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Discourse Analysis of Nature Conservation Policies in Africa: a Beninese Case Study

Fanny Pochet

Introduction

- 1 Protected areas (PAs) have recently been defined as “one of the most powerful natural solutions to the climate crisis”¹. This new call for the extension of the worldwide PAs network supplements an already long list: from the creation of reserves to protect the so-called African wilderness from the destructive influences of indigenous people, to the establishment of PAs to ensure a sustainable use of the biodiversity, and further. The purpose of this work is to investigate nature conservation policies, and especially the process leading to the establishment and management of PAs in the African context. The continent already has a long history in relation to parks with the first ones dating back to the early twentieth century (Rodary and Milian, 2008; Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2010). Since then, the African network of PAs has never ceased to increase and it now covers nearly 12% of the sub-Saharan African territory. Furthermore, nature conservation policies have left their mark on the continent, as proven by the fact that the implementation of these parks has often been concomitant with evictions and repressive measures aimed at controlling, even prohibiting access and use of natural resources (Brockington and Igoe, 2006). The repercussions of such measures are all the more evident as the livelihood of the majority of the African population depends on them.
- 2 Most of the literature about nature conservation focuses primarily on the ‘what’, in other words, on the matter that justifies the implementation of policies and the creation of PAs (Brechtin *et al.*, 2002): the biodiversity loss at a global scale. Without questioning the importance and urgency of such issue, it seems equally important to challenge the ‘hows’ and ‘whos’ of conservation, in other words “to question the *process*

by which biodiversity conservation is commonly conducted” (*ibid.* p. 57). For over a century, conservation policies are not the fruit of a philanthropic ideal but the result of an ongoing effort to separate spaces for nature from those reserved for humans (Adams and Hulme, 1998). Political ecologists have analyzed such policies from a critical point of view to better understand the nature-people relationship involved in the establishment of PAs (Adams and Hutton, 2007).

- 3 Political ecology has investigated the field of conservation for nearly two decades, both through case studies and works seeking to question what is called an “environmental problem” (e.g. the biodiversity loss), along with the “solutions” that are suggested to solve it (e.g. the establishment of a global network of PAs), the social actors involved (e.g. state and non-state actors), and the consequences of the whole process at a local level (e.g. conflicts over access to and control of natural resources). In other words, this approach interprets the conservation issue as a highly political and social one, entailing power struggles between the actors who participate in the definition and implementation of policies (Adams and Hutton, 2007; Brechin *et al.*, 2002; Neumann, 1997; Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2009 and 2010). Brown (1998) shows for instance, how the adoption of a political ecological analytical framework provides a way for analyzing the influence of science on the policies related to biodiversity management, and their entanglement with understandings, perceptions and values of the most influential actors and interest groups. She concludes that these policies raise issues of environmental justice, as they inevitably create ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.
- 4 The political ecology of conservation mainly relies on post-structuralism. Peet and Watts’ *Liberation ecology* has been particularly influential: they proposed a political ecology approach “which integrates politics more centrally, draws upon aspects of discourse theory which demand that the politics of meaning and the construction of knowledge be taken seriously, and engages with the wide ranging critique of development and modernity” (Watts and Peet, 2004, p. 5). Briefly said, the authors argue that conflicts for resources are not only conflicts for the control of material resources, but also ideological struggles manifested through discourses (Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2009; Adger *et al.*, 2001).
- 5 Discourse analysis, particularly important for this post-structuralist branch of political ecologists, draw upon the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. In his view, discourse is a “system of representation” (Hall, 2001) which results from the interaction of the binomial knowledge-power. In a Foucauldian understanding, discourse goes therefore beyond the text or discussion to embrace both actions and practices (Svarstad, 2012). Foucault argues that discourses ‘do’ things: they produce meaning, truth and subjectivity while being dependant on the “regimes of knowledge” that circumscribe, at a certain point, what is true from what is false. Power is at the core of these regimes given that it determines which knowledge can be applied and defines what has been called a “field of knowledge” (Hall, 2001). Nevertheless, the philosopher considers discourse as a place of struggles and negotiations between actors who support each specific discursive formation linked with various strategies of power. In the field of environmental policy, the Foucauldian discourse theory has a strong echo, since it brings new perspectives for the understanding of policy processes (Sharp and Richardson, 2001). This work particularly follows Maarten Hajer’s reading of Foucault, who uses discourse analysis to bring out the “secondary discursive realities”

of environmental politics, that is to say the close links between policy outcomes and discourses (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005).

