

Raiding Sovereignty in Central African Borderlands

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on raiding and sovereignty in the Central African Republic's (CAR) northeastern borderlands, on the margins of Darfur. A vast literature on social evolution has assumed the inevitability of political centralization. But these borderlands show centralization does not always occur. Never claimed by any centralizing forces, the area has instead long been used as a reservoir of resources by neighboring areas' militarized entrepreneurs, who seek the savanna's goods. The raiders seize resources but also govern. The dynamics of this zone, much of it a place anthropologists used to refer to as "stateless," suggest a re-thinking of the modalities of sovereignty. The dissertation proposes conceptualizing sovereignty not as a totalizing, territorialized political order, but through its constituent governing capabilities, which may centralize or not and can combine to create hybrid political systems.

The dissertation develops this framework through analysis of three categories of men-in-arms—road blockers, anti-poaching militiamen, and members of rebel groups—and their relationships with international peacebuilding initiatives. It compares roadblocks and "road cutting" (robbery) to show how these men stop traffic and create flexible, personalized entitlements to profit for those who operate them. The dissertation also probes the politics of militarized conservation: in a low-level war that has lasted for 25 years, European Union-funded militiamen fight deadly battles against herders and hunters. Though ostensibly fought to protect CAR's "national patrimony" (its animals and plants), this war bolsters the sovereign capabilities of non-state actors and has

resulted in hundreds of deaths in the last few years alone, many of them hidden in the bush. The dissertation then shows how CAR's recent cycle of rebellion has changed governance in rural areas. Though mobile armed groups have long operated in CAR, they used to work as road cutters and local defense forces and only recently started calling themselves "rebels" — a move that has landed in them in new roles as "governors" of populations. Throughout these various raiders' projects, the *idea* of the all-powerful state serves as a reference they use to qualify themselves with sovereign authorities. But their actions as rulers undermine the creation of the unitary political authority they desire and invoke. Failure to appreciate these non-centralized micropolitical processes is a main reason peacebuilding efforts (such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration) have failed.

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Acknowledgements

Before graduate school, I spent three years as a research assistant and consultant at think tanks and research institutes, focusing on conflict and development in Africa. These organizations' rigid analytical frameworks were not for me, and I longed to study how politics *actually* worked. Anthropology seemed to offer a way to do that. Six years later, I know more about what anthropology can and cannot do, and I am pleased to know that my choice of *métier* was wise.

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Preface

Ethnographies usually start with an arrival story. A departure story frequently follows. These bookending tropes are usual, almost necessary, components of how authors establish credibility in the genre. “How little I knew then” transforms into “how much I know now.” My engagement with the empirical terrains of CAR does not fit these models. In addition to my long chunks of field research, I have visited the country many times as a research consultant (which gives me a chance to pursue my own interests as well). I pop in and out, most recently in June 2012 with my not-quite-two-month-old daughter. This serial travel means that I know myself to always be on my way back, and never definitively departed. “When will you return?” friends ask. I rarely know for certain, but can truthfully respond, “Soon.”

The contrast between my frequent movement as a privileged researcher, and the constrained mobility of so many people in this region, is huge. Awareness of this fact has shaped my conceptualization of the space and the opportunities and challenges life there presents. Without contributing to the developmental biases that see Central Africa solely as a place of lack and deprivation, I hope this dissertation will draw out the frustrations about being confined to such a marginalized “place-in-the-world” (Ferguson 2006) that animate much of social life here.¹ For nearly a decade now, I have enjoyed the friendship

1. To give just a sample of the challenges Central Africans confront: Acute malnutrition in Vakaga prefecture, where I did research, currently stands at twenty-one percent, and severe acute malnutrition at seven percent—three times what humanitarians label an “emergency” situation. Two-thirds of Central Africans have no access to clean drinking water or health facilities, and there are ninety-five students for every teacher (OCHA 2012). The entire country’s gross domestic product is substantially smaller than that of the town of Pine Bluff, Arkansas (Wood 2010).

of people in Bangui and the Central African hinterlands. Still, when I decided to research my dissertation there, it was not because I loved living there, nor because I felt connected to the scenery, nor because “the people are so warm and friendly” (a sentiment that appears to have motivated many a Westerner’s jaunt to Africa). No—what attracted me was the challenge. Though sometimes maddening, not understanding can also be thrilling. Grappling with (apparent) contradictions brings one back to the old aims of anthropology: solving social puzzles.

While doing fieldwork I read Margaret Mead’s memoir, *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years*. What struck me most amid the occasionally self-congratulatory prose was the sense of urgency that motivated Mead and fellow early- to mid- twentieth century anthropologists. All around, they saw cultures vanishing, and with them the incredible diversity in social systems. Saving them required extensive documentation, and also the solving of “riddles” of kinship, ritual, and the constitution of political power. I worked out no solutions in the course of my fieldwork, and I never saw myself as working to “preserve” cultures—whether my own, those of my interlocutors, or those we shared. But I did take inspiration from that dedication to the puzzle, and it remains with me.

Dedication to the puzzles is what helped me navigate between moments of intense connection and their opposite. While in Ndele I spent most late afternoons with my friend Habiba, a Chadian woman who had moved to the area a few years before to marry. Her husband proved abusive. Now she and her toddler daughter stayed at the compound of relatives on the outskirts of town. Habiba and the other women would sit

together, sipping sweet, sweet tea, and putter away at the chores of the compound: preparing vegetables for the evening meal, grinding manioc and sorghum into flour to cook *kisra*, the slightly-sour pancakes favored for sopping up sauce by those who trace their descent to Chad, washing babies, and so forth. We communicated with some difficulty. Some of the women spoke Sango, but Habiba did not, so our conversations were in Arabic. She had spent some time studying the Koran and so understood my flowery university-learned parlance. Unluckily, that meant she did not want to teach me her dialect, which she saw as inferior. Such challenges aside, we had a running joke: one day, I had decided to be extra-animated in my request for *hilwa*, a bitter brew made from yellow flowers grown in Sudan, and pumped my fist in the air, turning the word into a song. Forever after, I had only to begin to raise my arm, and the others would do the same, breaking into a chorus of “Hilwa, hilwa!” interrupted by peals of laughter. One day a Sudanese truck had stopped in town with soda in plastic bottles. Habiba’s family had bought her a “Bebsi” (Arabic does not have a [p]) made in Khartoum. Together, we sounded out the Arabic on the wrapper. Habiba came to an unfamiliar word: “Nyooo... nyewww... yooork?” she looked at me quizzically. When I suddenly realize that I had to explain the existence of this, the most famous city in the world, I suddenly felt very tired, and far away from home.

A few days earlier, I had sat with Habiba’s neighbor Ismain, a smiling man who served as the representative (to whom was unclear) of the Chadians living in the area and worked as a merchant just outside the market, where he sold onions so small they

could be mistaken for garlic cloves, batteries, and other luxuries from the North. It was through Ismain that I had met Habiba. Another friend had invited me to a party he threw to thank Allah for safe escape from the rebels, who had taken him hostage while he was attempting to do a census of the herders using the lands north of Ndele. I met Habiba and her entourage at the women's section of this party. Ismain was quick to point out his connections to people of power. He claimed to have Chadian President Idriss Déby's phone number, though he was never able to get through to Déby in my presence. Nevertheless he frequently had updates on the president's health. Did I, he wondered, have the news of Barack? Ismain had settled here in part because he had taken a Central African wife (according, he said, to the will of Allah). But he was a wanderer. Born in Am Timan (eastern Chad), he moved to Ndjamena as a young man, and then proceeded to explore Cameroon, Nigeria, Niger, Benin, Ivory Coast, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Cairo, Malta, and Italy. Partly, he traveled in search of work and family connections, and partly, he traveled for adventure. As he was recounting these peregrinations, he drew maps in the sandy dirt for my friend Aziza. His map took the form of concentric circles: Ndele, Chad, the Atlas Mountains, the sea... and all the way out to the -stans of Central Asia. His cartography baffled me. How could Chad be seen as a circle around Ndele? How could Kazakhstan envelop us all? Was that what the circles were meant to represent?

I never figured it out. But these never-solved puzzles make the motivation for research endure. In this spirit I offer this dissertation: not as a definitive account of solved puzzles, but as a conjecture—based on strong, deep impressions gleaned through

time, people, and places—thrown into the world in hopes of suggesting debate and a few even new ways of seeing.

Ambivalent multisitedness

My main fieldwork was from September 2009 to June of 2010. I returned from October through December of that year and for a month in mid-2011. I designed my research to be two-sited. I would split my time between Ndele and Sam Ouandja, towns in northeastern CAR that presented different facets of the dynamics of plural authorities that I hoped to investigate. Already during my early days after arrival in Bangui, however, I realized that my plans would have to change. Sam Ouandja had become even harder to reach than usual. Though there were still weekly United Nations humanitarian flights into Sam, the non-governmental organization (NGO) that would have hosted me asked me not to go, because the town was at the time “policed” by multiple groups—an armed rebel group, militarized Darfuri refugees, Ugandan soldiers, Central African soldiers, and intermittently by United Nations peacekeepers as well. Sam lies on paths taken by the heavily armed poachers, and rumors located the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in the vicinity. These factors combined to make it a fascinating place marked by high levels of mistrust. Since ethnographic methods rely to a large extent on trust, Sam would have been difficult. Instead, I did my best to be flexible and “follow the problem” (Nordstrom 2004): I spent more time in Ndele and other northeastern towns with armed group presences, particularly Tiringoulou, a base for the *Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement* (UFDR), and Kaga Bandoro, a hub for a branch of the *Armée*

populaire pour la restauration de la république et la démocratie (APRD). Chapters three (on the post-independence character of the Central African state), four (on roadblockers and road cutters), and five (on militarized anti-poaching) draw heavily on my research in Ndele. Chapters six (on rebellion) and seven (on disarmament) are mostly sited in Tiringoulou and Kaga Bandoro.

Mobility (who can move freely, who cannot, and how and why) is an essential rubric for understanding governance in this area. While in any given town, I rarely left the center, because if I did, “There would be rumors.” (As a popular expression has it, the CAR is a country of rumors, because of the remoteness and inaccessibility of much of the terrain, and the unreliable communication over it.) The implication was that these rumors would close doors for me and for those who tried to help me. My own mobility thus largely confined to point-to-point jumping, it was only in following the “problem” to another town that I could begin to capture the ways that motion and profit work together in this space. Doing so empowered me to track not just the impacts of a nearby armed rebel group on a town (as was the case during my time in Ndele), but also the privileges, authorities, and demands of an armed group itself (as was possible in Tiringoulou).

But unlike the impression that Nordstrom leaves with her argument for the imperative of multi-sitedness (especially to understand contemporary conflict)—an argument that, protestations about the ordinariness of violence notwithstanding, conveys a heady combination of breathless excitement and certitude, my own

experiences following the problem were mixed. I found that a certain ambivalence necessarily accompanies multi-sited research. The sense of time such frenetic hopping introduces is not without drawbacks.² First, friendships and the kind of “deep hanging out” that anthropologists traditionally learn from become harder, though not impossible, to maintain. Mobile phones made it easier to check in with people (and if one has the good fortune to obtain mobile phone credit in CAR, one is expected to redistribute it through calls to family and friends). But it is also possible to lose touch, to never hear the resolution to a story, to not know what happened to the elders caught in the midst of a battle.

I felt this problem particularly acutely in the case of the friendships I developed in Ndele. I left the town in late March. Shortly thereafter, the rebel group that controlled the road north of the town (the path leading to Chad, some 100 kilometers to the north) attacked. In the aftermath, the Central African armed forces led an offensive against the group. They surged northward, battled the armed group and/or civilians in the area, then retreated to Ndele, then repeated the whole process several times. For months, the situation in town remained so tense that the humanitarians all pulled out. With the departure of the humanitarians, transport became even more difficult. Under calmer circumstances, I could get a ride with an NGO or a Bangui-based transporter, but during

2. The anthropological debate over space and multi-sitedness that raged in the mid-1990s (for a cautionary review, see Marcus (1995); for a more encouraging one see Gupta and Ferguson [1997]) has quieted, perhaps because an “anything goes” attitude toward ethnography has become more widespread. In comparison to avant-garde experiments like ethnographies of stones (Raffles 2011), doing research in a few different towns in the same region appears downright staid. Nevertheless, I would argue that the downsides and risks of “spreading oneself too thin” (Starn 1999: 15) remain.

this period highway bandit attacks increased, including in areas long free of banditry. Habiba returned home to Chad, and when the usually-unflappable Aziza added her voice to the chorus of diplomatic security advisers telling me not to return, I knew I should heed her assessment. Then she lost her phone. I sent her a new one through another friend, but she did not receive it until I had already left the country.

In the end, then, my endorsement of multi-sited research is ambivalent. My caution is not limited to those projects officially labeled “multi-sited.” Doing research in the “single site” of Mexico City means working with a population some sixty times the human population of the geographically vast area I studied in northeastern CAR. Each presents its challenges. I wonder if the push to re-evaluate anthropological terrain(s) (as for instance, Gupta and Ferguson (1997) famously suggested) has outpaced the push to re-evaluate anthropological methods. A multi-sited project simply cannot obtain the same kind of encyclopedic knowledge that the embedded, village-based projects of old could. Some would greet that prospect with glee. The old projects were always packed with hubris, and worse, in their aspiration to obtain the essential truths of a community. But my experiences caused me to vow to strive for methodological omnivorousness and creativity in projects to come.

The independent researcher who needs a team

When I arrived in Bangui in September 2009, I set to work improving my Sango, a language spoken by most Central Africans. I found a steadfast teacher in Maurice Dimanche, who had dusted off creased hand-written lessons originally prepared for the

Peace Corps volunteers who left CAR in the mid-1990s. In addition to helping me with grammar and vocabulary, Maurice explained expressions and answered my endless questions. He did this all between shuttling around the city to tutor people in three languages (Sango, French, and English). Even in the case of an unexpected rainstorm, he was never late.

Fluency is itself a fluid concept. I can understand most conversations in Sango and have a sense for cadence. But I still miss layers of understanding. Sango has relatively few words; many sentences are peppered with poached French. Surface-level meaning is therefore easily inferred, but layers beneath—communicated through word-play, tone, and speaker context, are harder to access. In general I saw this constraint as an opportunity: in reviewing the transcript or recording of a perplexing conversation, I could have a wide-ranging discussion with the original speaker and a second person helping me understand the original conversation.

I hired research assistants. In Bangui, I worked with a university student, Justin Mamdou, to conduct interviews with meat transporters. Justin had worked with a Ph.D. researcher before (Lesley Lynn Daspit, whose dissertation looks at bushmeat in the southeastern part of the country) and so had some familiarity with research techniques and the topics I was tracking. Even more importantly, he was known around the bushmeat markets as a trustworthy person. In Kaga Bandoro, Marcel Sendema, a pastor, helped me get to know members of the APRD. Marcel became my main protector and defender. When I mentioned that I disliked the catcalls from fighters that followed me

through the center of town, he took it upon himself to tell the young men that I was an upstanding visitor from his church and should not be harassed. Marcel had never left CAR, but he was eager to learn more of the rest of the world. He listened to my explanations about my family and life in the United States with a cultivated openness, and we passed many long walks across the sprawling town debating the advantages and disadvantages of life there and in my country. Elsewhere I was more opportunistic, and would collar a friend to attend a meeting or ceremony with me; at events I would choose my seat-mates advisedly.

The archives

In addition to my fieldwork, I conducted two months of research in colonial and military archives in Aix-en-Provence and Paris, France, and spent several weeks perusing the European Commission's archives in Bangui for their reports on militarized anti-poaching. I also dipped into the immense resources at the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (who knew there were so many memoirs by safari hunters in CAR!). On the one hand, I enjoyed meandering through the trails of information; each carton the archivist presented seemed rich with potential treasures. But I found myself continually chastened when I would impute a certain meaning into an official's account, only to find that a subsequent document contradicted my impression. What else might I be misinterpreting, I wondered? Led by the examples of Clifford Geertz and others, anthropologists are encouraged to interpret to make sense of social worlds. Historians, I realized, draw from a slightly different methodologies. Grant (2004) has reflected on the

vagaries of archival interpretation. He describes how one paragraph among the hundreds of pages he read in Azeri archives arrested his attention: “From the end of 1929 to April of 1930, the political situation in [our region] was good. In April, a few kulaks and bandits raised a commotion and spread discontent. Currently, however, our political situation can be considered average.” What, he wondered, did “average” mean in the context of November 1930 Azerbaijan, when the report was written? And what, for that matter, did “good” mean? (The “kulaks and bandits” in question were the grandson of a Sufi-style saint and his followers, who fought a rebellion against the Soviet presence—clearly there was much more going on than the official’s account let on.) I had many similar moments in the archives.

At the colonial archives in Aix and at the library in Paris, I watched a master at work. Fred Cooper was researching citizenship in post-WWII French West Africa. He went through carton after carton, quickly assessing each document: some he would photograph, some he would quickly note, and many, many he simply whizzed past. As a mere part-time historian, I lacked that facility. Too often, I would ponder word choice (how odd, for instance, that the French referred to Sultan Senoussi as the “sovereign” even as their treaty theoretically stripped him of all sovereign powers), wonder about the backgrounds and characters of the people writing the documents (was he really a slacker, as his higher-ups said, or was he really the only one who could see the folly of the colonial system?), and get dragged down side paths by stray sentences or details that caught my eye (funny that the 1935 Oubangui-Chari census listed Turks—as well as

Brazilians, Americans and Syrians—under the category “European”: new evidence for EU accession talks?). But if this openness makes for slower research, it is also a strength, and it was in following *unexpected* problems and unexpected trails that I came to the understandings that I did, such as they are.

Conclusion

Victor Turner (1974), longtime observer of the social effects of rites of passage, suggested that

In moving from experience of social life to conceptualization and intellectual history, I follow the path of anthropologists almost everywhere. Although we take theories into the field with us, these become relevant only if and when they illuminate social reality. Moreover, we tend to find very frequently that it is not a theorist’s whole system which so illuminates, but his scattered ideas, his flashes of insight taken out of systemic context and applied to scattered data. Such ideas have a virtue of their own and may generate new hypotheses. They even show how scattered facts may be systematically connected! Randomly distributed through some monstrous logical system, they resemble nourishing raisins in a cellular mass of inedible dough. The intuitions, not the tissue of logic connecting them, are what tend to survive in the field experience.³

In this dissertation, I present some of those points of knowledge and the new map of reasoning that my fieldwork, for all its wandering, drew around them.

3. Thanks to Orin Starn for pointing out this quote.

1. Introduction: Sovereignty in the buffer zone

1.1 *Introduction*

“Sometimes I ask myself why I was born here. The Central African Republic sure is a bizarre country.” Colonel Tarzan—a rebel officer, children’s rights advocate, soccer coach, and former anti-poaching militia guard—offered these words with an uncomprehending shake of his head. We sat under the mango tree outside his house, watching the sun creep into our shadow as we talked and cracked peanuts from the recent harvest. We were in his hometown, Tiringoulou, in remotest northeastern CAR. The area becomes an island, cut off by floods, during the rainy season. And even during the dry season, vehicles pass only with great difficulty. For Colonel Tarzan, the bizarreness of his home owed to its abandonment. Though officially attached to the CAR, it has never been claimed by the centralizing forces that have transformed the region through the past several centuries. It has, instead, served as a reservoir of resources (slaves, ivory, grazing space, meat, diamonds...), where other kinds of authorities—primarily directed toward extraction and regulating others’ movement and extraction—have developed and been deployed.

I often asked myself a version of Tarzan’s question: how did I end up here? Why am I so interested in the politics of this apparent anomaly, this anachronism, this so-called “stateless” space? The answer, I think, is that these apparent anomalies reveal more about the world than the supposedly paradigmatic political configurations (Benton (2010) makes this argument brilliantly), and that incorporating those in forgotten,

abandoned, corners of the globe into dialogues about the constitution of contemporary politics is compulsory both for rigorous analysis and for justice. The present study builds on a long, fascinating, and morally ambiguous (it was, after all, offered up as a tool of colonial rule) history of anthropological engagement with the “different” political structures of Africa.

When E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes edited *African Political Systems*, for many years a bible for political anthropologists of Africa, they divided the societies under discussion into “type A” and “type B.” Type A societies were “state-builders,” groups that had historically moved toward centralization and hierarchization. Type B societies were “stateless,” decentralized, and relatively free from hierarchical coercion. For all the structural-functionalist shortcomings of their work (not least the decision to term groups already long latched to colonial projects “stateless”), it championed one major innovation that remains with anthropology today: namely, the argument that political institutions should be objects of empirical study, and that sovereignty and the state, often chained together in Western political theory, should be considered separately, the better to account for the varieties of political experience. As A. R. Radcliffe-Brown wrote in his foreword to the book, there has been a

tendency to concentrate attention too much on what is called the ‘sovereign state.’ But states are merely territorial groups within a larger political system in which their relations are defined by war or its possibilities, treaties, and international law. A political system of this kind, such as now exists in Europe, of sovereign nations linked by international relations, is only one type of political system. Political theory and political practice (including colonial administration) have often suffered by reason of this type of system being set up, consciously or unconsciously, as a norm (1970 [1940]: xxi).

Among those of his contemporaries who put Radcliffe-Brown's testy entreaty into action, Evans-Pritchard's work is the best remembered today, both for its content and for its status as a favored target of critique (Asad 1973; Sacks 1979; Kelly 1985). In his study of the Nuer of southern Sudan, Evans-Pritchard—ranging beyond the usual anthropological family- and culture-related topics—took on Hobbes. Life without an over-awing sovereign, as the Nuer lived in his representation, was not “nasty, brutish and short,” but organized and dignified. Evans-Pritchard showed that “ordered anarchy” (1940: 6) is not an oxymoron, for the Nuer enjoyed a sovereignty, a social order, without Leviathan's centralizing, stratifying impulses. Within anthropology and beyond, this was a step away from understanding political structures by imagining how they might have developed from “primitive” origins, as, for instance, Hobbes did by describing the state as the necessarily step out of the “state of nature.” Evans-Pritchard and Fortes explained their innovation,

We have not found that the theories of political philosophers have helped us to understand the societies we have studied and we consider them of little scientific value; for their conclusions are seldom formulated in terms of observed behavior or capable of being tested by this criterion. Political philosophy has chiefly concerned itself with how men *ought* to live and what form of government they *ought* to have, rather than what *are* their political habits and institutions (1940: 4).

Of course, the anthropologists had blind spots, too. With time, it became harder to perpetuate the fiction of statelessness, even when studying formerly acephalous groups that were incorporated into centralizing polities by force. For example, Paul Bohannan, whose account of Tiv life was among APS's “Type B” cases, shifted toward discussing how the introduction of money disrupted their systems of value and exchange (1959).

But the need for analytical constructs—fictions, all, in a way—does not disappear. They just become more and less visible as such, more and less consciously pursued, at particular moments. When analytical categories become visible as fictions, change occurs in anthropological theory. Edmund Leach, for instance, recognized that the anthropological trope of social equilibrium could not be true, given how much change and strife characterizes social life, but he allowed that the *fiction* of social equilibrium might be analytically useful, or even necessary, and he began building a new, and fruitful, bridge between anthropology and history (1957).

As colonialism came to an end, the fiction of statelessness was replaced by the fiction of the sovereign state. Radcliffe-Brown's "one type of political system" seemed to have spread around the globe. The United Nations (UN) exploded with members. The 51 sovereign states that participated in the initial meetings of the General Assembly have become 192 today. And yet, at this moment all the world's land has been carved into sovereign state chunks, the analytical construct of the sovereign-state compound requires revision.¹ Others have made this case in explaining globalization, whatever such a term might mean (Cooper 2001). These accounts see sovereignty as once unified and unitary for each polity, but now fractured. As will become clear below, my argument differs from those of these globalization-hawks. If, today, we must consider sovereignty not simply as an attribute of "the state," that is not because unprecedented change and global connection characterize the current moment, whether politically or economically

1. Hansen and Stepputat (2006) also make this suggestion.

(they are in fact not unprecedented—see Cooper (2001) or Edelman and Haugerud [2005]), but because new attention to scale makes the relationships among governing entities and forces that had previously been obscured more visible.

In this dissertation, I return to a terrain not far removed from Evans-Pritchard's southern Sudanese fields—which today's maps mark as the northeastern Central African Republic (CAR)—to argue, like my predecessors, that sovereignty and state are not coterminous. Attention to space and territory, and the ways that authorities are exercised in different ways in different geographies (for instance, in town versus in the “bush”), shows how there are, rather, configurations of different actors each bearing what 17th century political theorist Hugo Grotius called “marks of sovereignty” a term that merits revival as a way to better apprehend the workings of politics. A mark, or capability, of sovereignty is a mode of authority exercised in relation to others bearing perhaps overlapping, or perhaps more-or-less separate, modes of authority.² In this area of extremely limited institutional presence of the state, such sovereign capabilities tend to center on the enforcement of jurisdiction (regulation of movement) and extraction (raiding for resources), both of which can be backed up with violence.

Unlike my disciplinary predecessors, I cannot perpetuate the idea that this situation represents a harmonious social equilibrium. People living here feel abandoned and frustrated by politics. It is time to revise the critiques of Hobbes, but the ability of the state—sovereign or otherwise—to respond to these challenges has come into

2. In the interest of minimizing jargon, I will mostly use the term “capability” in place of “mark.”

question in an unprecedented way. Recognition of this fact should not be taken as an excuse for pessimism but as a call to pursue creative, and not necessarily state-based, solutions.

1.2 The return to sovereignty

Discomfort about globalization³ reached a peak at the turn of the 21st century, when the categories associated with the nation-state seemed to have simultaneously become important (as in immigration debates and ethnic violence) and irrelevant (as in capital movement). The attitude toward globalization changed, though, and gave way to a new fascination with the singular violence of sovereignty in the aftermath of 9/11. These two approaches to contemporary politics—concern with the dispersal of state/sovereign power and concern with its exceptionalism and war—have alternated as the organizing dilemmas of much of the recent writings on geo- and national politics. Though both have yielded insights, they both take aspects of political power for granted, and are both unsatisfying. The two threads reflect the *aporia* at the heart of understandings of sovereignty: that it is at once a transcendent concept and an empirical one. By focusing on configurations of different actors bearing marks of sovereignty, I suggest a way forward. Though my approach is unabashedly empirical and thereby tackles this *aporia* mostly from one side, I submit that this attention to lived experience is

3. “Globalization” is so vague a term as to frustrate analysis, but Appadurai (2006) helpfully uses it to draw out three particularities of the current moment: the crucial role of finance capital; the revolution in electronic information; the fact that new forms of wealth appear magical.

a better way of approaching the transcendent, and perhaps unknowable, aspects of politics.

Political Theology as the Explanation for Sovereignty

Especially after 9/11, the writings of a previously-obscure Italian academic, Giorgio Agamben, appeared prescient in their accounting for Western, and especially American, violent and exclusionary responses (Greif 2005). In *Homo Sacer* (1998) Agamben used Nazi extermination camps to argue that the ancient Greek theoretical division of life into *bios* (associational life) and *zoe* (“bare life,” or the mere biological fact of being alive) has become a reality in whose creation and maintenance beats the heart of sovereign power.⁴ For Agamben, the paradigmatic form of spatial configuration of sovereignty is thus the death camp, and especially the Nazi camps, because it demarcates a zone in which living beings are reduced to a condition of bare life. The paradigmatic form of life, then, is *Homo sacer*, the camp-dweller, who, by virtue of being only *zoe*, can be “killed but not sacrificed.” That is, he can be executed, but not in any of the ritualized, meaningful ways that accompany the associational life made possible by law and society.

Agamben marshals the work of Carl Schmitt (whose work has recently re-emerged from a certain obscurity in American academia). Schmitt, himself a non-

4. As Greif (2005) points out, the Greeks never imagined that *bios* and *zoe* manifested as such in the world. To describe their function anachronistically, they were ideal types, in the Weberian sense—“pure” or “logical conclusion” forms intended to categorize and differentiate diverse trends and tendencies. As with all ideal types, the urge to use them instead as norms seems to have colored Agamben’s account.

ideological Nazi,⁵ explicitly treated the nature of sovereignty in his *Political Theology* (2005 [1922]). The innovation that underlies Schmitt's analysis is his concern for the distinction between "constituting power" and "constituted power" (in Walter Benjamin's related conception, "law-making" and "law-preserving" violence). There is, in this distinction, the kind of power that *creates* a state (which forms the basis for the legitimacy and organization of the state) and another power that *resides in the norms* of a state (this is the power of its day-to-day running and place in the world). Schmitt argues that most theorists of sovereignty ignore the first type of power, which cannot be described as a function of daily norms. They simply naturalize or theologize the second type.⁶ Schmitt tries to account for that initial big bang-type of power, the afterlife of which he locates in the sovereign ability—or even, the sovereign requirement—to decide on the exception. The sovereign decides when the laws (daily norms, constitutions) must be suspended to preserve the Law (values that transcend human-made institutions). Agamben tweaks Schmitt to say that sovereign decision-making is a question of imposing the state of exception as it is about deciding who shall become bare life, *Homo sacer*.

Schmitt argued that current understandings of sovereign power originated in theological concepts that through time became secularized. In *The King's Two Bodies*

5. Schmitt's theories of sovereign exceptionalism, which he began developing prior to the rise of the Third Reich, seemed to require him to join the Nazi movement, as it appeared dedicated to putting his theories into action.

6. I will discuss the challenge of analyzing "constituting power" in postcolonial contexts such as Africa later in chapters two and three. For now, suffice it to signal that when commandment rules the polity (Mbembe 2000b, 2001), constituting power might turn on the banal facts of violence.

(1957), Ernst Kantorowicz dissected and charted this transformation and provided another view of constituting versus constituted power. He narrates his answer by tracking the idea of the “king’s two bodies,” that is, the fact that the king has both an earth-bound, physical vessel-body and a transcendent authority-body (a distinction that explains the sense of “The king is dead, long live the king!”). Kantorowicz tracks the legitimacy of kingly power through time, from kings’ direct connection with Christ, to their legitimacy through in divinely-dictated law, toward natural law (with its heavy Roman influences) and the legitimate authority of the polity more broadly. Still, the king retains his two bodies, as a sovereign—whether royal or republican—retains two bodies, one of daily laws and regulations and the other of the mysterious power that legitimates the subjugation of the people to his will.⁷ The fascination of Kantorowicz’s account is his micro-political focus on jurists’ dispute-resolution practices. He shows how these medieval thought-leaders drew from the philosophical the tools available to them to craft justifications for the legitimacy of the evolving roles played by royalty and other governors. Read against the grain, then, Kantorowicz shows not just the transcendence of a particular reading of the origins of constituting power, but also the shifts in sovereign capabilities that accompanied it.

The political theological approach to understanding sovereignty has inspired much scholarship (Humphrey 2004; Litzinger 2006; Ong 2006), some of it creative and

7. Agamben (1998), points out that Kantorowicz has perhaps deliberately ignored the other origins of sovereign power besides Christianity, such as pagan rituals (which he mentions in the epilogue, but only as an aside).

insightful. Didier Fassin and Paula Vasquez explicitly engage with the question of the constitution of sovereignty in their discussion of the import of the collective response to catastrophic mudslides in Venezuela in 1999, known as the *Tragedia* (2005). President Hugo Chavez, also head of the military, declared a state of emergency. They note that Schmitt's and Walter Benjamin's interest in the state of the exception as a kind of rule founding political orders, and the work of those who have subsequently taken up these theorists, have tended to emphasize the exception as necessarily a process of exclusion. In contrast, Fassin and Vasquez argue that the state of exception can also be founded on an impulse toward a new kind of inclusion, whether temporary or longer-lasting. The *Tragedia* and the response from the military inculcated and refreshed nationalist sentiment and solidarity. They conclude that "Whereas the 'One' of the body of society materialized only fleetingly in the moment of the humanitarian exception, the 'One' of the body of power is perpetuated in the figure of the chief" (403). And they infer that the theological-political is not a kind of vestigial "survival" but a "permanent" and important aspect of modern democracies.⁸

In different ways, whether by focusing on inclusion or exclusion, on bare life or political life, on religion or law, the theological-political thread in sovereignty studies has tended to emphasize a sense of unity fostered by the mysterious power at the origins of the polity. This power lives on in the present. These theorists are all concerned with

8. In a different and yet somewhat related argument, Partha Chatterjee (2004) argues for the importance of a state of being that is neither inside nor outside the law (he refers to this realm as the *paralegal*, and its inhabitants as members of "political society"), and yet offers the possibility of inclusion to those otherwise ignored, to the maintenance of sovereign power.

identifying how groups of people become a unity and maintain it, even as the polity changes in membership and adopts new justifications. In these accounts, the existence of a position that is neither inside nor outside the law is the constant that determines the constitution of politics. They reduce the multi-headed, polymorphous realm of politics to this phenomenon of perpetuation. This approach has however, also “tended to render sovereignty as if it were best analyzed as a spectral relic of a past political theology” (Das 2006: 162). Notable exceptions such as Didier and Fassin’s work notwithstanding, the political-theological approach tells us little about how sovereign power is experienced and reproduced in day-to-day interactions.⁹

Moreover, the emphasis on the sovereign power to decide assumes that decision translates into action in a straight, linear process free from translation, mediation, and negotiation. Here, sovereign will equals political fact. Nowhere here do we see the miscommunications and miscommunicators of history, like the German Politburo spokesperson Günther Schabowski, whose 1989 declaration of “immediate” open passage between East and West Berlin unleashed popular mobility in unintentional contravention of his higher-ups’ preferred gradual approach. Nowhere here do we see the gray areas in which sovereign will is unclear or impotent; nor do we see how sovereign power exists in relation to other powers. Even Schmitt’s and Agamben’s

9. Das responds to this analytical gap by forgoing analysis of sovereignty in favor of analysis of the state. She identifies what the dealings of low-level state officials illuminate about the character of state power, namely that it “is a form of regulation that oscillates between a rational mode and a magical mode of being” (2006: 162). For reasons I will discuss below, the state is insufficient as a category to drive my analysis.

totalizing sovereign *par excellence*, Adolf Hitler, proved incapable of sustaining the total independence that political-theologically-inflected accounts of sovereignty seem to assume.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri also invoke the state of exception to describe the workings of “world power” and sovereignty through time, and especially now. Their texts betray historical-material leanings in presenting the history of global organization as driven by capital expansion. Like Marx, who saw industrialization and the creation of a global proletariat as inexorable, Hardt and Negri describe sovereignty under empire as “continually expanding.” This description hints at the ways in which Hardt and Negri’s analysis is at once too specific and too abstract. What does “expansion” mean in a world marked not by open flows of connection but by spotty, differential integration (Ferguson 2006)? But then they also seem to assume that sovereignty is a territorial mode of organization. Analysis of cases such as the raiding modes of sovereignty (which I discuss in chapter one) will lead us to deny this assumption. Theirs is a vision at once overly attuned to the importance of “war” in shaping the globe (2005: 21) and yet under-attuned to particular kinds of exploitation and abandonment. Their vision of the coming “multitude” that will take over the earth—a global conglomeration of singularities—does not address the tenuousness of solidarity in the absence of centralization or a common project.

1.2.1 Colonialism and Divisible Sovereignty

The political-theological tradition draws opportunistically from another thread in the study of sovereignty, namely how understandings of sovereignty are a product of projects of expansion, and perhaps especially a product of European colonialism. This argument has been made in more and less polemical ways. Hannah Arendt (1976) and Michel Foucault (2003) both argued for the foundational importance of racism as a wedge concept dividing the sovereign nation-state from the world beyond. In Arendt's account (and, in a related but different way, Rosa Luxemburg's), racism and the pull of expansion (as a way of finding productive uses for capital) are the forces that define European sovereignty in contrast to the rest of the (non-sovereign) world. Antony Anghie has provided a similarly provocative rendering of the last 500 years of "sovereignty" in arguing that it is a concept (the meaning of which has changed through time) that reproduces the "dynamic of difference" between the West and the rest of the world (2005). He seeks to de-naturalize the idea of sovereignty and elucidate how it is bound up in, and reproduces, global power relations.

Though I endorse Anghie's call to de-naturalize and historicize sovereignty, by organizing his historical analysis around a taken-for-granted power differential between Europe and the rest of the world, Anghie leaves little space for the unexpected, unintended and surprising. He presents sovereignty as if it were a guided unerringly by an over-arching trajectory. In fact, as Lauren Benton (2010) has shown, not only was sovereignty never and nowhere as totalizing as political-theological theories tend to

imply, but it also did not develop linearly, as if guided from above. Rather, it has developed in highly contingent fits, spurred by the need to craft solutions to surprising and difficult-to-resolve situations in which theories were insufficient for the resolution of dilemmas of governance. For instance, dominion over a territory is often taken as a foundational element of sovereignty. But Benton recounts example after example of “legally anomalous zones” —penal colonies, hard-to-reach hinterlands, islands, and so forth—and the people and officials working there—pirates, petty officials, prison guards, and so forth—to show how partial and contested such projects have been.

In her account of the last half-millennium, Benton draws on many theoretical predecessors. Among them is Henry Maine, author of *Ancient Law* (a text with a good claim to be the first work of legal anthropology), who seems too often forgotten or ignored by political scientists and others interested in the character of sovereignty.¹⁰ (Bartelson, for instance, in his sweeping if Euro-centric genealogy of sovereignty, makes no reference to Maine or the line of reasoning stemming from his work.) Maine’s conception of sovereignty developed out of his practical work in the princely states of India. In the princely states, Indian governors held substantial sovereign powers alongside British commercial and colonial officials. In this case, it was not so much that the Indian governors were granted powers out of the cache of coercion held by the British (as Mamdani describes in his account of the “decentralized despots” created by colonizers of Africa [1996]), but that princely governing capabilities developed

10. A notable exception is Keene (2002), discussed below.

alongside—sometimes in cooperation with, sometimes in conflict with, but always in relation to—those of the British. This state of affairs implied to Maine that there exist different *kinds* of sovereignty, based on differing levels of capabilities and authorities. He explained,

Sovereignty is a term which, in international law, indicates a well-ascertained assemblage of separate powers or privileges.... A sovereign who possesses the whole of this aggregate of rights is called an *independent* sovereign; but there is not, nor has there ever been, anything in international law to prevent some of those rights being lodged with one possessor, and some with another. Sovereignty has always been regarded as divisible (Maine in Benton 2010: 248; a truncated excerpt also quoted in Keene 2002: 4).

Heretical as it might sound to describe sovereignty—by some accounts the very definition of unitary power—as divisible, Maine in fact drew on a long tradition of scholarship in making his claim. Grotius, the “father of international law,” whose work I will discuss at greater length below and in chapter one, also argued that various sovereigns might look different and possess different sets of capabilities. Thus it makes more sense to track “marks of sovereignty” than to track sovereignty as such without interrogating the content of this category. Jean Bodin also used the term “marks of sovereignty” (Benton 2010: footnote 72, 132-133).¹¹

Whether implicitly or explicitly, many scholars have lately reanimated and updated Maine’s theories to account for the contemporary mutations of sovereignty and citizenship. In many cases, these efforts have yielded newly-qualified understandings of the nature of sovereignty. Thus Benton describes “partial sovereigns” (2010; Roitman

11. It is unclear to me from where the discrepancy arises, but Bartelson describes Bodin as the father of the unitary-sovereign school. How to account for this divergence between his and Benton’s accounts?

(1998), too, used this term, though she later distanced herself from sovereignty as an object of study); Aihwa Ong writes that a fragmentation of sovereignty has occurred, which has given rise to “graduated sovereignties” (2003); Bartelson admits the existence of “mixed sovereignty” (2006); sovereignty has come to appear as “nested,” especially in postcolonial settings (Buur 2005); and so forth. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat sum up this body of literature: “Because the nation-state is no longer the privileged locus of sovereignty — always doubtful in much of the postcolonial world — sovereignties are found in layered and multiple forms around the world” (2006: 309).

As the quote above suggests, the study of gradations of sovereignty has a cousin in the vast recent literature that pontificates on globalization and “the end of the nation-state.” This literature, which often ignores Africa (Ferguson 2006), tends to assume the following temporal and structural trajectory: over time, and especially through projects of bureaucratization, sovereignty and the nation-state became coterminous; power was effectively consolidated in each of these units. Now, under the pressures of global capitalism and the demands of technology, these powers are slipping out of the sovereign’s grasp. The “independent sovereignty” international relations scholars located in the nation-state form can no longer be taken for granted. To take one oft-decried example, private military companies have taken on many of the functions of state armies, and they often operate in the gray areas between state laws (Singer 2003; Nordstrom 2004). Hansen and Stepputat indicate a problem with this international-relations trend in noting that the idea of the nation-state as the “privileged locus of

sovereignty” was “always doubtful” in the post-colonial world: namely, that sovereignty has never been as unitary, independent, and twinned with the state as these theories suggest. Benton shows us that Hansen and Stepputat do not go far enough in their qualification to their endorsement of a version of the “end of the nation-state” hypothesis. Former colonies in the Third World are not the only entities that lie somehow outside of the narrative of sovereign completeness. Sovereignty has always and everywhere been inherently relational. This fact is easiest to see in the dusty corners of Benton’s “anomalous zones,” but it is true elsewhere as well.

Bartelson argues that the concept of sovereignty has changed in relation to shifts in knowledge, and so it cannot be separated from the meandering intellectual histories that have constituted it. Even among those who have made sovereignty their object of study, most have seemed almost to be talking around it, rather than acknowledging the messiness of the theories’ application in the world. Sovereignty—and especially the idea of independent sovereignty—is an ideal type that all too often goes unacknowledged as such. An analysis of terminology reveals this bias. First, Max Weber himself: he used “un-loading” to describe how sovereigns outsource governance to private actors. For instance, faced with collecting taxes in hinterland areas, contracts would be auctioned to “tax farmers.” Tax farmers could keep a share of whatever revenue they could wring from the zones under their control (Levi 1988). “Un-loading” suggests that the sovereign had handed off powers already possessed, but in reality the tax farmers had to create authority themselves, where none had existed. Through time, the sovereign might—or

might not—assume the authority thus created. Saskia Sassen—Weber’s successor in more ways than one—recreates his bias in arguing that sovereign powers have become “un-bundled.” But this term implies the existence of some kind of fully “bundled” sovereignty, i.e., an ideal-type sovereignty. Since the meaning and character of the concept of sovereignty is always changing and politicized (as Anghie 2005 so carefully illustrates), it does not make sense to think of it as an ideal type unless the content of the ideal-type referent is an explicit mode of study, in the mode of Weber. Sovereign capabilities—the faculties that are visible as marks of sovereignty—are created through collaboration and conflict, and they do not develop like a set of matryoshka dolls,¹² with each capability presaging the next (the impression given by Sassen’s otherwise fascinating “experiment” of tracking governing capabilities in regard to territory, authorities and rights from the medieval period onward [2006]) until riven by the sundering effects of “globalization.” Rather, sovereign capabilities develop fitfully, undirected by a master scheme. Benton (2010) reminds us that problems, such as the issue of who in the American colonies counted as a subject of the king, were just that—*problems*, in need of novel solutions and justifications. Sovereign authorities are never assumed or delegated without change and challenge.

12. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri use the metaphor of matryoshka dolls to illustrate how war has come to dominate global politics: “war is now the outermost container in which is nestled the power of control and finally disciplinary power” (2005: 21). The comparison is misleading because the units of a set of Russian dolls do not depend on each other in the way that these various aspects of politics share a necessary relation.

That sovereignty has so long operated as a stealthy ideal type owes in part to the grip that the myth¹³ of constituting power holds over understandings of sovereignty. If there must be a big-bang/God-creates-the-world/all-agree-to-the-social-contract moment at the origin of political power, then all subsequent authority must in some essential way derive from that moment. Hence, it follows that sovereign powers are “un-loaded” or “un-bundled.” This myth is easier to sustain in polities with apparently smooth national histories. (As many scholars have shown, national histories are always objects in motion, subject to ruptures, change and struggle like so much else (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Trouillot 1995).) Does this mean, then, that the powers accruing to a *chef de village* in rural CAR stem from the originating moment of French sovereignty? To argue that seems a stretch, especially considering how minimal and ambivalent the French colonial presence was there. Most likely, this *chef de village*’s ancestors’ experience of political hierarchy prior to colonization was one of flight—hiding from, and sometimes fighting against, the raiders who traversed the territory in the nineteenth century in search of slaves and other valuable goods. Can one locate the originating kernel of authority in desperate flight? Some combination of factors? If, following Berman Lonsdale’s (1992) provocative pronouncement, one of Africa’s main contributions to the world is the art of living peacefully outside the state, where might we locate a mysterious/mystified constituting power?

13. I am confronted here with the limits of language: “myth” inevitably appears as “mere” belief in the secular, Enlightenment understanding of the world that has dominated the social sciences. I do not intend to dismiss myth as inferior to other ways of knowing but feel the need to retain the term for clarity.

A critic might complain that my understanding of constituting power is too literal. On one level, she would be correct. I will not belabor the point, for I do not want to give the impression of dismissing the contributions of the important literature on this topic, which is only ancillary to my own. However, the case of Africa provides an opportunity for re-thinking those European-derived theories that are often taken as universal. Political scientists have argued that African sovereignty has been “negatively” granted (that is, dictated from the level of international organizations) (Krasner 1999). Though this idea has produced interesting discussions of state and sovereignty on the continent (Englebert 2009), it is a point that has the tendency of making Africa appear yet again the exception. The relational nature of sovereignty may be more *visible* in certain African cases, but that should encourage re-evaluation of what is elsewhere taken for granted, rather than the assumption of difference.

Whereas in much of Western Europe, the founding of the polities in many cases happened so long ago that it’s relatively easy to deal in unknowns and hypotheticals (consider those “as if” clauses that pepper *Leviathan* — “as if” he had entered social contract...), in Africa one doesn’t have the luxury of many centuries’ alienation from “constituting” violence. Achille Mbembe’s characterization of founding violence in the postcolony: *commandement*. Under *commandement* (the law of command), force and law have been merged. It was the *loi de repartition des armes* (“law of gun distribution,” to borrow a term Mbembe uses to describe contemporary politics) backed by a civilizing mission that by turns denigrated and exoticized all things African. *Commandement*

instantiates new relationships and changes the experience and expression of political power not just for the people now subject to orders but also for those doing the ordering (whether literally or by association).

Fundamentally, sovereignty is always a question of relationships. In the study of international relations, in contrast, sovereignty has served as the “black box” that generates and maintains an ordered “internal” sphere as functionally severed from other sovereign “insides.” These relationships have been split conceptually between those ordering the realm internal to the polity, and those ordering the relationships between polities, with sovereignty the entity that generates and maintains the boundaries around/between these categories. But the idea that a sovereign or a state is “independent” is similar to saying a thirty-something urban American is an independent, stand-alone unit—it is an ideological fiction only possible to perpetuate by willfully ignoring the farmers who grow her food, the truckers who transport it, the factory workers who make her clothes, etc. This relational reality is something that the scholars of plural sovereignties—those who have heeded Hansen and Stepputat’s call to question make the relationships among sovereignty, state, and territory an object of study, rather than a set of a prior assumptions (2006)—are trying to describe and account for. Often, though, they rely on qualifying terms like Maine’s “divisible” to make the case, and betray the lingering influence of the idea that there exists full sovereignty (understanding what “partial sovereign” means requires an understanding of what a full sovereign is), or a hierarchy of sovereignties (“nested sovereigns” require that some

sovereigns be subordinate, or somehow subsumed, by others, which seems to contradict the idea that the “lower-level” indeed merit the term sovereign, and which returns us to the logical end point—is the individual self-sovereign?—that indicates the term has become unmanageably loose). But “full sovereignty” is an unspoken ideal type whose definitional content too often remains unspecified. This oversight is perhaps due to the difficulty of apprehending its transcendent side. It becomes especially problematic, though, when used as fodder for empirical discussions. As Anghie (2005), Bartelson (1995), and others have argued, the content needed to evidence full sovereignty would depend on the time, place, people and interests at stake.

1.3 Marks of sovereignty

A way out of the transcendent/empirical muddle in the study of sovereignty is to focus on configurations of sovereign capabilities. We should make the constitution of sovereignty an object of empirical analysis by producing cartographies of the semi-autonomous authorities that different governing actors claim for themselves and their institutions. This adjustment of attention would let us see how what qualifies as a “mark of sovereignty” has changed through time in particular places. It would also provide a rubric for incorporating the different modes of territorialization at work in the constellations of governing entities that jump scales from localized projects to global discourses and capital-rich hubs. Further, tracking marks of sovereignty makes *visibility* an explicit element of study. That is, to refer to marks of sovereignty signals a process of qualification (becoming qualified for, becoming seen as qualified), whether on a

localized or a scope-spanning level. The process concerns how a governing entity becomes recognized as bearing sovereign capabilities and thus incorporates relationality into sovereignty. In northeastern CAR, as I will describe in the following chapters, visibility and its opposite are key to the operation of governance in such a remote and difficult to access space. Finally, following marks of sovereignty steers analysis away from implicit/explicit referencing an ideal type of “full sovereignty,” which has never existed in such a clear-cut way.

The study of capabilities has come to animate one strand of development research, led by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2011). My discussion of capabilities shares Sassen’s (2006) critique of Sen and Nussbaum’s contention that capabilities bear a positive valence. Capabilities—in my use, political authorities—have a wholly ambiguous moral charge. Neither positive nor negative, they are quite simply the action-tools of coercion. Grotius also sought to steer analysis away from value-driven assessments of political authorities in the world. Whereas other theorists spent their days deriving solid logical arguments for how international politics should work, Grotius more often worked to describe how they actually did (Keene 2002). Though he wrote that sovereignty is unitary and totalizing within polities, he quickly qualified that statement with empirical cases that showed how sovereign capabilities in fact are often spread between different actors. He explained, “it may be possible for some marks [of sovereignty] to reside...with persons or assemblies, while others do not” (Grotius in Keene 2002: 46). A historical incident ongoing while Grotius wrote is illustrative: Spain

had taken control of Holland and the Spanish king claimed sovereignty; however, certain marks of sovereignty—such as the ability to raise taxes—remained the sole prerogative of the Dutch states. When the Spanish rulers attempted to tax their Dutch subjects, Grotius argued that the Dutch were within their rights to rise up in war to preserve their marks of sovereignty (Keene 2002: 47). A mark of sovereignty is thus a capability to pursue a project of authority over people, space, or resources. It might be grabbed and asserted, delegated from someone more powerful, or arise from collective energies.

To illustrate what I mean by “marks of sovereignty,” it helps to consider the elements that might count. My typology is not comprehensive or authoritative, but it is a tool for picking apart the empirical black box of sovereignty to better appreciate differences and continuities through time and allow for a finer-grained appreciation of the authorities that different governors sharing a space might hold. For Grotius and Maine, a typology of marks of sovereignty might look something like the following, presented in no particular order: jurisdiction/regulation; dominion/ownership; fear/coercion/enforcement (necropolitics); extraction/exploitation; protection (biopolitics); diplomacy. These capabilities are of course intertwined, with, for instance, ability to perform jurisdiction in many cases tightly linked with an ability to extract and exploit. The issue of which authorities come into play in the case of dealing with transgressors can be particularly difficult, or even impossible, to disambiguate. These marks of sovereignty are also those capabilities most often named as essential

capabilities of the state. For Grotius and Maine, even if marks of sovereignty could be held by different rulers sharing a space, the marks all attached to projects associated with state-building. These capabilities are important as indicators of the avenues through which centralizing political projects are generally pursued. Even in northeastern CAR, where the centralizing impulses have been limited, the state-focused marks of sovereignty contribute to the exercise of power. However, centralization is only one part of the story of the rhizome-like developments of political trajectories and the “global assemblages” (Ong and Collier 2005) that ensue. Non-centralization—rule based in illegibility (in contrast to Scott’s (1998) rendering of state practices of making legible), nomadism, the maintenance of loose alliances in multiple far-flung places—accompanies centralization, and its emissaries carry their own marks of sovereignty.

