



Navigating violence and exclusion: The Mbororo's claim to the Central African Republic's margins

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the ways in which the nomadic Mbororo's claim to grazing land in the territorial margins of the Central African Republic (CAR) has shifted under the influence of increased competition. It unpacks the ambiguities of a nomadic lifestyle that requires navigation between acquired political inclusion, and increasing social exclusion. The paper explores how the Mbororo adapted their strategies under the influence of changing political and security situations since their arrival in the country around a century ago. The Mbororo's initial strategy to keep a low profile and occupy the largely empty pastures came under pressure due to increased competition from various armed groups over the territorial margins. Rebel groups, transhumance, poachers, and highway bandits now occupy the same territories for their political and economic projects. The country's recent and ongoing crisis has imposed unprecedented new challenges. The Mbororo adapted their strategies to uphold their claims to land and belonging: the majority temporarily sought exile, while some others have resorted to joining armed groups. Meanwhile, their political and economic inclusion weakened and their cattle became one of the main sources financing the conflict economy. The paper argues that increasing social and political marginality combined with the violence in the territorial margins will make it hard for the Mbororo to reclaim the Central African pastures that are the heart of their lives and livelihoods.

1. Introduction

In attempts to stay away from increasingly regulatory, and taxing colonial and local Fulani authorities in northern Cameroon and Nigeria, the first pastoralist Mbororo people tried to enter what was then still called Oubangui-Chari—present-day Central African Republic (CAR)—nearly a century ago (Seignobos, 2008; Tennebay, 2015). Living a life on the margins of political authorities has been one of the key features of this nomadic sub-group of the Peuhl (Boutrais, 1990). The depopulated pastures and relative absence of effective government control over Oubangui-Chari created ample space for the Mbororo to prosper (Azarya, 1996). The Fulani are a cattle-rearing people that are spread over about eighteen countries in West and Central Africa. Victor Azarya suggests a sharp divide between Fulani groups that sought to establish—or become part of—larger political units on the one hand, and groups such as the Mbororo living in present-day Cameroon and CAR and the Wodaabe in Niger who largely maintained their nomadic lifestyle. In Azarya's words these “smaller groups of Fulbe, who took little part in the Jihad and state-formation, or even (actually) opposed them, continued to live at the margin, or even completely beyond those states, in smaller decentralized units, as in the past” (Azarya, 1996, 12).

Contrary to many of the sedentary groups of Fulani, the Mbororo

have always explicitly sought to escape impositions of state-like institutions that emerged in other pastoralist areas on the continent. Today, the Mbororo occupy the spatial and political ‘frontiers’ (Kopytoff, 1987): liminal spaces largely beyond the control of political institutions (Korf and Raeymaekers, 2013a, 10). Initially, the CAR was not a bad choice. Roland Marchal succinctly described the CAR as “the sum of its neighbors’ peripheral hinterlands” (Marchal, 2009, 5). At a crossroad between east Africa, the Great Lakes Region and West Africa, the landlocked country is of little geopolitical importance to most of its neighbors—perhaps with the exception of Chad, which fears that the CAR's hinterland might harbor opposition groups. Korf and Raeymaekers (2013a, 5) define sites of state marginality as ‘spaces in which state practices and images are co-present with other systems of rule’—e.g. rebellious or traditional authorities—, which often involves ‘unsettling and violent renegotiation of rights and social conditions’.

In the CAR, the state's authority never extended throughout the territory, and other systems of rule filled that space. Meanwhile, mundane and more repressive forms of violence has always been part of social and local political life in the history of the various communities across the country (Lombard and Batianga-Kinzi, 2015; Bouju and De Bruijn, 2008). The arrival of the Mbororo from the 1920s onward did not cause major renegotiations of rights and access because land was

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abundant and sparsely populated. Because the Mbororo did not aim for local political power, the first groups quickly found ways to cohabitate with the farming communities and their chiefs. Although the pastoralists kept their geographical and social distance from the rest of society, the Mbororo's lives and livelihoods fitted quite well in the CAR's open territories.

The spaces that they occupied were politically liminal in the sense that they were not subject to central control or even taxation, but not necessarily subject to violent new order-making that were associated with frontier dynamics in other parts of the territory in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century (Lombard, 2016a, 72–73). The colonial powers kept their administration at a distance, and the authority of local chiefs was not challenged by outsiders. This has, however, changed in the past decades. Certain zones in the northwest and especially the unpopulated eastern part of the country, have become sites of increased interest to groups of 'outlaws' (Bauman, 2004) over the past twenty to twenty-five years. The lack of government control and the presence of mineral resources turned these marginal spaces into frontier zones attracting armed groups, highway bandits, seasonal pastoralists from neighboring states, poachers and other groups who flourish in contexts of constant fluidity and reordering. The marginal territories of the CAR have thus become sites of competing interests and violent claims, instead of remote grazing lands in which few take an interest. These changes have had important repercussions on the ways in which the Mbororo could effectively make claims to these lands in order to ensure their livelihoods.

Through an analysis of the Peuhl Mbororo's navigation into the Central African territorial, political and economic margins, I seek to trace how the claim to belonging has become constrained over the past twenty years as a result of increasing insecurity. By staying away from wielding political powers, the Mbororo initially 'navigated' (Vigh, 2008, 2009) the political, social and economic conditions of Kopytoff's frontiers quite successfully. The paper demonstrates how because the Mbororo were losing out on their original unobtrusive claims to land, protection and belonging, they diversified their strategies in response to increasing insecurity. Their adaptations vary from life in exile, mobility—again—, but also joining armed groups, or forming a tacit or imposed alliance with some of the rebel groups in return for protection. From 2013 onwards, when the latest and most violent conflict ever struck the country, the position of the Mbororo in society has become even more tenuous. Perceptions of religion and belonging have increasingly shaped societal rifts over the past five years (see Section 3). As a result, many remain in exile in neighboring Chad and Cameroon with no return in sight. At the same time, the Mbororo continue to be considered a factor in insecurity in CAR public opinion (Rapporteurs, 2015), which is not wholly unfounded (see Section 6). I conclude that as long as this remains the case, it will be hard to reclaim belonging to Central African's territorial margins.

