

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Delegated Prison Order: Inmate Self-Organisation, Zones of Uncertainty and Indirect Rule in a West African Civil Prison**Florentin NANGBE***

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an organisational analysis of an African prison based on first-hand ethnographic material collected in the civil prison of a West African country: an architectural description of the site, a count of inmates by building, and observation of sleeping regimes, chores, the internal economy, hygiene and food. The scientific problem addressed is not the normative one of detention conditions, but the properly sociological one of how order is produced in an organisation forced to operate far beyond its capacity. On roughly 3,000 m² designed for a much smaller population, 1,633 recorded persons (nearly 1,700 according to the inmates' own estimate) live together under a numerically negligible legal staff. The argument is that this organisation survives neither through disciplinary coercion nor through collapse, but through an informal and systematic delegation of sovereign functions to the captive population itself. Combining Goffman's theory of the total institution, Crozier and Friedberg's strategic analysis of organisations and the sociology of imprisonment (Sykes, Combessie, Chantraine), the article reconstructs a six-tier internal hierarchy, objectifies a spatial sleeping scale operating as a stratification system, and shows how institutional scarcity is converted into a power resource. The establishment corresponds less to the panoptic model than to indirect rule: the administration retains sovereignty over the perimeter and abandons the interior to privatised regulation, whose cost is borne by inmates lacking relational and monetary capital. Implications are drawn for the organisational audit of prisons.

Keywords: *total institution; negotiated order; zones of uncertainty; informal delegation of authority; prison overcrowding; prison governance*

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1. Introduction

For the sociology of organisations, the prison constitutes a particularly fruitful limiting case, or else an improbable organisational object. It indeed combines three properties that are rarely found together: an explicit official purpose codified by law, an involuntary population that can neither resign nor negotiate its membership, and an extreme asymmetry of resources between those who supervise and those who are supervised. What ought to make it the most thoroughly controllable of organisations is precisely what makes it the organisation most dependent on the cooperation of those it constrains.

The material on which this article is based accentuates this paradox. It describes an establishment of approximately 3,000 m², three quarters of whose surface is occupied by buildings, encircled by a five-metre wall topped with shards of broken bottles, in which 1,633 persons are held according to the building-by-building count, and some 1,700 according to the inmates' own estimate. Two blocks of sanitary facilities and a single tap serve the entire population. One nurse, two hospital rooms and a storeroom for medicines make up the whole of the health provision. Against this, the legal staff is reduced to a prison governor (régisseur), a deputy governor, a registrar, a chief warder, a brigade commander, a few gendarmes at the guard post and a military guard.

A normative reading would immediately conclude that the conditions of detention are degrading, and it would not be wrong. Yet such a reading misses the sociological enigma. For this establishment does not collapse. The buildings are swept three times a day, at fixed times. The roll call is drawn up, visiting lists are published, the doors open at seven o'clock, collective prayer is called at half past five by the striking together of two planks, a market operates from nine in the morning until a quarter to six in the evening, an inter-building championship is endowed with a cup, and at around eleven at night "everything becomes calm". An organisation deprived of the means of its own order nonetheless produces order. It is this fact, and not its scandalous character, that constitutes the object of this article.

1.1 Research Problem

The research question is formulated as follows:

through what organisational mechanisms does a structurally under-resourced prison establishment manage to produce a stable social order; and at what internal redistributive cost?

Three sub-questions follow from it. How is a hierarchy of authority constituted when the legal hierarchy is numerically incapable of occupying the ground? Which resources become strategic in a universe of absolute scarcity, and who controls them? Finally, what form of stratification results from this informal regulation, and onto which categories of actors is its cost transferred?

1.2 Hypotheses

Main hypothesis. The order observed in the civil prison of this West African country does not rest on the direct exercise of disciplinary coercion, but on an informal, stabilised and functionally

indispensable delegation of sovereign competences (surveillance, allocation of space, internal policing, administrative information, hygiene, distribution) to the inmate population itself.