The early anthropologists were clear on this point: “stateless” societies, too, exercised sovereignty. In the move to correct colonial-era anthropologists’ tendency to ignore the sundering effects of imperial rule, this point fell by the wayside. Instead, in keeping with the general bias that sees state-building and centralization as inexorable, the opposite of political centralization has been represented as “resistance” to state-building. Pierre Clastres’ *Society Against the State* (1989), which built on Rousseauian notions of the superiority of “primitive” life over the depravities of the city, launched this strand of literature. More recently, James C. Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) picked up where Clastres left off. In between, a literature on “exit” from the state described how people seek to free themselves from repressive state interventions in their

lives (Azarya and Chazan 1987). Though this literature has contributed important insights into how people experienced state projects of expansion; rather than liberating, incorporation often entailed a usurpation of hard-won liberties. But the tenor of these works, and their tendency to represent centralization and non-centralization as opposing poles, has also misled. For the two processes generally occur together. One does not have to go so far as to see them as symbiotic (such as, for instance, Comaroff and Comaroff [2006] do in their study of how (il)legalization feeds increasing disorder) to recognize that they work in tandem: centralizing leaders may also found their rule in personal capacities, may also play with visibility and invisibility, may also maintain mobility—all hallmarks of non-centralizing trajectories. The analogy of urban studies helps illustrate this point. Still heavy with Durkheimian notions of city dwellers' organic solidarity, "Urbanization conventionally denotes a thickening of fields, an assemblage of increasingly heterogeneous elements into more complicated collectives" (Simone 2004: 408). However, in Africa "the outcomes of residents' reciprocal efforts are radically open, flexible, and provisional.... The accelerated, extended, and intensified intersections of bodies, landscapes, objects, and technologies defer calcification of institutional ensembles or fixed territories of belonging" (ibid: 408). Similarly, sovereignty has conventionally been assigned a unilinear path: even though the bearer of sovereign authority might change, centralization (a marker of organic solidarity) is generally assumed to be the overall direction of the shifts. But to describe provisional, flexible assemblages as edifices of centralization impoverishes the analysis.

Deleuze and Guattari have come closest to recognizing the ways in which centralization and non-centralization coexist to create political assemblages. They differentiated between what they termed a “State” mode of power and a “war machine” mode of power. They explain the difference between the two through an analogy to games: State is like chess, with its mappable strategies, codified capabilities of socially differentiated pieces, and aim of unsettling the king to claim power; war machine, in contrast, is like Go, a game played by undifferentiated chips acting in the moment. In Go, “‘It’ makes a move. ‘It’ could be a man, a woman, a louse, an elephant. Go pieces are elements of a nonsubjectified machine assemblage with no intrinsic properties, only situational ones. . . . Chess is indeed a war, but an institutionalized, regulated, coded war, with a front, a rear, battles. But what is proper to Go is war without battle lines, with neither confrontation nor retreat, without battles even” (1986: 6). The state mode of power is oriented toward centralization, hierarchization, sedentarization, regularization, and so forth. War machine is oriented toward non-centralization, networks, nomadism, and flexibility. Though Deleuze and Guattari do not use this terminology, the two modes are ideal types of the Weberian sort.¹⁴ They are categorical devices that enable the picking apart of political projects into urges and desires. As with all ideal types, one never sees a “pure” State mode or a “pure” war machine—they exist together, in gradations. The army (State) might capture the tactics and resources of the guerilla (war machine) to create a new hybrid. However, the new hybrid will reflect some

14. Kapferer (1997) has also commented on the ways in which State and war machine resemble ideal types.

combination of war machine and State desires that sometimes intertwine, sometimes work together, and sometimes remain separate. The foundational difference in war machine and State desires is what they are referring to when they write that “In every respect, the war machine is of another species, another nature, another origin than the State apparatus” (1986: 3), *even though the two modes coexist*. Deleuze and Guattari’s emphasis on the “exteriority” of the war machine is also potentially misleading, for it recreates the old resistance/domination binary between non-state and state forces. The governing projects in northeastern CAR show how centralizing and non-centralizing impulses coexist in cycles of desire and disavowal. State and war machine allow one to think about how desires for control, discipline and visibility might share a political field with desires for independence, movement and invisibility, without these desires contradicting each other. Adding the war machine mode—un-centralized political objectives—to an understanding of sovereignty helps account for the different kinds of autonomy that marks of sovereignty signal.

However, there are several problems with Deleuze and Guattari’s approach (see also Miller 1998). In addition to the obfuscatory conventions of their post-structural style (they meanderingly direct readers through belabored discussions of the difference between ‘anexact’ and ‘inexact’ that nevertheless left me with more questions than answers; they include enigmatic thought-bubbles such as “The State is perpetually producing and reproducing ideal circles, but a war machine is necessary to make it round” [1986: 29]), their terminology is inherently problematic. Deleuze and Guattari go

to lengths to explain that what they call “war machine” is neither necessarily more nor less violent than “State.” In other words, the war machine is not a machine of/for war. Given that, the term “war machine” at best confuses, and at worst feeds facile stereotypes that represent non-state modes of power as inherently anarchic and violent. Similarly, capital-S “State” projects of legibility might be undertaken by actors not formally of the lowercase-s state; referring to both using the same term makes it awkward to differentiate the two. Clarity thus demands filtering to retain the cogency of their ideas while rejecting their choice of terms. Instead of State and war machine, I think of those marks of sovereignty that are directed toward *centralizing* prerogatives and those that are directed toward *non-centralizing* prerogatives—a return to the anthropological approaches of old, which differentiated the degrees of stateness of various societies, but this time with greater attention to the ways in which centralizing and non-centralizing forces play off each other, sometimes cooperating and sometimes competing.¹⁵ Taking this approach makes it possible to see how the two tendencies interact.

Centralizing marks of sovereignty map more or less onto the state-based capabilities outlined above, though they may be undertaken by “non-state” actors. At issue is the set of desires and urges that the projects represent, not the formal affiliation of the people carrying them out. Non-centralizing marks of sovereignty consist

15. As Miller (1998) points out, had Deleuze and Guattari engaged in a less opportunistic reading of the anthropological literature on nomadism, the continuous interplay between nomadic and non-nomadic ways of life would have been apparent.

primarily of movement/mobility, invisibility, and flexibility (for instance, flexibility in self-representation). My objective in laying out a loose typology of marks of sovereignty that includes both centralizing and non-centralizing impulses is not to delineate discrete capabilities but to show the different valences authorities can take when applied to people, resources, and land; the ways that these become marks of sovereignty; and the ways that marks of sovereignty become tangled and produce violent or otherwise lamentable outcomes, as well as more favorable ones.

Developing this typology allows more apt description of the authorities exercised in northeastern CAR than the divisible or political-theological models of sovereignty might permit. The thinkers whose ideas I discuss to elaborate each of the typology's terms are not exhaustive. But they portray these authorities in ways that make it possible to track different facets of political power over space, goods, and people, and to sketch the range of iterations that these various capabilities might take, from the more- to less-present forms.

1.3.1 A typology of marks of sovereignty

1.3.1.1 Jurisdiction, as differentiated from dominion

The differentiation of jurisdiction from dominion was suggested by Alberico Gentili and by Grotius. It bears retention because it highlights how sovereign capabilities are constrained and furthered by specific geographic terrains, and it enables a more nuanced understanding of the different relationships possible between authority and territory. Grotius argued that dominion (ownership) could be attained only over

spaces that are both exploited and policed. First, exploitation: God created the world for its resources to be extracted from and turned to profit by humans, thus rendering exploitation imperative. Grotius also exhibited a realist streak in arguing for the requirement that authority over a space must be performed for it to exist (he was writing pre-*Leviathan*, with the assurances afforded by its “as if” clauses as to the protections accruing those who relinquish the “state of nature”). But there also exist spaces on earth—most obviously, the ocean—that are simply too vast to be policed or, therefore, owned. As Benton explains, “A ship could not mark possession [of a space, the sea], in other words, but its presence could signal jurisdiction and control, or the right to protect subjects and their goods” (Benton 2010: 136). Though dominion over spaces like the ocean is therefore impossible, a more specific authority *can* be exercised, to maintain order, namely jurisdiction. Jurisdiction consists of authority to regulate others’ navigation.

The idea that a person could restrict others’ movements even though he did not own the territory—whether water or solid ground—stemmed partly from the seventeenth-century preoccupation with piracy. Whereas the ability to move around to put fallow, un-exploited lands and resources to use was held as an inalienable right and duty, those who refused to abide by the basic rules of property, like pirates, lost this freedom of circulation and could be subjected to controls. In this way, a capability of jurisdiction slid toward a capability of punishment. More importantly for the discussion of jurisdiction, more narrowly understood, Grotius saw jurisdiction as a capacity of

policing exercised in the first place over people, and only secondarily over land. For instance: "...as when a Fleet, which is a Sea-Army, is Kept in any Part of the Sea..." (Grotius quoted in Tuck 1999: 107). That is, a military captain's authority over his soldiers travels with them and is not determined by their location, but by the people involved and the roles they carry out. Richard Tuck explains,

So jurisdiction is a right over people, not over things, though it is a right which may be exercised over all people who come into certain areas of the world's surface, where such a comprehensive control is feasible. So while the Romans could not possess jurisdiction, in this sense, over the Mediterranean, the King of the Algonquins could possess it over the New Netherlands, despite the fact that in neither case was the actual material of the earth's surface owned by anyone. However, the key point for Grotius was that jurisdictional rights could not be pleaded as a justification for stopping free passage or the occupation of waste: since both these activities are entirely legitimate, no local authorities could have rights over people in their territory which would extend to preventing them from behaving in this way (Tuck 1999: 107).

The idea that occupation of wastelands was a legitimate, or even a required, activity stemmed from the reigning understanding of the relationships among resources, time, and profit. If today our social construction of time is changing in favor of long-sighted calculations (e.g., resources will someday have been used up)—a situation Guyer (2007) refers to as "evacuation of the near present"—the sixteenth century perspective appears quite the opposite: the pressing, "near-present" requirements of laws of God and nature clamored for attention. Gentili wrote, "True indeed, 'God did not create the world to be empty'.... And even though such lands belong to the sovereign of that territory...yet because of that law of nature which abhors a vacuum, they will fall to the lot of those who take them..." (Gentili quoted in Tuck 1999: 107). Here Gentili indicates the fundamental importance assigned to exploitation of wastelands—this law of God and

nature invalidated even sovereign claims, if the sovereign was not himself occupied with exploiting the lands of his dominion. Colonists, plantation founders, and other profiteers engaged in just this project: they set up settlements over whose human inhabitants they retained certain authorities determined not by physical space but by the activities (or lack thereof) of the people living there. Grotius's idea of primary jurisdiction favored this concept of governance.

Dominion, or property ownership, was a capability subject to two specific qualifications.¹⁶ First, a would-be ruler had to exploit the resources on the land; second, he had to police it. Dominion was subject to realist calculations based on capability to manifest force and adherence to the law of God/nature, requiring the pursuit of sustenance first and then profit. The strand of realist calculations stemming from Grotius' work was, however, different from the kind of realism that became associated with Hobbes's explication of *Leviathan* capabilities and constraints. One of the primary differences lay in their differing assessments of the nature of private property. Grotius understood ownership in a much more constrained sense than Hobbes. For Grotius, ownership was a right of "first Occupancy": "In a state of nature, all commodities were in common, in the sense that each man took what he needed from the common store of nature and left what he did not need for other people to use.... Once the owners' needs had been met, Grotius always argued, the surplus could be claimed by the genuinely needy" (Tuck in Grotius 2005: xxviii). *Leviathan*, as Hobbes imagined the unitary

16. Grotius differentiated private ownership (dominion) from public ownership (occupation). Unlike many others, he held that both public and private actors could exercise marks of sovereignty.

sovereign, entailed a strengthening and new emphasis on ownership, and its enforcement, as a sovereign capability. Separating jurisdiction from ownership (of goods, people, lands) enables a finer-grained appreciation of how these capabilities articulate differently in different times and places. By denying the assumption that authority always equals authority over people in a place, this distinction also facilitates the project of making the content of configurations of sovereign authorities an object of study, rather than a taken-for-granted or otherwise unspecified category.

1.3.1.2 Extraction

My use of the term “extraction” is not intended to connote predation. We should not assume a particular moral valence of sovereign capabilities, but make that moral question an object of study. And extraction (or exploitation) can express anywhere on a broad range of practices, from taxation for the sake of social welfare redistribution, to tithes landing directly in rulers’ richly-embroidered pockets, to rubber cultivation and production. Charles Tilly (1985) famously argued that the process of state-making in Europe was propelled by the transformation of organized crime into public authority. The construction of capabilities of extraction, and the legitimation of these projects, thus constituted a core mark of sovereignty. Moreover, a focus on extraction and exploitation as marks of sovereignty helps us see gradations in the categories of *over whom* sovereign capabilities are exercised. The raiding polities that spread across Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often proceeded from differentiation between those who could be raided and those who could be protected. The former were crucial to production and

expansion in these polities, even as their exploitation was founded on the idea that they did not fully belong to them.

For instance, Janet Ewald (1990) describes how in Taqali, in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, traders claimed a mark of sovereignty by commandeering soldiers to raid for slaves and other goods. The raids led to war with the political/religious authorities over the control of extraction. As a resonant and yet contrasting case, she mentions medieval Norway, where peasants maintained certain marks of sovereignty, such as their own militias and local government. The king depended for his maintenance on receipt of a gift, called a *veizla*, which through time developed into a right for certain of the king's men to claim goods and foodstuffs from the peasantry. But even then, these extractive grants did not imply "*occupatio*," or full right of ownership, for the peasants continued to own their land. Whereas the land could be passed down hereditarily, the grants could not (1990: 183). I mention these examples to justify extraction as a particular mark of sovereignty that must be analyzed in relation to other capabilities and processes of territorialization.

1.3.1.3 Violent coercion

As Ewald's Taqali example suggests, extraction/exploitation can be a highly contested mark of sovereignty, and it can signal fault lines within polities. In Eric Hobsbawm's Robin Hood-derived treatment of "social bandits," these extractors become heroes of the poor and scourges of the rich (1969). Other analyses (Blok 1976; Sant Cassia 1993; Issa 2010) suggest a more ambiguous relationship between bandits and the

communities they work in or call home. Whatever moral valence one assigns to modes of authority like banditry or piracy, the ability to label these types of extraction criminal is itself a mark of sovereignty (but not one that necessarily negates the fact that the extraction, too, is a mark of sovereignty).

Another sovereign capability is violent coercion, or, to use an evocatively dire term of art, necropolitics. This category includes a broad range of coercive capabilities founded in violence, from the widespread sowing of fear, to the punishment of transgressions (such as pirates have historically faced), to the ability to raise an army, to the capabilities implied in Mbembe's phrase, the ability to decide "who may live and who must die" (sovereignty as the "right to kill")—necropolitics (2003). Certainly, in the political-theological tradition of sovereignty studies, power over life and death appears to be the essential capability to which sovereignty can be reduced. However, the right to kill does not exist in isolation from other marks of sovereignty, which are in turn influenced by or themselves influence capacities of violent enforcement. My interest here is to see the configurations that emerge when this capability attaches to, or detaches itself from, other marks of sovereignty to produce a range of different kinds of violence and justifications for targeting groups, resources, or places. When war and politics merge, for instance, "radical predation" (a form of extraction) comes to accompany killing as the main operative marks of sovereignty (Mbembe 2006).¹⁷

17. As Tilly put it, "Frank recognition of the central place of force in governmental activity does not require us to believe that governmental authority rests 'only' or 'ultimately' on the threat of violence" (1985: 172). After all, even the most repressive, war-making polities must face the fact that conflating the categories

The range of expressions of violent coercion is wide. Punishment is one element of enforcement, and it indicates a right to stop others from doing something. Both Grotius and Hobbes (most notably in *Leviathan*) explained the development and modalities of a ruler's right to punish.¹⁸ An authority to stop others from doing something is only one possible expression of a right to punish. As I will discuss further in chapter three, on roadblocks, an ability to regulate and extract from certain types of commerce because they are illicit might be quite separate from either a project of stopping said traffics or a capability of correcting those who have thus violated written laws. However, punishment has more to do with the *threat* of violent coercion than the sheer fact of taking life itself; as Mbembe has argued, the "law of weapons distribution," (a law that "must be understood simply as the quality of power relations that develops whenever political disagreement and other forms of dispute can be settled by the force of arms"), has increasingly come to color African politics (2006: 323). At the same time, processes of negotiation and justification most often accompany and nuance the poles of life-and-death politics. Even the law of weapons distribution operates within climates of conviviality.

1.3.1.4 Protection

On the flip side of violent coercion is protection. By "protection," I mean to refer to the range of projects that Foucault termed "biopolitics" —the ability to make live or to

of would-be subjects and opponents/enemies generally gives rise to mass strategies of flight as a form of resistance (Scott 2010).

18. Expand on this with van Nifterik, "Grotius and the Origins of the Ruler's Right to Punish," in Blom, ed. *Property, Punishment, Piracy*.

let die (2010). Historically, protection has been a mark of sovereignty most often expressed on a localized level, such as in the village militias of medieval Norway, described above. But, beyond preventing incursions by threatening outsiders or other transgressors, protection has also come to orient a range of projects geared toward constructing social welfare for a given populace. A huge array of humanitarian and development agencies and organizations strive to improve human welfare in various impoverished parts of the world. Protection is often their operative mark of sovereignty, though the effects of their efforts might not produce the holistic security they desire. For instance, Peter Redfield has taken Agamben's interest in the *zoe/bios* distinction to show how the medical charity Doctors Without Borders (*Médecins sans frontières*, MSF) operates in a zone of "inherent tension within the value of 'life' that [they] seek to defend, between the maintenance of physical existence [*zoe*], on the one hand, and the defense of human dignity [*bios*], on the other hand" (2005: 330). Because MSF prioritizes "doing something" —or perhaps more precisely, doing what they can: providing medical aid intended to alleviate physical suffering and restore biological health, rather than pondering over and attempting to figure out ways to address the causes of suffering— they enact what Redfield terms a "minimalist biopolitics." In this minimalist biopolitics the maintenance of physical existence takes precedence over a broader struggle for human dignity. This analysis of MSF's intended politics leaves un-addressed the ways in which the intended beneficiaries might take up and re-invent MSF's presence among

them,¹⁹ but it helpfully probes the content of protection as a mark of sovereignty by making the moral regimes thus enacted an object of study rather than taking them for granted, as many discussions of protection do (this, for instance, is the ideological emphasis on protection that has emerged in the United Nations in recent years).

Although some governing entities, like MSF, might mark their sovereignty only through reference to protection, a look at the historical record shows how closely protection ties into other marks of sovereignty, such as extraction (even MSF must raise funds). As Tilly has explained, “the word ‘protection’ sounds two contrasting tones. One is comforting, the other ominous. With one tone, ‘protection’ calls up images of the shelter against danger provided by a powerful friend, a large insurance policy, or a sturdy roof. With the other, it evokes the racket in which a strong man forces merchants to pay tribute to avoid damage—damage the strong man himself threatened to deliver” (1985: 170). Protection, coercion and extraction may be differentiated less by the *de facto* politics they create (in fact, they are often operate together as a configuration) and more by the ways they justify their authorities. In northeastern CAR, newly-arrived humanitarian agencies have encouraged the sentiment—widespread among the region’s inhabitants—that protection is a mark of sovereignty that is lacking in their case. As I will discuss further in the chapters on rebellion, the region’s “abandonment” has become

19. In the course of my interest in humanitarian politics in CAR, I have heard Central Africans claim MSF as their representative in a hostile world (for instance, trusting MSF to provide political and security-related information). I have also heard them decry MSF’s staff as charlatans and hucksters whose clinic was not worthy of a visit. Clearly, even in applying only a minimalist biopolitics, the personal practices of all involved can drastically change how it is experienced, and the extent to which it is embraced or rejected.

a major justification for taking up arms. Frustratingly for these rebels and the people among whom they live, these claims to protection have not yet translated into security.

1.3.1.5 Diplomacy

One final centralizing mark of sovereignty bears mentioning: diplomacy.

Clauswitzians might take issue with inclusion of diplomacy as a mark of sovereignty, for in their accounts diplomacy is a subordinate element in the war-politics continuum.

Others might object on the grounds that its inclusion perpetuates the distinction between the “inside” and “outside” of a polity (see, for instance, Bartelson 1995). Despite these potential critiques, I justify including it to account for processes of representation, which often jump scales. The clearest example of this in northeastern CAR comes in the form of the rebel groups, who, by virtue of enacting the form of the rebel group, gain access to visibility on the “level of the world” (Simone 2002) and claim to “represent” area residents. This claim is somewhat different from the claim to protect. In contrast, when a self-defense group/anti-poaching militia became embroiled in a series of back-and-forth raids against pastoralists and their allies in 2002-2005 (discussed further in chapter five), they did not possess diplomatic capabilities, even as they did claim the capability of war-making. In this way, the existence or absence of diplomacy draws attention to the futility of looking for a “complete” set of marks of sovereignty. It also highlights the importance of relationships to claiming and maintaining power.

1.3.1.6 Mobility

People who stay put are targeted for projects of governance. People who move can avoid interference and are able to mark themselves as bearing sovereign capabilities. The hostility with which State actors have met nomads throughout history testifies to the importance of mobility as a mark of sovereign autonomy. For instance, Roitman (2005) describes the case of the “*population flottante*” (floating population), a category troubling to French colonial administrators. Herders and others who declined to stay put in one spot were notoriously difficult to transform into subjects by collecting. The French also worried about the people they referred to as “*transfuges*” (deserters): these people would move around to find spouses, work, avoid taxes, or otherwise live unfettered by centralizers.

Attention to mobility also draws out capabilities of rulers who might prefer not to see themselves as occupying any such governing role, namely humanitarian and other aid workers (Pandolfi 2000). “If only some were free to travel and others held in place, the maps of aid organizations would uncomfortably resemble those of empires” notes Redfield (2012: 373). Even when the will to operate on equal footing is present, as Redfield describes in the case of MSF, the inequalities in global circulation are themselves too powerful to overcome. Ability to evade attempts at accountability and profit are both frequently bound up in the question of who can move, and who cannot.

1.3.1.7 Invisibility

To understand why invisibility can constitute a mark of sovereignty, it helps to consider its opposite, namely the ways that state actors try to make their populations visible for the purposes of controlling and disciplining them. James C. Scott has shown how state centralizers must deploy and enforce means to make populations “legible” (visible) as subjects. He argues that the state engages in tactics of simplification to keep track of and “arrange the population” to facilitate “taxation, conscription, and the prevention of rebellion” (1998: 2). Needing to make sense of and tabulate sprawling areas and peoples, the state must render them legible through certain matrices. Central to Scott’s understanding is that these simplifications do not merely reflect reality; the state imposes its simplifications, and the population transforms reality and re-makes it following the state’s logics. The imposition of a state language and surnames, the creation of standardized land-tenure systems, the regulation of traffic, and city planning all serve to organize people and space in ways facilitating the needs of the central state. In the name of standardization that will facilitate long-distance trade and governance, these tactics simplify rich and complicated local systems of organization. People resist and subvert (1998: 49), and illegibility (living in a neighborhood navigable only by a local, for instance), allow for a degree of political autonomy (54). But the fiscal and material interests of the rulers provide the driving logic to the state’s shorthand (24), and the state rewards those who abide and punishes those who do not (73). The project of legibility suffuses the modern state, because a centralized government needs legibility to

be able to view all its messy diversity at the same time. However, in focusing on the grandiose projects of “high modern” state-builders, Scott blinds himself to the ways in which playing with visibility constitutes not just an act of resistance to a more-powerful state system, but its own kind of mastery and transcendence of that system. This mastery is especially clear in a place like CAR, which has never seen the kinds of state-building projects attempted in areas studied by Scott.

Invisibility as a mark of sovereignty has both a prosaic and a spiritual dimension. On the prosaic side, an ability to hide—a capability preferentially at play in the vast bush of CAR—enables non-centralized projects of profit and networking. On the spiritual side, invisibility involves a capability to manage the world of the occult, the world of spirits and forces for both good and ill. Hecht and Simone define what they call “invisible governance” as “a frame of elliptical efforts, that maintains competing agendas and aspirations in some kind of functional and parallel existence—where the need to survive does not take precedence or swallow up the need to imagine, and where the need to imagine does not impede completely the ability to survive” (1994: 13). They further explain,

In thousands of small ways, African societies “play” with visibility—fronting masks when nothing is hidden; deploying stark realities as covers for something more complex or uncertain...Religious convictions, ethnic identifications, distinct world views are very real—allegiances are not merely cynical convenience. Muslims take Islamic law seriously even when they are sharing alcoholic drinks with heathen Dinka hustlers in a car junkyard that serves as a makeshift bar. One set of convictions do not preclude other, seemingly, contradictory affiliations from taking place.... The efficacy of such modes of social organization do not radically alter the highly precarious conditions in which they operate. Communities are increasingly collections of disparate practices and points of view—a bricolage effect that has immediate strategic value but in the long run,

does not address the need for coherence or the construction of legitimate authority (ibid: 52-53; 54).

One leader who effectively claimed the power of the invisible as among his marks of sovereignty was Togo's Gnassingbe Eyadema. Eyadema claimed powers of witchcraft himself and invoked the friendship and patronage of powerful deities (Piot 2010). Playing with visibility and mastering the invisible world reflects another mark of un-centralizing sovereignty, namely flexibility. (Though both invisibility and flexibility might serve to further centralizing projects, they remain in important ways un-centralizing forces because they preserve personalized, informally networked structures rather than institutionalized ones.)

1.3.1.8 Flexibility

Flexibility is the ability to qualify oneself for a range of opportunities, whether solo or collaborative, by interpreting meaning in a loose way. The importance of skilled playing with meaning has emerged from studies of conflict in Africa. A growing literature on conflict in Africa, such as the works of Achille Mbembe, Mariane C. Ferme, Danny Hoffman, and Janet Roitman, shares several observations. First, the authors acknowledge the pervasiveness of the instability that characterizes these settings, going beyond the battlefield and into various aspects of daily life. Second, they show how this instability disrupts the spatial and temporal rootedness that static categories, such as "soldier," "rebel," or any number of ethnic classifications, assume. Finally, their work is an effort to understand the ways in which people respond to that pervasive instability — how they render it productive to further their lives and shape logics of survival, or what

Stephen J. Collier and Andrew Lakoff have termed “regimes of living” (2005), moral economies for a denationalized world. Flexibility as a mark of sovereignty consists of capacity to position meaning within a malleable political zone, or what Mbembe has called “the power of the false.”

The experience of radical uncertainty is at the heart of contemporary processes of identity formation in the continent. In fact, in Africa today, life may suddenly take unbearable turns (war, extreme inflation, pandemics, etc.)...Each time, reality is erased, recreated, and duplicated. It is this power of proliferation (and its ability to obliterate notions of truth and falsehood, of the real and the unreal, of the visible and the occult) that characterizes contemporary African experience, which is at least original, if not unique (2002b: 639–640).

The kind of flexibility denoted by the power of the false is a mark of sovereignty because it entails a capability to self-style depending not on some kind of essence of identity but based on the strategic representation of qualifications. For instance, one player in Central Africa’s conflicts for the past twenty years uses at least three names (Abdulaye Miskine, Brahim Moustapha, Martin Koumta Madji²⁰) and two nationalities (Chadian and Central African) interchangeably, depending on the situation. Flexibility means making the proliferation of un-fixed meanings productive toward the end of profitably governing oneself and others.

In elaborating a typology of marks of sovereignty, it becomes apparent how these different capabilities are often tightly interwoven, to the extent that it becomes problematic to consider them separately. What from one perspective appears as protection from another could appear as extraction. But this does not render the project

20. Each of these names has multiple spellings as well. These are the most common, working from English.

of developing a typology useless. Intertwined though they are, it still might be possible to identify which sovereign capability is most salient in establishing and maintaining authority over people, places and things in particular locales. To do so, one must pay particular attention to two sets of processes: the actions and practices that constitute governing relationships; and the justifications people use to explain their authorities to different audiences.

1.3.2 Chapter overview

More obviously than in most other settings, no undisputed sovereign rules over northeastern CAR. With few people and a vast terrain, with the riches in the form of animals and plants, it has long been used and conceived of as a reservoir of resources. Toward that end, since the second half of the nineteenth century (as long as the region has been integrated into global markets), extraction, jurisdiction, violent coercion, and diplomacy have all been central to the sovereign capabilities exercised in the zone. At the same time, perhaps even more non-centralizing capabilities have cut through those centralizing tendencies and ensured that politics in the area remains personalized, with negotiation and confrontation key structuring mechanisms. In all these processes, geographic factors are key producers of both opportunities and constraints. These fall into two main themes: visibility and mobility. Particular abilities to play with visibility and/or to hide arise from the region's remoteness. The *idea* of the state (as differentiated from the institutions of the state) has become an important reference point because the seemingly unassailable normative legitimacy that it enjoys in the system of international

organizations lends it a capacity to both reveal and conceal as needed. In such a difficult-to-access terrain, information does not circulate in open flows. People and goods, too, are not flowingly mobile here. But constrained and constraining mobility can also create opportunities, as, for instance, occurs on roadblocks.

The second chapter, “Historical Geography: Mapping the Space,” investigates the region’s history to show how impulses toward centralization and non-centralization coexist in this zone, sometimes cooperating, sometimes coming into conflict; sometimes abusing confidences and sometimes creating them. It argues that the area is best understood as a “buffer zone” between defined polities. It is characterized by ties to multiple centers and use as a reservoir of resources by raiders from throughout the region. This chapter focuses on the immense changes wrought by this region’s incorporation into the trans-Saharan slave trade and French colonialism.

In the third chapter, “The State of the Buffer Zone: Non-centralization and Brokered/Vicarious Autonomy Amid Dreams of Welfare,” I draw this history into the present and answer the question, “What *is* the state in CAR?” However, my purpose in the chapter is not to write an ethnography of the state. Instead, I try to delve into a micro-level analysis of political and social organization to explore what it is like to live in a place where negotiation and confrontation, not rules, determine outcomes. Throughout, I seek to show the ways that “the state,” as an ideal type, plays into such a non-centralized state of affairs.

Chapter four, “Capabilities of Dispossession: Road Blockers and Road Cutters,” consists of three sections. In the first section, I discuss roadblocks and travelers’ strategies and tactics for successfully navigating them—that is, for getting through with some of their sources of profit intact. This section draws out the extent to which these encounters are contingent and situationally determined. In the second section, I turn to another practice with deep historical roots in the region: road robbery. I bring road cutting into the discussion to show the shared origins and shared effects of different modes of dispossession. However, roadblocking and road cutting have come to offer different opportunities for recognition in the region and beyond, which the third section shows through discussion of rebels’ decision to take on roadblocks.

Chapter five, “Sovereign Capabilities and the Limits of the State: The Case of Militarized Anti-Poaching,” seeks to describe the sovereign capabilities exercised by anti-poaching militiamen and their opponents to show the ways that centralizing modes of power and justifications collide with non-centralizing forces to create hybrid, contingent political configurations that never build toward the unitary, totalizing authority that political theory suggests should eventually result. The anti-poachers’ sovereign capabilities include the use of force and a claim to the right to manage extraction. But their simultaneous visibility (being a clear threat to their opponents) and invisibility (never having their violence subjected to democratic scrutiny or oversight) are the true foundation of their power. The nature of their power is apparent in the way

that capabilities are claimed through playing confrontation and negotiation off each other, a theme that emerges here.

The two final chapters both consider the rebellions that have sprung up in the buffer zone in recent years. Chapter six, “The Visibility of Rebellion,” begins by showing that the rebels took up arms to “shock” the government into caring for them. This care remains elusive. Rebellion has resulted not in a new level of care by an all-powerful, unitary form of rule, but in new responsibilities, and new capabilities, for the rebels themselves. For instance, the rebel groups have taken over witchcraft adjudication processes. These shifts have provided new opportunities for profit. Rebellion has become a form of work, with work defined, as before, as labor that brings remuneration. Whereas others have emphasized the need to see armed men’s violence itself as a form of labor (Hoffman 2011), I found that the experiences of armed men in the buffer zone are heavy on waiting and boredom rather than violence. Fighters are frustrated. On one hand, they have new authorities, and a new claim to a status as a worker. But on the other, that claim has not led to the outcomes they desired, and they still feel trapped in a highly marginal position, ignored and abandoned. Though rebellion transforms social relations and responsibilities, its liberation potential thus emerges as fleeting and ephemeral. Chapter seven, “Waiting for the State: Disarmament, Circulation, and the Deferral of Accountability,” uses the example of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) to lay out the shortcomings of the (state-based) post-conflict toolkit. Steadfast faith in the state as a form, despite so much evidence that a traditionally

formed state is not a likely outcome anytime soon, blinds aid-givers to the ways that this helps displace accountability. Inequalities in circulation emerge as particularly important to the displacement of accountability.

This dissertation aims to show that places where the state has only an extremely minimal institutional presence are not necessarily places of resistance to the state. Here, people invoke the form of the state as a reference point to create opportunities to pursue their own personalized projects. The buffer zone shows that when contingency dominates, cunning must be brought to every interaction, and yet cunning offers no guarantee of success. The buffer zone also shows that the increasing centralization that many pundits of globalization—to say nothing of social/political theory itself—have deemed inevitable is in fact but one of a range of possible hybrid outcomes.²¹ The area thus encourages a revision of the usual teleologies of political development. More specifically, northeastern CAR, one of the places anthropologists used to refer to as “stateless,” suggests a re-thinking of the components of sovereignty to include not just those sovereign capabilities directed toward state-building, such as jurisdiction, but also those sovereign capabilities that foster non-centralized modes of rule. With this observation, I ask: where else might these non-centralizing dynamics be present, but unrecognized?

21. To take just one example, Olson argued that state-building occurs when “roving bandits” become “stationary bandits.” Living among their potential targets, they must modulate their predatory tactics and develop protective institutions (2000). Roadblockers, though, represent a category Olson did not foresee: stationary bandits preying on mobile populations.

1.4 *Why sovereignty?*

The shift I advocate and illustrate toward marks of sovereignty and away from ideal-type sovereignty raises an obvious question: why retain the idea of sovereignty at all when arguing against the totalizing visions of political power and belonging that it has so often represented? A critic might see this move as unhelpfully muddling the discussion.²² Specifically, I must convince skeptics that sovereignty (or marks of sovereignty) is doing is doing important conceptual work, once it is described as configurations of capabilities, rather than as an all-powerful decider.

One reason for retaining sovereignty as an organizing category is political. There is a rich anthropological tradition of studying sovereignty outside the state. By portraying what initially appears as “African difference,” I hope to show that the opposite is the case: that this apparent outlier that does not adhere to Western political science encourages re-evaluation of the ways in which a more flexible, relational, and capability-based conception of sovereignty more aptly describes the governance we see around the world today. Perhaps it even offers a vision of the projects of rule and collaborations of the future (Hecht and Simone 1994; Ferguson 2006; Hoffman 2007). My

22. Bartelson, for one, criticizes efforts to discuss how sovereignty might be divisible by arguing that this move makes “sovereignty little more than a shorthand term whose meaning is far removed from the linguistic conventions” that are more often employed (2006: 467). He argues that we must tackle sovereignty as a concept, and not simply as an “attribute of individual entities” (472). In emphasizing the concept, he comes close to suggesting that we should study the ideal type rather than its empirical manifestations. This approach ignores the fact that conceptions of sovereignty may be quite diverse. The faith that Euro-Americans place in the political-theological myth of unitary sovereignty is not everywhere expressed as such. Think, for instance, of the large number of Central Africans who ask, “What has sovereignty ever done for us? We want the US to come in and run our country.”

project here, then, seeks to contribute to the vernacularization of European/American politics.

Many scholars (Das and Poole 2004; Das 2006; Roitman 2001, 2005) have preferred “state” to “sovereignty” as the category organizing their discussion of politics. And clearly, “the state” —imagined as sets of disparate projects, aspirations, people, and institutions, and, above all, as an idea—is a player in my analysis as well. But relying analytically on “the state” will not work in this case, because of the extent to which this category has come to be associated with particular normative content. The neoliberal moment in aid and international institutions has passed. Certainly, tenets of neoliberal theory have been rolled into ongoing efforts, now part of the received wisdom about how the world works rather than active projects of forcing these ideas onto people. But now, especially post-9/11, we are in a “state-building” moment. These projects all work from an assumption that there exist in the world both “fragile/failing/failed/collapsed” states and also successful ones, in which ideals of rational-bureaucratic efficiency and monopolies on violence have been attained. CAR, which the 2012 Failed States Index labeled the 9th most failed state in the world, and whose capital, Bangui, houses various international agencies geared toward “state-building” or its corollary, “peace-building,” is one of the main sites of the application of this analytical logic. Given this hegemonic normativity surrounding the state, and given that I hope to make this dissertation intelligible to the “state-builders” and other diplomats, aid workers, and officials, I am forced to communicate using words my readers understand. “Sovereignty” —or more

specifically, “marks of sovereignty” —is a jargon I need to do my analysis, for it creates a space beside more popularly-used terms that allows us to pull apart the capabilities and projects that comprise them.²³

Another problem with the term “state” bears calling out here. The normative bias associated with the state assumes that politics always evolves toward greater centralization. Like Scott (2010), I seek to question that bias and recuperate some aspects of the recognition that society might have decentralizing tendencies that work “against the state” (Clastres 1979). As Deleuze and Guattari wrote, there exist at least two polar modes of expressing political power, which they label “State” and “war machine.”

Though I find these terms tend to instantiate an ideal-type frame (another critique: if *the* war machine is not *a* war machine, why call it one?), they nevertheless remind us that there exist forces oriented toward centralization and hierarchy (State), and there also exist tendencies oriented toward nomadism and *esprit de corps*, which in their rendering sounds like Durkheim’s mechanical solidarity²⁴ (war machine, so to speak). Of course, like any ideal types, these forms never exist as pure instantiations, but are rather always partial. Tracking marks of sovereignty, while sidelining “the state,” helps me show both those processes tending toward “war machine” modes of non-centralization and those tending toward “State” modes of centralization, which together create configurations of sovereign power. In the case of northeastern CAR especially, where collective,

23. Credit for this idea is due to William O’Barr, who suggested it during a seminar in October 2008.

24. Deleuze and Guattari prefer the term “*esprit de corps*,” which they draw from a translation of the concept of *asabiyya*, as described in Ibn Khaldun’s text on Bedouin life.

centralizing projects have had little purchase, refusing to render my description and analysis in terms of “state-building” seems an important corrective to those arguments that take these processes as global inevitabilities.²⁵

Finally, however remotely they may live, the people in northeastern CAR are fully part of the modern world (Piot 1999), and their position must enter discussions of the constitution of the globe today. Understanding their situation by considering sovereignty (unitarily conceived) or the state (unitarily conceived) leaves no option but to label the region simply a failure. That label suggests a failure of analysis on the part of its user. Looking instead at marks of sovereignty shows exactly how the social processes there work. It fosters an appreciation of vernacular politics, and might thereby illuminate ways to improve people’s lives (de Waal 2009). I am inspired by an impassioned entreaty from an Ivoirian colleague, Henri-Michel Yere. Speaking of French willingness to fight peaceful protesters in the Ivory Coast, he argued that the reigning language of political science and international relations cannot make the imbrications of the contemporary moment visible, and that this hinders the conception of ways forward. “Neo-colonialism” is imprecise and often more ideologically than analytically oriented. My project here attempts to indicate a more fruitful way to capture the dynamics of relationships in political projects by following marks of sovereignty, how they change through time, and how/whose perspective determines the legitimacy of these authorities.

25. Hardt and Negri (2001) seem to fall into this line of reasoning in writing that sovereignty is always “expanding” in empire.

1.5 Conclusion

Perhaps more than other social and human sciences, anthropology is bound to politics, to the extent that separating the two becomes difficult. Evans-Pritchard may not have considered his presentation of Nuer sovereignty political, but in contradicting the reigning perspective that labeled such “primitive” or “stateless” societies backward and inferior, his thoroughly empirical, analytical assessment helped, in both direct and indirect ways, to broaden the applicability of toleration and mutual respect on a global scale, which in turn engendered sweeping political effects. Evans-Pritchard showed that life outside the state is not “nasty, brutish and short,” to return to Hobbes’s vision of the awful life beyond the Leviathan’s awesome protection. In his work on politics as well as his work on witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard welcomed the philosophers. That tradition of interdisciplinary dialogue has become more difficult as our respective vocabularies have become more specialized, and as anthropology has become interested in the politics of knowledge and representation. I see my return to a terrain near Evans-Pritchard’s as an opportunity to re-open these discussions. The abandonment that people living here feel at the hands of an indifferent world, the way they make claims on a state that is more an imagined utopia than institutional presence, and the violence that often characterizes dispute resolution suggest that Hobbes’s rendering was not wholly off the mark. This observation is no excuse for pessimism, but an entreaty to make forms of solidarity, and how to strengthen them, an object of inquiry. (In this respect, Hardt and Negri’s (2005)

effort to characterize the “multitude” appears a brave step into uncharted territory, if, to borrow one critic’s assessment, a bit “hasty and starry-eyed” (Chatterjee 2004: 103).)

Such a project must start with recognition of the capabilities already exercised:

In thousands of small ways, African societies “play” with visibility—fronting masks when nothing is hidden; deploying stark realities as covers for something more complex or uncertain.... Religious convictions, ethnic identifications, distinct world views are very real—allegiances are not merely cynical convenience. Muslims take Islamic law seriously even when they are sharing alcoholic drinks with heathen Dinka hustlers in a car junkyard that serves as a makeshift bar. One set of convictions do not preclude other, seemingly, contradictory affiliations from taking place. Every smuggling operation in these shantytowns contains individuals from different national, religious and ethnic backgrounds who bring to the operation different external alliances, resources, contacts, and access to competing interests at other levels.... The efficacy of such modes of social organization do not radically alter the highly precarious conditions in which they operate. Communities are increasingly collections of disparate practices and points of view—a bricolage effect that has immediate strategic value but in the long run, does not address the need for coherence or the construction of legitimate authority (Hecht and Simone 1994: 52-54).

Playing with visibility; surviving, and sometimes thriving, in a context marked by generalized precariousness—these factors and practices, as well as the fact of geographic remoteness, indelibly color the marks of sovereignty exercised in a place like northeastern CAR. This dissertation will unearth opportunities amid the constraints, and familiarity amid the bizarre.

2. Mapping the space: An historical geography

2.1 Introduction

Step into any UN field office, and you will find a room decorated with maps. For international administrators, they are an essential tool for understanding terrain. Sometimes, too, they cause frustration, such as when local leaders—who know the terrain well—have trouble translating that knowledge into particular spots, routes, and landmarks on these pieces of paper. Maps have become a basis for new claims on representation and autonomy: the *Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace* (CPJP),¹ the latest armed group to declare itself a rebellion in CAR, stated its grievances in terms of mapping. Its base of operations, Sikkikede, is the largest town in its prefecture, with about 20,000 residents (Birao, the prefectural capital, is the second-largest town, at about 10,000). And yet Sikkikede appeared on no map of the region until the CPJP took its rebellious stand and attracted humanitarian attention. To the CPJP leadership, the failure of leaders in the capital to make their plight visible is emblematic of the government's wrongful disregard for and neglect of the population's welfare. Though the CAR government has responded only lackadaisically to the group—which it long persisted in describing as criminal—Sikkikede at least now appears on all the UN maps.

Mapping, as a metaphor and as a practice, has long been part of centralizing projects of rule.² In seventeenth-century China, the euphemism for incorporation into

1. For further discussion of the various rebellions in CAR, see chapters six and seven.

2. Tellingly, as late as less than a decade before the French officially renounced their colonial endeavors in *Afrique Equatoriale Française* (French Equatorial Africa, AEF), the administrator of Oubangui-

the state was “to enter the map” (Scott 2009: 78). On the surface, the CPJP’s demand is a straightforward request for incorporation into a centralized polity. Two observations just below the surface of that rhetoric bear drawing forth, however. First, what are we to make of the fact that the Central African government—a “state” that is therefore assumed to be striving for territorial integration—has never evinced much interest in territorial integration? In addition to not appearing on any maps, Sikkikede had not seen a single government functionary, whether based there or just passing through, in the decade prior to the CPJP’s emergence. And second, what are we to make of a “rebel” group that simultaneously demands representation on the map, while itself continually enjoying the invisibility that its isolated location affords, for instance by taking credit for attacks by armed gangs that have no relationship with the CPJP?

In this chapter, I argue that the ambivalence of the government in Bangui toward claiming control over its hinterlands and the way people profiting in the hinterlands, such as armed groups, play with visibility can be understood when considered in relation to the area’s history. The trajectories rulers in present-day northeastern CAR from the nineteenth century onward have embarked on reflect a productive tension between centralizing and non-centralizing impulses. That is, many of the various actors governing here demonstrate and exercise sovereign authorities by playing with the forms of centralization, and especially the rituals and form of the state, while also

Chari (as CAR was then known) complained that he still lacked a good map of the colony. Moreover, the map he had was “partially false,” dotted with non-existent rivers and villages. Regional maps, sometimes more accurate, were also more *ad hoc*—usually just hand-drawn sketches (Brégeon 1998: 104).

enacting mobile, personal capabilities that undermine the creation of any unitary sovereign power.

To appreciate how this state of affairs came to be, it is useful to consider the particular position of this remote space. Achille Mbembe has observed that historically in Africa “Vast areas might lie between distinct polities, veritable buffer zones not subject to direct control, exclusive domination, or close supervision” (2000a: 263).³ Though written as a general descriptor, these remarks seem tailored to the situation of the northeastern reaches of CAR. The area’s forested savannas extend up toward Chad and Sudan, with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to the south. The whole area of CAR measures about the size of Texas, and the vast, sparsely-populated east consumes most of that. In the rainy season, many towns and villages become marsh- and lake-surrounded islands. A geographer in 1985 suggested that contemporary map-makers plumb the accounts of the European explorers who first came here at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth,⁴ for many of their routes have never been retraced, or at least, if they have been retraced, these movements have not been recorded (Boulvert 1985: 300, 312). Then as now, the area represents the “last blank

3. Hubbell, in describing nineteenth-century Souroudougou, gives another description of the characteristics of a buffer zone: “The connections between village communities in Souroudougou and centralized polities such as Bandiagara, Barani and Ouahigouya were oftentimes nebulous and fluid, with spheres of influence extending into and receding from Souroudougou on the basis of volatile local conditions. Depicting such zones of influence on a map of Souroudougou would not fit the typical schematic of solid swaths of shaded area representing the control of one power or another area representing the control of one or another power, but would rather appear more as an irregular pattern of contacts and allies that constituted oftentimes tenuous political, commercial, and informational networks (2001: 35).

4. Prior to these expeditions, European scientists were convinced that these lands contained desert and/or homo caudatus—humans with tails) (Boulvert 1985: 312).

spot on the map of Africa” (Boulvert 1985). According to *National Geographic*, CAR has the least light pollution in the world (Klinkenborg 2008). In these areas, mail has not been delivered since at least the mid-1970s.

But the region’s governors have rendered that isolation productive. Webs of relationships, whose terms are continually being brokered and broken, connect this space to multiple nodes of power within the terrain and beyond. This interaction enables both projects of profitable rule and fantasies of control, while affording an atomized autonomy that does not engender a centralized polity. In this buffer zone, politics is largely about access to profitable goods. Access to goods⁵ is itself bound up in ability to play with visibility and invisibility, and the ability to circulate. The authorities that qualify a person or institution as bearing sovereign capabilities are also bound up in these processes. The bush, as a site of invisibility, mobility, and goods *par excellence*, is the main site for the exercise of sovereign capabilities in the buffer zone. Sovereign authorities are exercised in the village or town as well, but the kind of dispersed surveillance that exists in towns (which is not unified in a way that would give rise to Foucauldian discipline or control, but which nevertheless has a leveling effect by laying bare people’s lives and things for all to “see”⁶) constrains politics, with politics understood as primarily having to do with access to profitable resources, as outlined

5. In conservation or environmentally-focused accounts, the valuable products coming from wild lands are usually termed “resources.” I use “goods” instead because the term resource tends to carry with it an etymology that is not shared here (specifically, scarcity as a guiding principle) and to emphasize the central role of these products economically.

6. Witchcraft accusations are a prime example of how leveling processes can work. See Geschiere (1997).

above. In focusing on the politics of resource access, I am reflecting the local understanding of politics.⁷ Much recent anthropological work questions the analytical boundaries erected around various domains of life, but the category of “politics” remains a distinct sphere in the buffer zone (even though it does not encompass all that is political). It is a touchy subject and connotes crookedness, the need to seize opportunities that arise, and the need for personal caution and attention to the demands and expectations of one’s family. Because of these sensitivities, I never explained my research as political. Had I done so, few would have responded with more than platitudes. Instead, I said I was trying to understand “the management of space,” an accurate description that, being territory- rather than profit-focused, raised far fewer hackles.

As the local focus of politics suggests, qualifying oneself with sovereign capabilities in the buffer zone is a process marked by confrontation and negotiation. Whereas Grotius and, two centuries later, Henry Maine, saw sovereignty as divisible into a set of functions of governance associated with state-building that could be divided between different actors like so many pieces of a cake,⁸ the buffer zone suggests that marks of sovereignty are inherently contested, messy, and piecemeal. Since the mid-

7. I am also following Chauveau, Le Pape and Olivier de Sardan, who define politics as “ ‘competition for power and access to scarce strategic resources,’ which might be either living resources or symbolic resources, the mobilization of which determines access to material resources” (my translation). (2001: 151). By way of explanation, the authors remind readers of a popular expression in Africa: “Chacun fait sa politique” (151). Bayart (2003) defines politics similarly in noting that the struggle for power is a struggle for wealth (89).

8. For a discussion of Grotius’s and Maine’s related understanding of sovereignty, see chapter one. See also Keene (2002).

nineteenth century, when this area became a raiding outpost for the trans-Saharan slave trade, extraction and jurisdiction have been important ways of marking sovereignty. Violent coercion, in the form of the “law of weapons distribution” (“the quality of power relations that develops whenever political disagreement can be settled by recourse to the force of arms” [Mbembe 2006: 323]), has accompanied and facilitated these capabilities. Sultan Sanusi, the foremost of the early raiders, sought to control the means of production and exchange. At the time, control meant violent extraction. The (minimal) French colonial presence imparted the importance of regulation of people’s mobility (jurisdiction) as a sovereign quality. The rebel groups that have arisen in recent years enact these sovereign capabilities, too, but in invoking humanitarian tenets, they attempt to add protection to the sovereign capabilities exercised here. In theory, all these capabilities are oriented toward centralization: monopolization of the legitimate means of force *à la* Weber, fixing populations in visible ways, *à la* Scott.

