Hunting Game

Raiding Politics in the Central African Republic

Louisa Lombard

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North-eastern Central African Republic – a vast space bordering Chad, Darfur, and South Sudan – is a quintessential 'stateless' space, where the government has little presence and armed actors operate freely. In this first ethnographic and historical study of Central African raiding, Louisa Lombard investigates practices of forceful acquisition, a distinctive political repertoire in which claims to social status are linked to the ability to take (from wild spaces or from others) and are frequently overturned. People have developed raiding skills to survive and live in a stateless borderland for over 150 years. From the trans-Saharan slave trade and colonial forced labour regimes, to big-game hunting and coercive conservation, and to rebellion, raiding has flourished where people's status in relation to each other is unclear and where institutional guidance is absent. *Hunting Game* offers rich comparative insights into the vibrant, if not always salutary, role that forceful acquisition plays in the world today.

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Acknowledgements

Sovereignty is a term used often by academics but much more rarely by others. Yet it is the answer to the most basic of questions: who gets to decide how people live? I came to north-eastern Central African Republic (CAR) interested in exploring sovereignty as experienced in the world. I saw something different from the vision offered by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, who wrote of the sovereign as someone whom everyone held in awe. In north-eastern CAR, no sovereign consistently set the terms for social life. Instead, people claimed liberties for themselves while also intermittently lamenting the absence of a sovereign, and wishing for one. But in the sovereign's absence, life in the region was not 'nasty and brutish', as Hobbes predicted, but something different altogether, with political modalities not prophesised by classical theorists.

Here were multiple aspirants to sovereign prerogatives. I went into this project equipped with the personal and disciplinary conviction that Hobbes' account of life outside the sovereign state is more bogeyman than description of actual experience in the world. Anthropologists of old sought to collect accounts from the precolonial past, which they, and their interlocutors, could represent as morally coherent, in contrast to the kinds of distortions, discontent, and injustice that accompanied colonial regimes. That is no longer defensible. Instead, contradictions and inconsistencies are obvious, and it is necessary to account for the resilience, creativity, and joys of people in these places, and their particular struggles.

While life in a controlling state has its discontents, following rules and norms under the *threat* of force rather than its exercise usually has advantages, including for interpersonal relations and especially in the context of widespread armament. For instance, consider the travails of Marcel, the operational chief at the Ministry of Water and Forests in Ndele, a town beside north-eastern CAR's parklands. I saw one subordinate physically attack Marcel when Marcel tried to tell him how to do his job. Marcel's plight was similar to that of a colonial official in the town some 70 years earlier, who had no officers to carry out his

directives. The hunting inspector 'lent' him an ungovernable corporal described as 'incapable of doing anything good' (Lignier 1936b). Then as now, officials complained about their inability to address their associates' armed mischief. Marcel appreciated having someone to listen to him. He said with understatement, 'It's a little bit difficult when you recruit someone [for arms-carrying work] without knowing if he's got a good moral compass. It's very difficult.'

Yet it is not right to put all the onus on individuals. They participate in social situations, and in those situations moral precepts can be expressed, re-made, or brought into conflict. There are particular kinds of social situations when one lives in a place such as north-eastern CAR, where there are few people and little institutional and material infrastructure, and where the surrounding region has seen pervasive violent conflict. In this book I describe the contested sovereignty of CAR while avoiding both the demonising stereotypes about stateless spaces and the rosy ones put forth by anarchists and their supporters. Each new version of the manuscript that became this book has been a process of discovery.

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I first landed in CAR 16 years ago due to some combination of luck, ignorance, and hubris. I had completed my undergraduate studies about three weeks earlier and served as a research assistant to Eric Berman, then working on a study of small arms and light weapons in CAR for the Small Arms Survey. My ignorance was deep, but so was my curiosity. Each time I go to CAR, and in many of my remote conversations with Central African friends, I am confronted with the knowledge of how much I don't know, and how impossible it is to know a people or a place comprehensively.

But nor am I wholly in the dark. I have come to see patterns in the dilemmas and opportunities people in Central Africa – whether born there or more recently arrived – face and how they deal with them. These patterns are only a few among many others in the lives of Central Africans, and they are not even necessarily the most prevalent (only a subset of people are directly involved in raiding, those most directly almost all men), but they show both something important about what life here has been like and something about the human condition.

I have tried to convey some of the simultaneous freedom and constraint that marks the processes through which people in a hunting zone strive to acquire some measure of status, liberty, and the ability to make their lives as they desire. I look forward to Central Africans, and others, discussing with me in what ways mine has been a worthwhile endeavour, and what remains to be done.