First secondary hypothesis. Scarcity is not merely a constraint that is endured: it is converted into a resource of power. The scarcer a vital resource is (thirty centimetres of floor, a place along the “bars”, access to the dispensary, information about a visit), the more effective authority is accumulated by whoever controls its distribution.

Second secondary hypothesis. Delegation produces a cumulative stratification: external relational capital (receiving visits) is converted into internal monetary capital, which is converted into hierarchical position, which is in turn converted into bodily comfort and health security. Inmates without visitors bear the entire cost of the order.

Third secondary hypothesis. The relevant model of government is not panopticism but indirect rule: the institution concentrates its means on sovereignty over the perimeter and delegates the regulation of the interior, which explains the coexistence of rigorous control of the enclosure and a quasi-autonomous internal life.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Total Institution and Its Limits

The obligatory starting point is the notion of the total institution developed by Erving Goffman [1]: a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. The notion, discussed and taken up by contemporary sociology [2], describes several features of the field remarkably well: the breakdown of the barriers separating the spheres of sleep, leisure and work; admission rituals; and the mortification of the self through enforced promiscuity.

The material confirms these features with precision. The admission ritual is codified: the deputy building chief receives the newcomer, introduces him to the building chief, and then entrusts him to the hygiene chief, who “makes the internal rules known to him”. The mortification is literal, the indigenous text rendering it through two convergent animal and industrial metaphors: the “*zongome*”, a crowd of goats at the Zongo market, and being arranged “like fish in a sardine tin”.

But the concept encounters a decisive limit here, and this is the first analytical contribution of this article. In Goffman, the regulation of enclosed life is the work of the *staff*. In this West African country, it is the work of the inmates. The internal rules are notified not by an officer but by an inmate. The roll call is drawn up not by the registry but by inmates recruited to the registry. The internal surveillance posts, “at the strategic corners”, are held by inmates wearing armbands, of whom the material says exactly that they “watch over one another”. The institution is total without being, in the strict sense, administered. A second framework is therefore required.

2.2 Strategic Analysis: Power and Zones of Uncertainty

The strategic analysis of organisations developed by Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg provides this framework. It establishes that power in an organisation is not an attribute of status but a relationship of unbalanced exchange, and that its source lies in the control of a zone of uncertainty

that is relevant to other actors [3]. No actor, even the most dominated, is devoid of a margin of freedom; and any actor who controls an uncertainty on which others depend holds real power, whatever his place in the organisational chart [4].

This shift is fundamental for our object. It allows us to stop reading the establishment as an apparatus of unilateral domination and to read it instead as a concrete system of action, in which actors formally without status hold substantial power because they control uncertainties that the administration has given up managing: where the newcomer will sleep, who will go to the dispensary, who will learn that he has a visitor, how the ration will be shared out, who will keep the “precious parcels”.

2.3 Sociology of the Prison: Corruption of Authority and Negotiated Order

These two general frameworks intersect in a specific achievement of prison sociology. Gresham Sykes had established, in a maximum-security institution, that the guard lacking sufficient means buys compliance by conceding advantages and tolerating infractions: this is the “corruption of authority”, a mechanism that has been discussed at length in prison research [5], [6]. French sociology extended this insight under the notion of negotiated order, which invites us to open the “black box” of daily transactions between staff and inmates [7], while Philippe Combessie provided the French-speaking field with a reference synthesis on prison organisation and its margins [8], [9]. Gilles Chantraine, for his part, argued for a decentring of critical analysis, attentive to the trajectories and competences of inmates rather than to institutional logic alone [10].

Our contribution lies in the continuation of this body of work, but shifts its point of application. Whereas negotiated order describes a transaction between two constituted bodies, the West African field reveals a more advanced stage of the process: no longer a negotiation at the margins, but a structural outsourcing of the order-maintenance function. The staff do not concede advantages in exchange for calm; they have ceded the management of the interior. We propose to name this configuration *delegated prison order*: a regime in which the functions of policing, allocation of vital resources, administrative information and discipline are durably exercised by inmates vested with an authority that is informal yet institutionally recognised and equipped, down to the numbered armband.