But these putatively centralizing marks of sovereignty are only one part of the picture. In the buffer zone, ownership or control of territory has never been as important as control of the means of production and exchange, which themselves are rooted in the goods available in open spaces.⁹ In this context, property is subject to alienation, and accumulation of goods depends on an ability to circulate, powers to make visible or invisible, and a willingness to be flexible in representing oneself and others. Making

9. In that territory is only an ancillary concern in the larger problem of governing people and things, the buffer zone has always been modern, or perhaps post-modern, or even the future: “In [the modern exercise of power], you will notice that the definition of government in no way refers to territory: one governs things” (Foucault in Watts 2004a: 57).

visible or invisible has both an occult/religious dimension (the world of unknowable spiritual power) and a prosaic dimension (ease of hiding in the bush), and both are preferentially at play in the buffer zone. Here, the proliferation of norms (Chavreau, Le Pape and Olivier de Sardan 2001; Mbembe 2006: 311), together with the geography of remoteness, contribute to making far-flung relationships (loose alliances) a way to achieve greater autonomy. Distant relationships allow their terms to be more easily ignored or contravened without a break in the relationship. Qualifying oneself with the sovereign capabilities of mobility, invisibility, and/or flexibility creates non-centralized modes of political power. And integrated, centralized institutions that swallow up a territory and place it under the control of a capital sovereign do not arise. Hecht and Simone quote a Sudanese adage: “Sometimes it is better to play the fool...for once one is committed to pursue a specific plan, he or she becomes blind to the fact that they may really be going nowhere” (Hecht and Simone 1994: 35). Movement, invisibility, and flexibility are necessary to “get somewhere,” both physically and materially.

Even Hobbes—champion of champions of the monopolizing, centralizing state—recognized that the function the social contract depends on deceptive practices by its members. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes borrows the Biblical figure of the Foole to explore questions related to the transgression of laws and contracts (see especially chapter fifteen). In Hobbes’s philosophy, self-interest pulls humans through their earthly lives. Though maintaining a harmonious social order depends upon keeping “covenants,” the Foole notices that from time to time the terms of these agreements become unfavorable.

Hobbes, whose Foole argument is nuanced, first denies that the Foole ever has reason to break his covenants, for to renege flagrantly would have hurt both him and society as a whole, and thus does not actually serve his self-interest except in the short-term (hence the name “Foole”). But Hobbes then argues that in instances in which the Foole can easily hide his transgression, covenant-breaking is indeed in his self-interest (Hoekstra 1997). Hobbes, too, recognizes the importance of invisibility as a way people can guard sovereign capabilities within a social contract.¹⁰

2.2 Mapping this space

In this chapter, I will use the metaphor and practice of mapping to show how impulses toward centralization and non-centralization coexist in the buffer zone, sometimes cooperating, sometimes coming into conflict, sometimes abusing confidences, and sometimes creating them. I will lay out both the changes and continuities in how sovereign capabilities have been exercised in the buffer zone. I will do so partly by connecting these processes to territorial characteristics. This line of research follows the recent “spatial turn” in anthropology and beyond, the better to reflect the irrelevance of territory (access to profitable goods is a much more important concern) and its relevance (the isolation of this space enables these projects). Whereas a time-oriented framework (that is, the idea that the world is composed of places more and less advanced on an evolutionary spectrum) guided the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernization projects, the twenty-first seems so far to have taken space as an object of

10. Hoekstra’s interpretation of the Foole convincingly breaks with much of the previous scholarship on the figure.

concern.¹¹ Scholars have critiqued punditry about the “flat world” of globalization by showing how, rather than a necessary march toward global integration, processes of integration and disintegration are manifold and often pull in opposite directions. By some measures the world was more integrated 100 years ago than today (Cooper 2001). But these cautionary critiques notwithstanding, the current moment has seen an especial interest in the speed with which information, people, and things travel (Appadurai 2006).

Mapping metaphors are equally important. Tsing (2005) writes of “roads” that structure flows of knowledge, people, and products; Sassen considers the “channels” through which transfers and exchanges of all kinds occur (Sassen 2006). Santos, drawing on Geertz’s assertion that law is “a way of imagining the real” (1987: 286), has argued that law operates similarly to a map, which itself is a way of imagining a real, physical landscape that is complicated and changing. Maps guide us to the quickest, easiest, or most scenic route, just like legal rules and regulations guide us to the most reasonable, harmonious, or safe course of action. State laws are like main roads drawn on cartographers’ maps, and customary laws are like mental maps of trails or through the bush. In both cases, they orient the routes social relations most often meander along, even though they do not necessarily determine them. Any number of maps might represent a given place, each in a related but particular way, depending on what they seek to make visible and at what scale. Santos argues that this proliferation of ways of

11. See for example Perelman 1971; Santos, Boaventura de Sousa 1987; Tsing 2000.

imagining corresponds with “interlegality,” or the simultaneous operation of multiple legal levels at once.

These spatial and mapping metaphors are analytically rich. Thinking of maps permits appreciation of the hierarchies of different kinds of knowledge about landscapes that arise as a function of their degree of usefulness to projects of governance and profit (Tsing 2005; Sassen 2006). The avenues and byways created by the metaphorical map of law serve as signposts of unexpected claims on representation, belonging and community. For instance, Hoffman writes of a woman in Sierra Leone/Liberia who used refugee status to claim a kind of biopolitical citizenship furnished by the international community (Hoffman 2004). Maurer (2005) describes how legal/fiscal projects enable new forms of solidarity, even though all realize that these constructions are part of larger financial systems that, on a superficial level, render their activities a game. And Rajagopal (2003) argues that activists invoke multiple legal levels and registers to make claims to environmental rights—in effect, they embark on every kind of road available to them to reach their hoped-for destination.

But the map metaphor has limits.¹² A map is a static, two-dimensional representation that relies on literacy and its associated, particular modes of understanding and using space. As Scott (2009) has recently pointed out, maps distort. They do not capture the varying degree of control a state government has over different areas, they often do not represent topography, and they create the impression that

12. Thanks to Orin Starn for posing the challenging question of the limits of map metaphors during my oral examinations. As I hope the analysis here makes clear, the question has stayed with me.

travel-time is uniform across all distances, which they measure in kilometers or miles as opposed to vernacular forms of measurement (e.g., walking hours). In other words, the process of mapping a terrain shapes, and even limits and distorts, the way it is understood.¹³

Mapping has become a favored technique in the world of development research and a standard part of the Participatory Rural Appraisal “toolkit” of rapid social research techniques (Chambers 2004). As Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan explain,

The utilization of these tools is supposed to promote the “participation” of the “population” in the conception and evaluation of development projects. But it could also be shown that these “tools” are far from being a purely neutral way of eliciting information from the “real world” about its nature. Already implicitly, and prior to their utilization, they carry statements on the nature of the social configurations in regard to which they are to be employed (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 1997b: 239).

Perhaps for this reason, participatory mapping efforts in northeastern CAR have failed (though they have produced other effects and revealed other kinds of information).

For instance, Pierre-Armand Roulet, trained as a geographer and a consultant to ECOFAC, a European Union-funded conservation project operating in northeastern CAR, set out to map area residents’ conceptions of their communities’ boundaries. The project’s managers figured that taking local wisdom as a starting point would help them design a more-participatory system of variegated access zones for governing the space

13. Consider Hubbell’s description of Souroudougou, an African buffer zone similar to the one I describe here: “The connections between village communities in Souroudougou and centralized polities such as Bandiagara, Barani and Ouahigouya were oftentimes nebulous and fluid, with spheres of influence extending into and receding from Souroudougou on the basis of volatile local conditions. Depicting such zones of influence on a map of Souroudougou would not fit the typical schematic of solid swaths of shaded area representing the control of one or another power, but would rather appear more as an irregular pattern of contacts and allies that constituted oftentimes tenuous political, commercial and informational networks” (2001: 35).

and the resources in it. The team borrowed a military-khaki Land Cruiser and began the journey from village to village. At each stop, they called for the village elders. Children were dispatched to round up the village's chairs. After pleasantries, the ECOFAC team pulled out a large, red, road dusty pad of paper and a few stubby-tipped markers. A translator explained that they should draw their homes and the borders of their control. The elders pointed out where houses and the fields beyond should go, but they could ink in no lines of demarcation (Roulet 2010). Asking his questions as many different ways as he could, Roulet still uncovered no dividing lines between communities, and no group-based rules of access to space or goods.¹⁴ Instead, people described how their cluster of houses and fields gave onto open space beyond, with other clusters of houses and fields breaking up the reaches of open space.¹⁵ Map-line boundaries imply ownership—whether individual or corporate—of carved-up spaces, but in the buffer zone, where human settlements are engulfed by, bush, ownership of land is a subordinate concern.

The geography of remoteness is vital to the story of the passing of time here (people, goods, and ideas circulate with difficulty, and much can here be hidden). But space in and of itself, in its abundance, is not a node of local interest and concern. The two levels of importance accorded to space here are similar to my own ambivalence as

14. As Mamdani (1996) observed in the case of “customary” law, local “tradition” did not suit the would-be governors’ needs.

15. In Sango, home/village is *kodoro*, fields are *yaka*, and the bush/hunting space beyond is *ngonda*. Further-away, more-difficult to reach bush is *benyama*, also the word for desert, or other kinds of inhospitable, hard-to-traverse terrains.

an anthropologist here. When I told people I was conducting field research in northeastern CAR, they often reacted with surprise and sometimes (in the case of aid workers in Bangui) eagerness to hear my results. The aid workers responded with some variation on, “That’s like a blank spot on the map! I hope you will be able to explain to us what’s going on there.”¹⁶ My research shares with the projects of European explorers and early anthropologists a desire to open the area up to globally- (or at least anthropologically-) circulating knowledge. I, too, seek to map “unmapped” terrain; I, too, am attempting to illuminate dynamics with the permanent visibility and authority of writing. An example illustrates my ambivalence. In 1876-77, a doctor named Potagos was the first European to recount treks in eastern CAR. He detailed the habits of the “Yioulou” (usually spelled Youlou or Yulu) and the “Kreki” (usually spelled Kreich) peoples he encountered. Historians now believe that his accounts are false (the doctor never went to Central Africa) and one of the best sources of pre-colonial information about the area (Boulvert 1985: 301). It would seem a contradiction to label an account both made up and a good source of information, but if the “how” of his story was fabricated, the “what” nevertheless imparted useful information. Sometimes it seems a mixture of true and false is the best one can expect in this region.

16. In the titular phrasing of a Belgian geographer in 1885, this area is “the last big blank space on the map of Africa” (“Le dernier grand blanc de la carte de l’Afrique”) (Boulvert 1985: 304).

I do not need to belabor the ethnographer's discomfort with the representational inequities of writing, laid down with such searing melancholy by Claude Lévi-Strauss.¹⁷ In fact, most of the people I studied in CAR urged me to be their spokesperson. Armed group members in Kaga Bandoro lamented their situation and implored me to "Tell your ambassador! Tell the other ambassadors! Give the State our message!" I tried to the honor such requests, figuring it was a service I, the mobile globalite, could offer in exchange for their opinions. My own mapping of this history is not a panopticon-style "high modern" state-led project of spatial visibility (Scott 1998), but indicates the opportunities and constraints afforded by geography, how these factors have changed through time, and, perhaps most importantly, how people have played with and manipulated mapping projects themselves.¹⁸ For its shortcomings, the map can also remind that human-made knowledge of the world is always partial, and political, and as such can guard against hubris. I write this chapter in this spirit.

2.3 Not the next frontier?

Influential scholarship of politics in Africa has emphasized the importance of the frontier to the creation, expansion, and maintenance of African states. Kopytoff (1987) led this charge. He sought to delineate the particular mode of state-making in Africa throughout history. If wars and protection rackets drove state-making in Europe (Tilly

17. In his most extreme phrasing: "If my hypothesis is correct, the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings" (1955: 354; my translation.)

18. Notable in this regard is the way in which though the institutions of the state have but minimal presence on the ground, the idea of the all-powerful, welfare-distributing state has become a powerful reference point invoked by diverse actors claiming and negotiating sovereign capabilities. For more on these idea, see chapter three.

1985), the frontier drove state projects in Africa. To make this argument, Kopytoff reworked Frederick Jackson Turner's theory of the frontier in American history.¹⁹ Whereas Turner saw the frontier as a site for production of new mores and modes of order, Kopytoff demonstrated how the "internal African frontier" might be a conservative force. In Africa, he argued, migrants sought new frontiers to re-create and impose the political orders of their origins. Far-flung locales became subsumed, until social cohesion came under too much strain and new "frontiersmen" struck out. This process was "social construction by immigrants in an area that to them represented an institutional vacuum" (255). In this way, "African metropolitan societies prefigured frontier ones as African frontier societies prefigured metropolitan ones" (16). The internal frontier and the center are locked in a dialectical relationship.

The creative and conservative internal frontier has informed many accounts of politics in rural Africa. For instance, Moran (2006) explicitly draws on Kopytoff's internal frontier in her study of Liberia. She shows how being "civilized" became a "thing" (in the Foucauldian sense of a bridge-concept that ties humans to their "customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking and so on" [Watts 2004a: 57]) that generated and maintained a hierarchical relationship between the country's urban and frontier zones. The contested process of defining who is and how to be civilized produced the polity as a unit. She argues that this entanglement renders meaningless

19. Cordell (1985) also refers to Turner in describing political developments in northeastern CAR.

any effort to consider city or hinterland separately, for it is through their relationship that they are constituted as the empirical objects that they are.

Kopytoff's internal African frontier, and the ways it has been taken up,²⁰ is a version of a broader genre in international political economy and beyond that takes center-periphery relationships as its starting point for understanding global processes. In the Chad Basin and beyond, many scholars have found the examination of different aspects of center-periphery dynamics a fruitful entry point to understanding the workings of politics. For instance, De Waal has explained the proliferation of militias and wars in Sudan's peripheral regions as not just a "cheap tool of counterinsurgency" but also among the main strategies of the central government for "governing the hinterlands" (2007: 7). Sudan has a "hyper-dominant but unstable political center" that "determines a particular pattern of center-periphery political bargaining that in turn helps to explain the pattern and persistence of violence in Sudan's provinces" (20). Similarly, Hardin emphasizes the importance of negotiating and approving concessions

20. Related to the study of the frontier, a number of scholars have recently taken up the idea of margins, which encompass boundaries both physical/geographical and theoretical. This approach to the ethnography of the state (Das and Poole 2004) has been particularly fruitful and has helped expose the modes of governmentality and changing patterns of rule that comprise the always-unfolding and never completed project of state-building. Das and Poole, too, refer to Turner's thesis as they consider three primary kinds of margins: spaces for those unsocialized into law; spaces of the illegibility of the state; spaces between bodies, law, and discipline. Upon appreciation of the ambiguities and struggles on the state's margins, it becomes impossible to consider the state as a totalizing entity. It emerges instead as an agglomeration of projects. Das and Poole explain how their work seeks to shift liberal theory of the state through reference to Weber. Whereas Weber saw the creation of boundaries as part of the process whereby the state legitimates itself through the pursuit and attainment of monopolies, Das and Poole instead see boundary-making as productive of a proliferation of projects of rule. I share Das and Poole's interest in the productivity of the margins. My terrain is a limiting case ("an instance marking one end of a continuum of different configurations that can be taken by a particular set of dynamics" [Rutherford 2003: 229]) of the state in general.

to the formation of political classes in *both* Bangui and the furthest reaches of southwestern CAR, though she also carefully unpacks the local-level micro-politics in these tropical forest concession zones (Hardin 2002). In Cameroon, Roitman (1998, 2001) describes how the proliferation of figures of regulatory authority—which to casual observers might appear the creation of a new kind of polity, a new sovereign—in fact have deep and close ties to military and other state officials in regional and national capitals.

As the above examples attest, the internal frontier and center-periphery models have yielded important insights into the various kinds of relationships that can tie together capital and hinterland. Mamdani (1996) re-imagined the center-periphery dynamic in relation to the history of indirect rule in Africa. He argued that European colonial officials went looking for a “customary law” that they could use as the basis of an “appropriate” system of governance for the natives. The colonists imagined that African tradition included undemocratic, chief-centered coercive polities, and, given this bias, that is what they found. In fact, complicated systems effectively checked leaders’ repressive tendencies, and these leaders did not necessarily have punitive capabilities. But this nuanced reality did not suit the colonizers’ needs, which were primarily for peons who could do the brutal work of civilizing. The colonizers thus promulgated their own opportunistic version of “customary” law, based on a system of chiefs endowed with “traditional” authorities. These leaders became, in Mamdani’s phrasing, “decentralized despots.” The repressive powers they drew from the colonial regime

dwarfed whatever more-accountable authority they had previously drawn organically from the people among whom they lived. The idea of decentralized despotism has been especially useful in terms of thinking about the ways that the injection of firepower and the social capital that accompanied it warped social relations and diverted accountability in Africa.

But the people and entities bearing marks of sovereignty in the buffer zone are not decentralized despots. For the buffer zone, though remote, is neither a frontier nor a periphery. That is, in important ways it is not internal to a polity (it is not the periphery of a center), nor the next place on the verge of getting swallowed by forces of centralization, but a geographic terrain unto itself. Its leaders are not conferred powers from the central government but arrogate and shape them themselves. The region is not outside of the organizing logic of state-based projects of rule and their spheres of power; the many villages in the northern part of CAR's territory that were attacked by the Chadian army can attest to that. And the fact of the area's having been left unto itself must be understood in relation to the centralizing projects that could/should have claimed it. But in northeastern CAR, the institutional footprint of the state has always been so light, and the territorial aspirations of nearby central governments so ambivalent, that the region should be considered as a space unto itself. Doing so draws out the inherently contested nature of the processes through which actors here qualify themselves as bearing marks of sovereignty. The heightened importance of capabilities of mobility, invisibility, and flexibility in the buffer zone means that a productive tension

is maintained between centralizing and non-centralizing tendencies, a tension that enables people to engage in seemingly contradictory projects simultaneously and results in a hybrid political configuration marked by personal profit, confrontation, negotiation, and unmet expectations.

At one time, during the final decades of the trans-Saharan slave trade's nineteenth-century apex, this area was the "periphery of a periphery" (Cordell 1985)—the site of furthest expansion of the religious, political, and economic norms of an empire (a potential internal frontier, in Kopytoff's sense). But a half-hearted colonial interlude interrupted the process of incorporation. The colonial period gave way to a cash-poor independence, presided over by southern rulers, for whom this land is foreign space that they mostly ignored. More than as a periphery or a frontier, this territory has been used and conceptualized as a reservoir of goods that are valuable to different actors in different ways. Because of this area's peculiar history of neglect by forces of state centralization, I center my analysis on the geographical phenomenon of the buffer zone itself and to make its relationship to a center/capital or multiple centers/capitals an object of investigation rather than an *a priori* assumption. I am informed by Benton's attention to the micro-politics of often hard-to-access legally "anomalous" zones in the dark corners of empires where a range of actors claim and contest sovereign capabilities (Benton 2010).

Whereas political theory has tended to see centralization as as inevitable as cell division, the politics of the buffer zone reflects a rhizome-like mode of expansion—

knotty, in various directions at once, like a ginger root. Any tendencies toward centralization in the buffer zone (for instance, the spread of Sango as a lingua franca) have been accompanied by tendencies toward atomization (for instance, mistrust of any who do not also speak the local dialect).²¹ This has created a situation neither wholly functional nor wholly dysfunctional, marked both by frequent conflict and unlikely collaborations. To understand how this situation might be sustainable, if not durable, consider Simone's observations on urban life in Johannesburg: "an experience of regularity capable of anchoring the livelihoods of residents and their transactions with one another is consolidated precisely because the outcomes of residents' reciprocal efforts are radically open, flexible and provisional" (2004a: 408)." This combination of regularity and provisionality is not solely an urban phenomenon. Too often, rural areas have been presented as regularized spaces poor in the innovations stemming from flexibility and mistrust. In describing how different actors have qualified themselves as bearing sovereign capabilities in the buffer zone, it is precisely this productivity that I seek to evoke.

2.4 Raiding comes to Central Africa

Most of the people living in northeastern CAR in the nineteenth century had recently migrated there from the north in hopes of finding a haven from the intensifying slave raiding to which they had been subjected. The people who came to settle in

21. For instance, the term *gagango* (literally, "person who has come [from elsewhere]") has taken heightened salience and is applied to all who live in a village other than that of their birth. Concerns over autochthony attach not to the level of the nation, but of the village.

northeastern CAR formed largely non-centralized communities governed by the relationships established through marriage, hunting and farming, and the changing rituals of village life. But these years brought profound changes to the area. New modes of resource creation and exchange tied to long-distance economic processes and the at once unifying and divisive power of Islam were transforming social relations. Raiding, as a mode of extraction and therefore also rule, entailed a cycle of conflict and innovation that continues to this day, as new ideas, new ways of learning, and new modes of wealth creation and dispossession took hold and evolved. Violence pushed these developments into new lands, and people migrated, fled, and resettled on a scale that, though difficult to measure precisely, has not been seen before or after, the presentist and alarmist biases of contemporary humanitarian activism notwithstanding (Cordell 2002).

The raiders' politics were in large measure determined by their goal of controlling the means of production and exchange, capabilities of extraction often attained through ability to exercise force (the law of weapons distribution). In this region, production encompassed both making bodies into slaves and the labor that those slaves carried out. Exchange encompassed both the flourishing trades in currencies and other valuables that washed over Central Africa during the late nineteenth century (Guyer 1995) and the sale of the slaves. Toward these ends, the would-be rulers and the would-be traders found themselves sometimes cooperating and sometimes competing. Those caught in these struggles occupied a deeply ambiguous position, for the raiders

represented both their biggest threats and their most likely sources of protection. Far from passive, people continually sought to make that apparent bind work to their advantage. As Janet Ewald describes how these processes played out in Taqali (present-day Nuba Mountains, Sudan), The would-be rulers' rapacity attracted and repelled those living on the hills, and out of this a polity came into being.²² The body of the polity—its subjects—could be used to feed the rulers and support them; and those subjects sought *both* to escape the reach of the rulers and to benefit from it. Ewald shows that projects of domination and expansion are contested and partial, even in places governed by force (Ewald 1990).

The apparently contradictory processes of incorporation and its opposite form the core tensions of political expansion here. Extraction and the use of force were the determinative sovereign capabilities, and they were not held by one ruler or institution alone.²³ Joining into the new armies or otherwise contributing to their productive capacity brought a measure of protection, but their protection was ancillary to the other roles they could fulfill and the opportunities they could craft for themselves. In the end, the Taqali warrior-kings were supplanted by armies more powerful than their own, and

22. This dynamic persists in the present. The popularity of Liberian President Charles Taylor's election slogan "He killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I'll vote for him" reflected people's recognition that supporting the most feared party might afford protection (Moran 2006). In my interviews with armed group members in CAR, I encountered several people who explained that they joined the group because of its attacks against their families. Joining offered the possibility of preventing them from being targeted, similar to the situation McGovern (2011) describes in Ivory Coast.

23. The Taqali "rulers did not manage to remove military power from their subjects. The failure of the kings to monopolize military power forced them to rely on their private estates for sustenance in all three states" (183-4). However, one wonders to what extent a quest for monopolization necessarily defines political expansion. As I will discuss below, relationships can bring more autonomy than independence.

the institutions they were building destroyed. Taqali hill dwellers found themselves immersed in new struggles as they were drawn into the orbits of first the Mahdi and then the British colonial government and policies. In northeastern CAR, as will become clear below, Sultan Sanusi, himself a warrior-king, was eventually supplanted by an extremely minimal French colonial presence that treated the region not so much as a part of the French federation of Central Africa but as an “autonomous zone” too remote to follow the daily-issued circulars and directives of the regional capitals.²⁴

The literature on state-building is teleological. It explains the past in view of its assumed (future) endpoint, “the state.”²⁵ It tends to portray increasing centralization as an inevitable, straight path. The countries of Europe come the closest to this ideal type: national polities are constructed and create monopolies on force and rational bureaucracies. But the process does not stop there, and these states begin joining, ceding power to a supra-national organization, the European Union, which becomes a kind of super-state that itself keeps expanding beyond its initial frontiers. However, even in the European experience, fracturing processes based on various other kinds of solidarities or interests are also at work during the meandering path toward integration. They are not

24. This colonel’s 1910 description of the French position proved accurate: “We occupy certain points in a vast territory.... Our influence stops not far from our posts and our administration only exists in those places where we forcefully impose it” (Mordrelle 1910).

25. Berman and Lonsdale attempt to sidestep this binary model of teleological state development by differentiating between “state-building” and “state-formation.” The former is “a conscious effort at creating an apparatus of control,” whereas the latter is “an historical process whose outcome is a largely unconscious and contradictory process of conflicts, negotiations and compromises between diverse groups whose self-serving actions and trade-offs constitute the ‘vulgarisation’ of power” (1992: 5). However, even the less-deterministic term “state formation” suggests a trajectory—they are interested in formation, not deformation—that might be misleading considering that centralizing forces almost always coexist with decentralizing ones, and the balance might in fact shift in favor of the latter (Deleuze and Guattari: 1986).

simply “resisting” the state’s projects of centralization and legibility (a resistance that state-building forces eventually overcome [Scott 1998, 2009]). Rather, their centralizing and non-centralizing processes are always being co-opted by and co-opting each other to create new hybrids, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest. Historians have increasingly come to recognize that the “predatory state thesis” (the idea that states developed by swallowing passive “stateless” societies) that had oriented many studies of slave-raiding expansion in Africa misses “stateless” peoples’ own projects of rule—projects neither directed toward centralization nor its opposite.²⁶ Ewald’s work pays attention to the vagaries of state formation: people caught up in these trades found themselves neither resisting nor submitting to the new modes of rule, but navigating the two to create new polities that pulled them into centralizing processes and helped them develop personalized capabilities based on mobility and flexibility.²⁷ To take a contemporary example, Hoffman (2007) describes one such emergent hybrid in the Mano River region of West Africa, where linked, changing networks of barracks and work spaces have come to organize increasingly-mobile social life, to the detriment of models founded on “centers” and “peripheries.”

26. Hubbell (2001) borrows the concept of the “*espace de compétition*” from Jean Bazin and Emmanuel Terray to analyze how decentralized societies engaged in the slave trade. Bazin and Terray “liken a decentralized society to a terrain of competition in which warfare, raiding and feuding are the expression of an underlying competitive tension between lineages and individuals over access to the scarce resources needed for their reproduction and growth” (30). This approach has the benefit of emphasizing conflicts, and hence also process and change, as the boundaries of the terrain of competition themselves evolve.

27. To borrow Klein’s description of raiding political economies elsewhere in Africa in the nineteenth century: “The logic of the state was not as irresistible as the logic of the market” (2001: 65).

The geography of the buffer zone contributes to its status as a hybrid marked by non-centralization. Whereas histories of state-building emphasize the importance of monopolization (however completely achieved) of control over a territory and the people living there,²⁸ in the buffer zone, territory is at best an ancillary concern, for it is not scarce.²⁹ Consider the history of the Chamba, who also embarked on a course of raiding warrior-king expansion in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century in the area that today counts as parts of northern Cameroon and Nigeria. Chamba soldiers attacked and plundered villages, whose residents could either contribute to the productive capacity of the polity or be killed. Only once they bumped into greater resistance from other established polities—that is, only once they ran out of “free” space—did their leaders begin to develop a more routinized, sedentary system of rule (Fardon 1988). Ownership of or authority over land becomes important as a sovereign capability only when land is perceived as scarce.

Because space is not scarce in the buffer zone, sovereign capabilities here have been founded not on the subjugation of a population within a given swathe of territory (that is, ownership and dominion, in Grotius’s typology) but on mobile, flexible forms of

28. Even those committed to demonstrating the highly varied iterations of the state form throughout the world confirm that the state’s essential characteristic is territory: “To begin with the most fundamental trait, the state is a territorial entity” (Young 1994: 26). Or consider Sassen (2006), who explains the contemporary state and sovereignty by showing how changes in capabilities, tipping points and organizing logics drove mutations in territory, authority and rights. However, unlike Weber, a predecessor who undertook a similar initiative of explanation, her “natural experiment” relies almost entirely on Euro-American history, a specificity left largely unacknowledged. Sassen’s model, though full of fascinating details, is explicitly teleological in its approach to state-building.

29. This does not mean that the goods people can produce from the space are never scarce, but that it is not the territory in and of itself that is of interest.

accumulation and coercion directed toward control of the goods produced. Through the years, the valuable goods made here have included slaves, ivory, diamonds, meat, grass, honey, and pelts. Alongside these shifts, the range of sovereign capabilities that the various governing entities in the area have claimed and enacted has included the ability to extract (producing goods from the bush is itself a form of extraction), the ability to form loose, far-flung alliances (diplomacy), the ability to settle disagreements with a gun, and control over others' movement along routes of navigation (jurisdiction). Whereas these sovereign capabilities might tend toward centralization and incorporation, they are always accompanied by authorities stemming from invisibility (what happens in the bush can easily be hidden, and what happens in the bush is often understood in terms of supernatural forces), mobility (opportunities and profit area bound to movement), and flexibility, all traits that tend in the direction of non-centralization and the personalization of power. The point is not that certain actors, such as the French colonists, cared only about performing the centralizing marks of sovereignty and that others "resisted" centralization by producing authorities directed toward non-centralization. The point is that in this buffer zone, marking oneself as bearing sovereign capabilities has entailed both centralizing *and* non-centralizing dynamics. This double interplay has produced a contested, provisional political order, in which sovereign capabilities must continually be produced, maintained, and fought over.

2.5 Raiding in the buffer zone

Northeastern CAR was the last frontier that Muslim traders and raiders from the north reached before European colonialism disrupted and arrested southward expansion. During the first half of the nineteenth century, increased centralization and routinization of rule in the powerful Muslim empires to the north (such as Khartoum, Wadai, and Dar Fur) enabled the expansion of slave-raiding and trading into Equatorial Africa. Dar Fur's leaders sought to control long-distance trade with the Mediterranean basin. To make progress toward this goal they needed to create standing armies of *bazingirs* (slave-warriors) instead of relying on intermittent access to spontaneous conscripts, as they had done before. This need resulted in an increased need for slaves, and the raiding frontier shifted with the expansion of Islam. Dar Runga (the home of the Runga), which lay to these south, began paying tribute to Wadai. Paying tribute is usually a sign of submission and protection, but in this case it primarily offered a way for leaders to launch raiding initiatives of their own without appearing to threaten the interests of those with larger armies.³⁰ The Runga sultan sent his son-in-law—a person whose character has largely been forgotten with the passing of time but who was reportedly of Bagirmi origin—south to oversee operations in an area that became known

30. Gustav Nachtigal, traveling through the region in the 1870s, observed that tributary relationships did not indicate subservience. He carried a letter of introduction from the governor-general of Tripoli, ostensibly a superior of the leaders Nachtigal met in the Sahara. But when he presented it to the king of Wadai, "He simply handed it back, and found it quite strange that a pasha of Tripoli should wish to teach the king of Wadai how he should conduct himself with strangers" (Nachtigal 1971: 130).

as Dar al Kuti, and, later, northeastern CAR.³¹ Kobur joined the *jellaba* (Muslim traders) who had already established themselves there. Initially, then, it was to expand capabilities of exchange and production, and to spread Islam, and not a drive to incorporate that drove the northerners into this area (Cordell 1985: 14). *Faqihs* (religious teachers) joined the *jellaba*, who often took on pedagogical roles themselves. The first definitive ruler of Dar al-Kuti was Kobur (perhaps the son of the above-mentioned emissary), who took over in the late 1860s or early 1870s and ruled until his nephew, Muhammad al-Sanusi, succeeded him in 1890 (46). At the same time, traders and soldiers worked to create a network of thorn-tree stockades that served as assembly points for captured slaves. Each *zariba*, as these bases were called, became an important military-commercial node. Sanusi took what Kobur had started and transformed this backwater of the Islamic world into a martial power. By developing a closer relationship with Rabih, the notoriously belligerent sultan of Wadai, Sanusi gained access to crucial tools like firearms³² and expanded his control over the region's economy. He amassed armies of *bazingirs* and ramped up both raiding and trading. His base, Sha, became the largest town in the region. His expansion did not go unopposed, however, and by the early 1890s he had moved his capital base to a wide, rocky plateau that he could more

31. People in southeastern CAR got caught up in these raiding transformations as well, and by the time French explorers arrived at the end of the nineteenth century sultans ruled in Bangassou, Zemio and Rafai, towns along the present-day border with the DRC.

32. For ammunition he supplemented that obtained through trade and treaty with bullets he made from his own recipe, which combined bird excrement, urine, and other ingredients. A few elders in Ndele still guard the formula.

easily defend, which came to be known as Ndele.³³ As a trading harbor amid a landscape made productive through war, the city grew to 20-25,000 and was the biggest city between there and Abeche, in eastern Chad.³⁴ The center of the *zariba* network, it was itself a *zariba*. Mobility was a core sovereign capability of those working through this network. In the end, it was Sanusi's mobility—especially the threat that he might relocate to a “perfectly defensible,” “natural fortune” of a rocky plateau—that struck the French as sufficiently threatening to warrant eliminating the sultan (Modat 1910b).

When I visited the ruins of Sanusi's city on a hill—a trip that required approvals from the First Adjunct Mayor (the Sultan-Mayor's replacement when he is not around), the General Secretary of the Mayor's office, the Zone Commander of the army, and the Unit Chief of the *gendarmerie* (had the Sultan-Mayor been present, he could have issued the laissez-passer himself, but he languished in the capital, reportedly suffering from gout)—my guide described almost all the crumbling mud ruins we encountered as one kind of garrison or another. Whether these structures were in fact the most numerous when Ndele churned with raiding commerce, their continued structural strength indicates that they must have been some of the most important. Guardhouses on the perimeter still stand, watching over the access paths. Near Sanusi's residence, the houses where his close guard would have slept and awaited his orders remained. Further away,

33. As Cordell (1985) explains, the origins of this name are disputed.

34. Whereas Abeche has continued to grow, and now has about 80,000 inhabitants and serves as the aid hub for eastern Chad (with all the expatriates and resources that entails), Ndele's population plummeted after Sanusi's reign and is a ghost of its former grandeur.

the slave-raiding *bazingirs* would have made camp. In between, various other militia barracks defined the town's geography to this day.

The *bazingirs* had themselves been captured in raids, but upon entering the sultan's extended entourage they were encouraged to convert to Islam and became a class of citizen. The French administrator who wrote that for Sanusi slavery was a "practice of government" and *razzia* his economic engine (Modat 1909; my translation) understood something of the workings of the polity. Becoming a warrior, or a slave, was a process that strictly a question of being either coerced or giving consent. In addition to their new powers of destruction (and protection), those working for Sanusi had a whole new lifestyle, which some doubtless found attractive.³⁵ Moreover, living in the sultan's city afforded protection: "The sultan was not the only slave-raider. Bands from Wadai, Dar Sila, the western Sudan, and the southern Azande and Nzakara states as well as the scattered Banda and Kresh enclaves, pillaged the region" (Cordell 1985: 111).

Though he is careful to mention all the other accomplishments and changes accompanying Sanusi's reign, such as the spread of Islam and new modes of schooling, Cordell leaves no doubt as to the viciousness of Sanusi's raiders. When the sultan sent out a slave-raiding party, the raiders would find a strategic spot to set up a *zariba* and then attack all the villages within range. They would tie the captives to the thorn-wall enclosure while they went in search of more. The raiders relied on surprise: they generally attacked before dawn, and they announced their arrival with guns for shock

35. Bayart (2000) evokes the workings of these processes of attraction.

and awe. Those villagers who could not run fast enough were caught immediately. Then the *bazingirs* collected valuables (food, ivory) from the houses, sent teams in search of the stragglers, and waited for any who dared return. Though it is difficult to know the precise magnitude of the slave-raiding, Cordell (1985) estimates that some 6,000 were captured each year during Sanusi's reign (approximately 1890-1911). (The current population of the northeastern-most Vakaga prefecture is fewer than 40,000.) Of these, the raider claimed one-half to two-thirds, and Sanusi claimed the remainder. Those not sold would till the fields in the plantations that fed the growing city and its armies. In addition to intensifying raiding, Sanusi sought to oversee the burgeoning long-distance trades. All the merchants in Dar al-Kuti were supposed to conduct business at his residence under his supervision. Ivory was the most valuable non-human commodity (at its height, commerce reached an estimated 16 tons/year [Cordell 1985: 148]), but other trade goods also proliferated on a scale unmatched since. The area was diverse in currencies, with cloth (at least eleven major varieties),³⁶ beads, and several different kinds of coins all serving as tender.³⁷ Firearms, the tool that allowed the slave-raiding that fueled the economy, were the key import.

36. In 1936, the administrator in the far northeastern town of Birao noted that youth named their desire for japonaise cloth as one of the primary reasons they traveled to Sudan. Fabrics remained goods of great value even years after the height of the slave trade (Perrien 1936).

37. Nachtigal describes the many currencies he came across: "Red Sudan pepper, *kimba*, salt, cowrie shells and beads are much in demand, but onions and garlic are also used.... The usual needles, whose value in these regions is generally doubtful, were also used as a medium of exchange, and with them on several occasions I was able to buy wood, hens and even a little milk. In this region and in Wadai cowrie shells are worth much more than in Bornu, since they are used not as money but as ornaments" (1971: 37).

As important as guns and controlling extraction were to Sanusi's power, his rule would have foundered without diplomacy, or the ability to enter into relationships with other holders of marks of sovereignty, both those more and less powerful than himself. Rather than decreasing his autonomy, these relationships gave him different kinds of leverage to pursue his various projects more successfully.³⁸ In the early years of Sanusi's career, he leaned heavily on Rabih, a soldier who had become the most powerful sultan in the Chad-Sudan borderlands. Sanusi cemented their relationship through kinship by taking one of Rabih's daughters as a wife. Then Sanusi exchanged tribute for Rabih's gifts of munitions and integration into the trade routes leading northward to the Mediterranean. Rabih expended little effort to monitor the actions of his neighbor to the south. Communications passed only with difficulty, and their ongoing exchange relationship was a way of marking a high degree of autonomy rather than simple subservience.

Moreover, this relationship did not stop Sanusi from forming other useful alliances. The first French explorers arrived in the area around the time Sanusi moved to Ndele. They offered new trade networks leading to the Atlantic coast and could also source firearms and ammunition. Sanusi signed a series of treaties with the French (in 1897, 1903, and 1908) with terms similar to those of the relationship he enjoyed with Rabih (whom French soldiers killed in 1900). Sanusi offered tribute (primarily ivory and

38. Hubbell's description of another African raiding reservoir applies in Sanusi's case as well: "Real power in late-nineteenth-century Souroudougou resided in those who were able by dint of force or alliance with external powers to exert their will locally" (2001: 47).

foodstuffs), and the French reciprocated with guns more sophisticated than any the area had yet seen. Besides the material requirements for war, the relationship provided Sanusi with a powerful, if somewhat unknown, associate with his own trading networks, and allowed him to fight more aggressively for the region's people and goods. The last decade of Sanusi's rule (he, too, fell to the French, in 1911) was the period of most intense raiding and centralization (of soldiers, plantation workers) at Ndele. Though the treaties stipulated that Sanusi cease raiding, his military superiority, greater knowledge of the area, and defensively well-placed position atop the hill meant that his sovereignty was marked by substantial ability to continue raiding on the sly. For their part, the French colonizers constructed an outpost on a small hill of their own, two kilometers from Sanusi's haven.

The text of the treaties reflects the productive tension between Sanusi and the French. Each sought to aggrandize the other rhetorically while simultaneously siphoning his productive powers. Written by the French, the treaties reflect French desire for control and management of territory and populations foreign to Sanusi's itinerant mode of rule. But the two sides also envisioned governing in similar ways, specifically in their methods of marking sovereignty through control of production. The first two treaties showed the French eager to latch onto Sanusi's productive force without necessarily displacing him as bearer of marks of sovereignty. The 1897 treaty refers to Dar al-Kuti as a "country" (*pays*). Both the 1903 and 1908 treaties qualify Sanusi as the "sovereign" of Dar al-Kuti. Unless one ascribes the choice of these terms to French

cynicism, it seems clear that they show acknowledgment of multiple actors with sovereign capability in a single terrain. In these negotiations, both “country” and “sovereign” meant something different from what they generally refer to today in the nation-state context. Written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the treaties seem instead to acknowledge the existence of two rulers in a single geographic space. In 1897, Sanusi accorded the French a monopoly on all trade: any European goods had to be of French origin. In both the 1897 and 1903 texts, the French offered military training to Sanusi’s army. By the 1908 treaty, the collaboration had ended. Sanusi was to stop raiding and cease all trade with the *jellaba*. Further, he was to carry out a census of his population to facilitate a sedentary mode of tax collection (Sanusi’s modes of tax extraction—raiding and tributes—had always been mobile). Though still listed as “SENOUSSI bed ABA-BAKAR souverain de Dar-el-Kouti,” by signing the document he promised to “end all *razzias* and military operations not approved by the French authorities. He will take up this course under the direction and control of the *Resident* placed near to him to ensure the enforcement of the present treaty.”³⁹ But neither side ever respected the terms. Both understood alliances in flexible ways, and this flexibility was backed up by substantial ability to pursue competing projects undetected. Sanusi complained of frequent arrears in the goods promised him by the French. The French complained that Sanusi continued to raid for slaves (in some documents, the French

39. “Mettre fin à toutes *razzias* et expéditions militaires non approuvées par l’autorité française. Il entrera sans retard dans cette voie sous la direction et le contrôle du Résident placé près de lui pour le renseigner et veiller à l’exécution du présent traité.”

seem genuinely surprised that the sultan they continued to arm would do such a thing) and yet did not furnish them with sufficient ivory and food. Contravening or ignoring the treaties' terms was productive for both these bearers of sovereign capabilities.

In their letters and other reports to each other, the French questioned the legitimacy of Sanusi's authority. They called him a "pseudo-sultan" (Oubangui-Chari/Tchad 1910) on the grounds of his ethno-geographic foreignness (and did not, of course, see any irony in using this fact to explain why their own rule was inherently more justly-founded). The region's peoples' itinerancy confounded the French, in both their administrative and empathetic capacities (they admitted no possibility that a person could live and understand oneself without a tether to a particular *terre*), and so they were quick to apply map-line definitions of foreignness while categorizing themselves above these distinctions. The European advance in Africa may appear to have been inexorable, a *fait accompli* already with the Berlin conference in 1884. But the French position vis-à-vis Sanusi was still very uncertain. Indeed, Sanusi's men killed Paul Crampel, the first European to arrive in Sanusi's raiding sphere, along with several of his men, and his murder set a tone for Sanusi's relationship with these newcomers. Captain Modat, French *resident* in Ndele in the final years of Sanusi's power, seemed surprised when he remarked that though Sanusi "voluntarily declares himself a vassal of France, he continues to expand his authority, which the treaties with the French have

but consolidated”⁴⁰ (Modat, 1909a). Sanusi’s armies outnumbered French (mostly from Senegal) soldiers sent to check his power by a factor of 23. The sultan’s own armed escorts accompanied the French during their first years in the area, and the protection afforded Sanusi a superior surveillance position and ability to hide aspects of his rule. When the French determined that Sanusi was too mobile and hatched a plan to assassinate him, they faced a hugely precarious situation: if his army fought back, the few administrators and soldiers there would at best face a protracted battle. In the event, the *bazingirs*, plantation workers and all the others responded to Sanusi’s death by using the tactics of the mode of warfare they knew, which prescribed flight when caught in a surprise attack. Nearly all fled soon after they learned of their leader’s death. Most scattered back into village life. Until then, both Sanusi and the French had used each other to expand the marks of sovereignty that they exercised.

The two decades of French-Sanusi relations (roughly 1890-1910) saw a window of active diplomacy between Europeans and Africans throughout Central Africa. Arabic, by this time widely spoken throughout the area, facilitated these relationships. Luffin (2004) describes the period of letter-writing and exchange that characterized the first years of Azande/Belgian relations: “The few letters that survived show a very polite style, between persons treating each other as equals, which do not really correspond with the tone used by most—not all—Europeans describing the African populations at this time.

40. “Mais il y a lieu de remarquer que si SENOUSSI se déclare volontiers vassal de la France, il n’en reste pas moins extrêmement jaloux de son autorité, autorité qui est effective et que nous n’avons fait que reconnaître et consolider par des divers traités.”

This illustrates well the meaning of the word ‘diplomacy’” (2002: 172-173). In this excerpt of a letter from Sasa, the uncle of the Azande sultan at Zemio, in present-day CAR, the author, who had formally “submitted” to European rule, nevertheless retains marks of sovereignty, specifically those founded in control of trade through an ability to conceal and reveal productive force as is profitable to him:

As you want a good relation between us, you are welcome. Until now, I had forbidden to bring you ivory. But now my ivory is at your disposal and nothing will be able to disrupt the harmony of our trade. Especially that I have a treasury of ivory. Anyway, you will notice that on your own, if God allows you to stay in my territory (ibid: 147).

In these years of concessionaire wildcatting, both the African and European rulers saw in each other opportunities for trade and knowledge. They recognized each other as bearers of marks of sovereignty. With the infiltration of Arabic-disdaining Christian missionaries and administrators, this mode of amicably divided sovereignty came to an end. It is nevertheless a useful reminder of the flexibility in European-African relations through time.

Sanusi and his advisers sent letters to Bangui and beyond. Ndele elders today take pride in having welcomed the first French “ambassador” on Central African soil, before even the creation of Bangui in 1899. In one series of five letters,⁴¹ Sanusi has two main preoccupations: first, that the French officials arriving in Ndele stopped respecting the sultan’s protocol, which dictated that arriving Europeans enter the town accompanied by his soldiers; and second, that the French have not helped him recover

41. The haphazard collection at the French colonial archives is not exhaustive: it includes only a dozen or so missives.

several of his subjects, who had traveled north to Fort Archambault (today's Sahr), taking their guns with them. Sanusi tacked between reminding his correspondent of his subservience to the French and arguing for being treated as an equal. For instance, around 1910 he wrote,

The reason for the letter I am sending you is the functionaries who are arriving at Ndele. Earlier, many functionaries presented themselves. As soon as the arrival of one of them was announced, I would personally arise with my armed people and we would go down to the road to escort him to the house of the authorities. We would greet him and return to our home. This we have done with all the functionaries from the beginning. But the current Resident in Ndele does not want the enlightenment of the country. The proof is that he prefers lies that he writes to the French. Because of that arms and soldiers are accumulating near us.... Every day their soldiers, morning and night, announce war to us and liars lie their most beautiful lies, and this by the order of the Resident in Ndele and not by our order because I am one of the servants of France and we ask you for help because I am in possession of children, elderly people, and women and we do not want disaster⁴² (Senoussi ND).⁴³

These letters are a way for Sanusi to qualify himself as bearing marks of sovereignty. In the missive cited here, he argues that his military escort should have supremacy over that of the French. Moreover, he describes himself as the protector of vulnerable subjects/possessions—children, the elderly, and women. In the other letters, he asserts that people who have left his city should be returned to him, for he has jurisdiction over

42. Though it would be wrong to read too much into a French translation of Sanusi's Arabic, it is nevertheless interesting to see how he refers to his people as both subjects and possessions simultaneously.

43. *"La cause de la lettre que je vous envoie est au sujet des fonctionnaires qui arrivaient vers Nous à Ndele. Antérieurement se sont présentés à nous beaucoup de fonctionnaires. Dès que l'un d'eux est annoncé aussitôt je me lève en personne avec mes gens armés et nous allons à ses devants sur la route pour l'escorter jusqu'à la maison de l'autorité. Nous le saluons et nous retournons chez nous. Ceci nous l'avons fait avec tous les fonctionnaires des premiers temps; mais le Résident actuel de N'dele ne veut pas l'édification, mais la suivre [?] du pays. La preuve de ceci est qu'il désire le mensonge puisqu'il croit tous les gens lui rapportant des renseignements mensongers qu'il écrit aux Français. A cause de cela s'accumulent sur nous armes et soldats.... Tous les jours leurs soldats, matin et soir, nous annoncent la guerre et les gens menteurs, mentent de plus belle, cela par ordre du Résident de Ndele et non par notre ordre puisque je suis un des serviteurs de la France et nous demandons à vous l'amân, car je suis en possession d'enfants, de vieillards, de femmes et nous ne voulons pas la destruction."*

the movement of these people and the guns he gave them; that is, he argues that he exerts jurisdiction over them. (His concern over these “*fuyards*” is strikingly similar to the French concern over “*transfuges*,” discussed in the following section.) True, Sanusi describes himself as a “servant” of the French, but his assumption of vassal status appears more a *Realpolitik* calculation than an abdication. (In another letter, his description of the taxes he pays the French and what he expects in return sound more like a merchant’s deal-making than a subject’s acquiescence.) As with his approach to Rabiḥ, Sanusi perhaps expected that treaty-signing (ritualized submission) was a way of making himself less threatening and hence permit him to carry on with his projects undisturbed.

The French hinted that they recognized the workings of ritualized submission when they described Djellab, another ruler in the area, as having paid a “*droit de razzia*” (right/tax/entitlement to raid) to Sanusi. Djellab stood as leader of the Yulu, a group that straddled the present-day northern CAR-Sudan border. The most simplistic take on Sanusi and Djellab’s relationship would describe the latter as paying tribute to the former. But the *droit de razzia* indicates the import of that tribute: not only would Sanusi direct his armies elsewhere besides Djellab’s outpost, but Djellab gained the right to raid, that is, a substantial stake in the region’s leading industry. Djellab was also authorized to “exploit the caravans and merchants coming from Ndele and heading toward Dar-Sabah ([the towns of] Kafiakingi and Omdurman [Sudan])” (Modat 1910a; my translation). The better to direct these offensives, Djellab established a base high on the rock plateau at

Ouanda. The French admitted that Djellab had found the perfect base. The difficulty of accessing its long, broad summit made it extremely difficult for invaders to reach. Modat described the spot's unique political advantage by using economic language: "This vast six kilometer by two kilometer plateau, almost inaccessible, is a natural fortune of the highest degree, able to offer secure refuge to a large population" (Modat 1910b: 6; my translation). Djellab sat upon a "natural fortune." The murder of several merchants in Djellab's area brought the wrath of Sanusi's *bazingirs*, but Djellab proved a crafty opponent. His men managed to recover the cannon Sanusi had obtained through his relations with the French—the only cannon in the region and therefore one of the ultimate demonstrations of shock and awe. They killed about a hundred of Sanusi's men in an early battle (Modat 1910a).

As the French presence became more invasive and meddling, Sanusi made a new plan. He sought to dislodge Djellab and take over the plateau for himself and his fighters and slaves. He knew the battle for control of Ouanda Djallé would likely take some time, and he sent his military chief and his close regiments to launch the onslaught and prepare for a long fight. Fearing that Sanusi's impending move would make him even more difficult to contain (the Ouanda Djallé plateau was, after all, a uniquely defensible position), the French *résident* at Ndele, Captain Modat, assassinated the sultan in January 1911.⁴⁴ Sanusi's sons and some fighters fought the French, but after a few days all had

44. Today, Ndele residents blame one of Sanusi's daughters for her father's murder. Modat had taken her as a lover, and she betrayed the sultan by telling Modat when the sultan would be vulnerable, namely just as he went to pray. Had she not done so, Sanusi's occult powers would have made him impervious to French bullets.

fled. The vibrant Ndele-on-the-hill, home to most people within a range of hundreds of kilometers, was transformed into only a feeble Ndele-in-the-valley ghost town beside the French outpost. The circumstances of this event are telling: only upon worrying that Sanusi might become problematically superior to them did the French finally decide to eliminate their rival. Prior to that, a situation in which each recognized the other's marks of sovereignty (even if disparaging them in private) was mutually advantageous.

