Introduction

‘One response to ‘bad’ policy is to explain why it is misguided and suggest how it might be improved: the technical approach. However, if there is something intrinsic to the policy process that means that policies invariably take a particular shape, then technical policy analysis may have limited utility, and what may be needed is a more wide ranging examination of policy-making itself (Keeley and Scoones 1999: 3).

An anthropology of policy should not be marginal to the discipline. After all, policy processes construct and debate ideas of social and moral order, social problems and solutions, and hence expose patterns of social reflexivity and the relations of power they embody. The discipline has been – and continues to be – a voice in such reflection, with our science (or art) entrapped like any other in what Shackley and Wynne (1996) call a co-production of science and policy, a co-production which echoes Foucault’s knowledge/power.

And whilst Said’s Orientalism may have provoked more nuanced debate, it surely left in ruins any claim that a social science could be a policy-neutral discipline. With disengagement now seen as the ostrich option, ‘critical’ engagement with policy has been a friendly alternative. But critical engagement – for example in Escobar’s or Ferguson’s reflection on development policy – is nevertheless still engagement with policy debate and hence process. Viewed thus, the popularity of the term ‘critical’ in all our works may only be a curious deferring device helping to create a false distinction between ‘orthodox’ participation in policy process, and the analyst’s engagement with the issue (as if from beyond the margins). When the author discusses whether or not their work is aimed at policy – it is as if the author was both in control and able to hop in and out of the social matrix of which they are a part.

It is moreover, impossible to teach the history of social anthropology without referring to the different political epochs it has traversed, to their particular policy debates, and to the ways that the subject matter and debates in our discipline have been shaped by, and helped shape these.

Whilst historians have long studied policy processes – of colonial and post colonial states, for example - focused ethnographic study of contemporary policy processes is relatively recent, so that, for example, when Shore and Wright edited their volume on the anthropology of policy in 1997, they were able to call their introduction ‘Policy: a new field for anthropology’. It would be overstretching the argument that anthropologists had, to date, somehow overlooked processes of social reflexivity, and the attempts to shape social destiny in all the societies they study. Yet on reflection, this has certainly not been central to much ethnographic writing. Examining the issue through the prism of ‘policy’ (as instruments and technologies of governance) might rectify this.
One arena where anthropologists have focused more directly on policy is in the anthropology of ‘development’. Much of the this work has, however, been less an ethnography of the formation of policy, than of its implementation and effects. Numerous writers (at times ourselves included) have been tempted to present development policy as rather monolithic and homogeneous, emanating from and reproducing the power of the state and its international alignments and sponsors (e.g. Ferguson 1990, Escobar 1995, Sachs 1992, Fairhead and Leach 1997).

Yet as several more patient ethnographers have argued, bureaucracies and their technologies are often far from monolithic and cannot be understood as so divorced from wider society. Considering them as monoliths absolves the actors involved of consciousness, agency, responsibility, and their multiple axes of identity (Long and Long 1992, Agrawal 1996, Grillo 1997, Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal, 1998). Even a cursory look at different people engaged in producing, experiencing and implementing policy shows a much greater variety of perspectives, rooted in a huge variety of influences extending far beyond anything we might gloss as the ‘state’. As Grillo has argued, development is conceived of in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways by the actors and institutions involved in it. One aspect of this, is that people pursue very different ‘projects’ within a common Project (Long 1992, Gardner 1997), or as we shall argue here, use the same Policy to pursue very different policies.

This echoes, but hopefully in a more socially nuanced way, some of the more disaggregative work which political scientists and public administrators have been engaged in (see Keeley and Scoones 1999). It requires what Marcus (1995) characterizes as multi-sited ethnography, which inevitably lacks the depth and rigour of single sited ethnography, but can respond to questions that other methods cannot reach.

Global concern with declining tropical forests, and a ‘will’ for policy direction has produced much funding and research into forestry practices and policy, leading many anthropologists such as ourselves to study people’s vegetation management, and the impact of and transformations in forest policy. Many of the works have contributed to initiatives aiming to devolve control over forests from states which inherited centralized control from colonial regimes, to ‘community’ forests, or at least to ‘joint’ forest management.

One of these works, by Sivaramakrishnan (1997) has done what we are about to do in this paper; that is, to explore a range of ideas from those involved concerning what a policy is, what it is for, and how it originated. In many ways our work echoes his, showing how ‘Through their varying accounts of the same events, narratives become discursive strategies working to organize and win property claims, limit social freedom and legitimate state intervention’ (Sivaramakrishnan 1997)

Yet we want to extend the scope of his approach. First, we want to highlight the distinctive narratives of different ‘state’ agents, that is people working ‘for the state’ in some capacity, but under very different institutional and economic conditions, and with rather different relations with international organizations on the one hand, and publics on the other. As we shall explore, each is often highly critical of the others. Nevertheless, as Schatzberg has made so clear in DRC, as incoherent and contradictory as state policy processes may be, ‘the state’ and its policy is often felt and interpreted as coherent and monolithic by those experiencing it.