3. Methodology

3.1 Nature of the Material

The article is based on a single monographic corpus, produced in situ by an observer inside the establishment. This corpus has four components: a systematic architectural description of the site, conducted along an oriented route from the main gate to the large courtyard; a detailed chronology of the day and the night, with times; a quantitative count of the population by building, with indigenous designations; and a series of thematic notes on hygiene, health, food and visits.

This material has the specific value of participant observation in a closed setting: access to indigenous categories that no external survey could reach. The typology of sleeping regimes (“*zongome*”, “*champ dosé*”, “*champ plat*”, “*barres*”) and the nomenclature of the buildings (“Ministre” [Minister], “Employé” [Employee], “Maison Blanche” [White House], “Zaïre”, “T.F.” glossed as “Tu es Fou” [You are Mad]) constitute first-order data, since they are the instrument through which the actors themselves conceive and enact stratification.

3.2 Analytical Processing

The corpus, initially descriptive, was subjected to three operations. An operation of relational coding first consisted in identifying, in each descriptive statement, the actor who decides, the actor who executes and the resource at stake, in order to turn a topography into a map of authority. An operation of serialisation then consolidated the scattered quantitative data (population figures, surface areas, timetables, contributions, rations) into comparable tables. Finally, an operation of generalisation confronted the regularities obtained with the theoretical propositions, systematically distinguishing what confirms the available framework from what exceeds it.

3.3 Limitations and Precautions

The validity of the results is bounded. This is a monograph of one site, at a given moment; no statistical generalisation is legitimate, only an analytical generalisation, namely the proposal of a candidate mechanism, testable elsewhere. The position of the observer, internal to the setting and directly affected by what he describes, guarantees depth of access but engages his perspective: the register of testimony surfaces in places, and the scientific approach requires that it be distinguished from descriptive statement. The discourse of the prison staff was not collected, which leaves out of scope the agents' own rationality, notably the budgetary and statutory constraints that no doubt explain part of the delegation observed. Finally, the gap between the tabulated total of 1,633 and the indigenous estimate of 1,700 is itself a sociological fact: it measures the distance between the administrative count and the population actually present, a fraction of which escapes registration by building.

The national context documented elsewhere confirms the plausibility of the field described: prison data and the observations of human rights organisations have long attested to massive overcrowding and inadequate sanitary equipment in the country's establishments. See, in particular, the summary tables of prison data [11] and the report of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) on state violence in this West African country [12].

4. Results

4.1 The Morphology of the Site: Sovereignty Concentrated on the Perimeter

The architectural description reveals a logic of layout that is not panoptic. Control resources are massively concentrated on the envelope and the thresholds: a five-metre wall lined with shards over two hundred by one hundred and fifty metres, a main gate four metres by three, a guard post with control at the entrance, a military guard by day and by night, a new sentry box built at the rear, and then a series of successive gates of decreasing height separating the courtyard of honour, the chief warder's courtyard, the small courtyard and the large courtyard.

By contrast, no device for the continuous observation of the interior is mentioned. The governor's office, his secretariat, his residence, those of the chief warder and of the registrar, the grilled visiting room, the brigade, the registry and the infirmary form an administrative core located at the front, on the entrance side. The material explicitly notes that at the brigade, the registry and the infirmary "calm can be felt during the day", whereas at the same moment the small courtyard is a market and the large courtyard a saturated space. The geography of noise traces the geography of power: the administration is present where it records and filters, absent where people live.

This dissociation is the central morphological fact. It validates the third secondary hypothesis: the model is one of frontier sovereignty. The institution guarantees that no one leaves; it does not claim to govern what happens inside. The governor's very residence, reached by a few steps above his office, with bedrooms, dining room, living room, shower and terrace, materialises the gap in condition that separates the two worlds divided by a gate.