2.6 Colonialism

Less than a decade before the French officially renounced their colonial endeavors in Afrique Equatoriale Française (French Equatorial Africa, AEF), the administrator of Oubangui-Chari, as CAR was then known, complained that he still lacked a good map of his colony. Moreover, the map he had was “partially false,” dotted with non-existent rivers and villages. Regional maps, sometimes more accurate, were also more *ad hoc*—usually just hand-drawn sketches (Brégeon 1998: 104). The French inattention to map-making is symbolic of their at best half-hearted interest in state-building in this part of Central Africa. Instead of embarking on centralizing projects to transform populations into legible subjects, French energies in the buffer zone reflected a blend of performances of all-seeing control (primarily authority over extraction and jurisdiction) and highly personalized, improvised tactics for rule and profit made possible by their ability to hide what happened here. They were not alone in recognizing that one could mark one's sovereignty by wielding powers of mobility and invisibility: the others who used the space, too, from mostly sedentary villagers to nomadic herders,

drew profit and functional autonomy by moving and hiding. The result was a situation in which sovereignty was inherently contested, situational, and directed as much toward non-centralizing ends as centralizing ones.

Penury and geography go a long way toward explaining the region's contested politics during this period. The idea that colonies should pay for themselves was imperial common sense. If it was difficult to achieve even in those places with high-producing plantations, in Oubangui-Chari it forced miserable scrimping and continual budget cuts. The French differentiated *Afrique utile* (useful Africa: "areas that produced revenues sufficient to pay for administration") from *Afrique inutile* (useless Africa: "areas abandoned by the state as too costly to administer") (Reno 1999: 35). The northeastern reaches of Oubangui-Chari—a colony known to expatriates as either the "Cinderella colony" or the "trashcan colony" (*colonie poubelle*), depending on how charitable their stance on tropical isolation ((Brégeon 1998: 117)—represent the paradigmatic example of the latter category.

In the buffer zone, the heart of *Afrique inutile*, laws and directives issued in Bangui were like blueprints for a never-built dream house. French concern for effectuating centralizing marks of sovereignty was channeled into the colonial technique of the *tourn  e*, a mission to make themselves visible to the people they considered under their control. Instead of transforming the population into subjects, as state-building projects must, *tourn  e*-centered governance had the effect of turning centralizing impulses into ritual while leaving space for mobility, invisibility, and flexibility, all of

which have an non-centralizing character, as effective marks of sovereignty. Desire for control of extraction/production and the law of weapons distribution cut between and entangled centralizing and non-centralizing tendencies. The French emphasis on conservation meant that nearly all means of profiting in the buffer zone became illegal. These blueprint-laws became tools throw light onto others' profit-making strategies and thereby drain their sovereign mark of invisibility. For the most part, though, this region was all-swallowing, all-encompassing bush, where competing projects of profit and rule coexisted.

2.6.1 *Sous-divisions autonomes*

Far away in Brazzaville and Bangui, officials fretted over the organization of their empire. They shifted responsibility for the vast terrain of northeastern Oubangui-Chari many times. They redefined the borders of Birao, the last outpost before the border with Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (AES), and/or changed its administrative status at least twelve times before 1953 (Brégeon 1998). Though the area around Ndele remained part of Oubangui-Chari, responsibility for the area around Birao sometimes shifted to Chad. In his political report for 1936, Louis Perrier, administrator in Birao from 1935-8, wrote of his surprise upon returning to his post after a visit to the villages and finding a missive awaiting him with the news that the day before his zone had shifted from being part of Oubangui-Chari to become part of Chad. He criticized the change, arguing that it took even longer to receive mail from Fort Lamy than from Bangui (Perrier 1936). Finally, rather than attempt to govern it as they would more-accessible districts, they declared it

an “autonomous zone”—home to too few people and too difficult to communicate with to require that administrators enforce all the directives issued from Bangui, Fort Lamy (Ndjamena today), or Brazzaville. In my interviews with Ndele elders, they took pride in their history as an autonomous zone, a status they explained as resulting not from their isolation but from their well-developed administrative capabilities, which in their telling amounted to marks of sovereignty even the French had to recognize.

Much of the time the colonial office at Birao stood empty. The town lies in an area denuded by the *razzias* of people and only repopulated as a result of French explorer-administrators’ encouragement (supported by a small contingent of the often-brutal *gardes régionnaux*, composed mostly of West African officers and Central African soldiers from the southern riverine part of the country), for they needed help with provisioning at their new almost-border post. Even when fully staffed, the office had just one European.⁴⁵ It was difficult to find a person with a constitution (mental, physical) that could support such isolation.⁴⁶ Finding people of sufficient fortitude was not made easier by the rule of thumb that of graduates of the school that prepared colonial administrators, the *Ecole Nationale de la France d’Outre-Mer*, those with the best grades

45. “Birao was like the Zabriskie Point of French colonization of Central Africa. It was made because of not a single vital economic, political or strategic value, solely to occupy the terrain, almost for the pleasure of it” (Brégeon 1998: 227; my translation). “*Birao était un peu le ‘Zabriskie Point’ d la colonisation française en Afrique Centrale. Elle s’est faite là sans aucune nécessité vitale, économique, politique ou stratégique, juste pour occuper le terrain, peut-être même pour le plaisir.*”

46. In the words of one French military adviser, “It is obviously necessary that the European who holds this post have the kind of hardy character one does not frequently encounter” (“*Il faut évidemment de la part de l’Européen qui tient ce Poste, un caractère solidement trempé qui ne se rencontre pas si fréquemment*”)(Teulière 1952).

should be sent to Indochina, while those with the worst should be shunted off to AEF (Brégeon 1998).⁴⁷

The solo administrators posted to Birao or Ndele had extremely limited means at their disposal to construct and enforce a “civilized” way of life. In the series of reports he sent from Ndele in the mid-30s, administrator Lignier’s tone succumbed increasingly to begging. A typewriter, please, only a typewriter! He also noted the difficulty of enforcing laws, given that he had only a few unmotivated regional guards, and no officers, working with him. He suggested that his superiors send him scrap metal, for it had become too difficult to keep prisoners.

It would be good if some chains could be sent to me to be used with some of our prisoners. I have here one prisoner, Outoundou, seriously dangerous, a specialist in theft and evasion, and, moreover, capable of anything. I could only attach locally-made chains (made with an old oil drum given to me by a merchant) around his legs. When we put these chains on him, Outoundou declared “that or nothing, it’s all the same, and it’s not that chain that is going to stop me when I want to go” (Lignier 1936; my translation).

While reading these words in 2009, I found myself attributing Lignier’s beseechment to passive-aggression or sarcasm. Why else would he so prostrate himself for such basic tools of government? But by the end his letters and reports reveal straightforward desperation. He felt attacked and swallowed by the bush, even in his own house. In one dispatch, he related that he had killed two poisonous snakes and several scorpions and centipedes inside the house the day before: “I repeat: inside the house” (ibid, emphasis in original; my translation). With such limited means at their disposal, the French

47. Perhaps this partly explains the brutality of Central Africa’s administrators. As the humanist critic Jean Guéhenno noted in his 1954 book *La France et les Noirs*, the dumber the white person is, the dumber he thinks the black person is, and the more vicious his comportment.

administrators were not the limbs of a body of government with its heart at the capital. Rather, they were outposts unto themselves, where marking oneself with sovereignty was a continual process of qualification.

For the French, marking sovereignty involved staging performances of centralized control. That is, they exercised only limited effective control, but they would try to give the impression of greater control by making themselves visible in a ritualized way. These performances took the form of the *tourn  e* (rounds). The administrator would mount the *tipoye* (a chair borne by four Africans)⁴⁸ and, together with some guards, descend upon the villages so that they could view and be viewed by the populations they saw themselves as governing. In the words of one directive from Brazzaville,

Making the rounds is the indispensable act that enables one to obtain information about the people in light of the orders to be made, to surveille the execution of orders, to study the reactions of those carrying them out and, in making oneself seen and heard, to establish personal contacts that contribute forcefully to the creation of team spirit (quoted in Br  geon 1998: 127; my translation).

Often, the administrators used the rounds as an occasion to collect taxes, and sometimes they would undertake public health initiatives, like vaccinations. But making the rounds was above all about showing oneself—seeing and being seen.⁴⁹ To facilitate administration and give administrators on their rounds easier access, the guards helped

48. After World War II, vehicles replaced *tipoyes*, but the new cars often broke down and were unusable.

49. On the military side, the technique of the *tourn  e* had a corollary in the *action de presence* (act of presence; see, for instance, SHAT reports on actions de presence in Birao area in 1959). Contained in the idea of the *action de presence* is the acknowledgement that the governors are mostly not present.

resettle people along the roadways. In the words of the head of the colonial administrative training school,

At the most basic level, the ideal *tourn  * is the “*tourn  * without objective,” which makes it possible to get into things. It is therefore a “method to get to know and collaborate with the peasants and at the same time a method for administering,” briefly and to finish, the *tourn  * is the essential act of *commandement* (quoted in Br  geon 1998: 127; my translation).

The mark of a good *colon* was the frequency of his rounds, but, should he prefer the relative comfort (snakes and scorpions notwithstanding) of his base, it was difficult for those far-off in the capital to know of his neglect. The colonial corps liked to laugh about how during World War II the official posted at Birao decided to take a quick vacation in Cairo, 3,500 kilometers away. Upon arrival, he sat down in the hotel bar and discovered that his bar-mate was F  lix Ebou  , the head of Gaullist AEF (Br  geon 1998: 226)! He got caught, but the story’s humor lies not just in its hero’s comeuppance but also in the fact that he was more likely to meet his superior thousands of kilometers away than on his own terrain.

The advantage of remotest AEF was that much that happened, or didn’t happen, could be hidden, eaten up by the bush. An administrator sent to collect taxes could actually spend his time hunting, as did the above-mentioned Perrier, who sent blithe reports about the hard-working, tax-paying natives (he wrote, “The political situation in the subdivision keeps improving and is good this end of the year. The tax has been fully collected since the month of April and that with ease” [Perrier 1936 ANOM 54; my translation]), while actually devoting his time to collecting trophies. He decorated his house with thirty-six buffalo horns (Br  geon 1998: 229). Passing through Bangui in 1932,

the ethnologist Michel Leiris learned that it was easier to build roads in Oubangui-Chari than in Cameroon, because in Oubangui-Chari overseers could easily force their African workers to work for longer than the fifteen-day annual labor tax, without worry of sanction over the abuse (ibid: 163).⁵⁰ Laws passed under public pressure in France, where movements decrying colonial abuses gathered steam already in the first decades of the twentieth century, such as outlawing the *chicotte* (a whip, usually made from hippo or rhino hide, also called a sjambok) or tying people together during forced labor, remained only blueprints, with no scaffolding of enforcement.

But if the vastness of the bush and the limited means at the disposal of the colonists afforded the administrators an autonomy that Brégeon (1998) glosses positively as “elbow room,” it afforded the same to the people they aimed to rule. The tone of Colonel Mordrelle’s 1910 Chad and Oubangui-Chari Inspection Report testified to the civil servants’ powerlessness and bears a tinge of “we’ve created a monster”:

The difficulties the administrators encounter in the exercise of their functions come, on the one hand, from the existence of powerful concessionary companies that have long exploited the country without control and who relinquish to the Administration only under duress those privileges that have managed to obtain from the sultans and indigenous chiefs. On the other hand, there are also free colonists who have established themselves in the region who complicate the situation, because, natural enemies of the concessionary companies, they also oppose the rules of the administration, which, they believe, constrain them in their commerce. Innumerable problems stem from the fact that these colonists are not always very scrupulous in their choice of means of hindering the activities of the administrators (Mordrelle 1910; my translation).

50. One can imagine that the sobriquets given to the French administrators in Ndele during this period by the surrounding populations, “He who likes to kick the stones” and “He who built the Ouadda road” (Brégeon 1998: 12), were chosen to indicate the crushing labor necessary to realize these projects.

The various people using this space employed a range of tactics that frustrated centralization and furthered their own, largely non-centralized projects. For instance, Central Africans often played with names: residents of an agglomeration might name their village one way on the arrival of a given administrator and then switch the name for his successor. That way, two villages would pop up on the (hand-drawn, “partially false”) map and, when queried by the tax collector, residents could always claim not to be the sought-after village. A wanted criminal could adopt a new name (the *code civil* did not appear in Oubangui-Chari until the 1950s) and effectively become invisible to those attempting to track him down. Area residents also defied the centralizing imperatives of the colonists. The French had forced villages to resettle along the newly-created roads, the better to obtain information about their doings and access them for tax collection purposes. But administrators’ ability to reach these places still depended on *tipoyes* and, later, often-broken-down vehicles. Moreover, the road-fronting villages were in some ways Potemkin villages, which their ostensible inhabitants visited when doing so was to their advantage. People made their real homes next to their fields, several kilometers away (Brégeon 1998: 140). Similarly, people moved to their advantage. Upon the approach of the administrator, husbands sent their women to hide so that they would not be counted in the tax census. Also, people traveled far to find jobs (for instance, to work on plantations in AES), spouses, and medical treatment (the British had set up a sleeping sickness treatment center staffed with Syrian doctors just a few hundred yards from the border, and the Belgians offered free treatment as well; the French cut the

health care, due to World War I budget woes), or to avoid the head tax (AES had none). People and goods moved with new freedom, thanks to the new colonial roads. The French termed these entrepreneurs of circulation “*transfuges*” (deserters).

The problem of *transfuges* was grave, because loss of a person meant loss of a taxpayer. Taxes were generally paid in labor (building roads, for instance) and were hence directly beneficial to officials at their posts. But just as the colonizers never had a good map of Oubangui-Chari, they never established a definitive census. They couldn’t know who had left and who had returned. To be sure, people might face the fury of the administrator if they got caught breaking the rules in any of the above-mentioned (or other) ways, and they might have to serve prison time or endure beatings. The colonial administrators had armed guards. But the bush offered invisibility and movement for those who developed these skills, which marked them as bearers of powerful, non-centralizing sovereign authorities.

The ritualization of practices related to centralization, the blueprint-like nature of legal directives, and the power graspable by those who circulated and used their changing visibility created a peculiar kind of system, in which multiple actors found ways to profit in ways that at first glance appear contradictory. Conservation, which quickly became the colonial authorities’ main concern in the buffer zone, illustrates all these dynamics. Of their various endeavors to produce wealth in the northeastern hinterlands (such as compulsory cotton growing), only conservation remains pertinent today. Anemic centralizing practices married invisibility and mobility to create

constellations of marks of sovereignty, all crystallized around conservation, hunting, and profit. The conservation complex makes clear that marks of sovereignty are not stable but contested, pulling in opposite directions, and yet somehow producing a new hybrid assemblage.

2.6.2 Conservation

The one thing the French could achieve in Oubangui-Chari, for it cost so little, was to create vast national parks out of the animal-rich northeastern savannas. As projects of governance go, conservation has the benefit of requiring not expenditures but saving, of a kind—the riches are latent until recognized, made apprehendable, and gazetted as park. The *razzias* had removed tens of thousands of people from the zone, and, though the Europeans rarely remarked on the beauty of the land, they exulted in the hunting. Many of the surviving reports from *tournées* include pasted-in photos of hunters next to animals killed and eaten during the rounds. Success in hunting established prestige, brought pleasure, and also furnished an important—perhaps the most important—source of nourishment in these hard to provision, low-yield agriculture areas. The French were disappointed in the resources in their “trashcan colony.” Oubangui-Chari was a country “that too-pompous reports had unfortunately presented as rich and fertile, which is far from the exact truth,” wrote an administrator in 1903 with frustration familiar today (Colonie du Congo 1903; my translation). In 1915, colonial authorities proposed ceding Oubangui-Chari to Britain in exchange for land on

the Gulf of Guinea, an offer the British quickly declined (Brégeon 1998: 272). The abundant fauna became the sole consolation.

In the early years of AEF's colonization, hunting was the most important form of profit. Buyers prized Central African ivory for its tenderness and exceptional whiteness, which would not yellow over time, unlike that of Asia or East Africa (Roulet 2004: 77). Though ivory has been an object of desire nearly as long as *Homo sapiens* have lived,⁵¹ the market had two booms: from 1840-1910, during which Europeans organized the slaughter; and from 1970-1990, driven by Western investors (who saw the price of ivory triple twice in the 1970s, an increase that paralleled steep declines of both gold and diamond prices) and Asians eager for carvings (Naylor 2005: 275). In the nineteenth-century boom, between 3.3 and 3.4 million elephants were killed for an annual ivory export of 500-1000 tons; in the more recent boom, about 90,000 elephants were killed per year for an annual export of 1000 tons (tusk size drastically dropped between the booms) (Roulet 2004: 77). In AEF alone, the official export figures list 2,355 tons of ivory (tens of thousands of elephants) during the 15 years from 1896-1911 (ibid: 78). The interlude was a short-lived but profitable. Ivory was also a currency; Sanusi paid tax-tribute in tusks. The trade declined subsequently, partly because of the waning of the concession system

51. Ivory may have been the "first organic substance used for human ornamentation" and the "first globally-traded commodity, before even gold" (Naylor 2005).

(individual white hunters took over the business of commercial hunting) and partly because of the global conservation movement led by Americans and British (ibid: 78).⁵²

Even during the most rapacious years of ivory production, the French cultivated a vision of themselves as rational exploiters of wildlife. Belgian King Leopold had reaped more profit from his colony, the Congo, but the French could gloat that he had not “rationally managed” hunting and had few beasts left. “It seems that some years ago the Belgian Congo was a remarkable country for game hunting. Today, there remains hardly any large game outside of the national parks,” wrote one conservationist in 1931 (Lavauden 1931: 8; my translation). In contrast, the French sought to make fauna a long-term profit source by charging rents and seizing the wares of anyone who contravened their system. Two linked sets of legal projects underpinned conservation: restrictive hunting policies (laws so narrow they would make it difficult for Central Africans to provision for themselves) and the drawing of new areas marked “fauna reserve” or “hunting reserve” on the maps.

Already in 1916 hunting regulations were signed into law. This law provided for “protected” hunting reserves, though the government did not designate any for almost a decade (IUCN 1992). The hunting policies required anyone possessing a firearm to obtain a permit, and they sought to instantiate a dual system in which Europeans had privileges that Africans were denied. For instance, whereas a European with a hunting permit could obtain 50 cartridges, the limit for Africans stood at 25 (Roulet 2004: 92).

52. Concern about the possible extinction of the elephants goes back to the classical era, when ivory was also important (Naylor 2005).

Africans were allowed only certain weapons. In 1929, amid concern over dwindling wildlife populations, the colonial government began protecting different kinds of animals at different levels. Those deemed at risk of extinction could be hunted only by Europeans who obtained permits and paid trophy taxes. Africans could legally access only small game.

The codification of a plethora of taxes and restrictions related to hunting preceded the building of capacity to manage systems for the rational exploitation of wildlife. Conservation was first and foremost a plan to assure revenues, including through fines charged to those breaking the law. These grandiose plans took the form of the above-mentioned regulations, and more. Regulating Africans' hunting was of utmost importance; the law mandating fines for hunting in protected areas preceded the demarcation of a single protected area by nine years (Roulet 2004: 112). But the laws were only blueprints. For one thing, all permitting was centralized in the capital, as much as a thousand kilometers from the buffer zone and largely inaccessible to its inhabitants. For another, possibilities for invisibility sprouted even amid the seemingly impervious span of the sweeping laws. For instance, Europeans (with African help) were allowed to kill any animal in self-defense (AEF 1934). In the bush, almost anything can be called self-defense.

Lawmakers far away from the buffer zone demarcated the first hunting reserves in 1925. Both lay in the far eastern part of the colony, near the just-determined border between Oubangui-Chari and Sudan: Ouandja-Vakaga to the north and Zemongo

toward the center. Both these hunting reserves were later reclassified as *réerves faune* (faunal reserves). Just prior to the London Convention on conservation in 1933, the French decreed that an area lying directly to the south of Sanusi's former capital would henceforth be Bamingui-Bangoran National Park, and the area to the north and east would be Manovo Gounda St. Floris National Park. During this period, three more hunting reserves were created and soon re-classified as faunal reserves in accordance with the London Convention: Aouk-Aoukale (1939; to the north and east of Ndele), Gribingui-Bamingui (1940), and Koukourou-Bamingui (1940) (IUCN 1992: 43). By 1952, AEF boasted nineteen islands of ostensible plant and animal protection. Of those, more than half (eleven) lay on the terrain of Oubangui-Chari alone, and three—encompassing almost all the subdivision—around Birao (Brégeon 1998: 232).⁵³

The above policies represent the legal blueprints for conservation, and they reflect the usual story told about conservation and state-building: a bifurcated system of access to hunting rights and the demarcation of vast areas as off-limits to humans (or off-limits to all but those Europeans with safari rights) combine to illegalize profitable

53. As elsewhere, setting up these parks required displacing the people living on these lands. One elderly *chef de groupe* and blacksmith (trained in France) in Ndele recounted how he had helped build the road to Ouadda in 1939-41. Since the Birao road now sliced through a new park, making the land off-limits to humans, he next worked to move the villages on the road to Birao to the road to Ouadda (more than a hundred kilometers as the crow flies, or much further by road—the two routes form sides of a wide triangle without a third leg to connect them). The villages of Kpata, Krakoma, Takra, Njongaga, and Yango Bringi (more than a thousand people) all date to this transfer. Today, those villages are again unfortunately placed, for they lie just beside another protected wildlife area, the resources of which are contested by the nearby safari hunting companies and their anti-poaching guards, elephant hunters, and diamond miners. The anti-poaching guards claim people from the village of Krakoma, who found of revenue in cultivating and selling millet to the transient workers (whether hunters or miners), betrayed their location to the well-armed and organized hunters from Sudan. These hunters ambushed and killed five anti-poaching guards. The guards call traitors “Krakomistes,” a sobriquet that has caught on broadly in towns like Ndele.

production by the poor while giving privileged access to the rich or others in power. This, for instance, is the story Thompson (1975) tells about how the hunting of the poor was transformed into “poaching” by legislation and related practices in eighteenth-century England in his ground-breaking study of these precursors to contemporary conservation policies. But in the buffer zone, the policies adopted in the capital did not translate neatly into action on the ground. Colonial officials’ enforcement capabilities were limited given how few guards they had to do the work and how vast the terrain they covered. Though they harshly punished those who openly contravened their dictates, often surpassing the punishments set forth in the *Code de l’Indigénat*, invisibility carved a degree of autonomy for those adept at responding flexibly to the opportunities on the ground. This was true not just of Africans but of Europeans as well. For instance, those Europeans who had used up their ivory export quota in the Belgian Congo, where white hunters faced a limit of four elephants per person, would cross the border to Oubangui-Chari, where ivory production was taxed but unlimited (Roulet 2004: 112). The three most famous of these hunters were the “three musketeers of Mboumou [southeastern CAR],” French men by the names of Beaumont, Kespars and Cormon, who collaborated with like-minded Africans:

The Breton Kespars, rough and even wrathful, a real feudal guerrilla atypical from the perspective of the commanders but an authentic bush runner in the grand tradition of Canadian forest-burners. He mistreated the Africans but would never leave them in the lurch. Edouards Cormon, finally, (1903-1981), a former Communist militant. More a trafficker than a hunter, he spoke the

Azande dialect and played intermediary on behalf of an administration he found too strict (Brégeon 1998: 224; my translation⁵⁴).

For white hunters, a part of the allure of this terrain was the invisibility its vastness afforded them, a mark of sovereignty made all the more powerful when combined with the law of weapons distribution and capabilities of extraction.

Europeans were not the only people to take advantage of the riches that mobile actors could produce from the vast bush. Herders and hunters, especially those who moved between CAR space and that of Chad and Sudan, found opportunities for profit here. Administrators came to abhor the herders and hunters not so much because they traversed CAR space—and protected areas at that—but because they produced goods (meat and other valuables) from the area without submitting to rents. From the perspective of the French, the area's riches had a limit, and they sought to control exploitation so as to reap the most profit from it. The "Arabs" threatened their ability to do this. Already in 1934, an administrator wrote in his *Monographie de Birao* that "Eastern Dar Kouti [Vakaga prefecture today, more or less] knew a grand prosperity just a few years ago, thanks to hunting. It was the time when ivory was still in high demand and hunting was not closely regulated. The *circonscription* was then invaded by many Arabs, who had no occupation besides the pursuit of elephants and giraffes"⁵⁵ (Boucher 1934:

54. "Le Breton Kespars, rugueux et même colérique, vrai féodal 'en guérilla larvée à l'égard des commandants' mais authentique coureur de brousse dans la grande tradition des Bois-Brûlés canadiens. Il rudoie les Africains mais ne les laisse jamais dans la peine. Edouard Cormon enfin (1903-1981), ancien militant communiste, en rupture de parti. Trafiquant plus que chasseur, il parle le dialecte zandé et joue les truchements à l'égard d'une administration qu'il trouve trop directive."

55. Le Dar Kouti Oriental connut une grand prospérité il n'y a encore quelques années, grâce à la chasse. C'était du temps ou l'ivoire avait encore une grande valeur et ou la chasse n'était pas très

51; my translation). The French acknowledged the extent to which sovereignty was marked through personalized initiatives:

The administration organized auctions and managed to sell, good year/bad year, four to seven tons of ivory, bought by the Kotto concession company through Syrian or Greek negotiators. But most of the transactions, maybe ten times as much, took place in the bush where "Arab traders" barter ivory for gunpowder, which they re-sell to the Europeans. All this fruitful and disastrous traffic took place in full sight and knowledge of the administrator of Ndele, who recommended, in 1924, the banning of spear-hunting elephants on horseback with a spear. Lamblin [governor of Oubangui-Chari] retorted that the first measure to take would be "the abstention of the *chef de circonscription* from himself practicing the fraudulent hunting of this important pachyderm"⁵⁶ (Brégeon 1998: 253; my translation).

The French never obtained a monopoly on the sovereign mark of extraction. Whether other extractors hid their loot from the administrators or negotiated their connivance, the fact remained that they, too, played with mobility and visibility to craft authorities for themselves, authorities that grew out of sometimes entering into alliances and sometimes hiding from them.

In many cases, the question of which bearer of a mark of sovereignty would prevail was an open one. For instance, in 1959 the anti-hunting guards stationed at Birao captured three "Fellata" (their term for the herding nomads who moved between Oubangui-Chari and Sudan), men who they accused of illegally hunting in the area, all

sévèrement réglementée. La Circonscription était alors envahie par de nombreux arabes, qui n'avaient pour occupation que la poursuite des éléphants et des Girafes.

56. L'Administration organise des ventes aux enchères et arrive à écouler, bon an mal an, quatre à sept tonnes d'ivoire, acheté par les agents de la Kotto et par des négociants syriens ou grecs. Mais l'essentiel des transactions, dix fois pus peut-être, se fait en brousse où circulent des 'traitants arabisés' qui troquent les pointes contre de la poudre pour les revendre aux Européens. Tout ce fructueux et désastreux trafic se fait au vu et au su d'un administrateur de Ndélé qui recommande, en 1924, l'interdiction absolue de la chasse à l'éléphant à cheval, à la sagaie, au moyen de battues, Lamblin rétorque que la première mesure à prendre serait: 'l'abstention de la part du chef de circonscription de pratiquer lui-même en fraude la chasse de cet intéressant pachyderme.'"

of which laws consecrated as off-limits park. One way or another, the captives managed to kill three guards and escape, never to be found again by the Central African authorities (Bordier 1959). (This incident was hardly isolated; the hunting guards often came under attack.⁵⁷) David Dacko, a pre-independence president of the territory, sought to prohibit all Fellata from entering the country (Dacko 1959), but his French advisers cautioned him that doing so would be fool-hardy and impossible. The terrain was too vast—the herders could always slip into the bush—and the guards too few, especially considering that taking such a repressive action against a single ethnic group would likely inflame their anger and result in much bloodshed (Bordier 1959). Instead, the adviser encouraged Prime Minister Abel Goumba to write to the French ambassador in Sudan and request that he entreat the authorities to take greater care to control the unruly herders, who Central Africans always consider foreigners in their territory, despite the fact that they spend from a third to half of their year in CAR. Goumba lamented

The increasingly undisciplined attitude of members of the Sudanese Republic, who deliberately cross the border with the CAR in the region of Am Dafok during the dry season to come here to practice poaching, the amplitude of which is indicated by the size of the massacres committed. This problem is not new but this past dry season it took on a new magnitude and it has become necessary to reduce it or else the CAR will not be able to maintain the volume of hunting animals that we want in this zone. Despite the measures taken to assure the surveillance of these vast regions to reduce poaching, it is impossible to obtain useful results through unilateral measures. And the northeastern region of the territory of the CAR constitutes for our country one of the zones on which we

57. For instance, the annual report for Ndele in 1948 states that the only case heard by Justice Française that year concerned a “rebellion” by nine people against the hunting guards and the laws they attempted to enforce (Placet 1949).

found our greatest hopes for development of hunting tourism. This hope is founded on the magnitude and diversity of animals existing there, who, in the opinion of those with professional competency in the matter, render hunting there competitive with countries like Kenya or Tanganyika, both internationally known as especially well-endowed⁵⁸ (Goumba ND; my translation).

Goumba sought to dignify his powerlessness by arguing that they should properly be dealt with multi-laterally.

As the accompanying note from the French advisor explained, their efforts “*préservé cette richesse du pays*” (Bourges ND) risked coming to naught. They launched frequent anti-poaching/anti-herding patrols, but the reports submitted upon completion of “*actions de présence—contrôle des soudanais*” in those years describe not a single arrest.⁵⁹ As Colonel Alain acknowledged of his caravan, “It is likely that Sudanese hunters, herders, who might have been met by the detachment slipped away as it approached” (Alain 1960). The patrols turned enforcement and control into a ritual, a performance,

58. “...de l’attitude de plus en plus indisciplinée des membres de la République Soudanais qui, à l’époque de la saison sèche, franchissent de façon délibérée la frontière de la REPUBLIQUE CENTRAFRICAINE dans la région de AM DAFOK pour venir y pratiquer un braconnage dont l’ampleur est indiquée par l’importance constatée des massacres accomplis.

Ce problème qui n’est pas nouveau a pris au cours de la dernière saison sèche une importance qu’il est nécessaire de réduire dans toute la mesure du possible si, comme elle le désire, la REPUBLIQUE CENTRAFRICAINE veut voir dans cette zone, se maintenir un volume intéressant pour elle de bêtes de chasse.

Malgré les mesures prises pour assurer la surveillance de ces vastes régions et pour réduire le braconnage, il n’est pas possible d’obtenir des résultats valables par une mesure unilatérale.

Or la région du Nord-Est du Territoire de la REPUBLIQUE CENTRAFRICAINE constitue pour ce pays l’une des zones sur laquelle il fonde les plus grands espoirs quant au développement du tourisme cynégétique ; cet espoir étant fondé sur l’importance et la diversité du nombre des animaux existants qui, de l’avis de personnalités compétentes professionnellement en la matière, rendent cette chasse concurrente possible de pays qui, tel le KENYA ou le TANGANYKA, sont reconnus internationalement comme particulièrement favorisés.”

59. The collection of these reports in the French military and colonial archives should not be taken as comprehensive, however.

that did little to convince people of the colonial authorities' omnipotence. Another report includes an even more telling statement of the government's position in the northeastern regions: "The 1959 Birao campaign permitted us to indispensably mark our sovereignty toward Sudan" ("*la campagne BIRAO 1959 a permis de marquer face au Soudan une souveraineté indispensable*") (Bertin 1959). Though phrased to make it sound like a positive accomplishment, the admission indicates that sovereignty, far from a *fait accompli*, was indeed something that the French had to endeavor to mark, or make apparent, in relation to the others using this space.⁶⁰

Though the conservation blueprints gave the impression that the French owned and controlled the land, in a realist sense they never actually possessed these powers. Remember Grotius: in Grotius's realist perspective, which was informed by the study of ancient Rome, space that cannot be both policed and exploited, such as the sea, cannot be owned. As Tuck explains, "The basis of the idea seems to have been a sense that even the Romans could not, as a matter of sheer practicality, enforce their will on the high seas in a consistent and effective fashion—because of the size and unmanageable character of the sea, it was always possible for other people to slip through it unmolested and to fish in it" (1999: 91). Though he focused only on the sea, Grotius meant for his theories to apply to unoccupied or otherwise unpoliceable land as well. (It was using this path of argumentation that he justified the occupation of land associated with sovereigns like the Native Americans: new arrivals who could make the land produce money through

60. Just a few years earlier, one military officer had written that "This country is first and foremost Chadian and Sudanese" (Teulière 1952; my translation).

agriculture, hunting, or other forms of exploitation could claim precedence (Keene 2002).) Policing a buffer zone like northeastern Oubangui-Chari was effectively impossible, and so no one could be said to “own” or have dominion over this territory. Managing the mobility of people using the space, which Grotius considered the primary sense of jurisdiction (the right to restrict others’ navigation [Benton 2010: 125]), was the focus of their efforts.

Already prior to Sanusi’s death, the French administrator in Ndele, Capt. Modat, announced that he would seek to collaborate with his British counterparts in AES to create a passport system. Travelers would henceforth be required to obtain medical certification attesting to being sleeping sickness-free, for the arrival of the disease worried officials in South Darfur, where tsetse flies had yet to swarm. Merchant caravans, too, would need papers, and those documents would include a listing of everything that they carried. Modat worried that they might be hiding sources of profit, such as weapons or—even graver—slaves. He explained that the leaders of these caravans often use the pretense of conducting “legitimate commerce” or making a pilgrimage to hide their trafficking in slaves and guns (Ounabgui-Chari/Tchad 1912). The laws were published in the Sudan register in 1911 (Oubangui-Chari/Tchad 1918), and in the following years French administrators made the arduous trek to Kafia Kingi to discuss the modalities of the new system. Every man seeking to move from one colony to the other would have to carry papers, which included a line for the listing of

wives and children accompanying him. As the British captain summarized in his letter to his counterpart across the border in 1914,

Punishments for Native trespassers entering AE Sudan via Bahr el Ghazal. As Bahr el Ghazal is a closed Province, any native trespasser, by which I mean any native unprovided with a proper pass, is liable to fine and imprisonment, and in addition if found any contraband articles on him is liable to be punished for them & have them confiscated.

Natives “wanted” by the French Authorities. The custom of the Sudan Govt with regard to settlers is this: If they are wanted for criminal offences, they will be handed over if demanded, but Political refugees it is not customary to hand over.

The Mamur of Kafia Kingi has been instructed to hunt for the rifle thieves and murderers mentioned by you to Captain Clark, and if captured, they will be detained until you can send an escort for them. I am sorry to inform you that the rifles themselves which were in custody in Kafia Kingi Fort have been stolen owing the dishonesty of a soldier

Lieutenant Ripault informs me in a recent letter that all Natives from Bahr el Ghazal found in the French Territories without proper passes will be detained, and I am delighted to hear it and hope that, by our joint efforts, the large amount of contraband trade and Slave dealing that undoubtedly still goes on may be severely checked (Maud 1914).

What is interesting about this document is that it simultaneously indicates the imagined architecture of control and admits to how limited its actual reach—in practice, soldiers could steal guns or otherwise act with impunity. Control of travelers was never as total as the colonial authorities would have liked. *Transfuges* still found opportunities to profit by remaining mobile. Tellingly, all these passport deliberations occurred more than a decade before the physical, geographic border between the colonies was even demarcated. Once the border was finally inked onto the maps, neither administration bothered setting up a post there. Instead, border formalities, for those who followed them, were taken care of in Am Dafok (Sudan) and Bambouti (Oubangui-Chari), towns 700 kilometers apart! (Boulvert 1985: 310). For many reasons, including the simple fact of

the cost (in money, armament, soldiers) of any attempt to do so, control of territory was an important mark of sovereignty for neither Sanusi and the other raiders nor the colonial or post-colonial governments. For all these raiders, the important boundary-drawing distinction was production-based, not geographic: the border was the zone to be raided (Metefia 1982), and as such its geographic position continually changed.

2.7 Conclusion

In the years just before France officially quit its role as governor,⁶¹ military officials made a sober assessment of the terrain in a “top secret” report:

The Oubangui, a country of forested savanna, with a population clearly concentrated along the roads and vast empty spaces seems like the ideal terrain for a guerilla: easy to mount an ambush on a penetration road; profitable destruction of bridges, small bridges and ferries that all itineraries must cross; possibility to disappear in the bush the moment the act is committed and there be minimally vulnerable by virtue of the difficulties of penetrating and the quasi-impossibility for aerial surveillance of individuals or small detachments; possibility of organizing rear bases in this same bush, away from inhabited areas but in the former zones of habitation; possibility to receive supplies from the exterior via either the eastern or western borders.... In these conditions, the task of the forces charged with maintaining or re-establishing order appears particularly arduous.... Large spaces escape all control; and operations there must be taken on foot, with all the slowness and fatigue that this mode of movement entails. Many men would be needed because the Oubangui bush with its lack of horizon and absence of clear routes is an ‘eater of men’⁶² (Oubangui-Chari ND; my translation).

61. In fact, French people continued to occupy positions in the CAR government into at least the 1970s, and as advisers (one per ministry) they continue to exert a strong influence.

62. “L'Oubangui, pays de savane boisée, avec sa population clairsemée concentrée le long des routes et ses vastes espaces vides semble une terre d'élection pour la guérilla : embuscades faciles à monter sur les axes de pénétration, destructions payantes des ponts, ponceaux ou bacs que doivent franchir tous les itinéraires, possibilité de disparaître dans la brousse le coup fait et d'y être peu vulnérable par suite des difficultés de pénétration et de la quasi-impossibilité pour l'aviation d'y repérer des isolés ou de petits détachements ; possibilité d'organiser dans cette même brousse, à l'écart des lieux habités mais dans les anciennes zones de peuplement des bases de recueil ; possibilité enfin de recevoir dans ces bases un ravitaillement extérieur par la frontière de l'Est ou de l'Ouest. Dans ces conditions, la tâche des forces chargées du maintien ou du rétablissement de l'ordre apparaît comme particulièrement ardue... de larges espaces échappent à tout contrôle ; et des opérations ne pourront y être entreprises qu'à pied, avec toute la

In the end, they handed over the capital and its wan administrative tentacles before any guerrilla war broke out. The description above of the limits of their control as they prepared to depart is strikingly similar to an assessment written in 1910, little more than a decade after they had arrived: “Our situation is the following: we occupy certain points in a vast territory that we easily penetrated, but our influence stops not far from our posts and our administration only really exists in those places where we can impose it”⁶³ (Mordrelle 1910; my translation). Rather than a portrait of omnipotent sovereignty, analysis of the French presence in northeastern CAR reveals a complicated scene in which a number of actors struggled to mark themselves as sovereign. Some did this through making themselves and their authorities visible, as the French did with their *tournées* and *actions de présence*. Others, like the herder-hunters, more often did so by making themselves invisible in the all-encompassing bush. All these tactics, both those founded on visibility and those founded on invisibility, relied on mobility and circulation, and all these tactics had power over production as their main goal. Throughout these years and throughout this space, constellations of extraction, jurisdiction and diplomacy (the ability to negotiate relationships), intersected by the law of weapons distribution, were the paradigmatic capabilities marking sovereignty. In the next chapter, I will turn to the question of the Central African state and the roles it has

lenteur et la fatigue que ce mode de déplacement comporte. Elles exigeront des effectifs importants car la brousse Oubanguienne avec son manque d’horizon et l’absence de tout itinéraire ‘obligé’ est une ‘mangeuse d’hommes.’ ”

63. Notre situation est donc la suivante: nous occupons certains points d’un vaste territoire dans lequel nous avons facilement pénétré; mais notre influence s’arrête non loin de nos postes et notre administration ne s’exerce réellement que là où nous pouvons l’imposer.

(and has not) played in the buffer zone. I will argue that “the state” here has a dual character: on the one hand, the institutions of the state, withered and disconnected; and on the other, the idea of the state, an ideal-type mental image, invocation of which paradoxically activates marks of sovereignty for a range of actors and thereby undermines any kind of unitary state control.

3. The state of the buffer zone: Non-centralization and brokered/vicarious autonomy amid dreams of welfare

3.1 Introduction

Returning from a visit to a friend who lived on the outskirts of Tiringoulou one sunny mid-afternoon, I passed the primary school: one concrete building and two thatch-covered lean-tos with rows of benches underneath. I found the director, Amal, outside his office, said hello, and asked how he was. Fine, he said. But something was bothering him. I waited, happy for the shade of the schoolhouse wall, and soon Amal explained what had happened. One of the boys at the *collège* (junior high school) had sneaked into his office in the corner of one of the classrooms and written on his desk. The writing involved a certain girl, one of Amal's students. He wrote that this girl had married a number of boys in town, and the student wrote that she had married Amal too. Amal knew the culprit immediately, because the boys listed as husbands were the rivals of one *collège* student. He wanted to punish the boy himself, he said, but "*la Centrafrique, c'est un pays de droit*" —CAR is a country of law/right—so he decided to alert the authorities. Amal collared the boy and dragged him to the gendarmerie, which in Tiringoulou was run by the UFDR armed group.¹ When he passed the gendarmerie post the next morning, though, he found no sign of the boy. The gendarmes said the matter was closed. Amal was sure the boy or his family had paid for release. He went to the boy's parents. They denied responsibility, arguing that it was the school's job to teach him good behavior. As he recounted these events, Amal paced—we were now doing

1. For more on this rebellion, see chapter six.

laps of the mud-and-straw school buildings. “*Nous sommes dans un pays de droit*,” he kept repeating, as if to justify his failure to beat the boy, who in his mind clearly warranted it. Now, Amal had developed a new plan: he would kick the girl out of school. Her parents would be angry, and would force the boy’s parents to punish him. Then the girl could be reinstated. In the meantime, Amal wrote a letter to the mayor—a man from a village some 50km away and not respected by people here—explaining his frustration. When we parted company, Amal’s agitated, hopping-mad demeanor had calmed. His repetitions of “*La Centrafrique est quand même un pays de droit*” now contained resignation along with the anger.

Amal’s dilemma strikes me as emblematic of the challenges people in the buffer zone faced. The fall-out from the desktop defacement is one example of how tenuous (non-violent) coercion is, and how difficult it is to work together based on shared rules. Tiringoulou, it should be noted, is an overgrown village of 2,000 people. Around town the language most frequently heard is Gula, and almost all residents are Gula. The challenges of coercion and working together in groups are not, then, functions of the failure of inter-ethnic integration. Nor are they functions of the solidarities of the African town or city (Simone 2004a; Bonhomme 2009). Rather, they reflect social organization in which the construction of large-scale, long-term, collaborative social projects is extremely difficult. It’s as hard to say whether this difficulty is because people prefer autonomy, or tend to mistrust each other, or whether some other factor is at work, as it is to explain why “corruption” is idiomatic, and thus hard to get rid of (Smith 2007).

Amal's anger incarnates this tension: he expects the government and its laws to watch over people and punish them so they behave in particular ways. Yet he recognizes that the reality is far from the theory. "This is after all a country of laws": Amal's diatribe was not marked by cynicism, even as it was full of frustration. Rather, Amal wanted to make it come true by repeating it. He had an *aspiration* for what an all-powerful state that could regulate all behavior would look like, but his ideal continued to be far, far from any of his experiences of rule in his home village. Educated in Bangui, Amal made a point of wearing freshly-laundered, dustless suits and ties in shiny blacks and purples every day at the schoolhouse. His leather shoes remained clean, even during the windy, dusty months of March and April. The vandal's parents, meanwhile, expected—perhaps a purely opportunistic—that the school would shape their son in accordance with certain rules. And yet these expectations fell flat in the face of social organization that militated against them, social organization in which all group-building projects were outsourced to "the state," a hollow entity that never responded to any appeals.

A few months before, a representative of Kwa na Kwa ("work, nothing but work"), the president's political party, had alighted in Tiringoulou in a small plane. After resting on the plush sofas in the fanciest house in town, an aqua-painted concrete dwelling that belonged to the leader of the town's armed group (who preferred to live in his old, mud-and-thatch compound a ten minute walk away), the representative began to receive supplicants. Dressed in a golfer's attire—khaki shorts, loafers, a striped polo shirt stretched into a hammock for his growing belly—he welcomed would-be wildlife

guards and chalk-less schoolteachers to explain their needs. “Here’s what you need to do,” he told each one in turn. “Write a letter to the president. I myself will place it on his desk. I will make sure he reads it.” The town’s rebel gendarmes explained how difficult it is to do their work without a motorcycle to get around. “Write a letter. You need a motorcycle? No—you need *two* motorcycles!” A youth member of the rebel group and hopeful future soldier expressed some skepticism. The KNK representative asked rhetorically: “You think the president won’t reply? You think that when I present him with this letter, he will not answer?” People dutifully copied out their requests in cursive. His laptop bag full of letters, the KNK representative flew the following morning. Months later, no one received an answer. The KNK representative was not seen or heard from in Tiringoulou again.

In addition to creating awe among the peasants when faced with this oddly- yet clearly richly-clad stranger, the encounter had a pedagogical purpose. The KNK representative was teaching people to displace their desires for social organization, for welfare and for salaries, onto a near-magical entity, a president with a desk and the ability to answer prayers written in the right way. And yet the magic brought only disappointment. The letter-writers never received replies. Instead they went on, fashioning opportunities as best they could in a place where collective action is immensely difficult, except in the case of resolving grave threats to social welfare. (A suspected penis-snatcher was caught and killed, for instance, as will be explained in chapter six.)

My purpose in this chapter is not to write an ethnography of the state. Instead, I micro-analyze political and social organization to explore life in a place where negotiation and confrontation, not rules, determine outcomes. Throughout, I seek to show the ways that “the state,” as an ideal type, affects such a non-centralized state of affairs. To do this, in this chapter I will develop my discussion of non-centralized sovereign capabilities, foremost among them flexibility, negotiation, and invisibility (that is, an ability to play with what others do and do not know about what one is doing, an ability that exists on a spectrum from the straightforward to the occult). I will do this first by presenting the buffer zone’s post-independence history and discussing the governing strategies of a few actors in the zone, such as a Water and Forests Ministry boss, who bear sovereign capabilities. I then examine a conflict between anti-poaching guards and diamond miners and a meeting held to air the parties’ grievances. “The state” keeps popping into the discussion, because it has come to stand in for all that politics in the buffer zone is not, and has come to justify a wide range of undertakings that thwart the creation of unitary authority.

An aside, first, about my research: most of the material comes from fieldwork in northeastern CAR, and especially Tiringoulou, Ndele, and Kaga Bandoro. It is supplemented by experience as a research consultant to international organizations in Bangui and abroad. Through this work, I was present in meetings with high-level officials, and I managed a collaborative, large-scale research project² on village-level

2. Together with a co-research designer, an anthropology professor at the University of Bangui, and a magistrate, I trained twelve researchers from various parts of the country.

dispute resolution in six prefectures. This last project made it impossible to ignore the extent to which mistrust characterizes even small-scale social agglomerations. These projects also showed how Central Africans, diplomats, and aid workers share a vision of a future, ideal-type state, and how they are approaching these goals backward, with theories disconnected from practice.

3.2 Independence for the trash-can colony

To explain the non-centralization of politics in the buffer zone, it is important to understand the area's peculiarly limited history of being subjected to centralizing initiatives. In chapter two, I related the governing projects of the raiding sultans, the raiding sultans in combination with the European explorer-officer-administrators, and then the French colonial officials, all of which contributed to the creation of a system of political organization in which a range of actors bore sovereign capabilities, and some of these capabilities favored centralization while others led to non-centralization. In this chapter, partly to preempt the critiques of those who think the study of politics should begin with the assumptions inherent in the United Nations roll call (that every patch of the earth is owned by a nation-state, that these nation-states have the monopoly on the legitimate use of force, that states protect and non-state actors are dangerous "vigilantes," and so forth), I will present an overview of the area's history since the 1960s and show how fitfully centralization has ever been pursued here.

The CAR is at best an improbable state.³ Lying at the geographic center of the continent, it comprises the lands left behind when the rest of the region had been claimed. It was a way station on the road to Chad, a colony of far greater strategic importance for the French.⁴ The colonizers had hoped it would provide as many riches as the Belgian Congo, just to the south, but it never proved *rentable* (financially feasible) to do so. Instead, it has languished in the purgatory of the label “potentially rich”: it has reserves of timber, oil, diamonds, gold, and uranium, and, in the south, ample water and relatively fertile land. But for a range of reasons its resources are hard to exploit on anything but an artisanal scale. This has not, however, stopped raiders from here finding the goods that they find valuable, such as ivory and grazing land.

In the years just prior to independence, France admitted that the colony was probably the worst-off of its territories, in terms of both the weakness of governing institutions and their empty coffers. In their less charitable assessments, they referred to it as the *colonie poubelle* (trashcan colony).⁵ Little changed with independence. French administrators either kept their jobs or became “advisers” who despite their downgrade in ranking retained their authority for governing. Even European clerks and typists were brought in to fill the gaps left behind by the miserly French, who had educated so few

3. Others have pointed out the importance of a regional analysis to understanding the constitution of the Central African state. See for instance Marchal 2009; ICG 2007.

4. Amazingly, given how difficult the route is, traveling from Brazzaville to Bangui and on through the wilds of Oubangui-Chari (from Fort de Possel—Sibut today—to Fort Crampel—now Kaga Bandoro) was for many years the “least bad option” for supplying French troops and administrators in Chad. Given the lack of roads and motorized vehicles in the early years of colonization, forced labor was the main way that goods—including, notoriously, a battleship—and Europeans were transported (Mollion 1992).

5. More charitably, it was the Cendrillon de l’Empire (Cinderella of empire). (Brégeon 1998.)

people (Webb 1990: 113). Central government revenues came mostly from donors and from taxes extracted from the French planters who had decided to stick it out. The northeastern buffer zone, in contrast, held little to no interest to the country's presidents.⁶

Not only did the hinterlands not provide revenue or any other kind of profit (symbolic, for instance) to the people occupying government posts in Bangui, but they were also a source of fear. Early in his tenure, David Dacko, the first president of the CAR, planned a trip to Birao, the northeastern-most outpost of CAR. The administrator there (still a French man, despite the formal passing of independence) later recounted that he had been on rounds when the president arrived and returned home only in the wee hours. "When I joined him [Dacko] around three in the morning, I found him barricaded in my residence (the furniture had even been pushed up against the doors). The next morning, he informed me that he wanted to leave immediately for Bangui. I realized then how full of worry he was" (Claustre in Brégeon 1998: 226; my translation). For Dacko and the other southern riverine folk who comprised the ruling elite,⁷ the

6. Webb's observation of Bokassa still holds true today: "The 'warrior' who had acted to save his 'abandoned' people was also a practical man—at least in the initial stages of his new regime. He was well aware that his long term survival depended as much, if not more so, on his ability to obtain foreign recognition and support, particularly from his African neighbors and of course France, than it rested on incorporating the largely disaffected Central African people" (1990: 130). CAR provides the textbook case of "negative sovereignty" (Englebert 2009).

