

Radical Autochthony? Proprietary Political Discourse Among Elites and Peasants in the Anti-Balaka Armed Movement in the Central African Republic

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Abstract: Since at least the colonial era, the Central African Republic (CAR) has been a hotbed of rural rebellion and protest. This article explores the political discourses of members of the Anti-Balaka, a diffuse protest movement and armed rebellion, comparing discourses to see how they vary in relation to demographic categories: urban and rural, elites and peasants. Lombard and Vlavonou find that rural peasants demand a moral economy of interpersonal respect, while elite (usually urban) adherents claim inclusion in a system of official recognition and patronage. Both

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are concerned with respect, but what is radical about the vision of the peasants is that they can enact it on their own.

Résumé : Depuis l'époque coloniale, la République centrafricaine (RCA) est un foyer de rébellion et de protestation rurale. Cet article explore les discours politiques des membres de l'Anti-Balaka, un mouvement de protestation diffus et de rébellion armée, en comparant les discours pour voir comment ils varient en fonction des catégories démographiques : urbaines et rurales, élites et paysans. L'article constate que les paysans ruraux exigent une économie morale basée sur le respect interpersonnel, tandis que les adhérents de l'élite (généralement urbaine) revendiquent l'inclusion dans un système de reconnaissance et de patronage officiels. L'un et l'autre sont soucieux du respect, mais ce qui est radical dans la vision des paysans, c'est qu'ils peuvent l'appliquer eux-mêmes.

Resumo : Desde, pelo menos, a época colonial, a República Centro-Africana (RCA) tem sido um espaço fértil em revoltas e protestos rurais. Este ensaio explora as vozes políticas dos membros do Anti-Balaka, um movimento difuso de protesto e de rebelião armada, e compara os seus vários discursos para compreender de que modo eles diferem em função das categorias demográficas: população urbana e rural, elites e camponeses. Os autores concluem que os camponeses rurais exigem uma economia moral de respeito interpessoal, ao passo que os membros das elites (normalmente urbanas) defendem a inclusão num sistema de reconhecimento e patrocínio oficial. Ambos se preocupam com a questão do respeito, mas a radicalidade da visão dos camponeses consiste no facto de eles conseguirem activá-lo por sua própria conta.

Keywords: Central African Republic; rebellion; protest; social movement; violence; Anti-Balaka; moral economy; autochthony

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Introduction

In the 1920s, French Equatorial Africa was in turmoil. Ruled by a combination of private concessionary companies and cash-strapped colonizers who were equally brutal in the labor demands they made of locals,¹ Central Africans looked for (and found) opportunities for protest—targeted killings, theft, and rebellion. Ubangi-Shari, as the landlocked central colony (now the Central African Republic, CAR) was known, was the heart of these rebellions. As historian Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch (2016) explained, “Peasants were exhausted and furiously, radically hostile to colonizers. They were ready for losing their life to change it. In the case of the Baya revolt, they succeeded in organizing a long war over a large space, where nevertheless no centralized power existed before; their leader was himself a peasant, he was killed early, in 1928, and his death did not stop the open revolt.” Ubangi-Shari became known as a place with high levels of rural protest and rebellion. Almost a hundred years later, it has regained that reputation. The Anti-Balaka

mobilizations have been among the most prominent, and they bear some striking similarities to the rebellions a century earlier, but there are also some differences. For instance, the Anti-Balaka have mobilized both in rural and in urban areas.

The Anti-Balaka mobilizations are quite diverse, and that makes them a particularly useful case for understanding the discourses of popular protest in Africa today. They are geographically diffuse, spread across both urban and rural areas; people participate or feel affinity for them at a range of levels; and they have no effective, over-arching organization. Like the Baya (also spelled Gbaya) revolt of old, Anti-Balaka functions not as a group with an ideology (singular) but as a broad call to action that draws in people who all see their varied interests and claims reflected in it by virtue of its polyvalent symbolic repertoire.

In this article, we explore the changing contours of rural and urban, and peasant and elite life in CAR to situate and compare the preoccupations and reasons for mobilization of diverse sets of people. Peasants live in both urban and rural areas. Many peasants strike out for the capital in search of schooling or jobs but later return to the village. We focus more on the voices of rural peasants for the sake of space and comparison; they explain the peasant worldview with clarity and passion. Elites, in contrast, tend to stay in the capital. Big city residence is close to a definitional element of what it means to be elite in the CAR. Anti-Balaka mobilization has in some cases taken place through urban-rural interchange, such as when soldiers of the *Forces armées centrafricaines* (FACA) who worked with the former president Bozizé returned to their villages to organize militias. But while there are urban and rural connections, elite and peasant are less porous categories.

Anti-Balaka adherents are united in being concerned with respect and status, but the forms those concerns take diverge among peasants (who are most focused on interpersonal civility and power relations) and elites (who are more focused on institutional recognition for the Anti-Balaka and the geopolitical status of the CAR). Peasants, particularly but not only in rural areas, enforce a moral economy that involves interpersonal civility, including—especially—in the context of occasional paid labor and material inequality. Elites speak about gaining access and recognition in official institutions and the geopolitical arena. There are two things that are radical about the peasants' vision. The first is that they diagnose a social ill and wish to change it. The second is that their desired change does not require access from institutional gatekeepers. They can enact it on their own (though the extent to which their practices are a good reflection of their philosophy is debatable, and beyond the scope of this paper). Elites, in contrast, are more interested in joining, on a privileged plane, existing institutions which they see as problematic less by their nature than by their current composition and membership.

