contending with the ramifications of the turbulent 1990s.

In contrast to the DB's concentration on the cost and time required to perform ordinary tasks when running a business, I have a less constricted focus on the everyday encounters of a varied range of business actors with public bureaucracies and their agents. Those encounters and the performances that accompany them – great and small, publicly accessible and restricted in various ways – are at the core of what socio-legal scholars would call legality. This term is meant to convey the 'meanings, sources of authority, and cultural practices that are commonly recognized as legal, regardless of who employs them or for what ends' (Ewick and Silbey 1998: 22). From such a perspective, the shape that law takes results not so much from 'an authoritative rule-producing voice' as from 'a multiplicity of voices and dialogues within and outside the state' (Channock 2001: 12). Such voices and dialogues are framed within specific registers that feature prominently in the production of legalities (and illegalities) in the economic sphere. To refer to those encounters, dialogues, and registers that are integral to economic activities anywhere, I use the capacious term 'economic governance'.

For instance, in terms of 'ease of doing business' (the DB's aggregate indicator), the country has gone from 130 out of 155 countries in the 2006 report to 166 out of 190 countries in the 2017 one.

Governance emerged in the late 1980s as a new field of analysis in sociology and political science. The proliferation of the term owed much to its espousal in the 1990s by international and national policymakers. Cameroon, for instance, announced the adoption of a National Governance Programme in 1996. The usage of the term in policy circles was overtly normative, calling for the promotion of good governance, which was largely understood in terms of minimising the role of the state, downsizing the civil service, and supporting non-state mechanisms of regulation. The DB initiative itself is in many regards part of the long-term legacy of this good governance agenda. In explicit contrast to this normative usage, academic work on governance tended to approach it as an emergent pattern arising out of complex interactions between actors, groups, and organisations; of these, state institutions were only one example, and not necessarily the most significant, among many others. While anthropology was slower than other disciplines to address academic and policy debates around governance, recognition of the whole variety of authorities that govern in different sites, in relation to different objectives, and with recourse to different techniques has in many ways been one of its long-standing characteristics.⁶

Anatomy, a trope with a long and venerable history, refers to ‘the dissection ... of anything material or immaterial for the purpose of examining its parts’, or, more simply, a ‘detailed examination’ (OED). I have been inspired in my choice of ‘anatomy’ in the subtitle of my book by Béatrice Hibou’s advocacy of a political anatomy of economic detail (2011: 17). The economic field whose governance is dissected in these pages refers to several types of economic activity. Freight transport is only one of them. Cattle trade, public contracting, and work by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are the other three. The focus on four sectors is partly a matter of design. I set out to explore who governed what in diverse settings. Different types of activity occupied distinct places in popular hierarchies of value (e.g. the precedence of cattle wealth) or in widespread topographies of power (e.g. the mobility of truckers, which makes them distant, elusive targets for some state

⁶ Gerhard Anders (2010) and Brenda Chalfin (2010) have approached ethnographically what being ‘in the shadow of good governance’ meant respectively for the Malawian civil service and the Ghanaian customs authority. Critics of the new sociology of governance of the 1990s underscored its largely descriptive thrust and how it neglected the assumptions and blind spots of existing strategies for governing (e.g. Rose 1999: 19). In turn, scholars inspired by Foucault, who favour analyses of power in terms of governmentality, have conceded that within their approach to the blueprints and programmes of government there is limited scope for studying how those blueprints and programmes are implemented and adopted (Rose, O’Malley, and Valverde 2006: 100). For an Africa-focused anthropological intervention that tries to strike a balance between a governmentality approach and an exploratory, descriptive notion of governance, see Blundo and LeMeur (2009).

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bureaucracies, compared with the proximity of public contractors to those bureaucracies). I also wanted to explore how the shape of the economic itself was interrogated, as is the case with NGO work and the debate over whether it should be considered an economic activity. Nonetheless, these choices were also a function of the relationships that I could forge during my fieldwork.

Although my interlocutors and I use the notion of ‘sector’ as shorthand for the worlds that hinge around these different types of activity, it is important to avoid any temptation to conceive of them as compartmentalised. The same can be said about occupational categories. Commonly used labels to designate cattle traders in the places where I conducted research (the Fulfulde *filoobe na’i*, the Hausa *falke*, or the French *commerçants à bétail*), for example, carry with them a set of distinct albeit changing connotations. These tend to permeate the identity of those involved in the trade in ways that obfuscate their engagement in other activities, from livestock husbandry and butchery to other commercial enterprises and transport. The chapters that follow feature numerous people who engage in different activities either simultaneously or successively. Financial resources derived from one line of business are also frequently used to help sustain other activities. Words such as ‘sectors’ and ‘professions’ are thus useful in tidying up a messy world for the sake of clarity, but it is important to see them for what they are: widely used categories that may serve as heuristic devices but should not blind us to what happens between, across, and beyond them.