4.2 Density as Structure: A Quantitative Anatomy

The population count makes it possible to objectify the load and, above all, to show that it is unevenly distributed. Table 1 reproduces the data of the corpus, adding the calculation of each building's share of the total population.

Table 1. Distribution of inmates by building and indigenous designations (N = 1,633)

Building	Indigenous designation	Number of inmates	Share of total
A	Ministre (Minister)	50	3.1%
B	Employé (Employee)	15	0.9%
C	—	275	16.8%
D	—	270	16.5%
E	—	269	16.5%
F	Zaïre	269	16.5%
G	T.F. ("Tu es Fou", You are Mad)	270	16.5%
H	Secours "A" (Relief "A")	54	3.3%
I	Minors	17	1.0%
J	Women	60	3.7%
K	—	45	2.8%
L	Maison Blanche (White House)	26	1.6%
M	Sentenced to death	16	1.0%
N	Isolated (sick)	Included	—
TOTAL		1,633	100%

Source: field survey, monographic corpus, civil prison of the West African country. The indigenous designations are names coined by the inmates themselves.

Two lessons emerge. The first is concentration: only five buildings (C, D, E, F and G) house 1,353 persons, or 82.9% of the total population. These are the buildings of the large courtyard, lacking any valorising designation or bearing the most degrading names, "Zaïre" and "Tu es Fou". The second is differentiation: the buildings named "Ministre" and "Employé" house fifty and fifteen persons respectively, and their description mentions a kitchen, internal and external showers, an internal toilet,

an *apatam* (thatched shelter) for relaxation where belote, dominoes and draughts are played, and, in one case, a small garden.

The gap is therefore considerable. An inmate in building B enjoys an incomparably more favourable environment than an inmate in building C, which has more than eighteen times as many occupants. Overcrowding is not a uniform condition endured by all: it is a gradient, and position on this gradient is precisely what is at stake in internal power games. The indigenous designation functions as a public ranking of this gradient: being in the “Ministre” or with the “Employé” signals status; being in the “T.F.” signals its absence.

4.3 The Delegated Hierarchy: A Six-Tier Structure

Relational coding of the corpus brings out a structure of authority far more differentiated than the staff/inmates dichotomy. Table 2 sets it out.

Table 2. Structure of authority and resources controlled

<i>Tier</i>	<i>Actors</i>	<i>Basis of power</i>	<i>Resource controlled</i>
Tier 1 — Legal administration	Governor, deputy governor, registrar, chief warder, brigade commander, soldiers, nurse	Legal-rational authority; formal monopoly of coercion	Perimeter, gates, committals, registers, visiting room
Tier 2 — General delegated supervision	General security chief, deputy, general hygiene chief	Delegated authority cutting across the whole detention area	Movement between courtyards, collective chores, discipline
Tier 3 — Local delegated supervision	Building chief, deputy, hygiene chief, sweeping chief, food controller, “bar” keeper	Delegated authority over a building; power of allocation	Sleeping space, internal rules, ration, chores, deposited goods
Tier 4 — Functional auxiliaries	Registry inmates, doorkeepers and armband-wearing “security agents”, “vocalists”, servers, chore workers	Technical authority derived from an administrative function	Roll-call lists, information on visits, access to offices, daytime outings
Tier 5 — Endowed inmates	Owners of “ghettos”, artisans, resellers, athletes	Economic and reputational power	Goods, credit, employment of captive labour
Tier 6 — Destitute inmates	“Those without visitors”, abandoned minors, isolated sick inmates, newcomers	No resource that can be mobilised	None: a position of total dependence

Source: analytical reconstruction based on the monographic corpus.