Methods

Lombard has done ethnographic and historical research in CAR since 2003. In the years since the Séléka rebel alliance's emergence in 2013, she has explored the effects and forms of rebellion and international intervention in CAR through interviews, participant observation, and small group discussions in Bangui, Bambari, and Tiringoulou (in CAR's far northeast) during yearly visits to CAR between 2014 and 2018 and in 2021 (two trips in each year 2016 and 2017). While the research was not exclusively focused on Anti-Balaka, it is not difficult to encounter people who support Anti-Balaka or consider themselves full-fledged Anti-Balaka, whether in Bangui or other predominantly Christian areas of CAR. Vlavonou conducted ethnographic and newspaper archival research at the *Alliance Française de Bangui* in CAR in 2017 and 2019. He completed an in-depth study of autochthony discourses in the CAR and the meaning that various actors ascribe to the concept through interviews, participant observation, and small group discussions in Bangui, Yaloké, and Gaga. His work has explored a variety of social categories such as former and current members of government, members of armed groups in confrontation, the Anti-Balaka and Séléka. He has also visited other parts of CAR such as Paoua and Kaga-Bandoro for research not exclusively focused on autochthony. In total, we spoke with approximately seventy-five Anti-Balaka adherents.

Our research has been qualitative and our interview and conversational process open-ended rather than structured. Anti-Balaka members were reticent when it came to speaking about what they did as Anti-Balaka (such as chasing out their Muslim former neighbors) beyond describing themselves as protectors of their communities. Our interlocutors often seemed to interpret attempts to encourage them to speak about their activities as a criticism of those actions and therefore deflected or refused them. Some of those who responded directly said that the justification was the action, in the sense of "We did only what was necessary, which should be obvious based on what I'm telling you" (a paraphrase). In short, the accounts in this study are self-interested and motivated/situated; they largely cover what Anti-Balaka wanted to tell foreign researchers. But they are nonetheless interesting, because they let us explore how Anti-Balaka speak about themselves when given the chance to direct the conversation.

Changing Contours of Rural and Urban Life in CAR

The editors of this special issue note that there is new momentum around the long-term shifts that have been affecting the lives of people in rural areas in Africa. They outline four major areas to consider: circuits of capitalist accumulation, digital technologies, street protests, and migration (including beyond the continent). James Ferguson (2006) has noted that amid the hype about new capital investments in Africa, it is too often forgotten that the capital investments are generally quite geographically delimited, and they

“hop over” wide swathes of the continent—an Africa-focused manifestation of the American expression “fly-over country.” CAR has, for the most part, been hopped over, or flown over, not just by capital but also by digital technologies and long-distance migration (thousands of Congolese and Cameroonians people refugee camps in Greece, but no Central Africans). But CAR too has been subject to accelerated shifts in urban/rural life – they just take a different form. One is the expansion of armed groups (some well-organized, others less so) and other armed activity in the country, including armed actors whom Central Africans identify as foreigners (though not everyone agrees on where the dividing line between Central Africans and foreigners lies). Another is the expansion of humanitarian, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping institutions and actors. The details of these developments vary substantially across the country, but by this point far more localities have experienced direct violent conflict than not. For nearly a decade, about a quarter of the Central African population has been displaced, some close by (many leave their homes by the roadside for greater cover by their fields), and others across the borders to neighboring Chad, Cameroon, or DRC. For years now, fear, anger, frustration, and loss have been larger parts of Central Africans’ lives than anyone would consider ideal.

The editors write that radical content (how radicalism is expressed, what forms it takes, and what objects it demands) is always historically constructed, and this is the case in contemporary CAR as well. As E.P. Thompson has argued, popular protest tends to rely on a “legitimizing notion”: “By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community.” Thompson used the term “moral economy” to describe the values around exchange that can be so important as to “override” the “fear or deference” that people might otherwise feel toward those they saw as imposing a different system (1971:78).

For rural peasants in CAR who have joined the Anti-Balaka (more on their background below), it is just such a moral economy that they seek to defend. They want to determine the norms of interpersonal civility, particularly to be treated as owners/proprietors/equals while they may be materially poorer than the Muslim merchant class whose presence has expanded in their midst since the 1970s (Filakota 2012). Even rural areas in CAR are socially heterogeneous, or are proximate to places that are; there is anxiety about whether groups of people—chiefly Muslims and non-Muslims—are living by different, downright antagonistic rules and norms, and whether that divergence disqualifies certain people from social membership. This is quite different from the vision of moral economy Thompson imparted based on his study of eighteenth-century Britain. There, the major social schism was between a governing class and a working class, both of which were trying to impose their norms of exchange on everyone. It was taken for granted that all were part of, and would remain part of, the same polity. Central Africans, in contrast, have come to see their social scenes as highly permeable, and in

conjunction with that, rebellion and protest have involved linking a discourse of a moral economy of interpersonal respect (and even on occasion a demand for deference from wealthy outsiders) and an exclusionary social agenda—respect the moral economy, or be chased out of the polity.

