

Local radio stations, political transformation and the demonopolisation of public communication: the case of Radio Rurale Locale Tanguieta (Northern Benin)

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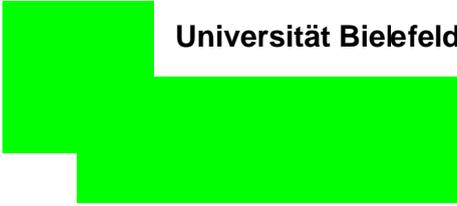
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**Local Radio Stations
Political Transformation and the
Demonopolisation of Public Communication:
The Case of *Radio Rurale Locale Tanguieta*
(Northern Benin)**

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Local radio stations, political transformation and the démonopolisation of public communication: The case of *Radio Rurale Locale Tanguiéta* (Northern Benin)

1. Introduction

This essay¹ examines the processes involved in the establishment of new local radio stations, broadcasting in African languages in the Republic of Benin. One such station, *Radio Rurale Locale Tanguiéta*, is discussed at length. With reference to this case study I aim to show the specifically political processes at work in: Struggles to appropriate and negotiate management of the community radio project by actors on the local and national scene in Benin today, the impact of the radio broadcasts - as symbolic resources - on local listeners and grass-roots local-level politics, and finally, the potential - and limits - of local radio stations as means of forging a new civic consciousness in the process of democratization promoted by different development agencies and donors². I begin with an account of the general situation of local broadcasting and of the problems new community radios are facing.

General problems in setting up local radio stations in Benin

Local radio stations broadcasting entirely in African languages have been existing in the Republic of Benin since 1994. They were the very first independent stations in the country enlarging the variety of media in the process of the so called *renouveau démocratique*, or 'democratic renewal', that had been going on in Benin since 1990 (Raynal 1991, Allen 1992, Bierschenk 1994, 1995). Promotion of local radio stations was designed to improve access to information for the rural population, especially in African languages, and to promote development initiatives. A

¹ Field research was carried out 1995/1996 in Tanguiéta / Benin as part of a research project on political transformation in Northern Atacora in Benin, as a member of the graduate school of sociology and social anthropology, University of Bielefeld, financed by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. Additionally, I used informations by Erik Voss (Berlin) working in 1996 with the radio station in Banikoara, and an evaluation by the Institut Kilimandjaro on the account of the *Coopération Suisse* and the Centre Afrika OBOTA intervening in this field.

² The positive impacts of independant radio stations on the process of democratization is often simply presupposed (for example by De Souza, 1996).

project on these lines was requested by the Ministry of Culture and Communication and mainly financed by ACCT (*Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique*, the Joint Development Agency of French Speaking Countries) in close collaboration with other donors. The project has been developed together with the Benin national radio service ORTB.

ORTB, the state owned national broadcasting agency, had already established a service promoting African languages in the 60s under a programme called *Radio Rurale* with equipment supplied by German technical assistance. Hours were scheduled in the programming of Radio Cotonou and Radio Parakou which previously broadcasted only in French for broadcasts in each important Beninoise language. These programmes, broadcasting on both FM and SW³, were unanimously judged to be inadequate and difficult to receive. Their programmes, which tended towards monologic lectures, were considered remote from the needs of the local population. Therefore, a project to create community radio stations began in early 1994.

Initially, four (today five) relatively remote communities were chosen: Lalo, Ouèssè, Banikoara, Ouakè and, later Tanguiéta. The stations, which transmitted in FM, were designed to cover large rural zones. Radio Lalo, for instance, covered a radius of 100 km. The stations were set up in different parts of the country with very basic equipment consisting of transmitters, solar panels (and batteries) and a small studio⁴. Each station was meant to broadcast in two languages to serve the multilingual situation of its locality.

table 1: The five community radio stations and their *départements* in Benin by 1996

Radio Rurale Locale Tanguiéta	dépt. Atacora
Radio Rurale Locale Ouèssè	dépt. Zou
Radio Rurale Locale Banikoara	dépt. Borgou
Radio Rurale Locale Lalo	dépt. Mono
Radio Rurale Locale Ouake	dépt Atacora

In status and administrative structure these associative radios were to be strictly independent, related neither to the state or political groups, and not to be run as a private enterprise. Each station was to be managed by a local association and supervised by an elected committee, the *comité local de gestion* (CLG⁵) headed by a president other than the station director. Each community radio was to be run by a staff of five employees :

- two local radio presenters (*animateurs*), for each language one, and
- two technicians all recruited by tests, then trained in a special programme in Ouèssè and financed by the committee, and

³ In the beginning, Radio Parakou was planned to broadcast entirely in African languages, but it later turned in parts to French.

⁴ Basic installation costs ran to about \$ 100 000 Canadian (Ouèssè)

- one experienced and specifically trained⁶ station director (*chef de station*) chosen and paid by the national broadcasting service ORTB.

The committee and its president were to be elected by a general assembly, including representatives of all local groups and associations, and to consist of: A representative of the station itself, the director of the station, and representatives of as many *sous-préfectures* (administrative units) as were covered by the radio. The programmes were to be free from political statement or comment (I shall discuss the reality later). The buildings to house the radio station were to be erected by the population which was also asked to collect money to defray the costs of setting up the station. The finances for a permanent operation was to flow from payment of programmes by development agencies, from other funds (especially support by political foundations), as well as money raised from payment for public announcements, commercials, greetings and any other messages requested by the local population.