2. A note on terminology and methods

References to societal groups have come to play an important role in the recent conflict dynamics, which makes precise terminology all the more important. Unpacking precise understandings and references to different social groups into clear categories turned out less easy than expected, however. In an attempt to clarify things, one Fulani trader in Paoua explained the different references to his people as: "There is no such thing as an Mbororo race. That only exists in the mind of the Central Africans. All these people are in fact Fulani."¹ The respondent is right in stating that all these groups are part of different branches of the Fulani people, but his comment that the Mbororo as a group only exist in the mind of Central Africans is incorrect: the term Mbororo is used

¹ Interview with the representative of the Fulani cattle-herders community in Paoua, 3 March 2015.

for a Fulani pastoralist group living in Cameroon, CAR and even further south and east (DR Congo and South Sudan) (Pelican, 2015). In popular vernacular in the CAR, the term Mbororo is often used interchangeably with the more encompassing reference Peuhl, the general French name for a people living all over West and Central Africa. In English, these same people are called Fulani and other recurring terms are Fellata, Fula, while the Fulani also refer to themselves as Fulbe.² In CAR, Fulani is thus a reference to a variety of people with different roles in society. It primarily refers to Fulani who live sedentary lives in towns, but also to transhumance pastoralist who seasonally migrate from Chad and Sudan, and lastly to the Mbororo pastoralists.

Sedentary Fulani may use the term Mbororo pejoratively, but I follow Seignobos here who uses it because it is the way that the people mostly refer to themselves (Seignobos, 2011, II). When I speak about the Mbororo I thus mean the pastoralist (semi-nomadic) subgroup, and when I say Fulani I mean people who have permanently settled in town and whose livelihoods do not revolve around pastoralism. I will also use Fulani instead of Peuhl because this is the English term for these people. Members of these communities and other Central Africans used the terms Mbororo and Fulani interchangeably. The vernacular amalgamation of the different groups of people that go under the term Fulani has turned out to be problematic in current social dynamics because many Central Africans see the Fulani people in general as part of the reason for conflict in the country.

Blurred lines between different terms used for social groups, especially in popular vernacular, can be observed in reference to Muslims in general as well. The Mbororo and Fulani are predominantly Muslim and the same holds for other certain other subgroups in society such as the Hausa and Arabs who originated from Nigeria, Sudan and Chad (Moukadas-Nouré, 2015). The majority of these other groups are not only Muslim but also speak Arabic. Yet in the national *lingua franca* Sango, the term *Arabou* means both Muslim (religion) and Arab (individuals that migrated from Chad and Sudan mainly, or with lighter skin-color). *Arabou* in Sango thus simply lumps together all Muslims, without distinguishing between their origins, relations and social or economic rootedness in society. The lack of precision has increasingly become problematic since the start of the latest crisis. Terminology is not only a source of confusion, but also can have violent repercussions (see next section).

The paper is based on fieldwork in Bangui in August 2017 when I looked specifically into the situation of the Mbororo, and on two earlier periods of fieldwork in the CAR in Bangassou, Obo, Paoua and Bangui in February and March 2015 and in February 2016. In the total of eleven weeks over the course of two and a half years, we³ conducted 170 interviews, using a mixture of qualitative approaches to study local dynamics of security and insecurity via interviews, observations, and group discussions with key sections of society such as traders, refugees, women groups, and various security forces.

3. On CAR's latest crisis and the issue of belonging

The extensive violence that started early in 2013 and continues today was often framed as a conflict fought along religious lines, pitting Christians against Muslims (Herbert et al., 2013; ICG, 2013; Carayannis and Lombard, 2015). While religion was not a key cause of the conflict, it certainly has grown into an important factor as a result of the constant framing by international and national media along these lines. A related and initially more important aspect of the conflict had to do with the two different, but interlinked, issues of belonging. The first element of belonging—or rather the absence of the recognition to

² Terminology surrounding the FulBe has been subject to quite some debate. See e.g. Loftsdóttir (2007, 68–74) for a detailed description.

³ I travelled together with my colleague (Tim Glawion) who works on the same research project.

belong—was a mobilizing force of the Séléka. The Séléka rebellion, an alliance of predominantly Muslim rebel groups from the northeast founded in 2012 to overthrow the regime of former President Bozizé, sparked the current crisis. The neglect and exclusion of the northern and eastern part of the territory in the governance of the country motivated youth from these peripheral hinterlands to join rebel groups. Part of the Séléka rebellion, however, just as in previous peaks in violence in 2002 and 2007/8 for instance, was driven by men-in-arms from neighboring Chad and Sudan. The majority of these outsiders are Muslim and speak Arabic.

The second—arguably more important—element of belonging had to do with who could claim to be part of Central African society, and who was to blame for the trouble the country was in. The Muslim minority of about ten percent of the population is scattered throughout the territory, especially in the urban centers where they often dominate the commercial sector. In the remote northeastern region, Islam is the most important religion. After the Séléka took power in Bangui in March 2013, many people started to blame Central African Muslims, including the Mbororo, for insecurity and violence in the country, pointing to their religious affiliations and alleged ‘foreignness’ and exploiting narratives of ‘othering’ (van Houtum and van Naerssen, 2002). Although Muslims and the culture of Islam have historically formed an integral part of CAR society (Moukadas-Nouré, 2015), violent rhetoric of politicians and local vigilantes targeted the Muslim minority, calling them ‘invaders’ from Chad or Sudan.⁴ At the height of the crisis, the sense of belonging of the entire Muslim minority (including that of the Mbororo) was challenged and many fled to neighboring countries.

In times of crisis, nuances about the identities and origins of minority groups are easily transformed into simplified, or worse, discriminatory narratives that instigate and legitimize violence.⁵ In the CAR this resulted in targeted violence against the Muslim population and their wealth, and against Mbororo herdsman and their cattle (Betabelet et al., 2015). Some Muslims’ relations with trading hubs across national borders and their mobility only reinforced their suggested otherness or foreignness. Some of these sentiments found their origin in envy: wealth and mobility are commonly associated with power.⁶ The period from late 2013 to early 2014 marked the peak in intergroup violence, but since the summer of 2016 violence between religious and ethnic communities has been on the rise again.

