Introduction: Comparative Municipal Ethnographies

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This issue of *kritisk etnografi* focuses on ethnographies of the municipality, the district, or the local government. The purpose is to contribute to ethnographically informed analyses of the conditions and articulations of local politics from different parts of the world. It includes ethnographic case-studies from Africa, Asia, and Latin America on a large variety of themes and approaches. Rich ethnographic descriptions cover themes like the marketspace of party politics (Ghana), diaspora politics and local development (Mali, Tibet/India), urban development and land speculation (Uganda, Niger), decentralised policy reforms (Indonesia, Bolivia), tourism industry and local politics (Philippines), and political failure (Burkina Faso). A common thread is the ethnographic analysis of how "democratic decentralisation" articulates meaning in different contexts and countries across the world. Key questions asked by the authors include: How do social and political actors navigate in the context of local elections and development schemes? How is public authority asserted – and by whom? What are the basic structures and rules of the game in changing institutional landscapes? To what extent is it possible and meaningful to compare municipalities cross-culturally?

With the help of such questions, this issue explores the contours of what can be termed "a comparative municipal ethnography"; hence, an ethnographically grounded analysis of what in different settings best approximate the English concept of municipality as a comparative analytical unit across cases, countries, and continents. The comparison of discourse and practice between municipalities puts the searchlight on the interaction of various actors and institutions, including administrative procedures, traditional and religious authorities, representatives of marginalised groups, development actors, political parties, and social and political brokers. The issue invites ethnographic case-studies on specific municipalities, as well as comparative anthropological approaches.

In the democratisation processes that were shaped in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, governments and international agencies across the world manifested a renewed interest in decentralisation as a means by which the over-centralisation of political decisions at the top of the state would be altered. A wide range of actors, including civil society actors, political opponents, and international donors, supported decentralisation for its potential to favour the devolution of central power to local institutions and structures (Manor 2011; Mback 2003; Ribot 2011; Sabbi et al. 2020). Decentralisation was a central element of the democratisation processes, which made some to refer to it as "democratic decentralisation" (Crook and Manor 1998). Others saw decentralisation as a legal technique of territorial administration, and as a political mode of sharing powers between central and local authorities in a country (Mback 2003; Oluwo 2001). A central distinction in terms of

the concept of decentralisation is that between "deconcentration" and "devolution". While deconcentration refers to the delegation of responsibility and authority to field units of the same department or level of government, devolution denotes the transfer of authority to locally constituted units of government or special purpose authorities. A local service of the central ministry is an example of deconcentration, whereas the autonomous municipality run by an assembly of democratically elected councilors is a case in point for devolution.

Decentralisation policies and their political and economic implications dominated scholarly debates on how decentralisation should be and ought to be. Being a major component of the World Bank's "good governance" package, democratic decentralisation was expected to bring service delivery closer to consumers, to improve the responsiveness of the central government to public demands and thereby reduce poverty, to improve the efficiency and quality of public services, and to empower lower units to become more involved (Nadeem 2016). Hence, laudable and yet somewhat contradictory goals were attached to decentralisation.

Anthropologists entered this scholarly debate by engaging the discipline to understand how the decentralisation reforms affected and transformed society. In studies in West Africa decentralisation became a very important research theme for many years (e.g. Amanor and Annan 1999; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2003; Fay et al. 2006; Hagberg 2010; Hahonou 2010; Kassibo 1997; Laurent et al. 2004; Olivier de Sardan 2015; Olivier de Sardan et Tidjani Alou 2009; Sawadogo 2001).[1] For instance, Malian anthropologists were often involved both in basic research and applied work when decentralisation reforms were implemented in the 1990s (Kassibo 1997; Fay et al. 2006). In my own work, I have found it fruitful to look at the wide range of activities that are carried out "in the name" of decentralisation rather than how decentralisation should be; hence, decentralisation is to be explored as a series of political, economic and cultural practices at work in local arenas (Hagberg 2010). While decentralisation practices are neither coherent nor uniform, they do justify legitimate claims made by local political actors. In other words, while decentralisation in the Global South was part of a neoliberal paradigm promoted by international donors – a model to be implement independently of country, context, and culture – we see that the democratic election of local governments also transformed and gave context to the model itself. Rather than looking at the implementation of the model, decentralisaton provides context to understanding transformations in local arenas.