However, since 1994 the process of establishing these radio stations have been beset right from the beginning by general difficulties and specific conflicts (Coopération Suisse 1996) have been two main causes. The first is the prolonged absence of official regulations, legislative provisions and statutes that have thoroughly been discussed and received the consent of all those involved. The second derives from the general process of reorganizing radio and public media in Benin. This has involved restructuring at the national radio, new legislation, and the establishment of the national media-supervising board, the HAAC (*Haute Autorité d'Audiovisuel et de la Communication*). New laws governing the operations of independent radio and TV stations have only 1997 passed the Benin parliament after prolonged debate and controversy.

The Republic of Benin, widely seen as a good example of democratic transition, was a latecomer to reform public media compared to other former socialistic francophone countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso (Panos Institute 1993, Bourgault 1995, Nombre 1997, Ilboudo 1997).

Today, some reorganization of several of these radio stations is underway due to the intervention of a special assistance programme (*Programme d'appui à la communication*) headed by the Swiss Development organization (*Coopération Suisse*). But the process of reform is far from being complete because of a variety of problems (from the sustainability of funding, to technical hitches etc.).

In the case of the Radio Rurale Locale Tanguiéta I shall focus particularly on the structural difficulties of local management. My account involves the relations between the local actors in this newly emerging field of public negotiation in Tanguiéta.

⁵ Sometimes called *Comité de Gestion communal*, COGEC

⁶ All of them were trained in the Center of Inter-African Studies on Rural Radio in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (*Centre Inter-Africain d'Etudes en Radio Rurale de Ouagadougou CIERRO*)

The establishment of *Radio Rurale Locale* in Tanguiéta

The region of Tanguiéta consisting of the three *sous-préfectures* Tanguiéta, Materi and Coby represents a remote area forming a sort of a triangle between Burkina Faso and Togo and Benin. It is a plural social and cultural setting composed by a variety of linguistically distinct peasant groups, i.e. the *Fulbe* herdsmen, immigrant craftsmen, and Muslim traders. The town of Tanguiéta, a French colonial foundation dating from the beginning of the century, is a regional centre of trade and has about 20 000 inhabitants. The region „*behind the mountains*“ is neither covered by any television nor reached by newspapers. In that region, the first radios were brought in the fifties by migrants returning from Ghana⁷ and demobilized soldiers (*anciens combattants*). Before the installation of *Radio Rurale Locale Tanguiéta* the main stations were Radio Cotonou and Radio Parakou on SW which could only be received in a very bad quality. In that respect the choice of Tanguiéta as a place for a communal radio project could be considered a fortunate decision. Broadcasting started in July 1994.

The staff of RRL Tanguiéta in march 1996

Sandros Tigri	(technician and interim director)
Nicaise Yokossi	(technician)
Dacosa Sahgui Sarré	(presenter <i>Biali</i>)
Ahmadou Méchanou Bukari	(presenter <i>Dendi</i>)
Robert Tiando	(presenter <i>Waama</i>)
Firmin Kpakpari	(presenter <i>Natÿni</i>)
Léon Kenati	(presenter <i>M'bylimÿ</i>)
Bello Blanquit Adam	(temporary presenter <i>Fulfulde</i> , 1995)

However, *Radio Rurale Locale Tanguiéta* was originally supposed to be located elsewhere, in Ouaké. This was a result of several disputes between two neighbouring communities in that region, Ouaké and Badjoudé, about the location of the radio, as the donor agencies and state authorities had decided to relocate the radio and all its equipment; by the time ready to be installed elsewhere. They chose Tanguiéta (for reasons I shall touch on later), although the relocation to Tanguiéta came in some ways unexpectedly and without adequate preparation.

The local state administrator, the *sous-préfet*, charged the existing association of Community Development Association, the *Association de développement de Tanguiéta*, with responsibility for the radio. The *sous-préfet* of that time was on good terms with the President of the Association, Séraphin Syéri N'Déry, who was elected president of the first managing committee, the *Comité de suivi*. Other leading members of the association similarly took over positions in the committee.

⁷ Biali: *walesehun* (from *wireless*=)

The main problem once the radio station and its interim structures - by now called the *Comité de Gestion* CLG - were founded, was the absence of any process to define the functions of the committee, its collaborative relations, and the system of financing the radio. This situation persisted until the end of 1995 (Coopération Suisse 1996). The absence of statutes, which I mentioned earlier, caused problems at several levels. It was up to the local committee to create its own unwritten statutes, a fact which subsequently gave much room for manoeuvre to local actors, to define their own positions, and to impose their own regulations. Several conflicts over the management followed.

The first problem for the Tanguiéta committee resulted from the official preference for two local broadcast languages. The choice of *Biali* and *Nateni* was considered as overly restrictive by speakers of other languages in the community. Their demands were agreed upon by the president, who authorized broadcasting in six languages, adding *Gurmancema*, *Mbelime* and *Waama* (local Gur - languages), and *Dendi*, the language of the local trading community as well as the *lingua franca* in the north of Benin. Additional presenters were recruited who, although not formally trained, nonetheless claimed a salary. This was approved by the committee, though with a smaller salary than the trained presenters. Some months later, the financial situation of the station worsened. As a consequence the committee lacked funds to pay all of the presenters. By the end of 1995, no salaries were being paid to the presenters at all, a situation which caused a grave conflict between the president and the presenters and provoked dispute about the different status of the two trained presenters and the newcomers. All the presenters related better to the station director than to the president and his committee and they expressed a wish for greater independence as befitted professional journalists rather than as volunteers in a community project.