In this sense, Anti-Balaka have been concerned with upholding “normal life,” as Didier Péclard et al. summarize one goal of rebel governance in several African countries. But where studies of governance by rebel groups define “normal life” in terms of public services or other state-like activities (“economic activities, the provision of basic services such as health and education, as well as a system of justice” [Péclard et al. 2019:22]), rural Anti-Balaka are, first, not a “group” and, second, not particularly involved in ideal-typical state-like projects. Instead, they strive to make a credible claim to being the ones who can legitimately impose social norms, and one of the pillars their case rests on is seeing themselves as the first-comers, or autochthons. Autochthony is classically explained as the belief that those who can make the strongest claim to being first-comers to the land have rights to citizenship that others should be deprived of (Bøås & Dunn 2013; Geschiere 2009; Dunn 2009; Ceuppens & Geschiere 2005; Geschiere & Jackson 2006; Marshall-Fratani 2006). Many scholars have published works on autochthony and armed groups, taking the state as the referent object. This topic has been studied extensively in Africa, particularly in the Central African region that covers the area from Sudan to Angola. We follow Judith Verweijen’s prompt that points “to the necessity of a disaggregated approach to the study of violent practices that are framed in the language of autochthony” (2015:158). In that sense, we build on the findings of the scholars of autochthony when it comes to the politics of being first-comers, but we are interested in how Anti-Balaka rhetoric expresses their demand to be seen in the CAR.

A sense of self as the first-comers to CAR indeed underlies the accounts of many Anti-Balaka adherents, but it is the conjoined desire to be part of a proprietary class and able to set a moral economy that really inspires them. While many accounts of autochthony see the state or nation as the crucial frame for people’s protest, Anti-Balaka are more generally concerned with autonomy and belonging. Their narratives focus on their desire to “shape people’s self-conduct,” similarly to Kaspar Hoffman and Judith Verweijen’s (2019) description of Mai-Mai groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As a result, while a desire to use autochthony as a criterion for autonomy and belonging is part of the peasant Anti-Balaka worldview, we find moral economy to more effectively capture the tenor of their discourse.

For the elites, their claims are less reflective of a moral economy than of a desire for inclusion in a system that already exists; if the elites of the independence period strove for “Africanization” of the existing colonial structures, the elites of today’s Anti-Balaka strive for “Balakanization” of the existing state structures of recognition, and greater geopolitical respect for CAR. We provide evidence of the moral economy-meets-autochthony perspective taken by rural peasants affiliated with Anti-Balaka, and of elite

(generally urban) Anti-Balaka members' expressed desires for institutional inclusion. We argue for the radicalness of the former in contrast to the latter. However, where Thompson drew straight lines between moral economy and practices of popular protest (the practices were a means of achieving specific objectives), Anti-Balaka violence exceeded that kind of instrumental calculation and even at times flashed in the direction of genocide. We therefore conclude with a call for more research looking at the range of possible relationships between narratives and practices, and for caution in seeing radicalism as inherently virtuous.

Who are the Anti-Balaka?

Anti-Balaka is a label that first came into broad use in CAR in 2013. In March of that year, an agglomeration of rebel groups and their supporters took power in the CAR capital, Bangui.² Known as the Séléka (meaning "alliance" in CAR's main language), their strongest elements were Muslim, though at least initially the people who joined them included many Christians. This assortment of armed actors was united by the dream of taking over the presidency and the promise of payment. The former accomplished, they turned to the latter. Commanders dispersed around CAR, ruling towns as fiefdoms. People quickly became convinced that the Séléka leaders favored Muslims over everyone else. Where Christians could be extorted, beaten, killed, or raped, Muslims would be allowed to go about life as normal, though many Muslims also suffered from Séléka's power. Anger grew, and non-Muslims began organizing to strike back in protest. There were several strands of agency in these mobilizations. Some were locally based, drawing on village modes of organizing, which borrowed from the practices used in Evangelical churches and for village leadership roles. Others relied on individuals' initiative to seek out and gain occult and material "armoring" for the protection of themselves and their fellows. At the same time, the ousted president, François Bozizé, and his close agents were interested in riling people up and motivating them to attack and push back against Séléka.

Targeting Séléka was difficult, however. In September 2013, the Séléka leader Michel Djotodia had officially disbanded the network. And maybe more importantly, the most fearsome Séléka members and groups were hard to attack, whereas the Muslims whom Bozizé's elite constituency vilified were sitting targets. Except in the Northeast, where Muslims are a majority and have lived for centuries, in most of the country Muslims are an economically dominant minority, frequently involved in trading, money transfer, and precious gems. Their status—real Central Africans, or exploitative foreign invaders?—has been disputed since before the colonial era, with periods of relative harmony and periods of elevated mistrust. Anti-Balaka began concerted targeting of Muslims in September 2013, and in December they launched several coordinated assaults in Bangui that left the remaining Muslims in the city trapped in a single neighborhood. Any goods they could

not actively protect were confiscated or destroyed by Anti-Balaka and their hangers-on.