A second extension is methodological (theoretical), considering policy processes in relation to a the diverse set of practices (lobbying, workshops, signing, meetings). Where possible, our approach is to give primary focus to the constellation of such particular practices and procedures which can be and are glossed as policy, and to a field which they add mass to and from which they derive funding. Such a perspective allows each practice – each workshop, meeting, report, signature, legislative decision, funding flow - to have its own biography traditions, networks, political economy and culture etc. which at once contribute to ‘policy’
without conforming to any particular totaling narrative of the policy process - its evolution and enactment. From this perspective, when looking at different narratives of policy origin, each appears to picks out and emphasize different practices as significant events to the development of the policy, which shapes what it is. Different narrative emphasize the different practices that people have been involved in (and which they are familiar with and benefit from) and which thus emphasize their own centrality.

Taking this approach to policy processes certainly questions naïve distinctions between state and civil society. More interestingly, it also questions the utility of a priori distinctions between policy formulation and implementation, and between science and policy.

**Background**

Granting rights over forest trees back to villagers heralds a major change in forest policy direction in the West African Republic of Guinea. Until now, and since the mid-colonial period, the state forestry service has claimed rights to decide which trees may be felled, and by whom. Villagers could not be certain of gaining revenue apart from compensation for collateral damage. Whilst de facto villagers might exploit their own trees, the Ministry of Agriculture and Presidency can sell concessions covering village territories. That the timber from one tree would meet the bridewealth in marriage might suggest the importance of forestry revenue to villager and minister alike.

The devolution policy requires, however, that villagers constitute ‘forestry associations’ or ‘Groupements Forestiers’ to which the state hands over forest management and revenue rights. The approach currently has high profile in Guinea’s policy circles and has been embraced by many donor-funded programs in the country. It has involved new laws, major training programs, and new social and political structures at the village, district and prefecture level.

We outline a range of different narratives on the advantages and operation of groupements forestiers. We look at the parameters which have structured the development of groupements forestiers as practiced, and examine these practices within the broader context of the politics of rural administration and the political economy of rural resource control.

Guinea’s groupements forestieres fall within the genre of community forestry approaches which is far from new. Approaches which devolve forest control to ‘communities’ under assorted conditions are now popular in many countries. The global popularity has led some to argue that this is a context in which internationally-derived policy approaches are configured locally. Others see approaches involving devolution of forest resources from the state to local communities as emerging more ‘organically’ in particular places in ways that reflect their particular histories.

This paper identifies the different perspectives but will not attempt to adjudicate between them as alternative truth claims to be judged, but will explore each narratives as an integral part and product of the political field in which different people are involved in groupement forestier ‘practice’.

Finally, when imaged as a devolution of control over forest resources, community forestry approaches are frequently seen as part of broader decentralization of governance. In the case of groupements forestiers we show this terminology to be problematic. While certain people applaud (or regret) Groupement Forestiers as a devolution of state resources, others experience it as an extension of state control, and a loss in autonomy. We therefore ‘decentre’ ourselves from centre-decentre dichotomy, and in doing so can explore the various meanings of the centre/state that it embodies, and the imagery of ‘decentralization’, whatever this may be.
This paper is in no sense an evaluation of the Groupements Forestiers policy change. It would be too early for this. Moreover, people’s perceptions of outcomes are inextricable to their positions in and perspectives on processes of policy transformation; which is the issue of this paper.

First, a summary of the practical and legal changes which have taken place,
Then an exploration of the range of explanations those involved give to explain why and what has happened.

**Groupements Forestiers in Guinea**

Since the early 1990s Guinea’s Forest Department has been attempting to transform itself from a ‘service of repression’ to a service which works in collaboration with local populations. Militarily-trained forest guards have been dispensed with and many forest agents have been trained in participatory methods. The new Forestry Code made provision for devolution of forest control to Guinea’s elected Rural Councils, with each elected committee supported by a state forestry service representative. In 1996 the Ministry took a step further to permit the legal establishment of village and private forests, although this has yet to be passed by the country’s National Assembly.

The Forest Department now permits the establishment of village forests. Administratively, the National Forest Director of Forestry must sign a dossier of request from the groupement concerned. The dossier requires that those with tenurial rights over parts of the forest are identified, mapped and give their consent. The forest must be mapped basic forest inventory and management plan which shows a zonation to be agreed in conjunction with the Chef de Cantonement Forestiere. Typically this would include priority zones for tree crops (coffee, oil palm), for tree enrichment, for water source protection and for timber exploitation. It also requires that the groupement constitutes a management committee (7-8 people), which in the case of a village groupement formulates a village development plan that forest revenues can feed into. Before the request is submitted to the National Director, it needs to be approved and signed by Prefectoral representatives of the many ministries. Trees are the property of the groupement, and decisions to fell are made by the groupement management committee, although it must make a demand to the local forestry service for permission to fell. This would only be refused if it contravened the previously approved forest management plan. Once a groupement has a permit, it can negotiate with a timber contractor to carry out the felling, and can use contractors who are not ‘approved’ by the Prefecture.

