TEACHERS’ UNIONS AND THE SELECTIVE APPROPRIATION OF PUBLIC SERVICE REFORMS IN BENIN

Azizou Chabi Imorou

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to explore an avenue that has so far attracted little attention, namely the response of the teaching unions to educational reforms. Empirical observations of the challenges to reforms of the public service sector in Africa enable the identification of rationales of actors, and highlight the interaction between different interests and professional practices (cf. Chabi Imorou 2010b; Grindle and Thomas 1990 for comparative perspectives). They also render a re-reading of African civil services reforms necessary (Anders, Charton, Hamani, this volume; see also Olowu 1999). The focus in the case in hand is on the relationship between these challenges and the functions of the state in producing public service reforms. The analysis is based on the premise that these challenges are not so much obstacles (Brimelow 2003; Peterson 1995 and Trefon 2010) as the generators of socio-political dynamics.

Beginning with a close examination of the demands made by teachers throughout the implementation process of the ‘New Study Programme’ (Nouveaux programmes d’études, hereafter NPEs), an educational reform introduced in Benin during the 1993–1994 school year, I shall analyse how these demands, along with the practices to which they gave rise among teachers, helped shape the classroom delivery of public education and hence illustrate the complex nature of the reform process.

1 This chapter is a reviewed and revised version of a chapter of my Dr. phil. dissertation entitled: “Le Bénin à l’épreuve du syndicalisme enseignant. Les revendications des ‘dévalorisés’ et la construction de l’État (1945–2008)” (Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, 2011). Fieldwork was conducted between 2006 and 2008 in Parakou, Cotonou and Karimama, documentary research mainly in Cotonou and archive material and the colonial press were consulted in Porto-Novo (Benin) and Dakar (Senegal). This research was undertaken within the framework of the research programme States at Work (University of Mainz, Germany and LASDEL, Benin-Niger, see Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, Introduction, this volume). I am grateful to Thomas Bierschenk, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, Marcelle Yosson, Aziz Mossi, Nouratou Danko, Saï Sotima Tchantipo, Elieth Eyebiyi, Yacine Bio Tchané and Dominique Ahogbéhossou for their many suggestions. Special thanks to Susan Cox for translation into English.
This chapter is organized around four key points. The first consists of a short history of educational reforms in Benin since 1945. The second briefly describes the content of the NPE reform and the context in which it was implemented. The third describes trade-union reactions to the reforms as well as the arguments underpinning the teachers’ misgivings. Finally, on the basis of the first three points, I shall discuss a number of practices at work within the state apparatus.

AN OVERVIEW OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS BETWEEN 1945 AND 1990

The educational system in Benin has a long tradition of reforms, which it is important to remember here to facilitate a clearer understanding of the current debate on the NPEs. These reforms met with varying degrees of resistance.

The Colonial Reform of 1945 and Its Continuity

The first reform—and perhaps the most important to have been implemented in Dahomey (present-day Benin)—dates from 15 September 1945. It reorganized teaching in the territories of French West Africa and made provision for, among other things, the introduction of the syllabuses in force in France in schools that taught to secondary level and for the training of ‘indigenous’ teachers in the context of the extension of primary education desired by local populations. As Abdou Moumouni observes, this reform contained ‘many of the features of the educational system as it is organized in France, as well as others that are quite specific: this organization will remain in place until the territories of the French colonies in Africa win their independence’ (Moumouni 1964: 78). The aim of the reform was to ‘train indigenous managers to become our assistants in every field, and to ensure the emergence of a carefully selected elite; it is also a matter of educating the masses, to make them more like ourselves and to transform their lifestyles’ (Governor Bévié, quoted in Moumouni 1964: 54).

The nationalist movements which preceded independence and in which teachers played an active role were quick to criticize an education policy that created a division between Africans and their everyday environment. As a protest against this educational policy, teachers would demand the

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2 A brief historical survey of education reforms in Benin can be found in Lanoue (2004: 121).