In the years since then, Anti-Balaka has become a more diffuse category. While it is often portrayed as an armed group, that perception is incorrect. Anti-Balaka is not an armed group, nor are its members best understood as representing a number of connected armed groups. Rather, they are adherents of a political worldview. Some people are actual members, and there is an organized structure that some participate in, but many more support certain basic tenets and see those traits as central to their view of how the world should be, but are ambivalent about or dismissive of the idea that the self-proclaimed leadership represents them or is directly connected to them—Anti-Balaka is more of a worldview than an organized institution. In the past few years, Central Africans have shortened Anti-Balaka to Balaka, and both are used more or less interchangeably in speech.

The Anti-Balaka “heartland” is the Baya region, where the major 1920s rebellion was centered (see Nzabakomada-Yakoma 1986; O’Toole 1984), but Anti-Balaka are spread widely among non-Muslim Central Africans. There are people—usually men—who undergo initiations to join self-defense associations in their localities and become known as Anti-Balaka, but they are not a standing armed group so much as a network that mobilizes in response to perceived threats. Then there are people who occupy positions of leadership in what they describe as organized Anti-Balaka chains of command; these tend to be more urban-based. Then there are many more people who support the broad political claims and objectives of the Anti-Balaka; they are Balaka in spirit and morals, if not in the form of being active fighters themselves. Consider that in Bangui in March 2016, when a newly elected president was inaugurated, many Christians in Bangui said they were hopeful for the future because the new president “is a Balaka.” Officially, he was not, but many people assumed that his primary sympathies lay with the Balaka and that he could well be a secret member.

The most widespread tenet of Balakanism, as some elite adherents and Séléka rebel leadership have termed the Anti-Balaka worldview, is that Central Africans are being exploited and dispossessed by rapacious, evil foreigners and must fight back. The most obvious of those dispossessors are the Séléka, particularly those members of the Séléka whose appearance marked them as Chadian or Sudanese and Muslim. If the Séléka are the dispossessors, it follows that they should become the targets of the Anti-Balaka and their supporters. But lacking easy access to Séléka, Anti-Balaka attacked people who could be assimilated to the Séléka, such as Muslims and others with family ties to the north. These included the Peulh herders and businesspeople who move semi-itinerantly through CAR, as well as the shopkeepers and diamond dealers, who are also mostly Muslims. (Muslims with West African heritage were generally not as targeted as those with heritage and ties to CAR’s closer northern neighbors.)

We have sketched out the above to give a sense of the ideas and history that form the platform that is common to most Anti-Balaka. Next, we will

compare the statements of urban, elite Anti-Balaka, particularly as voiced by one of their leaders, Maxime Mokom, and rural, peasant Anti-Balaka to show the divergences in how they narrate their grievances and agenda. Elites talk about respect as a matter of diplomatic and institutional inclusion, while peasants talk about respect as a matter of being able to determine norms for interpersonal relationships. They are therefore united in being concerned with respect, but peasants are oriented around a moral economy of which they see themselves as the keepers, while elites seek access to an institutional realm that has thus far been closed off to them.

Listening to Urban, Elite Anti-Balaka

One of the recognized Anti-Balaka leaders in Bangui is Maxime Mokom. In this section we draw particularly from interviews with him because he so clearly articulated the urban, elite Anti-Balaka perspective that we also heard from others (see, for instance, Lombard 2024). According to Mokom and those close to him, he founded the Anti-Balaka movement from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where he was living at the time. He holds the title of Coordinator of the Anti-Balaka. There are, however, two main Anti-Balaka factions. The other is headed by Edouard Patrice Ngaïssona. (Most people who consider themselves Anti-Balaka are at most tangentially connected to these leaders and their networks, though.) Ngaïssona had long been close to former president Bozizé and was a minister of sports under his regime. In 2014, he wanted to turn part of the Anti-Balaka into a political party (Dukhan 2016:7), an indication that he sought to remain an important public personage even in the event of a peace deal that might disband the Anti-Balaka. Ultimately, he had limited control over some of the Anti-Balaka but was arrested and transferred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) on that basis in November 2018. Unlike Ngaïssona, Mokom has not been a public figure in CAR politics. He owes his rise solely to his involvement with the Anti-Balaka. He had a career as a security officer prior to Séléka's arrival in power. He joined the police in 2006 and then the intelligence service. He is a pastor as well. Mokom has a modest house with a big compound where he managed to build a chapel. He held masses and long nights of prayers with various followers. In March 2019, Mokom joined the government of President Touadéra (following the signing of the *Accord politique pour la paix et la réconciliation en République centrafricaine [APPR-RCA]*, the current peace accord between the government and armed groups) as the minister in charge of Disarmament Demobilization and Reinsertion (DDR), but their relationship has not always been easy (*Jeune Afrique* 2020). In December 2020 Mokom joined the Coalition des patriotes pour le changement (CPC), led by Bozizé, in an attempt to remove Touadéra from power. The coalition's attempt to seize power was unsuccessful, and Mokom then sought refuge in neighboring Chad. After a breach of the exile conditions, the Chadian government arrested Mokom and transferred him to the ICC in February 2022. At the ICC, he faced charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity

committed between 2013 and 2014, but the charges were withdrawn in October 2023.