Abbreviations and acronyms

AEF	Afrique Équatoriale Française/French Equatorial Africa
ARRC	Africa Rainforest and River Conservation
AT	*assistant technique*/technical assistant
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAMPFIRE	Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources
CAR	Central African Republic
CFA	Central African franc
DDR	disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECOFAC	Ecosystèmes Forestiers d'Afrique Centrale/Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa
ECOFAUNE	Ecosystèmes Fauni du nord RCA et du Sud-est de la RCA ques/ Faunal Ecosystems of North and Southeast CAR
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FPRC	Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafrique/Popular Front for the Renaissance of the Central African Republic
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
LAB	*lutte anti-braconnage*/fight against poaching
MINUSCA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PDRN	Programme pour le Développement de la Région Nord/Programme for the Development of the Northern Region

PDZCV	Programme pour le Développement des Zones Cynégétiques Villageoises/Programme for the Development of Community Hunting Zones
RFI	Radio France Internationale/French International Radio
RPRC	Rassemblement Patriotique pour le Renouveau de la Centrafrique/Union for the Patriotic Renewal of the Central African Republic
UFDR	Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement/Union of Democratic Forces for Unity
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPC	Union pour la paix en Centrafrique/Union for Peace in the CAR
ZCV	zone cynégétique villageoise/community hunting zone
ZIC	zone d'intérêt cynégétique/zone of hunting interest

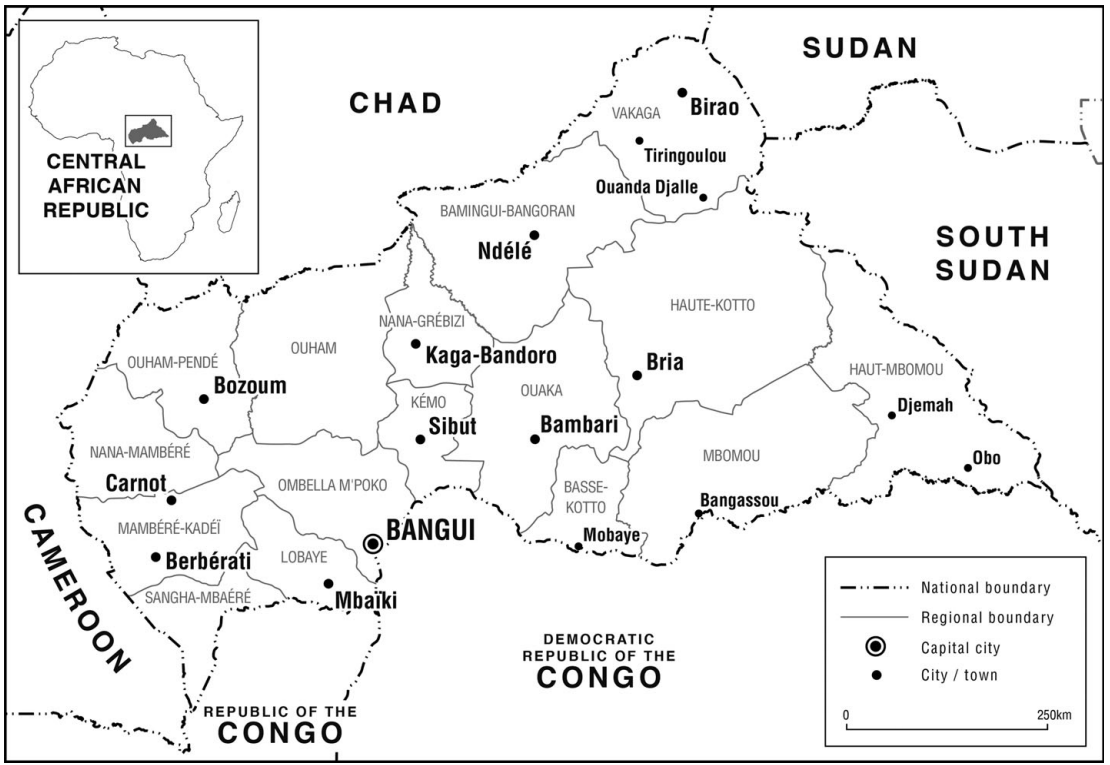

Figure 0.1 Map of the Central African Republic

1 Force, status, and uncertainty in the arts of acquisition

A hunting raid

In the vast parklands of north-eastern Central African Republic (CAR), at a place called Tata, a pathway crosses the road. The built to allow motorised vehicles to travel between the small towns of Ouanda Djallé and Sam Ouandja, appears on maps. The path, which does not show up on the maps, is for hunters, herders, and trackers, people who travel on foot, or on the back of an animal when they are in luck. Neither road nor path is much more than a rutted dirt track; both are constantly encroached upon by trees and scrub. Herds of hundreds of cows are the only force that can effectively blaze an opening.