- 6 On the basis of these theoretical insights, political ecologists dealing with nature conservation have thus highlighted the existence of three main discourses supporting the implementation of PAs (Adams and Hulme, 1998; Hutton *et al.*, 2005; Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2010; Rodary *et al.*, 2003). The first one, the “fortress” conservation, relies on the idea that conservation initiatives should be conducted against the local populations, who are blamed for environmental degradation. Stemming from colonial policies, this paradigm dominated conservation discourse until the 1980s. The second discourse, “community” conservation, appeared in the wake of the emergence of the famous concept of “sustainable development”. This allowed the broadening of the definition of PAs to development issues: from then on, conservation policies are asked to reach a win-win situation between biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction, in which local participation is perceived as the key element of this balance. The latest discourse is known as “back to the barriers”: observable from the late 1990s, in a context of accelerated environmental globalization, it promotes conservation policies based on the commodification of nature (Wunder, 2005). It is characterized by a return to exclusive and authoritarian forms of conservation, which put a particular emphasis on a global scientific knowledge (Milian and Rodary, 2010), in response to both the alleged “failure” of community-based approaches and to the emergence of new urgent concerns such as the biodiversity crisis and climate change. Although this political ecological literature has identified a specific historical period for each discourse, it also insists on the fact that these three discourses have to be understood in the sense of “leading discourses”: while being highly influential on policies and practices, none of them exclusively dominated one specific period (Svarstad, 2012).
- 7 Recently, the Beninese government has been particularly committed to increase its network of protected areas (DGFRN, 2010; RB, 2011), whose total surface had not evolved since the 1960s. Nevertheless, the current network of PAs already covers about 23% of its territory and includes a part of the W-Arly-Pendjari complex², considered as one of the most important areas for the conservation of western African ecosystems and fauna (Lamarque, 2004 in Clerici *et al.*, 2007). The territorial grip of PAs in Benin is then important, but no critical analysis of the conservation policies carried out since the early 20th century exists to the best of our knowledge. A desire to contribute to the scientific literature relating social and political issues to nature conservation, particularly Benin and French West Africa (FWA) motivates the choice for this case study.
- 8 The analytical framework defined by political ecologists, relying on a “genealogy” of discourses of conservation starting from the early twentieth century in Africa, is at the basis of this work. The main objective is to shed a light on the evolution of the Beninese policy-making process of nature conservation. More precisely, the contribution of this paper consists in extending the political ecologist’s analytical framework to Benin to assess whether discursive elements exist that can be related to the three aforementioned discourses. This paper is structured as follows. The second section describes the relevant literature and the methodology according to which the discursive analysis is carried out. The third section presents and discusses the discursive elements supporting nature conservation policies in Benin in chronological order. The last section summarizes the findings and draws conclusions.

Methodology

- 9 The analysis of the case study relied on secondary data, mainly collected in 2011 in Benin: policy documents at the national and international level, legislative documents, reports of major international organizations, and scientific papers. The focus of this paper is on the two national parks on the country, the W and Pendjari, and, whenever possible on the particular case of the Pendjari since it is considered as an example of success conservation in Benin and in West Africa in general (Kiansi, 2011; Vodouhê *et al.*, 2010).
- 10 These materials comprise the literature that is subject to discourse analysis based on the Foucauldian approach and political ecological interpretation (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005; Adger *et al.*, 2001; Jensen, 2009). More precisely, the following elements are investigated: 1) the understanding of the problem and the underlying perception of the human-nature relationship, 2) the explanation of the causes of the problem, 3) the solutions suggested and, 4) the actors involved and their roles.
- 11 Researchers in political ecology have shown that nature conservation discourses, and hence the evolution of the network of PAs, have always been shaped by the international environmental agenda and particularly by its understanding of the relationship between poverty and development (Adams *et al.*, 2004; Rodary and Milian, 2008). Jensen (2009) paid special attention to the definition of a generational framework which reflects the evolution of the international environmental debate throughout the 20th century. The discourse analysis carried out in this paper starts from this useful generational framework in order to define a new periodization, based on the discourses effectively found in Benin.