Mokom initially did not want to be interviewed, but he eventually agreed when a pastor he respected told him he could trust Vlavonou. Mokom came to the pastor's house for the interview in August 2017. He was dressed casually and would not have stood out among a gathering of young, urban Central African men: clean, new jeans, fresh polo shirt, bright trainers. The story he wanted to tell about the Anti-Balaka focused on geopolitics. "Déby [Chadian president at the time; now deceased] wants to take control of the CAR [and make it] the nineteenth prefecture of Chad and form the Republic of Logone." Séléka, in Mokom's telling, was an extension of Déby's will and populated by Chadians—"foreign mercenaries," in Mokom's phrasing (*Radio Ndeke Luka* 2017).

Indeed, there was a nearly twenty-year history of Déby playing an outsize role in Central African politics, for instance by providing the armed fighters who helped François Bozizé take power in Bangui in 2003 (Debos 2008). Bozizé remained in power for a decade, thanks in large part to Déby's provision of troops to serve as his personal guard. President Déby had several political opponents who were living in CAR, and he wanted to ensure that the regime in Bangui was favorable to his interests (Ceriana Mayneri 2014:182). When Bozizé stopped being as deferential to Déby, he became topplable. Bozizé and other Central African politicians became cunning, if not always successful, negotiators in the market for Déby's patronage, sometimes turning to him and sometimes away. This was a challenging dance, because popular Central African mistrust of Chadian inroads in CAR is profound. And yet amazingly, Bozizé was both the president most associated with Chadian support and an inspiring figure to many Anti-Balaka who decry the presence of Chadians in general and Chadian fighters in particular.

Mokom argued that Séléka fighters could only be foreigners, and the evidence he gave was the way they acted. "If they were Central African, what is the point in burning houses and pillaging people? If you are really autochthon, you cannot burn all these farms and houses." He was implying that a sense of proprietorship and patriotism would prevent true Central Africans from perpetrating such destructive acts. (The broad participation in destruction in CAR, including by Anti-Balaka, undermines Mokom's contention.) Mokom also emphasized that when the Anti-Balaka movement emerged, it was because Central Africans were living through a hellish, stateless anarchy. He said the following several times, nearly verbatim: "There was no state. It was total anarchy, and it was external aggression. There was no state. We are seeking sovereignty and real independence" (Bangui, August 16, 2017). In Mokom's telling, Anti-Balaka adherents are avengers who wrested control of their country back from rapacious foreigners.

At the same time, Mokom was eager to point out that Anti-Balaka abided by international treaties. In the formal list of Anti-Balaka demands drafted by elites who describe themselves as Anti-Balaka, there is an annex detailing the legal instruments that in their view authorize their use of force.³ The official

Anti-Balaka spokesperson in Bangui is a law graduate of the University of Bangui and helped prepare the list. When questioned about whether they had really abided by these legal instruments, he was less solicitous to show his deference to the law. “Are we the ones who draft international law? It is them the whites/foreigners, so they should not tell us later that we are ill-using it. Look at the whole territory: the Anti-Balaka are not circulating with weapons. It is the Séléka” (Bangui, August 28, 2017). Whether deferential to international law or not, Mokom’s discourse remained steadily on geopolitical dimensions to the violence in CAR.

The same is true of the list of elite Anti-Balaka demands. The list contains seventeen points. The first: “All the rights universally recognized and respected everywhere in the world, in Asia, in Europe, in the Americas, in Oceania, among others, as enumerated in the annex, are the same rights that we demand that the international community apply and respect in the CAR.”⁴ There are several things one might note about this demand, including that the respect of Central African rights is directed at the “international community,” rather than the national authorities who according to international law are responsible for assuring that human rights are promoted in CAR. (It is also interesting that Africa is not mentioned among the continents where human rights are “universally acknowledged and respected.”) The rest of the list contains several political aims, such as the integration and involvement of Anti-Balaka in peace processes, DDR, and the eventual reconstitution of the Central African Armed Forces. In addition, fully three demands relate to formally recognizing Anti-Balaka as national heroes and patriots. Number ten: “The recognition of the heroism of the Anti-Balaka patriots as a resistance movement.”⁵ And fourteen: “The erection of a monument to the memory of the Anti-Balaka patriots who fell during the resistance battles.”⁶ And also sixteen: “The erection of museums to their [fallen Anti-Balaka] memory and in memory of others who fell in the course of resistance.”⁷

A theme running throughout the demands is respect and status, but it is a mode of respect in a patriotic/institutional register. The demands do not all relate to money, though some do. But they all have to do with the institutionalization of Anti-Balaka within the Central African state and within official accounts of Central African history. The elite Anti-Balaka focus on institutionalization and becoming part of a political establishment is very different from the preoccupations of peasants in the Anti-Balaka movement, as the next section will explore. Elites such as Mokom claim that they initiated the movement, and that people followed them. However, peasants who see themselves as Anti-Balaka tell a very different story, one in which there is little to no place for elite geopolitical concerns, and in which elites figure minimally.