The ‘othering’ of Muslims since the start of the crisis in 2013 was not a new phenomenon. Bruno Martinelli traces anti-Muslim resentment back to the early days of President Bozizé’s regime. In 2003/4 Muslims were allegedly less subject to the ruin that the ‘Chadian liberators’ (their co-religionists)—who helped Bozizé to take power—left behind than other Central Africans (Martinelli, 2014). Either way, many Central Africans associate foreign intervention (especially from Chad and Sudan) with violence and insecurity. The Sango reference *Arabou*, combining the markers of religion, language, and appearance, makes violent rhetoric all the easier because it collectively categorizes a very large group of people with very different roles and relations to CAR’s recent history. Terminology has thus fed into debates on belonging and citizenship, and contributes to violence.

Whereas a sense of belonging might be an individual property, autochthony is inherently a reference to a social group. It is hence a more exclusive or exclusionary term than the notion of citizenship that theoretically comes with equal rights and duties. The claim to autochthony has come to be associated with entitlements such as being the

custodians of communal land, or dominating the local political arena (Geschiere, 2009; Geschiere and Jackson, 2006). While autochthony is a negotiable and fluid term, it has become an increasingly important condition for claiming belonging in places like DR Congo (Mathys, 2017; Jackson, 2006) and Burkina Faso. In the CAR similar debates about who arrived first—and is therefore entitled to certain political and social benefits—can be observed throughout the country. The discussions about the alleged foreignness of Muslims and the Mbororo community also feed into these debates. However, while other Muslims can claim autochthony as part of specific local communities or because they reside in regions that are historically Muslim-dominated, the Mbororo only arrived about a hundred years ago.

The Mbororo thus simply claim belonging to the CAR from when they started to arrive around 1920. Meanwhile, people refer to Fulani or Mbororo as strangers or foreigners, without making a distinction between those who are Central Africans and those who come from Chad and Sudan for seasonal migration with cattle. Although their claim to belonging is perhaps weaker than the claim to autochthony of other Muslim minorities, the Mbororo rightly seek to oppose the discourse that considers them as strangers in the CAR. However mobility, an essential part of the identity of the Mbororo, has become increasingly strained due to the imposition of borders by the colonial authorities, and more recently due to insecurity (de Bruijn and van Dijk, 2003; de Bruijn et al., 2016).

In an article about autochthony as a source of ‘capital’ Mathieu Hilgers alerts us to the relatively recent inversion of roles between the powerful stranger, conqueror or latecomer on-the-one-hand, and the subordinated, autochthonous people on the other (Hilgers, 2011). Colonial powers, conquerors themselves, gave autochthones political advantages over semi-sedentary and nomadic groups such as the Fulani and the Tuareg, who controlled trade and cattle corridors and who used to be politically and economically dominant during pre-colonial times (Hilgers, 2011). To nomadic groups, including pastoralists like the Mbororo, the imposition of national borders as a lasting consequence of the colonial conquest, came with important limitations: movement became subject to control via taxation on cattle and trading routes. In this region many nomadic peoples became subject to political control by ‘autochthonous’ groups that they had previously dominated. The Mbororo, however, were never subject to the inversion of political roles in the Central African Republic because they never sought domination. Nonetheless, the imposition of sovereign borders and the meanings and rights attached to belonging to a nation state only increased over the decades with the introduction of voting rights and decentralization policies.

The United Nations 2006 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples acknowledged the Mbororo, together with Baka Pygmies as the indigenous people in the CAR.⁷ When the Central African government ratified this UN Declaration in 2010, the Mbororo officially became an indigenous people in the CAR.⁸ This points to an interesting element in discussions of autochthony. While autochthony mostly offers opportunities and claims to political power and land, the term ‘indigenous’ is rather associated with minority groups and their ‘traditional’ lifestyles that deserve preservation and protection instead. Having the status of indigenous people does not make much of a political difference, but in neighboring Cameroon, the same official status contributed to a political ‘awakening’ of the Mbororo as a community (Mouiche, 2011). However, as Pelican notes for the case of Cameroon, despite this official recognition, “the Mbororo are locally considered strangers, migrants, and latecomers with limited rights to land and resources.” (Pelican, 2009, 53) The situation in the CAR is very similar: local ‘autochthonous’

⁴ See for instance the public statement of the King of the Nzakara (Bandia) in Bangassou of 21 June 2017. (Copy with author.)

⁵ Wilson, Cathérina. “Changing Definitions of Autochthony and Foreignness in Bangui.” Hot Spots, *Cultural Anthropology* website, June 11, 2014. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/540-changing-definitions-of-autochthony-and-foreignness-in-bangui> (accessed 15 February 2017).

⁶ Lombard (2016) State of Rebellion (esp chapter 3).

⁷ http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf International Workgroup for Indigenous Affairs see <http://www.iwgia.org/regions/africa/central-african-republic> (accessed 1 Dec '16).

⁸ For more information: minority rights group briefing http://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/MRG_Brief_CAR_Dec15-2.pdf (accessed 23 October 2017).

communities do not necessarily agree with the official acceptance of the Mbororo as an indigenous people.

4. Integration into Central African society

With about seven people on average per square kilometers in a country roughly the size of France, the CAR is one of the least populated countries in the world. Moreover, because ninety percent of the 5.6 million citizens live in the central and western part of the country—in the capital Bangui and towards the borders with Cameroon and Chad in the northwest—the central and eastern parts are very “empty”.⁹ The majority of the country’s ethnic groups (about 100) are farming communities (Bradshaw and Fandos-Rius, 2016, 254). Successive independent governments were confronted with an extraordinary challenge to control, let alone develop, the vast territory. There are very few roads; social services are mostly absent, and vital state institutions such as the judiciary and the army are hardly functioning, and absent in most of the provincial capitals. Instead, the country’s different communities are forced to largely govern and organize themselves (see also Bierschenk and De Sardan, 1997).

