BOOK REVIEW

Gino Vlavonou. *Belonging, Identity, and Conflict in the Central African Republic.* Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023. 243 pp. Bibliography, Index. $89.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780299345709.

Belonging, Identity, and Conflict in the Central African Republic sheds light on the social and political dynamics in the Central African Republic that led to the construction of autochthony discourses which took a violent and unprecedented turn during the civil war. Through the analysis of political speeches, newspapers, and qualitative interviews, Gino Vlavonou retraces how the categories of "foreignness" and "autochthony" have been produced before and during the crisis and contributed to explaining the eruption of violence against the Muslim minority in 2013.

Vlavonou points out that autochthony discourses are not necessarily tied to the soil and can be related to various forms of competitions: they are temporally and spatially specific and require empirical investigation. He interprets identity as a *capital*, which means that identities are not only principles of social affiliations, but also indicate a rank in the access to resources in a context of unequal competition between groups (Dorronsoro & Grojean, 2018). The "value" of this capital is determined through elites' discourses and policies as well as through the discursive practices nonelites employ to exclude the "other" (the "Muslim-foreigners"). The book illustrates the importance of moving beyond a top-down approach to grasp the logics of autochthony, while elites' and nonelites' discourses shape each other in a fluid process.

Vlavonou details how "Muslims" have been othered in different ordinary spaces where autochthony finds expression, such as the political, the linguistic, and the religious ones. For instance, the national language, Sango, has been crucial in defining national identity and normalizing Muslim exclusion. In the same vein, Vlavonou shows how religious identity is a marker between "autochthons" and "foreigners" and played a key role in the conflict. More generally, he explains how the "non-Muslims" deployed the "host-guest" metaphor toward "Muslims," whom they claimed have been "welcomed" to the country. As "guests," the Muslims historically had no place in the political sphere and should conform to the hosts' political choices. In this context, the support of some Muslims to the Seleka rebellion was perceived as a treason in 2013 and they were conceptualized as "ungrateful guests" who took up weapons against their hosts. At the opposite end, Central African "Muslims" offer counterclaims to the narratives that construct them as "guests." They express their belonging through counter rhetoric, for instance by claiming their historical presence on the territory.

To explore the building of the autochthony category, Vlavonou also analyzes how President Bozizé's rhetoric before 2013 has constructed autochthony as an instrument to exclude "Muslim-foreigners" and contributed to making them targets of violence during the conflict. Since Vlavonou focuses on the Bozizé regime, the book tends to underestimate the construction of the autochthonous category before this period. However, Vlavonou rightly points out that Bozizé's speeches further deployed a negative vision of foreignness while his power was threatened by Muslim armed groups. He identifies different phases of Bozizé's regime around which themes of belonging have been mobilized. Bozizé first presented himself as the president of unity to seek legitimacy (2003–05), but he started to link "Muslim-foreigners" with the country's security problem after his election (2005–08). He then deescalated this oppositional narrative (2008–11) but soon reestablished the relationship between insecurity and "foreignness" when his regime was dangerously threatened by rebels (2011–13). This analysis demonstrates that the construction of autochthony is a non-linear process and that discourses on identity constantly adapt to external and domestic challenges.

Beyond discourses, the book illustrates how autochthony is constructed through state policy. Vlavonou takes the example of the mining sector, where most dominant actors are "Muslim-foreigners." Bozizé's government excluded "foreigners" by conducting the "Closing Gate" Operation (2008), which led to the seizure of collectors' goods and diamonds. Additionally, the government established a new mining code (2009) which aimed at increasing its role in the production chain, marginalizing "Muslim" collectors, and putting back "nationals" in the sector. These government measures interacted with the concern of some parts of the population, who negatively perceived the presence of "Muslim" in the sector, as revealed by the media framing of collectors as a "problem."

Finally, Vlavonou focuses on the markets' daily life in Bangui since the conflicts over the control of sale spaces reveal tensions between "nationals" and "Muslim-foreigners." While "Muslims" were perceived as dominant in the sector, being a *vrai Centrafricain* has represented a key resource in the competition for the best vending places. Vlavonou explains how "non-Muslim" market actors mobilized different strategies to secure the position of "nationals" by overtaxing "Muslims" and blocking their access to the market. Vlavonou notices here that the government has been involved in this competition and argues that the relationship "non-Muslims" developed with state actors was central to their preferential treatment, but he does not develop this argument. However, the value of the identity capital is largely defined and maintained by state institutions. Although Vlavonou occasionally mentions the centrality of state power in building identity capital, the book tends to overlook the role of state actors (not only leaders) in determining its value and imposing identity hierarchies through their practices. Nevertheless, this book is an in-depth study of autochthony discourses in the CAR. It demonstrates how autochthony identity has been a valuable resource in politics and has played a key role in the competition between groups before the 2013 conflict. The book thus accurately highlights

the importance of re-placing conflicts in longer-term dynamics to explain violence, in the CAR and beyond.

Mathilde Tarif 🆔
Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne
Paris, France
mathilde.tarif@gmail.com

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Reference

Gilles Dorronsoro and Olivier Grojean (eds.), *Identity, Conflict and Politics in Turkey, Iran and Pakistan.* London: Hurst & Company, 2018.