Numerous projects and donors support the creation of Groupements Forestiers. To date the only groupements created have been those supported by these projects. In particular, several projects within the huge Regional Niger River Basin management program coordinated by the OAU and funded by assorted donors (EU, USAID, etc.) have promoted the approach within their areas of operation.

The policy is national. In Guinea’s Fouta Djallon, the rationale for devolution of forest control was largely to enable those who wanted to constitute a business group to invest in forestry on their land. In contrast, in Kissidougou (where we work) most of the 800 villages already have a ring of forest 10-400ha which they or their ancestors have established around their village, and the idea of creating a groupement forestier is to put these forests under the control of a groupement which represents the village population. Where villages do not have a forest, it is hoped that that villages will constitute groupements forestiers to develop one.

The creation of groupements forestiers is accelerating. In Kissidougou, 5 were ratified in 1997, 11 in 1998 and today there are more than 50. As more are created, pressure has mounted from the projects managing them for their federation, at first at the sub-prefecture
level, and then most recently, Kissidougou’s sub-prefecture federations formed a prefectural federation at a meeting in February 1999. Donor funded programs supporting the state forestry service have been critical to the groupements forestiers movement, with the EU funded program being of particular importance in Kissidougou. Alongside the ‘decentralization’ of forest control, there has also been a ‘decentralization’ and ‘contractualization’ in the way donor funded programs operate. Most notably, many of those who had been employed by the project have now formed independent NGOs and must bid for contracts as independents. There are 3 such NGOs in Kissidougou.

Alongside such contractualization, the EU funded program has also slimmed down its staffing structure and interlocked itself into the local forestry administration which it had once almost duplicated (or swamped). Those few who still work for the project now formally also work for the Prefectoral forestry service, as sub-prefecture representatives.

A Summary of Policy origin narratives of some of those involved

(i) NGO I - linked with French consultancy

One of the new NGOs in Kissidougou narrated that the policy originated from two French expatriates and the Guinean personnel they worked with. One Frenchman was under contract to a French consultancy who had been working in Kissidougou since 1991 as a technical advisor. The other worked for the same consultancy but visited Guinea irregularly as senior consultant. In a key meeting in 1995 these expatriates argued that if Guinea already had herding groupements, vegetable gardening groupements, then why should they not have forestry groupements. The senior consultant drafted the guide for procedures, and more junior, lobbied successfully for the addendum to the Forestry Code which eventually permitted their creation.

The policy was proposed to the administration who took it on willingly to incorporate people in the management of their resources and as a showcase in innovation. ‘This is the first time in Guinea and in the world’. The NGO respected the junior expatriate for his dedication and persistence in pushing this innovation through; and the influence of the senior was boosted by charisma as international mover (‘has has traveled to more than 40 countries, never spends more than 4 months in each and is a senior consultant). Unusually for expatriates, he was ‘with the people’, ‘a bearded, heavy drinker of palm wine and eater of local rice’.

The influence that the NGO attribute to the consultants is linked to their personal loyalty. The French expatriates had particularly supported the establishment of their NGO who had mostly been student interns with the project that the expatriate managed, and who had gained contracts from the project after their studies. They imaged their loyalty to the French team as mutual, stating that the French team encouraged the NGO to price itself out of the market when solicited to collaborate with other consulting firms which might compete with theirs, suggesting both their own importance and the exclusivity of their relationship with the consultancy firm. The NGO had attempted to create as many groupements in Kissidougou as possible to assist the expatriate’s reputation before the expatriate finally left Guinea at the end of 1998. It is important to note here that at the time of our interviews in 1999, consultancy organizations were competing for new contracts under a refinancing of the program.

This account highlights the experience of interdependency between development workers and expatriate staff. International dimensions of community forestry are personified and localized in the agency of key expatriates, in a way which also upholds the NGO’s own agency and status – supporting their future competitiveness in a contractualized development world. Thus the interplay between international consultancy organizations and national NGO networks is locked not just into general interdependency South and north NGOs but also in competing personalized patronage networks and the acquisition of aid contracts.
(ii) NGO II - student intellectuals

A second NGO also describes the Groupements Forestiers approach as an innovation originating in Kissidougou, but located the original ideas and innovatory practices in a set of student studies carried out by final-year forestry students of Guinea’s Agricultural University. The EU Niger River program supported several students to conduct studies relating to participation and the reservation of forests in the interests of village communities during 1992-4. Key studies were on ‘Forest classification for local groups’, ‘Participatory forest inventory’, and ‘Management of village territory’.