Discourse analysis of nature conservation policies in Benin

1st generation (1900-1960)

- 12 Benin, formerly Dahomey, was a French colony from 1894 and officially integrated within French West Africa (FWA)³ in 1905 (Anignikin *et al.*, 1992). From the early 20th century, the depletion of wildlife and forests in Africa became the focus of colonial power⁴. As evidenced by the writing of influential scientists such as Bertin or Aubréville⁵, territories the loss of forest cover in FWA is pointed out as being the main “problem”. This concern echoes a utilitarian vision of nature, in which the economic argument is the main driver of decision-making. Bertin (1918), for instance, argues that deforestation in the French colonies is synonymous with a loss of money for the *Métropole*, since logging activity is part of the war effort. Since the 1930s and particularly from the late 1940s, alarmist scientific statements about the risk of desertification of the continent further justified the importance given to forests. Aubréville is especially concerned with the advancing of savannah, interpreted as the first stage of degradation of the primary forest. The botanist confirms his argument by noting the presence of many forest islands in Dahomey that he identifies as relics of a formerly dense forest cover (Aubréville, 1937).

- 13 From the mid-century, the discourse analysis reveals a progressive broadening of the problem: the destruction of nature and its resources takes a central place in the debate, at the expense of the deforestation one (Aubréville, 1954). The study carried out by Calendra (2000) shows a similar change of approach of the French administration, which passes from a specific focus on the productive sector (forests) to a stronger ideological engagement towards nature protection.
- 14 The objects of protection, from forests to nature more broadly, are clearly understood in a dualistic vision of the human-nature relationship (Castree and Braun, 2001) that encourages a definition of nature as anything that is not human, the so-called African “wilderness” (Neumann, 2004). Human actions are considered as uniformly destructive, referring to the image of the “reckless” indigenous (Castree and Braun, 2001). Looking at the corpus of colonial texts on the subject, the practices of African people are invariably blamed by the authors as the causes of the aforementioned problems (Aubréville, 1937; Roure, 1956). Initially embedded in a civilization discourse, where Africans are cruel and lack of knowledge because of their inferior race, this argument later becomes part of a modernization discourse, in which Africans have to be educated in order to liberate themselves from the so-called “weight of traditions” (Monod, 1950; Aubréville, 1937).
- 15 Further analysis reveals that, from the late 1940s, some external causes are also put forward to explain deforestation and nature degradation: the looting of Africa by the French colonial enterprise (Monod, 1950)⁶ and the exceptionality of its “conditions”, in particular its climate (Aubréville, 1947 and 1954). However, far from defending any progressist thesis, the first assertion helps to claim the importance of science in the field of nature protection while the second one puts Africans in a ‘victim’ position: because of unfavorable weather conditions, they had finally no other choice but to destroy nature. This victimization of African people easily leads to the identification of a ‘savior’, the *Métropole*.
- 16 In the literature in question, the proposed solutions are oriented towards the creation of PAs. The objectives given to such areas mainly reflect the old 17th century French philosophy of “patrimonialism” (Rodary *et al.*, 2003) which promotes exploitation of forest in a perspective of conservation. Its benefits are initially seen as privileging the *Métropole* but, from the 1950s onwards, the need to address the needs of local populations through conservation actions became increasingly urgent (Aubréville, 1954; Monod, 1950).
- 17 In line with the goal of the object of protection, scientists and the state initially encouraged the establishment of classified forests (RF, 1935) and, in a second phase, of national parks (RF, 1954). In Benin, most of the current protected area network was established during the colonial period and on the basis of Aubréville’s assessment of the state of forests in Dahomey (1937). As elsewhere in FWA, parts of these classified forests were later converted to national parks under the influence of the growing environmental concern (Calendra, 2000). This strategy of PAs creation’s goes hand in hand with highly repressive policies towards local people, whose cornerstone is the 1935 forestry code. This famous decree allowed the extension of the colonial land tenure over the whole forest areas and increased the control of the French colonial administration over people by prohibiting (in classified forests) or restricting (in protected forests) the rights of indigenous people over natural resources (RF, 1935, chap. II). The repression is additionally implemented through exclusionist practices,

carried out within the purpose of emptying spaces to protect their inhabitants. As underlined in the literature, these displacements entailed substantial material and social costs, affecting the livelihoods of the hardest hit populations (Brockington and Igoe, 2006). In Benin, the signs of such evictions can particularly be found in Fiasson's work (1937) on the W Park (Benoit, 1999). Kiansi (2011) also discusses the displacement of people to particular centers at the periphery of the Pendjari park until the 1960s and demonstrates the land inequalities that this process has caused, which are today an important source of conflicts.