In the dry early months of 2009, a group of *pisteurs* (tracker-guards employed by an aid project to counter poachers) led by a former French special forces mercenary was tracking the movements of humans and livestock through Tata. The taking of anything from the parklands is 'strictly prohibited'; this does not refer only to hunting – it is 'taking' when livestock are allowed to graze on the wild grasses. To the *pisteurs*, Tata seemed like a promising spot for a blind. They could lie in wait for transgressors who had been spotted in the area and would likely pass this crossroads.

The *pisteurs* set themselves up on either side of the intersection so that it would be harder for their prey to escape. They lay in wait for two hours. Eventually, five or six men dressed in military uniforms (in this region, not always a marker of serving in the armed forces), carrying automatic weapons, and leading pack donkeys came into view. Their appearance and manner of travel made them recognisable as a foreign species: *Janjaweed*[1] come to CAR to collect all the wild goods they could. The

[1] In the words of one of the *pisteurs* who participated in this hunt, 'Those people the Sudanese hired in Darfur, and they don't have work now so they come down here and poach.' The *pisteurs* do not generally verify these kinds of details, however – it is a working assumption. Their choice of terminology makes use of their knowledge that *Janjaweed* are known and vilified internationally.

pisteurs took aim and shot. They killed four men but the fifth managed to shoot one of the *pisteurs* before he ran. The French mercenary pursued and killed him too.

With the most dangerous targets eliminated, the *pisteurs* turned to the donkeys and killed all 36. A rapid inventory of what the donkeys had been carrying provided evidence of a fruitful hunting and gathering mission: many kilos of smoked meat; honey; *mazindi*, a tree seed used in sauces; wild *gumbo* (okra). This they left, although they collected the guns and ammunition, including a G3 battle rifle with 19 rounds. They moved quickly, knowing that associates of the dead men would be roused by news of the raid. The *pisteurs* jumped into their Land Cruiser – a few in the cab, most into the bed – and sped off towards Sam Ouandja.

At that time, Sam Ouandja was home to a few thousand Darfuri refugees; a contingent from the Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement (UFDR, or Union of Democratic Forces for Unity), a CAR rebel group; a few dozen government troops; several thousand residents; some fortune seekers labouring nearby to dig up a diamond or two; and a few middlemen who financed and bought from them. When the Land Cruiser arrived and some former *pisteurs*, now in the UFDR, heard about the loot left behind at Tata, several in the group headed out to retrieve what they could.

'Vengeance,' explained one of the *pisteurs*, summing up their mission in this raid. That word came up a lot; we will return to it later in the book. The *pisteurs* also recognised that they benefited from these operations because they got first dibs on the loot they could capture and received monetary bonuses for items seized. 'When we find someone who has been hunting or fishing in the park, it is us, the *pisteurs*, who benefit from that,' summarised one.[2] At least some of the time, they also distribute to those they consider fellows by alerting them when goods are left behind.

The *pisteurs* spoke of their job as a struggle to stamp out hunting. But the eventful parts of their work consisted of tracking and a particularly violent mode of hunting other hunters. Besides that, they waited, and they told stories. The more I immersed myself in the history of the region, the more I saw the centrality of violent hunting to the projects of coercion and profit pursued there over the last 150 years. State building, in the form of establishing dominant authority and control and managing populations in a stable manner, has been far less significant.

I wanted to explore politics as they are, rather than in terms of what is missing. To do so, I have set aside the usual political frameworks and

[2] This statement came after the reflection that 'the locals are just trying to feed their families, but unfortunately it [hunting or fishing in the parks] is strictly prohibited'.

metaphors, instead trying to understand what skills, capacities, and objectives accompany the more violent forms of hunting, which I refer to for simplicity's sake as raiding. Raiding is due serious consideration as a fundamental element in the constitution of politics, arising as it does in times and places of disputed status, uncertain ownership, and fragile accord.