7. Ange-Felix Patassé, elected in 1992, was the first non-southerner to claim the presidency. His successor, Jean-François Bozizé, also hails from the north. The extent to which these leaders have ignored their home regions (Mehler 2011)—and even faced armed uprisings from these zones—suggests that the fundamental political divide is not regional, but is rather an opposition between capital elites/everyone else. There has still never been a capital leader from the Northeast or East; Bozizé and Patassé's Northwest has historically been much more integrated and understood as a part of the Central African polity than the Northeast, which stands apart as a land of deprivation, isolation, and foreignness.

inhabitants of the Northeast were foreigners. Whereas most of the people living in the south and west are Christian, most in the north practice Islam. Rumors of Muslim plots swirl through the churches and in the *quartiers*. I have heard variations on several themes: “The Muslims have a plan to take over our country”; “All Muslims smuggle illegal goods”; “Muslims are violent, hot-headed and cannot be trusted.” These sentiments sometimes manifest as a mutual, overt hostility, but more often they lie in the not-quite-visible realm of mistrust that underlies day-to-day relations. Every now and then, the mistrust erupts into major incidents. Just before I arrived in Bangui for a brief visit in June—July 2011, two young boys were found dead in the trunk of a car. The car belonged to a merchant of Chadian descent, and one interpretation of the event quickly came to dominate: the children had been murdered and their corpses were to be brought to Nigeria, where their organs would become fodder for occult ceremonies. People rioted to protest the presence of such a grave threat in their midst. Mobs stormed schools and demanded that Muslim children be brought out for vengeance. One Muslim friend who just the week before had financed several projects for his *chef de quartier* found the quarter chief now demanding to search his rubbish and anything else he sought to quit his compound of. (The following week, the *chef* resumed cordial relations without a word about the mistrustful interlude. This is the trackless roller coaster that many people here are on. Navigating these fluctuations is a major preoccupation in a place of such tenuous social cohesion.) Presidential security forces, comprised mostly of the Chadian soldiers that prop up the current president, quelled the riots, killing a dozen

people in the process. This incident was just one example of how quick southerners are to understand Muslims and northerners as profiteering, violent foreigners.⁸

Language is another dividing line that sets the Northeast apart as foreign. Initially, only a small number of people in the riverine regions of the south spoke Sango, a trading language used by merchants in the area. Colonialism and missionaries helped spread its use throughout almost all the country. The French, always eager for the easiest, cheapest path in this trashcan of a colony, preferred to promulgate Sango-learning over French because the former's closeness to the other Niger-Congo languages that predominate in the more heavily-populated areas made it quicker for people to learn. In the early years, people saw it as a "white" language, as surely as French. Speaking Sango became the immediately-apparent badge of the *évolué* (a term that Sango borrowed from the French). With time, though, people, nudged by popular 1950s Sango-crooning guitar players, appropriated the language as their own. The appropriation was so whole-hearted as to spur one linguist to write in 1979, "They [southerners] have gotten so used to the (false) idea that all Central Africans, wherever they are, speak Sango, that they are vividly astonished when in front of someone who

8. The figure of the profiteering foreigner plays a number of roles in CAR politics. It plays into the trope that Central Africa is being economically raped by foreigners, which has some basis in truth but ignores the ways that certain people here themselves profit from and facilitate such a relationships. Given that perhaps the main duty of the president is to negotiate concessions—whether to private companies or aid groups—with foreigners, criticizing the rapacious foreigner has become a way of criticizing the president without appearing to do so (Marchal 2010). This line of critique takes on an additional edge given that many in the political class have the capacity to use nationality opportunistically. Many hold French passports, and they and/or their families live part time in Europe. If trouble strikes in Bangui, they can quickly decamp. Regional foreigners are also vilified. The entrepreneurial streak that causes countries like Nigeria and Cameroon to hum with businesses and schemes running the full spectrum of legitimacy does not form part of "Central African" self-conceptions. Thus most of the successful businesspeople in Bangui are "Cameroonian" or "Chadian," even if born and raised in the city.

does not speak it. That person is treated with much condescension, as an incongruity!” (Diki-Kidiri 1979: 38; my translation). During a World Bank-sponsored research workshop I attended in Bangui, which had the goal of enumerating the causes of Central Africa’s “fragility,”⁹ the most potent emotions flowed when a professor at the University of Bangui told the story of one time when she went to pay her electric bill and the man in front of her in line had a Central African identity card and yet spoke no Sango! She was livid, certain the card must be counterfeit and its bearer a shifty Chadian, Cameroonian or Congolese. When another participant sought to sanitize the professor’s comments (“Of course, it is *possible* to be Central African but not speak Sango...”), a louder chorus repudiated such heresy.

At this point anyone familiar with the history of colonization in Africa might raise an objection: all over the continent, the less-accessible regions were demonized as foreign. Resources and crops may have been pulled from these zones, but colonial goods such as education and social services were reserved for the “civilizing” souths. This dynamic is seen throughout West Africa, for instance, and the old colonial biases stayed strong in the independent administrations. In some cases, though the *idea* of a north/south divide retains social currency, the political elite is actually fairly integrated

9. The previous terminology used to describe state dysfunctionality (collapsed/failed/failing) seems to have fallen out of favor with most of the international development/policy crowd. In addition to sounding rather judgmental to development “partners,” “failed” is not a very useful analytical category because it does not explain the workings of politics, but only what they lack (de Waal 2009). The new “fragility” lens is analytically impoverished too, however. Many states labeled “fragile,” like CAR, are actually quite durable in their weakness. They remain mired in a position of low functionality, receiving just enough aid to prop up the status quo; their negative (externally-granted) sovereignty makes revolutionary change difficult to achieve (Englebert 2009).

(Piot 2010). The difference between these cases and that of CAR and the buffer zone is a matter of degree. Recall that the buffer zone was not just under-noticed during the colonial period; it was an “autonomous zone” variously semi-attached to Oubangui-Chari and Chad, which allowed administrators to play our fantasies of control, if they did not first go crazy from the isolation. Independence did not change this; rather, it exacerbated these dynamics, since now central government authorities added the still-fresh family memories of northern-led slave raiding to their understanding and treatment of the zone and its inhabitants. The degree to which the northeast has been left unto itself while also not being on the road to anywhere is arguably unmatched elsewhere on the continent, with the exception perhaps of patches of the major deserts.¹⁰

Given how ignored this northeastern zone by and large was, the usual center-periphery model needs to be called into question, as suggested in chapter two. Mamdani (1996) has argued for the importance of tracking the trajectories of “decentralized despots” who ruled rural areas during colonialism’s projects of indirect rule. He showed how colonial policies of decentralizing governance to “traditional” leaders injected new powers of coercion into these men’s authority and fundamentally warped the preceding, more-egalitarian social structures. These patterns remained in place with independence. As useful as this model is, it assumes a stable center-periphery framework. In the buffer zone, in contrast, bearers of sovereign capabilities draw claims to authority from

10. Lydon (2009) has argued that the apparent space of disconnection of the Saharan desert has in fact long been an ocean-like space of flows and connection. The Central African buffer zone, though home to important modes of mobility, has not seen this kind of interconnectedness and transport.

relationships with multiple, geographically-disparate, far-off patrons depending on the interests at stake. I bring this up to highlight that the framing of the buffer zone as “foreign” breaks out of the center-periphery model that is usually assumed in other studies of southern government/uncivilized north dynamics. Nationalism is still a salient category, but it can work in unexpected ways.¹¹ My intention here is not to debunk or contradict the studies that have emphasized capital/nation/state versus hinterland/foreign/uncivilized dynamics in Africa but to explore what becomes visible when we set that model somewhat to the side and study the hinterland for in terms of its own non-centralized dynamics rather than assuming its mode of functional integration with the “center.”

Anyone with a passing familiarity with Central African history will raise another objection to my presentation of the limits of the area’s statehood: What about the Emperor Bokassa? Did his authoritarian charisma not imbue people with a new sense of nationhood? To a greater degree than anyone else in the country’s history, he did (Faës and Smith 1998). He lives on more in legend than in deed. An immediate challenge arises when attempting to analyze Bokassa, his rule, and his legacy, in the present. For it has become difficult to differentiate what he actually did, and people’s sentiments toward him while he ruled, from the ways he has come to be remembered. This dilemma

11. There is an element of Geschiere’s (2009) argument that struggles over autochthony have become increasingly salient to nationalist politics in these dynamics. To account for vernaculars of nationalism it bears recalling Sassen’s (2006) reminder that what we see today is not a “post-national” phase but a “de-nationalized” one—that is, it is not that nationalism is not important but that relationships to and with the national are in flux.

is not unique, of course; history is always written in the present (Trouillot 1995). With the economic decline and increasing militarization that has characterized the region since Bokassa's ouster, people are all the more likely to impute to their former leader all-powerful control that he did not actually exert. Compared to the situation that would confront him today, he benefited from a less-straitened context in which to operate, making him seem more effective. Still, Bokassa is important for the ways that he contributed to the shaping of an *idea* of the all-powerful state, which has if anything become even more important in the absence of such an over-arching structure. "All presidents kill people. Bokassa killed the right people," people told me.

While watching a volleyball game in Ndele one afternoon, I struck up a conversation with some of the other onlookers, mostly young men. One player kept screaming at his teammates when they made mistakes. He stomped and fumed like the cartoon Tasmanian Devil. The young man was a corporal in the army, and all knew him simply as Bokassa. Some claimed he descended by blood, others held that they shared a spirit.¹² We talked about his namesake. "Bokassa was our Louis XIV! He was our Pericles!" they said animatedly. "You see these buildings? All these buildings" —he pointed at the *préfet's* house, the tribunal, and the *sous-préfet's* office, which together comprise Ndele's administrative node—"he built them."

In fact, the buildings date to the French period. Though Bokassa built more than any other Central African president, the memory of him as a master state-builder seems

12. Corporal Bokassa died when the CPJP attacked Ndele in November 2009. According to acquaintances, he had been out late drinking and was not in top form for the 5 a.m. battle.

somewhat out of proportion to his physical legacy. It seems to reflect a contemporary desire for an imagined all-powerful state more than an analysis of the historical record. As Herzog's (1990) documentary about Bokassa suggested, the stories people told about him—from his alleged cannibalism and carnivorous pets to his preposterously grand ceremonies—created an immense figure out of a person who was, in actual fact, quite petite.

Today, Bokassa's most potent legacy is the vision he encouraged of a government that would envelop everyone under its watchful eye, which was at once wrathful and caring. He conjured the vision, but it has grown in inverse proportion to the political chaos and neglect that has marked the years since his fall. President Bozizé clearly understood this appeal when he decided to rehabilitate Bokassa in 2010, fourteen years after the erstwhile emperor's death—and in the run-up to presidential elections. The widespread contemporary respect for Bokassa indexes people's frustration with their compatriots' inability to organize for collective projects in any substantial way anymore, with the exception of rebellion and self-defense.

Two men, Doungous Koro and Abdirahman Adé, made this frustration real to me. Born around 1930, they were quite likely the oldest residents of northeastern CAR. They both lived in villages just north of Ndele, along the road that had come to be controlled by a rebel group. They were the repositories of information about the Sanusi sultanate, and we met to talk history. After discussing the skill of Sanusi's battle techniques, Doungous carefully pulled a stack of small squares of paper, each one the

size of a large postage stamp, from his wallet. They were tax receipts for the individual tax once required of each resident. He had retained one for almost every year (and assured me that he had the gap years at home), from 1955 (“Oubangui-Chari”) through the 60s (“République Centrafricaine”) and 70s (“Empire Centrafricain”) and into the 80s (“République Centrafricaine”). Then they stopped. As a presidential candidate in 1992, Ange-Félix Patassé pledged to eliminate the head tax if elected. He did so. This move coincided with the decrease in international aid in the post-Cold War era, and central coffers quickly emptied. The few health clinics and other services that had operated in remote areas like Ndele withered. As Doungous made a neat pile of the frayed tickets, he said, “When you have your tax receipt in hand, everyone respects you. It was through the receipts that we gained our dignity” [*C’était notre dignité a travers ça*]. The two men’s villages lay at the heart of fighting between government soldiers and rebels, and in the months following our meeting they were repeatedly attacked. After the first attacks, I heard they had survived in the bush along with the others fleeing the fighting. Then, as access to the area became increasingly difficult, I heard no more.

Today, “the state” is an idea that helps people index their feeling of abandonment in a rapidly-changing world that they feel is passing them by. In this sense, the attachment of buffer zone residents to the state appears to be quite different from that of people in rural Uganda, as described by Jones (2008). There, the state had lost all significance as an organizer of people’s hopes and dreams. In the Central African buffer zone, it has taken on an even greater significance as a marker of all that is happening in

the world but not reaching them.¹³ People would bring up reports they had tuned in on their radios about times when Western governments would go to great lengths to rescue their citizens held captive abroad. Many of them, in contrast, remembered times when government soldiers had attacked and burned their villages. What, they wondered, could explain or justify this disparity in treatment?

But if people in the buffer zone have indeed been abandoned, it is an abandonment in which the implied preceding phase of care never obtained. Tattered tax receipts notwithstanding, there was never much centralized control and organization in hinterlands like those inhabited by Doungous and Abdirahman. True, some administrative functions seem to have been more widespread in previous decades. The archives of the Ndele tribunal (a dark corner filled with stacks of paper so dust-encrusted just looking at them made my lungs contract in fear of rapid-onset asthma) attest that in the period 1964-1971, tribunal officers regularly prosecuted people for such colonial-era crimes as public drunkenness (punished by a 2,000 CFA fine and a night in jail), production of alcohol (a prohibition still on the books, but never prosecuted; as the Ndele tribunal clerk explained, the people tasked with enforcing the ban are among the most-eager consumers of the brew), idleness, and even “failure to maintain one’s concession.” But to the extent the trajectory of governance in the region can be described

13. As Gupta reminds, “Rather than take the notion of ‘the state’ as a point of departure, we should leave open the analytical question as to the conditions under which the state does act as a cohesive and unitary whole” (1995: 392). Because it exists both discursively and institutionally, “There is no position strictly inside or outside the state because what is being contested is the terrain of the ideological field” (393). My interest in the workings of non-centralization is not meant to deny these observations but provide an alternate approach to the analysis of them.

as a “retreat of the state” (Strange 1996), it is a much less marked retreat than elsewhere, for the simple reason that there was so little that could pull back.

I emphasize the longing of people like Doungous not to argue that everything—administration, law and order—worked better in the past; what little there was has withered, but there was indeed so little to wither in the first place. Rather, I emphasize their and others’ lamentations of abandonment to recognize their bitterness and frustration, which were palpable in so many conversations. In describing the workings of the largely non-centralized political configurations found in the buffer zone, as I do in this dissertation, there is a risk of making the dysfunction seem more functional than it actually is. This, for instance, is a critique leveled at some of the anthropological literature that rose to challenge the “new barbarism” (Richards 1996) thesis that initially dominated analysis of Africa’s post-Cold War conflicts. The violence is not senseless, these accounts argued, but has a logic if only one takes the time to understand. The risk, then, is making it all sound *too* reasonable (Coulter 2009). And people in the buffer zone are not content. They are immensely frustrated even as organizing on a local level—seemingly the first step toward building collective institutions—is rarely attempted, except in the form of rebellion. (And even then, for reasons I will discuss further in chapters six and seven, the new social forms remain loosely-affiliated groupings, not entities united in solidarity.) Instead, the frustrations all get channeled onto this imagined state-ideal. Over and over I heard some variation on, “Only the state can fix these problems.” The sentiment was the same whether expressed by a peasant in a

remote village or a suit-clad diplomat from an international organization in the capital. To give just one example, on the UN plane to Tiringoulou I struck up a conversation with a Chadian man working for the Comité d'Aide Médicale (CAM, Medical Aid Committee; a French humanitarian organization) in Birao. He told of having been in a vehicle stopped by road robbers a few months before. One of the attackers spoke an Arabic dialect that sounded Sudanese, and the three others spoke an Arabic he recognized from Chad. The bandits held them all day. At sundown, they relinquished their captives and told them to walk back to Birao, thirty kilometers away. The robbers kept the Land Cruiser. "It is up to the state to make peace here," the aid worker testified. "Only the state can bring peace." At this point we had landed at Birao and were standing in the scant shade offered by the airplane wing. Around us, French and Togolese soldiers puttered busily around the massive military peacekeeping base they oversaw here, some twelve kilometers from town. A few weeks later, unknown attackers (they later claimed to represent an otherwise-unknown armed group, the African Free Eagles) abducted two international NGO employees from their house in Birao. Who or what, I wondered, is this state that can solve all problems? I did not see it anywhere. The omniscience and power that everyone here attributed to the state approached what my western-categorical self would have associated with the respect the religious hold for God. As Graeber has suggested, the state is a Utopian, cosmological project because it is a "set of ideals that by definition can never be realized; after all, if the cosmos, and the

kingdom, really could be brought into conformity with the ideal, there would be no excuse for the predatory violence” (2011: 3).

Over and over, the opinion that only the state can solve the region’s troubles is idea came to stand in as explanation for why individuals could not take initiative to change the status quo on their own. At a meeting between international NGO employees and government officials in Ndele, for instance, I listened as each functionary in turn proclaimed the necessity for the state to “*agir*” (act) or “*réagir*” (react) and establish security¹⁴ and provide jobs. And over and over, I saw how a personalized, non-centralized politics resulted from the gap between the avowed adherence to the state ideal and the practices that people actually engaged in. Hecht and Simone have argued that as the state has become little more than an “inflated ritual”—a “form” participated in as a way of avoiding “content” (1994: 12, 21), people become used to what Hecht and Simone term “vicarious autonomy,” or the ability to integrate and play with the forms associated with a variety of ways of understanding and living in the world.

All this vicarious autonomy comes at an enormous price in terms of the concrete indices of well-being. But on the level of the social body—its characteristics, desires, resiliencies and productivity—a more constructive picture emerges. With their feet straddling different worlds, the accomplishment of African societies has been to maintain many competing agendas and aspirations in some kind of creative balance. For example, the arbitrary borders that colonialism imposed on nation states may have cruelly divided ethnicities, but they can also maximize the capacities of those on each side (20).

Hecht and Simone go on to describe how the Nigeria/Benin border, though “cruelly” separating ethnic groups, also stimulates a range of profit-making endeavors for

14. An oft-voiced suggestion in this regard: more roadblocks. See chapter four for more on this form of governance.

individuals on both sides. (For this to be true the border has to be on the way somewhere, of course (Bayart 2008).) Micro-political practices such as the over-regulation of official commerce and its corollary, the flourishing of illicit commerce, “undermine the social cohesion necessary for Africans to establish meaningful institutions. They can be seen as the very reasons for Africa’s stagnation and suffering. But in other ways, they point to Africa’s potential to not only survive but to restructure and reinvent itself within a context of global realities” (15). It is my hope that by presenting the challenges of non-centralized politics in the buffer zone I will both indicate the hazards of this mode of social organization, and also gesture toward its creative potential. As such the buffer zone provides an empirical supplement (cautionary, yes, but also, perhaps, inspirational) to those aspirational accounts of politics that argue that we are seeing the emergence of a new, supranational mode of social organization centered on “singularities” and comprising many networks rather than centers and peripheries (Hardt and Negri 2000; 2005). Moving from the level of abstraction to that of the practices of living people, what does this look like? In the next section, I will begin to answer this question by presenting stories of people who bear a range of sovereign capabilities in the buffer zone.

3.3 Flexibility: “As an African, I must be flexible...”

Mbembe describes how far the African state deviates from the Weberian or Hobbesian ideal type.

Ultimately, it is the state itself that no longer exists as a general technology of domination. Nominally, a central power still exists. Its organizational chart

remains more or less intact, even though the institutions and the bureaucracy that are supposed to embody it have collapsed.... Where real powers exist and are exercised, this is not by virtue of a law or rule, but often on the basis of purely informal, contingent arrangements that can be changed at any time and without warning.... In reality, there is a proliferation, not of autonomous centers of power, but of nuclei and enclaves within the very heart of what until recently took the place of a system. These nuclei and this series of enclaves overlap, and are in competition with each other, and sometimes compose networks. They constitute, in any case, the links in a chain that is itself weak and unstable, and in which parallel decisions coexist with centralized decisions (Mbembe 2000b: 92-93).

Mbembe's language presents the trajectory of the state as one of break-down from a previously-coherent centralized entity. But the history of the "trashcan colony," and the practices of its rulers, whose methods and modes have always been personalized (that is, flexible, opportunistically secretive, and directed toward profit-seeking), gives reason to question whether such a representation might be giving more credit to colonial and early-independence officials as overseers of rational-bureaucratic systems than they are in fact due.¹⁵ Mbembe and Roitman's (1995) analysis of the lived effects of the generalized "crisis" that struck Cameroon beginning in the 1980s suggests that the experience of statehood had been much more widespread there than in CAR. The crisis, then, was experienced as a breakdown of former assumptions about the progress and development the form of the centralized state would bring. To a degree, these sentiments

15. In studying even political configurations far more institutionalized than those of the Central African buffer zone, scholars have suggested that flexibility plays an important role. For instance, Hoag describes how flexibility is a crucial skill deployed by "street-level bureaucrats" in South African immigration offices: "Officials are committed to the idea of national-statist movement control, yet they understand that circumstances can sometimes demand that stipulated rules be relaxed or modified—and therefore that the systems be sometimes contradicted. Indeed, officials sometimes even choose to ignore the systems altogether, when their maintenance might be worth less than a bribe, resisting time-consuming accountability measures, or simply being idle, to mention a few examples. Officials seek safety, legibility, predictability, and trust, but these concepts do not stand alone. Instead, they must be constituted through processes of meaning making which legitimate an as-yet indeterminate set of actions" (2010: 18).

were shared in CAR, but they never penetrated as deeply or as widely. So though I recognize that the experience of the past 25 years has in many cases been one of state delinquency, by setting aside that trajectory for a moment will show other possibilities—and especially the persistence of non-centralization, and pluralized sovereign capabilities—that the state-retreat model often ignores. For instance, though the idea of the privatization of the state gained currency in the late 1990s as a description of the kinds of mutations states were undergoing as a result of neoliberal strictures, already in 1984 Besteman pointed to the prevalence of privatized modes of operating in the Congolese state, which suggests that other processes and logics might be at work. Going back a bit further to the concessionary system similarly suggests that “parallel decisions” have always coexisted with centralized ones.

Instead of prioritizing the tracing of the breakdown of the colonial administrative state to the exclusion of other political trajectories, it might be useful to consider other historical configurations of power and their legacies. Graeber, through his study of the Shilluk, reminds that though they had knowledge of administrative, bureaucratic states, the Shilluk kingdom was a “system of institutionalized raiding, and a utopian project, and little else” (2011: 3). In other words, the Shilluk king had “almost no systematic way to impose his will on ordinary Shilluk.” Though kings were “expected to make displays of spectacular, arbitrary violence, the means they had at their disposal were extremely limited, and most of all, they found themselves checked and stymied whenever they tried to transform those displays into the basis for any sort of systematic power” (23).

Contemporary resonances of this political model—a model in which raiding and a utopian project crowd out administration, which seems broadly to have been the case with the raiding sultanates of the buffer zone as well—are deep and widespread.

Lest someone accuse me of a-historicism, let me emphasize that I am not arguing that governance has been unchanging in Africa since the rise of the raiding sultanates. Clearly, there have been big changes; one of the biggest, to my mind, is how the idea of the state has recently become such a widespread form through which to make certain claims (e.g. a claim to having been abandoned). Another is how rebellion has become a new form of aspirational social organization. I am simply curious to probe what some of the trajectories that are usually marshaled to describe the changes that have occurred, and especially the narrative of the strong colonial state that has withered in the years since independence, might have missed.

Setting aside the chronological assumptions in Mbembe's assessment, his is a thought-provoking description suggesting new ways of understanding "the state" as other than synonymous with centralized, unitary power, or even as centralized, capillary power. The idea of nuclei and enclaves is especially compelling. Multiple centers can coexist with multiple "enclaves," a term that suggests invisibility and thus the ways that the visible and invisible worlds coexist. Practically, this means that people who take on the mantle of governance, whether as putative state employees, rebels, NGO staff, or any number of other roles, must be skilled in flexibly balancing their operations and claims on behalf of the nuclei and their operations and claims in the enclaves. Without a single

set of rules—with, in fact, many sets of rules that are frequently changing, breached, and/or malleable—negotiation and confrontation become the main modes through which governing skills are exercised. This reflects the way that centralizing and non-centralizing capabilities are wielded simultaneously. Whereas Bohannan (1958) differentiated between “authority,” which entailed a power of physical coercion and other kinds of punishments and often came about as a result of colonial policies, from “influence,” which entailed no such powers and was associated with traditional acephalous political modes, the buffer zone demonstrates that such a distinction has to a large degree become untenable. People draw on authority and influence interchangeably, depending on the needs the situation presents.

I got a sense both for the potential and the danger inherent in such a state of affairs discussing with and observing Mathieu Sacks, the *Chef de cantonnement* of the Ministry of Water and Forests outpost in Ndele. In theory, Sacks should have been the third-highest-ranking official in the office, which should have been headed by the *Directeur régional* and then the *Inspecteur préfectorale* for Bamingui-Bangoran prefecture. I never met either of these men, however; either they were on vacation in Bangui or, if in Ndele, they did not seem to come to the office. In their absence, Sacks was in charge. He was opinionated and thoughtful, and I spent many long mornings in his office discussing everything from the challenges of his work to his critiques of humanitarianism.¹⁶ Sacks sat behind his desk in a narrow, dark office with dusty

16. Similarly to some recent scholarly accounts (Keen 2005; Kennedy 2004), Sacks saw humanitarianism and armed rebellion as locked in a symbiotic relationship: “It’s because, if the rebellion

whitewashed walls. Portraits of Barthélemy Boganda (the independence hero of CAR, killed in a plane crash just before independence) and President Bozizé loomed in a column above his head. On his desk, Sacks had a copy of the 1958 Register for Afrique Equatoriale Française, a tome the thickness of several telephone books that recorded all the colonial government's decisions. For safe-keeping, he guarded his personal documents—a copy of the wildlife law from 1984, whose articles 81 through 93 regulate the ivory trade, which was banned later that same year; a few other outdated texts—in a battered folder at home.

From time to time his mobile phone would interrupt the flow of our conversations with its blaring ring—a siren, accompanied by a voice shouting “*Appel en provenance direct des Etats-Unis, ville de New York!*” [Direct call from the United States, city of New York!] Other times the interruption would come in the form of his wide-eyed, mostly silent, two-year-old daughter, toddling in to greet her father on her way home from nursery school. Building and maintaining relationships was central to Sacks's ability to flourish in the foreign land of Ndele, no easy feat for a Christian from the south who privately expressed a supreme mistrust in the Muslims among whom he found himself. He earned a comfortable level of wealth, at least by Ndele standards, through

ends, there won't be any more NGOs. In order for the NGOs to exist, there has to be rebellion. Eh? You'll at least agree with me on that? If you want your line of work to exist there has to be rebellion. There where the rebellion ends people will say no, we don't need NGOs, and that will end their occupation. They won't have any more financing from over there and all that either.” The idea that humanitarians collaborate with rebels in order to preserve their livelihoods is a commonly-held truism among Central Africans. The mobile, disaster-hopping existence of these expatriates is so far beyond the experience of people in Central Africa, who struggle so hard to find paid work, and who face such constraints to their mobility, that people quickly dismiss it as absurd and impossible.)

farming. He took over the moist, black soil land at the base of Sultan Sanusi's hill (he had only to ask around and be sure no one else was using it—beyond that, legal ownership was not important) and hired people to grow luxury crops like spinach and tomatoes for NGO employees whose cooks now frequented the local market. By employing people, and by bringing his whole family to Ndele (most functionaries prefer to maintain their families in Bangui, where there are more amenities and better schools), he made a place for himself in the town.

Sacks explained that managing flexibility is the core of the “technical competencies” that he saw as legitimating his sovereign capabilities. In theory, his job requires him to seize meat that has been procured in the parklands and protected areas. Most meat found around Ndele comes from these zones, because the free-for-all “*zone banale*” that rings the town has been more or less denuded of sustenance. “The law in the parks is very harsh. It is truly categorical. All humans are prohibited from entering the park. You can't even pluck a leaf, or kill a single animal. All is prohibited. But Ndele is right inside the park. If we didn't allow people to go into the parks a bit, no one could live here. There would be no city of Ndele.” This makes carrying out the legal dictates both morally and practically difficult. “*Ca joue sur vous! Ca joue sur vous!*” [It weighs on you] Sacks would repeat ruefully during our conversations. “Sometimes, in one's capacity as an African, one is forced to close one's eyes” [*Quelquefois, en tant qu'africain, on est obligé de fermer les yeux*]. By making explanatory recourse to his “Africanness” he

indicates his conception of the laws as foreign and imposed¹⁷ and hence out of step with the necessities of living and profiting in a place like this.

Sacks further explained, “The peasant will say, ‘That meat is my life, my livelihood,’ pleading that you not take it. He will say, ‘I will give you this’—either money or a part of the meat—in exchange for you not seizing everything. And then people complain that we are corrupt! So you see, it is a very technical work that we do.” He contrasted his ability to read these confrontations and determine the optimal course of negotiation with the thuggish approach of the anti-poaching militia members, who enforce the same rules, only in the parks themselves as opposed to in the surrounding areas. (Though according to their mandate the Water and Forests Ministry employees are supposed to carry out patrols as well, they lack ammunition for the automatic weapons they carry, and the Ndele contingent has not accomplished a full *tournée* in many years.) Water and Forests employees’ regulatory scope is largely confined to the roads, and especially the roadblocks they control, the subject of chapter four. The anti-poaching militia members have only to pass a physical test (a running race); there are no education or moral requirements, and, in Sacks’s view, these guards lack the “mental

17. Like Ferguson (2006), I found that, whatever the scholarly reasons for distancing oneself from “Africa” as an analytical category (often has it been used as a marker of lack and otherness, and used to deny the continent’s diversity), it remained salient for my interlocutors. Usually, these statements of Africanness were offered as justification or explanation, and usually they followed the linguistic pattern used here: “*en tant qu’africain*.” Among other things, this trope is a polite way of referring to the racial/cultural/geographical distance between my interlocutor and me—a strategy used to broker an understanding across the gap between our respective experiences (Mosse and Lewis 2007). It seemed especially important to discussions of legality, and the reasons the laws could not be followed.

capacity” for anything but brute force. His skill, in contrast, was “technical,” a term he kept returning to.

Like most game meat, locally-made hunting rifles, known as *ganaponde*, are totally prohibited under Central African law. It is illegal to make them, and hence it is illegal to register them, and hence it is illegal to possess one at all.¹⁸ And yet *ganaponde* are the weapon of choice for the region’s hunters, as well as for self-defense, because they are widely available and cheap (in Ndele, you can purchase one for 5 or 10,000 CFA, US\$10 to 20), and because it is relatively easy to obtain or make ammunition for them. An old ammunition recipe of Sultan Sanusi’s, using bird excrement and other locally-available materials, is still in use. Almost all the rebels in CAR’s largest armed group, the APRD, carry *ganaponde*. When I asked whether they would regret turning in their weapons during the upcoming disarmament, they shrugged. “Not really. We can always buy another one.” Foreign-manufactured weaponry is too expensive. So in this domain, too, Sacks must apply his “technical” know-how: when and who can he push for breaking this law? What can he ask for in return for looking the other way? And when must he simply ignore? These calculations run through his head every time he encounters an infraction. And since the laws surrounding hunting and resource

18. The system for regulating firearms ownership and use is yet another example of how state laws are wholly out of step with the needs of people in this zone. It costs 30,000–50,000 CFA (US\$60 to 100) to obtain a firearm purchase authorization, depending on the type of gun. Then one must pay 5,000 CFA/year to obtain and maintain one’s “*carnet d’arme légal*.” And then on top of those fees a hunting permit costs between 30,000–50,000 CFA per year. Sacks noted that he had only issued one hunting permit last year, and that was to a visiting safari hunter. “People here are so stubborn,” he complained. Stubborn or not, expecting people to pay multiple times their annual incomes just to register firearms that most use simply to assure the subsistence of their families is unrealistic at best.

exploitation are so “categorical” (his term), almost all what people do could be construed as an infraction. That does not mean that everything can be prosecuted (whether in the tribunal or outside it) as an infraction, however. The laws’ hold is not as firm as that; they are, rather, levers that help people who know how to exercise sovereign capabilities of flexibility alongside their sovereign capabilities of force lend traction (Tsing 2005) to their endeavors.

This suggests that though the state does indeed have its “magic” — that is, an uncanny ability to legitimate a range of projects and claims, whether technically legal or illegal (Das 2006)¹⁹ — that magic has little traction when considered in isolation from the capabilities of the people involved in governance transactions. By governance transaction, I mean to refer to the processes of negotiation and confrontation through which access to profit-generating resources is claimed and/or brokered. Consider the case of tax collection in Ndele. The offices of functionaries frequently stood empty, for officials preferred to stay in Bangui rather than journey to the foreign, violent north of

19. Das argues that although the state, through its bureaucratized institutions, has pretensions of enlightened rationalism, in reality it exists as “neither a purely rational-bureaucratic organization nor simply as a fetish, but as a form of regulation that oscillates between a rational mode and a magical mode of being” (Das 2006: 162). The simplifications required for the state’s project of legibility give rise to profound ambiguities when implemented, as they always are, by officials with only a loose sense of how to proceed when a narrow category meets the broader, messier social terrain. Citizens, too, work within the many ambiguities of laws and regulations to shape their social lives. Das gives the example of how, following riots in which government forces violently abused citizens, victims sought accident reports from those very same government forces in order to be able to claim insurance benefits. In this case, the government document assumed a magical illegibility. Its power came not from reflecting the truth, the fullness of how events unfolded. Rather, the victim and the civil servant together created document bearing a state imprimatur that opened an otherwise locked door to a certain kind of largess. This can be thought of as another way that people who may not bear the full rights of citizens nevertheless are able to claim rights through state institutions (Chatterjee 2004). My point here is not to contradict these accounts, but to extend them by emphasizing the importance of embodied skills in determining the outcomes that result from governance encounters.

their imaginations. (To be fair, there were several armed group attacks on Ndele during my fieldwork, so the fears of conflict were not unjustified.) Take the Tourism Ministry outpost. President Bozizé created the Ministry of Tourism in 2007.²⁰ In theory, the simple two-room building housed three employees, but the boss—the Regional Director—was most often in Bangui. The Inspector for Bamingui-Bangoran prefecture and his secretary took over in his absence. The Inspector explained their job as making sure that tourism standards are upheld in the prefecture. Toward that end, they attempt to collect a three percent tax on all hotel, restaurant, and bar revenue.²¹ But they have no real means to force people to do so. Proprietors plead penury, explaining that soldiers, who receive a daily food allowance, are their main client base but often refuse to pay. So, rather than being standard across the country, or even standard across Ndele, the taxes are personalized, based on ability and willingness (*“bonne volonté”*) to pay. In theory, the tourism office should have a truck and a motorcycle at their disposition but, as the inspector put it, “Until now, we are waiting.”

The tax service is in a similar kind of purgatory. The first time I walked into the Ndele tax collector’s office I found him sitting upright behind his desk, but fast asleep.

As the head of the Ndele office of the *Service des Impôts* he has responsibility for both

20. Founding a ministry provides an opportunity to dole out a new ministerial crown; since ministry-creation does not imply ministry-financing, these new offices are generally empty shells using their names and implied legitimacy to fish for donor project financing. Meanwhile, the president has assuaged another potential discontent with a high-ranking title.

21. Lest this give the sense that Ndele was some kind of tourist metropolis, it bears noting that Ndele’s one auberge was destroyed during army-rebel fighting in November 2009. The town had little that could properly be termed a restaurant, though there were establishments that specialized in mishui, grilled meat.

Bamingui-Bangoran and Vakaga prefectures. That means that he must collect market taxes from the town of Bamingui all the way to Birao, 700 kilometers to the north and east. However, he has neither car nor motorcycle, and, given the utter dearth of bush taxis or the like, that means that he cannot/does not leave Ndele. The tax service chief's office abuts the office of the *Agence Speciale* (Special Agency), a branch of the public treasury that should bank the tax revenue until it can safely be transported to the capital. The office contains a safe for storing the money collected. Only, a previous employee died on the job. It seems he hid the key, for no one since has been able to find it. The safe, then, is "not operational," and since there are no banks or other institutions to safeguard money, anything collected must simply be hidden, such as at the home of the person staffing the office, no easy task in a place where people who try to hide their domestic lives are targets of suspicion, whether of witchcraft or other nefarious dealings.

Two main points emerge from these examples. First, "the state" is not a trump card. It has no necessary capability to override other projects of rule and/or profit. Second, sovereign capabilities do not stand alone but are activated through relationships with other people, who themselves may bear sovereign capabilities. Though there are indeed people who rely very nearly entirely on the exercise of violent force to obtain their will, they are few in comparison to the number who build their capabilities through relationships—that is, those who rely on "*bonne volonté*" or who take heed of how dispossession affects fellow residents of the area ("*Ca joue sur vous!*"). In the next section, I use the example of a dispute between diamond miners and anti-poaching

guards to further explore these dynamics, especially in regard to geography and patterns of association. The meeting introduces the problem of militarized conservation efforts, which I will discuss in greater detail in chapter five. Here, without getting into the nitty-gritty of these endeavors, I wish to show the ways that different actors engage in both negotiation and confrontation to be able to continue their profit-making endeavors. State laws are alternately a hurdle or a lever in these struggles.

3.4 Negotiating mining rights: Laws as hurdles or levers

In a single night at the end of January 2010, the jail in Ndele filled. Eighteen people—among them two village chiefs, Dimanche Michel and Walamba Jean-Bernard—were locked up. Anti-poaching guards caught them mining in a protected area and arrested them. The guards, who receive a bounty for any equipment they seize, took the villagers' pumps, shovels, bicycles, and anything else they found. The village chiefs and a few others paid their way out of prison a few days later: 6,000 CFA—about US\$12—per person, disbursed to the prison guard. When he met the men in town, the Dieudonné Senego, the court clerk, decided he would liberate those who remained as well. The court had not been functional for the better part of a year, and it seemed unfair to detain people indefinitely unless they could purchase their way out. The clerk was also hoping that liberating so many people might “shock” officials in Bangui into sending people to staff the tribunal. He undertook this tactic with the support of the International Committee of the Red Cross's justice monitor, who passed occasionally

through town to check on the status and rights of prisoners and who was to bring the message to Bangui. Whether the monitor agitated or not, no one in Bangui was roused.

Even after the villagers' liberation, tensions only continued to grow. Those arrested told of the injustice—beatings, seizure of all their worldly possessions—to anyone who would listen, and rumors began to circulate that they would join forces to attack the anti-poaching militia. Around this time, the Minister of Territorial Administration, Elie Ouefio, made a rare appearance in Ndele to explore the possibility of negotiations with the rebels occupying the road north of town. He held a meeting at the sultan-mayor's office for town notables, and Dimanche and Walamba both rose to tell the tales of their arrests: the *munjus* (whites, foreigners) came and created this system with *zones banales* (buffer zones around the parks in which hunting and other activities should be allowed), and yet we were arrested for mining in these areas. The chiefs complained of being persecuted on all sides. The rebels pay mercenaries to hold them hostage in their villages, and then the government accuses them of supporting the rebels. The minister apologized and promised to take the issue under review. At the time, no administrative officials were present in town—not the *préfet*, not the *sous-préfet*, and not their assistants, all of whom were in Bangui.

When the *sous-préfet* returned, about a week later, he convoked a meeting between the miners and the anti-poaching forces in hopes of preventing violent conflict between the opposing sides (and also to make visible his skills and authority as a mediator, which Minister Ouefio had publicly doubted). The anti-poaching contingent

arrived from their bases the night before. They blasted into town in full combat gear, guns and all, so many of them present that they spilled out the back of their Land Cruisers. The red-faced mercenary who led them came too but did not attend the meeting, instead passing the hours at a bar in the center of town.

The *sous-préfet*, Adraman Mongbi, stood at the door to the meeting hall (as always, the sultan-mayor's offices) and greeted people. "Which side are you on—anti-poachers or diamond miners?" he asked, as if seating guests at a wedding, as I entered. I spluttered in hopes of alighting upon a wittily non-committal response, but Adraman interrupted me—"I know—you're on neither side! You're on the side of the gold prospectors, coming here hoping to find gold!" We laughed together, Adraman happy to have found a way to express one of the stereotypes about Americans (our greediness and capitalist skill) he had learned from an old Peace Corps teacher. The anti-poachers arrived last. The *conservateur national* and *conservateur national adjoint* (the head of the Manovo anti-poaching base and his deputy) sat at the front of the hall, together with a few other prominent people, such as the *sous-préfet* and Sandjema Noel, the head of the Ministry of Agriculture outpost here and, more importantly, a skilled orator and politician.²² The rows of benches were packed with other interested parties—diamond miners, religious officials, a few gendarmes, the head of the youth association and the head of the women's association—and a few on-lookers. Not present was so much as a

22. Consider: very nearly alone among functionaries, he had managed to obtain for himself not one but two motorcycles to facilitate his office's work. (In theory, the second motorcycle was for his deputy, but I frequently saw Sandjema tooling around town on the flashy turquoise bike.) His wheels were a testament to his knowing how to curry the kind of favor that would win him greater autonomy.

single employee of any of the humanitarian NGOs or UN agencies working in the town. Their days were over-filled with ever-urgent report-writing and accounting, and they saw political disputes like these as barely peripherally important to their programs to aid the vulnerable, such as rural health post-stocking and school latrine-building.²³

The meeting lasted all morning and was marked by a number of eloquent speeches, which drew intermittent hearty applause. The speeches' eloquence lay in the ability of a wide range of actors to alternately assume and disavow authority in ways that suited their agendas while also pleasing/assuaging others present. Notable in this regard was the way that the (absent) *munju* (white, foreigner, colonizer) came to stand in for all repressive policies. The *munju* was the bad guy all could agree on. The conservateur national was the most skilled at displacing blame onto the *munjus*. Though according to the anti-poaching project hierarchies, he is the boss and the foreigners are only "technical assistants" (a nod to "local ownership"), he repeatedly used the term "munju" to stand in for leader/person in charge, as if the policies were entirely out of his hands (which, to a certain extent, they were).

Similarly, the law (*les textes*) was repeatedly invoked as a hurdle that must be overcome so that people could pursue their various interests. Since the laws were written by people far away with no knowledge of the needs of those living here, this

23. The people managing these offices—largely, but not entirely, expatriates—were acutely aware that their work had political implications, and how to best manage these implications was a frequent topic of debate during evening drinks-gatherings. Nevertheless, in general they saw their sphere of interest/operations as limited and were too busy to concern themselves with anything they saw as outside of that sphere. They did not have funding to do so. In these ways, they simultaneously did and did not engage in the much-critiqued humanitarian disavowal of politics (de Waal 1998; Kennedy 2004; Pandolfi 2000).

reasoning went, we must figure out a *mango tere* (entente, compromise) that will allow us to profitably pursue our livelihoods. As Tefra Henri, a notable who styled himself a peacemaker, put it, “Manovo park is part of the patrimony of humanity. And the laws that regulate this park are made at an international level and to modify them it would be necessary to convene international forums. And that is a very long process and we do not know where it would lead. Let’s return to the reality of things: this population needs to be able to live, and I have been asking myself, are all the modern laws of the CAR applied in all their vigor?” That final question was a rhetorical one; everyone knew they were not. The anti-poaching guards had been enforcing these laws because it was in their (financial) interest to do so; but the miners, too, needed to eat and clothe and school their families, which meant that they should be able to pursue their prospecting. The *sous-préfet* took the lead in advocating for this flexible approach to the law, which was itself made possible by their remoteness and ability to hide what happens here from powerful people elsewhere (those *munjus* whose money runs the anti-poaching project, for instance) who might object, but others seconded it. Sandjema the politician summed up this reasoning: “Obeying the laws is good, but the guards must be flexible on the ground. It is true that the goat eats where it is tethered [i.e., if guards get bonuses for seizing things, they should be expected to do so].²⁴ But that does not mean that they should react too harshly against their brothers. And if that persists, the population can do nothing but disobey the law to fight for a decent life.” In the *sous-préfet*’s take, “I

24. Bayart cites this expression, which he labels Cameroonian, in explaining the “politics of the belly” (1993).

would like for these debates to help the population and teach them the reality of things, and that this debate begin from respect for the laws. These laws were adopted from afar without taking the population's needs into account but still we must live with the consequences. We shouldn't throw away our responsibilities, but everyone should understand his part and draw conclusions that will let all the population benefit." The theme that the laws had been voted in by people with no connection to this terrain, with no understanding of the needs of people here, was a common one. One person told of how he had once met a white person who had been astonished to learn that people lived here—this munju had assumed only animals called the buffer zone home.

A third theme that emerged was that no one knew exactly where the boundaries of the parks, protected areas, and *zones banales* lay. Or rather, there was both confusion and disagreement about what the boundaries and rules were. No one had brought a copy of the relevant laws (especially the *code de la faune* and the *code minier*). Some of the miners argued that the Manovo River was the most important dividing line: on the left bank it is park; on the right bank, it is zone banale. The anti-poaching contingent demurred. One person suggested the zones banales need to be re-gazetted because they extend only five or ten kilometers from the center of Ndele, and owing to sprawl more or less that entire area was now inhabited and hence not proper hunting terrain. Other miners recounted stories of getting caught prospecting in protected areas and being brought to anti-poaching bosses or safari hunting concessionaires and being told that as long as they did not hunt, they could continue their labors. In other words, there had

been a *mango tere* (compromise) whereby miners agreed not to hunt and anti-poachers had agreed not to go after miners. But then the project staff had changed, and the miners found themselves subject to the full force of the harsh laws, including their geographic prohibitions, which previously had been more or less ignored. (The *sous-préfet* summed this up this earlier policy as “*Mbi baa, mais mbi baa pepe*” —that is, “I see, but I don’t see.”)

In the end, though no official agreement was reached, the adjunct national conservator’s proposition seemed like the one that would be followed. He began by downplaying his authority: “I must specify that we are only the executors of these laws. I have understood that the population is unhappy about the activities that we are involved in. It is not us who can decide because we could run afoul of the law. All the propositions that the miners have made will be transmitted to the site director and he will take contact with the relevant authorities and we will wait to hear what they say.” Bear in mind that the site director, according to the policies governing the anti-poaching program, was the conservateur national, who was seated directly next to him in the meeting hall, not the shadowy *munju* that he outlined in this speech. He continued, “There are certain kinds of things that we can’t speak about in a heterogeneous setting like this one. For example, if the leader of the miners wants to work in a particular place he should come see me so we can talk just the two of us, and without telling other people I could give him an authorization. I’ll give another example: a group of fishermen from Alihou [a village north of Ndele] came to see me bearing an authorization from the inspector of the Ministry of Water and Forests permitting them to

fish in the Manovo River. And I accepted. We are not here to legalize the situation but more to make suggestions.” Like marijuana in Amsterdam, it is possible for something to be illegal and yet decriminalized, and that was the policy that Motoko, the adjunct national conservationist, was advocating here. Only, in this case the policy was to be a surreptitious one, negotiated man-to-man rather than made broadly known. People I discussed this with later figured that Motoko was pushing for this resolution to the problem because he stood to be able to extract a fee from supplicants for providing the service of seizure-less mining, but I heard no evidence that he ended up doing so.

The meeting disbanded well after the sun had shifted to the western side of the sky. The final decision was that the miners should obtain copies of maps and the relevant laws and then make propositions as to where they should be allowed to carry out their activities and where they agreed would be off-limits. Oddly enough, though, the conflict more or less fizzled out after that. Perhaps the adjunct national conservator could be taken at his word, and people worked out personalized accommodations. Perhaps the anti-poaching leaders decided to focus more on the “foreign” herders and hunters and leave local residents alone. A few months later, the dry season ended and the anti-poaching project fell into a funding gap and the miners, fishermen, and hunters could resume their work unmolested.

But I would argue that in addition to these practical reasons for the reduction of tension among the various buffer zone profit-seekers, the meeting itself played an important role. The anti-poachers, in full uniform, with canteens strapped to their thighs

and Kalashnikovs by their sides, made an undeniable show of force. Rather than return to their base immediately after the meeting, they stayed in town, where they were a most visible presence, until the following day. But the miners, too, made claims to authorities that could not be ignored. They too threatened force if necessary. The specter of violence hung behind all these discussions, as everyone had a story of being “*bastonné*” or “*tabassé*” (beaten) unjustly. More important to the working out of how governance would play out, though, was the way that all the disputants argued for the judicious application of sovereign capabilities of flexibility (alternately using and ignoring the laws so that a wider range of people could profit) and invisibility (managing access to information about who knows what about what others are doing). Given these priorities, it was helpful for everyone to construct an external “boss” (in this case, the munju, together with the state laws) who could serve both as a repository for blame for the policies many people found objectionable and also as the figure who held responsibility for devising centralized, institutionalized systems regulating things like parkland access. Though the *sous-préfet* did seem to be enjoying his prerogative of telling people who could speak, and when (“I’m the one who is managing this meeting!” he barked when someone spoke without being called on by him), for the most part people seemed to have found that acephaly let more people have and exercise the capabilities that would allow them to profit in the buffer zone. In relation to the outcome brokered, the *sous-préfet* was almost a situational leader; that is, someone who commands, but only

for a specific and defined purpose (Service 1971), in this case the meeting. The outcome was a version of what Tilly (2004) has called “brokered autonomy.”

3.5 Social atomization

Partly through still in balancing negotiation and confrontation, and partly through chance (a long gap in anti-poaching project funds), the miners got what they wanted without organizing in a hierarchical, centralized manner. But at the same time, people increasingly complained of how hard life was becoming now that people could decreasingly trust each other. People longed for the kind of trust that would allow them to enjoy the fruits of collaborative projects and enterprises. To give just one example: mobile phones had finally made it to Ndele, but almost no one had a generator at home to charge them. Orange, the mobile phone operator, ran a service letting people pay a small fee to charge the battery. They stopped the service, though, when theft became too big of a problem. People would return to pick up “their” phone. Later, the real owner would find that his device was already collected by someone else. The Orange staffer handed out numbered chips that people would have to return to be able to retrieve their phones, but people would take them or make copies to claim a phone that was not their own. Without Orange’s services to charge their phones, people went to generator operators in the market who knew them and would remember whose phone was whose. The service only worked as long as it was founded on relationships between people rather than on abstract institutions and displaced workers like the mobile phone

company and its one Ndele employee, who came from the capital, which have weak accountability mechanisms.

Symptomatic of this mistrust, witchcraft accusations have reached epidemic proportions.²⁵ In some cases, this means that people have turned inward, defining their communities in narrower ways.²⁶ Sorcery accusations and worries blanket the region's communities, and they take different, localized forms in each place. In much of the country, the definition of foreigner has become "a person not native to this village," and natives set out these "strangers" for mistrust and discrimination, even if they have lived in the town for decades.²⁷ In other cases, people are directing their energies toward finding profit in further reaches of the bush or any of a number of regional hubs. In short, social life is becoming increasingly atomized. "Globalization" in this area has brought not a new connectedness, but non-centralization and increasingly personalized modes of governance as responses to mysterious new sources of wealth and the jealousies and fears that have resulted.

In referring to processes of non-centralization, I am inspired by African urban studies' emphasis on the provisional, flexible modes of association that have come to characterize social life in Africa. As AbdouMalik Simone has noted, though urbanists

25. One international NGO tracking executions of accused witches in three of the country's sixteen sparsely-populated prefectures recorded an average of two killings per week in 2010.

26. For instance, people once living together in towns have become visible as distinct "ethnic groups" and witchcraft accusations have penetrated into immediate families.

27. The term generally used in Sango is *gagango*, which refers to the act of having come from somewhere else.

tend to assume that cities build toward increased complexity and Durkheimian organic solidarity, in contemporary Africa “the accelerated, extended, and intensified intersection of bodies, landscapes, objects, and technologies defer calcification of institutional ensembles or fixed territories of belonging” (2004a: 408). Similarly, though accounts of the state have tended to assume that centralization is an inexorably expanding force, parts of rural Africa are not targets of conquest by capital leaders but instead hinterland buffer zones where non-centralized tendencies—mobility, flexibility, invisibility—are more important to the organization of profit and sociality. The prevalence of these capabilities offers people here both opportunities and constraints.

Flexibility, and the proliferation of people with sovereign capabilities, offered my friend Habiba Mohammed an important opportunity. Habiba had moved from the outskirts of Ndjamena, Chad, to Ndele to take on the role of wife. However, her new husband beat her unacceptably (“He is a bad, bad man,” she and the other women in her entourage frequently clucked, shaking their heads), and she and her baby daughter, Khadija, fled to the compound of some relatives who also lived in the town. One morning Habiba’s (ex-)husband’s sister came and stole Khadija away. Habiba became so despondent her family took her to the hospital, where she languished sipping luxury goods like tiny tins of condensed milk purchased at the market while her heart fluttered crazily. (I felt her chest: her heart beat as fast as a bird’s.) On the morning Habiba was preparing to go home from the hospital, two Chadian soldiers approached her room.