The president and the station director were also involved in another conflict. The president of the CLG, Syéri, a former politician and influential member of the MNDD party (at that time represented in parliament and with one minister in the government), entrusted the station director with the administration of the radio station budget. In mid-1995, Syéri accused the director of non-transparency and embezzling funds for his own use and wrote a letter of complaint to the ORTB and the donors. Séraphin Syéri N'Déry, or "the old Séraphin" as he is called by his followers and his opponents alike, was supported by representatives of the region in parliament and government. The station director quit the station, returned to a position in the ORTB and appointed one of the technicians as interim director.

Yet a third conflict had already arisen during the first year, concerning one of the methods of fund raising: a general collection (*cotisation*). The population around the village of Matéri collected less money than others arguing, first, that the radio transmissions did not cover the whole region⁸ and, second, that they had already collected a lot of money in the three recent

⁸ Later, the presenters made several tests refuting this, but they had worked with better receivers

cotisations for other projects, all of which had required either funds or active participation (*participation communautaire*). Only a third of the anticipated sum was raised. Later on, relations between the representatives of Matéri and Tanguiéta became even more strained.

At the beginning of 1996, the Swiss mission for technical cooperation embarked on a programme (*Programme d'appui à la communication*) to promote the reorganization and improvement of management of local radio stations in Benin. They enlisted a domestic NGO, *Institut Kilimandjaro*, to carry out this task which was meant to bring together all those involved to elaborate a new management structure and set up new statutes for each radio association, as well as to re-establish cooperation between the radios, the ORTB and other institutions. Meetings and discussions were initiated in each of the communities involved as well as at the national level.

These discussions, designed to ameliorate the situation, had the unexpected effect of renewing older tensions between ethnic groups in the region and refocussing them on *Radio Rurale Locale Tanguiéta*. People in Matéri, Tanguiéta and Coby, differing in linguistic composition, tend to see themselves as engaged in competition for the allocation of available resources of the region. The inhabitants of Tanguiéta, a town privileged since colonial times which remained the sole administrative centre until 1975, were regarded with envy and their official representatives considered arrogant. More than anything else, the actions of the president, Syéri, provoked criticism. Despite his age of seventy years, he remained politically very active, and held a role as promoter of local culture and history. As a sort of local "*big man*", he was criticized for accumulating too many functions (he presided simultaneously over the Community Development Association, the *Nateni* Alphabetization Committee and the Association of the Parents Tanguiéta School Children). Also as president of the radio committee, he was accused of being an obstacle to the radio's better management.

A meeting (*assemblée générale*), held in June 1996, to discuss and vote on the new statutes revealed how far these tensions had increased (Adéniyi 1996b). The representatives of the *sous-préfectures* Matéri and Coby demanded better representation in the CLG as well as limitations on the president's mandate. In the ensuing discussion the President was supported by his friend and political party crony, the mayor of Tanguiéta Albert Yomboleny. In preparation for the meeting, they had already invited more persons from Tanguiéta than from anywhere else. Before the vote could commence, the invited participants were listed and others had to leave the meeting. The organizers, representatives of the Swiss agency, tried hard to mediate between the factions and eventually reached an agreement about the station's statutes, which was voted through at the beginning of 1997. The *assemblée générale* then elected a very large committee (nineteen in all), with additional representatives of all the communities. The president's period of office was limited to a single term. To oversee day-to-day functioning a smaller executive bureau was elected of which Syéri was also made president. He seemed to come out of the affair well,

but discussion of the radio station and of his role in it was not over, especially among the younger people and his political opponents in Tanguiéta.

Clearly, the project of Radio Rurale Tanguiéta had become the object of symbolic action and dispute in the local political field. Over and above the routine problems of fund raising and remuneration for the presenters the process of establishing the radio station created a field for negotiation and intense struggles in local politics mainly in view of the appropriation of its management. Since this does not offer direct material benefits, I see it as the acquisition of symbolic capital in the form of a highly esteemed public affair which may, in the long term, be a potential resource in the struggle for political power in the wider social field of the region.

The symbolic cum political aspect of control over the management of local broadcasting becomes evident in the question of programming in African languages, a field of symbolic struggle linked with questions of local identification (and the creation or maintenance of ethnic boundaries) and with tensions between interest groups in the region.