Such transformations are political, economic, and cultural in nature, or, perhaps better understood when described as responding to three basic human ambitions: power, wealth, and meaning. First, decentralisation affects the distribution and the exercise of power within society. Therefore, the materialisation of decentralisation depends not only on policy and legislative reform, but also on the political will of the central government to transfer real, discretionary, decision-making powers to local government bodies. Another issue pertains to legitimacy of the local government. Local governments may well be legal in that they have acquired decision-making powers without being legitimate vis-à-vis other local power holders. The role of the traditional chief vis-à-vis the mayor is tricky, to say the least. To some

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[1] In the 2000s, research labs in Burkina Faso (Labo citoyenneté, https://laboratoire-citoyennetes.org/), Mali (Point Sud, http://pointsud.org/, ARGA), and Niger (LASDEL, https://www.lasdel.net/), to mention a few, had specific research programmes on decentralisation. The think-tank ARGA (http://www.afrique-gouvernance.net/) has had a particular focus on decentralisation policies ever since.

extent, rather than legislating away former power structures, the municipal council led by the democratically elected mayor represents a new layer of political institutions.

Second, transformations are economic, that is, in terms of people's livelihoods and local economic development. The raison d'être of decentralisation largely relies on elected government bodies' abilities to support the livelihoods of local people and to address everyday problems of poor health and education facilities, inadequate water supplies, and lack of employment, marketing and investment opportunities. This requires ensuring effective management of natural resources, the provision of appropriate, efficient, and affordable services, the seizing of new economic opportunities, and the reconciling of competing interests of different social groups. The paying of taxes and the increased control over people's livelihoods through land tenure and cattle markets are likely to have implications for rural producers' capacities to subsist. In practice, however, decentralisation does not necessarily lead to local development. Poor municipalities may well see their opportunities deteriorate. Corrupt practices do not disappear because of decentralisation as demonstrated by Blundo's (2001) study of "embezzled decentralisation" in Senegal. International donors supporting decentralisation processes in principle may often practically undermine local governments by channeling public aid through NGOs, leaving municipal councils with scarce resources.

Third, decentralisation involves people's perceptions and meanings attributed to the transformations in local arenas. Decentralisation may enable a re-appropriation of local cultural identities and values and allow for local arrangements building on local rules and institutions. By devolving more power to local communities, it may help make sense of the postcolonial state administration and favour the emergence of local democratic culture. The sense of belonging to a municipality has a lot to do with political imagination of "Us" and "Them". This might in turn lead to a politics of belonging where only autochthons may aspire to the highest political positions (Geschiere 2009; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Hagberg 2007). The tricky issue of how to draw politico-administrative boundaries prevails in most countries and articulates with belonging and exclusion, whether in Mali or Sweden, in Mozambique or Bolivia.

The title of this Special Issue is *Comparative Municipal Ethnographies* so as to signal the importance of thick descriptions of local politics and transformative processes, while simultaneously developing a comparative ethnographic analysis. What I call "municipal ethnography" is in fact an attempt to use the municipality as an entry-point for studying society, and cultural and political change. The municipality is thus conceptualised as a spatial and temporal unit of analysis, and as a local socio-political, economic, and cultural arena. As is the case in this issue of *kritisk etnografi*, a wide variety of themes and approaches may be brought together, and productively compared, in a municipal ethnography. An interest in local democracy is not limited to postcolonial contexts but has become a major area of concern in most countries. There are numerous experiments and approaches of local participatory governance, that is, "government-sponsored direct participation between invited citizens and local officials in concrete arrangements and concerning problems that affect them" (Hertting and Kugelberg 2018: 1). Hence, electoral democracy is not enough to secure legitimacy for municipalities. This point is valid for any municipality, not just those in countries in the Global South. Local democracy is by definition always in the making or work in progress. In Clarissa Kugelberg's (2018) insightful ethnographic study of participatory governance in Botkyrka municipality in Sweden, the interaction between