Listening to Peasants

Urban elites who consider themselves Anti-Balaka leaders think they are responsible for having generated an ideology, Balakanism, that is the glue

uniting all people inspired by, mobilized by, or sympathetic to the elements of that ideology. As Maxime Mokom said when interviewed by Vlavonou, “When we started [Anti-Balaka] it [was] an ideology for and of the whole territory.” Former Prime Minister Martin Ziguélé also said that he and other politicians are “ideologically responsible” for the self-defense groups that exist, at least latently, in most Central African villages. They may be right that people get inspired when hearing autochthony ideas on the radio or through other news sources, but urban elites’ claim that they, through the ideas they promulgate, are responsible for the widespread and multifarious Anti-Balaka mobilizations is self-serving and false. In fact, the mobilizations have many different sources of inspiration and expertise, including people’s experiences organizing for Evangelical churches and for local government (the *chef de village* and his counselors and their ways of getting things done). Setting aside the elite ways of taking credit for peasants’ ingenuity, what do the peasants themselves have to say?

To find out, Vlavonou interviewed fighters and their supporters in Yaloké, a small town in western CAR, and Gaga, a small mining town next to Yaloké, northwest of Bangui. Respect and proprietorship were as important to the peasants as they were to the elites who speak on behalf of Anti-Balaka to the world, but they used different registers. For elites, the disrespect they objected to plays out on a geopolitical level. For peasants, they protest disrespect in their daily lives. Time and again, these interlocutors returned to norms of interpersonal respect and how they had been breached over a long period, but especially during the Séléka period. One *chef de quartier* turned fighter in Yaloké said, “Séléka does not respect authorities. When they arrived in my neighborhood, they burned the house of the *chef de quartier*” (Interview, August 8, 2017). Similarly, the village chief in Gaga said that even prior to Séléka’s arrival, “they [Muslims] became Central African by force. Why do I say this? Some of them do not listen to the voice of the village chief. They take him as a servant because they have money” (Interview, August 10, 2017). He said that even despite this poor treatment, prior to the Séléka period non-Muslims in Gaga tolerated the presence of the Muslims and mostly got along well, but the Muslims would sometimes take advantage of them. For instance, he described how the Muslims would ask non-Muslims to do all kinds of menial jobs for them and then either not pay them or pay them less than they had promised. The Muslims did not abide by what he saw as the norms of proper behavior. For instance, he said, describing the kind of small jobs non-Muslims would do for Muslims, “A woman can take a calabash and transport firewood or cassava flour [for a Muslim]. She is told to put them in the concession. When she gets there, the Arab [Muslim] woman, cannot [does not] even help her when she puts it [the calabash] down. She even insults her again and again. OK. She goes back to the store and is told to go and get the money from the boss. She goes to the boss, and he insults her again. No, no, no—these people were savages.” From the chief’s perspective, the normal, respectful thing for the Muslim woman to do would be to help the woman who had carried the goods. She would have carried the goods on

her head, and it is much less taxing for someone else to lift it down than it is for the carrier, who can't see it and risks toppling it or the strain of a weighted squat.

These situations when people felt Muslims disrespected them contributed to their sense that in fact Muslims were not just people whose behavior could use correction, but fundamentally a different kind of person: "savages," in the chief's wording. In the words of the members of a focus group discussion with Anti-Balaka in Yaloké, Muslims are "robbers by nature" (group interview with Anti-Balaka, August 9, 2017), whereas Christians are not like that.

Both Yaloké and Gaga are populated by many incomers from throughout the region, because they have attracted people who want to try their luck at gold-digging (Sole-Ngakoutou 1989:4–6). The town authorities accommodate this social diversity while reserving Arabs/Muslims as a different category—not just strangers, but dangerous strangers. In part, their relatively greater wealth sets them apart. The suspicion that Muslims did not abide by the local authority structures was borne out by the way Séléka treated people when they ruled over the region. During group interviews, people complained that they were forced to submit to Séléka's authority, which, in their view, was inherently illegitimate because the Séléka were not among those seen as first-comers (or at least early-comers) to the area. During that time, "to get out of the bush, you have to swear in front of Séléka that you are not a thug" (family in Yaloké, August 8, 2017). "Previously, we used our machete without problem. But with Séléka, even to go farm, when you have a machete, they say that you are Balaka. At the beginning, the Christians were subordinated but after they said '*merde*.'"⁸ Even at the "market they put Séléka to watch over you until you got home" (August 8, 2017). From being poor but relatively sovereign, under Séléka villagers came to feel unjustly subordinated.

In Gaga (35 kilometers northwest of Yaloké and accessible only by motorbike or on foot), the village chief said that Séléka were above all imposing and violent. "They [Séléka] take you like that; when they see a device [e.g., mobile phone] in your hand, instead of taking it, they kill you before taking the device. That is why there was a little uprising of the children, men and even women to say no, if we leave it like this, it will not work." During a group interview in Yaloké, one elderly man said, "They [Séléka] killed two of my children. I spent three months in the bush. We ate plants, roots, fruits, and also wild yams. Even to look for firewood was a problem. When there was a little noise, Séléka would come" (Yaloké, August 8, 2017). Another older man said that Séléka members told people, "'We now have power. Come out so that we can play.' They have insulted Christians" (Yaloké, August 8, 2017). Provocation, humiliation, and subordination all characterized how people experienced the Séléka months. The peasants wanted to not feel subordinated to outsiders like Séléka, and even to be able to set the terms of moral economy for others. Generally, peasants were poorer than their Muslim counterparts, who were more likely to be involved in commerce, and peasants wanted that material difference to at least be mitigated by ownership of the

moral economy. As they lacked this kind of position of moral dominance, they decided to enact it on their own.

