

Belonging, Identity and Conflict in the Central African Republic

by Gino Vlavonou

Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023. Pp. 256, \$88.95 (hb), ISBN 9780299345709.

Andreas Mehler

Arnold Bergstraesser Institut, University of Freiburg

Gino Vlavonou innovates by focusing strongly on the discrimination against Muslims in Central African Republic (CAR) embedded in a broader, historically informed analysis. CAR has in the recent past attracted much more attention than in the first 50 years of its independent existence – with monographs, edited volumes and relevant singular articles published quite constantly since about 2010. This is not to say that one should deduct saturation right now. CAR is in fact a fascinating case not only of state weakness and outside intervention, but also of political entrepreneurship, elite aloofness and exploitation – themes that run also through this book.

Vlavonou's book excels with very valuable and unique empirical observations on CAR, but the author has also a much broader ambition than description. Vlavonou wants to prove that populist autochthony discourses don't depend on the instrumentalisation of controversies over claims to the land which was frequently on the forefront of the academic debate when focusing on Africa. So the main research question of this book is 'how and why is autochthony being mobilized in the CAR politics before and after the 2013 coup?' (p. 5). In fact, a look beyond the continent, potentially to Europe would have instructed the African Studies community that this linkage is neither necessary nor sufficient. Right-wing and other populist xenophobic discourses can be simply about scapegoating, about allegedly disparate economic opportunities favouring 'strangers' and CAR is simply not an exception. But it is Vlavonou's merit to redirect the attention of area-oriented researchers on issues other than land, that way 'de-exotisizing' the study of xenophobia in Africa.

The book provides the reader with a succinct and appropriate historical background in its introduction, which stresses that 'Muslims belong to the country and are Central Africans' (p. 14). It proceeds with a theory chapter on 'autochthony without land', a chapter on autochthony discourses within civil society and armed actors in CAR, one very relevant on mining, and another equally relevant on the market and everyday life. In these two last fields (mining, public markets) the 'vrais Centrafricains' stood chances to profit most clearly from excluding quite diverse actors that had in common to be Muslim (but little else).

However, it is the third chapter on former president and military insurgent, coup-maker and political entrepreneur François Bozizé that merits special mention. Bozizé was straddling – like others in CAR – different fields of engagement or modes of action. Credible threat and real coercion were part of his reign, but he invested equally in building up popular legitimacy and outside recognition. Vlavonou takes the coup-leader turned president and thereafter rebel leader Bozizé – maybe for the first time – seriously by analysing his presidential discourses between 2003 and 2013. Much too rarely is this done for such political figures. Vlavonou's assumption that discourses by leading politicians matter (not so much by their sincerity, but effect) contains a lot of probability. CAR had only a handful of dominant political personalities. While Klaas van Walraven's biographical research on Bathélémy Boganda is a thorough basis for understanding the founding-father of CAR and while Didier Bigo's seminal work on power and obedience nicely shows the patrimonial logics of Jean-Bédél Bokassa's rule, there is still little on presidents David Dacko and André Kolingba (both reportedly with limited rhetorical skills), and – what is much worse – on Ange-Félix Patassé with his pronounced nationalist discourse, a certain charisma (that Bozizé lacks) and a more credible track-record as a long-time underground opponent than all the others. But at least now we have a serious attempt to understand Bozizé's moves once he made it by force to the top position. My only critique here is that Vlavonou could have gone deeper in the description of the complex relationship that Bozizé and Patassé shared – particularly before coming to power, but also much later as Bozizé could be held responsible for the death of his predecessor in 2011 when he did not allow him to leave the country for medical treatment. Patassé also was clearly a populist, but both elections he won (1993 and 1999) were more credible than any before and after. It would be of interest to study whether autochthony discourses by this earlier president included already strong anti-Muslim rhetorics.

Similarly, Vlavonou is silent on Bozizé's speech acts after his demise following the so-called Séléka rebellion; admittedly it might be more difficult to get hold of such texts. Some spokespersons of Séléka factions had an anti-discrimination agenda, invariably they were portrayed as Muslim. It was repeatedly reported that on the opposite end anti-Balaka militias, describing themselves as bulwarks against Muslim expansion, were sponsored or inspired by Bozizé or some of his allies including former ministers. But what did Bozizé say on this? Vlavonou shows how Bozizé over the years had prepared the ground for interreligious violence that however exploded only after Séléka as a broad rebel alliance formed in late 2012. It was obviously easy for Bozizé's camp to now mobilise anti-Muslim vigilantes in 2013 and in the following years (the period primarily observed by Vlavonou on the ground), but this had not saved his regime. In the end, the Séléka reign in Bangui was short-lived, but further undermined interreligious conviviality. The surprising turn took place when Bozizé allied with some Séléka factions in 2020 when he joined the underground after his candidacy for presidential elections was not validated (a fact mentioned only in passing, p. 182). Should we deduce

that Bozizé himself was not convinced about his own anti-Muslim rhetoric or that he was ‘pacting with the devil’ for purely opportunistic reasons?

Last but not least a sort of epilogue that touches on interreligious conviviality under current president Faustin-Archange Touadéra would have complemented the rich analysis provided in this book that is recommended reading for all interested (a) in CAR’s political and social history, (b) autochthony discourses more broadly. The book fills a vacuum and is thought-provoking; it provides the reader with a comparatively short text, but extended notes, bibliography and index. A translation into French would be nice to see – in order to engage with actors on the ground who may not always question what is involved when they call themselves ‘vrais Centrafricains’ – at the expense of others.

doi:10.1017/S0022278X24000193

The West African Revival: Faith Tabernacle Congregation on the Guinea Coast, 1918–1929

By Adam Mohr Baylor University Press, 2023

Allan H. Anderson

University of Birmingham

Adam Mohr examines the history of the Faith Tabernacle congregation in Philadelphia and this church’s involvement in the ‘West African Revival’. This time of intense religious fervour in the Guinea Coast is seen in the proliferation of prophetic-healing and Pentecostal churches that followed the influenza pandemic of 1918–19. Mohr argues that this small American denomination was responsible for this revival, and he traces the history of the movement from its origins at the end of the 19th century to its expansion in West Africa in the 1920s. This study fills gaps in our historical knowledge. Its strength lies in its extensive primary source evidence (particularly archival material from the original letters to and from Ambrose Clark, the movement’s leader at the time) that have never previously been examined. The connections between Faith Tabernacle and West African Pentecostalism, although referred to in various scholarly publications, are comprehensively explored for the first time in this research. Secondary sources are mainly used to sketch the background to and the context of the various events described both in the USA and in West Africa.

The author points out that because of the relatively short period of time covered (1918–1929), the chapters are not chronologically arranged, except for chapters 1 and 6, which cover the periods before 1918 and after 1929