They called out a greeting and then stood, slightly awkwardly, in the doorway. One removed his large aviator sunglasses. Then he asked her about her marital problems.

Since Bozizé took power in 2003 with a “liberating” force that was largely Chadian (Debos 2008; ICG 2007), the Central African *Garde Présidentielle* (Presidential Guard) has been full of Chadians, who are easily recognizable by their olive-colored turbans. They are known as the elite force in the army because they guard the president, but they also have a well-deserved reputation for brutality (HRW 2007). A contingent had been sent to Ndele to watch over the town given the recent rebel attack. I spoke with a number of people who described being beaten or otherwise harassed by these forces.

However, that morning sitting on Habiba’s hospital bed I saw another side to the soldiers. Habiba told them that her ex-husband had taken her daughter to live with his sister six days ago. She described the location of the house the child had been taken to, down to the guava trees in the yard. And she described Khadija. The soldier nodded, assenting that he understood the directions, and then he and his companion turned and left. By mid-morning, both Habiba and her beloved daughter were back at her compound. She told me that afternoon that she did not know the soldier, but that he helps out with problems that arise in the Chadian community here: domestic problems, settling debt, and so forth. I asked how the soldier does his work, and Habiba pantomimed threatening with a Kalashnikov and then laughed. She was joking. Or perhaps not.

The soldier could not help Habiba with her larger problem, though: she needed a document from the Sultan-Mayor stating her husband's mistreatment of her and her daughter so that she could return to Ndjamenā a proper woman. The Sultan had spent months in Bangui convalescing, and no one knew when he might return. Habiba asked me daily if I had any insight, since she knew that I frequently spoke with the sultan's relatives and other town notables. Unfortunately, I always let her down. Eventually, after enduring a second rebel attack, she left on her own and made her way back to Ndjamenā. Every now and then a +235 country code (Chad) would flash on my mobile phone, and Habiba and I would exchange a few words shouted across almost impenetrable static.

In just these few life events alone, Habiba's experiences demonstrate some of the lived effects of non-centralized politics and sociality. She had been sent hundreds of kilometers from home to marry someone she had never met, but who was an acquaintance of an uncle; she found an ally in a Chadian soldier who himself had bosses in both Bangui and Ndjamenā; her own honor was subject to the health and travel itinerary of a sultan whose sphere of influence extended into Chad and South Darfur but who ended up in Bangui to recuperate (people said he had gout); via market merchant networks, she received cash transfers from her father and uncles, who were spread throughout the region and worried over her plight; her favorite songs on her mobile phone were all recorded in Khartoum. She was not exactly nomadic, but she lived her life in relation to a number of different nodes—different geographic nodes, but also

different nodes of religion, family, and commerce that spread throughout the region and even beyond. (For instance, one uncle occasionally called her from Aleppo, Syria, where he worked as a veterinarian.)

While providing people with opportunities in what is a materially impoverished zone, the flexibility—which is a kind of agility—of non-centralization also has downsides. One is the tenuousness of coercion. Without a fixed set of rules of behavior that all can count on, violence sometimes appears as the most effective way to make a point and get one's way. For instance, in Ndele one November 2009 evening a bit after eight, I heard a rapid series of gunshots. I was getting ready for bed and easily convinced myself I hadn't heard anything. (Perhaps it was thunder?) I got the story the next day. Ibrahim, a Central African employee of Aide Médicale Internationale (AMI), a French humanitarian NGO focused on health care, had gone out to visit some friends. He was headed home when he crossed the path of three shorts-clad soldiers who had most likely been out drinking. *Are you Ibrahim?* They asked. *Do you work for AMI? Do you know who the préfet is?* Ibrahim responded affirmatively to all these questions. *We should kill you,* the soldier said, *but we are going to let you go—just this time—so that you can transmit our message: we should have been relieved by now. We have been here three months and want to go home to Bangui.* The army is based in Bangui, and soldiers are deployed on short-term assignments to the hinterlands depending on which areas need a show of presence. Fears of rebel attacks had caused them to be dispatched here to Ndele, and they felt they had served their time. Then one of the soldiers shot Ibrahim in the leg.

Luckily, the bullet hit neither artery nor bone. People came out to see what was going on, and one of the soldiers fired in the air (the shots I heard) to disperse and warn the curious crowd.

Initially, in talking with the spooked and angry humanitarians, the Comm Zone (short for *Commandant de Zone*, the head of the military contingent in town) and the *préfet* (a former colonel in the army) manifested their fury and promised to find and punish the soldiers who had shot Ibrahim. But nothing ever came of their threats. The culprits were never publicly named, and no one was punished. The Comm Zone and the prefect had few resources of coercion at their disposal. If the Comm Zone aggressively pursued the culprits, his men might mutiny. The prefect, untethered to the army's ostensible hierarchy, had even less pull. Soon thereafter, while walking through town, a convoy of trucks, each piled with goods and military-uniform-clad men, labored past me. The men were singing, and they cheered and waved at passerby. The soldiers were headed home to Bangui. It was hard to know whether shooting Ibrahim swayed their higher-ups into making the troop rotation; such a move could, of course, have been in the works anyway. But the shooting was interpreted as one of the soldiers' capabilities: using a gun to make discontent and grievance visible through violence. The visibility that violence brings about is harder to ignore than other ways people might strive to make their problems noticed by those they see as capable of responding to and fixing them. Leaders of rebel groups have learned these truths, as I will discuss further in chapter six. While this might help certain people achieve punctual aims, it also frequently places further

strain on already-frayed social cohesion and the extent to which people feel they can trust each other.

Mistrust surfaced again and again in my discussions with people. It was proffered as both a problem (“This is why we can’t develop like the rest of the world...”) and a solution (“It is necessary to protect yourself”). Using an elegant econometric analysis, Nunn has shown that in places that were heavily raided during Africa’s eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave trades (both that leading across the Atlantic and that directed toward the Indian Ocean), people today report trusting others substantially less than in places not as heavily-targeted for such depredations (2008; Nunn and Wantchekon 2011). “Individuals’ trust in their relatives, neighbors, coethnics, and local government is lower if their ancestors were heavily affected by the slave trade.... We also find evidence that the slave trade altered the trust of modern Africans through internal factors, such as norms, beliefs, and values. Our tests suggest that the internal channel accounts for at least half of the reduced-form effect of the slave trade on trust” (Nunn and Wantchekon 2011: 3249-50). Foreign as the language of tests and causality might be to a thoroughly qualitative anthropologist such as myself, I thought frequently of these findings during my fieldwork. The Central African buffer zone falls out of their data, lying as it does too far from centers with statistics on the numbers of people captured or Afrobarometer surveyors to query people about trust. But it seems to add further proof to their argument. Here, the memories of slave raiding are even more recent than in the sites of their analysis. Though I met no one who could himself

remember those days, I met several whose fathers had recalled running to caves to hide when marauders arrived and, upon return to the village, finding it razed and burned. The slave trade sowed mistrust and paranoia, and colonial and postcolonial orders have only added to those ills. This blooming of mistrust has had both socially adaptive and social maladaptive consequences in that it helps people to survive and pursue life projects, but at the expense of establishing structures and institutions that might assure a less-precarious way of living.

"We should have killed you." On that otherwise quiet evening, Ibrahim did not even have time to trust or to mistrust his tormentors. But the soldiers showed all who assembled at the scene or later heard of the attack that their volatility was a force all could be forced to reckon with.

3.6 Conclusion

An expression in CAR holds that *"L'Etat s'arrête à PK12,"* that is, the state ends twelve kilometers from the center of the capital (Bierschenk and de Sardan 1997a). The expression is hyperbole, but suggestive nevertheless. In Bangui, layer upon layer of protocol must be observed whenever a high-level state functionary is involved. Who is seated next to whom, who greets whom and using which titles, who arrives first and how long she or he waits, who chairs a meeting and under what auspices²⁸—all these markers of hierarchy are scrupulously observed. Every Thursday just before lunch, the

28. Frequently, a meeting of government functionaries will include the denomination of one person as the president of the gathering; each person who then requests to speak respectfully begins his address with *"Merci, monsieur le président."*

president personally decides whether to approve every proposed government expenditure. (Bokassa did the same during his tenure (Webb 1990: 135).) Given the constrained size of the government's budget, especially in the wake of donors stopping budget support in 2011, this oversight is feasible, if tedious. But outside Bangui, and especially in the buffer zone, though protocol is still important (not just anyone got to sit at the front of the meeting hall when the anti-poachers debated the miners, and everyone seemed to know who belonged where), the geography of remoteness and the history of raiding and pluralized rule afford people opportunities for circumvention of institutionalized hierarchies. The miners continue to mine, despite the illegality of their occupation. Modes of rule are thus non-centralized, in that the flexibility, invisibility, and mobility that they rely on militate against the creation of static structures and rules. Brokered, or vicarious, autonomy reigns in that sovereign capabilities grow out of the management of relationships through the management of visibility.

There is a kind of freedom in this way of life. I once tried to explain the phrase, "The only two sure things in life are death and taxes" to the Ndele tax collector. I am not sure I succeeded. His experience of attempting to collect taxes had shown the work to be a highly personalized endeavor, reliant on his skills as well as the good will of those he approached. The idea that tax-paying could be as predictable and unavoidable as death was quite foreign. (For that matter, the insinuation that death is predictable probably also appeared strange to him—here, death can strike quickly, unexpectedly, and all the time. Funerals are far more common than weddings, and seem even more common than

baptisms or other birth ceremonies.) Still, it is hard not to see this freedom as, in Hecht and Simone's phrasing, "vicarious autonomy." For, mining and hunting and flexibility aside, people in this zone still mostly struggle to get by. Subsistence is not assured, especially given recent years' fitful rains; profit margins, when they appear, are slim and quickly spent. Abdulaye Tago, a successful diamond miner in Ndele, told of how many motorcycles he had bought in the past; now, however, he had none. Dispossession can strike at any time, whether purposefully or not. Zeneba, a friend in Tiringoulou, approached me tearfully one morning to say that her neighbor had lit a fire for warmth in Zeneba's house and the thatch-roofed structure had burst into flames, destroying her few cherished possessions, like photos of her family. But people still hope dispossession is not a permanent state. There are more diamonds out there to be dug up.

Living in such precarious circumstances, "the state" became the entity onto which hopes for a more-secure future were projected. I lost count of how many times hinterland residents expressed the hope of "integration" into the public service ("I have handed in my file; up till now I am waiting...") or frustration at their "abandonment" or certainty that "It is the state alone that can... [insert problem—any problem—to be fixed]." At the same time, everyone was certain that the people who served in their government were hopelessly corrupt, so that in any dispute it was he who could pay off the relevant official who would win. This push-pull dynamic was equally, if not more, marked among diplomats than among those in the buffer zone. The question of what or who this problem-solving state could be left me mystified. It certainly did not seem to be

the rickety, multi-nucleated ensemble of institutions and actors that comprised the effective state organization in the country. The form of the state has come to represent the “possibility of movement across diverse value codes” (Pietz 1985: 16) and as such oscillates somewhere between a fetish and a reference point (Simone 2001). Though it has a problematic history, the term fetish is useful here for its “border-straddling character”; that is, “the utopian dreams it incessantly rekindles, the way it works all the better because it fails,” and the way that it is at once a “structure of consciousness” and a “site of stubborn desires” (Rutherford 2003: 21).

The idea of the ideal-type state is a Utopian vision, and it bespeaks a kind of hope that empirical realities do little to dissuade. While I do not wish to disabuse people of hope, I do seek in the coming chapters to show some of the ways that this orientation ends up imbuing a range of actors with new capabilities, which undermine the creation of the unitary state that so many invoke and desire. In an area marked by state absence and a history of raiding, the idea of the state, combined with capabilities of flexibility, invisibility, and force, have yielded violence and atomization. I hope that laying out some of these processes might encourage creative solutions to these discords, as well as new modes of integration.

4. Capabilities of dispossession: Road blockers and road cutters

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, I discuss roadblocks and travelers' strategies and tactics for navigating them with some of their sources of profit intact. I explain the extent to which these encounters are contingent and situationally determined. To get through roadblocks, people use tools, skill, and tricks, but they must also use cunning and are not guaranteed success. The roadblockers, too, must cultivate these characteristics. In the second section, I turn to another practice with deep historical roots in the region: road robbery. Drawing on the work of others who have studied this phenomenon in the region (Issa, Roitman), I show how CAR's buffer zone, too, supports the idea that road robbery, like roadblocking, is another face of the problematic of wealth creation by dispossession. Though its legitimacy as a mode of wealth creation is contested, road robbery has also been widespread here for hundreds of years. I bring in road cutting to show the shared origins and effects (such as the increasing sense of disorder that accompanies illegalization [Comaroff and Comaroff 2006]) of different modes of dispossession. However, roadblocking and road cutting have come to offer different opportunities for recognition in the region and beyond, which the third section shows through discussion of rebels' decision to take on roadblocks.

In recent years armed men have come to differentiate cutting roads (making money through robbery) from roadblocks (frequently part of rebellion). Though these armed men might engage in both, depending on the day, and though their road cutting

frequently breaks with previous norms and conventions, such as not attacking near one's home, there appears nevertheless to have been a shift in how these actors talk about their work and make it visible. Today, road robbery is based on hiding, whereas rebellion and roadblocking are ways to make oneself visible. In both cases, dispossession remains crucial, but it is carried out under particular rhetorical and performative frameworks that draw on particular capabilities.¹ The spread of the ideal-type state as a reference shared both by people in the buffer zone and the international organization diplomats (whose interest intermittently rests on the zone) is vital to the development of this distinction. Roadblocking has become a manifestation of a desire for the ideal-type state, as well as a reason no ideal-type state with unitary authority has come to exist.

4.2 Part one: Navigational tools for Central African roadblocks

4.2.1 Introducing roadblocks

People living in northeastern Central African Republic (CAR) have long experience navigating roadblocks. The roadblocks may be staffed by any of a broad assortment of people: Water and Forests Ministry guards, gendarmes, soldiers, police officers, presidential guards, customs agents, rebels and/or freelancers. Though the barriers have existed for decades and are the result of historically-resonant modes of rule, most people aver that they have become more widespread, and more capriciously operated, over the past 10 years. This chapter explores the politics that result from

1. Dispossession is often included as part of a Marxist framework related to the enclosure of commons and as a crucial process at the heart of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005; Watts 2009). The dispossession I refer to here is slightly different in that it is not understood to be as permanent as it seems to be in the Marxist models. Today's dispossessors might tomorrow be dispossessed.

roadblock governance and argues that though their operators refer to an idea of an all-powerful state in justifying their presence and activities, roadblocks instantiate a situational, contingent mode of rule. They demand cunning of those who would navigate them and offer no guarantee of safe passage.

Consider two experiences described by Dieudonné, a clerk living in Ndele, a town in northeastern CAR and site of much roadblock activity:

Dieudonné hitched a ride in a truck a French aid organization had hired to transport equipment. He bought fresh meat to take to his family and packed it under a tarp in the back of the pick-up, to keep dust off it. Water and Forests Ministry guards stopped the vehicle at their roadblock at the exit to Bamingui-Bangoran National Park. When they found the meat, they hassled Dieudonné. We should take it, they told him. It's not permitted to take meat from the park. (Dieudonné had bought the meat well before reaching the park.) Dieudonné told the driver to speed away. He figured it would be ridiculous for the barrier guards to shoot them over two measly pieces of meat. That time, he was right. Another time, he was driving with a few functionaries from the Ministry of Justice *en mission* to the provinces. They arrived at a roadblock and the soldiers told them to get out and present their ID cards. The president of the court of appeals refused. The soldiers scoffed: "The president of *what*? Even the *president of the country* gets out and stands before *us*!" They strong-armed him out of the vehicle and dragged him into the bush beside the barrier. They made him kneel and placed a gun at his temple. Dieudonné and the others by the roadside heard the loud crack of a gunshot.

They were all sure the president had been shot. But the soldier had fired in the air. Each traveler paid a few thousand francs, and they continued on their way. Silence choked the car until Dieudonné started telling a funny story. Soon they were all laughing. When the driver saw a place to pull over for a beer, they all got out and had a drink to unwind.

The two roadblocks produced two very different experiences of navigation. When outcomes are unpredictable, what kind of cunning is needed to be able to pursue one's mobile projects? This section explores this question in the context of roadblock encounters in an area dominated by negotiated and personalized practices of governance.

4.2.2 Situating roadblocks

Seen from the air, the northeastern hinterlands of CAR spread like an ocean. Only rarely will a cluster of houses, or the snaking brown of a road, interrupt this view. It is helpful to picture these undulating waves of trees and scrub, to place oneself in this little-populated territory, because although it would be naïve to assume that territory determines governance,² it is certainly a factor shaping the tools of governance. In this case, the vastness and isolation have helped produce a militarized political economy and fragmented, contingent identities among the few people who live here.³

2. Some anthropologists of the ecological persuasion, for instance, saw landscape as determinative and thus missed more contingent reasons for social organization (Sacks 1979).

3. Larkin (2008) suggests mediation as a way of understanding what factors contribute to the creation of a situation or social world. This suggestion has the benefit of indicating causal links without making unsupported claims. In this "mediation" sense landscape has contributed to governance in the buffer zone.

For at least the past two centuries, this land has been used as a reservoir of resources for raiders from throughout the region, as well as a refuge, both for raiders and their prey. The few people here have seen almost nothing in the way of the centralizing (state-building) impulses that take root when land becomes scarce and raiders' rule becomes sedentarized and regularized.⁴ The trans-Saharan slave trade's sultans unleashed their raiding armies here, but their settlements were fairly mobile, and their focus lay in making people, plants, and animals into *goods* rather than subjects. People came seeking refuge and profit from raiding, and these partially-contradictory dynamics have made volatility a stable aspect of the zone's politics. As Sikainga has observed of the border communities between CAR and Sudan, "These groups were not discrete entities but open communities. They became interdependent and integrated by the facts of settlement, subordination, and resistance to external pressures" (1991: 54-55). The apparent fixity of tribal solidarity is a fiction throughout Africa (Mamdani 1996), but here the fluidity of group affiliations fatally frustrated the limited, fleeting attempts by colonial administrators to impose indirect rule along ethnic lines (Sikainga 1991).

For their part, the French colonists in CAR calculated that these lands were too remote and poor to administer, and essentially left them alone, except for (often-brutal) incursions by solo officers and their guards.⁵ Little changed with independence.⁶ Then as

4. See Fardon (1988) for a discussion of how space, and its eventual scarcity, shaped Chamba political development over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

5. Northeastern Oubangui-Chari, as CAR was then known, was an "autonomous zone" by virtue of being too remote and poor to keep up with the endless directives issuing from the capital.

now, profit is made out of movement, and those who move are subject to dispossession, whether by robbers in the bush or road blockers on the roads. By dispossession, I mean that goods and/or money are taken, sometimes at gunpoint, and sometimes in more convivial ways.⁷

So one should consider roadblocks as small points of regulation in this vast, depopled terrain.⁸ Ostensibly, roadblocks are a tool of state surveillance. Roadblocks, the theory goes, are a way to keep track of the human movement and subject it to scrutiny, the better to arrest contraband.⁹ In line with this rationale, people explain them as a

6. To point out the limits of centralizing impulses is not to say that “the state” is not important in northeastern CAR. As will become clear in the analysis below, the idea of the state is incredibly important. But the degree of stateness here is more limited than even elsewhere within the region. For instance, neighboring Cameroon experienced a period of broad-based belief in state-organized progress and modernity that “crisis” disrupted in the 1980s (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). At that point, the state’s hold on authority splintered, and people proliferated claiming regulatory capabilities on its behalf. In CAR, the proliferation of would-be regulators—the intensification of roadblocks and bandits, for instance—has different referents. This expansion does not contrast with a widespread earlier experience of state-building. Instead, people attribute the area’s militarization to the decades-long wars in Chad (a factor Roitman [2005] also recognizes). As a result of those conflicts, thousands of men entered the occupation of itinerant arms-carrying (Debos 2011). In the aftermath of these developments, “zaraguinas” (road robbers) made their presence felt as a newly-destabilizing class of actor, and that roadblocks flourished. In other words, the roadblocks are more closely connected to the non-centralized robbers than to any kind of bureaucracy of the state. The central authorities in Bangui do not have oversight over how many roadblocks exist in the country, and they recognize that there are both “official” and “unofficial” roadblocks.

7. Mbembe (2001) describes conviviality as “the dynamics of domesticity and familiarity” (110): the “constant compromises, the small tokens of fealty, the inherent cautiousness” hidden in the ways people “guide, deceive, and toy with power instead of confronting it directly” (128). Conviviality cuts even seemingly impenetrable authoritarian rule with unexpected subversion and vulgarity. As I understand it, conviviality also has to do with hope, in the sense that everyone can imagine himself profiting in the future, even though today he might be the one subject to extortion, and in the sense that any relationship, even an exploitative one, might one day bring unexpected fruits.

8. In this respect, little has changed since the early 20th century arrival of the French, when one colonial colonel observed, “Our situation is thus the following: we occupy a few specific points in a vast territory.... Our influence stops not far from our outposts and our administration is felt only in those places where we enforce it” (Mordrelle 1910: 12).

9. Though they share this putative purpose, roadblocks can become a kind of cipher for the modes of rule at work in the places where they are deployed. For instance, by making all who pass visible to those

legacy of the Emperor Bokassa, the only ruler the country has ever seen who seriously attempted state-building. But roadblocks really spread only in the decades following his 1979 ouster. Roadblocks metastasized in the 1980s and 90s as one manifestation of the fall-out from the wars in Chad. However, as a mode of rule they also descend from another, longer genealogy: as the trans-Saharan trades swept these areas into their orbit, traders set up *zara'ib* (fortified outposts) to police traffic while also facilitating trade.¹⁰

The roadblockers often refer to a vision of an all-seeing, unitary state in explaining their purpose in stopping travelers. A vision of the all-powerful state is a reference point (Simone 2001; 2004¹¹) they invoke to qualify themselves with a sovereign capability, namely jurisdiction (authority over navigation).¹² But the thin poles they suspend across the road are easy to bypass. Those who travel (on foot or on horse- or camel-back) through the bush can avoid them. The barrier agents are calling on the *form* of the state in a terrain where the *institutions* of the state have little presence, a terrain in

who guard the barriers, roadblocks might give rise to a fitful kind of accountability between humanitarians and the people they seek to aid (Pottier 2009).

10. See Nachtigal (1975), Cordell (1985), and Mire (1985) for more on the *zariba* mode of governance. Issa (2010) explains how it alternately merges with and diverges from the regional practice of road robbery over the past two hundred years.

11. In Simone's explanation, a reference point is a kind of "platform" for improvised collective action. A reference point is a shared frame that enables projects among diverse sets of actors, even though the assumed meaning of that frame might vary widely among the different parties. Simone elaborates using the example of Islam: "Islam provides a vehicle for mutual accommodation among actors from substantially different cultural and political contexts.... Throughout all of these deliberations, Islam remains a consistent reference point. What Islam might mean to various African actors and institutions is, of course, not consistent in itself. Nevertheless, Islam remains an important platform through which many Africans of various capacities and walks of life attempt to access and operate at the level of a larger world" (2004: 133; emphasis added).

12. In this respect, the Central African case is different from that described by Jones (2009), who argues that in rural Uganda even visions of the state have lost any local salience.

which no central government has ever evinced much interest.¹³ In other words, the roadblockers improvise a performance of the state and thereby claim new authorities for themselves.

Because of these peculiarities, in examining roadblocks as a technique of governance, I am interested not just in what roadblockers say they are doing, but also in their effects and in what these effects tell us about the workings of sovereignty in a place with plural authorities, a place where “*the* sovereign” is seen as absent. Though to set the scene of the dispossession encounters roadblockers make reference to the all-powerful state, their practices end up creating a non-centralized mode of rule. That is, their authorities are not “normative” (founded in the application of rules) but “pragmatic” (negotiated in particular circumstances) (Bailey 1969). Here, I emphasize the incredible flexibility that characterizes these encounters, flexibility that produces profit for individuals who subject strangers to dispossession. This flexibility ends up creating a politics that has little to do with capital-S State modes of operating (Deleuze and Guattari 1986).

At the same time, the existence of roadblocks in “stateless” spaces also challenges the dominant literature on the politics of those areas that centralized rulers have largely left alone. Whereas critical scholars have tended to construe them as spaces of

13. As Mbembe has noted, in Africa today one cannot assume that state employees and state structures operate within a coherent organizational chart. “In reality, there is a proliferation, not of autonomous centers of power, but of nuclei and enclaves.... These nuclei and this series of enclaves overlap, and are in competition with each other, and sometimes compose networks” (2000: 92-93). Nuclei and enclaves, or points of regulation in a sea of bush: such are roadblocks.

“resistance” to or “exit from” the state (Clastres 1987; Rothchild and Chazan 1988; Scott 2009), people here have enthusiastically taken up forms associated with the state and turned them toward non-centralized aims.

On the face of it, roadblocks might appear so haphazard that successful operation and navigation of them is a matter of luck. But the flexibly systematic way these encounters play out—and the caprice of gunmen—does not mean they involve no skill. It *does* make it harder to generalize about those skills. Where, then, does cunning reside when contingency dominates? Without anchored rules, cunning is the dominant marker of success.

4.2.3 The “corruption” of the “weak” state?

The “good governance” police among international donors consider roadblocks a problem reducible to corruption. And on a superficial level, roadblocks are indeed a kind of bribe or rent. However, the analytical frame of “corruption” as a way to label and understand extra-legal ways of getting things done suffers from a lack of definitional clarity. Even those studies that examine the ambivalence with which people participate in corruption and its denunciation (see, e.g., Smith 2007) define the corrupt obliquely. In the absence of analytical clarity, technical ideal-type “good governance” dictates stand in, and they may not reflect how these practices are lived and understood in diverse locations. Olivier de Sardan (1999) has emphasized the need to understand corruption from the perspective of those engaging in it and dealing with it. He shows how bribes and other practices that comprise the “corruption complex” are embedded in

moral economies of negotiation, gift-giving, solidarity, predatory authority, and redistributive accumulation. Olivier de Sardan sees corruption as a product of the schizophrenic nature of African modes of governing, which reflect a disconnect between sociocultural norms and state laws. He emphasizes that though corrupt practices are disparaged, they are not considered shameful, and that because these practices are inherently dependent on negotiation and bargaining, “there is no consensus on the many rules of this ‘game,’ which are selected, arranged, modified, and reinvented along the way” (36).

For all the insight of Olivier de Sardan’s overview, the corruption lens nevertheless still distorts aspects of these practices in Africa. First, the term implies the sully of a prior purity: practices *become* corrupted. In postcolonial settings, and perhaps especially in concession-ruled French Equatorial Africa, in contrast, what we now label corruption may be as old as hierarchical administrative apparatuses themselves.¹⁴ Even more fundamentally, the notion of corruption (generally defined as the abuse of *public* office for *private* gain¹⁵) relies on a theoretical division between the public and private realms that in Africa (like many other places) is not distinct in

14. Moreover, the corruption frame has an inherent tendency toward pathologizing (even Olivier de Sardan explains it through reference to mental illness, as noted above) and eliding the political and historical circumstances that shaped Africa’s “place-in-the-world” as a hotbed of corruption (Ferguson 2006).

15. A classic definition: “behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of private-regarding influence” (Nye 1967: 419, cited in Olivier de Sardan 1999: 27).

reality.¹⁶ The recent interest in corruption and the “privatization of the state” (Hibou 1999) downplays the deep historical underpinnings of public/private messiness on the continent. In delineating what she terms the state’s privatization, Hibou’s interest lies in the processes through which state institutions and other actors imbued with a state *imprimature* have become instruments of private gain. Thus while the neoliberal sense of “privatizing the state” refers to a belief in the greater efficiency of for-profit entities over formally public ones and the associated shrinking of the state, Hibou shows how these measures in fact strengthen the state by heightening its powers of Weberian “discharge” (Hibou 1999). Hibou may be correct to emphasize how privatization has multiplied the points of exercise of state power in from the 1980s to the present. But in the case of the CAR a temporal frame that included only on these recent decades could mislead by giving the impression that privatization is somehow recent. In fact, during the colonial period the French leased almost all CAR’s territory to concessionary companies (Coquéry-Vidrovitch 1972). The French official in Ndele, for instance, had a counterpart in the *concessionnaire* directing the Kotto company. Would-be French administrators, struggling with insufficient budgets, described their difficulty in wresting power back from the concessionaires:

The difficulties administrators face in carrying out their functions is partly because of the powerful concessionary companies who have long exploited the territory without control and give up the privileges they have acquired from the sultans and indigenous chiefs only under duress (Mordrelle 1910; my translation).

16. This is not to say that the categories “public” and “private” have no salience, but to point out the vagaries of the ways they are, and are not, invoked at various times and by various people.

For the first half of the colonial period, the concessionaires played a more important role than the administrators when it came to interacting with the African population. Although the concessionary companies packed up in the early 1930s, the mode of rule they instantiated has proved enduring (Hardin 2011). Personalized processes of enrichment facilitated by the impunity—freedom—that accompanies isolation have long characterized the Central African hinterlands. Since in this region hierarchical rule has always entailed personal gain (in other words, it has always been privatized)¹⁷ it makes little analytical sense to refer to privatization as a recent process, except perhaps insofar as one could identify a fresh intensification of powerful actors' desire to capture spoils for themselves in the broader climate of economic and social instability that has characterized recent decades. At the same time, in Africa there "is a general lack of a tradition of the 'public domain'" (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 31). Instead, people negotiate processes and transactions in personalized ways that frequently confound the public/private binary.

Another angle on roadblock practices would see them as a function of the breakdown of the already-dysfunctional African state, and especially what some have called the "retreat of the state" (Strange 1996) from governing rural areas (Bayart 2000). Hibou's (1999) re-invention of the idea of discharge fits this model: discharge indicates a power held by the state and then outsourced and, sometimes, metastasized. Roitman's discussion of the "*garrison entrepôt*" in Cameroon is another example of the vulgarization

17. Bayart (1993) also makes this point; he notes that private accumulation through public office is in fact "organic" to the "state's fabric" (89) in Africa.

of putatively state authorities (1998; 2005). But, as mentioned above, the case of the CAR differs from these models in that the experience of state-building was far more limited. The state could not “retreat” because it had never really expanded into these hinterland domains in the first place.¹⁸ This does not, however, mean that “the state” is not an important conceptual category and rhetorical tool in these areas. On the contrary, it remains a salient way that people qualify themselves with personalized authorities, and it is a “logic” that people frequently invoke to influence negotiations. This suggests that, rather than assuming a uniform state trajectory of decline and corruption in the face of neoliberal strictures, it is necessary to differentiate between the state as a set of institutions and the state as an idea (Migdal and Schlichte 2005).¹⁹ This distinction helps account for the ways that a certain ideal type idea of the state has become widespread around the globe even in those places where the state’s institutions are “weak,” “collapsed” or labelable with any of the other descriptors that have been proffered in recent years in attempts to capture the diversity of states in the contemporary world. Of course, the analytical distinction between how people imagine the state (should be), and

18. Widespread contemporary popular imaginings of Bokassa’s omniscient control seem out of proportion to the emperor’s actual record. People attribute those years’ relative calm to his rule rather than to the fact that the region was not nearly as militarized as it is today, a factor Bokassa can take little credit for. Webb’s (1990) description, though overly dichotomizing “state” and “society,” captures some reasons for capital politicians’ limited interest in governing the hinterlands: “The relative autonomy of the Central African state is protected not by a continued assertion of state power and the penetration of society, both of which are largely beyond its immediate capabilities. Rather, the autonomy of the Central African state is preserved by limiting its penetration of society, thus reducing potential societal opposition and increasing its freedom to use the limited resources available to the state” (202; emphasis in original).

19. Migdal and Schlichte (2005) helpfully distinguish between “seeing the state” and “doing the state”; that is, their analysis separates the ways that people talk about and imagine the state and the practices through which they enact the state. In another of their evocative phrasings, they separate the “state as image,” from the “state as practice.”

how people *enact* the state, becomes hard to determine in specific instances. But it nevertheless provides a framework for understanding how an idea of the all-powerful state can serve ends other than the creation of a unitary state. Titeca and de Herdt (2011) provide an example of how this works through discussion of the negotiations that characterize the management of the educational system in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in the wake of that state's "collapse." In their description, the state remains a reference point even as (maybe *especially* as) people involved in educational provision engage in flexibly-organized and personalized practices to achieve their goals, whether those goals are schooling for one's kids or a respectable income for a teacher. These improvisations are not predictable.

The frames of "corruption" and the "retreating state" leave little analytical space for unpredictability of this kind, which is so clearly present in roadblock encounters in northeastern CAR. How, instead, might one foreground the processes of negotiation and qualification in the claiming of authorities, as well as unpredictability? By highlighting the "magic" of the state (that is, the mysterious way that the idea of the state can legitimize even non-state and extra-legal transactions), Das (2006) offers an example of what such a project might look like. In this chapter, I seek to describe some of the ways such "magical" encounters play out, and also to suggest that they force a re-thinking of politics and political trajectories in areas of minimal state presence. To make this point, I place my discussion of roadblocks in conversation with a reading of road robbery in the region. Doing so shows the similarities between these two modes of dispossession, both

of which rely on taxing movement (in a word, jurisdiction) as a way to obtain profit, and both of which seem to prevent the formation of centralized, institutionalized rules and procedures.

4.2.4 A note on methods

As sites where money and other goods change hands, roadblocks are politically sensitive.²⁰ White people of apparent humanitarian sensibility (a category people generally placed me in, since most of the researchers with whom they were familiar worked for aid and development organizations) are known as peculiarly worshipful of the letter of the law, and so it was difficult for me to observe first-hand the extra-legal transactions that occur on roadblocks. I passed through many roadblocks while traveling, but, for the sake of safety on the bandit-plagued roads, I most often traveled in NGO vehicles, which generally get waved through with only a cursory glance at the *ordre de mission*. We would wait only as long as it took for the official staffing the barrier to rouse himself, saunter over, and open it. His body language seemed to indicate boredom (the youth's way of showing disappointment?) at such a worthless interruption. For this reason most of my knowledge of roadblock stops comes from what I have seen in passing, and what I have heard and overheard, especially people's frustrations with the search policies and capricious fee structures. In Ndele I was able to directly observe one roadblock in action, for it lay just beside the office of the Ministry of Water and Forests, and I could keep an eye on the barrier while also holding other

20. See chapter two for a discussion of my use of the term politics, defined herein as finding or making access to goods and other valuable resources.

conversations. In theory, no vehicles should pass on that road, because it leads directly through a national park. Even just passing through the park is deemed to present people with a too-great temptation to hunt, fish or mine, and so the road, too, is a no-go zone. But because it is the only road from Ndele toward the Northeast and on to Sudan and the town would otherwise be largely cut off from that traffic, the roadblock employees generally made exceptions, against a fee.

I also commissioned an anthropology student at the University of Bangui to carry out interviews with meat transporters for me. The transporters work like wholesale merchants. They generally travel to northern towns like Ndele, purchase bundles of *sharmoot* (the smoked meat of savannah animals like buffalo), and then accompany the sacks to southern cities like the capital, where they sell them to *wali gara*, the market women who are the product's retail face.²¹ About 30-40% of the meat for sale at the main market in Bangui (PK12) comes from Bamingui-Bangoran, the prefecture that has Ndele as its capital and almost all of which is consecrated as off-limits protected area, whether national park or safari hunting reserve. Most of the transporters are women, and many of them explain that this line of work is what enabled them to build their houses (building a house is a marker of security and wealth among city-dwellers), as many of

21. Much of the wild meat industry is financed and controlled by ministers' wives. This makes it unlikely that the technically illegal trade will ever face a crackdown at the hands of capital leaders. In addition to the transporters described here, another class of meat merchant exists. These are Bangui residents who travel to the rural north and distribute bullets so that locals can procure meat for them. These prospectors often have substantial resources, sometimes including even their own vehicle. Their passage through the barriers depends on factors such as the extent of their *kota zo* status and the frequency with which they travel the road. This segment of the meat industry might well be the largest. For instance, in one raid in December 2009 on a conservation-scheme participating village, anti-poaching guards found 800 kg of meat that had been prepared for one such prospector.

their husbands have no steady work. The research assistant had some familiarity with the Bangui meat markets because he had previously helped with a study that sought to track “bush meat” sales in the capital.²² Together we developed a semi-structured interview format, and he asked people who worked the Ndele—Bangui meat transport corridor to talk with him over tea. (The interviews were not recorded, because in my experience trying to talk with people in the meat trade recording devices brought alarm, discomfort, and shut mouths, as well as requests for additional payment.) He then transcribed the interviews (which he had conducted in Sango) into French. Because of this multi-level translation (from Sango to written French) the quotes presented herein should not be taken as dialogue from the mouths of the people interviewed, but as a rough rendering of the sentiments expressed. The interviews took place at two sites: the vast market called PK12, site of a roadblock that marks the boundary of Bangui; and the depot in the Miskine quarter, the Bangui home of transporters and others who frequent or hail from the northeastern savannas.²³

22. Though the magnitude of the bush meat trade is notoriously difficult to estimate, Roulet (2004) offers the figure of 9,500 tonnes of meat per year in the Bangui markets alone.

23. A substantial dose of caution should infuse the interpretation of these narratives. I reminded my assistant not to ask leading questions and to record as many details as possible. But invariably the accounts contained ambiguities or inconsistencies that neither he nor I knew how to resolve. For instance, the amount people said they earned varied hugely. Because difficult-to-measure factors like pride and the numeracy of people who have little formal schooling enter into such calculations of wealth and earnings, and because I cannot know how many failed/bankrupted would-be transporters never made it into my sample, I will not venture a guess as to the profitability of the trade. I should note, too, that I did not devise a way to verify the research assistant’s honesty. Some survey-designers now use GPS and other technologically sophisticated means of tracking their surveyors’ whereabouts to ensure they are interviewing where they say they are, and are talking with the people they should be. I had neither the tools nor the inclination to take such an approach. Admittedly, the reliability of the data decreases as a result. As a child of a remote region of the country who had made it to university, my research assistant had personal

4.2.5 Roadblocks as sites of profit

There is no public transport in northeastern CAR. There are no bush taxis, and there are no motorcycle taxis. People wishing to travel long distances must pay to hitch a lift on the massive, falling-apart trucks that ply the roads from Am Dogon, Sudan through CAR. While in CAR, the transporters peddle cheap household goods (plastic kettles, toothpaste, desiccated dates) and take on paying fares. Once they reach southern CAR or northern DRC, they refill their trucks with coffee beans and return northward. From Ndele to the capital, Bangui, a ticket on top of the piles of goods in the bed of the truck costs about 10,000 CFA (US\$20), a price that rises whenever there is insecurity. The journey takes three or four days. In a zooming NGO Land Cruiser, the trip can be made in one very long day. The NGO trucks and other vehicles *en mission* blast through villages, sending children and other pedestrians scurrying to leap the ditch at the side of the road in search of safety, all while covering their faces to protect from the clouds of dust. Those chickens and dogs that fail to clear out in time are, in the words of one UNICEF doctor I hitched a ride with once, “collateral damage.” The vehicles of *kota azo* (big people, generally the salaried class of functionaries) generally expect only to have to stop at the barriers long enough for one of the men staffing it to rouse himself, saunter over, and move the horizontal pole or branch that forms the barrier. But even these VIPs enjoy no guarantees. Indeed, when government officials make infrequent forays into this

experience with navigating roadblocks. In the worst case, the interview notes he presented me with reflect those personal experiences more than the transporters’ own.

zone, many prefer to travel at night in hopes of being less subject to detection and extortion.

Especially for the trucks that wend between Sudan and CAR, the roadblocks are more serious hurdles than the look of their thin poles might suggest. A truck operator might pay some 500,000 CFA (about US\$1000) on the journey from Ndele to Bangui.²⁴ The price varies widely depending on the characteristics and relationships of those operating the truck, the sensibility of the roadblockers, and the broader security context. The price rises in relation to armed group attacks, since they provide roadblockers with another justification for suspicion. Once, while on a rest stop at the market in Sibut (the town where the pavement ends, two or three hours' drive north of Bangui), a popular refreshment site for travelers, I heard a familiar voice. I knew no one in Sibut other than the guys at Restaurant Destroy (a name written only slightly larger than those of the humanitarian organizations that have patronized the establishment) who serve me my usual omelet and avocado salad. I turned, surprised, to see the smiling face of Al Habib, a friend from Ndele who works as a fixer on transport trucks. He had hopped on in Ndele and would ride south to DRC, where they would buy coffee beans and then turn around for the trek north to Am Dogon, Sudan, where they would sell the beans and restock with household goods for sale in CAR. At each village, they stop and peddle cheap

24. For non-Muslims the prices are lower, but still substantial. One Bangui-based construction company boss said that the cost of moving a truck loaded with building equipment from the capital to Ndele, where he had won a bid to construct a base for the regional peacekeeping mission, MICOPAX, was around 65,000 CFA. The prices went up as a result of new Presidential Guard barriers in the towns outside Bangui. His trucks were also attacked several times by armed robbers between Bamingui and Ndele.

Chinese-made pots and tea sets, toothpaste and desiccated dates. For the time being, Al Habib was stuck in Sibut waiting for a transfer of some 200,000 CFA (more than US\$400). Muslim merchants provide banking services—a person can pay a merchant in Bangui who then calls a merchant in Sibut and tells him to dispense the given amount of cash to the intended beneficiary—in this entirely “unbanked” terrain.

These truckers, and the travelers with them, are subject to, and sometimes beneficiaries of, the “*droit de fouille*” (in simplest terms, the right of search). Barrier agents speak of the *droit de fouille* as if it were a state law, but its terms appear in not a single text. As Roitman (2007) has pointed out, the French term *droit* has multiple valences in the region: it means right, but also tax, and also (in the sense of getting one’s due, or “goods and services over which people have legitimate effective command” [Leach in Watts and Peet 2004: 26]).²⁵ In this way, the *droit de fouille*—a seemingly cut-and-dry rule—also has multiple meanings. If truckers refuse or neglect to pay the *droit de fouille* (here imagined as an entitlement to freedom from search), the roadblockers will painstakingly start to unpack the belongings of everyone on the truck, a labor that also requires payment of a *droit de fouille* (here imagined as a fee for the service of performing a search). During a search, everyone has their things splayed out on the ground: carefully-laundered and folded clothes and undergarments get rooted through and

25. Early European explorer-administrators noted the existence of the “*droit de razzia*” (entitlement to raid) among the area’s sultans (Modat 1910). One raider might pay such a fee to another with access to greater military and human resources than himself. Rather than indicating straightforward subservience, this payment was a way of bringing about “brokered autonomy” (Tilly 2004)—that is, a way to claim sovereign capabilities in a context where politics are relational as opposed to dominated by a single Leviathan.

covered in red road dust. And it takes time. Sometimes a very long time. People pay the *droit de fouille* so they can avoid the search, especially since that search might itself also entail payment of a *droit de fouille*. They grumble about these practices but nevertheless often accommodate them for the sake of avoiding friction. Because these encounters are foundationally contingent and situational, they effectively displace debates over their legitimacy.²⁶

The roadblockers justify the search by saying they must root out contraband: guns, ammunition, and drugs. But none of the roadblockers I spoke with had ever uncovered any such items. (Because people can almost always pay to avoid search, it is unclear whether contraband is a phantom illicit commerce or not.) Much more obviously present, in contrast, is meat, usually smoked. Because on paper most of the northeastern part of the country is consecrated national park, all game meat coming from these areas is in theory illegal. However, people in the more-populous south would starve without the northern meat. Few living here in the tsetse zone keep livestock, and the nomadic herders who use the space (many of whom have veterinary medicine to prevent bovine sleeping sickness) no longer sell their cows here because they fetch higher prices in Chad and Cameroon, where Nigerians buyers have swarmed the markets, and because these regions have become too choked with highway robbers. And anyway, people prefer the taste of game. Hunters and butchers produce *boucané*, the generic term for the smoked flesh of wild animals, throughout the country. These small creatures—such as monkeys

26. To say that dispossession has a long history in this region risks giving the impression that people accept it. In fact, people actively criticize these tactics while also often being complicit in them.

and cane rats (*sibissi*)—are usually smoked whole. Meat from the Northeast, called *sharmoot*, is especially sought-after because it comes from large savannah animals like buffalo. It is sold in bundles of small pieces. People say that but a small chunk satisfyingly flavors a large pot of sauce.

To understand how and why meat became such a critical object of roadblocker concern, it bears taking a brief detour into the question of the role of wild meat in Central African life. Though few have the money to eat meat every day, eating “correctly” (in the French sense) requires meat. The fact that but a small piece of *sharmoot* will flavor a sauce for the whole family is important in a place where most people must stretch their few francs. Any time someone leaves Bangui, he or she is expected to return bearing meat, whether fresh or smoked, for family and friends. It is a gift, but a gift so expected as to be an obligation. If you fail to produce some, people will almost go so far as to label you crazy. So everyone uses the rest stops and roadblock interruptions on the way back to the capital to provision in meat (and dried, crumbled manioc). Even the anti-poaching guards and the expatriate mercenaries who lead them, upon return to Bangui, are continually asked for gifts of the beloved *sharmoot* from the north—this despite the fact that all *sharmoot* is illegal, and the anti-poaching guards’ explicit job is to stop the trade! Even the West African nuns at the Catholic mission in Ndele stockpile tubs of meat to take to their sisters in Bangui. Every African NGO or international agency employee must bring a stash too. Vehicles nearing the capital resemble jumbled zoos, with monkeys hanging by their arms from side-view mirrors,

guinea fowl and antelope strapped to the roof, and bundles of smoked meat cradling the suitcases in the overstuffed trunk. People in Bangui understand the hinterlands—and especially the Northeast—as wild, foreign lands of deprivation and armed conflict. But they also see them as larders, and especially of meat. Smoked meat has become a kind of fulcrum on which much, if not most, of the regulation that takes place on northeastern roadblocks turns. The move to make meat illegal (a course embarked on with much international organization guidance²⁷) was intended as a step in the direction of increasing state control over the area. But in fact, in a place like this that has never really been claimed by a state, it has had the opposite effect: it has given barrier agents another flexible reference point to invoke to obtain personal profit from travelers.

The other main locus of roadblock regulation is *la civilité*—one’s status as possessor of citizenship documents of one kind or another (birth certificate, marriage license, and especially a national ID card) or not. For a rural resident, obtaining a national ID card is a major accomplishment. Doing so requires a trip to the capital, the completion of reams of paperwork in a succession of offices, the assemblage of a host of official documents such as a birth certificate, which most people do not have,²⁸ and the

27. See chapter five on militarized anti-poaching for more on how this regime came into being, and what it has meant for the region’s governance.

28. In theory, those whose parents did not obtain birth certificates within the first month of their lives can later petition for a *jugement supplétif* and then use that to get the birth certificate, but these documents are expensive (US\$5–10, depending on the officials involved in the transactions), and the tribunal officials charged with performing these duties often neglect them. The tribunal in Ndele, for instance, heard no cases for the entirety of my time there. Birth certificates themselves often contain more falsehoods than truths. One friend showed me the paper produced for her baby. The girl’s name was spelled so incorrectly that the clerk had effectively renamed her, the mother’s nationality was incorrect, and the date of birth was off by several days. But it bore an official cachet.

payment of various fees. The whole process can take months, if not years. In rural areas, perhaps less than twenty percent of the population has an identity card. Even those few who manage to obtain one find the laminated card frequently contains errors.

So though *civilité* is a rank obtained by very few, and though the documents on which it is based frequently contain errors or are otherwise compromised, it, too, has become a pretext for roadblock checks. This is true whether the roadblockers claim a relationship to the state (gendarmes, soldiers, and so forth) or not (rebels, for instance). When stopped, all men must present an ID card.²⁹ Failure to present one does not mean that you cannot pass; it means, rather, that you must pay extra or risk being detained indefinitely. In other words, the form of state surveillance of nationality gets performed on roadblocks, but without the substance that it is generally assumed to entail.

Regardless of what their paperwork says, people with Muslim-sounding names must pay, and usually pay more than other people, especially as they range further from the far northeast where they are in the majority. From Ndele onward, the Sango-speaking roadblock operators assume that Muslims are “Sudanese” or “Chadian.” In my conversations with them, functionaries hailing from the south tended to assume that all Muslims, regardless of where they or their families were born, were foreigners and not rightful residents. (“They’re different. They live here in the heat, and the heat makes them nervous and they fight easily,” said one official, reflecting widespread sentiments.) One schoolteacher in Tiringoulou, a town in the far northeast, took the precaution of

29. Women are generally not expected to have *civilité* documents, and so they are generally exempted from these checks. [How can I push this gender aspect further...?]

obtaining his identity card with a non-Muslim sobriquet, the better to avoid such unwanted attentions. Another Tiringoulou resident, Abdulaye, who worked as a photographer and hence traveled often to Bangui to develop the exposed film, described how he was always forced to pay at roadblocks on account of his “foreign” name. One time, the roadblockers even threw him in prison.³⁰ In all these encounters, whether involving civilité or meat, roadblockers perform a mode of rule obsessed with centralizing surveillance. But because these encounters play out in such non-centralized political arenas, these performances are improvised pretense with the effect of creating flexible systems of dispossession and seizure. As such they have far more in common with the practices of road robbers than the people operating them admit to.

It is in moving around—traveling to the diamond fields, transporting meat to the capital, etc.—that people make profits beyond subsistence. And it is in moving around that people become subject to dispossession by roadblockers and road robbers, whose arrests serve as a kind of personalized tax. Profit and dispossession are thus tightly linked. Profit is preferentially targeted for dispossession, which is simply another way of saying that one person’s profit can be appropriated by another. Within towns, economies are dominated by subsistence strategies, but on the roads and in the bush people are both able to accumulate, and are subject to dispossession. Profit is thus bound up in

30. As I will discuss further in chapter six, he cited this as a reason for entering into rebellion against the government—to “shock” the state into recognizing him as a rightful and entitlement-bearing citizen.

expense and risk, and these factors render the ultimate winner of that profit less certain, and less fixed, than in places with more-formalized rules for accumulation.

In Central African buffer zones, control of navigation as a way of intervening in projects of profiteering, a common mode of exercising jurisdiction (in the Grotian sense) has a long history. Sultan Sanusi and the other nineteenth-century raiders saw those living outside the protected space of their fortified cities as reasonable targets for attack or other predation. Sanusi understood that controlling mobility was an important way of demonstrating one's own power—this is one reason why he saw it as so important that the French accept his *guard de corps* accompaniment whenever the foreigners approached Ndele [see chapter 2]. The French in turn also emphasized the importance of jurisdiction, particularly in terms of their concern about those they called “deserters” (*transfuges*)—the people who left to work and live abroad and thus escaped the heavy French taxation scheme. Arresting the mobile was also a way of having the sense that one was controlling potential danger. The widespread mistrust of strangers evident today³¹ owes in part to the history of surprise attack and the imperative of managing such threats. As a consequence of this history, in ways more and less extractive and coercive, intervening in people's movement has become an expected—which is not to say that it has become an accepted—technique of governance. The question of whether this is “fair” or “legitimate” or not gets displaced, because each dispossession encounter relies on a constellation of situational factors, which are up for negotiation anew each time.