- 18 The state, namely the French colonial administration, is the key actor of the protection of nature in FWA. The creation of PAs obviously contributed towards the reinforcement of its control over spaces and people (Rodary, 2008). Neumann (2004) shows how the establishment of "conservation enclosures" is concomitant with the emergence of new spaces called "artificial wilderness", which are the product of an idealized conception of nature with state control over the territory. He argues that "wilderness", and therefore its protection, is part of the process of modern state formation. Throughout the colonial period, foresters played an increasingly important role as their missions expanded. At the end of the period, the structure and activities of forestry services is made more complex since nature protection is part of their remit (Roure, 1956). However, it is the scientists who particularly increase their power during this first generation, thanks, for instance, to the refocusing of the conservation issue on the reasonable use of natural resources (Monod, 1950). Moreover, at the dawn of the independences, they rely on an international coordination as evidenced by the creation of IUPN (Roure, 1956).
- 19 The discourse analysis conducted for this first generation highlights several elements which are typical of the "fortress discourse": a focus on the "wild", here the forest, at the expense of human activities, perceived as the only responsible for nature degradation; the promotion of 'coercive' policies of conservation and strict protected areas, whose establishment clearly limited the access and rights of indigenous people to resources; lastly, a central place given to the State, that can easily "make rules about who can use nature and where, when and how they can do so" (Adams and Hutton, 2007, p. 152).

2nd generation (1960-1992)

- 20 After its independence in 1960, Benin experienced considerable political instability noticeable by a succession of military coups. The latest, in 1972, was led by Commander Kérékou, who remained in power for nearly 17 years. In the years immediately following the Kérékou coup (1972-1974) the system of government took the form of a military dictatorship. The second period (1974-1980) is characterized by a radicalization of the regime and the adoption of Marxism-Leninism. The last decade of the Kérékou regime was marked by a certain "deradicalization", concomitant with a strong recession of the country, which compelled it to institute economic liberalization reforms and to initiate a democratic transition (Bierschenk and Oliver de Sardan, 2003).
- 21 During this second generation of conservation policies, international NGOs, such as IUCN and WWF, participated in environmental debates. While there is certain continuity with the previous generation regarding the framing of environmental problems and their causes, the second generation of conservation policies changes due

to the influence of these new actors. The discourse analysis shows that the grip of international bodies on the field of conservation in Benin is already manifest from 1962⁷. However, it is only starting from the 1970s that the “conservationist machine” begins to operate. This is evidenced by the establishment of the conservation program on the National Parks conducted by the FAO and UNDP (Röbbel and Child, 1973). Relying mainly on a neo-Malthusian discourse, which links destruction of nature to the increase of population, the central argument put forward by the international NGOs did not rely on wildlife protection as much as on the economic income from its “rational use”. As stated by many authors (Dumoulin and Rodary, 2005; Barrow and Murphree, 2001), this economic strategy, combined with an offer of technical assistance, has been repeated all around Africa since the 1960s. They stressed that this economic rationale allowed NGOs to convince newly independent governments to perpetuate colonial conservation strategies.

- 22 The Beninese conservation program put in place at this time focused on the economic potential of tourism in the Pendjari National Park. The priority given to the development of sport hunting and the international aid is directed towards technical measures and anti-poaching regulations (Sayer *et al.*, 1979). This post-independent period is especially characterized by the establishment of a legislative arsenal that has limited access to the two national parks and their three hunting zones to any other activities that are neither touristic nor scientific (*ibid.*). The denial of indigenous people’s rights to the forest is also observable when one sees that “traditional” or “local” hunting is automatically equated with poaching, and that commercialization of all hunting products is prohibited (RPB, 1980 and 1987). Violent repression became common. For example a 1980 edict allows the foresters to use military personnel to assist them in law enforcement actions against poachers (*ibid.*).
- 23 The “exclusionary” conservation policies promoted by big international NGOs have only been made possible by the presence of a strong central state. It is interesting to note that these policies have been particularly resilient to the political changes of the period mentioned previously: before the 1980s, they have been in line with the Marxist-Leninist regime, whose purpose was to increase its centralizing power and its rents, stemming from tourism in PAs and from the international aid promoting their conservation. After the 1980s, the economic crisis, the rise of park-population conflicts (Aladji Boni, 1984) and the decline of wildlife and the great droughts⁸ prevented the less authoritarian Kérékou regime from questioning such coercive approach. Finally, the discourse promoted in Benin by IUCN, FAO and UNDP in this period supports the idea that international cooperation is the only way that can ensure effective long-term nature protection. This second generation is in fact essential insofar as international conservation groups have defended discourses and practices that have placed them as key players in a world of global conservation.
- 24 Here again, we have all the elements characterizing a “fortress discourse”: reinforcement of the barriers of the previously created protected areas, conservation priorities defined according to the potential benefits they can bring to the central state, profusion of the legal instruments aimed at achieving these goals at the same time they marginalize local people in an even more violent fashion than during the colonial period. The novelty is that the authoritarian central state is supported by new influential actors: the international NGOs and intergovernmental agencies.

