

J'y Crois - I Believe in it: The Road to Decentralization in Mali, 2004. A Film by Emile Adriaan van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and Maarten van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal. Distributed by First Run/Icarus Films. VHS, color, 55 min.

Until 1991, Mali- the landlocked and impoverished West African country was ruled by General Moussa Traore, a military dictator who, brooking no dissent, straddled the country like an hectoring bull, doling out governmental largesse to cronies and sycophants while the vast majority of the people suffered untold hardship and misery. Power was centralized and the component units had to rely on the center for funds to execute the most basic programs, which most times did not come through. As a result, there was restiveness and tension in the land culminating in a 1991 insurrection by the Tuaregs in the North and the consequent breakdown of law and order. General Traore's government heavy handed response to the insurrection led to his overthrow by reform-minded elements within the military, aghast at the wanton human rights abuses and the killing of innocent protesters. A key recommendation of the National Conference empanelled by the new administration was the need to devolve power to the component units or decentralization as a means of bringing development directly, and closer to the people.

The film, *J'Crois* or I believe looks at the journey down the decentralization path. Has the road to decentralization been easy? Or has the reception been at best lukewarm? According to Dr. Moussa Djire a professor at the university of Bamako, the whole philosophy of devolution of power is a step in the right direction since it amounts to "returning power to the people". For Aminata, a resident of Bamako, whose forlorn and vacant look speak of years of deprivation and misery, the decentralization project has brought "nothing" to her material circumstance. According to Aminata, "just take a look around you, and you'll see for yourself that decentralization has brought nothing".

Oumarou Ag Mohammed Ibrahim, the president of the decentralized Communities, disagrees. He thinks decentralization has brought government closer to the people, engendering in the process, a high degree of participation and a new orientation on the part of the people not to see government as the sole means of advancing their well-being and welfare, but to look inward and use the enabling environment that government has created to improve their living condition. "I believe, I believe and I believe!" was the exultant manner Mohammed in which endorsed the program.

Ag Mohammed Ibrahim's optimistic view of the program is shared by Ibrahim Sylla, a director of Collectivities Territories who said, that decentralization was "very important to us". For Ahmed El Kori, a journalist, the decentralization project has brought the former rebel forces in the North into the larger national armed forces, who now pledge their allegiance to the national government.

As laudable as the decentralization program appears, it has also brought about tensions among traditionally minded people especially those in the southern section of Segou whose Chief, Kokedje Coulibaly dismissed the program as not being homegrown, but from "Europe" and wished that government had embarked on a lengthier enlightenment campaign before the program was launched maintaining that the idea for disparate communities that have nothing in common to come together and embark upon development projects cannot work. Already, the tension Coulibaly talked about is playing out in the communities of Nieguen Koro and Nieguen Coura who were regrouped to form a new Commune. "There has been conflicts" Dr. Djire acknowledged noting that the greatest problem confronting decentralization has been "the issue of where the capital" of the new communes should be "located". He also cited the problem with the nomadic nature of the Tuaregs in the north who are itinerant cattle rearers. Confining the Tuaregs to a commune threatens to dislocate them and grievously damage their way of life.

The seeming disconnect between the people and government that decentralization has created alarmed most Malians like a fisherman who complained that he has not seen a Minister or other government officials in his Commune for over 12 years—a situation he said has brought about corruption among the Commune's leadership who are not accountable to anyone but themselves.

The idea of devolution of power is a welcome development especially in a continent where leaders tend to ascribe to themselves the role of sole repository of wisdom, power and knowledge. But to leave the people

to the designs and machinations of Commune leadership without accountability opens up the prospects of abuse of power, which could in the long run imperil the success of decentralization. As Oumarou Ag Mohammed Ibrahim, the head of the decentralization program mused, ten years after its introduction “it’s still early to conclude whether it is working” or not. It is “a learning process”. One hopes that decentralization works because its success could become a working model or framework for other African countries desirous of devolving power from center to the regional and local levels of government.

Ekerete Udoh, M.A. Political Science, Brooklyn College, CUNY. Publisher of *The Diasporan Star*. <http://www.thediasporanstar.com>