It was these studies, the NGO leader claimed, that provided most of the ideas and practical procedures which subsequently became the policy approach. While the project had, in effect, commissioned the studies, it was students’ own work and vibrant discussion between them which generated the important new ideas making it practicable, such as the participatory form of forest inventory created to replace cumbersome conventional inventory procedures in the approach. Thus ‘Bassin Versants decided to take these brilliant studies and work with them’.

In this version of events, the senior French consultant only elaborated a guide on the basis of ideas and practices emergent within the students’ studies and their dynamics within the project. And the 1995 meeting was not a significant turning point. Rather, it was to inform and train certain sub-prefecture forestry agents and to launch the guide – thus an event for dissemination, not innovation. Members of this NGO are somewhat aggrieved that the French consultants had gained so much personal credit for the policy.

These two accounts, then, both locate the origin of Groupements Forestiers within project practice in Kissidougou. Both NGOs were founded by university students and have emerged along with the groupement forestier approach, which is central to their sense of identity and funding. The different weight that the two NGOs attribute to the students and to the expatriates of the project may reflect the assumptions being made during our interviews, or reflect the NGOs’ different experiences with the expatriates concerned. Both accounts certainly present Kissidougou as an important experimental field in which formal research and learning-by-doing in project practice have generated a novel approach ripe for replication around the country by the NGOs which have helped spawn it.

This sense of innovation enables the NGOs to represent themselves as uniquely capable of replicating and training others in the approach; important in a contractualized development world. Indeed the ongoing creation of groupements forestiers is also crucial to NGO survival, since most of their project contracts consist in the lengthy surveying, village meetings and paperwork involved in the preparation of groupement dossiers – as we shall explore later.

(iii) NGO III - Solidarity against loggers

The third NGO differs in that 10 of its 12 members used to be employed as extension staff by the project. They remain better equipped – having retained their project motorcycles – and are on average slightly older. A former (or continuing) state employees, they remain more securely linked to the state administration despite their NGO status.

They narrate the origins of the policy within the emergent practices of their earlier extension when working with the EU Niger River program. A key problem they had identified was the virtual ‘theft’ of timber resources by chainsaw operators who would fell trees in peri-village forests, giving villagers only one plank in ten – and then offering to buy even the latter at very low prices to save villagers the difficulty of transporting them. Encouraged by the project, extension staff carried out demonstration fellings ‘to show villagers the value of their wood,
and that their resources were being stolen from them’. Together, the project struggled to introduce groupements forestiers to get timber revenues into the hands of villagers. The policy in this account was still ‘born in Kissidougou’, but as a struggle against political economic conditions there which the villagers and the project was facing. The Groupement policy is seen as an encouragement to villagers to negotiate better with loggers, and a major role of the village management committee is in conducting such negotiations to village benefit, both so that wood can be used locally, and so that villagers get a better price. And herein lies the potential value of federations of groupements.

(iv) Expatriate advisors - State forestry service as predator

A different perspective again is prevalent among many expatriate forestry advisors, reflecting their cynicism towards the intent of many nationals of the Guinean forestry service. They see overt messages about sustainable forest management on the part of national, prefectoral and sub-prefectoral forestry agents as a mask for personal and political interests in timber exploitation, or merely to gain access to the personal financial advantages that projects bring. Overt messages about participation are treated with distrust, as rhetorical statements detracting attention from real interests in maintaining state control over forest resources for financial and other reasons.

These perspectives seem to originate both in expatriates’ personal experiences in their own projects, of the staff they work with, and of how the central Forestry department tries to cash in on them. Continually defensive of the budget lines they control, they also draw on experiences of practices of corruption, and on stories which circulate of forestry administrators using their positions to extract personal profits from timber resources.

Emerging from these views, expatriate narrate the policy as originating in a struggle against the state forestry service. ‘There is a need to protect villagers and their forests from the state.’ They position themselves as part of a worldwide movement towards community forestry and participation; a geography in which the nation state is seen largely as an obstacle.

The successful enaction of legislation permitting groupements forestiers in Guinea is presented in these terms as the result of pressure put by a group of donors on the national forestry department as a condition of continued funding (The roundtable of March 1997). Moreover, the view of more than one expatriate advisor is that the national forestry department is still resistant to the policy, and has stalled signing the dossiers for new groupements. From their perspective, only the forthcoming appointment of an expatriate forestry consultant within the ministry devoted to the Groupement Forestier issue promises to ‘unblock’ the situation. The support of the prefectoral forestry service to the movement is also viewed with suspicion. Will the Prefectoral authorities attempt to exert control over village forest resources once inventories etc. have demonstrated their value? And does the local forestry service’s involvement with the Groupement through signatures and monitoring represent a route for individual agents to exert leverage over timber for personal profit? Some projects are taking steps to circumvent this.