Limit cases of state and sovereignty

The globe in my university library, benignly round, large, and smooth, divides the earth's surface into a jigsaw puzzle, each coloured piece corresponding to a country. It is such a comfortingly neat portrayal, yet so misleading. Vast spaces that are formally assigned to states remain outside their interest or effective authority. Many terms are pressed into service to describe such remote recesses. Are they frontiers, borderlands, hinterlands, or margins? Most studies focus on what these areas do for state power and/or capitalist modes of production, or how their resources are taken, sometimes violently, to profit actors who are closer to the centre of the state, whether national or foreign, and are bent on accumulation. North-eastern CAR is a quintessential example of such state recesses, and cursory treatments of the area usually tell a version of the accumulation story. Current versions list the region's rebels among the chief profiteers. Such accounts have not discerned what is interesting and illuminating about the difficult history of places such as Tata: namely, that if acquisition is attempted where infrastructure and institutions are ineffective, certain interpersonal repertoires and ethical possibilities – modes of practical power – are likely to develop. A look at Tata and its environs and the encounters that take place there shows that people develop improvisational skills that let them acquire goods and assert their own status. These skills are markedly different from those associated with state building and steady accumulation, and yet this space is not fully outside state logics, either.

Above all, this area has been a site of encounter, innovation, and moral conflict. Although many people in north-eastern CAR claim entitlements and privileges, and the right to distribute to their kin, sovereignty is deeply contested, rather than residing in one leader or institution. Take the 'strict prohibition' against claiming goods from parkland spaces. In fact, *de jure* prohibitions are not as extensive as the *pisteurs* aver, nor are the *pisteurs* legally authorised to ambush as they did at Tata. But nor do the non-*pisteur* acquisitors see the laws as a form of colonial repression, or their own acts as morally defiant poaching. In other words, this is neither a situation in which there exist a number of fairly distinct legal and/or

moral orders in competition, nor one in which people see their technically illegal actions as somehow licit. To a great extent, people involved in these kinds of hunting and raiding are more concerned with specific situations. Who, in *this* instance, on this Thursday morning hunting trip, is a fellow? What can we get away with, knowing that rivals are in the vicinity? Abstractions have little weight; people might state that they support a principle and later rally others to denounce its application to those who join in protest. State laws have power – in particular, they can be a kind of scaffolding for collaboration with people outside the space – but they are not hegemonic. Instead, they are negotiable, deeply and continually.

Acquisition, especially raiding, in north-eastern CAR provides an opportunity to revisit classic anthropological discussions of 'statelessness' from a fresh vantage point and to call into question teleological assumptions attached to histories of states and economic development. Statelessness used to be studied as a mode of organisation of a people – the Tiv (Bohannan and Bohannan 1953), the Tallensi (Fortes 1940), and the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940), for example. But while north-eastern CAR is a place where state institutions have little presence, it is not home to 'peoples' organised 'against the state', in Clastres' famous phrasing (1977). Instead, it is a place where legal and cosmological orders are fundamentally plural and contested, as is the content of the terms 'we' and 'they', which change depending on the particular circumstances in which they are employed. Contentious circumstances greatly affect social relations here and raiding encounters are one particularly prominent form of contentious circumstance.

In focusing on raiding encounters and how people go about them, I am reviving the 'situational analysis' promulgated by Max Gluckman (1958), who argued against the analysis of complexes of people and cultures as if they were stable entities in favour of focusing on:

> everyday events of crisis in which ordinary expectations for action were thrown into question and taken-for-granted values opened to interpretation with potentially system-changing effects. Gluckman's method stressed the heterogeneities of value in practice and the conflicts and tensions in interpretation and judgment. (Kapferer and Gold 2018: 7)

These conflictual situations in which values and practice must be argued for or negotiated, Gluckman posited, are how norms are tentatively produced and changed. The insight that process and encounter are more important than 'people and their culture' explanations allows an understanding of the interplay among people with competing world views, operating in the same space or reacting to the same problems. It helps make sense of how people with greatly differing explanations about what

they are doing or why (for example, sultans as opposed to colonial officials) nevertheless often engage in similar practices.