The Jaafun sub-group of Mbororo installed themselves around 1920 in the Nana-Mambéré prefecture in the northwest of the present-day CAR, towards the border with Cameroon. They came from the Adamouwa region, in what is now the northern part of Cameroon, where they had migrated from Nigeria in the early eighteenth century. However, in the face of domination by the Fulani paramount chieftaincies (*Lamidats*) and their leaders (the *Lamidos*), who were entitled to loyalty and imposed exorbitant taxes on their people, some Mbororo decided to move further into the fringes of the neighboring territory. Between 1920s and ’70s, four *legnols* (subgroups) migrated into the CAR: the Jaafun, arriving around 1920; the Wodabé who arrived in two waves in the 1920s from Cameroon and from Chad around 1975; the Uu’da in 1975 from Chad too; and the Danadji in the 70s from Nigeria (Tennebay, 2015, 25). The four subgroups have different origins and herd different types of cows. There is some competition between the Mbororo communities, although in interviews people would insist that they are all one group.¹⁰ There is consensus however that the Mbororo group that arrived first, the Jaafun, are by far the biggest community, but also the most established, settled, and best educated. Members of the Jaafun sub-group also came to dominate the administration of the Mbororo in the CAR. Today, the total size of the whole community is unknown but estimated to be somewhere between 150,000 and 450,000 people (between 3 and 10% of the total population).¹¹

With cattle as a source of wealth, local chiefs welcomed the cattle keepers in their areas. The pastoralists provided a source of local revenue to chiefs and higher authorities, including the colonial administration. Through taxation and mutually accepted practices of compensation to farmers in case of a conflict, the Mbororo generally coexisted quite peacefully with the autochthonous farmers in the rural lands in the west of the country. An important step forward in the integration of the Mbororo occurred when the newly independent government established three so-called ‘rural livestock communities’ in 1962 and two more in 1965 and ’66.¹² The establishment of these rural livestock communities formalized the Mbororo’s claim to grazing land. In the 80s, the government decreed another two rural livestock communities, bringing the total to seven. In 1964 the government also organized the

local government system including the management of local authorities, municipal councils, the appointment of mayors, etc. The *Lamido* thus combined his traditional authority with the government appointment as mayor of the rural livestock community. This meant that the *Lamido* not only wielded important traditional powers but also administrative ones, which made him an even more powerful figure in the lives of ordinary Mbororo than before.

The Mbororo’s integration into the political economy of the CAR that had started in the sixties with administrative recognition became more substantial when the national government started to consider livestock as a key economic sector. While the Mbororo community continued to live their lives at the margins of the Central African society, their cattle became seen to be an important part of the national economy. In the early seventies, the largely informal cattle sector became subject to increased organization, initially instigated by the CAR government, and later also by important donors such as the World Bank (WB) and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). An important step forward in the organization of the cattle economy was the establishment of the National Association of Livestock Breeders in the CAR (*Association Nationale des Eleveurs Centrafricains* ANEC) in 1974, which aimed at levying taxes and monitoring livestock health. In 1982 the ANEC became the *Fédération Nationale des Eleveurs Centrafricains* (FNEC). Headed by an Mbororo state administrator, the FNEC’s primary concern was livestock health, which they pursued through vaccination programs and the establishment of numerous ‘pastoral interest groups’ (*Groupement d’Intérêt Pastoraux* - GIPs) that stored and sold veterinary medicines locally.¹³ Cattle owners selling their cattle at the market paid fees to the local authorities and to the FNEC, turning the organization into a powerful and wealthy union in the eighties and nineties. Specific cattle routes across the territory and national boundaries were also established in this period, aimed at channeling seasonal migration and minimizing conflicts with farmers. In the first decades after the establishment of FNEC’s GIPs network, the (cattle-) economy flourished and the country was relatively stable. The organization of the sector went hand-in-hand with the establishment of a group of educated Mbororo leaders who took up technical and administrative positions in the sector. These networks continue to exist today: the father of the current minister for livestock, for instance, created the ANEC back in 1974.¹⁴

The image of the Mbororo as a group that evades political authorities, which motivated the move from Cameroon into CAR in the first place, is thus no longer entirely correct. Still occupying pasture land, the Mbororo elite is increasingly associated with the country’s national economic and political powers. Their power stems from combining traditional and administrative functions. The interests of the *ArDOS* and *Lamidos*, and the government of the CAR converged over improved organization of the cattle sector. At the height of these developments, the cattle sector accounted for 15–19 per cent of GDP.¹⁵ It was a win-win situation for the Central African government and the Mbororo leadership. The claims that Mbororo elites could make on the territory and the government were thus firmly anchored in their contribution to the economy. Yet, this alliance rooted in shared economic elite interest did not contribute to improving the lives of ordinary members of the Mbororo community, for instance through the provision of public services, education and healthcare. On the contrary the association between administrative powers and the traditional *Lamidos* and *ArDOS* created resentment among ordinary Mbororo. As one Mbororo civil society leader commented: “the primary interest of the *Lamidos* and *ArDOS* are the cattle, not the women and children.”¹⁶ Dissatisfied with the imposed loyalty and taxation schemes of the *Lamidos*, some families moved away from the seven rural livestock communities in order to

⁹ See the CIA factbook on CAR for more details. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ct.html> (accessed 26 February 2018).

¹⁰ Interviews with members of Mbororo community, Bangui 20 August 2017; Interview with Lamido 16 August 2017; Interview with Minority Rights leader 18 August 2017; Interview with Mbororo civil society leader 18 August 2017.

¹¹ Tennebay (2015). The numbers vary substantially. The 1993 population census counts 39,000 Mbororo.

¹² (International Crisis Group 2014) Annex B, p 27 for an overview of the Laws involved.

¹³ Interview FNEC representative 21 August 2017 Bangui.

¹⁴ Interview with chairperson of the minority movement, Bangui 18 August.

¹⁵ Interviews with FNEC representative and Lamido, Bangui 21 and 16 August 2017.

¹⁶ Interview Mbororo civil society leader, 18 August 2017.

stay beyond their control. They persisted in their mobile lifestyle beyond the political radar, and today live in fourteen out of the sixteen prefectures in the country. The divide between the wishes of ordinary Mbororo people for services, such as healthcare and education, and their elite's prioritizing the needs of their cattle also persists.