3rd generation (1992-2002)

- 25 In the early 1990s, a peaceful transition brought the *Renouveau Démocratique* to Benin and the concomitant establishment of a multiparty system. At the global scale, this period is marked by a major change of perspective started by the previous one⁹. The concept of sustainable development, popularized by the Rio's UN conference in 1992, confirms the commitment of the international community to merge the environment and development agendas. The 'protected area' tool becomes, starting from this generation, a global tool oriented both towards biodiversity protection and sustainable development in which "participation" became the new buzzword.
- 26 Discourse analysis of conservation policies in Benin identified one central problem starting from the early 1990s: conservation initiatives are too expensive for the state. This argument is particularly obvious in the feedback on the EEC development project of national parks (PAPN) which highlights the disappointing conservation results compared with the important financial investments (Mahe and Touré, 1990). In parallel, the fact that conservation failed to provide benefits for local people was identified as a serious problem (Green and Chardonnet, 1988). On the ground, this is particularly visible through an increase in the number of park-population conflicts, the latter claiming for more land for agriculture and denouncing parks as exclusively oriented towards international tourism (Aladji Boni, 1984). The "non-involvement of local communities" (RB, 1995) is consequently seen as a major cause of the mismanagement of PAs in Benin, exacerbated by the "return to land" policy advocated in the late 1980s by the Kérékou government which resulted in higher rates of population growth in the rural areas of the country (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2003).
- 27 The so-called participation of communities in conservation initiatives became a centerpiece of the suggested solution. However, the institutional framing of the problem automatically bears an institutional understanding of what is called "participation". As evidenced in the 1995 National strategy for the management and conservation of PAs, the participation mainly consisted in the creation of Village Councils¹⁰ in order to give local communities a sense of "responsibility" towards the management of natural resources (RB, 1995, p. 9). A deeper analysis of the strategy reveals that the only objective is the participation of local people in profit sharing, that is to say, only downstream in the decision-making process. In addition, the structure, composition, operation and role of the councils are more imposed than negotiated (*ibid*). As shown by the political ecologist literature, this static and idealized vision of what a "community" is and its restricted power in decision-making, allowed by the vagueness of the concept of "participation", is one of the major limits of the success of this approach in conservation¹¹ (Adams and Hulme, 1998; Hulme and Murphree, 1999; Barrow and Murphree, 2001, Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). We could also question the historical heritage of Village Councils as such and relate them with previous creations: the *coopératives paysannes* supported by the colonial state and later, the *associations de développement* promoted by the regime of Kérékou suffering from a lack of popularity, which never offered peasants better chances to influence development projects (Daane and Mongbo 1991). Arguably, the Village Councils have been simply rearranged in the terms of the "sustainable development" to, among other, continue to receive the conservation rent.