Donor-funded projects (despite nominally working under forestry service tutelle) image themselves as allied with villagers, initiating and promoting Groupements Forestieres in an uphill struggle against the real (private) interests of state forestry agents.

(v) State forestry department - Management where there was none before

Members of the prefectoral forestry narrate the origin of the policy differently, suggesting it originates in the state forestry service itself, and its own conscious efforts to improve the efficiency, coverage and sustainability of forest management. Through groupements forestiers and the inventories and the state monitoring of village forestry management plans,
there is a sense of management of village forests where there was no management before. Sub-prefecture foresters will monitor village forest management, and moreover, the improved capacity to monitor tree stocks will improve tax collection from felling, and stifle illegal operators. Moreover, participation means that ‘villagers do the work of forest management themselves. It is no longer necessary to send so many foresters’. By giving villagers responsibility for carrying out these tasks, monitored by state forestry agents, there is a much greater chance that they are actually done, than where a small number of forestry agents attempt to do it themselves.

There is a coverage argument. More land is classified and brought under state influenced management, albeit to the benefit of the village and not the state. The forestry code can be applied with rigour in more locations than would be possible through the capacity of the understaffed forest department itself, or associated projects.

And there is a sustainability argument. Villagers will become ‘fully conscious of the need to preserve forests around their villages’ through the education, ‘sensibilization’ and technical advice associated with the constitution of Groupement Forestiers, and so be in a position to conserve forests in a durable way, as the 99 year lease that they are given.

The policy originates a part of the broader shift towards participatory approaches in the Guinean forestry service since the early 1990s, traced it back to the instigators of this approach in Guinea – the late Forestry Director Mamadou Oury Bah, and German Technical Consultants who supported him, and the training involved. In imaging groupements as an extension of state activity, Prefectoral forestry administrators consider the formation and monitoring of Groupement Forestiers as their role, and one which they can and will assume in the future. Donor projects are not indispensable.

In short, this perspective narrates groupements forestiers as a transformation towards greater effectiveness and scope of state forestry activity, not a diminution.

The economy of a policy

To understand the institutional and narrative positionings discussed above more fully requires some tracing of the financial flows associated with the policy, which helps account for the enthusiasm and rapid development of Groupement Forestiers by the administration. Noticeably absent from all accounts concerning the origin of Groupement Forestiers is agitation for the policy from villages. This we explore once we have examined its administrative momentum.

The creation of groupements entails a great deal of money changing hands. Currently, much of this originates in donor project funds which are channeled in a variety of ways through the practices of Groupement constitution, creating an economy surrounding forests that is independent of the value of timber.¹

The NGOs which establish groupements are major recipients of these funds, paid for (a) training Chefs de Cantonnements, (b) per diems for attending project meetings, and crucially (c) creating Groupements (a given number in a specified time). There is some considerable financial pressure for NGOs to get the work done and meet the terms and conditions of their contract. To date, the NGOs has been able to assist villages to receive major infrastructure (schools, bridge building, wells) from a different project funding envelope as a quid pro quo of the establishment of a groupement, which has certainly been effective in generating interest for the idea among villagers. This has stopped, however, and as we shall see when considering village perspectives, strong tensions have emerged between the desires of the NGOs to establish groupements, and villagers.
The sub-prefecture representatives of the forest department who monitor the work of the NGOs are paid for this, for training others, and they receive per diems and transport costs for attending meetings. Ministerial representatives at the Prefecture level who sign their approval of the request for a Groupement are paid for their work and signature. The need for many administrative signatures is explained, at least by Kissidougou’s NGOs, as an important way to involve a wide range of state institutions in the phenomenon and in the decisions about it, so that they cannot object later. Villagers receive per diems and transport costs for attending training and other meetings called by the project, and half of the receipts go the Groupement’s account.

The National Forestry Director (or his head, the Minister of Agriculture), can request money for signatures on the dossier. According to some sources, a project had to pay so much for signing off on eight community forests that in January 1999, a further 28 awaited signatures as the project’s refinancing had not been forthcoming. A different project was asked for ‘several million’ GNF to sign off for each of 5 dossiers.

In this economy, the creation of a thick dossier, with many forms and procedures generates both more paid work for NGOs in administering them, and more payments for officials to sign off at each stage. Moreover, the more paperwork and the more complex the procedure, the more training is required – and the more training contracts around the country NGOs need to conduct. These are paid for both by the project and the administration. As one donor put it: You have to ‘buy groupements forestiers in travel expenses, per diems, and moyens logistique’.