The work of the state in times of crisis and reform

How has the Cameroonian government gone about its mission of governing the economy in an era marked by contestation over what that mission should consist of and by severe, albeit fluctuating, financial constraints? The myriad periodic reports of ministerial departments are a good starting point to explore this question. Consider the Ministry of Economic Planning and Regional Development report (MINEPAT 2003) on the Adamaoua Province’s economy and society for the fiscal year 2001–2. The report opens with a disclaimer. The author, a young official who had spent only a couple of years in the north of the country and whose only previous professional experience had been in the capital Yaoundé, explains how the provincial offices of many ministries had simply stopped producing the annual reports on which MINEPAT’s own reports relied. Moreover, the ministries that still bothered to write those reports had to be hounded to share them with MINEPAT. If such a situation had become the norm in recent times, readers are informed, it had been made worse by the ‘specific circumstances’ of 2002. What

made that year different from others? The legislative and municipal elections in June and the cabinet reshuffle in August 2002 had created 'a distinct wait-and-see attitude' among the staff of many provincial offices. In a climate marked by 'the popular fever' of electoral periods and 'the uncertain days ahead' of government rearrangements, many of those in charge 'simply forgot to compile their annual reports'. The MINEPAT report was prepared without any contribution from nine ministerial departments. As a result, it lacked 'statistical data about vital sectors' of Adamaoua's economy, such as agriculture and livestock (MINEPAT 2003).

In recent decades, routines such as the production of periodic reports, which were established in the colonial era and reinstated in the early years after independence, have become obsolete in many islands of the Cameroonian 'administrative archipelago'. Such bureaucratic practices tend to generate effects that have been dissected by the anthropology of the state in recent decades. This type of report is premised on the 'taken-for-granted spatial and scalar image of a state that both sits above and contains its localities, regions and communities' (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 982). Reports offer synoptic views of economic activity at the district, provincial, and national levels, those at higher scales subsuming reports produced at lower scales. When these routines of official document production are upset, claims of vertical encompassment are weakened. A report with glaring gaps in what it covered was an admission of sorts of the long-term decline of MINEPAT, which, like other planning departments in the 1990s and 2000s, was starved of support and resources by international financial organisations that privileged finance ministries instead. In such situations, when state agencies falter in their task of constructing the economy as 'an object of knowledge through an extensive process of statistical representation', the idea of the economy itself as a totality 'subject to intervention, adjustment, and management by an externally situated state' (Mitchell 1999: 94) seems to be in jeopardy.⁷

It would seem disingenuous, however, to give much importance to the periodic activity reports coming out of ministerial offices across the country. After all, these reports might be thought of as the 'empty

⁷ Jean Copans (2001) proposed the image of the archipelago to capture the unevenness of the state apparatus in sub-Saharan Africa. A prime minister's instruction of 1968 establishes an explicit link between periodic reporting and the efficiency of government departments (National Archives, Yaoundé (ANY) 1AA 1381, 'Cameroun Francophone, Administration, Efficacité, Rapport Annuel, Instruction Premier Ministre'). On anthropology and state effects, see Trouillot (2001). Thomas Bierschenk (2014: 232) points out that the decline of planning ministries is an outcome of structural adjustment and its aftermath. However, the reactivation of infrastructural investment in the late 2000s has reversed this trend in many countries.

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calories' of economic governance. The day-to-day operations of these ministries do not depend on such reports in any meaningful way. In terms of documentation, decisions and activities are amply covered in copious official minutes and correspondence. In fact, this is a common justification among civil servants for the current rarity of reports. The usefulness of periodic reports has always been limited, some argue. This sort of document hardly ever constitutes a lever of control by superiors and, given its restricted circulation, the opportunities it opens up for meaningful public scrutiny are meagre. The reports are riddled with formulaic, vacuous turns of phrase. Their authors do not hesitate to draw a veil over any developments that could cause controversy or contestation. Beneath the ready-made formulas, the reports contain scant information, and the little information they do provide in terms of statistics is often unreliable.

If activity reports are not the most consequential instance of the Cameroonian state failing to live up to its ambitions, there is no lack of other examples. The last national census to be completed is a case in point. It was ordered by presidential decree in 2001, well past the ten-year periodicity recommended by international bodies – the previous census dated from 1987. As international financial support took several years to materialise, the census operations were only completed by the end of 2005. The data gathered suffered from numerous technical deficiencies, which were blamed for successive postponements of the publication date. The political sensitivity of census data was broadly seen as an equally important delaying factor. In 2010, when the results were finally made public, they came in the form of projections of the 2005 data to 2010 and generated much controversy. The whole lengthy saga, which received extensive media attention, does not speak of a state invested in generating statistical knowledge about its population.⁸ As in the case of activity reports, the importance of the census could be questioned. Although it can certainly affect the territorial distribution of resources, the absence of an updated, reliable census is not something that in itself hinders the operations of public offices representing different ministries at the district and provincial levels.

Nonetheless, the civil servants I encountered were not inclined to dismiss as trivial the interruption of activity reports or the failure to produce a census worthy of the name. Many saw these as symptoms of the demotivated, under-resourced, and politicised bureaucracies that make up the Cameroonian state. The late 1980s and early 1990s are

⁸ Presidential decree no. 2001/251 of 13 September 2001 ordered a national census to be conducted. The previous 1987 census was itself marred by irregularities and its results were never fully published. For a sample of press coverage of the 2005 census, see Foute (2005), Nkonlak (2008), and Guichi (2010).