- 28 The promotion of the participatory approach goes hand in hand with previous conservation policies (RB, 1995): highly repressive regulations (e.g. the training of officers involved in the anti-poaching was based on methods inspired by the army), restrictions of use (e.g. prohibition of village hunting in some important areas), extension of state-controlled land (e.g. through the proposed extension of the Pendjari park boundaries or through the creation of buffer zones¹²).
- 29 This generation of conservation policies is evidently marked by a decline in the role of the state in conservation. Analysis reveals that the promotion of the participatory approach is more a result than a cause of this change. In other words, the emergence of this discourse is a consequence of the inability of the central state, both in terms of political legitimacy and economic performances, an observation made elsewhere in Africa from the late 1980s (Rodary, 2008). The *Renouveau Démocratique* has thus been an opportunity to defend a new type of discourse, aligned with the international one. In practice however, the analysis brings out that the change of strategy of the state in favor of local population is not as obvious. This supports the findings of Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (2003), who demonstrated that the Beninese democratic turn does not constitute a profound break in the functioning of the state and the logic that it unfolds (bureaucratic-administrative, factional-clientelist, etc.). In their opinion, the decentralization process, yet considered as a condition and a guarantee of good governance, only reinforces the complexity of local-level politics, and speeds up the fragmentation of local political arenas in which the state is profoundly entangled.
- 30 At the same time, this 3rd generation is characterized by the confirmation of the role of NGOs in conservation policies. As argued by Rodary and Milian (2008), the concept of sustainable development enabled them, from the late 1970s, to re-legitimize their actions in a context of strong criticism about PAs. At the global scale, the number of NGOs increased exponentially from the 1990s, and a multi-level governance system has been progressively established in order to articulate the global strategy with local actions based on PAs (Dumoulin and Rodary, 2005). In the PAs management strategy of 1995, the delegation of some activities to NGOs and private actors is clearly encouraged (RB, 1995). As shown by Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (2003), the proliferation of NGOs and private actors should also be linked with the new space left by the decline of the central state. Progressively, the NGOs place themselves as new actors: they both compensate for the lack of the state at the local level (e.g. public services) and are seen as privileged interlocutors by aid donors thanks to their supposed apolitical position towards “civil society”. The greater number and roles of NGOs has served to increase the complexity of local politics.
- 31 In summary, the discourse promoted from the early 1990s is clearly new compared with the previous “fortress” one. It has been identified in the literature as the “community conservation discourse”. While starting from a financial concern about conservation, it relies on the idea that conservation initiatives cannot be carried out against the interests of local people, who should instead reap their benefits (Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2010). The participation of local population is thus considered as the guarantee of the success of conservation. The literature argues that how this participation occurs is a key element of the sustainability of conservation projects. However, the interests of the central state did not allow for a real reconfiguration of power in favor of local people, and the multiplication of NGOs contributed to the

increasing complexity of the situation, where frontiers between the actors of conservation became more and more blurred.

4th generation (from 2002)

- 32 More than a decade after the democratic turn, the decentralization process in Benin was officially completed in the early 2000s. At the international level, the conservation issue became progressively integrated into more global concerns such as the biodiversity crisis and climate change. PAs seem to have, once again, gained legitimacy in this debate since they support both the global strategy of mitigation and adaptation to climate changes (Dudley *et al.*, 2010).
- 33 The analysis of conservation texts echoes this evolution of the international environmental agenda. The new Beninese strategy 2011-2020 about conservation of PAs is of particular interest. It presents the biodiversity crisis as a serious preoccupation and stresses that the conservation efforts are insufficient given the rates of species extinction and habitats destruction, especially in classified forests overrun by farmers and loggers (RB, 2011; RB, 2002 and 2012). Climate change is considered to be exacerbating biodiversity loss and thus identified as a core problem. Moreover, the discourse analysis puts forward a financial concern in nature conservation, and underlines more precisely the lack of mechanisms to ensure sustainable financing which is not only based on development aid programmes (RB, 2011).
- 34 The current discourse in Benin seems to generalize, even standardize the participatory approach to conservation. The Wildlife Act of 2004¹³ and its implementing decree of 2011 offer a regulatory effort and recognize the role of the co-management structures such as AVIGREF. Furthermore, the participatory model, previously limited to national parks and hunting zones, is promoted in new PAs, as evidenced in the Programme of Work on Protected Areas (POWPA) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (UNDP and GEF, 2008 and 2009). However, texts under study still reveal a weak conception of the participatory approach which does not encourage the empowerment of local people: as in previous period, hunting areas are solely reserved for sport hunting, land and resources are still owned by the state¹⁴, and the latter, is always the one responsible for the setting of hunting quotas (CENAGREF, 2009). As previously mentioned, the lack of resources allocated to the decentralization process, that takes more the form of a simple deconcentration of the central government than a real devolution of power to accountable local authorities (Ribot *et al.*, 2006), also contributed to the “fatigue” of the community-based conservation approach. Moreover, local governments experience legitimacy and authority difficulties regarding the management of resources, as they face a plethora of actors already well established: the co-management bodies, NGOs, traditional authorities and the private sector (RB, 2011; Le Meur and Hochet, 2010).
- 35 What emerges from the discursive analysis is that the spreading of the participatory approach has lost ground against the new national priority given to the extension of the PAs network. This solution is in response to the new focus on a biodiversity crisis and particularly relies on a global scientific knowledge and prioritization tools (Milian and Rodary, 2010). The POWPA of the CBD goes in that direction by identifying new potential PAs¹⁵ on the basis of tools such as gap analysis, key biodiversity areas approach and IUCN red list. The urgency of creating new wildlife reserves in the

southern part of the country, hitherto not covered by protected areas, is obvious from the text corpus (UNDP and GEF, 2008 and 2009). More recently, UNEP (2011) is working on the designation of new protected areas both important for biodiversity protection and carbon storage, and for that purpose, they also based their analysis on such global tools. Lastly, it should be mentioned that the extension of the Beninese PAs network is further promoted through the development of corridors and trans-boundary reserves. The strengthening of the already established W-Arly-Pendjari complex, now the largest protected area of West Africa, is on the priority list.