The impact of radio broadcasting in Tanguiéta

Types of programmes

There are three different types of radio programmes on *Radio Rurale Tanguiéta*:

- 1) *concerts d'auditeurs*⁹, request programmes, the playing of music to greet somebody
- 2) programmes offering advice, services and carrying advertisements
- 3) information and discussion broadcasts

Especially with respect to 3), local radio works together with various development agencies and foreign donors as well as local NGOs. I shall give examples of two different types of influence those programmes may have. This impact is often overestimated in statements uncritically celebrating radio, as if it were a means to "globalize" access to the free flow of information and promote democratisation *per se* (Thiam and Sy 1996, De Souza 1996). As an element of liberalized mass media operating in African languages, radio is expected to improve popular consciousness and find ways for "development". Studies have revealed the limitations of these expectations (Kunczik 1985, Jazbinsek 1992). This must be conceded, but it is still the case that the introduction of local radio broadcasting represents a new medium, and this can reconfigure the local political field in a variety of ways. Development agencies may begin to

⁹ Listeners pay 100 F CFA per *disque demandée*, or request

promote radio, and members of local communities themselves come to express their demands for programmes closer to their interests and the everyday life in their community. Genres of programme may have different public impacts. I shall examine three cases :

- the programme of civic education (*programme d'éducation civique*), which ran throughout 1996;
- request shows (*concerts d'auditeurs*)
- and news coverage of a local event, the *Natamba* rally, in October 1995

The programme of civic education (*programme d'éducation civique*)

The programme of political education was initiated in collaboration with two community radio stations, Tanguiéta and Lalo, by the NGO *Centre Afrika OBOTA* (CAO) and financed by a German political foundation, *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* (CAO 1995, Mehler 1996).¹⁰

The programme in Tanguiéta began in January 1995, following a three day seminar (CAO 1996) to discern the local problems to be addressed and to develop a series of broadcasts together with the presenters and a selected number of representatives of different communities: often teachers and facilitators (*animateurs*) of development agencies. Subsequently, monitoring workshops (*comité de pilotage*) were held every three months to discuss past programmes and propose the next. The NGO sent out two members in order to work out the programmes with the President of the association, the Station Director and two presenters, to assess the transmissions together with a what is called a *cellule d'écoute*, or monitoring group, and to supply finances.¹¹

The broadcasts (104 transmissions in all, half in each of two languages, *Biali* and *Natèni*, lasting half an hour per week) treated diverse subjects related to the social and political life of the region. There were domestic problems that occurred within and between the households, such as early or forced marriage and advice on hygienic. But there were also such public issues as poaching in the nearby game reserve (*Parc National du Pendjari*), the use of trees, and

¹⁰ Convention de PARTENARIAT: Entre le Centre Afrika Obota (CAO), et Radio Rurale Locale Tanguiéta
"La présente convention porte sur la production d'émissions radiophonique d'Education civique. Cette émission est répartie en 104 éditions en deux (2) langues à savoir : Langue Biali - 52 émissions, langue Natèni - 52 émissions.

Les buts visés par la production de l'émission sont les suivants :

- créer un cadre de discussion entre pouvoirs publics et citoyens
- susciter des débats sur les problèmes de développement au niveau local
- renforcer la capacité et la confiance des citoyens dans la recherche de solutions endogènes
- encourager l'esprit d'initiative de citoyens et des communautés aux actions civiques.

Tous ces objectifs concourent au renforcement de la démocratie pour un développement dans un contexte de paix sociale (Convention Afrika OBOTA, Jan 1996)."

¹¹ Which ran to a total sum of 2.256.400 FCFA, Convention, January 1996, p.3

protection of the discussed environment. The responsibilities of local authorities as well as the local population were pointed out. During the period of the presidential elections information was given on how to vote. The range of subjects was wide and designed to enlarge the local population's knowledge and consciousness and awareness¹².

The most interesting aspect was the form of broadcasting initiated by the presenters. These consisted predominantly of discussions between the presenter and participants in different villages which often concluded with the presenter's remarks correcting previous opinions or pointing out the "correct opinion" which was either offered by the presenter himself or by a specialist (a school director or member of the local administration) who proposed the "correct conclusion".

But this controlled framework was often subverted when debate led to controversy in relation to sensitive local issues. For instance, the presenter might propose that poaching should be suppressed, but the listeners and participants point out that gamekeepers commonly practised poaching. The roles in community life of such functionaries as local chiefs, village heads, the mayor etc. were frequently controversial, and presenters struggled to respond to the proposals that arose when debate occasionally took an unexpected direction. For example, a discussion in *Biali* about the right way to vote included a participant who complained of having been abused and imprisoned during the 1995 parliamentary elections. He had been accused of taking a second voting card after losing his first and did not know that he should have declared this fact officially at the polling station. He gave a shocking report of what happened to him afterwards¹³ recounting how he had been physically abused in prison and then subordinated to rules established by hardened prisoners designed to initiate him into criminal behaviour. During this discussion the presenter first tried to treat him as a salutary example from which others might derive better knowledge about the election process. But as the debate went on, the excesses of his treatment said more about the state of civil rights in that region of Benin than it did about any inadequacies in the poor man's knowledge. Finally, the presenter was left at a loss about how to link this example with his original intention of stressing the importance of taking part in elections as an element of political education.