The organization of the livestock sector and the increasing national interest in cattle did not make life easier for the majority of the Mbororo people. Starting with the drought in the seventies, many lost their cattle. In the eighties, cattle pest was widespread in the CAR. Many animals died, and herders crossed the Oubangui River into Zaïre (present-day DR Congo) to stay away from the sickness. In Zaïre, however, their cattle risked being confiscated by the Zaïrian authorities and the density of the forest proved a challenge for the cattle (Boutrais, 1990, 86). The Mbororo returned to the CAR when the worst of the outbreak was over which was important to the government because the herders formed an important source of tax revenue.¹⁷ With the waves of cattle loss, many Mbororo started to combine herding with farming. Many Mbororo settled in towns or began migrating between the bush and rural towns. Because of economic hardships, quite a few among them were hired to herd the cattle of more wealthy people in town; often, Muslim traders who bought cattle as an investment. The loss of cattle also had repercussions for the community's social organization. The Mbororo are a largely hierarchized society where the elders, and especially the *Lamidos* and *Ardos* demand respect from younger generations.¹⁸ This respect, however, comes with wealth, in other words, cattle. When many families started to lose their cattle, initially because of drought and illness, and later because of the increasing insecurity that spread across the country (see next section), the young started to lose respect for their elders. In the words of one Mbororo chief, a parent needs cattle to impose authority over his sons. In poverty, youth start to aspire to alternative livelihoods.¹⁹

Despite their incorporation into the administrative and economic realms, the Mbororo never quite integrated into Central African society. Their claims to the margins were tolerated, but others never considered them as integrated into mainstream society (International Crisis Group, 2014, Tennebay, 2015). Many predetermined, at times stigmatizing, ideas about the Mbororo continued to circulate in society, including amongst other Muslims: that they were a people with backward lives that revolve around cattle, largely ignorant about politics, uninterested in education. The small Muslim community in Obo (in the southeast towards the border with South Sudan) had two mosques: one for the local Muslims and Arabs living in town; the other for the Mbororo with their own Imam because the Mbororo have their own distinctive way of practicing their religion, which includes elements of paganism.²⁰ More problematic than these types of social stigma, however, is that many people associate the Mbororo with sources of insecurity; especially the transhumance cattle-keepers from Chad and Sudan who began to enter the country in the 1980s. Fighting these ideas is difficult, especially for a community that is spread across the territory living in largely decentralized family units with hardly any representatives who speak on their behalf. The most important defense that Mbororo people have, in order to underline their belonging to society, is the fact that they speak the *lingua franca*, Sango. Although, indeed, this clearly sets them apart from other groups that migrate into the country, it has not been enough to alter popular perceptions. In addition, the past twenty years have been a period of protracted turmoil with successive regional, political, and economic crises. Insecurity has become part of everyday life in the CAR and the Mbororo became increasingly caught up in these

dynamics, most of all as victims, but with a few younger Mbororo men also as perpetrators.

5. Competition over the margins

The government of the CAR never had much control over large parts of its territory, and hence most rural lands would qualify as sites of state marginality, where different systems of rule co-exist (Korf and Raeymaekers, 2013b). Whereas Korf and Raeymaekers call frontier zones spaces where order needs to be constantly renegotiated, Zygmunt Bauman (2004, 87) summarizes frontier-lands as a condition where 'cattle barons and outlaws were in a tacit agreement and perhaps thus relatively stable: neither of them wished the lawlessness and the rule of the quickest and the shrewdest and the least scrupulous to grind to a halt and to be replaced with the government of law. They both thrived on the absence of routine, on fluidity of alliances and front lines and on the overall frailty of commitments, rights and obligations'. In the CAR, despite the absence of state control over the pasture lands during the first six decades of Mbororo presence in the country, order did not need to be constantly renegotiated. Indeed, the Mbororo successfully managed to come to, what Bauman called, 'tacit agreements' with the rural farming populations. From the eighties and nineties onwards, however, the dynamics of the rural-lands started to change in the direction of Korf and Raeymaekers' understanding of the frontier.

From that time groups that Bauman would qualify as outlaws started to establish themselves in rural spaces beyond state control. The local relations between segments of society (the tacit agreement between farmers and pastoralist) thus came under pressure with the arrival of new actors more interested in frontier dynamics, and willing to violently negotiate order. Bauman reminds us that the condition of the frontier was not always to the benefit of ordinary people, which was clearly the case for the Mbororo. Because of droughts in the seventies and eighties, pastoralist groups throughout West Africa started to move further south. In the case of the CAR, this meant seasonal visits of Chadian pastoralists; a first source of competition with the locally established Mbororo. In addition to the armed expeditions of the herders with cattle from Chad, three other groups of actors started to claim the territorial margins mainly for economic profit: (1) the 'highway bandits', also called *zaraguinas*, who extorted people along the roads; (2) the rebel groups that emerged during the reign of President Bozizé (2003–2013), mainly aiming at control of resource extraction; and (3) the poachers/traders involved in trafficking different mineral resources and poaching wildlife for meat and ivory. Each of these groups relied on networks across the borders in Chad, Nigeria, and Sudan for the provision of weapons and the trading of goods (Berg, 2008). Where the Mbororo combined their claim to the territorial and societal margins with political and economic inclusion, 'outlaws' like these groups flourished in the absence of effective government control.

One of the outcomes of the increased competition on the frontier was the need for a readjustment of the relations among the social segments that had relatively peacefully accepted each other's presence in the margins. Social relations with fellow Central Africans had never been completely tension-free but by and large relations were peaceful and accommodating (Chauvin and Seignobos, 2014, 123). As in many other sub-Saharan countries, conflict erupted between farmers and herders, and compensation mechanisms were used to prevent violence spiraling out of control (Gautier et al., 2005; Benjaminsen and Ba, 2009; Verweijen, 2017; Maiangwa, 2017). Some Mbororo as well as farmers, when interviewed, mentioned occasional friction between them. The local *Ardo* in Obo acknowledged problems between farmers and cattle keepers but also stressed the capacity to resolve such problems amicably: "We have animals and we all know that the field cannot move. It is the cow that eats [the crops] so you have to pay a little, often around 10,000 CFA (15 euros). Otherwise he [the farmer] might also kill your cow. We sensitize our people not to walk through the fields with their

¹⁷ Interview with Mbororo Civil society leader, 18 August 2017.

¹⁸ Interview with Lamido, 16 August 2017.