politicians, civil servants, electors, residents, etc. or the so-called dialogue forum is analysed. The dialogue forum was set up to complement electoral democracy by inviting residents to discuss local issues. Yet rather than bringing about a deepening of participation, Kugelberg observes the power involved in informal discussions. She argues: "participatory governance is constructed and re-constructed in social interaction between participants from different sectors, with different mandates, and with different initial understandings of the roles and rules of such governance. It is a state of becoming" (Kugelberg 2018: 54). The important point highlighted by Kugelberg has a direct bearing on this issue of *kritisk etnografi*. Even in a country like Sweden, with more than 150 years of municipal self-government, local democracy faces important challenges to thrive and can obviously never be taken for granted. Hence, even though most contributions concern countries that turned to electoral democracy in the 1990s, the questions asked are valid for "old democracies" as well.[2]

This Special Issue of *kritisk etnografi* comprises of nine articles about municipal politics in nine countries in three continents, starting in Indonesia and ending in Burkina Faso. In his study of the politics of the 2014 Village Law in Indonesia, Hans Antlöv brings us to the core of decentralisation reforms. By this law, Indonesia was one of first countries in the world to provide far-reaching autonomy and fiscal devolution to its 75,000 villages. The Village Law gave villages the right to manage village-scale activities, empowered the village government and provided substantial national and district funds to do so. Throughout the article, Antlöv outlines the trajectory and results of implementing the Law, and analyses challenges in terms of collective action, village development and grassroots democracy.

Charlotta Widmark addresses the situation for female Bolivian leaders of indigenous and social movements and analyses their chances of exerting influence and promoting female interests. She discusses the use of gender quotas to increase female participation, and the roles of the feminist movement and women's organisations. Despite the gender quotas, the women's participation has been unsatisfactory. Why do many women find it strategically more beneficial to promote female issues outside of formal political structures? Female politicians of indigenous and social movements need to balance dilemmas of conflict and complementarity in relation to other organised women, politically active men and women, and the organisations/communities that elected them.

Anna Baral explores how informal workers understood the role of the city management in the demolition of Kisekka, a spare parts market in the Ugandan capital of Kampala, to be replaced by an "ultramodern" shopping mall. She unveils two main forces prevailing in urban development: the push for entrepreneurialism and competition typical of neoliberal urban planning, and the trend towards re-centralisation with more government control. While decentralisation in Uganda has not necessarily guaranteed better service provision, the mushrooming of local administrative divisions has strengthened the party in power. For two decades mayors of Kampala have been from opposition parties, prompting the central government to re-centralise the city administration to be under the government's direct control. As a result, the City of Kampala has intervened massively in projects of urban development, including the demolition and reconstruction of a number of city markets like Kisekka.

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[2] Interestingly, the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy engages in Municipal Partnerships between municipalities in Sweden and in municipalities in a number of countries in the Global South. Currently, more than 60 Swedish municipalities, county councils, and regions are involved in a Municipal Partnership (https://icld.se/).

From the demolition of a market to the construction of a shopping mall, Gabriella Körling and Hassane Moussa Ibrahima describe land issues on a micro and down-to-earth level. In the Nigerien capital of Niamey, and certainly in other African capitals as well, land is a central source of economic and political capital and the object of intense competition. Land speculation has accelerated with the decentralisation of land management, including zoning operations whereby rural land such as agricultural fields is transformed into plots for housing. The actors involved in zoning include municipalities, private and public enterprises, private entrepreneurs and individual land speculators, national politicians, customary landowners, brokers, and intermediaries to name a few. Körling and Moussa Ibrahima analyse the economic, political and spatial stakes of land management in the periphery of Niamey and demonstrate that land speculation is part of a wider struggle for political and economic influence that is reshaping local political arenas and rapidly transforming the urban periphery.