Cynically, but realistically, NGOs have a financial interest in creating more and more paperwork and complex procedures, surveys etc, which creates more work for them. It also inflates the importance of their ‘know how’ in the creation of Groupement Forestiers which renders their expertise more unique and in demand. Paradoxically, then, while NGOs may claim to support decentralization and avoiding the state (and their formal reasons for signatures and procedures is to give the state a minimal ‘involvement’), their economic interests in the work actually encourages more and more state bureaucratic involvement in the creation of the groupement.

That there is a limit on the size that any Groupement Forestier forest can have has played into this multiplication of labour. Currently a single groupement cannot have a forest of more than 100ha., unless signed off by the Minister (a lengthy, potentially expensive affair, not yet achieved and worth avoiding). This ruling has many interpretations. For the ‘management where there was none before’ narrative it is justified because a village could not be expected to manage a forest larger than this. Within the ‘state as predator’ narrative, 100ha is construed as the maximum amount that could be obtained in negotiation with the state which wants to keep control of forest resources for itself. A third interpretation, with an eye for the Groupement Forestier economy is that there are payments for every groupement, at every level. It makes financial sense to create more, smaller groupements rather than a few larger ones. One village sought to create their 400 ha forest as Groupement but were encouraged by the NGO involved to divide it into 4, each with its own ‘groupement’, dossier and management committee. There were no losers in this exercise, except perhaps villagers now encumbered by four separate committees.

In short, Groupement Forestiers have created a whole new set of revenues from forests, giving momentum to the policy, and shaping its form. The only financial losers would appear to be the donors, but it is they who need to spend the money and it is attractive for them to do so in what they can sell as a ‘cutting edge’ and ‘participatory’ development approach.

Administrative visions of locality
In several of the discussions in which the perspectives discussed above were voiced, donor, state or NGO staff did refer to some positive aspects of villagers’ practices; to the soundness of traditional forestry management techniques, and to villagers’ dissatisfaction with state and project forestry approaches, as evidenced, for example, by the burning of tree nurseries. Many administrators are aware that many forest patches in Kissidougou have anthropogenic – not ‘natural’ origins. Yet while this provide extra support for the need to responsibilise villages, it seems that it is not allowed to undermine the need for complex project and state procedures in creating and monitoring groupements, and educate villagers. There is no narrative seeing groupements forestiers as a logical outcome of villagers’ past and present management of their dynamic forest landscapes, and their lobbying of projects and policy.

Accepting the capacity of villagers to enrich and manage effectively their environment can be supportive of the Groupement Forestiers movement, but can also undermine it by suggesting that villagers are already managing forests effectively, rendering Groupement Forestiers (and much of the action of the forestry service, NGOs and projects) irrelevant. This contradiction evaded in several ways.

First, it is simply ignored, drawn into debate when relevant, and excluded when not. Second, it is resolved in the ‘breakdown of tradition’ argument. Traditional techniques used to work, but no longer do. Note here that the myth of a romantic past threatened by modernity actually emanates from the structural tensions inherent in administration. Third, the modern is to be grafted onto the old. This can be imaged technically, integrating science and tradition, or economically, showing people the new value of their old products.

Both these latter aspects of narration constructs the technician as ‘modern’. The imagery of what it is to be ‘a villager’ (living in breakdown, and not being modern) which is produced in administrative circles emerges from the day to day practices of ‘street-level’ bureaucrats. As we explore elsewhere, such arguments find their media (paper, radio) and mass audience, and when they encounter village dissent in journalistic interviews, these are managed in a similar vein to that above. Endlessly reproduced images of a lost arcadia and an incapacity of peasants to cope with modernity without external support are not merely truths in the culture of intelligentsia. Rather they are a necessary corollary of the positions that administrators work in.

Perspectives from the village

This Groupement Forestiere policy does not appear to have emerged from villagers’ agitation, despite the fact that it is a policy (one policy or many) which has been elaborated ‘in their interests’. This is at first sight surprising. Agitation from below has been noted in accounts of the emergence of community forestry elsewhere.

Yet villagers are not so concerned as foresters about their forests (which as we document elsewhere, they have established, and adapted over many generations – Fairhead and Leach 1996). They are far more concerned about the dangers of forest classification (reservation) and the exactions (formal and informal) of the forest department if they break forest codes. With boundaries, inventories, management plans, state signatures and increased state surveillance, the groupement idea is easily taken for forest ‘classification’, and many villagers understand it as such, done as it is ‘by the state’ and ‘for the project’, even if is also ‘for the village’. For those distrustful of the future intent of the forestry service formalizing a groupement is a step towards formal alienation. In law, a Groupement forest is considered a reserve, but ‘for the villagers’, yet there is a clause in the legislation that if villagers are deemed by the forest service not to have fulfilled their part in the management contract, the state has the right to take over management. The extent to which villagers are informed of this is unclear, but their fears seem well-grounded.
The reticence of one village to be involved begins to reveal some of the anxieties that this new policy momentum raises. In discussions, members of the management committee of the Groupement Forestier said that when the village was first approached by sub-prefecture forestry representative to discuss the possibility of making a Groupement, villagers were afraid and stalled. It was their own forest which they had created and they feared that it would be classified for the state. They feared losing further control over resources which they knew to be valuable. The forestry representative went to the village five times and each time the village refused.