In terms of how people mobilized as Anti-Balaka in rural areas such as Yaloké and Gaga, our interlocutors had several analyses. None of them said that it was an ideology transmitted from political elites in the capital. One Central African working for an international NGO said that “It is the discontent of our ancestors in each region that has encouraged young people to take up arms” (Interview, May 10, 2017). Rural and non-elite Anti-Balaka leaders also said that they were drawing on their by-now extensive experience defending themselves from unwanted incursions (both state forces and robber gangs). Already, when André Kolingba was president of CAR (1981 to 1993), he encouraged men to form local defense forces. “When Kolingba was in power, he pushed young people to do self-defense. We then collaborated with the Peulhs to fight Chadian and Sudanese [robbers]. We learned how to organize under Kolingba with the fight against robbers, and the fight against zaraguinas [organized robber bands]. And even prior to the arrival of the white people [prior to colonialism], there was the traditional organization” (group interview, Yaloké, August 9, 2017)—that is, initiated men were poised and cultivated skills to defend against threats.

Rural peasants emphasized their personal experiences and those of their compatriots, but this was not necessarily because they were ignorant of other ways of speaking about their grievances. Rural elites could, for instance, speak the international human rights language that urban elites used. In explaining why Anti-Balaka had mobilized, one Yaloké leader said, “According to the UN Charter in San Francisco [the charter on human rights], article 51, ‘the young people of a country should mobilize in order to defend the country’” (group interview with Anti-Balaka, Yaloké, August 9, 2017).

Rural and non-elite Anti-Balaka connected their recent direct, personal experiences of disrespect and subordination to their historical experience organizing for self-defense, arguing that these threads were part of the same general trait of standing up for themselves. “When you are Anti-Balaka, you inherit a courage that allows you to say no. It is the whole village that decides whether or not young people would participate” (Interview, May 10, 2017). They presented these actions as markers of their being national heroes and patriots, and in this way connected themselves to the national Anti-Balaka movement. “It is the Anti-Balaka who reinstated the authority of the state. When we arrived in Bangui, we provoked the departure of Djotodia [the Séléka president]” (group interview with Anti-Balaka, Yaloké, August 9, 2017).

While urban elites over-emphasize their status as leaders over all Anti-Balaka, rural and non-elites might under-emphasize it. They acknowledge that at particular moments elites played a role in coordinating. One such instance was the coordinated Anti-Balaka assaults on Bangui on December 5 and 25, 2013. Anti-Balaka action that is coordinated among people living far from each other—that is, action involving people who are not from neighboring villages—has been rare and was more common in the early years of

CAR's "crisis" period. The precise details of how people became organized to undertake coordinated action, and what accounts for the decline in coordinated activity (violent or otherwise), remain to be told in the research record.

Comparing Elite and Peasant Views

In noting the divergence between elite and peasant views of Anti-Balaka's genesis and reasons for existing, we do not seek to make it seem as though one is true and the other false. Nor is it the case that one is sophisticated and the other is less so. Rather, both elites and peasants tell those stories that most resonate with their positions and interests, and therefore they are all self-serving in ways that combine truth and falsity, and that are both sophisticated and simple. The peasants' stories lend credence to the argument that violence and mobilization during civil wars owe much to the particular dynamics of local fragmentation and local cleavages, and not just to the overarching ideological projects that a war's elites profess (Kalyvas 2006).

What do we learn in comparing what urban, elite Anti-Balaka and rural, peasant Anti-Balaka say about their involvement in the movement? First, in line with longstanding findings about protest and rebellion in Africa (e.g., Weiss 1967), the elites are mostly interested in the perfection of the political system as it currently exists, most notably through their own incorporation and institutionalization within political structures. They seek to reify Anti-Balaka goals and objectives within the Central African state and in the national imaginary. Peasants, in contrast, are more interested in their status as proprietary Central Africans, part of an owning/deciding class who can enforce a localized moral economy in which others are not able to place themselves above them. Peasants—by their words and by their actions—enforce a certain moral code, but the terms of inclusion in that sphere of moral protection and fellowship change (most notably, they have cast Muslims out). In moments of high emotional entrainment and performative strength, they put forward this radically exclusionary aspect to express their sense of grievance and objective most strongly.

Mokom began to get at peasants' interests when he said that because of Séléka's actions, "Central African dignity no longer existed" (Bangui, August 16, 2017). Among Anti-Balaka elites, Mokom is the one whom people see as closest to the peasants. He did not turn his branch of the movement into a political party. Prior to joining the government, Mokom was considered a radical, as some of his public speeches exemplified (*Radio Ndeke Luka* 2017). During his discussion with Vlavonou, Mokom claimed that "Ngaïssona came from Cameroon, he contacted the French embassy to transform the movement into a political party. This is how the movement has split. The Anti-Balaka seek my approval/paternity. Those in Bangassou, Haute-Kotto [and elsewhere]. But they said, if you engage in politics, we will not be with you. This is what people from there told me. We are seeking sovereignty and real independence" (August 16, 2017). (It is also the case that if he were

incorporated into Bangui elite political networks he would be a small player, while as an Anti-Balaka national coordinator he can claim to be a bigger player.)