The result is not an emic, or ontological, account. 'Raider' is not an identity proudly claimed by people in north-eastern CAR; raiding is instead a complex of practices and encounters that I argue are enacted by a range of people – from European Union (EU) bureaucrats looking for ways to fund conservation, to *pisteurs*-turned-rebels, to itinerant cattle herders. In other words, this raiding analytic is not a 'local' category that I am endeavouring to interpret. The various people I describe as engaging in raiding and hunting do not necessarily see themselves as 'raiders' or 'hunters' in the sense of either assumed or innate identity. 'Raiding' is a framework I have developed to draw out the capabilities, know-how, tactics, and frustrations of the various people who encounter each other in this area as they seek regard and respect from audiences there and elsewhere. Raiding shows similarities among people with disparate qualities and origins who use the area to further their careers,[3] and it shows how their lives have been shaped by 'everyday events of crisis' and 'heterogeneities of value in practice' (Kapferer and Gold 2018: 7). This is not the story of a group with a shared vocabulary for the dynamics I describe, with a coherent, shared moral framework. I have chosen terms of raiding and acquisition as a meta-language to communicate the findings of my situational-analytical project. The utility of these terms in describing a political repertoire – the practices and orientations of those who raid to further their careers – passed a significant test when I shared them with my interlocutors in CAR and they recognised themselves and others working in the zone.

After more than 15 years of familiarity with CAR, I have invested myself in the worth of this place and what life there contributes to understanding the world and the diversity of ways in which people inhabit it. Understanding the trajectory of politics in north-eastern CAR can enrich and alter how we think about politico-economic processes much more broadly. This area disproves accounts that portray 'stateness' as the inevitable direction of politics, if only enough time is allowed. It also demonstrates the limitations of frameworks such as 'modes of production', since raiding encounters are primarily 'modes of acquisition', which has consequences for the political formations that follow. An understanding of CAR's 'hunting zone' also reminds us of the many ways beyond war and conquest in which violence can be part of

[3] As sociologist Erving Goffman explained, 'The concept of the career … allows one to move back and forth between the self and its significant society, without having overly to rely for data upon what the person says he thinks he imagines himself to be' (1959: 123).

governance and extraction, illuminating the point that, while raiding and acquisition have usually been understood as a phase of historical development (e.g. Ling, Earle, and Kristiansen 2018), they remain a fundamental part of the modern world, and can be persistent. In north-eastern CAR, raiding has taken the form of a kind of turbocharged hunting – including, notably, hunts for humans. But the features that I identify as pushing in the direction of raiding, such as uncertainty around status and property, also obtain in contexts far beyond Central Africa.

Many have posited that 'precarity' – in Anna Tsing's (2015) clear and concise phrasing, life without the promise of stability – has become the condition of our times. In the terrains this book covers, most people do indeed live without the promise of political, economic, or social stability. But this is not a recent development; it has persisted for generations. This has been a '*disturbance-based ecology in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest*' (Tsing 2015: 5, emphasis in original) ever since it became integrated into long-distance trades and political projects some 150 years ago. Certainly, precarity did not happen here first, but the area's prolonged exposure to uncertainty and its mixing of people and species amid dynamics of acquisition offer rich lessons about the vagaries of collaboration, force, ethics, and law when stability cannot be assumed. Self-consistency in ethical striving, identified as the goal of many in fascinating recent anthropological accounts of ethics (Laidlaw 2013; Mahmood 2004; Zigon 2007), becomes possible only when facilitated by infrastructures and institutions. When, in contrast, raiding and acquisition are more prevalent, a different kind of relational ethical person emerges.

But first, we must situate ourselves. Please travel with me to north-eastern Central African Republic (CAR), this book's heart. Once upon a time, not so long ago, places like this were the lifeblood of my discipline, anthropology. The more remote they were the better, for fieldwork bragging rights and for generating anthropological theory. But with the decline of the impetus of 'butterfly-collecting' cultural preservation, over the last few decades remoteness has lost its cachet. The rural, the remote, the village: all came to seem reserves of gossip and tradition and outdated anthropological questions in comparison to those generated from gleaming, congested, rough-and-tumble cities where people went to seek their fortunes and new ways of life and connection. But these rural–urban contrasts, explicit or implicit, are misguided. The 'bush' – places where there are few humans stably resident – has been as much a site of social and economic innovation as anywhere else. It has also been a site where relationships between people and other creatures have been particularly unstable, a site of both quite a lot of violence and unexpected situational collaboration.

Even in the context of a figurative, book-generated journey, it can be difficult to convince people to make the trek to north-eastern CAR. Where is it exactly? 'Central African Republic' conveys a vague sense of location, but rarely clear pictures of the place or its history. In this introductory chapter, let me situate the places, people, and relational dynamics that make it such an important, and neglected, part of social histories of the world and ideas about the future. Throughout the book I show that the area has been a crucible for the development of processes of acquisition and the personal and political repertoires that allow them, and that ignoring the lessons these dynamics confer makes our understanding incomplete. First, though, let me show you around.