The forest representative, however, interpreted the villagers’ reticence not as originating from their own disquiet, but claimed that a politically active ‘sons of the village’ based in Kissidougou town, but affiliated to the opposition party, had been to the village to discourage villagers from participation. By interpreting village reticence in terms of party politics, the forester was able to avoid facing the possibility that hesitancy was ‘real’, with all that that would imply. Such interpretations raise the complicating importance of party politics in modern engagement with state services.

The project eventually took several villagers to another village where a Groupement Forestier had already been established. This appeared to have changed their minds as the villagers there explained that when trees were mature they could cut them and keep the profit.

A second village example shows how problems have arisen following classification. Villagers were similarly unhappy about establishing a groupement when approached by the project. The forest representative came three times, and according to the chief, more or less coerced him to coerce others to constitute a groupement. Thirteen people joined, accepting because the establishment of the groupement was linked to a promise of infrastructural improvement (building a bridge or school). Sure enough, after they classified the forest, the project did build a new classroom for the school. A year later, however, a separate project offered assistance in building a three classroom school. As is their practice, this project needed inputs of labour and local materials, including timber, from the village. The villagers contracted a chainsaw operator to fell and prepare a tree.

The forest officer who had initiated the Groupement, and who knew that the people were building a school, and that it needed timber, intervened. He asked the chief ‘who did you ask for authorization?’ The chief replied that the forest ‘is for us’. The forester objected, saying that he had to give the authorization, and imposed a large fine on the villagers, and then took the chainsaw operator to the sub-prefecture tribunal where he had to pay a fine too, leaving the village further in debt to him as well. Prior to the establishment of a groupement, villagers had never had problems in felling a tree for their own infrastructure improvement. That this was somehow now problematic massively discouraged groupement members. Two left, and even its President no longer has confidence in it. As one more senior project official said in despair ‘Several forest agents look for money, which breaks the system’.

The money giving momentum to the policy has now dried up (as of early 1999), and no work is presently being carried out.

**Concluding discussion**

There are presumably elements of ‘truth’ in each of these perspectives on the origins of Groupement Forestiers, and indeed there may well be other explanatory narratives which we do not cover here. Our aim, though, has not been to evaluate them. Notably, each narrative presents some actors necessary to the Groupement Forestiere movement rather negatively, and others positively. Nevertheless, each group can find a narrative in which the policy is
advantageous to them, and it is partly this which explains how Groupement Forestiers have emerged in a convergence of diverse interests.

So in one sense, Groupements Forestiers is case of a policy emerging through a discourse coalition, as defined by Hajer. His concept sees a ‘discourse coalition’ formed if previously independent practices are being actively related to one another; ‘if a common discourse is created in which several practices get meaning in a common political project’ (Hajer 1995: 65).

However, in another sense, the diverse narratives reveal that Groupement Forestiers do not actually constitute a common political project. The Groupement Forestier policy goes on meaning different things to different people, despite the manuals, procedures and laws which appear to produce it as a unitary phenomenon. The ‘origin stories’ for the Groupement Forestiers approach, linked to particular positions on its raison d’être and meaning, are continually played out in the doing of Groupement Forestiers, and in administrative discussions about it. The different interpretations echo economic-structural differences between those involved.

One Policy thus exists as very different policies for those participating and for those involved in its administration. Among the latter, there is a clear tension between those seeing these groupements as ‘protecting people from a predatory state’ and as those seeing the policy extending state management and influence; those seeing the policy basically in terms of revenue generation, and those focusing on forest regeneration and protection.

In a very real sense, a claimed process of decentralization and village empowerment has translated into more points of authority, more ‘techniques of registration’; of tenure, of forest inventory etc., with the village being brought closer to the administration. Villagers may gain in being less exploited by timber contractors (although this may be more a virtual problem, than real for reasons we have not had time to discuss), but in so doing may become more vulnerable to other actions of the state. And whilst the village is acquiring control, it does so within a committee structure (with president, treasurer, secretary, fire warden, and token women to do the cooking) which is a microcosm of the bureaucratic ideal of statecraft.