Peasants in Yaloké and Gaga recognized Mokom's greater connection to them, though often in the negative form of rejecting others, such as Ngaïssona: "Ngaïssona is not Anti-Balaka. He is a self-proclaimed Anti-Balaka leader. He created his party thinking that he might take advantage of it. It is Ngaïssona who betrayed [us] and gave some Balaka to [transitional president] Samba-Panza. People like Andilo [Rodrigue Ngaïbona, a prominent Anti-Balaka chief], it was him" (Yaloké, August 9, 2017). The sense of betrayal by Ngaïssona was profound. (Indeed, prior to his arrest, Ngaïssona already had limited authority over the movement [Dukhan 2016:7]). In contrast, Yaloké leaders said that "Mokom is a real coordinator. He encouraged us a lot" (Yaloké, August 9, 2017). The word choice here—"coordinator" and "encouraged"—is telling, in that it indicates that one of the reasons peasants appreciated Mokom was that he did not put himself above them (even though "encouragement" in this context can take monetary form). While autochthony, respect, and status underlie both elite and peasant Anti-Balaka concerns, peasants have an interest in enforcing a kind of interpersonal egalitarianism that elites such as Mokom sometimes accommodate but do not share to the same degree.

Conclusion

In the ways they speak about themselves, both urban and rural, elite and peasant adherents of Balakanism focus on respect and being proprietors of their own country, in terms of both institutions and the norms that comprise moral economies. A fundamental trait of sovereign action is to demarcate political and economic proprietorship: who belongs, who owns the wealth of a country, and who can be cast out? This capacity is one that peasants have realized they can take control of, even when they are otherwise mired in feelings of powerlessness and disconnection from their government.

An important next step for research will be to carefully connect Anti-Balaka narratives to the practices, especially the violent practices, that Anti-Balaka have engaged in. In moments of high emotional entrainment and performative strength, their moral economy became radically exclusionary and noteworthy primarily for its turning former fellow residents into enemies. For instance, in a TV report by the journalist Laëticia Souly for the French cable news channel BFMTV during the height of the violence in CAR in January 2014 and posted to YouTube, Anti-Balaka fighters said that "We are going to kill all the Arabs in the Central African Republic, we do not need Arabs in the Central African Republic, we are the Central African people" (BFMTV2014). With statements such as this one, Anti-Balaka drew a thicker, tighter border around the imagined Central African community. In less-guarded and/or more passionate or provocative moments, Anti-Balaka voiced this desire for violence to establish proprietorship. In Yaloké, some

Anti-Balaka peasants threatened, “If we were bad revolutionaries, we should have killed all the Fulani” [implying that they always could do so] (August 9, 2017). Their demand for a moral economy of interpersonal respect, when combined with autochthony anxiety, started to border on genocide. Some Fulani now live in Yaloké, but they are newly arrived, having traveled from other regions where they were persecuted. Anti-Balaka in Yaloké tell the story of their new Fulani neighbors to show that they are “a good movement” (August 9, 2017), but if there is space for neighbors it is because the Anti-Balaka had earlier chased others out.

Therefore, while there is certainly a connection between the moral economy Anti-Balaka claimed as their objective in calmer moments and this vilification of Arab/Muslim/foreigners, the connection was not just direct and instrumental. At the same time as it is important to make sense of people’s stated reasons for protest and rebellion, one must not stop there. In the final analysis, rural Anti-Balaka are not just radical because they are directly able to enact their demands; they are radical because their actions can morph beyond their stated goals and create altered futures that they, too, did not foresee. Such has been the case in CAR, where some Muslims have come back to rural CAR, but rarely to the places where they lived before.

Notes

1. The colonial brutality in the neighboring Belgian Congo is better known outside of Africa, but the history of French Equatorial Africa was similar, only its worst abuses played out in the decades immediately succeeding the brutality in the Congo.
2. Other authors have addressed the general context that led to the Séléka’s takeover (Carayannis & Lombard 2015; Ngovon 2015; Lombard 2016; Vlavonou 2016; Gomina-Pampali 2017)
3. These are:
 - United Nations Resolution no. 3314 of 14 December 1974 which authorizes any nation to use force to free themselves from aggression;
 - The Organization of African Unity Convention of 1977 on the elimination of mercenarism in Africa;
 - United Nations Resolution no. 523 of January 12, 1952, recognizing the right of developing countries to freely dispose of their natural wealth;
 - The right to resistance against oppression provided for in paragraph 3 of the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of December 10, 1948.
4. “Tous les droits universellement reconnus et respectés partout dans le monde, en Asie, en Europe, en Amérique, en Océanie, entre autres, ceux énumérés en annexe (page 3), sont ces mêmes droits dont nous demandons à la communauté internationale l’application et le respect en République Centrafricaine.”
5. “La Reconnaissance de l’héroïsme des Patriotes Anti-balaka comme mouvement de résistance.”
6. “L’édification de monument à la mémoire des patriotes Anti-Balaka tombés sur les champs de la résistance.”
7. “L’édification des musées en leur mémoire et à la mémoire de ceux ou celles tombés sur le champ de la résistance.”

8. This French word conveys a sense of exasperation and at the same time refers to a despicable person or thing.

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