¹⁹ Group discussion with Mbororo representatives, 20 August 2017. See for a similar argument on the differences between Mbororo youth and their elders in Cameroon (Boutrais, 2002).

²⁰ Various conversations with members of different communities in Obo, including the Mbororo. See also Chauvin and Seignobos (2014, 248).

cattle.”²¹ Unfortunately, this previously respected culture of compensation increasingly came under pressure.

According to a representative of an Mbororo civil society organization, politicians from the late eighties onwards started to spread poisonous stories about the Mbororo.²² As a result, suspicion towards the Mbororo increased and more violent means of dispute resolution, often involving arms became dominant over the old practice of organizing things amicably.²³ The presence of seasonal cattle keepers from Chad also made it harder for Central African Mbororo to continue to strive for amicable solutions to conflicts with local farmers: Well-armed Chadian Fulani herders entered the country with large numbers of cattle, destroying farms and crops, and burning villages on the way, without concern for their local reputation. They also ignored the transhumance routes that were established to avoid conflict between farmers and pastoralist. This has had great repercussions on the local Mbororo since local people do not distinguish between the different groups, blaming the Mbororo for actions committed by Chadian Fulani. The relations between the Mbororo and the Chadian pastoralists have not been without tensions either, despite exchange and interaction. The *International Crisis Group* (2014, 12) even speaks of ‘rural wars’. A Fulani man in Paoua explained: “Between the Central Africans (Mbororo and others LdV) there is no problem, they live in one community. But with the Chadians (pastoralist LdV), this is difficult. For instance, when you kill a cow because he ate your agricultural product, he will come with the weapons and kill people. If such a thing would happen between Central Africans, this is solved amicably. We drink tea and we find a solution...The Central African cattle keepers don’t carry any weapons. They have never had any weapons”²⁴

The second important competitor that entered the frontier zone was the *zaraguina*. These well-organized ‘highway bandits’ did not operate exclusively on Central African territory but also in Northern Cameroon and Chad. The *zaraguina* phenomenon started to emerge in large parts of the north and northwestern part of the country in the early nineties and quickly proved to be a source of great trouble to those travelling the roads. The *zaraguinas* are a mixture of men-in-arms from the region, including some Central African Mbororo. *Seignobos* (2011, p. ix) distinguishes between four groups that form their basis: the best trained and armed are Chadian military men who deserted; second are members of the Uda’en Mbororo subgroup (also from Chad speaking both Fulani and Arabic); a third, smaller segment are local Mbororo from the CAR who are useful for their knowledge of the terrain. The final group is in charge of organizing criminal activity, including distributing wages and spoils and managing logistics (*Seignobos*, 2011, ix). Stolen products are sold across the borders in Chad and Cameroon. Although some members were involved in the *zaraguina*, to the Mbororo community in general, the *zaraguina* presented a great new threat in different ways.

The *zaraguinas* did not directly target cattle because they were hard to hide. Instead they abducted Mbororo children so that their parents would feel forced to sell a few cows to pay ransoms.²⁵ Many families fell victim to this practice and once again lost more of their shrinking herds. From 2006 onward many sought refuge in Cameroon and Chad. In 2007, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees opened a refugee camp in eastern Cameroon for the Mbororo people who arrived from CAR.²⁶ People with cattle tried to be (re)integrated in pastoralist life in Cameroon. Others decided to move further south and east towards Sudan, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (*Seignobos*, 2008). At the same time, the *zaraguina* hosted quite a few

young Mbororo from the CAR among them. To those that joined the new violent livelihood offered an alternative to predetermined and hierarchical life in their community. Just as with the Chadian pastoralists, the role of Mbororo in the *zaraguina* phenomenon negatively affected the ways in which others perceived the community. Although the majority of the Fulani among the *zaraguina* came from Chad, the Central Africans projected or attributed the new source of insecurity to the Mbororo people (*Tennebay*, 2015). Such accusations were not wholly unfounded.

Joining Bauman’s ‘outlaws’ was an effective way to not only fight poverty and social exclusion, but also to break with the strong hierarchies within Mbororo society. This made many Central African Mbororo uncomfortable, especially since they were also victims of highway bandits. ‘Some of our kids have gone away’, said members of the Mbororo community in interviews.²⁷ ‘People came from Chad and Sudan to offer weapons to our children and we have lost control over them. Without money you don’t have any authority, but we need to make sure that our kids return.’²⁸ One of the results of these dynamics was the establishment of the anti-*zaraguinas*, a group of mainly Wodaabe Mbororo. They operated as a self-defense force and started to accompany herds of cattle for protection (*Seignobos*, 2011).

The third group of armed men that sought space in the margin were rebel groups. They started to play an important role in the country’s security dynamics from the moment that Jean-François Bozizé took power in Bangui with the help of so-called ‘liberators’ from Chad in 2003. The ‘liberators’ grew angry with Bozizé for not fulfilling his promise of rewards upon the successful taking of power. Some liberators stayed in the country transforming themselves into rebel groups in 2004 and 2005, vying for control over territory with mineral resources to exploit.²⁹ Mostly based in the eastern and northern part of the country, they drew on support from neighboring Chad and Sudan. At the same time these groups played their part in the regional conflict dynamic between Chad and Sudan over Darfur (*Berg*, 2008). In 2012 these groups from the northeast formed the backbone of the Séléka alliance. Most rebel groups did not operate in the same zones as the rural livestock communities. The areas under control of rebel groups did host the seasonal pastoralists from Chad who paid these armed groups to be allowed to herd their cows (which put extensive pasture land at their disposal).³⁰ The impact of these rebellions on the Mbororo would change in the aftermath of the crisis that started in 2013.

The last source of competition over the margins is poaching. From the 1980s onward groups of well-equipped poachers seasonally entered the northeastern region from Sudan. These groups were involved in hunting big game such as elephant. With the decline of big game, organized poachers shifted to the hunting and drying of bush meat, which used to be the domain of local hunters. Some cattle keepers also engaged in these activities to supplement their income (*Weyns et al.*, 2014, 40–42). Poaching is especially common in the eastern parts of the country, where large parts of the territory belong to national parks, reserves and conservation projects (*Lombard*, 2016).