Similar cases arose often. In another example, a presenter who was supposed to discuss the responsibilities and obligations of the local authorities was confronted with quite startling realities. The inhabitants of a village near Dassari quoted the case of a young boy accused of having stolen a sheep. The boy had been coerced by his village head, the *chef de village*, in keeping with his formal responsibilities, to give himself up to the *Gendarmerie*. The youngster was imprisoned and so mistreated that he died. The parents of the boy accused the *chef de*

¹² The programme in *Biali* was named *bi kanseke pwam dii ke iibu*, 'a curious child wouldn't eat his own totem' (not to commit a transgression on diet taboos, to say a person who knows will manage its life better). I do not intend to give an elaborated evaluation of the programme

village of direct responsibility for their son's death, supporting their case by the fact that the sheep had been found in the meantime, and its owner had dropped charges against the boy. The *chef de village*, they said, should have tried the case within the village, and should have negotiated ways of restitution.

As these two cases show, the hiatus between the rhetoric of "political renewal" and the local realities became obvious during discussion programmes. This is, in my opinion, an interesting result, but not one intended by the donors. The effect came about due to a technical deficiency: lacking editing devices, the presenters had to either present the entirety of what they had taped or nothing at all.

Transmissions of civic education programme were widely followed as they offered a forum for discussion, and their reports were sometimes done well, even if their style tended to be didactic. Compared to other programmes, those of civic education were a novelty: Local problems were put on the agenda, and new styles of broadcasting were being tested. The most popular transmissions were those concerned with such problems as traditional marriage, particularly the position of women in exchange marriage (*cigeru* in Biali) - a crucial social problem in the region responsible for antagonisms between generations. After request shows, the programmes on civic education transmitted in Nateni and Biali were the most appreciated by the listeners.

Concerts d'auditeurs

Request shows are interesting because of the way in which, by revitalizing local culture in particular ways, they contribute to the process of collective identification. Going out in all of the six languages used by the radio station, they address the listeners as members of communities defined by language, and as inhabitants of one of the zones covered by the radio station's transmissions.

The extreme linguistic variety in that region, and the flux of languages which have hitherto been studied as objects of scientific curiosity, is becoming more fixed. Some languages have gained greater importance than others by virtue of their usage in songs and tales presented there on the radio almost daily. Here is a flavour of what went into a request show broadcast in Biali:

29 February, 1996, 7 p.m., in the studio of *Radio Rurale Tanguiéta*. The request show in *Biali* is on air. The presenter, Dacosa greets the listeners in his usual way : "*n'yǎbɛ̃ nii- i peem*", „good evening fellows". He passes on greetings and announcements to the *Biali* - speaking population, the regions of Dassari, Materi, Gouandé, Tanguiéta etc.:

¹³ He said that he was abused in prison and subjected to rules established by older prisoners, criminals trying to initiate him into their business

Sambieni greets his great brother *Yuomfe* in Tanguiéta, and the people of Mamoussa (*mumusú yj̄bɛ*); a funeral (*humum*) in Materi is announced. At the beginning of the broadcast, the studio hosts one of the "sons of the village", to the late Monsieur Raphaël Windali N'Ouéni, known by his name *Kwakɛ Wj̄ndai*, the name he used for a long time when he was presenting the first radio programme in *Biali* at Radio Cotonou in the eighties. As director of the national board of functional alphabetization, he came to Tanguiéta in the company of the Minister Alassane Tigri (*Natým̄ba*), a "son of Tanguiéta", who was campaigning for President Soglo. Together with the "guest of the evening", young Gnammi Richard of Materi, they are talking about the need to participate in the polls, the right way to vote, and so forth.

Windali does not propagandize overtly, but listeners know his political persuasions. There follows a song of Pauline, a woman of Gouandé, evoking the burial of the mother of Daniel Tawema of Materi, a friend of Windali, who is another big man of the region - former minister and parliamentary deputy (1991-1995). Then Dacosa sends another series of greetings and announcements across the airwaves: 'The mayor of Materi invites the villagers to clean the market place', 'a meeting of war veterans is to take place', and 'the white student, Sambieni Tilo, greets his colleague Annette in Kotari'. Dacosa now motions the technician to play a song of a blind singer. The song concerns a violent dispute over a woman. The singer berates someone for denying his real lineage identity to avoid being beaten in a dispute - such denial being a sort of sacrilege for *Byj̄fɛbɛ*. After several invitations (mainly concerning burials, *humum*, which are the major festivity among the *Byj̄fɛbɛ*), some womens' songs requested by people of Tanguiéta are played. Later that same evening, Dacosa reverts to the subjects of "*Byj̄fɛbɛ* heritage". Some wise elders discuss dietary taboos, *iibu*, among the *Byj̄fɛbɛ*...

The greetings exchanged by members of this language community point to a special set of kinship and neighbourhood relations. There are invitations to family events, public festivals and craftsmens' diploma parties, announcements about marriages and funerals; greetings to relatives living in different villages; and the possibility to hear one's own voice in songs recorded by the presenters (and the anthropologist as well). The dimension of language difference is only one of the ways that collective awareness might be fostered in the same social field. There could be other ways: e.g. emphasizing the socio-professional and religious division between traders and peasants, focusing on the solidarity between generations, or stressing political affiliations. Official socio-linguistic perspectives on ethnicity go back to the pioneer works of missionaries (Chantoux 1949, Prost 1973) and later activities of the *commissions linguistiques*, as well as the alphabetization campaigns of the socialist period (CENALA 1983, 1990). These cultural projects of the state were similar to others in West Africa during that period (Fardon / Furniss 1994), but they offered town-dwelling intellectuals and politicians ways to strengthen clientelist ties to their home regions. These processes are of renewed importance today. Features of difference and identity have become prominent in public negotiations in recent years as a symptom of the re-emergent ethnic discourse in Benin (Kohnert 1997). The impact of these processes is however hardly visibly as yet. But one could imagine similar developments, such as the *Kalenjin* of Kenya whose name - derived from the greeting formula *Kalenjin'* used in radio broadcasting - has

become a group identity symbol (a group of which Kenyan President, Daniel Arap Moi, is the most prominent member). How radio stations were appropriated and their broadcasts understood in the cultural and socially plural local spaces of Benin may transpire to be of equal significance.