A hunting zone

The lands that today form CAR lie at the geographic centre of the African continent. This was the last 'great blank space' (Boulvert 1996) on geographers' maps, drawn as empty space as late as 1890 (Kalck 1971: 1). CAR covers an area about the size of Texas (or France and Benelux combined) and encompasses a range of equatorial geographic zones: the tropical rainforests and rushing rivers of the south give way to forested savannah and the dry savannah of the north-east – marshy during the rainy season and near-desert during the dry. People are known to have lived in these lands for millennia, and indeed the savannah itself – far from a natural or wild condition – is the product of their use of fire for farming and settlement (Cordell 1983: 35–6). The area is well endowed with water, with space, and with other resources such as salt, all of which have supported flourishing settlements for many centuries. Although there has been a strong degree of linguistic continuity, the makeup of communities and networks of solidarity have shifted repeatedly, in part because, for centuries, people have moved around constantly (Cordell 1983; Sikainga 1991). Empires and states in the broader region have formed and disbanded; the Central African expanses were places where those seeking refuge from these upheavals could flee. The area is punctuated by rocky plateaus pockmarked with caves, or *kagas*, which were especially defensible and were good places to live and hide.

By the late eighteenth century, Muslim traders had established a network throughout these lands, both for business opportunities and to lay a pilgrimage route for their fellow believers. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Muslim presence increased. So did the demand for slaves in the long-booming and transforming Muslim polities to the north and west, such as Darfur and Bornu. The prosperous farmer-hunters of Central Africa became prime targets for raiding.

Occasional slave-hunting missions ramped up and gained intensity just when European colonial explorers started making forays into the area, as the 1800s were drawing to a close. The early (nineteenth-century) written accounts of the people living in this area, by both Arabs and Europeans, describe them as hierarchical only in limited ways. They note instead 'polycellular' modes of organisation characterised by a 'mobile equilibrium' that was a major source of resilience (Prioul 1981: 166). When Europeans passed through small agglomerations of residents, one man would usually come forward to act as interlocutor. The interlopers referred to these people as chiefs, but their authority consisted more of persuasion than command (Prioul 1981).

France had been allotted the area that became Afrique Équatoriale Française (AEF) at the Berlin Conference in 1884–5, but by the 1890s only a handful of French people were staffing Bangui, the recently proclaimed capital of the interior equatorial zone known as Oubangui-Chari, which later became CAR. There was only feeble support in France for the colonisation of Equatorial Africa. A colonial officer wrote dryly of the colony of Oubangui-Chari in 1903 that earlier 'reports, overly pompous, presented [this area] as rich and fertile, which is far from the precise truth' (Colonie du Congo 1903: 32).[4] One attempted solution – the granting of concessions to private companies – was expected by the French government to bring in useful short-term revenue and help establish European profit-oriented rule, in a manner similar to tax farming. But the companies had no lasting interest in the region; rather than investing in infrastructure they sought to extract concrete value – in ivory and rubber, for example – as quickly as they could, although only a few made a profit. The privatisation of governance is often assumed to be a contemporary phenomenon, but that assumption can be sustained only by presentist bias, and in particular by ignorance of the concessionary history of Equatorial Africa.

One of the key historical developments shaping this region was the coincidence of Muslim and European interests. Although their leaders were in some ways antagonistic, they also complemented each other, providing their counterparts with needed resources such as arms or labourers, and the 30 years from the 1890s to the First World War became the most intense period of raiding – forceful and armed (for instance, for people to be made slaves and forced labourers) as well as more negotiated – the region had ever seen. A well-populated, spacious home to people who lived with relative abundance became depopulated, with villages left smouldering and abandoned. Foreign diseases that had

[4] Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are my own.

begun to spread some hundred years before intensified, killing many. And the brutal forced labour and other policies of the French administration further decreased the population.

The area, then known as the Oubangui-Chari Division of the Federation of French Equatorial Africa, became a place with a 'disastrous demography' (Kalck 1959: 313). Because it had been such an important site for raiding and refuge, for flight and mobility, any so-called 'ethnic' group was in fact an amalgam, its organisation difficult to ascertain (Cordell 1983; Sikainga 1991: 53). If even French colonisers had been interested in co-opting African 'tradition' for their own despotic rule, as Mamdani (1996) has identified as the key colonial dynamic in Africa, they would have found little to work with. But they were not. The defining feature of French involvement in this part of the world was penury and cheapness, which meant that their rule – to the extent that they were indeed ruling – became an odd pattern of neglect punctuated by outbursts of arbitrary brutality when they needed to acquire people's labour for some project such as road clearing or the relocation of villages.