31. See chapter three for more on social atomization and mistrust of strangers.

Many of the people with whom I discussed roadblocks lamented how capriciously the barrier agents enact their authority in demanding bribes. But they did not necessarily challenge the form of the roadblock itself. They criticized, instead, how the roadblockers' demands had become "exaggerated." People's comments reflected a *desire* for an authority that could control all dangers, and this hopefulness about what the roadblock form *could be* was sometimes strong enough to outweigh the frustration with what it *was*. One thoughtful friend, an employee of an international humanitarian NGO, blew up when I suggested that roadblocks are useless for all but those working them, for whom barriers are a way to line their pockets and warm their stomachs. "You don't understand," he lamented. "Maybe in your country you don't need roadblocks, because your government controls what goes on. But here, we are poor and our government is weak. If we didn't have these roadblocks, anybody could come in and attack, carrying whatever goods they wanted—guns, ammunition, drugs. We *need* the barriers." His outburst reminded me of countless fragmentary conversations overheard at airport security about the necessity of Transportation Safety Authority screening rules and procedures; no amount of evidence as to the unlikelihood that a bomb could be assembled from a collection of liquids has stopped people from clucking approvingly "at least it keeps us safe" as they take their zip-top bag of three-ounce bottles carefully out of their suitcase for extra screening. For whatever reason, people seem eager to mentally connect performances of control of movement with safety and protection, whether or not their experiences support such a connection. The roadblockers play on

this. Even though their actions do not lead to a greater centralization of power (since one can always pay to avoid search, little of importance is actually thus controlled), their performance of centralizing, protective control (e.g., wearing uniforms, even if mismatched ones; invoking rationales of state control, such as conservation laws), invites people to accept their regulation and acquiesce to their demands. Thus the marshaling of a centralizing form as an arena for flexible, personalized, situational encounters has the effect of contributing to a non-centralized politics, and the prevention (perhaps inadvertent) of centralization itself. When the state becomes little more than “inflated ritual” these “state rituals become a ‘form’ that people participate in to avoid ‘content,’” posit Hecht and Simone (1994: 21). It is important to remember, though, that such avoidance is neither necessarily intentional nor seen as optimal, even as people have a hard time doing otherwise.

4.2.6 Tools for roadblock navigation

When roadblock agents come upon bundles of meat, they seize them. The owner can liberate the goods by paying a fee. The amount requested depends on a number of factors: whether the roadblocker and the transporter have some kind of relationship or family ties;³² how much the roadblocker has earned that day; the moods of the protagonists; the amount the roadblocker thinks the transporter can pay; and so on. The transporter will counter the roadblocker’s request, and eventually they will agree to a

32. As Schlee (2004) has argued, markers of identity such as ethnicity or other relationships are not static affinities that determine interactions. The meaning of any such social tie depends on a range of situational factors.

sum, which might be anywhere from 1,000-10,000 francs (US\$2-20). The various people present on a barrier each exact payment, because, although there may be some overlap in their roles, each assumes specific “formalities”: soldiers, gendarmes and police check identity papers; water and forests guards look for park products; customs agents look for anything that would likely have been imported at some point (e.g., a cassette player); free-lancers and rebels demand payment for the “security services” they are rendering. The driver or his fixer pays the generic “*formalité*”³³ (usually 1000 CFA, or about US\$2) to the soldiers or gendarmes, depending on who is present. Men must present “*une pièce d’identité*” for inspection. Those who do not have such a document must pay 500 or 1000 CFA, depending on what they have. Those deemed foreign must pay several times’ that amount (anywhere from a few thousand to 10,000).

Some transporters buy *laissez-passer* papers from the roadblockers’ ostensible superiors in regional offices, but most complain that whether you have a *laissez-passer* or not you still pay. They prefer to invent their own navigational tools. For instance, a transporter might temporarily distribute her wares among a number of fellow-passengers (described by one as “the African way” of avoiding roadblock hassles), the idea being that the smaller quantities of meat will look like they are for familial consumption rather than commerce and escape untaxed. Sometimes, transporters will confide their packages and a bit of cash to the driver or one of his helpers (“*le réservoir*”), because these workers traverse frequently, know the people on the roadblocks better,

33. This term, too, is a marker of how a centralizing form gets put to non-centralized ends, for the formalities are in fact entirely informal.

and so have a superior negotiating position. This strategy works best if it includes all the transporters on a vehicle, because then each contributes 5,000 or so, less than the amount if one or two people went in alone.

Another tool people often use is the *service*. A *service* is a document, sometimes just a scribbled scrap and other times a stamped, typed sheet of paper, that a *kota zo* (usually a functionary) prepares, generally but not always for a fee. The document is meant to transfer the *kota zo*'s freedom from search³⁴ to the bearer of the writ. A *laissez-passer* from the Ministry of Water and Forests is one form of service, but other officials produce these documents as well. In Ndele, the tribunal's prosecutor was known as a prolific producer of services. As best I could work out from the many people I asked about his activities, he was transporting large quantities of smoked meat to Bangui for his family's consumption and for sale, and he was also selling/giving *services* to people so they could do the same. Such a document would effectively say "This meat is for the prosecutor in Ndele" and in theory that would mean that the person traveling with it would not get hassled. In practice, the embodied capability of the *kota zo* does not always transfer so fluidly. In February of 2008, Water and Forests barrier workers seized forty packages of meat, accompanied by a *service* note indicating that the prosecutor took credit for them, and the following month anti-poaching guards intercepted another

34. "In effect, administrative vehicles... are exempt from search, and experience has shown, during all of 1995, that this category of vehicle frequently transports hunting ammunition that is then introduced without difficulty into the protected areas" (PDRN 1995: 38; my translation). Note that according to the relevant laws, state functionaries caught in violation—hunting in protected areas, for instance—should be subject to double fines and punishments (see Art. 115 of the Code de la faune).

forty packages. This all came out during a hearing to air the long-festering animosity between the prosecutor and the president of the tribunal at Ndele. Both were removed from those posts. (They were later given new jobs in Bangui, effectively a promotion.) Some people in Ndele thought the prosecutor was partial and due to be removed, but others argued that he had been a scapegoat, and that his case only came to light because it deflected attention from others' meat commerce. (It certainly appeared that the prosecutor had made his share of enemies in the locale.) The service is thus a tool for roadblock navigation, but rather than a surefire fix, it is always embedded in relationships and fickle and fleeting alliances.

As a technique of governance, the dispossession practiced on Central African roads have both accumulative and leveling effects.³⁵ Roadblockers one day are subject to seizure the next, whether by the anti-poaching militiamen or by armed robbers. Even on a roadblock itself, the putative infractions are endlessly malleable and the fees demanded negotiable. For instance, customs officers demand to see a receipt for any manufactured item transported. Otherwise, the item is confiscated. In a simplistic sense, it can be seized because the person carrying it might have stolen it, a circular process. The owner can free it by paying a fee. Even people who have a receipt might be forced to pay to obtain the right to circulate with the item. As one meat transporter explained a recent encounter, "The customs officers did their search and they found a manioc grinder. The owner presented the receipt. The customs agents made things hard for him

35. In this way, their effects are similar to those of witchcraft, as Geschiere (1997) has pointed out, and their workings similarly slippery, as compared to fixed rules.

by saying that he should give them some money, and he was obliged to give them 3000 CFA.” The fact that roadblockers enforce both sides of the law—whether a person abides or does not abide, the law serves as a pretext for seizure—lends their demands a capricious aspect. Even *kota azo* cannot be assured of preferential treatment. They, too, end up in negotiations and confrontations when stopped on the road.

One day I sauntered up to the Water and Forests ministry office in Ndele just as one of the more voluble guards, who I will call Sam, was launching into a story. He recounted how, a few days before, one among their ranks, a certain Clovis, had been traveling to Bangui in plainclothes. Like so many others, he carried bundles of meat. Along the way, anti-poaching militiamen stopped the truck he had gotten a ride on. Despite the papers he carried from his Water and Forests ministry superiors, the militiamen seized his meat. According to the texts that in theory regulate these actions, the militiamen should have arranged for the seized meat to be sold at public auction. But according to witnesses, they quickly divided the meat among themselves. Sam was livid at the injustice. He promised, “If it were me in Clovis’s place, the whole town would know what happened. I wouldn’t let them get away with it [that is, he would seek vengeance].” He shook his head in angry disbelief. His interlocutor, Marie, began by decrying the number of times she had bought meat from the anti-poaching militiamen—everyone knew they were the best hunters, those hypocrites. Then she added, “And the paper [a *laissez-passer*] Clovis got from the head of the office here—doesn’t that have any value for them? And if tomorrow they were the ones to show up here in front of our

authorities, how would they feel?" The conversation wound down as an elderly man with a suitcase got into an argument with the agents on the nearby roadblock, who were trying to grab his bag. Sam and his fellows lolling on the verandah disagreed with the agents' actions and started yelling, "*Eh! Droit de fouille! Droit de fouille!*" because the man had already paid to avoid search. the discussion moved on to the persistent problems with the mobile phone network, and health problems in their families (amoebas, stomach ailments, and their probable causes and cures).

4.2.7 The Clovis incident—A line by line translation

Sam: Kua ti ala ake na lege ape wa la na ya ti gara wa la na kodoro ape.

Their [ECOFAC] work isn't on the roads, nor in the market. When it gets to the town, it's no longer their work.

Marie: So ake kua ti ala ape. Kua ti ala ayeke na ya ti ngounda, kua ti ala ake na ya ti kodoro ape wa la na marche ape wa la na ndo ti lege ape.

[Shaking her head in agreement] It's not their work. Their work is in the bush, but in the village it's no longer their work.

Sam: La ni, Clovis ayeke gue na Bangui ala mu nyama ti lo.

That day, Clovis was going to Bangui with some boucané and sharmoot, and they seized it.

Marie: Clovis ni lo yeke zo wa?

Who's this Clovis?

Sam: Lo yeke ko gara ti ye so a affecte lo na Birao.

He's the brother-in-law of a guy who was posted to Birao.

Marie: Ah, mbi hinga lo awe.

Oh, yeah, I know him.

Sam: Ala mu nyama ti lo.

They took all his meat.

Marie: Meh lo sala tongana nyen?

But how could they do that?

Sam: Lo za ni. Mais la ni so, lo ken a civil.

He let them. That day he was in civilian clothes.

Marie: Ala ketene jusqu'a la wa? Ala kete jusqu'a a hunzi.

They're going to eat that until when...? It's going to come to an end!

Sam: Ala kwe ayeke complices ti a ye so!

They're all complicit [in bush meat profiteering], those ECOFAC!

Marie: Lakue ala gue na patrouille ala manquaient ti tokwa na mbi nyama ti te ape!

Oh, them, after their patrols, they never fail to send me some meat! All the time!

Sam: Tongaga mbi yeke na place ti Clovis mbi yeke ziya ni na ala pepe. Azo kwe ayeke hinga tene ni.

If it was me in Clovis's place, the whole town would know what happened. I wouldn't let them get away with it. [That is, he would seek vengeance.]

Marie: Na ya ti patrouilles ti ala, ala kui ti fa nyama. Ala manquaient ti tokwa na mbi ape. Mbi kwi ti tene. A fini pisteurs so mbi ma temoignages ti ala njoni ape. Ala malmaint azo. Ala pika azo mingi.

When they go on patrol, they're the ones who kill the animals! They send me fresh meat! I never lack for eating. The new recruits are known for mistreating people—they beat people and mess with them.

Marie: Na mbeti so autorité ti ge asala so ake na valeur ape? Mais tongana kekereke ala la akiri ge, ala yeke sala tongana nyen?

And the paper [a laissez-passer] Clovis got from the chef de cantonment here—doesn't that have any value for them? And if tomorrow they were the ones to show up here in front of our authorities, how would they feel? It's not right.

Eventually I turned and started chatting with Sam in French. Isn't it unfair, I asked, that the conservation programs forbid hunting? It seems too harsh—people need to eat! Even his boss, the chef de cantonment, described the laws' "categorical" strictness as "unfortunate." Not at all, Sam replied. He launched into a recitation of the reasoning in anti-poaching program documents. He gave a detailed explanation showing that villages stand to make exponentially more money from safari hunting trophy fees than they do from hunting meat for themselves to eat or sell. I was struck by how seamlessly he could switch from expounding on his right to (illegal) meat to expressing hardline conservation rhetoric. On the one hand, it evidenced a sense of himself as a bearer of exceptional privileges. On the other, it showed him to recognize the various modes of profit production available to people here, and to see modes that to me appeared to be contradictory as somehow separate when considered in light of the imperative to *débrouiller* (get by, make a living). Like the good Muslims Hecht and Simone describe who drink alcohol in Khartoum back lots while conducting business deals with "heathen" southerners, Sam had found openness to situational imperatives more important when seeking profit than adhering to a single doctrine. Such a "bricolage effect" has "immediate strategic value but in the long run, does not address the need for coherence or the construction of legitimate authority" (Hecht and Simone 2004: 54). Hence the overriding ambivalence with which people greet roadblocks: they appear to be markers of just such a coherent, utopian project—the all-controlling, protective state—and yet as much as on one level this goal is desired, the widespread recognition

that it does not actually operate that way forces people to act more in accordance with flexible, situational demands.

The Clovis incident provided fodder for many discussions among roadblockers and travelers in those weeks. People know that roadblock encounters play out following loose guidelines rather than rules, but even in such an unpredictable context, this case struck those who discussed it as egregious. In the end, though, all went back to work, and all went back to improvising navigational tools for roadblocks and other hurdles that confront the region's travelers.

The endless flexibility of roadblockers' (and travelers') tactics illustrates how a centralizing form—the roadblock as a site for organized surveillance of travelers—has been established and blossomed to serve non-centralized ends, especially personal profit. The *idea* of the state is the ultimate tool for roadblock navigation, for both roadblockers and travelers. This is significant because it tweaks a number of claims about the workings of the state in the margins. First, it shows how places where the state has only an extremely minimal institutional presence are not necessarily places of resistance to the state, as Clastres (1987) and Scott (2009) (among others) have argued. Here, people invoke the form of the state as a reference point to create opportunities for dispossession. Dispossession operates according to personalized and situational rubrics of profit and rule. In this way, Central African roadblocks indicate a possible answer to the question of where cunning resides when contingency dominates: everywhere, and yet with no guarantee of success. Roadblocks also show that the increasing

centralization that many pundits of globalization—to say nothing of social/political theory itself—have deemed inevitable is in fact but one of an unlimited range of possible hybrid outcomes.³⁶ The area thus encourages a revision of the usual teleologies of political development. More specifically, northeastern CAR, one of the places anthropologists used to refer to as “stateless,” suggests a re-thinking of the components of sovereignty to include not just those sovereign capabilities directed toward state-building, such as jurisdiction, but also those sovereign capabilities that foster non-centralized modes of rule. With this observation, I ask: where else might these non-centralizing dynamics be present, but unrecognized? And where does cunning reside when contingency dominates?

Turning to road robbers, whose non-centralizing (some would simply label them criminal) mode of rule has long been recognized—vilified—as such, makes clear how ambivalent people in the region are about living in a zone dominated by atomized forms of social organization and accumulation, as well as how deeply-rooted they are in the region’s history.

4.3 Part two: Road robbery

It is all too easy to see roadblocks as no more than an “inflated ritual” of a state that is all “form” and no “content” (Hecht and Simone 1994). Seeing them as more than that requires considering them in relation to other historically-embedded practices of

36. To take just one example, Olson argued that state-building occurs when “roving bandits” become “stationary bandits.” Living among their potential targets, they must modulate their predatory tactics and develop protective institutions (2000). Roadblockers, though, represent a category Olson did not foresee: stationary bandits preying on mobile populations.

governance in the buffer zone, such as road robbery. Indeed, two of the foremost scholars of these processes, Saibou Issa and Janet Roitman, have illuminated the many connections among road robbery, roadblocking, and state-led processes of dispossession, from the colonial era onward. In this section, I will first discuss these scholars' analysis of how road robbery is a historically-embedded mode of rule that also responds to the exigencies of the generalized crisis that emerged in the region beginning in the mid-1980s. At the same time as the road cutters have become more intense and breach previously-held bounds of propriety, efforts to combat and control road cutting through roadblocking have also spread. Former road cutters now describe themselves as forces dedicated to combat against road cutters, even as they continue to engage in robbery themselves. The rise of rebel-roadblockers, discussed in the final section, indicates that the rhetoric of the road is changing (roadblocks, a visible form of governance, are presented and performed as more legitimate than other forms of governance) even as the ethics of the road (what people hold to be true *and* put into practice [Roitman 2006]) remain ambivalent. Roadblocking and road cutting both remain elements of the repertoire of armed men.

Though roadblock employees bragged that "We control the roads," to the extent that they in fact hold effective control it lies in that particular point, and not in the stretch of space between that point and another. Recall the ocean-like way these lands spread in all directions. Road cutters, in contrast, move up and down the roads but are not constrained by them, for they make their homes and camps in the bush. They work

on the roads: they police travelers by stopping them and dispossessing them of their goods and cash. They also often take people hostage against a ransom. The children of nomadic herders like the Mbororo³⁷ are frequent targets, for these herders' cows represent huge cash reserves that farmers or other workers never accumulate (ACHPR 2009: 46). The herders count among both thieves' primary targets and among the ranks of those who take up the job of road bandit, a seemingly contradictory state of affairs that Issa explains as a function of their long position of marginality and the devastation wrought by successive droughts (Issa 2006: 122-123). Social categories, such as the cross-cutting ties of lineage or ethnicity, can be "situationally relevant" but also "situationally ignored" (Schlee 2004: 146). As these hostage-taking endeavors have expanded they have become veritable "*razzias d'otages*" (Issa 2010: 142), in which whole groups of people—herders, yes, but also anyone else who finds him- or herself on the road, such as would-be merchants traveling to purchase wares at regional markets—are captured.

As Issa (2006, 2010) has thoroughly documented, the current generation of bandits folds onto the region's long history of dispossession as a means of wealth creation.³⁸ Issa shows how the recent professionalization and commercialization of the

37. Also known as Peuhl or Fallata, Mbororo have spread from their West African roots to today cover an expanse stretching from Senegal to Ethiopia. They are known as the most nomadic of the many groups of mobile herders, though some have switched to more sedentary lifestyles as merchants and medicine vendors.

38. Nachtigal, one of the first European visitors to document his travels to present-day Chad and Sudan in the 1870s, wrote of his approach to Abeche that "The district was made unsafe not only by lions and rhinoceroses, but also by thieves; we were therefore compelled to camp close together and to surround the camp with a fence of thorns" (1971: 38-39). Nachtigal also documents how dispossession was an integral part of administrative practices at the time. For instance, consider the way the kursi handled disputes: "The kursi also has jurisdiction over robberies, adultery, police offences and bloody brawls, and the penalties

bandit bands grew out of the rise in banditry during the colonial era, when theft could be a strategy of resistance to the colonial authorities and when the newly-installed institution of incarceration provided criminals with new sites to socialize and plan (2010). Raiding and theft also served as a kind of insurance against difficult years, if the crops failed or pests descended, and enabled young men to begin assembling herds of cattle, the main form of accumulated wealth. As such it was a legitimate, and important, part of the economy. Similarly to Sant Cassia's study of the history of Mediterranean banditry (1992), which showed that bandits were neither simple stooges of provincial potentates nor socially-oriented Robin Hood-types but some uneasy combination of the two, Issa shows that Chad Basin banditry has always had an ambivalent potential.³⁹ It incorporates chiefs and other leaders, who dispatch groups of more-mobile youth to work the roads and bring back loot (2010: 37). The multi-faceted crisis that beset the region in the 1980s and 90s (salaries halved at the same time as prices doubled; two massive droughts; armed conflict and a resultant surge in the availability of small arms; the foreclosure of employment options for youth; etc.) transformed the milder historical forms of theft into the industrialized undertakings seen in recent years. During this period schools became "factories for the production of the unemployed" and these

nearly always take the form of fines which accrue to him" (Ibid.: 62). In other words, the position carried with it a means to personal profit through extracting retributive and/or predatory fees from others.

39. Blok (1972) argued that Sardinian bandits were Mafiosos' henchmen, which was a rejoinder to Hobsbawm's (1969) portrayal of "social bandits" as selfless communarians. Hobsbawm described these social bandits as "primitive rebels" because he saw them as resisters of exploitative status quos. Central Africa's bandit-rebels suggest that Hobsbawm romanticized bandits' importance as a counter-hegemonic force.

“children of the crisis” found that the criminal realm was the only business hiring (Issa 2010: 161, 163, 165, 172). The bush has become a place for the marginalized or dismissed to make a “claim to a right to wealth” (Roitman 2001: 246). Theft, in this reading, is an occupation like any other. It is, more than anything else, a way of working, with work (*travail*) understood as a form of labor that creates a profit, not just labor as such (working the fields, for instance, though laborious, is not work, in this sense).⁴⁰

In the years before I began fieldwork, I traveled in northwestern CAR, the part of the country closest to the Cameroonian zones Issa and Roitman have focused on and researched the problem of highway robbery for international human rights organizations. Central Africans refer to the robbers as “*zaraguinas*,” a term that grew out of the phenomenon of the men mobilized for the long Chadian civil wars who, beginning in the early 1980s, descended onto Central African and Cameroonian roads in search of spoils, or else as *coupeurs de route* (road cutters), or else simply as “bandits.” In this region, the *coupeur de route* problem reached an apex in 2006-2007. (Subsequently, an armed rebel group grew to sufficient strength to force the robbers from the area; some of the robbers went on to join or form rebel groups of their own, such as the robber-turned-anti-robber band led by “General” Baba Laddé that came to reside in northern CAR, discussed further below.) Humanitarian organizations “closed” the roads known as the robbers’ preferred targets to their staff. But area residents still used them when they had to. And in doing so they frequently found themselves dispossessed of their goods and/or

40. See chapter five on militarized anti-poaching for discussion of how men-in-arms understand various kinds of arms-carrying as “literal work” (Hoffman 2011).

taken hostage. People wishing to liberate captive relatives had to travel to the bandits' camps with an offering, usually a sum gathered by imploring everyone in their village or town to contribute to the fund. Ransoms could reach into the millions of CFA (thousands of US\$). (The bandits Roitman interviewed stressed that they would never steal from the poor; but it seems this and other aspects of the "law of the road," perhaps adhered to elsewhere, are more flexibly interpreted here in this place where accountability is so fraught.)

The bandits' camps were not secret, even though the people they targeted portrayed them as foreign outlaws impervious to reason. An Italian missionary priest living in the hardest-hit area, Father Aurelio, visited the bandits and began diplomatic overtures. Though Central Africans generally label these attackers "Chadian," the robbers Father Aurelio got to know hailed from as far as Togo and as near as a few hundred kilometers away. Other than the pervasive odor of marijuana, the bandits' camp revealed little in the way of luxury. They explained to Father Aurelio that they wished to return home but lacked the funds; they had either passed on to leaders or spent whatever they had earned in their raids and hostage-taking. The road home to Chad, to Cameroon, to Niger or elsewhere would be expensive, as it would pass many roadblocks, sites where payment would be demanded of them, too.⁴¹

41. President Bozizé in Bangui did not fund their passage home, for, coached by his French adviser, he worried that a pay-off to criminals would displease the international donors without whose support the ministries and presidency would be forced to operate in drastically reduced circumstances. The expansion of the area's self-defense groups into semi-unified rebel groups made them more effective challengers to the road bandits, and they eventually drove the gangs out. Road banditry decreased, but new "rebel" groups sprung up in their place and were comprised partly of these former zaraguinas.

The road robbers in northwestern CAR offer yet further proof that in the Chad Basin “seizure has become a generalized mode of enrichment” (Roitman 2003). As Roitman suggests, the tax collector closes shops and throws their proprietors in jail; gendarmes target trucks and travelers; anti-poaching guards hunt for ivory; and road robbers take people hostage. All these are forms of accumulation by dispossession and all are ambiguously legitimate from the perspective of those who must navigate them. “Taxation” has become a pluralized phenomenon, and gets extracted in a range of relationships other than simply that of the citizen to the state (Roitman 2003).

This is the case with road robbery in the northeastern CAR buffer zone, too. But, though crucial to understanding how dispossession has become so generalized, these observations miss some of the particularities of this remotest of areas. Here, too, herders and people traveling on the roads are preferential targets. But the encounters have an even less convivial aspect, and hostage-taking is far less common than simply seizing everything in the travelers’ possession—perhaps especially any vehicles they might be using to get around. Humanitarian NGO vehicles are attacked—even those of the usually-safe Doctors Without Borders (MSF). Issa shows the historical roots of road robbery to illuminate the social and ethical foundations of this institution, and Roitman shows how robbers, today, justify their actions in a context of “crisis.” As important as both these points are, it is also necessary to stress the extent to which the morality of dispossession is contested by the various people subjected to and perpetrating it, and the extent to which people are ambivalent about it as a dominant form of rule in their midst.

The current phase in the buffer zone is marked by rapid flux and quickly-changing norms and practices, shifts that often rely on breaking previously-accepted, if largely unspoken, norms. This is part of what it means to say that these interactions are situational and contingent: rules do not govern them, and so their legitimacy is always in question, and yet can never be directly debated.

Though one could argue that people have always played with and pushed social boundaries, the particularity of the current moment seems to be the accompanying trend toward the atomization of social life in the buffer zone. Whereas in the heroic past Issa describes bandits would only prey on “foreign” victims—and would preferentially seek out rivals and enemies—today people complain that the bandits’ choice of targets is determined by a combination of opportunism and economics. Solidarities are always in question. Aziza Kassara, a friend in Ndele and, as the local representative of the Central African Women’s Organization the only woman who came to and spoke at public meetings, summed up why robbers’ attacks so troubled her by lamenting, “These are our own sons who are doing this to us!” Indeed, some sons of Ndele and others raised along the road north of the town had tried their hand at diamond mining, taken up arms, and become bandits and rebels, not necessarily in that order. Now, when they attacked Ndele, as they did twice during my fieldwork, they caused enormous suffering for their relatives, who found themselves caught between the rebels and the soldiers, targeted by both as complicit with the enemy. (As Mbembe has observed, in warfare in Africa today, it is often civilians who are targeted, not an opposing force as such (2006).)

When people in the area traveled, they found themselves subject to attack from road cutters, who they frequently recognized as on-the-prowl rebels, and roadblockers, who could be either rebels or putative state employees. This is a pluralization of regulatory authority (Roitman 2005), and the people subjected to it see themselves as suffering from it. But it is a pluralization in which the “claims to rights to wealth” are made in different ways depending on the practice being engaged in, and the processes through which claims are made present different considerations in regard to what can and should be made visible, and what can and should be hidden.

During my time in Ndele the road south to Bamingui (which eventually leads to Bangui), site of a national park and safari hunting concessions, became known as unsafe. Bandits arrested several vehicles, battering the occupants and stealing their goods. Previously, this road had a reputation as always tranquil. (In the late 80s and mid-90s there were occasional bursts of road bandit activity, recorded in anti-poaching program documents, but these were seen as anomalous.) “Mobile banks,” as farmers half-jokingly refer to migrating cattle herders, did not frequent this stretch, and it was used by safari hunting companies and anti-poachers, who had before generally been left alone. Andre Bashe, who had worked for a conservation project in the area for about a decade, was among those on a truck that got hijacked between Ndele and Bamingui in March 2010. He quickly realized that he recognized his attackers, who had worked for him clearing roads and setting controlled bush fires in years past. When they asked his name and occupation, he blurted out a pseudonym and told them he worked in a clinic,

desperately hoping they would not see through his lies, for if so they would have known that he had the capability to, in his phrasing, “betray them.” The bandits, he explained, were also rebels, and to retain their legitimacy as rebels their thieving needed to remain occluded. They beat him and took his cash and computer and held him, bound hand and foot, for twenty-four hours. He managed to retain his external hard drive, with all his files backed up on it, by telling them it was a battery for a computer he kept in Bangui. They threw it to the ground but let him keep it. When he described the event to me from the safety of the capital a month later, he still seemed shaken up by the attack. He had decided not to return to the area until the end of the dry season, when rains would discourage bandits from frequenting the zone. He had made his peace with the losses (when one has been subjected to a situation like that, escaping with one’s life feels like having won something, rather than having lost it) and even scoffed ruefully, “I don’t know what use that computer will be to them, living in the bush without electricity.” The fact that “rebels” do not want to be fingered as “bandits” indicates that understandings of the morality⁴² of dispossession might be shifting even as it remains a favored tactic.

4.4 Part three: Road cutting becomes roadblocking, and vice versa

The region’s men-in-arms see banditry, rebellion, and soldiering all as more-or-less commensurate forms of work (Debos 2008). A roadblocker/rebel one day might go

42. Inspired by Roitman’s (2006) discussion of the difference between “ethics” and “morality,” I use the term morality to indicate a sense of right and wrong that is not necessarily put into action.

off and rob some cattle herders the next; they are part of the repertoire of tactics, or skills, that these men possess. As one ARPD rebel, exercised over what he saw as the piddling sums promised to him as part of disarmament, said, "If I go hold up the road will that now be enough for my family? I prefer to keep my gun rather than disarm if that's all they're going to give us. Then I can do what I need to do to make money. Robbery, whatever." But they also understand the importance of managing information about what they are doing, and especially, of rhetorically separating the work of the bush—robbery—from the work of the roadblocks. The former lights certain fears that the latter does not. Robbery can be used as a threat, like this APRD fighter did:

We will divide because our leaders lied to us, they misled us.... We will return to the bush because there are lots of road cutters and from the trucks and the travelers we will be able to find something to eat.... Me as a lieutenant I will return to my fighters and we will cut the roads and make money, cut the road and find money to live and that's enough. Because we can't go back to our households without money. No, we cannot.⁴³

The threat of robbery can be visible, but the actual work of it is something that people try to hide. In contrast, when working as a roadblocking rebel, identity and making the form of work visible are both crucial to effective claims to payment. However, people do

43. I later received a series of text messages from this young man as he tried to plan his next move as the impending failure of DDR became apparent (see chapter seven). First he asked how he could apply for a visa to the United States, but he did not have sufficient funds for the two- or three-day journey to an Internet cafe to register for the diversity visa lottery. Then he reported that his brother had told him he could find work in Sudan. "I am going to search for money by any means possible because I have not yet recovered my strength and it is not just me but there are many of us without force or dead just some of our suffering." When I told him to be safe, he replied, "Don't worry we have antis [gris-gris and other medicines] from our dear grandfather I will return how many years have I spent in the bush and now if I earn alongside before I return to my home I will throw my gun in the river." [My translation; I have somewhat corrected spelling and syntax to facilitate comprehension.] He was casting about for any opportunities he could find, and would have preferred any that did not involve carrying a weapon, but unfortunately those were few and far between.

not always succeed in maintaining these distinctions, whether because they slip up or because the people they attack recognize them.

While I was in Ndele, we received sporadic reports of attacks on the Miamani road (leading north and slightly west, toward Chad). According to witnesses, young men working as *Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix* (CPJP) rebels on the road directly north of Ndele had decided to return to see their families around Golongosso (on the Miamani road) and make some money on the side by robbing herders. One pastoralist passing through Ndele told me that he had been robbed three times. First, in early November, he had sent a boy to buy cows for him. The boy was held up near Miamani and robbed of the 450,000 CFA (about US\$1,000) he carried. The next time, in early January, he went himself and was taken hostage and relieved of the 400,000 he had on him. The third time, in March, he described the attackers as “rebels” who came to the plot at the edge of town where he had made his home and kept his cows. He was at the market. His young son was home and locked himself in the house when the attackers arrived, but they told him they would fire their “rocket” in if he failed to open on the count of five. The boy acquiesced, and the men took all the food and belongings in the dwelling, as well as the 250,000 CFA that had been carefully hidden in away. Rather than seeing them as unstoppable fiends, though, he saw this attack as a sign of the fighters’ weakness. “They have no food. They have no ammunition. They are weak, if they must steal from people like me,” he explained. In the aftermath of this and similar attacks, the leader of the CPJP made a point of getting word to leaders in Ndele (such as the Sultan-

Mayor's representatives) that the men who had perpetrated these attacks had been punished. This may or may not be true, but that the rebel leader felt the need to make this statement indicates that robbery is a less-socially-accepted practice than roadblocking or other forms of dispossession, even as all remain widespread.

Roadblocks are generally the first governing project rebels undertake, both because they are an effective way of raising revenue and because they are a way of making control visible and giving it an appearance of being more totalizing than it in fact is. When, in Ndele, I asked about the extent of the CPJP control of the Ngarba road leading north from the town, the responses I received tended to make reference to roadblocks: "Yes, they control it—they have already put up two roadblocks!" Some people went on to argue that once a roadblock exists, the processes of clearing the formalities draw everyone into a nest of complicity. No one argued this more forcefully than Mathieu Sacks, the chef de cantonnement of the Water and Forests ministry in Ndele, who himself presided over a roadblock. Humanitarian NGOs sought access to the rebel-controlled areas,⁴⁴ but Sacks argued that by going there, they would necessarily help strengthen the rebels, because "The rebels, too, have their formalities." He explained,

I'm telling you, they [humanitarians] also give to the rebels. It's true that the humanitarian give to the vulnerable. But they have also given to the rebels. When they go to Akoursoulbak, [site of two barriers] what kinds of formalities are they going to have to fulfill to cross this barrier? They arrive at the barrier and the

44. Following the CPJP's first attack on Ndele at the end of November 2009, the government in Bangui declared the Ngarba road closed—including to humanitarians. At times, the NGOs' deference to these rulings seems out of proportion to the actual enforcement will and capacity of the central government. Because the NGOs bring the legal sensibilities of their home bases in Europe or North America with them, they take the government's laws more seriously than others and as such perpetuate a myth of state control that has little grounding in reality.

rebels say “We, too, need to live.” ... It’s the rebels faced with the humanitarians. The humanitarian he says, “Stay calm, we aren’t for the government, and we aren’t for the rebels. Us, we’re for everyone.” If you have need of something, they’ll give it to you. So they give. But they aren’t going to tell you they gave to the rebels.... Even today, if this disagreement persists, if you go to Akoursoulbak you will see the rebels living in the bush, far from the road... and they built their houses with humanitarian products [tarps, etc.].

Though the humanitarians’ official policies stated that they would never pay rebel “taxes,” in private they often discussed how to navigate the gray areas at the core of these controls. The circumstances of the transactions were not always of their choosing. (One heated topic of debate: if it is within a humanitarian mandate to transport a wounded or ill soldier/fighter, what about transporting a corpse? The consensus seemed to be yes, because if challenged one could always say the person died en route to the hospital.) Pottier (2006) gives a number of examples of this kind of formality in Ituri, DRC, where passing humanitarians would often give a “token gift” to the rebels staffing roadblocks. From the humanitarian perspective, engaging with the roadblockers served two main purposes: it helped them get through to the populations they hoped to help, and it also gave them a chance to reiterate the humanitarian principles that they sought to proselytize. In contrast to those who would see greed as roadblockers’ only motivation, Pottier argues that their acceptance of these gifts turned not on the size of the gift, but on other factors, such as the perceived transparency of the NGO (170-171). The roadblock therefore became their way of forcing a process of recognition.

Recognition is usually understood as linked to the state or some other large-scale organization. In this case, a form associated with the state—the roadblock—has been turned to a contingent mode of recognition that does not create stable “subject”

populations, nor otherwise centralize power over people. In targeting mobile populations, and in remaining fairly mobile themselves, roadblockers—whether rebels or others—create situational, itinerant forms of governance. Centralizing projects of making people legible for the purposes of uniform administration are only of passing use of no use in this regard, such as the situational ways that *civilité* can become important. But temporarily disrupting the invisibility that allows people to profit (e.g., transporting meat and other illicit trades) is.

At the same time, the roadblock is of course a way to make money. It is a form that serves as justification for taking money from others. It is of crucial importance to rebels because they generally have left their fields to take up arms. If they do not find a way to extort people, they will starve. What was interesting to me in my interviews with about twenty members of the APRD⁴⁵ was how they all described their roadblock work using an ideology of voluntarism. That is, they averred that people gave to them because they appreciated the work being done. Here are a few examples of rebels' descriptions of what their work consists of:

If the road cutters come, then we go and attack them and drive them away, and we take whatever they have. And if transporters are passing through, then we ask them to give us something because we are hungry, and they give to us voluntarily.

I have been working on the *contrôle barrière* 48km from here, at Ouandago.⁴⁶ The work on the barrier is to secure the zone. It's so we can stop the trafficking of arms if someone is trying to traffic in arms. We stop all the vehicles

45. These interviews were all conducted in Kaga Bandoro in November 2010. My research assistant, a respected young pastor in town, arranged the interviews and helped with translation as needed. Most of the rebels spoke in a mixture of French and Sango.

46. The APRD maintained four barriers on this 48km stretch of road.

to verify that they do not have contraband. We protect the population. If people want to give us something, they give it to us voluntarily. We demand nothing.

I have been at the *ndo ti barrière* [place of the barrier; a phrase indicative of the way French and Sango are so regularly mixed] since March. We went and tried to attack the Peulh [herders; stereotype labels them robbers] but we did not find them. On the barrier we control the vehicles. We do *les formalités*. People who pass give to us voluntarily—they give us something for our cigarettes. We don't look through vehicles. Only if someone says there is a gun in there—then we would look through and find the gun. The formalities might be 1000, 2000, 500—it depends on what the person can pay. It's *selon capacité* [according to one's capacity]. Something they just give us a little something for our subsistence—some manioc, or whatever they are carrying. There are sixty of us based at the barrier. The barrier is one of our bases.

A religious leader in the area who watched the zone's politics become increasingly militarized since the 2002-2003 events that brought the current president to power reflected that the problem is that people have learned that rebellion is a line of work, a way to make money. "Everyone pulls his profit from rebellion. Everyone fills himself up well, materially-speaking. They racketeer. And people have to pay—what choice is there, at the point of a gun? So rebellion has become a way to improve one's life conditions. And if you're not in it you're not going to win/earn anything."

The rebels' claims that they only extract payment from those who "volunteer" to give them something do seem disingenuous given their greater firepower and their widely-circulating reputations as possessors of potent gris-gris (spiritual powers and mastery of occult forces). But it is interesting to note that though these interactions could be resolved with force, more often they turn on contingent processes of negotiation. I learned this while navigating a rebel barrier outside of Kaga Bandoro. My research assistant and I had hired a moto-taxi to take us to the rebels' main base, some 18km from town. The base lies 5km into the bush, away from the main road, and at the point where

one must veer off the rebels have erected a barrier. It is just a thin tree trunk suspended across the road between two shorter poles dug into the dirt, with y-joints at the tops to hold the horizontal bar. A handful of them dozed in the shade of a thick bush, rousing themselves only as we finally pulled up. Two held locally-made rifles. The others brandished machetes or similarly-sized knives. Their prized possession was a small solar cell phone charger that in theory let them stay in contact with their colonel (none had cell phone credit, so they could not initiate calls). None wore a uniform. We showed them the letter Captain Mbaigoto, an APRD representative in Bangui, had given to me to facilitate introductions. "It's OK, you can pass," said the most authoritative of the gang. "But I'm hungry." I told him we would discuss more when we returned. "OK, but be quick. I'm *hungry*." This time he rubbed his belly for emphasis.

Upon return from the base, the roadblockers again started complaining of their hunger. I asked if I could take their photo, and they agreed. They assumed warrior poses next to the barrier. Then they demanded that the moto be added as a prop, and the driver agreed. We were getting ready to drive off when one started yelling, "*Eh! Régler, régler!*" In other words, we have accounts to settle. The others joined in the chant. They were laughing as they said it, but I heard seriousness underneath their jokey tone. I tried to think fast: I generally do not pay the subjects of my research, and I was curious to test just how voluntary these payments really are. I realized that if I wanted to pass just this once, I could probably get away with stiffing them, but if I needed to return they could cause endless problems for me. Then again, whatever I handed over now, the next time

they might ask for more. I allowed my pocket to make the decision for me: amid the lint I found a crumpled 2000 note and handed it over. As we sped away I mused that “voluntary” transactions are always profoundly shaped by the social settings in which they play out—to such an extent that it seems an ideological (i.e., politically-motivated) distinction, rather than a matter of the exercise of free will, whatever that might connote.



Figure 1: The APRD roadblockers posing with motorcycle.

The use of force lies in the background of all these roadblock encounters. But the actual details of how they play out more often depend on contingent processes of negotiation. For instance, in the area of Kaga Bandoro and its environs, the APRD’s roadblocks sometimes overlap with those of the few state officials in these hinterland zones. The following letter, written by an APRD *Chef d’Etat major adjoint* and addressed

to the *préfet* and *sous-préfet* of the district, illustrates how negotiations over roadblock rights can proceed and how people contest the legitimacy of these practices even as they engage in them:

9 Mai 2010

Objet: Lettre de protestation

Je vous rappelle qu'il y a de cela quatre (4) mois, nous vous avons demandé de déplacer cette barrière sur l'axe Kaga Bandoro—Bangui. Pour des raisons de rackette sur la population empêchant leur libre circulation et leur biens. Populations qui depuis plusieurs années ont connus des événements douloureux, et qui tentent en vain de reconstruire leur vie. Après quatre mois, rien a changé la barrière de GOBONGO arrête les gens, pour les pièces d'identité, taxe sur les produits de pêche, chasse, céréale, motos et vélos pour des prétextes de faire la sécurité sur la ville de Kaga Bandoro. Ce que je viens de citer doit être l'œuvre des rebelles et non des forces de défense, de sécurité, paramilitaire. Plus grave encore, les éléments des forces de défense de sécurité sont chargés de protéger les personnes et leurs biens, se mettent au garde vous devant les bandits de grand chemin, des voleurs de bétail, des gens qui n'ont même pas le niveau d'un soldat de 2ème classe et qui se proclament colonel commandant. Vendent les équipements militaires, les munitions aux ennemis de la nation. Je refuse les tracasseries sur notre axe. Je réagi suite à plusieurs plaintes verbales de la population et mes propres constats. Donc demande la suppression de cette barrière, où nos éléments iront reposer à côté d'eux pour réguler la libre circulation des populations. Donnez aperçu.

9 May 2010

Objective: Letter of protest

I remind you that four months ago we asked you to move this roadblock on the Kaga Bandoro—Bangui road. Because of the racketeering of the population which impinged on their free circulation with their goods. Populations who for several years have known painful events, and who are trying in vain to reconstruct their lives. After four months, nothing has changed the GOBONGO roadblock stops people for identity cards, tax on fishing, hunting, and grains, motorcycles and bikes, all for the pretext of making Kaga Bandoro and the area secure. What I have just cited should be the job of the rebels, not the job of the security and defense forces and paramilitaries. Even more serious, the members of the security and defense forces are supposed to protect people and their goods and be on guard against the road robbers and cattle thieves and people who are not even soldiers of the second class but call themselves commanding colonel. They sell military equipment, ammunition to

the enemies of the nation. I refuse the harassment on our road. I am reacting after many verbal complaints from the population as well as my own assessments. Therefore I demand the lifting of this roadblock, where our members [rebels] will go and rest to regulate the free circulation of the population. Acknowledge receipt.

Every single practice that the rebel leader accuses the state forces of committing are tactics that people accuse the rebels, too, of engaging in: predatory roadblocks, cattle thieving, assigning themselves higher ranks than they have earned. This is not to say the rebel leader is insincere in his protestations against these practices. But the fact that stated ideals and practiced truths (ethics) diverge so greatly points to the way that rules do not govern encounters—instead, they depend on combinations of negotiation, (violent) coercion and personal traits. The result is an unpredictable system of rule in which the tactics people engage in to get by undermine the establishment of static rules.

4.4.1 Positive forces

The conundrums facing men-in-arms about recognition, making a living, and the optimal tactics to choose all crystallize in the group that now calls itself the *Front populaire pour le redressement* (FPR, Popular Front for Reform). Abdel Kader Baba Laddé, the group's leader, is a Fulani who has spent most of his life in Chad. He worked as a gendarme but was arrested in October 1998 on suspicion of involvement in a failed coup against the Chadian president, Idriss Déby. The following year, frustrated with his lack of work and with what he saw as the mistreatment of the Fulani, Laddé decided to launch a movement against the government. He spent most of the next decade in the borderlands between Darfur and Chad. In 2008, APRD leaders invited Laddé to join them in northern CAR. They were in negotiations with the government over

disarmament and wanted to make themselves appear a more fearsome force. The alliance quickly fell apart as the APRD started to worry over the FPR's obviously superior level of armament. The two groups accused each other of banditry and both described themselves as anti-bandit bulwarks. Laddé and the FPR took this claim to combat road robbery to a new level. When they first arrived in CAR they called themselves the Forces Positives (Positive Forces), which they explained as owing to their continual suppression of "negative forces," i.e., *coupeurs de route*. In addition, Laddé sought aid for his followers. He approached the UNHCR office in Kaga Bandoro and asked them to look after the "refugees" he had brought (the wives and children of the men who fought with him). UNHCR staffers demurred, saying that armed group members (even the women and children with them) did not fit the definition of refugee, which requires having been forced out of one's homeland and excludes those actively participating in hostilities.

From 2008-2011, the APRD was in the midst of disarmament negotiations with the government. Laddé refused to participate. As a Chadian, he felt he should be negotiating with Déby. While under the escort of MICOPAX, a regional peacekeeping force, he was handed over to the Chadian authorities and deported to Ndjamena, where he landed in prison. His men, some of them with their families, remained camped out in Gimari and Goundava, north of Kaga Bandoro, and waited for word from their leader. Allegedly, some stole and some stopped thieves. They were frequently seen at the market in Kaga Bandoro, easily recognizable by their "foreign" appearance, rubber

boots, and sophisticated weaponry. Laddé managed to escape and wound up in Cameroon, where he applied for asylum with UNHCR. But soon thereafter, in late 2010, he appeared back among his men in northern CAR. Since then, he has fitfully pursued negotiations with the Chadian government, come into occasional skirmishes and hostage-taking situations with the APRD, and set up a variety of roadblocks along key roads. When he finally agreed to release the 18 APRD fighters he and his men had taken hostage, he organized an elaborate show for their return. According to an eye witness, he arrived in a shiny new pick-up, with twenty-seven motorcycles driven by armed (two Kalashnikovs each) and turbaned FPR fighters as his escort.

What has been especially interesting to track in the evolution of this charismatic military entrepreneur is the various justifications and missions that he has said he and his men are carrying out. They make claims to authority based on suppression of road robbers, first and foremost. His statements of rebellion against the Chadian government have never had the same strength as his claims to be ridding the earth of the awful scourge that are road robbers. More recently, Laddé has taken a new tack: he claims to work on behalf of all the nomadic herders, especially the Fulani (Mbororo). Long persecuted by the region's sedentary populations and governments, he has set himself up as their protector from the cattle thieves that prey on them. In speeches, he has even gone so far as to claim a pan-Peulh agenda, drawing in slighted compatriots as far afield as Nafissatou Diallo, Dominique Strauss-Kahn's purported victim. As he and his men have worked to gather new recruits and move into new terrains further east in CAR, he

has sent emissaries to assure village chiefs and other local leaders that his men are to pay for food, not steal it. At the same time, reports of racketeering (on their roadblocks, of course, but also elsewhere) by FPR forces have grown. Part of being a rebel, as opposed to a bandit, is making a show of command and control over one's forces—hence the spectacular motorcycle and truck ceremony, hence the statements to assure village chiefs—even though that control may in fact be but partial and fleeting, with fighters interpreting the meaning of “work” according to their own needs.

In other words, the sovereign capabilities of a rebel/roadblocker and a road robber are largely the same. Both rely on extraction through dispossession and both rely on the use of violent force, while also operating in a context colored by conviviality. But the rebel/roadblocker has another platform from which to assert these claims, because of the way that his tactics latch onto a form associated with security and state control, namely, the roadblock. Even though roadblock practices and effects diverge widely from these ideas of security and unitary control, somehow, magically, the patina, the suggestion, of legitimacy never leaves them.⁴⁷ And because of this, they can be visible where robbers must attempt to stay invisible.

4.5 Conclusion

That roadblockers, too, question the ethics of their and other authorities' profit-making and governing tactics is scant solace for the people who have to navigate these hurdles. As Dieudonné's narrative of the tribunal president's folly suggests, traversing

47. This ideological resilience in the face of empirical challenges is another aspect of what Das terms the “magic of the state” (2006).

roadblocks can be as harrowing an experience as road robbery. But roadblocks also point to a way that, in the absence of the state as an institution, the state as an idea, and the forms associated with it, has become imbued with new currency as a way of marking, and making visible, one's authorities vis-à-vis others using the space. The sovereign capabilities of road robbers and roadblockers are largely the same, but the former draw heavily on invisibility, whereas the latter threaten a particular mode of making visible the mobile populations and the goods from which they draw profit. Their actions are too flexible and personalized to ever fully make that mode of visibility a reality, however.

Whereas Roitman emphasizes the connections between road robbers, roadblockers, and the agents of the state, here I have tried to draw out the extent to which these actors and processes are non-centralized. "The state" remains an important reference point, to be sure, but it seems unlikely to ever give rise to the kind of centralized organization that it usually implies. Instead, contingency dominates. With rules always flexible in given situations (even though people might explain them as more fixed when discussing them in theory), cunning becomes a determinative skill. Along those lines, part of cunning lies in the mode in which a person makes claims to authority, and by corollary to profit. Road robbery, historically-embedded though it may be, offers a repertoire of claims-making possibilities that seems constrained compared to those of the roadblocker/rebel. Perhaps this is what the phenomenon of rebellion marks: the popularization of Utopian ideas of the state in contexts where regulatory authority was already pluralized.

5. Sovereign capabilities and the limits of the state: The case of militarized anti-poaching

5.1 Introduction

“What is the difference between an AT [technical assistant, a donor/development-speak term for a foreign consultant] and a mercenary?” The question was didactic, and the man who asked it also answered: “An AT is doing the work for money and is paid through a European Union contract, whereas a mercenary gets paid in a somewhat hidden way to do the same work. Either way, the work is the same.” By his right side, he balanced his AK-47. In his pocket, he carried a grenade. He propped his rocket launcher against a nearby tree. We sat on low wooden chairs in the early afternoon quiet of downtown Ndele’s small bar district. He had chosen the spot because of its wide view of passersby and low visibility from the road. He was an AT and a mercenary, and tactical thinking was second nature.

He drank warm Castel beer and chain-smoked Sprints while explaining his work and his philosophy. “I was brought in to hit the poachers—*hard*,” he said, insinuating and at times stating outright that his predecessors lacked the necessary toughness. “The Sudanese¹ killed 35 elephants in Berberati last week and another 40 in Ngotto [both in southwestern CAR, far from where we sat in the northeast]. This cannot go on. When I go out, I take thirty men in three trucks, and with that many guys we are really able to

1. Whether they were Sudanese was never proven. Industrial hunters in the region are generally described as “Sudanese,” to deflect responsibility onto a foreign menace. For instance, in Zakouma national park in southeastern Chad, people described the elephant hunters as Sudanese, but careful study revealed that they more often came from Chad and Cameroon, and that the trophies went to Nigeria rather than Khartoum.

hit the poachers hard. Our most recent combat lasted six minutes. The one before that was only three. We use 700 rounds during an average battle.” Last week, he bragged, they had killed 50 million CFA (US\$100,000) worth of cattle to show the herders who was boss. After an operation like that, he and his men stop in a nearby village and eat a meal to demonstrate their lack of fear. Herders, hunters—all are fair game. “We shoot to kill—to see men on the ground.”²

He seemed especially concerned to explain the purity of his motives: “I don’t want money—I just want more ammo.” He loved battle and was morally flexible in ways that helped him explain the justice of what he did. He claimed to have taken the AT job for half the usual salary (others who had held the post disputed this claim). “I was in the French army for five years but I left because I wanted *combat* and didn’t have anything more to learn in the army.” He worked in Rwanda for the French military and as a freelance soldier—he didn’t understand why the soldiers couldn’t go after “the guys over there with the machetes.” He has worked for 30 Euros a month (in Yugoslavia, fighting with the Croats against the Serbs). In Burma, he fought with the Karen militias for free; he even paid for his own plane ticket. He has done time in prison in two African countries as well as France. He has changed his name twice. From these conventional unconventional wars he moved on to battling poachers³ in West and Central Africa. In

2. Some of the other anti-poaching employees disagreed with this tactic and noted that women and kids get caught in the crossfire and that the herders often do not understand the rules anyway.