Coverage of community events

I have already underlined the dangers of overemphasizing the influence of broadcasts in shaping the consciousness of a population, a regrettable tendency common to different initiatives and organizations that „discover“ the radio as a quick fix to promote development. Before jumping to this conclusion, I have argued that it is necessary to undertake more detailed study of all the processes involved in the establishment, control and impact of radio stations.

To indicate some of the complexities of the ways that radio programmes follow local events, and are involved in the formation of opinions, I want to go back to an event that occurred in 1995.

One day in late October of that year, peasants from Taiacou in the *Natamba* region showed up unexpectedly in the centre of Tanguiéta marching, singing and demonstrating against some inequities perpetrated by some *Fulbe* herdsmen of their village in general, and against the ill treatment meted out by the local *chef de brigade* in particular. They had come to present their problem to the administrative representative of the state, the *sous-préfet*, and demand he solve it. The *Nateni* - speaking radio presenter immediately went to cover events on the spot and conducted interviews with a number of participants in the march, as well as recording the refrain they were singing: "*CB tuulo CB tuulo*"; "*the chef de brigade is a thief*". The following morning he produced a long news broadcast on the subject with several excerpts from his interviews. It transpired that the accusations were not specifically being made against *Fulbe* herdsmen. Relations between them and the peasants in the region were routinely strained, apparently because the *Fulbe* were poorly paid for tending cattle on behalf of peasants who owned them and were therefore often tempted to work on their own account. The particular object of the peasants' displeasure was rather the local chief of police, the *chef de brigade*, who was supposed to apply basic law. He was accused of being corrupt and finding in favour of those who offered him bribes. Later the same day, an abbreviated version of this information was included in news flashes in other local languages, so that everyone came to hear of the incident.

The song was aired, too: "*CB tuulo CB tuulo*" was heard in each of the other five local language news bulletins. Immediately, children picked up the refrain and sang it constantly, "*CB tuulo CB tuulo*", could be heard all around the town expressing the solidarity of large sections of

the population with the demonstrators. During the following days, the case was transferred to the court of Natitingou and judged in favour of the peasants. Pressure on the CB persisted, however, and soon after these events he was transferred from his office.

The role of the community radios in changing the political arena in Benin

Radios Ouakè and Tanguiéta

I want to go back to the problems of setting up Radio Ouaké as a way of demonstrating the more general impact of the radio in Benin.

The radio station was initially destined to be installed in Badjoudé, however the inhabitants of the greater neighbouring community of Ouakè claimed that as they were more concerned with the project it should be sited in Ouakè. Dispute in that region, however, prevented its being set up. It was reported that a deputy from that region had vigorously criticized Benin's President Soglo and his wife in parliament, and apparently as a form of presidential revenge, the government withdrew the project from Badjoudé and offered it to another locality. Subsequent discussions were reported to have rumbled on in the departmental capital, Natitingou, in the presence of representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Communication. Other places were proposed, but the choice of Tanguiéta seems to have resulted from manoeuvring by one of its sons, a *fils du terroir*, Bertin Borna - an experienced lawyer and politician, and parliamentary deputy. At that time his party supported the President, so he would have been the first to be asked whether there was a building suitable to accommodate the radio in Tanguiéta. By coincidence, a short time previously just such a building had been constructed by community subscription to serve as the community's guest house.

Whatever the precise sequence of events, Borna seems to have seized the possibility to act as a mediator and gain a reputation as the person who *„brought the radio to Tanguiéta“*, as his supporters later recounted in accounts that probably exaggerated his role¹⁴. Together with the omnipresent president of the Managing Committee, the "old Syéri" a fellow member of the MNDD party, Borna strove to convince public opinion of his achievement. This must surely have contributed to his victory in the subsequent parliamentary elections of March 1995, since his constituency consisting of the four *sous-préfectures* of the region is largely covered by the transmissions of Radio Tanguiéta (Bako-Arifari 1995, Degboe 1995).

¹⁴ To quote an opposite opinion: *"Borna a fait sembler que c'était lui qui a amené la radio à Tanguiéta. En vérité, il n'y a rien fait. Le bâtiment était déjà là, construit par la population. Et la radio n'était pas prévu pour Tanguiéta. Sur tous les paquets était écrit "Badjoudé" (Antoine Dayori, 10.3.1996)"*

Radio Banikoara

A comparison between the circumstances of Radio Tanguiéta and other local radio stations in Benin reveals both similarities and differences. Radio Rurale Locale Banikoara¹⁵, situated in the north of the Borgou region, also possessed a driving force in the person of its influential director Mohammed Alidou. He used his radio activities to advance the projects of his own association APEM (Association pour la Protection des Enfants Malheureux) producing publicity and attracting donors for it. As a local *big man* he also acted as a mediator in local conflicts. Radio programming as well as the radio budget were predominantly under his sole management. Appropriation of the local radio was relatively easy for him, since he had gained experience from working for Radio Parakou. In his frequent television and press interviews (e.g. LE MATIN 1995) he laid public claim to great influence on the development of the region which he attributed to radio broadcasts.