- 36 The solution suggested to solve the financial problem mentioned above can be found in the new PAs strategy. Its primary objective is, for instance, to increase the ability of the Beninese PAs to mobilize sustainable funding. It thus calls to the participation of Benin to initiatives such as the Clean Development Mechanisms (CDM) and the REDD UN programme, and encourages the establishment of a trust fund, the Foundation of West African Savannas, to ensure a sustainable financing of the areas to be protected (RB, 2011).
- 37 The discourse analysis shows that from the 2000s, the actors involved in the conservation discourse are the same as during the previous generation. However, the gap between the national actors and trans-national ones is increasing. The later, such as NGOs or companies, are seen as central interlocutors in a context in which conservation issues are embedded with global concern. As Milian and Rodary (2010) demonstrate, prioritization tools are eloquently produced and advocated by NGOs themselves. In addition to gaining ground on activities previously attributable to the state, NGOs also supplant the so-called communities, as evidenced by the fact that they are in charge of the definition and management of the new PAs created in the southern part of the country (UNDP and GEF, 2008 and 2009).
- 38 To sum up, this last generation positions the protected areas issue on a global scale. The problem is global (the biodiversity and climate change crises), the solution is thus global (protected areas defined by prioritization tools) and the actors privileged are those with global scale connections (NGOs). The discourse analysis therefore clearly puts forward elements that could be linked to the “back to the barriers” discourse, identified by Hutton and colleagues (2005). However, in parallel, the analysis shows a significant persistence of the community conservation discourse since the participative approach is now legally framed (2004 Wildlife Act) and advocated in the management of all the protected areas of the country.

Conclusion

- 39 The discourse analysis informing this work brings a critical perspective to the nature conservation issue in Benin. Three discourses have been found, that match with those identified in the analytical framework: the fortress discourse (1900-1989), the community conservation discourse (from 1990), the “back to the barriers” discourse (from the late 2000s). A deeper comparison with the analytical framework shows that the fortress conservation discourse ended in Benin almost ten years later than elsewhere in Africa, and that the community conservation discourse is nowadays a leading discourse, while being in competition from the late 2000s with a “back to the barriers” one. The discourse analysis also brings some interesting elements about the nature of the shifts in discourses: the transition from a fortress discourse to a

community conservation one is mainly the result of external factors and not from a genuine political will to involve populations. More recently, the transition towards a “back to the barriers” discourse arises from the promotion of new dynamics among actors and new issues and not from a real critique of the community-based approach. Finally, the discourse analysis reveals a certain *status quo* in nature conservation policies during the twentieth century with the persistence of two elements: the economic interest is the first driver of nature conservation policies, and the place allotted to the local populations remains minor, despite the implementation of a community-based conservation approach. Such elements, which may be confirmed by further empirical studies focused on the practices of conservation, will be the subject of future investigations.