The only things that French administrators saw as valuable in these lands were the wild animals. In the aftermath of the intense elephant hunting of the raiding apogee of the 1890s to the 1910s, animal populations had dropped, but they began to rise again by the 1920s. The area appeared to be a wild paradise: Africa as it had always been. This was not true, of course, but it was a way for the French to salvage interest, financial and otherwise, in such a vast space at the centre of the continent, with so few people, so little infrastructure, and no straightforward path to industrial or plantation development or institutionalised capitalist rule. The few humans present were joined by a panoply of other creatures: elephants, lions, rhinos, hippos, and massive Lord Derby elands. Colonial administrators never commented on the charms of the 'natives' or the beauty of the landscape, except in the ways in which they both related to hunting. A. Boucher, an administrator in Birao, the north-easternmost outpost of Oubangui-Chari, wrote in a monograph on the area that it 'is without a doubt one of the most beautiful hunting regions in the world' (1934: 49). Colonial officials frequently noted how many animals they encountered, and, clearly captivated, they told verbose hunting stories (Brégeon 1998: 21). In my perusal of the French colonial and military archives, I frequently came across snapshots of proud hunters beside their prey: '*souvenirs de chasse*', or 'memories/keepsakes of hunting'.

The furthest interior corner of the colony, the north-east, was known as the area with the best big-game hunting. Very nearly the entirety of the north-east received the joint designations of *district autonome* (autonomous district, an area too far from the capital and of too limited value to administer directly) and *zone d'intérêt cynégétique* (ZIC, or zone of

hunting interest), or, in my shorthand, a hunting zone. Game reserves were created and hunting regulations adopted in an attempt to monetise and control the hunting of big game in the area. The regulations were, however, wholly out of touch with the vicissitudes of life in the area and were never very effective in controlling hunting, even as they became part of how people played hunting games.

In 1960, with the independence of France's West and Equatorial African colonies, Oubangui-Chari became the Central African Republic. The country's main independence visionary, Barthélémy Boganda, had been killed in a plane crash the year before, and in his absence the new leaders struggled to establish a vision for their country. French officials admitted that, of their former colonies, Oubangui-Chari was the least prepared for independence, due to the extremely limited institutional infrastructure built during the colonial period and the minimal formal economy. There were few schools or clinics, and in some parts of the country illegal forced labour persisted (Brégeon 1998).

What little infrastructural or institutional development had occurred was largely concentrated in the southern, riverine area near Bangui. In that area, during the colonial era, many people had converted to Christianity and had learned to speak the trading language Sango, promoted by the French as a lingua franca because teaching French would have been prohibitively difficult and expensive. The north-east, home mostly to Muslims, had been left largely to its own devices, except for the demarcation of the national parks, game reserves, and safari-hunting concessions. Both the French officials of AEF and the British in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan found their half-hearted attempts at indirect rule frustrated by the fluidity of social relations in the area, which 'defied' their notions of 'tribalism' and 'ethnicity' (Sikainga 1991: 53) when, on occasion, they tried to map out groups and lineages.

Neglected and overlooked, CAR gained international notoriety due to the flamboyant Jean-Bédel Bokassa, who seized power in a coup on New Year's Day 1966. Outside CAR, Bokassa is remembered largely for his megalomaniacal tendencies, which became more pronounced towards the end of his rule. In a lavish ceremony in 1977, he had himself crowned emperor. The following year, his troops brutally repressed an uprising by schoolchildren upset over rising costs for school fees and uniforms. Rumour had it he ate humans, including some of the recalcitrant schoolchildren.[5] But Central Africans today remember Bokassa as their sole leader with a

[5] This rumour was started by a former French mercenary, who admitted that it was a fabrication; it has persuaded many, non-Central Africans and Central Africans alike, but it has not been substantiated.

nation-building impulse. He inaugurated the annual *Fête des mères* (Mothers' Day), a day with expectations of gift giving and revelry as major as Christmas; and he built the university and the modernist ministerial edifices that dot the capital. He also had the benefit of leading during a period when foreign aid was relatively lavish and the regional security situation calmer than it would later become.