The president of the comité local de gestion Banikoara is also the director of the local primary school. Although he claims to exercise predominant influence over the radio station affairs presently, the director responds by emphasizing the importance of his role as a broadcasting professional. Unlike Radio Banikoara, he defends the choice of only two languages (*Baatonum* and *Fulfulde*) for broadcasts; but this causes inter-ethnic friction, since it is interpreted as a means to maintain the hegemony of these languages over other languages of the region (*Gurmancema, Boko, Dendi*).

The general quality of broadcasts on Radio Banikoara seems to be poor. Although many transmissions resemble *communiqués* in style, the most popular programme departs furthest from this norm: A live presentation of riddles and folktales in which up to six old men are gathered in the studio embarking on a round of storytelling replete with the traditional rhetoric devices of such performances - noises, answers, affirmations and so forth. It seems likely that the programme owes its success to employing a rhetorical mode closer to that familiar form of oral communication in everyday life¹⁶. Other programmes follow its format to a lesser degree.

The financial resources at the disposal of Radio Banikoara are much greater than those of Radio Tanguiéta. This is a cotton-producing region and, at the outset, the local producers' association USPP (Union Sous-Préfectorale des Producteurs) offered to pay for the building and start-up costs of the radio, so that no popular *cotisation* was needed. Additionally, the station director attracted paid contracts for religious broadcasts, worth 400,000 F CFA per annum, from each of the three major religious communities of the region.

¹⁵ Here I draw upon the work of Eric Voss (personal communications)

¹⁶ Those elements of oral communication might be used in other radio programmes, too

Although the situation of Radio Banikoara differs in some respect from those of Radio Tanguiéta and Radio Ouakè, but like these two, it has been differentially appropriated by local actors for their own ends. Its work provokes tensions in the region, and it has become involved as the subject (and forum) for negotiations of social status and - influence. This would appear to be quite generally the case, since similar processes have been reported from the radio station in Ouèssè (Adéniyi 1996a).

The presidents of the local radio associations now belong to a new association: The *Fédération des Radios Rurales*. Their deliberations on strategy anticipate the passage of effective laws decentralizing and liberalizing control of the media. They have agreed upon an uncompromising stand for independence from the national broadcaster, ORTB, and hope to make this a reality thanks to direct aid from donor agencies. ORTB representatives argued that sooner or later the local stations would face technical problems they cannot solve on their own (interview Dewanou 10.3.1997). They may have a point: Radio Ouèssè was out of action for a time when its transmitter broke down, while Radio Banikoara was broadcasting at half of its transmitting capacity. Nevertheless, the president of the Tanguiéta CLG argued that his station was experiencing no problems, despite the absence of a director.

Meanwhile, as the representatives of the Swiss task force attempted further mediation between the *fédération* and ORTB, most of those involved seemed to be expecting final release of the new media laws (eventually passed by Parliament on 12 August 1997), and the end of the restructuring process at the ORTB, before matters could develop further.

Changes in 1998 and the arrival of a new station director

At the beginning of 1998, a new station director arrived in Tanguiéta. Yodoma, paid by the ORTB, a technician and specialist for rural radio stations (trained at the CIERRO), introduced a variety of changes.

With few and cheap means he improved the technical standard of the station (studio). He convinced the managing committee to integrate two new employees: a typist, Line Nenehidini (she also intervenes in some programmes) and a general technician / guard, Gerard Sambieni. Léon Kenati (presenter *M'bylimy*) quit the station to work with an American Mission (Ministère de Jésus) and was replaced by Jerome Sambieni.

Some presenters were sent to further studies and training: Firmin Kpakpari (presenter *Natyni*) to Niamey for a three years turn, and Dacosa Sahgui Sarré was sent for two months to the CIERRO. Yodoma managed to acquire new contracts, especially with religious communities in the region, plus some more development agencies.

The most important changes concern the management and the programme of the station. Yodoma created an interior hierarchy, nominating a chef de programmewith a subordinated chef d'information to supervise the daily programmes and news; and a chef de technique. He tried to determine more precisely all responsibilities of the employees and established a day-to-day agenda of personal tasks concerning the covering of events. Two personal motorbikes and fuel allocations enable the presenters to visit the more remote villages according to a monthly plan.

Concerning the programme, he introduced French as a language of broadcasting, for example on Wednesday evening addressing the pupils, and on Saturday request shows addressing youngsters.

Unless Yodoma prefers a more moderate style of debate, new disputes with some representatives of the managing committee occurred. The issues of debate concerned this time mainly aspects of budget spending. Yodoma wants to buy new equipment and to improve the studio, but the managing committee prefers to save money for harder times. Yodoma plans to connect the station to the local power supply system energy, to create an alternative option at hand, a project very sceptically seen by the president Syéri.

In sum, Yodoma brought life into the station. He considers his main task to create better relations to the listeners by promoting so-called listeners clubs, e.g. representatives in the villages who act as local correspondents.