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NOTES

1. According to IUCN, a protected area is a “clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values” (Dudley *et al.*, 2010, p. 8).
2. More exactly, the WAP complex extends over 3000 000 ha, covers three countries (Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso) and encompasses around 24 protected areas, including the three national parks of W, Pendjari and the fauna reserve of Arly.
3. Most of the documents used for this period of analysis refer to all the FWA colonies, including Dahomey. The only text specific to Dahomey used here is Aubréville’s “Les forêts du Dahomey et du Togo”, written in 1937.
4. The 1900 London Convention aimed at preventing uncontrolled massacre of wild animals and ensuring the conservation of diverse wild animal species through the establishment of categories of protection and the incentive to create wildlife reserves. The 1933 London Convention especially encouraged the colonial powers to create national parks.
5. Deputy Inspector of Waters and Forests, Bertin is the first forester deployed to Africa in 1916 to assess the forest cover. Aubréville was an influential colonial botanist whose work was instrumental in the famous forestry code of 4 July 1935.
6. This idea particularly spread after the publication of Harroy’s book, who denounced the damaging effects of colonization on nature. He wrote in 1944 a famous book called “Afrique terre qui meurt. La dégradation des sols africains sous l’influence de la colonisation” (in Monod, 1950).
7. Only two years after attaining independence, Benin’s wildlife has been the subject of an evaluation conducted as part of a joint FAO/IUCN project, inspired by the commitments made at the Arusha Conference in 1961. Phase III of this project covers many African countries, including Dahomey, and has been achieved mainly by two experts, Riney and Hill, who traveled the continent between 1962 and 1963 (Riney and Hill, 1962).
8. The severe droughts that hit Benin in the 1970s and the growth in conflicts between local populations and the two parks, forced the government to close the sport hunting for ten years (1982-1992).
9. In fact, the UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972 paved the way for what later became the concept of sustainable development, by bringing poverty and development issues to the international environmental debate.
10. The Village Councils are currently known as *Associations Villageoises de Gestion des Réserves de Faune* (AVIGREF).
11. Other critics took the opportunity of the so-called “failure” of the community-based approach, to claim that local communities are incompetent in the management of natural resources and that the combination of conservation and development is a bad idea resulting in the diversion of funds which should be primarily used to curb the alarming loss of biodiversity (Hutton *et al.*, 2005).
12. According to Neumann (1997), the promotion of buffer zones around protected areas is a way to extend the control of the State on lands and customs of indigenous peoples under the guise of “integrated development”.

13. Benin Wildlife Act (RB, 2004) has even been judged as one of the most modern in Western Africa (UNDP and GEF, 2008).

14. The land issue is becoming more and more pressing as proven by the recurring conflicts in the buffer zone of the Pendjari, the *Zone d'Occupation Contrôlée* (ZOC), where co-management is implemented and agriculture is authorized (CENAGREF, 2009).

15. In December 2004, the government of Benin has decided to create new wildlife reserves in the southern part of the country.

ABSTRACTS

Political ecology studies the relationship between nature and society, a complex issue that has been explored in the African context by many of its researchers over the past few decades. Applied to the field of conservation, this approach provides a way to highlight the social and political processes inherent to the understanding of biodiversity conservation and its implementation, the creation of protected areas. The Foucauldian discourse approach offers the possibility to put a special emphasis on power and how it produces "truths" which eventually drive nature conservation policies. On the basis of these theoretical insights, post-structural political ecologists have highlighted the existence of three main discourses supporting the implementation of nature conservation policies in Africa: "fortress" conservation discourse, community conservation discourse and "back to the barriers" discourse. The aim of this work is to examine the evolution of such policies in Benin. The contribution of this paper consists in confronting the political ecologist's analytical framework to this particular case study and to verify whether discursive elements exist that can be related to the three aforementioned discourses. The results have shown that the discourses of nature conservation produced in Benin for over a century are relatively close to those identified in other African countries. In addition, the analysis reveals a certain *status quo* in nature conservation policies along the twentieth century despite the deep political and social changes.

En quelques mots, la *political ecology* étudie la relation entre la nature et la société, problématique complexe qui a particulièrement intéressé ses chercheurs dans le contexte africain. Appliquée au champ de la conservation, cette approche permet de mettre en lumière les processus politiques et sociaux inhérents à la compréhension de la conservation de la biodiversité et à sa mise en œuvre, c'est-à-dire la création d'aires protégées. L'approche Foucauldienne du discours permet de focaliser sur le pouvoir et la manière dont il produit des « vérités », lesquelles orientent les politiques de la conservation de la nature. À partir de cette base théorique, les chercheurs poststructuralistes en *political ecology* ont mis en évidence l'existence de trois principaux discours influençant la mise en œuvre des politiques de conservation de la nature en Afrique : discours de la conservation « forteresse », discours basé sur les communautés et discours du « retour aux barrières ». Dans ce contexte, ce travail s'est donné pour objectif d'examiner l'évolution des politiques de la conservation au Bénin. La contribution de cet article consiste à confronter le cadre d'analyse défini par la *political ecology* à cette étude de cas et à vérifier si les éléments discursifs trouvés peuvent être rattachés aux trois discours susmentionnés. Il ressort que les discours de la conservation présents au Bénin depuis plus d'un siècle sont finalement relativement fort semblables à ceux du reste du continent. En outre, l'analyse a révélé un certain

statu quo dans la manière dont les politiques de conservation de la nature sont menées depuis le début du XX^e siècle et ce, malgré les profonds changements politiques et sociaux.

INDEX

Mots-clés: political ecology, politique de conservation de la nature, analyse du discours, aire protégée, Bénin

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