A cross-reading of tiers 2 to 5 constitutes the main result. All of them are made up of inmates, and all of them exercise functions that the law assigns to the administration. The building chief, assisted by a deputy, a hygiene chief and a sweeping chief, “has authority over every prisoner as regards the tasks to be done in the building” and himself appoints the food controller: he therefore holds regulatory power, power of appointment and de facto disciplinary power. The general security chief, his deputy and the general hygiene chief oversee the whole, and the corpus specifies that the general hygiene chief supervises, alongside the soldiers, the outing of the women assigned to sweep the frontage.

Tier 4 deserves particular attention, since it shows that delegation is not a tacit tolerance but an assumed functional integration. The corpus is categorical: “all those who work in the registry office are recruited from among the prisoners”, and they draw up the list of names for the roll call. In other words, the founding administrative act of the prison institution (the counting of the persons in the State’s custody) is entrusted to the very persons who are its object. Likewise, the doorkeepers and security agents posted at strategic points are inmates wearing armbands, and the “vocalists” are responsible for announcing the visiting lists in the courtyards.

This configuration goes beyond the corruption of authority in Sykes’s sense. It is not a matter of a guard turning a blind eye to secure peace; it is a matter of an organisation that has transferred its operational processes to its captive users, providing them with distinctive insignia and recognised competences. The numbered armband is a uniform. Delegation is instituted.

4.4 The Sleeping Scale: Stratification Inscribed in Bodies

The most striking result concerns the allocation of night-time space. The corpus describes a continuous, named scale of sleeping positions, running from the back row reserved for the building chief down to the night spent standing. Table 3 formalises it.

Table 3. Indigenous scale of sleeping regimes

<i>Spatial regime</i>	<i>Occupants</i>	<i>Bodily modality</i>	<i>Autonomy</i>
Back row	Building chief and immediate collaborators	Lying on the back, ample space, close to the water jar	Maximum
<i>Barres</i> (“bars”, along the walls)	Long-standing inmates	Sleeping side by side, leaning against the wall	High
<i>Champ plat</i> (“flat field”)	Intermediate inmates	Lying flat on the back, aligned head-to-toe	Medium
<i>Champ dosé</i> (“measured field”)	Subordinate inmates	Enforced lying on the side, head-to-toe	Low
<i>Zongome</i>	Newcomers, inmates without resources	Crammed together under physical constraint, compressed head-to-toe	None
Standing	Surplus inmates	Night spent standing	None

Source: indigenous categories recorded in the corpus, ordered analytically.

This scale is a system of stratification in the full sense. It is hierarchical, named by the actors, endowed with allocation criteria (seniority, function, resources) and physically sanctioned. Its remarkable property is that it converts a social position into a bodily posture: the hierarchy is not merely symbolic; it is inscribed in the angle of the body, the surface occupied and the duration of sleep. The corpus provides the key to this conversion by locating the communal drinking-water jar at the back of the building, two metres from the chief's row: the vital resource is backed onto power, and reaching it means crossing the entire hierarchy of the floor.

The description of the journey to the chamber pots, placed at the left of the entrance, completes the demonstration of the regulatory function of the arrangement: whoever sets off from the back "performs a whole acrobatic act, trampling on people who often toss him about like a ping-pong ball". The price of a natural need is proportional to the social distance to be crossed. The scale is therefore not a mere expedient for managing congestion: it is the instrument through which scarcity is transformed into order, and order into lasting inequality.

It should be noted that this arrangement is administered entirely by tier 3, without any intervention by the staff. The allocation of the establishment's scarcest good (floor space) falls wholly within the remit of delegated power. This fact validates the first secondary hypothesis: it is because space is insufficient that it becomes a currency, and whoever controls its distribution holds the most relevant uncertainty in the entire system.

4.5 The Internal Economy: "Ghettos" and the Privatisation of Public Space

A second system of conversion operates by day. The corpus describes, along the buildings of the large courtyard, shelters built from salvaged materials (black plastic bags, mats) referred to as "ghettos", of which it specifies that "curiously, each ghetto always has its owner". The term is decisive: in a place where inmates own nothing in law, a *de facto* regime of private property has been constituted over collective space.

