

Summary

Periurban land in fast growing west-African cities is under strong urbanisation pressure. Such type of land represents an object that different actor groups are striving to obtain access to and property rights over. This thesis analyses these land issues at the urban margins of Niamey with regard to local politics, and interprets land access and property rights as issues of power and authority. The analysis of the dynamics around access to and recognition of property rights for periurban land mirrors the socio-political and institutional transformations the country went through during the last decades since Independence. Multiple institutions, from within the wide range between public and private, are involved in such dynamics, seeking to anchor their authority and to establish legitimacy through granting user rights and recognising property claims. Periurban land in Niamey can thus figure as a showcase that reflects the evolution of institutions and public authority, and the relationship between these with city residents who over time have become citizens with a consciousness for democratic rights.

These transformations are not occurring without frictions, contestations, and conflict. In the empirical part of this thesis, three cases at the former or the contemporary urban periphery of Niamey are analysed. The first site represents a green belt planted during the first decades after Independence by authoritarian regimes without consideration of the customary land rights of local farmers. By analysing the establishment of green spaces through tree plantation in urban areas and the transformations of forestry services, these places are conceptualized as political arenas through which legitimation practices and strategies of inscribing authority into space by a State in formation become evident. The second analytical spotlight is directed on the contemporary local politics around that same green belt where claims for recognition of customary rights, land rights formalisation processes, and the resulting institutionalisation of citizenship in a reformulated context of democratisation, are studied. Lastly, the analysis turns its attention to the new urban peripheries and the processes of zoning by powerful private actors. The production of urban land plots is then interpreted as territorialisation at the scale of the city where control over the spaces of future extensions of the capital contributes to local processes of authority formation.

The empirical results that reflect extensive ethnographic field research in Niamey suggest that urban peripheries represent spaces of political experimentation, configuration, and reconfiguration of various power poles, customary authorities, central or local political institutions, and economic key-players. These spaces prove to be privileged arenas where positions of authority and legitimacy are constantly renegotiated, and where differentiated forms of citizenship crystalize in the confluence of aspirations, strategies, needs and political challenges. The panoply of forms of productive exchange between space, authority, and citizenship in the context of a democratic State in the making, allows for a comprehensive and productive interpretation of contemporary struggles over periurban land as more broadly reflecting negotiations over statehood, and contributing to State making processes at the local level.