From the 1980s an increasing number of actors thus started to claim the territorial margins of the CAR. While initially activities such as poaching, mineral resource exploitation, and cattle keeping took place in different parts of the country, they increasingly started to overlap from the 1990s onward. In the same period, the proliferation of arms also started to play a part in the competition over the margins (*Berman and Lombard*, 2008, 69). Activities such as resource extraction by rebel groups worked well with the activities of seasonal poaching groups, who could for instance bring arms on their way down from Sudan and smuggle minerals out of the country on their way out. Local responses

²¹ Interview with Mbororo deputy *Ardo*, Obo, 17 March 2015.

²² Interview with Mbororo Civil society leader, 18 August 2017.

²³ Interview with Mbororo Civil society leader, 18 August 2017.

²⁴ Interview with a member of the Fulani community in Paoua, 3 March 2015.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch 2007.

²⁶ <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2007/3/4608f5e45/cameroon-new-office-opens-protect-care-mbororo-central-africans.html> (accessed 25 October 2017).

²⁷ Interview with Mbororo Civil society leader, 18 August 2017.

²⁸ Group discussion with members of Mbororo community, Bangui 20 August 2017.

²⁹ See *Weyns et al.* (2014) and *Southward et al.* (2014) for two very comprehensive reports about the armed rebellions and its linkages to resource exploitation.

³⁰ Personal communication with a Lamido in Bangui, 21 October 2017.

to these different dynamics of insecurity are largely comparable throughout the country. Communities established different forms of local defense groups, varying in scope and ambition, but all largely concerned with the maintenance of local security. Some of these local vigilantes would in 2013 turn into Anti-Balaka that would attack Muslims, including Mbororo, as a response to the violence caused by the Séléka. In response to the *zaraguinas*, many Mbororo armed themselves too to defend their lives and their livestock. The increase in local armed responses and the spread of small arms were thus important side-effects of the developments since the mid-nineties. At the same time the government increasingly retreated from governing the countryside (Bierschenk and De Sardan, 1997).

The Mbororo could still claim pasture land but the presence of the *zaraguina* and the armed transhumance groups from Chad made herding dangerous. The different armed actors did not all occupy the same grazing lands but their presence resulted in the constant ordering and reordering that characterizes frontier zones. Largely unarmed and faced with suspicion from the rest of society, the Mbororo's capacities to maintain their claim to their livelihood became more and more limited. The crisis that started in 2013 only further limited this space.

6. Maintaining claims through different strategies

Historically, the Mbororo successfully adapted to new circumstances emerging from shifting situations, but already in 1990 Boutrais (1990) wondered how much longer the pastoralist way of life was going to survive. Over the past decades the political and security situation has reduced the capacities of the Mbororo to navigate their situation in a way that ensures their well-being and that of their cattle. As the previous section has shown, reduced territorial space had repercussions for the social relations between the Mbororo and the rest of society. Reduced territorial space led to a decline in their economic position, which had repercussions on the political leverage of the Mbororo elites. Economically, marginalization had started well before the latest crisis. In the 2011–2015 poverty reduction strategy plan (PRSP) that the country developed in collaboration with UNDP, for instance, the word cattle (*bétail*) was mentioned just once in an overview of the country's export products.³¹ The final report of the Bangui Forum (a series of consultations as part of the transitional period in preparation of the elections), only mentioned the Fulani (which includes the Mbororo) as a source of insecurity instead of a group of fellow citizens who should be able to return home (Rapporteurs, 2015). The question thus is how the Mbororo adapted to increasing competition over the pasture lands, and in what ways they tried to uphold claims to belonging that they had successfully secured in the past century.

The previous section made clear that some members of the community, youths in particular, resorted to more violent means of make a living and perhaps even achieve a better position in society. In a study commissioned by an Mbororo civil society association, the author does not deny the role of the Mbororo as a source of insecurity and attributes some of these dynamics to the lack of opportunities: "Victim of exclusion, damages and losses caused by the loss of their cattle, the Mbororo have, in turn, invested in raids to replenish their herds of cattle by occasionally transforming into road robbers (*zaraguinas* LdV) themselves" (Tennebay, 2015, p. 34).³² This quote describes the double position of a small group of Mbororo at the time of the *zaraguina*, which negatively affected the ways in which the community was perceived by other Central Africans. The role of some local Mbororo in current armed conflicts has only further strained relations between the Mbororo and other communities.

³¹ http://www.undp.org/content/dam/car/docs/projectdocs/DSRP_II_Version_Française.pdf.

³² See also the Antwerp based NGO IPIS (2014) that has documented attacks that involved Peuhl between September 2012 and September 2014. See the online tool that accompanies the report by Weyns et al. e.g. <http://www.ipisresearch.be/mapping/webmapping/car/> (accessed 14 February 2018).

The Mbororo community is thus entangled in conflict dynamics in multiple ways. They have often been immediate victims of violence, perpetrated mainly by the *zaraguinas*, and they were indirectly affected by negative popular perceptions towards them through "guilt" by association. But the latest crisis that started in 2013 made it much worse. The Anti-Balaka's self-defense forces that attacked Mbororo's lives and property over the course of 2013–15 forced many more people into exile than the *zaraguinas* a decade earlier. The violence formed a threat to the Mbororo's (and wider Muslim community's) sentiment of belonging; treating them as strangers. But some of their community members joined armed groups, and importantly considering the festering conflict in the country, their cattle are an important conflict resource. Cows are caught up in the political economy of conflict; financing rebel groups on different sides of the divides. Their entanglements in conflict dynamics translated into different responses, with a key role for mobility. The most common response by the majority of the Mbororo has been to move internally or to go into exile. The choice of exile not only offered an adequate response to the threats that the community was facing, it was also a variation of their strategy in the first decades after moving into the CAR; claiming the pastures by lying low. Due to insecurity, especially in the western part of the country in 2013 and 14, the best adaptation was to move. Some Mbororo were registered in camps in Cameroon or Chad, but many preferred not to because it restricted their much-valued mobility. The alternative option was to move internally, further to the center and the east, to areas that initially were less affected by violence. These used to be the spaces that were controlled by some of the rebel groups between 2006 and 2012 and that annually hosted some of the transhumance groups too. There is no shortage of pasture land. But in the aftermath of the recent crisis, new and former armed groups spread across the territory, now posing a different threat to the Mbororo that have remained or moved into these zones.