These units house a differentiated economy. A productive branch brings together raffia and nylon crafts: household baskets, fans, purses, sandals, bottles wrapped in multicoloured threads, school bags and jute pencil cases. A commercial branch sells food inputs (maize flour, rice, condiments, red palm oil, groundnut oil, *gari*) as well as manufactured and pharmaceutical products coming mostly from Nigeria. A service branch covers hairdressing, washing and ironing of clothes, audiovisual screenings for followers of the Celestial Church of Christ, and services described as charlatanism. The market in the small courtyard, open from nine in the morning until a quarter to six in the evening, adds to this female resellers coming from outside, in direct competition with inmates of both sexes engaged in the same activity.

The existence of an internal labour market is attested unambiguously. In the small buildings, "server" inmates are recruited to cook and clean the sanitary facilities, and the corpus states their remuneration with brutal clarity: "in return for having their belly guaranteed for the day". The minors, some twenty of them, "left to fend for themselves", are "at the service of whomever they wish during the day in order to satisfy their hunger". Subsistence has thus become a wage, and hunger the mechanism for allocating labour.

The extortion of visitors and visited inmates at the main gate, which the corpus reports as persisting "despite all the measures taken by the prison authorities", completes the picture. It indicates that

privatisation does not stop at the boundary between the delegated and the legal: the point of contact with the outside world, an administrative monopoly par excellence, is also subject to informal levying.

4.6 Health, Hygiene and Food: The Transfer of the Institution's Cost

The fourth series of results shows where, ultimately, the bill for this system is settled. The monthly major cleaning of the buildings (removal of belongings, sweeping, washing of the floor with soap, disinfection with kerosene) is organised by the building chief and the hygiene chief, and financed by an individual contribution of 100 to 300 CFA francs, the corpus specifying that the cleaning products supplied by the administration "are of no use whatsoever". Collective hygiene is therefore a privatised charge, which mechanically means that it is beyond the reach of those who have no resources.

The chain of care operates according to the same logic. The building controller enters the sick inmate in the dispensary register: access to care therefore passes through tier 3, which constitutes an additional zone of uncertainty in the hands of delegated power. After consultation, a few available tablets (an antibiotic, chloroquine) are handed over together with a prescription. The corpus then draws the decisive consequence: "if you have neither visits nor financial means, the illness takes root", and the outcome is evacuation to a university referral centre. In a context of scarcity, the medical prescription is not care: it is a transfer of the burden onto the inmate's family network. Whoever has none is excluded from the system.

The corpus further reports that inmates from the outskirts and the villages, lacking adequate information on the dispensary procedure, treat themselves with medicines of dubious origin bought from stalls or from itinerant internal sellers. Monetary inequality is thus compounded by informational inequality, whose yield is directly measured in health. The action of the doctors of the NGO *Fraternité des prisons* (Prison Fellowship), of chaplains and of Catholic nuns is mentioned as real but insufficient to curb morbidity.

Finally, the official diet, set out in Table 4, sheds light on nutritional dependence on the external network.

Table 4. Weekly cycle of the official ration

<i>Day</i>	<i>Official ration served</i>	<i>Dominant nature</i>
Monday	Akassa paste, diluted sauce	Carbohydrate
Tuesday	Gari (one cup) + sugar or groundnut cake	Carbohydrate
Wednesday	Beans submerged in water	Degraded protein
Thursday	Rice with oil and chilli	Carbohydrate
Friday	Gari (one cup) + sugar or groundnut cake	Carbohydrate
Saturday	Beans submerged in water	Degraded protein
Sunday	Rice with oil and chilli	Carbohydrate

Source: monographic corpus. Gari is served by the cup, accompanied by twelve lumps of sugar or groundnut cakes.