In a study of a municipality in Mali, Sten Hagberg and Bintou Koné analyse how diaspora communities living abroad with strong links back home can be heavily involved in municipal politics. Throughout the article, they demonstrate that the the diaspora of Kiban municipality is supporting local development, while simultaneously fueling dispute. They describe the rivalry between two home-area associations when the municipality was founded in the late 1990s. While one association considered that it should support "the municipality", the other wanted to support "the population in town" only, and not those living in villages. Hagberg and Koné particularly analyse the extent to which Kiban's diasporas are drivers of both development and dispute.

Madhura Balasubramaniam and Sonika Gupta explore the history of collective claims made over the land in Majnu ka Tilla, an informal colony of exiled Tibetans, in New Delhi. The 60 years long exile has produced simultaneous narratives of refugeehood and citizen-like claims over land. In particular, the role of the Residents Welfare Association of Majnu ka Tilla in negotiating precarities of urban informality in Delhi is described. The association has provided the residents with an institutional form located outside of the formal process of Tibetan rehabilitation and has thereby allowed them to shift from the rhetoric of refuge to deploying a language of rights in their land claims. Interestingly, such a language of rights is unavailable to other Tibetans living in India.

Mari-Elina Ekoluoma explores the smallest political units of the Philippines, namely, the barangay, and the municipality. Since the 1980s, the tourist-town Sabang – one of a dozen of barangays of the municipality of Puerto Galera – has become an international sex tourism town. Sex tourism has brought lucrative business opportunities, as well as a reputation of seediness, immorality and a place of illegal and illicit activities. The municipal council has made several attempts to control the perceived "lewdness" of Sabang, including the go-go bars. In particular, the Lewd Ordinance was adopted by the council, but the mayor never signed it because, he argued, its implementation would ruin local businesses. Ekoluoma explores the practical outcome of the Lewd Ordinance: who and which institutions are entitled to identify, and control "lewdness"? The article draws attention to municipal policy-making and local responses to controversial municipal policies.

Ulrik Jennische approaches political governance in Tamale, Northern Ghana, to show how a conflict between the two royal lineages within the traditional Dagbon state is creating present-day divisions between the major political parties in the city. The article analyses small-scale street and market traders' relation to political parties. Although politically

interested, traders often find that political parties polarise and bring conflict. While distrust toward political parties and the government might undermine the decentralisation, it also brings traders together. Jennische demonstrates how alongside the conflict, there is a peace process initiated by the political establishment and the eminent chiefs of the Dagbon royal lineage so as to preserve the moral economy of small-scale urban trade.

Sten Hagberg examines the socio-political transformations of Burkina Faso, following the ousting of President Blaise Compaoré from power in October 2014 and culminating with the municipal elections in May 2016. He develops a case-study on the political failure of a newly founded party and its presidential candidate at the national level. In particular, the article looks at how municipal and regional representatives handled the failure. The issue of political failure highlights how local political leaders are caught between their constituencies of voters and supporters, on the one hand, and the party's headquarters and State administration, on the other. Hagberg argues that the framing and timing of political failure are central in understanding local leaders' attempts to turn failure into a socially and morally loaded virtue.

To conclude, I would like to argue that by bringing together such a diversity of cases, contexts, and countries, the contours of a comparative municipal ethnography become visible. The power struggles between the elected mayor and the central State, between local moral values and the pragmatics of social and economic development, between local residents and external actors, between traditional leadership and party politics, all indicate the comparative potential in studying the municipality as a social arena, as a public space, as a cultural representation, and as a political imagination.

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