In the wake of the incident with the students and other signs of what the French government took to be intransigence, French forces removed Bokassa from power in 1979, one of many times when they have played a decisive role in installing Central African leadership. In the decades that followed, most of the countries in the region were wracked by war, the Central African economy plummeted, and outside donors that had paid government salaries and otherwise kept things afloat reduced or ended their assistance. Violent upheaval increasingly became part of Central African politics, as did intervention – by forces from the region and by international coalitions of peacekeepers. I explore the dynamics of rebellion and international intervention in CAR at length in my book *State of Rebellion* (2016d).[6] Here, my focus is on the country's north-east – the hunting zone – and on exploring the improvised politico-economic repertoires of action that have developed out of people's raiding and acquisitive practices in the area.

The north-eastern expanses of CAR cover an area about the size of Switzerland, although this is something of an artificial demarcation because the neighbouring areas in Chad, Darfur, and South Sudan bear many of the same features: not a lot of humans and very little built infrastructure. The three north-easternmost prefectures of CAR make up nearly a third of the country's territory but hold less than 4 per cent of its human population.[7] The area is hard to get to. During the rainy

[6] In *State of Rebellion* I explored the consequences of rigid thinking about nation states as the only proper container for politics that has become dominant in the contemporary world, particularly in relation to the kinds of international interventions that have become widespread in 'fragile' states such as CAR in the post–Cold War world. Here, my interest lies in the mode of relations, the theatres of encounter, and the ways of being that have shaped life in this zone. The fact that the state is primarily understood to be 'absent' plays into all of that, but logics of state-like behaviour have a much smaller role in organising the ways in which people engage with others. Moreover, focusing on 'the state' would risk overshadowing the range of people and scales involved in these political-economic processes – for example, the ways in which humanitarian concern in Europe and beyond has played into the dynamics of raiding in Central Africa for more than a century. It would also prescribe categories of belonging and thereby would group people in ways that are more rigid than what has been seen in the hunting zone.

[7] According to the 2003 census, Vakaga, the north-easternmost prefecture, had a population of 37,595 and an area of 46,500 square kilometres; in Bamingui-Bangoran, that ratio was 38,437/58,200, and in Haute-Kotto it was 69,514/86,650.

season, it becomes a marshy island, impassable to trucks and frequently to small aircraft as well. There are no paved roads unless one journeys hundreds of kilometres to the south, although to the north, in oil-boom Chad, tarmac is more easily accessible (but, for the last decade or so, several rebel groups based on or near the road on the Central African side of the border have made it harder to pass that way). In CAR, an increase in the cross-regional hunting of large animals and cattle herding became the impetus for coercive conservation initiatives, many funded by the EU, beginning at the end of the 1980s and continuing to the present. The tracker-guards employed by these projects hunt people in the vast parklands, and some also participate in processes of acquiring the profitable wild goods this area is known for. Since 2006, rebel groups have also emerged in the area, using shows of force to acquire symbolically important assets in their claim to status and regard.

One way of speaking of this area – a favourite of journalists – is to describe it as 'potentially rich' thanks to its endowments of natural resources. Oil, diamonds, gold, uranium, and water – CAR's licit resources alone make it sound like a treasure chest. However, these resources are all difficult to exploit on an industrial scale, or otherwise less promising than they first sound. The oil is near the village of Boromata, one of the hardest-to-reach points possible, in the middle of an area that the rainy season turns impassable. The diamonds are high quality but spread widely rather than amenable to efficient mining. The gold is mostly in dust form, not chunks. And although the French firm Areva began a uranium-mining project at Bakouma in 2007, its profitability depended on high global prices, which dropped after the Fukushima disaster in 2011. Areva suspended prospecting, and the war in CAR since 2013 has continued to discourage investment. Therefore, although the area is not inherently benighted or desolate, and is indeed well endowed with life-giving features including water, space, and rich forage for livestock and other herbivores, it has never been a resource frontier. That is, it has never been a site for an intensive, overpowering kind of exploitation that allows certain people or classes to accumulate wealth at the expense of others and over time instantiates intensified capitalist relations of domination and effective administration and control of people and other resources. In this vein, resource frontiers are usually understood to be a phase in a process of exploitation, but even in studies of places that get 'stuck' in the frontier phase (such as the Niger Delta as described by Porter and Watts 2017; Watts 2012), their status as sites for accumulation by some at the cost of dispossession of others is never questioned.

The tallies of accumulation and state power in north-eastern CAR are less easily calculated. Instead of accumulation – the amassing of wealth