The regularity of the cycle is striking: the intake is almost exclusively carbohydrate, protein intake being reduced to two rations of beans described as “submerged in water”. The corpus describes the consequence for the category that has no alternative: “those without visitors who, by dint of taking the ration, become anaemic, and fatigue follows, leading them to death”. This statement must be read as the terminal result of the system described in the preceding sections. The institutional ration is not enough; the economy of the “ghettos” makes up for it, but at a price; the only means of taking part in it is to receive visits or to earn an income within it; the absence of visits simultaneously closes off access to food, to care, to hygiene and to an acceptable position on the sleeping scale.

The second secondary hypothesis is thus verified: inequalities do not add up, they multiply. External relational capital is the master variable of all internal stratification. The visiting hours recorded in the corpus (from nine to twelve o’clock and from three to five in the afternoon for men; from twelve to one o’clock and from five to six in the afternoon for women) thereby cease to be a regulatory detail: they delimit access to the establishment’s most strategic vital resource.

4.7 The Ritual Production of Calm

One last result must be recorded, for it rules out any conclusion of mere disorder. The day is punctuated with clockwork regularity: opening of the doors at seven o’clock, departure of the chore workers, sweeping in single file from seven to eight, then from two to three in the afternoon, then from five o’clock onwards; weightlifting and displays of strength from half past seven to nine; the market from nine in the morning until a quarter to six in the evening; return of the chore workers at six o’clock. The night is just as structured: fifteen minutes after lock-up, two inmates read and comment on a biblical passage to the rhythm of songs and dances; the television set in each building runs for twenty hours without interruption; calm settles in between eleven o’clock and midnight; at half past five, the striking together of two planks calls for thirty minutes of prayer.

The corpus describes this nocturnal calm as a “miracle of God”. Sociology must offer a more parsimonious explanation: this calm is produced. It results from the conjunction of a ritual saturation of time (worship, television, sport, games, reading, craft work) and an organised exhaustion, since the corpus notes that in the buildings of the large courtyard inmates sleep from morning to evening “to recover the sleep lost during the night”. The chapel, the mosque under an *apatam*, the sacristy backing onto a library and the electronics repair workshop are not ancillary facilities: they are the infrastructure of a system of regulation through occupation, which produces at zero administrative cost what the establishment lacks the means to obtain through coercion.

It should nevertheless be noted that the corpus itself points out a contradiction regarding the library: run by two inmates, it adjoins the cooperative’s cigarette sales point, and the heat makes staying there impracticable, so that “one cannot stay there to read”. The facility exists, but its function is neutralised by its location. This is a precise illustration of a decoupling between formal structure and actual activity.

5. Discussion

5.1 Indirect Rule Rather Than a Panopticon

The results converge towards a revision of the analytical model. The dominant image of the prison is that of panopticism: an architecture that makes the gaze permanent and internalised. Yet the civil

prison of this West African State does not see its own interior. Its architecture concentrates everything on the envelope and the thresholds, and it deliberately ignores what happens beyond the third gate. What can be read here is a form of indirect administration: the legal authority reserves for itself frontier sovereignty, the register and the filtering of entries and exits, and grants the internal chiefs a de facto competence over daily life, in return for tranquillity at the perimeter.

This configuration has its own rationality from the administration's point of view, and it is important to recognise it rather than denounce it. With the means described, direct control of 1,633 persons is materially impossible. Delegation is therefore not a dysfunction but an organisational solution to a problem that is otherwise insoluble. The cost of this solution, however, does not fall on the administration: it is entirely externalised onto the most deprived fraction of the captive population. This is where the properly political stake of the result lies.

5.2 Scarcity as a Resource and the Paradox of Under-Equipment

Strategic analysis sheds light on a counter-intuitive mechanism whose scope extends beyond the prison case. In an under-resourced organisation, every shortfall creates a zone of uncertainty, and therefore a power. Two blocks of sanitary facilities for 1,633 persons create the power to regulate the order of passage. One tap creates the power to regulate the queue. Insufficient sleeping space creates the power to allocate the floor. A limited stock of medicines creates the power to enter names in the dispensary register. A generalisable proposition follows: the under-equipment of an organisation does not weaken power; it displaces it and makes it informal.