A permanent debate is going on between the vice-president of the managing committee, Victor Tawema, and the presenters. He represents the *M'bylimy* speaking community which, as he puts it, contributes by donations a lot to the performance of the station, but is not enough gratified by more programmes in their language.

In that respect, he is not very well supported by Syéri and the secretary of the association, Serge Semba who represent the *Natyni* faction.

Community radio stations in the national political field

In October 1997, independent commercial and cooperative (communal) radio stations were given broadcasting licences (Gnangon 1997; L'AUTRE AFRIQUE 1997)¹⁷. Subsequently, the landscape of mass media in Benin¹⁸ will undergo a considerable change, given the criticism by Freire in 1993. The HAAC has been established as a supervising board which developed, after some mistakes, into an important independent and wise agency (Vogt 1996).

¹⁷ In total 15 stations were licensed, among them 7 associative radios (including religious broadcasting stations)

¹⁸ To mention the new independent and successful newspapers LE MATIN, LES ECHOS DU JOURS, LE CITOYEN etc.

The new private community stations which started broadcasting in 1998, for example those in Djougou and Ilema as well as the new stations in Cotonou (GOLF FM, Radio Star), enjoy a great success. They all have to obey strict rules of political neutrality supervised by HAAC.¹⁹

The tensions between the representatives of the ORTB, the local managing committees and PACOM mediator prevail and focus on the degree of autonomy of those stations. PACOM and the Institut Ilimandjaro are now planning to install a series of new community radio stations in five localities, co-financed by the communities. They will be even more independent from the state (there will be no director delegated and paid by the ORTB) and are supposed to start broadcasting in Mai 1999.

The economic background between the Radios Rurales has become meanwhile more and more striking and lead to a different level of equipment: Radio Banokora created a second studio, but Tanguiéta and Radio Djougou are still lacking some basic technical equipment.

Radio stations in Benin are important local symbolic resources subjected to competition by influential local political entrepreneurs, but they also have a wider political impact, particularly in multi-lingual regions where relations between language groups are politically fraught.

Generally, at the moment we are witnessing the remodelling of the landscape of mass media, especially of radio stations. The parliament passed a considerable law liberalizing the media. At the same time this law determined once again the range of freedom of political expression which has provoked a great debate on the national political scene which is still going on.

In that process, all local radio stations represent an issue of political negotiation, especially in relation to the process of establishing multi-party system. There is a variety of political parties based on very local headquarters like the mentioned MNDD and linked with some small regions which sometimes are in line with a limited number of socio-inguistic features. Their candidates are seen as *fils de terroir* , sons of the region, to represent and mediate local interests at higher political levels. They are brokers (Olivier de Sardan 1995:159) competing over followers by bringing "projects" to their region.

This resurgence of intermediary actors is closely linked to processes of reconstruction and politicization of fragmented local personalities. In the case of Tanguiéta, several candidates presented themselves at the parliamentary elections in March 1995, each from a different *sous-préfecture*. Thus the mobilization of followers by stressing the socio-linguistic differences related to radio broadcasts becomes an important issue of negotiation and cultural entrepreneurship. It is not only the relation to political parties and parliamentary elections that is shaping the field of political action and discourse in the region, but a future project of decentralization is already under

¹⁹ In the case of La voix de la Lama, HAAC did intervene to change the programmes because of „political partiality“.

discussion (Bako-Arifari 1997). A law concerning decentralization designed to strengthen local communities will be soon voted on in parliament (the communal elections are finally scheduled for the beginning of 1998) giving elected local councils many more rights and responsibilities than today, including financial authority. It is not difficult to foresee that an intensified struggle of interests over the project of *Radio Rurale Tanguiéta* will also form part of this process.

6. Summary

Reorganization of the media in Benin, their legislative framework and management structures is going on as I write. I have already mentioned the recent authorization of independent radio stations as an important instance. My aim in this essay has been to show just how difficult it is to establish radio stations as community projects that work in the interests of the local population independent of both state control and commercial interests. Participants have divergent interests, and they generally lack experience not just of broadcasting but of the whole process of establishing a civil society implied in the Beninois *Renouveau Démocratique*. This is not to suggest that either the technicians or presenters lack ability, but that they face problems which they have no precedents for. At best, their efforts will contribute to the diversification of the media system and enable the expression of multiple and new local "voices" after the demise of dominant state ideologies of the project. If they can create new forums for the exchange of opinions and information which contribute in the long run to liberalizing public communication in that local communities, their efforts will have been well worthwhile.

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Annexe

Abbreviations

ACCT	Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique
ANSSP	Appui Néerlandais aux Soins de Santé Primaire
CAO	Centre Afrika OBOTA
CB	Chef de Brigade
CIERRO	Centre Inter-Africain d'Etudes en Radio Rurale de Ouagadougou
CLCAM	Caisse Locale de Crédit Agricole Mutuel
CLG	Comité Local de Gestion
DFG	Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
HAAC	Haute Autorité d'Audiovisuel et de la Communication
MCC	Ministère de la Culture et des Communications
ORTB	Office de la Radio et Television du Benin
RRL	Radio Rurale Locale
USPP	Union Sous-préfectorale des Producteurs