Two developments deserve mentioning in this regard. First, cattle feeds the conflict economy in different ways. Cattle are subject to raids by armed groups. Rebel groups are many and the extent to which they are involved in cattle theft or, by contrast, offer protection differ but it is clear that this business model benefits many except the cattle herders, owners and traders. One way to extract resources from the Mbororo is by forcing them to pay for keeping cattle in, or transiting through, the spaces under rebel control. Another way to extract money is through imposed "mediation" by armed groups in case of a problem between farmers and herders.³³ All armed groups benefit from (stolen) cattle as they charge roughly 40 dollars' as a transit fee per head of cattle to pass through the territory they control.³⁴ Mbororo owners and herders feel victimized. The importance of cattle in the conflict economy prompted certain Mbororo leaders to speak of 'blood cows', in an analogy to 'blood diamonds'.³⁵

Secondly, two identity-driven armed groups have emerged vowing to protect the Mbororo. They explicitly claim to defend the wellbeing of the Mbororo and the cattle keepers in general. Their armed action, which is justified by reference to Mbororo identity, is the latest, and arguably counterproductive form of claim-making currently observed in the CAR. One of these groups has an Mbororo leader from the CAR. General Sidiki, operating in Kouï, in the west towards the border with Cameroon, has established the 3R movement (*Retour, Reclamation et Réhabilitation*) to ensure protection to community members herding and living in the area. More notorious is Ali Darassa who used to fight alongside the well-known Chadian rebel leader Baba Ladé. Darassa is a

³³ Interview with a Lamido, Bangui 16 August 2017, and with an anthropologist/humanitarian worker, Bangui 17 August 2017.

³⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain how the cattle market has changed as a result of the conflict but these changes are important. This mainly affects traders though, a sector that is historically dominated by 'Arab' (Muslim) traders.

³⁵ Interview with a Lamido, Bangui 16 August and with the chairperson of a minority rights group, Bangui 18 August 2017.

Fulani from Chad and just like his former boss, Baba Ladé, a highly controversial warlord. After the dissolution of the Séléka in September 2013, Darassa created his *Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique* (UPC) controlling the areas surrounding Bambari. In the beginning of 2017 MINUSCA forced him to leave the town, which led to a spiral of new violence in areas where he allegedly wanted to install himself. Both Sidiki and Darassa vowed to protect the interest of the Mbororo and their cattle but at the same time impose the same conditions on them as other rebel groups (but did not resort to cattle theft).

Local Mbororo have very mixed feelings about these armed groups and their ‘protection’. A representative of the Mbororo refugees in Cameroon expressed frustration with regard to the establishment of 3R. By asserting to represent the cause of the Mbororo through violence, Sidiki only made it harder on the Mbororo to return from exile.³⁶ In another interview someone noted: ‘they all are thieves and when they have weapons they impose themselves’.³⁷ A Member of Parliament from Bambari, on the other hand, claimed that rebels like Darassa and Sidiki represent ‘*un mal nécessaire*’ (a necessary evil) because otherwise cattle would continue to be stolen.³⁸ Others among the Mbororo elite made similar comments.³⁹ The divide between elites primarily concerned with the well-being of the cattle, and ordinary Mbororo who just want to quietly return to their pastures seems to be in play here again. The forceful and imposed ‘protection’ of cattle inhibits the well-being of the Mbororo as a people because it plays into the popular perception of them as a violent community. In other words, where for some it helps them access pasture land and protection for their cattle, it undermines the scope for wider social claims to citizenship and protection. The freedom and relative security with which Mbororo may move across the territory is largely contingent on which of the armed groups dominate the area.

7. Conclusions

Through the analysis of the Mbororo's navigation into Central African's territorial, political and economic margins, this paper traces how their claim to belonging via the unobtrusive occupation of the country's grazing land has become constrained over the past twenty years as a result of increasingly violent competition over the margins. While historically the Mbororo people demonstrated great capacities to adapt to changing circumstances, including drought, cattle pests and political volatility, the more recent developments in the country have resulted in the depletion of herds, with the majority of Central African Mbororo fleeing to Cameroon and Chad. This paper has argued that this is mainly caused by the increased competition over the territorial margins with the presence of arms and armed actors as a driving force to change the balance of political and economic power. From the early 90s, the margins of the CAR turned into frontier zones; a space dominated by ‘outlaws’, resulting in the continuous need for reordering.

The Mbororo and their cattle have been a target and a victim of this increased competition for decades. At the same time, increasing insecurity has gradually undermined their position in society. Conflict-mediation mechanisms have changed under the influence of weapons. The lack of a clear differentiation between the well-armed seasonal Fulani and *zaraguina* from Chad and Sudan and the Mbororo increased society's distrust towards the community. The Mbororo tried to adapt to the changing circumstances by establishing a protection force against the *zaraguina*, moving elsewhere within the CAR, or by seeking refuge in neighboring countries. A side effect of the economic difficulties and the loss of cattle with which the community was confronted was the loss of authority of the elder members over their ‘children.’ In the search for

alternative livelihoods and quick opportunities instead of a life with cattle in the bush, some youth joined the *zaraguina* or armed groups. As a result, it became harder for the rest of the community to express their wish to be part of society in peaceful way.

Claiming belonging is hard in a political environment that struggles with the persistent spread of insecurity and increasing animosity between segments of society. The return and rehabilitation of the Mbororo and their pastoral, nomadic livelihoods as part of Central African society is not yet in sight. Half a century ago their claims to the territorial margins paved the way for political inclusion and economic integration. Today, their social and political marginality, combined with continuing violent competition over the territorial margins will make it hard for the Mbororo to reclaim the pastures that they lost over past decades.

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³⁶ Telephone conversation with Mbororo Representative of Refugees in Bertoua, 15 February 2017.

³⁷ Group discussion with members of Mbororo community, Bangui 20 August 2017.

³⁸ Interview with an MP of the national assembly, Bangui 23 August 2017.

³⁹ Interview with Lamido, Bangui 16 August 2017.

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