This proposition has an important and rarely formulated practical consequence. A reform that increased resources without touching the circuits of delegation would destroy the power base of the intermediate tiers, and would therefore meet with their resistance. Conversely, a reform that attacked delegation without increasing resources would deprive the establishment of its mechanism of order, with a risk of collapse. The sequencing of reforms is therefore not a matter of indifference: this is a result of direct use to organisational auditing.

5.3 Contribution to the Debate on Negotiated Order

In relation to French-language work on negotiated order, the contribution of this field is to document an extreme point on the continuum. The literature describes transactions between a staff that is present and inmates who obtain margins. Here, the staff is structurally absent from the living space, and what is conceded is not margins but functions. The notion of delegated prison order that we propose makes it possible to name this point: it designates a regime in which delegation is stabilised, symbolically equipped (the armband) and integrated into the administrative processes themselves (the registry, the roll call, the announcement of visits).

This shift invites us to reconsider the application of models designed in well-resourced European or North American settings to establishments whose primary constraint is underfunding. In this respect it joins the call to decentre critical analysis by recognising the genuine organisational competence of inmates: tiers 2 to 5 are not parasites of the institution; they are its effective administration.

5.4 Implications for Organisational Auditing

Finally, the case suggests an analytical grid that can be transposed to the audit of heavily constrained public establishments, whether prisons or hospitals. Four questions emerge from it, none of which appears in any conventional internal control framework. Which officially sovereign functions are in fact exercised by the users of the establishment? Which scarce vital resources are subject to informal allocation, and by whom? Which external variable (here, visits) determines the internal position of users? And what is the cost of maintaining the observed order, and who bears it?

An audit confined to recording non-compliance with accommodation standards would produce a diagnosis that is accurate but ineffective. An audit that maps informal delegation, by contrast, identifies the actors whose support or opposition will decide the fate of any reform.

6. Conclusion

This article started from an ethnographic description and a population table in order to address a question in the sociology of organisations: how does an establishment structurally incapable of fulfilling its mission nonetheless produce order? The answer put forward is that the civil prison of this West African State operates under a regime of delegated prison order. The legal authority retains sovereignty over the perimeter and the registration of bodies, and transfers to the inmate population internal policing, the allocation of space, the management of hygiene, access to care, administrative information and subsistence. This delegation is instituted, organised hierarchically into six tiers, equipped with distinctive insignia, and backed by an indigenous sleeping scale that inscribes stratification in bodily postures.

Three results deserve to be retained. First, overcrowding is not a uniform condition but an unevenly distributed gradient, the heaviest share of which is borne by 82.9% of the population in five buildings of the large courtyard. Second, institutional scarcity is converted into a resource of power, so that every shortfall in equipment reinforces the informal authority of whoever regulates access to it. Third, external relational capital constitutes the master variable of internal stratification: the absence of visitors simultaneously closes off access to supplementary food, to prescribed medicines, to the hygiene contribution and to a tolerable position on the sleeping scale, with the deadly outcome that the corpus documents.

The scope of these conclusions is that of a monograph: they propose a mechanism; they do not establish it statistically. Three extensions are called for. A symmetrical survey of prison staff would make it possible to reconstruct the agents' rationality and the budgetary constraints that drive delegation. A comparison with other West African establishments would test the generality of the model. Finally, a longitudinal follow-up of individual trajectories would measure the conversion of external capital into internal position, the only way to quantify what this analysis has been able to establish only qualitatively.

The fact remains that the wish expressed by the inmates themselves (support from non-governmental and humanitarian organisations, vocational training, financial support for the activity they carried out before incarceration) finds in this analysis a justification that is not merely humanitarian. Supporting the productive activity of inmates means acting on the variable on which the whole of internal stratification depends. It is, in organisational terms, the only path that reduces dependence on external relational capital without destroying the mechanism of order on which the establishment depends in order not to sink.

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