Such committees are very different from the political networks, and those of kinship/descent, and other forms of association which connect villagers (within and between villages) in more embedded ways (in relation to people’s particular social and cultural histories and the obligations these impose). The committees contribute to an illusion of working ‘with community’, and of there being yet another state bureaucracy microcosm in the village. But actually a restricted membership ‘groupement’ and its committee is created, composed of a village elite here; a family there; and perhaps elsewhere of a press-ganged youth which may have acquired valuable forest resource claims or onerous obligations as the case may be. As Sivaramakrishnan argued for West Bengal, ‘If, on the one hand, [the state] stands on the shoulders of community, on the other, control also attempts to bend community to its needs. There is, then, at work in JFM... a tension between using the community and destroying it (1997: 289). Similar tensions appear to be at work in Guinea.

The emergence of the policy, the shape it has taken and its momentum has depended, in part, on a coalition of interests around a set of laws and practices but not a coalition of interpretation of what these are, and their intent. Equally it has depended on the particular nature of financial flows; the fountain of which can be seen to have stimulated the development of the policy (or more properly, policies), but which has not determined the shape that it took. It paid for the various meetings, studies, training programs, etc. etc. which have been understood and experienced very differently by those involved in some, and never in all. And it interlocked with ‘autonomous’ traditions of practice; of
the administrative signature
the allocation of contracts
the forest inventory
the clarification of tenure
the forest management plan
the election of a committee (village, sous-prefecture, prefecture)
the village development plan
the classified forest
the monitoring of forest management
e tc. etc.,

Although there can be no overarching narrative concerning the development of the policy, these the relatively ‘autonomous’ practices – in the sense of each having their own biography - have shaped the structure it has taken, and meanings it has acquired.

From a village perspective, amidst these practices, the state administration and apparently non-governmental organizations fade into one another - after all NGO contracts are monitored by state functionaries, and NGO staff once used to work for state projects. Moreover, all outsiders appear obsessed with forests (a particular vision of them) in a peculiar way, characteristic of outsiders for generations, and very alien to their experience. Thus however incoherent the policy may be, as we have outlined, it is felt at least initially by villagers as coherence – the state/party/project seeking to classify the village forest. That villagers considered the project/groupements forestiers movement to be essentially a continuation of forest classification was clear in their feedback to the project and NGOs in the federation meeting – emphasizing that ‘nobody had felled trees’. Read state obsession with forest, as an obsession with preserving them. The subsequent experience of the one village that did fell a tree only accentuated this.

**Bibliography**

to follow
A different perspective again - voiced by many national and prefectoral forest service staff - gives the central role in the emergence of the groupement forestier approach to the state forestry service, and its conscious efforts to improve the effectiveness of forest management. Through groupements forestiers, the inventories and the state monitoring of village forestry management plans, there is a sense of management of village forests where there was ‘no management’ before. The bureaucracy and capacity to monitor tree stocks enables the forestry administration to be more efficient in collecting tax dues from timber felling, and to stifle illegal operators. Participation also means labour mobilisation for replanting, making fire breaks etc.: ‘villagers themselves do the work of forest management. It is no longer necessary to send so many foresters .’ By giving villagers responsibility for carrying out these tasks, monitored by state forestry agents, there is a much greater chance that they are actually done, than where a small number of forestry agents attempt to do it themselves. Linked to these efficiency arguments is a coverage argument. More land is classified, albeit to the benefit of the village and not the state. By ‘responsibilising’ villagers, the forestry code can be applied with rigour in more locations than would otherwise be possible. Third, a sustainability argument links ‘responsibilising’ villagers to making them ‘fully conscious of the need to preserve forests around their villages’ (DPF) through the education, ‘sensibilisation’ and technical advice associated with the constitution of groupements forestiers. In imaging groupements as an extension of state activity in this way, prefectoral forestry administrators see constituting and monitoring groupements forestiers as their role; they do not see either donor funded projects or the NGOs they now fund as indispensable. In short, this perspective presents groupements forestiers in terms of transformation and greater effectiveness, not diminution, of state forestry activity.

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i In a similar way, Wade (19xx) has traced the formal and informal financial flows structuring incentives around canal irrigation in South Asia. As yet there has been little impact of Groupement Forestiers on the timber economy. Although not the subject here, the timber operators who we spoke with are rather unperturbed by the policy, as those operating in Kissidougou already consider that they negotiate with villagers, up to their limit, effectively paying them for their timber, accepting that de facto, timber belongs to the village, even if de jure it belongs to state.

ii Projects promoting Groupement Forestiers were going to use the term forest ‘classification’, but had to avoided it because of villagers fear. these associations. Groupement, with more benign association with development projects, was chosen instead. Nevertheless

iii The forester was also suspicious that certain local figures were also sympathetic to the political opposition, and had encouraged dissent from a programme of the existing government.

iv Those working within the state administration are reasonably assumed by villagers to be sympathetic to the party in power (PUP) which has been in power long enough (4 years, with the same president having been military dictator for a previous 9) to favour its supporters in administrative positions. Project staff are often state functionaries and are interpreted in the same way. More significantly, even when not state functionaries, and perhaps not sympathetic to the PUP, villagers generally still assume them to be.