3. Who is a hunter (i.e., has a legitimate claim to kill) and who is a poacher (i.e., kills without legitimacy) is difficult to determine in the buffer zone, given the tangled legality of would-be shooters’ actions (realistically, no one is sure). The distinction between hunter and poacher is founded on a power/wealth differential (Thompson 1975) that in the buffer zone remains unstable.

CAR, he adopted nationalist rhetoric: those profiting from the buffer zone are not of the correct nationality and must be stopped. “These are CAR’s animals—not Chad’s! Not Sudan’s!”

He loves combat and travels the world to find it. For the most part, he relishes the mercenary’s obscurity/invisibility, which allows him to be aggressive. When he sees a white person, he hides. The NGO/UN types have little affinity for people like him. (His hiding skills notwithstanding, I frequently glimpsed his shaved, pink head among the bodies filling the cab and bed of the anti-poachers’ pick-up truck. People in town surmised his presence was a show of force on the part of the anti-poachers in the wake of popular discontent over their heavy-handed exactions—see chapter three.) His meeting with me was a rare chance to brag about his authority and expertise. The hours-long conversation had a schizophrenic character, with him alternately regaling me with bloody stories of his attempts to control the buffer zone’s vast parklands, and then accusing me of spying and soliciting sensitive information.

When I explained my research, he responded, “Let me ask you something. Do you really believe what you’re saying?” “Yes?” I said, confused. “Do you really believe what you’re saying?” he repeated, his voice betraying annoyance and pleasure at his “gotcha” moment. “Do you really believe what you’re saying about doing an ethnological study, about doing some research about the situation on the border?” he scoffed. “Because what you’re doing here has nothing to do with an ethnological study—this is not what ethnological studies are about.”

He saw himself as a fatherly big man among the guards. Rather than sleeping in his own house, like most expatriate mercenaries/ATs, he dozes alongside his men. Every morning he greets each militiaman and his family. He kisses all the kids—except the ones with snotty noses. “*J’adore ça. C’est mon truc.*” (“I love that. It’s my thing.”) Partly, he was establishing authority over them. And partly, his claims to sovereign capabilities owed to his eagerness to use force. But another theme emerged as perhaps even more important: the ability to manage his visibility, on scales from the local to the global. Whether hiding from whites or making a show of lingering near the sites of battles post-victory, this man drew power from manipulating how and whether people could perceive him and his actions.

Anti-poachers draw on the idea of the state, and its associated trope of “national patrimony,” to explain and justify their mandate. The state framework is what brought them to the area and what gives them a mandate. But on the ground, they in fact enact a more personalized politics, which includes privileged access to the bush’s resources. The approach of this chapter is to describe the sovereign capabilities exercised by the anti-poaching militiamen and their opponents to show how centralizing modes of power and justification collide with non-centralizing forces to create hybrid, contingent political configurations that never build toward the unitary, totalizing authority that political theory suggests should eventually result. The case of militarized anti-poaching in the buffer zone also calls into question the usefulness of the binary frameworks marshaled to explain politics, such as public/private and state-non-state. The anti-poachers’

sovereign capabilities include the use of force and a claim to the right to manage extraction. But their operations are far removed from the projects of visibility that Scott (1998) argues are fundamental to centralized rule. Instead, their ability to be simultaneously visible and invisible makes them powerful. The sources of their power are apparent in how they claim capabilities by playing confrontation and negotiation off each other.

The main difference between the anti-poaching militiamen, herders, and hunters lies in the degree to which they call on the idea of the state to justify their actions. Significantly, throughout these calls on the idea of the state, the state itself—in its Bangui institutional manifestation—is seen as absent. I distinguish between the state as institution and the state as idea, because my interlocutors in CAR distinguished between how the state *does* behave and how it *should*. By focusing on these two faces to “the state” in a context in which sovereign capabilities are held by plural authorities, I seek to capture this distinction. Also significant is the anti-poaching “project” staff’s self-portrayal alternately agents of the state and as separate from it.

“My problem is that I’m an extremist,” said the AT/mercenary a few times during our conversation. In the buffer zone, his “extremist” tendencies find freer rein. Later, he said, “I’m an idealist.” In the buffer zone, fantasies of control and rule can be lived out without accountability and visibility.

A note on methods and data: I became acquainted with six AT/mercenaries who worked in the buffer zone between the mid-1980s and 2010. I interviewed their scientific

colleagues and the program officers who oversaw funding in Brussels and Bangui. I spent a week on an anti-poaching base near Ndele, interviewed the *pisteurs* (guards), and spoke with their wives, and participated in training exercises with them. Later, I interviewed them when we met in Ndele. The analysis is also informed by review of the European Commission's archives on the anti-poaching programs it has funded since the mid-1980s.

5.2 Contests over hunting profits

Hunting—whether of people, other animals, or plants and other bush products—has been the motor of production in the buffer zone over the past several hundred years. Hunting, after all, is just another word for raiding. Ivory in particular has long been a key resource in this regard. It was the second-largest part of Sultan Sanusi's economy, after slaves, and European explorers, officers, and concessionaires across the region loved it. On the Sudanese side of the buffer zone, "The only easily-exportable product of importance in the Bahr al-Ghazal was ivory and the government moved mercilessly to exploit it. Ivory export increased from fifteen tons, worth 7,925 Egyptian pounds in 1901 to seventy-six tons, worth 51,320 Egyptian pounds in 1905. Most of the exported ivory went to French Equatorial Africa [CAR today] where traders and locals could exchange it for firearms or export to Kurdufan and other northern markets" (Sikainga 1991: 30). As discussed in chapter 2, controlling the production and circulation of ivory was key to the demonstration of sovereign capabilities. Recall the letter Sasa, uncle of the Azande sultan at Zemio, sent to the nearly-arrived Europeans at the beginning of the 20th century:

“Until now, I had forbidden to bring you ivory. But now my ivory is at your disposal and nothing will be able to disrupt the harmony of our trade. Especially that I have a treasury of ivory” (cited in Luffin 2002: 147).

Hunting is both the scourge decried by the anti-poachers and conservationists and a mode of economic extraction they seek to protect, in the form of shooting safaris, which hold the promise of “rational” exploitation of wildlife. Safari hunting is the foundation of the buffer zone’s “formal” economy. The formality of this industry is questionable because of the prevalence of a cowboy mentality among some of the safari concessionaires. This mentality is shared with the AT/mercenaries, and is an attitude of entitlement and embodiment of the law that underlies their sovereign capabilities. Anti-poaching grew out of this safari-hunting enterprise. With the exception of one person who died in 2010, all the safari concessionaires have been foreign. Safari operators interact with people in their areas in different ways, but it bears pausing to consider the approach of the *Laboureur* family—not because the *Laboueurs* are representative (it is difficult to say if they are), but because of their long involvement with the place and particularly forthright presentation of the role they have assumed. Both *Laboureur père* and *fils* have written memoirs, and appear frequently in anti-poaching project archives as well.

According to his son, Matthieu, the safari concessionaire Jean Laboureur came to CAR in the waning days of the French empire and was greeted as a hero. The former

parachutist in the French army⁴ was sent to Oubangui-Chari to open the Oubangui River to navigation upstream from Bangui. With a team of 50 under him, he charted the course of the river, and “his reputation now extends the length of the river. In the villages, tam-tams announce his arrival. The chiefs search him out when there is a crop-destroying elephant in need of killing, or a lion that has been eating men. Festivals are organized in his honor. He was totally adopted by deep Africa” (Laboureur 1988: 39). Once he had finished this task, the new president asked him to take up a safari concession called Gounda, northeast of Ndele. Jean, his wife, and the infant Matthieu alighted to the 18,000 sq. km (just smaller than Israel; just larger than Kuwait) terrain and proceeded to set up camp.

The Laboureurs quickly became one of the *grandes familles de chasse* in CAR. Hunting was a prestige pastime. It became a shared love of Emperor Bokassa and the French Foreign Minister, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, who became an ally of sorts.⁵ At the urging of a friend, Giscard d’Estaing first came to hunt in CAR in 1970. In choosing the safari camp of Jean Laboureur, he chose the leadership of a true *broussard* (the term of art for those foreigners who find the enveloping nature of the African bush liberating). Feeling fully free from prying eyes and expectations, and nourished by clear, simple objectives and long walks in the bush, Giscard d’Estaing became hugely attached to CAR: “Bokassa’s country became his secret garden” (Faës and Smith 2000: 142; my

4. A number of the anti-poaching AT/mercenaries also claim this qualification. The parachutists are known for their toughness, daring, and for doing the “dirty” yet important jobs—they are the cowboys of the French army.

5. (In)famously, Bokassa gave Giscard d’Estaing a gift of gaudy diamonds.

translation). This highlights another trope in conceptions of buffer zone space, a trope that lies beside the conservation agenda, more- and less-comfortably. For the foreign tourists who alight in CAR for safari hunting vacations costing from US\$30,000 and up for two-week trips, the landscape offers their imagined Africa—free of people, a simple place where man can test himself against nature (and win). Safari hunting camp operators enact this fantasy for their clients and themselves even as they must develop webs of relationships with local residents to run their camps.

As explained in the autobiography his son, Matthieu, wrote as a young man, Jean Laboureur came to safari, hunting, and conservation only upon heeding the CAR president's suggestion. Some of their guests came for photographic safaris and others for hunting. As a result of this business, the Laboureurs took on new roles as enforcers of their domain. This meant arresting the "local poachers" who hunted in protected areas and their environs. Much of what Matthieu wrote in his young man memoir⁶ *Sans Défense*, about his work on behalf of elephants in his family's concessions and beyond, such as that cited above about the "happy natives" celebrating his father, is quickly recognizable as cliché and is disappointingly predictable. It is the stock footage from the archives. Elsewhere, however, he reveals the specifics of their roles governing the zone and the immense power they claimed for themselves. For instance, one of the photos in the centerpiece shows khaki-shorts-clad Laboureur père inspecting a line of roped-together "poachers" that his pisteurs have arrested. They are to be taken to the prison

6. His not a coming of age story, but rather a young man's brash assessment of his physical and moral fortitude, with a dash of blond bombshell love story and Rambo-style baring of muscles thrown in.

that he maintains on the premises. The caption reads: “Stalking the ‘*bracos*’ [a shortened, slangy, version of the French term for poacher, *braconnier*] sometimes pays off. This day, my father took about twenty prisoners” (Laboureur 1988; my translation).

Matthieu does his *tournées* in an airplane and finds much to anger him: artisanal diamond miners digging their eternally-hopeful pits in the muddy parklands, groups of elephant and rhino poachers, nomadic herders pasturing their cows with the parks’ rich grasses. CAR’s comparatively verdant parks provide a particular kind of ultra-nourishing grass that herders say makes their cows have two calves, rather than one. By the 1980s, hunting came to be practiced on an industrial scale by caravans of Sudanese and sometimes Chadian men armed with automatic weapons. *Paris Match* described Matthieu Laboureur as “A French Tarzan Coming to Save the Elephants,” (Mourousi 1985), and in his book Matthieu narrates several encounters between himself, together with a few local guides, and the offending hunters. These venal hunters will stop at nothing:

They have no scruples and are assured of impunity. Who could denounce them? If they surprised us they wouldn’t hesitate to take us out. Easy to exterminate five men when you’re stronger. Much easier than massacring a troop of elephants. Tomorrow, they will cross the border into their own country. Five cadavers [the number in Matthieu’s party] in the bush are quickly swallowed up; there won’t be so much as a trace after a few hours (1988: 91; my translation).

In the battle that unfolds in the following pages, however, Matthieu and his men are the ones who leave a coterie of cadavers to be swallowed by the bush and all that lives there. They happen upon a camp of seven men with their pack animals—horses, donkeys and camels, the latter two loaded with elephant tusks. A few minutes later, three of the men

lie dead on the ground. The others have fled, leaving behind even their sandals. One of Matthieu's guides has taken a bullet but remains alive. Matthieu goes on to kill the donkeys and horses and takes the camels to transport the recuperated guns and ivory, as well as his wounded guide. Later in the book, he kills herders' cows. The book is a young man's memoir and a particularly brash and violent one at that. The colonial mentality it displays (at one point, Matthieu exasperatedly calls his guides "children") provides the reader with low-hanging analytical fruit. The book, though presented as truth, reads like fiction (there is even a movie-ready love story). But, once these apparent caveats have been acknowledged, the story's conception of the space only becomes more interesting: as a fantasy, it is perhaps even more revealing.

It presents a mental map that has been important during the past decades of safari hunting and militarized anti-poaching: a sovereign polity ruled over by conservationists, in which wild animals are the subjects. More recently, conservationists have worked hard to distance themselves from such a vision, but it remains the uncomfortable trope that, good intentions and efforts notwithstanding, dogs all such projects. Partly this trope is tenacious because, more than in other places, here it is kind of true. From hunters' perspective, "Isolation at the heart of the continent, the extremely low population density, the respite that the animals benefited from thanks to the colonial period and the two world wars joined to make this country a vast hunting reserve, unique in the number and variety of species" (Faës and Smith 2000: 144; my translation). This characterization contains an allusion to an idea that lurks in some of the

conservation projects: that, in a colonial period marked by diffidence and un-investment, the park system was something that the French *did* for Central Africans, rather than simply a legal construct, and as such a category immensely difficult to make “real.”⁷

Safari lodge operators have always employed guards to patrol their concessions and track down poachers, but their efforts remained on a small scale until the 1980s, when the second major wave of elephant hunting reached the territory. At that point operations like those described by Laboureur came to be seen as necessary. If the hunters held automatic weapons and did not hesitate to use them against humans or other animals, so must the guards, went this reasoning. In some countries, like Kenya (where Richard Leakey launched a high-profile campaign⁸), vigorous public debate accompanied the decision to operate militarized anti-poaching patrols (Leakey 2002). In others, newspapers and other media outlets concertedly moralized hunting by describing the threats posed by illegal hunting as a “war,” which dehumanized the hunters, who then became enemies (Neumann 2004). The case of militarized anti-poaching in CAR is different in two main ways: first, the hunters were cast as foreign, which often but not always reflected the reality, and hence as doubly evil (not only were

7. As Li (2007) describes using the case of The Nature Conservancy’s projects in Indonesia, enacting legal-theoretical categories requires a process of translation that always transforms them.

8. Leakey describes and justifies these efforts in his memoir *Wildlife Wars: My Fight to Save Africa’s Natural Treasures* (2002). In addition to his militarization of the wildlife forces, Leakey gained fame and notoriety for publicly burning the stocks of ivory that the guards collected rather than selling it. He reasoned that as long as a market for the white gold existed, it would be impossible to stop elephant hunters. The AT/mercenary whose dialogue opens this chapter called Leakey a liar. He reasoned that it was impossible to burn ivory and that it was all just a faked media stunt and that Leakey profited on the side—perhaps by selling the ivory himself. Concealment and the production of conspiracy theories characterize all such “shadow world” trades (Nordstrom 2004) contribute to the difficulty of holding even government officials working in these domains accountable.

they killing charismatic animals, they had no *national* claim to those animals); and second, there was neither an effort to mobilize people behind the cause nor an effort to solicit real democratic participation. In the vast terrain, with its sparse human population (it does not lack for vultures), bodies simply disappear, as Laboureur pointed out. And, despite the hidden spectacle of the anti-poaching battles, plenty of hunters—whether “locals,” “foreigners,” or the anti-poaching guards themselves—are able to continue their work undetected. For these reasons, the various militarized anti-poaching efforts in northeastern CAR have operated in a peculiar climate of concealment. Here, the ability to manage the flow of information in and out of this isolated space is a tool for building relationships (for instance, with conservation donors) while perhaps pursuing contradictory projects. As will become clear in the analysis below of the two biggest anti-poaching projects, anti-poaching guards and people living in the villages near the parklands became adept at invoking state-based conservation reference points to bring international resources into the area, while continuing to hunt and otherwise exploit the lands’ goods themselves. Playing with visibility is thus a means to create and claim other sovereign capabilities.

Beginning in the 1980s, the safari hunters found their status as arbiters of wildlife protection and exploitation challenged by the arrival of the anti-poaching projects.

5.3 The projects: *Anti-poaching aid*

Arriving at the projects’ Manovo anti-poaching base, I felt like a traveler on the TV show *Lost* upon first sight of the colony: an hour’s drive from the nearest village,

after a wending journey through the densely-forested savanna that blankets the region, the AT/mercenary pick-up I had hitched a ride on emerged suddenly into a clearing sliced by two rows of neat concrete houses. Even in Ndele, the nearest town and a couple of hours' drive away, concrete houses are a rarity. Even in Bangui, one would never find such a tidy, extensive implantation of dwellings. Here they formed two seemingly endless rows, with a wide road down the middle. Some had flowers planted in the front yards. Children played among them and women sat in clusters braiding hair and chatting. We passed a dispensary, a store, and a school, all variations on the same concrete style of the other buildings. We stopped at several of the houses, and an anti-poaching militiaman jumped off the back of the truck to re-join his family. Leaving the area of the militiamen's houses, we passed a memorial to guards fallen in the line of duty in the 1990s. (Since then, many have died, but there has been no money to amend the memorial.) The road rounded a bend past a giant garage with a heavy equipment graveyard in front—broken-down tractors, graders and other machinery had here come to rest. As we passed through a wooded glade in the dusty late afternoon sun, a couple of baboons sauntered across the road. Finally, we arrived at the big houses: four modern concrete structures that wouldn't have been out of place in California were nestled in among the trees and shrubs. Each had been placed so as to afford its occupants some privacy. These were the dwellings of the project bosses. Only two were officially inhabited now that the project had shrunk from its early heyday. But when built, they had had electricity, running water—hot water, no less!—and air-conditioning. The room

I slept in had posters on the wall advertising children's books, a relic from the days when the project's pilot had lived here with his family.

It is difficult to overstate how bizarre this project-made town is in the context of the Central African buffer zone. *Is this real?* I couldn't help but wonder as I explored. I could only imagine what it might have looked like when the tractors and heavy construction equipment were grinding along the roads and the buildings buzzed with light and cool air, and hot showers flowed when the early-dry-season evening cool set in. I visited all three of the active anti-poaching bases (at Manovo, Sangha, and Bamingui; Gordil had closed the season before my main chunk of fieldwork in 2009-2010, for reasons discussed below), and all had this *Lost*-like aspect. The overall impression was of a project of a stunning magnitude compared to any other undertaking in the region, before or since. Old-timers on the base lamented the end of the project's glory days, days of profligate accounting when it seemed to people working here that conservation was a kind of magic key unlocking vast, otherwise hidden monies and resources.

What were the forms of reasoning that launched "*the project*,"⁹ as area residents referred to the anti-poaching offensive? How, in other words, did an undertaking that on the level of infrastructure and scale appears so incongruous become seen as a pressing,

9. In French, "*le projet*." The term hearkens back to an earlier mode of international aid when donors—in this case, largely the French government and the European Union—gave aid money to ministries so the ministries could become operational through the projects. In other cases, such as the situation described here, the project was assigned parastatal status: neither of the state nor not of the state, it drew its reason for being from state logics without being beholden to or having access to the resources of state institutions.

necessary concern? And how did it fold into and itself get enfolded by the governing repertoire already in use by the various people exercising sovereign capabilities in the area? Throughout, the project has intertwined a biological vision of the imperative of border-less conservation with the politico-nationalist imperative of protecting resources on the level of the state. These rationales take on new lives when enacted by people with a divergent range of allegiances: to the project, yes, but also to their families and to their own common sense, and, in a range of ways, to others who use the space. The zone's remoteness, which allows people to play with visibility, facilitates unpredictable, rhizome-like trajectories. It is this invisibility that emerges as key to the exercise of sovereign capabilities in the area. The importance of visibility points to the importance of the management of relationships, because it raises the question of what is visible to whom, and with what consequences. Herein lies part of the power of confrontation: violence is an unusually effective way of making something visible, a theme of the recent rebellions as well (see chapters six and seven).

The projects began to take shape in the mid-1980s. At that time, alarm was growing among safari hunting concessionaires and conservation scientists over the rising levels of militarization and armament among the area's illicit hunters, as well as the increasing numbers of herders coming to use this space. Though today the anti-poaching guards portray the influx of large gangs of herders as a recent problem, those who worked in the area beginning in the mid-80s say that already at that time the groups of hunters each numbered as many as one hundred men strong, a force

augmented by the donkeys, camels and horses they used for pack animals. An aerial survey conducted in 1985 estimated that the buffer zone's elephant population had declined by eighty percent in just four years (that is, more than 20,000 had been killed) and that during the same years the black rhinoceros population had gone from being the largest in the world to being totally extinct (Douglas-Hamilton et al. 1985). This was not the first time the black rhino had been declared extinct from this region—colonial authorities, too, lamented the creature's total demise. The recurring "extinction" of "Central African" rhinos seems to call into question the usefulness of nationalist frameworks for the study of extinction given that non-human animals, like their human counterparts, rely on mobility for survival in places like the Central African buffer zone. The rationale that was used most often to justify the project during its early years was a corollary to these animal-centric sentiments. Specifically, the major worry during this time was the spread of desertification in the wake of disastrous droughts during the 1970s. The drying up that marked the 1970s across the region was on a scale that makes even the major dry spells of recent years appear verdant in comparison. Thus, the project was to halt encroaching dryness. The following phrase, verbatim or with slight variations, stood in many early project documents: northeastern CAR should be made to serve as a "natural barrier/boundary"¹⁰ from the desert. In other words, the specific aim of the project was to make of the Northeastern part of the country a no man's land that

10. The French words "barrière" (barrier) and "frontière" (border, but also frontier) are used interchangeably in these documents. In these terms one sees a mirroring of contradiction at the heart of the projects themselves: on the one hand, they were to enforce a national border; on the other hand, they were to ensure that this zone remained a "no man's land" frontier beyond the designs of humans.

would protect the lush south from the dry pestilences emanating from the north. In a slightly different phrasing, the project's expatriate (European and American) visionaries explained that "With the erection of a system of conservation and the rational use of natural resources and these parks and reserves, this zone can play an essential role as a natural band of protection against the southward advance of degradations linked to processes of desertification" (PDRN Document de base 1985; my translation).¹¹

Initial schematics and descriptions for a major conservation effort in northeastern CAR were written in 1985. It took the rest of the 1980s to build the bases and get the project, known by its acronym "PDRN" (*Programme de développement de la région nord*) fully underway. (The materials, equipment, and human resources necessary for the construction of these bases were massive and subject to the predictable delays and charges of corruption common to white elephant projects of this kind.) At the outset, the project was to consist of two major components: 1) conservation and socio-economic development (an undertaking led by scientist ATs) and 2) "*lutte anti-braconnage*" (struggle against poaching, usually referred to by its acronym, LAB). With time, funding for the scientific aspects of conservation (surveys, monitoring, charting various species present) dried up, as did funding for development projects (bee-keeping, agriculture, animal farming, drilling new water points for cattle, improved butchering and meat smoking facilities...). In place of these components, a "participatory" approach whereby

11. "Par la mise en place d'un système de conservation et d'utilisation rationnelle de ces ressources, de ces parcs et réserves, cette zone peut jouer un rôle essentiel de bande de protection naturelle contre l'avancée vers le sud des dégradations liées au processus de désertification."

communities in proximity to parks and hunting concessions would receive taxes from tourism (previously, these taxes had all stayed in Bangui) in exchange for their own vigilance in patrolling hunting and other forms of profiting in open spaces was designed and implemented.

PDRN (1985-1992) gave way to PDRN II (1992-1998). The two projects lasted nearly fifteen years, an eternity for internationally-supported efforts. At that point, according to Enrico Pironio, the European Commission (EC) official in Brussels who did much of the design and lobbying for these projects, enthusiasm for conservation efforts in CAR had dropped. Many guards had been killed in battles with hunters and herders. As a development funder, staff deaths were not something the EC was used to. However, a multi-country forest conservation program, the *Ecosystèmes Forestiers de l'Afrique Centrale* (ECOFAC) was already underway in the region. To keep the community hunting management projects in CAR going, Pironio decided to pull a trick: he would slide them under ECOFAC's umbrella, even though the safari hunting zones lie far from the forests ECOFAC was designed to protect. But in order for these community projects to work, there had to be militarized anti-poaching—otherwise the villagers' efforts would be overrun by the rapacious hunters and herders. So he slid that in too. None of the other ECOFAC countries' projects contained militarized components. Because ECOFAC was managed out of Brazzaville, the EC's Central African hub, country reports went directly there, bypassing the EC office in Bangui. Since people in Brazzaville did not have much experience with the peculiarities of northeastern CAR,

the report writers could use generalities and ambiguities without the funders recognizing them as such. Each country's reports got compiled with the others, and so simplification of the problems encountered was necessary to avoid producing reports many hundreds of pages long (even so, many of the reports stretched to two or three hundred pages). In the buffer zone, ECOFAC lasted from 1998-2004 and then picked up again from 2007 to 2010.

From the perspective of people living in the areas around anti-poaching bases, these shifts were noticed, but mostly in terms of the changes they entailed in funding. Whereas PDRN brought massive investment in infrastructure—the likes of which had not been seen before, and, unless the region's oil exploitation dreams come true, will likely not be seen again—ECOFAC has focused on operations. Many of the grand buildings from the earlier period stand empty. People ruefully recall the golden days of old, when the money flowed freely and people could “work well.” These memories are somewhat at odds with the details of financing, however. Salaries have in fact kept up with inflation and the number of bonuses offered has even risen. Still, the year-to-year nature of these efforts has become increasingly apparent; no one can count on “the project” lasting longer than a season or two at a time. Cosmetic complaints take on larger significance: many guards at Manovo, for instance, lamented that in the early days of the project their houses had good doors with locks on them. At some point, whether during a break in funding or upon arrival of pillaging rebels (a favored scapegoat), the doors were all stolen and have not been replaced.

Throughout these shifts, the prosecution of LAB remained a central goal, even if it, too, has been subject to vagaries in financing. In many cases, working as an anti-poaching guard is a labor passed down in families. Sons or brothers take over for their seniors when they are killed or injured in battle. Nor is this line of work restricted to the projects alone. Since the early 1980s, foreign mercenaries, private conservation associations, French soldiers (tasked with the vague mandate of “operations to secure the border” while targeting the same foes as the anti-poachers), safari hunting concession guards, and parastatal project staff have all fought hunters, herders, and, sometimes, each other. If the focus in this chapter is on the projects, that is because their scope and scale have quite simply been the largest.

5.4 Conservation and the rhetorical rationale of nationalism

What the project mode of operation added to these efforts was a state-oriented claim to legitimate the authorities of these patrollers. The fact of hunters’ and herders’ extractive activities became transformed from a way of life that, if destructive, also mapped onto historical modes of profit and rule in the area (sometimes prosecuted in collaboration with the area’s more-sedentary residents), into a problem of external aggression against “national patrimony.” The emphasis on vilification of those modes of extraction carried out by mobile populations, who became cast as “foreigners” contributed to the hiding of “locals” hunting and other extractive activities, which were also illegal. One can see the seeds of this mode of reasoning already during the colonial era. In 1914, an administrator reported that

Also many natives foreign to the *circonscription* [the administrative unit that became the prefecture] come to take advantage of hunting. Over the course of the month of January, we met many of these natives (Hemat Arabs from Salamat, Ouled Saï Arabs from Dar Sila, Taisha Arabs from Darfur, Yulus from Kafia Kingi). These people perpetrate true massacres. A group of Hemat Arabs camped at Mamoun held 73 elephant tusks that they had obtained in less than a month (Schmoll 1914: 10; my translation).¹²

Schmoll adopted an observational tone. His compatriot Ripault, an officer exploring the region, advocated a bellicose stance, the substance of which remains an animating rhetoric today. He explained that he had come across a camp of Hennat Arabs from Am Timan (not far from the border, on the Chadian side). Women and children outnumbered men in the group, and they had donkeys, horses and cattle as well. Ripault reports that they had already killed two elephants and two giraffes. Villagers complained that the “Arabs” had stolen millet from them, but they could not or would not point out the thieves. (This kind of accusation has resonances in the ways that villagers have recently used anti-poaching forces as a way to play one set of interests off another and attempt to benefit from contradictory revenue sources.) “It is in our interest to ruthlessly hunt these Arabs who don’t live in Dar al-Kuti, who escape all surveillance, massacre troops of elephants and giraffes without interest for the treasury, because they pay no hunting license, nor with interest for commerce, because their ivory goes to Darfur, and raid the Rungas and are certainly engaged in the trades in slaves and

12. “Aussi de nombreux indigènes étrangers à la Circonscription viennent-ils se livrer à la chasse. Au cours du mois de Janvier, il a été rencontré une grande quantité de ces indigènes (Arabes Hemat du Salamat, Arabes Ouled Saï du Dar-Sila, Arabes Tayschés du Dar-Four, Youlous de Kafiakandji). Ces gens font de véritables massacres. Un des groupes d’Arabes Hemat dont le campement était sur le Mamoun détenait 73 défenses d’éléphants qu’il s’était procuré en moins d’un mois.”

gunpowder”¹³ (Ripault 1914; my translation).¹⁴ Ripault told his men to chase the Arabs to their “home” in Chad on the other side of the river, but, lacking time, was unable to verify that it had been done. An essential theme from the colonial era in this region is that people would espouse centralized, state-based imperatives and yet lacked the resources (financial, logistical, human) to carry them out, leading to a state of affairs in which the state-based ideas become foils, ways of claiming authorities, that led to non-centralized life projects and tactics and effects. Ripault’s report contains a number of themes familiar to anyone who has made a study of colonialism, such as the construction of a vilified category of “Arab,” the erection of regimes of nativity and foreignness, disgust for modes of commerce that do not benefit the treasury and the unit of sedentary administration. But the buffer zone allows one to see how partial and piecemeal the application of these modes of reasoning was. The colonizers’ blind spots and exceptional stance (Ripault and Schmoll wrote in the last years of *French* rapacity for ivory, a period when the trade had reached an impressive scale; throughout the colonial period administrators considered it their right to hunt, as demonstrated by, for instance, the Birao-based Perrier, described in chapter two, whose dwelling was choked with buffalo horns) meant that there was a disconnect between the authorities they claimed as

13. “Il y a du intérêt à chasser impitoyablement ces arabes qui n’habitent pas dans le Dar-Kouti, échappent à toute surveillance, massacrent les troupeaux d’éléphants et de girafes sans intérêt ni pour le trésor, car ils ne paient aucune patente, ni pour le commerce, car leur ivoire va au Dar-Four, qui razzient les Rongas et font certainement la traite des esclaves et de la poudre.”

14. To a contemporary reader, Ripault’s report contains an intriguing parallel seemingly un-noted by the author: like the villagers he critiques for being unable to point out the millet thieves, he offers no evidence for the Arabs’ trades in slaves and gunpowder, yet offers it up as justification for policing their navigation of this space. This blindness to one’s own biases seems, to a degree, inevitable, particularly as it is an essential part of legitimizing one’s claims to rule over others.

legitimate in their rhetoric and the effects of the authorities they enacted as rulers. Whereas the former all operated in service of the creation of a centralized polity, the latter ended up having far more personalized effects that, by virtue of being so tied to particular people and the contingent situations they found themselves in, lacked a similar future-vision as to the political entity that would ensue. In other words, they exercised non-centralized sovereign capabilities at the same time as they proselytized on behalf of ideas associated with the state and centralization. This pattern remains in effect with the anti-poaching programs of today.

The nationalist line of rationale for conservation came to maturity as Oubangui-Chari neared independence. As noted in chapter two, Prime Minister Abel Goumba pleaded with the French ambassador in Khartoum to entreat the authorities to stop the influx of Arab herders and hunters, who were preventing Goumba's country from realizing its dreams of Tanganyika-scale tourism. Goumba did not use the term "patrimony"; that came later, together with the rise of the projects. In the document founding the PDRN, the project was described as geared to the "conservation of the natural patrimony of the northern region." Three years later, in 1988, the United Nations (UNESCO) named the main national park surveyed by the project, Manovo Gounda St. Floris, a World Heritage Site for the "wealth of its flora and fauna"¹⁵ but then placed it on the "World Heritage in Danger" list less than ten years later. This move made official

15. In addition, the non-human animal population of the area had plummeted by more than eighty percent and UNESCO saw recognition as a way of drawing attention to the plight of the park (Blom et al. 2004).

the patrimonial status of the parklands.¹⁶ The guards took up this mode of reasoning in explaining their work and its importance. As one anti-poaching team leader explained to me, “We have to guard our parks, our patrimony. We cannot let it be pillaged by foreigners. This is our vengeance. We are going to get revenge. It’s dangerous, but this is our country. We cannot let up. We have to stop this bad mentality [that leads foreigners to come here to hunt]. If I refuse, who is going to do it?” He described his work as fighting a “war,” which this call-of-duty reasoning supports. Even when validated as important on the level of the global, as UNESCO aims to do, patrimony seems always to map onto the level of the nation, and defense of the nation, as this team leader’s explanation suggests.

Defense of national patrimony is a project linked to a particular way of understanding time and the position of humans in time, namely as guarantors of a timeless treasury that must be protected like a delicate, painted egg. Like older development models, the justification for militarized anti-poaching is a future-oriented goal of preservation and the importance of timeless nature, but these long-range justifications are enacted through short-burst funding cycles that last a few years at most. Many of the guards would explain the need for their harsh tactics by saying, “*La faune c’est l’avenir de nos enfants*,” (“Wildlife is our children’s future”), a status they

16. Some of the conservationists opposed UNESCO recognition because they knew it would give them less flexibility in dealing with the resource-access issues that the region faces. For instance, the parks cover enormous areas, and reducing the protected areas might make it possible to be more effective. But how can one pick and choose what to protect among an area all of which has been designated part of “global patrimony”? Park size reduction is further a non-starter with the major conservation outfits like the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

accorded it because of the administrative revenues that safari hunting generates. They repeat the phrase with the identical wording common to rote learning, which is not to say that their sentiment is not sincere (not something I could judge, even if I wanted to), but that it simultaneously says very little and hides layers of meaning. The phrase does not translate neatly into Sango, the language spoken by almost all Central Africans. “*Nyama*” stands for “animal,” “wildlife” and “meat,” and “*kekereke*” is used for time from “tomorrow” onward. (Meanwhile, Sango contains two expressions for hungry: general hunger and meat-hunger, giving a sense of how important meat is to eat “correctly.”) A word-for-word translation introduces substantial ambiguity; conveying the same meaning requires additional explanation, clarification and context, which few ever take the time for.¹⁷ More often people substitute French terminology as needed and then proceed to carry out their own projects as they see fit. Thus words like “*faune*” and “*avenir*” build almost entirely new etymologies in particular Central African contexts.¹⁸ French, as a language spoken and understood but not *owned* here in the way that Goula, Youlou or Banda are, is the ultimate generator of reference points—that is, of flexible signifiers that suggest a shared goal but leave substantial openness as to the particularities (Simone 2001; 2004a). In the case of militarized anti-poaching, the long-

17. Another example comes from 1984’s Wildlife Law. Articles 35-39 state that “*chasse coutumière*” (customary hunting) is legal without a permit (Kolingba 1984). However, nowhere does it explain what customary hunting does and does not consist of, other than saying that sophisticated firearms cannot count as “customary.” (This despite the fact that people have been hunting with guns in the area for hundreds of years.)

18. This situation is not unlike the divergent local meanings ascribed to “democracy” in rural Malawi (Englund 2006).

term, distant future-oriented perspective evidenced in justifications like “*La faune c’est l’avenir de nos enfants*” contrasts with the needs people in the region face to support their families and eat, and, perhaps even more importantly, the uncertainty they face over how long the work will continue. People are being asked to act *as if* the funding would continue indefinitely, *as if* this was not simply a job but was rather a higher calling of righteousness, when neither of those states are reflective of people’s actual, lived opportunities, constraints, and experiences.

Partly because of this disconnect between the *idea* (the stated philosophy) of militarized anti-poaching and the needs of people doing it, the buffer zone’s conservation wars have meant extensive conflict not just between the “defenders of patrimony” and the hunters, herders and other exploiters of the parks, but also between and among those who should on the face of it be allied. A wide range of actors—again, even those drawing on the same state-idea patrimonial defense logics—all struggle to exercise their sovereign capabilities. Especially important in this regard is the potent blend of violent coercion and invisibility that marks the buffer zone.

5.5 “Resistance”: Confrontation and collaboration in the shaping of sovereign capabilities

In the early years of project-led militarized anti-poaching, the conflicts were especially pitched among the various people who saw themselves as the defenders of wildlife, particularly the project staff and the safari hunting concessionaires. Next to the scientific rationales for protecting buffer zone patrimony (biodiversity, halting desertification, and so forth), the most important justification of militarized anti-

poaching is to protect the interests of the safari hunting industry, which is the main licit revenue-generator in the region. Were there another major source of licit revenues — plantation agriculture, say — the absurdity of propping up safari hunting in a region as militarized as this one would reveal itself more clearly.¹⁹ But the safari hunting concession mode of governance has been part of social life in the region for so long that it is taken for granted rather than having its merits critically examined, whether by people living in the area or people funding development projects. Reams of feasibility studies (can safari hunting support community development?) are conducted, and their results tentative; and safari hunting concessionaires pack up and leave without being replaced.²⁰ But the days of grand thinking economic overhaul are past, if ever they reached this remote zone in the first place. Instead, the old mode continues: safari hunting concessionaires have become used to enjoying sovereign capabilities their remoteness and wealth affords them, which includes both the largess aspects of their authority (providing health services, education and food for employees and their children) and the necropolitical aspects (punishing those who challenge their authority, such as hunters in their concession zones). As Matthieu Laboureur's memoir makes

19. Safari hunting in CAR occupies a niche market. Whereas safari hunters in most other African countries must content themselves with game ranches stocked with animals raised in captivity and released only for the chase, hunting in CAR is a "more real" experience, with hunters tracking wild game through dense bush. CAR is for the experienced, hard-core, hunter who wants to test him or herself. This means that the industry is inherently limited — if hunting in CAR became too accessible, it would lose its comparative advantage. But the demand is not high enough to make it a luxury good capable of bringing in vast revenues, expensive though a safari in CAR is.

20. In 2002, about 150 safari hunters visited CAR each year (Pampaloni 2003a). This number has dropped in the years since then due to the proliferation of armed groups and rising armed conflict in safari hunting areas.

clear, the safari hunting concessionaires saw themselves as privileged actors in the quest to secure the parklands from illicit hunters and herders.

Perhaps inadvertently, the project disrupted the safari hunters' autonomy. Project reports from the early years are full of asides about the difficulty of operating in the midst of hostility from safari hunters, and especially from the Laboureur clan, named in the reports with their company's name, Manovo SA. For instance, in the midst of a discussion of the project's innovativeness, the author acknowledges, "Of course, major difficulties remain, notably in regards to relations with the hunting companies present in the territory, such as Manovo SA..." (EC 1990: 3).²¹ Laboureur *père* and *fils* had grown used to operating their concession without interference, and, according to others working in the area at the time, they worried that the project would take over lands they used as their own. Manovo SA was by far the largest safari concession, with 17,400 sq. km; the eight other safari operators in the project area together made use of a total of 28,800 sq. km (PDRN 1990a: 35). The dispute and mistrust reached their apogee in early 1990, with a murder that, for once, *did* become visible beyond the buffer zone.

A team of laborers employed by the project were building a road near the Goro River. The road would facilitate the anti-poachers' patrols. Near midday, a gang of guards employed by the Labouleurs appeared. A battle broke out. It is unclear exactly how events unfolded, but when the fighting died down the workers noticed that one of their ranks, a man by the name of Gilbert Bangandombi-Koutali, was missing. A radio

21. "Toutefois, des difficultés majeures subsistent, notamment en ce qui concerne les relations avec les sociétés de chasse présentes sur le territoire, dont Manovo SA."

message went out to the project anti-poaching militiamen, who arrived on the scene later that afternoon and located Bangandombi's corpse. A few days later the project guards and their AT paid a visit to the Laboueurs at their camp. Jean Laboureur received them in the lodge dining hall. He explained that he had been out surveying his lands with his family when he noticed some vultures, a sign of a carcass nearby. They found the remains of a dead animal and, assuming there much be poachers in the area, set out to find them. Near the Goro, they saw smoke and then came upon the group of workers, who they assumed were poachers. According to a witness, Jean Laboureur said that,

Near the Goro we heard voices. I told my son to be careful because the people weren't Central African. We did not hear Sango. It is true that I am the one who shot. I used the M16 and a revolver, both of which are here in the interior of the house. It is not my fault; it is the PDRN that put me in this impossible situation. The project has never wanted to work in collaboration with me, and this despite the fact that I am the first protector of Manovo Gounda St. Floris. For forty years now I have been the one to protect wildlife in CAR (Djouma 1990).²²

The following day, Jean Laboureur was brought to Bangui and arrested. There was no trial; instead he left for France. Eventually his son Matthieu took over operations for him. Many questions remain about the Bangandombi murder. Even in the summary of events cited above, the author notes that he thinks Matthieu was the real killer, because he was the one who generally carried the M16. That the father took the fall for the son is the account that most people understand to be true. (It is, moreover, an oft-recurring

22. "Proche de la Goro nous avons écouté des voix. J'ai demandé à mon fils de faire attention car ce ne sont pas des centrafricaines. Mais on a pas écouté la langue sango. Il est vraie que c'est moi qui aie tiré. J'ai utilisé le M16 et le Revolver, les armes se trouvent actuellement à l'intérieur. Ce n'est pas de ma faute mais c'est le PDRN qui m'a induit en galeur. Ce projet ne veux jamais travailler en collaboration avec moi et pourtant c'est moi le premier protecteur du parc Manovo-Gounda-St-Floris. C'est depuis quarante ans que je fais la protection de la faune sauvage en RCA."

theme in tales of white hunters/conservationists gone amok in Africa.²³) Beyond that discrepancy, others I spoke to about the incident pointed out that the Goro River area has little wildlife of interest to poachers, rendering Laboureur's story of assuming that the laborers had come to hunt suspect. The workers were Central African, whether or not they were speaking Sango, and Laboureur's attempt to portray them as foreign (and hence killable) sounds a bit hollow. (The other major marker of foreignness is appearance and, especially, the use of pack animals.) Prior to the project's arrival, the Laboueurs had effectively taken over a large part of Manovo National Park for their own use, and the newly-arrived project stood to disrupt that. Some people with whom I spoke suggested that the Laboueurs had shot the worker to intimidate those who sought to work with the project. They could be used to getting away with this kind of thing. One person close to the safari hunting industry assured me that the only reason the Bangandombi murder became as much of a problem as it did was that the victim, in addition to his project work, had been poaching for none other than the president himself.

A more recent murder offers a telling comparison. In early 2006, a French safari hunting guide (and husband and father of two young children) was shot dead in his Land Cruiser. The other safari hunters blamed the murder on "foreign poachers" and said that the victim had been mistaken for some of the people leading anti-poaching patrols in the region at the time, namely two Russian former French Foreign

23. See, for instance, Goldberg's narration of a similar incident in Zambia involving an American conservationist and his stepson in the mid-1990s (Goldberg 2010).

Legionnaires operating under the aegis of a private conservation association known for their heavy-handed tactics and, for a range of reasons, disliked by the safari concessionaires who nevertheless contributed to their salaries. This version of events served the concessionaires well: it simultaneously evidenced the severity of the problem of “foreign poaching” and showed the Russians to be a contributing factor to the conflicts’ escalation. However, there is reason to doubt this story, too. The murdered guide was embroiled in a range of disagreements and personality clashes with the more-established safari operators. He was shot in an area that poachers had no reason to frequent. One person with whom I spoke who knew all these various people suggested that the killing was in fact a “*règlement des comptes*” (settling of scores) among the various guides.

A key feature of violence and the exercise of sovereign capabilities in the buffer zone is that the remoteness and inaccessibility make it much easier to hide what happens here than in more-populated parts of the globe. With rare exceptions, the bush will swallow it all. This has profound effects on both the ways that particular people and groups exercise authorities and the configurations of political power that emerge. Unless surprised by a confrontation, one must only be accountable to oneself. To maintain invisibility, centralization must in important ways be avoided, even as rhetorical invocations of centralization can prove intermittently useful. Through the years, and especially with the (temporary) closing of Manovo SA, relations between the anti-poaching projects and the safari hunting operators and their anti-poaching militias

mellowed, but it is unclear whether this mellowing owed to growing collaboration or rather to the various parties tacitly agreeing to look the other way as far as the others were concerned. The archival record as well as my own interviews suggest that it was in fact some of both.

Safari operators were not the only people to who rose up against the project. People living in the villages in and around the parklands were also hostile to the new arrivals to the extent they disrupted longstanding practices for profiting from open space resources. As the PDRN annual report from 1990 explains,

It is necessary to take into consideration the fact that until now the population, including a large number of functionaries and notables, has been used to pretty much free access to the region's natural resources, without respecting any Laws. The private companies [safari operators] have also operated in this informal manner.... People will be willing to accept and respect the Law when they sense that doing so is in the interest of the majority. But what people often forget is that respect for the Law means respect for all the laws, and especially those concerning the rights and customs of individuals, and not simply those laws that happen to be in the interest of a certain group (PDRN 1990a: 1; my translation)²⁴.

The report-writer's lofty, Leviathan-like goals (i.e., the top priority of bringing about "respect for the Law") were commonly espoused in the project's early years. Later, the impossibility of imposing the acceptance of and respect for the law (whether approached in a "participatory" manner or not) became clearer to all involved, and the

24. "Il faut tenir compte du fait que jusqu'à present la population, y compris un certain nombre de notables et de fonctionnaires, a ete habitue a acceder quasi librement aux ressources naturelles de la region, sans respect d'aucune Loi. Les Societes privees ont egalemt opere de cette facon desinvolte.... Les gens seront desireux d'accepter et de respecter la Loi pour autant qu'ils sentiront que c'est dans l'interet de la majorite. Mais ce que l'on oublie souvent, c'est que le respect de la Loi signifie toutes les Lois, et plus particulierement celles concernant les droits et coutumes des individus, et non pas simplement les Lois dans l'interet d'un certain groupe."

project reports contained fewer grandly idealistic statements of goals, even though in principle those goals remained the same.

Another incident around the time of the Bangandombi murder shows that safari hunters were not alone in their desire to protect the sovereign capabilities they had established through years of struggle and negotiation. In project reports, it is known simply as “the Doum affair.” On 27 July 1989, a group of anti-poaching militiamen arrived near the village of Doum (just north of Ndele), where residents told them to hand over their weapons. Faced with the decision to either fire at the villagers or accede to their demands, the guards chose the latter option. Negotiations for their liberation took days. According to the project staff who reported on the incident, the villagers mistrusted the project because they feared the project would rule with the same brutality as nearby Manovo SA (PDRN 1990a: 9). Eventually, the prisoners won their release. In December, an armed defense group from Akoursoulbak (a large village close to Doum) threatened a group of laborers working to clear paths so the anti-poaching militiamen could begin their dry season patrols. The men told the startled workers to “Go tell your Whites—the war is on!” (PDRN 1990a: 9; my translation).²⁵ The string of villages that line the road leading north from Ndele into Chad are known as full of avid fishermen,

25. That is, “*rapporter a leurs Blancs, que c’était la guerre.*” This warning indicates the ongoing importance of race in these encounters and in the region’s governance, with colonial dynamics tenaciously, if selectively, upheld by all parties when it suits them. Though the “whites” were never formally in charge and always hid behind the anodyne title of “technical assistant,” it was useful for all involved to portray them as the instigators and enforcers of unpopular policies, which, in effect, was true. That the Central African project staff also espoused support for these policies during meetings with the ATs and expatriate donors could be hidden from the populations angry about the rules. For more on these dynamics, see chapter three, on a series of meetings between anti-poaching guards and diamond miners in Ndele in early 2010.

who use trails heading east into Manovo to ply their trade, a commerce the project now sought to stop. More importantly, these villages are the homeland of the Sultan-Mayor of Ndele, grandson of Sultan Sanusi. Sultan-Mayor Kamoun lives in town, but there his support is mixed; it is in these northern villages that he can count on allegiance, and it is from these northern villages that he (or, now, his sons) organize hunting and mining expeditions. The Sultan-Mayor grew up near Nyala, in South Darfur, and much of his family remains in the area. One son is a mayor. Most of the large groups of hunters are organized in that region, specifically in Am Dogon and environs. Though the Sultan-Mayor did not always profit from this business, it was his job to help organize and facilitate it. In the early years of militarized anti-poaching (the 1980s), the guards would deposit people at the prison in Ndele. They noticed that locals would frequently be shot, whereas Sudanese would simply disappear, and they attributed this to the role of the Sultan-Mayor. Through the years, the Sultan-Mayor and his family have periodically run afoul of and themselves targeted the anti-poachers. This happens at times when the usual mutually-hidden side-by-side operations come into conflict with each other, such as when the aforementioned Russian legionnaires arrested one of the Sultan-Mayor's sons in 2006. An earlier anti-poaching mercenary told me that the Sultan-Mayor had put a bounty on his head. When he confronted the Sultan-Mayor about it, the Sultan-Mayor assured him that it "wasn't personal—just business."²⁶

26. Though I met with the Sultan-Mayor multiple times during my fieldwork, his infirmity made it difficult for me to ask about these topics; he had moved to Bangui for medical treatment, and his grand Ndele house stood open, almost abandoned, especially after it was hit by government forces during fighting between the army and the CPJP rebel group in November 2009.

The project reports are full of mentions of people—in theory collaborators—caught profiting from the modes of extraction they are in theory employed to stop. Each time, the writer indicates that now that this individual has been caught, the problem has been solved. For instance, in September 1990 an anti-poaching guard arrested a hunter he had found in the park. Both were slightly injured in the dispute, the hunter more gravely. The anti-poaching guard was then locked up—“totally without justification”—at the detention center run by the Bamingui gendarmerie . The gendarmerie’s “apparently inexplicable” reaction owed to the fact that the head of the gendarmerie contingent was himself an avid organizer of hunting parties in the parks. Now that he had been found out, though, there has been a “tight collaboration” between the gendarmerie and the anti-poachers (PDRN 1990a: 9; my translation). A few years later, three anti-poaching guards and one trainee found themselves doing battle with a group of twelve “local poachers” armed with sophisticated weapons. One of the hunters (widely known as a “professional hunter,” anti-poaching guards had already intercepted him twice at his labors) was killed during the firefight. Weeks passed. While in Bamingui, the anti-poaching guards found themselves thrown in prison. They spent the end of the year celebrations locked up. None of the hunters faced any penalty. Eventually, upon intervention of their bosses, the guards were released (PDRN II Rapport semestriel July 1995—January 1996; 23). Though the “foreigner” poachers represented the far-greater threat militarily, the anti-poachers found that locals had

powerful capabilities to fight back too, especially by making the anti-poachers' operations—which people supported rhetorically but opposed in application—visible.

At no time was this capability as powerfully invoked as by the residents of Idongo. Idongo, home to about 500 people, was the projects' "model village." In 2003, it was the subject of several glowing journalistic accounts, including on the French television channel *Arte*, which described how the devolved safari hunting revenues the village received in exchange for agreeing to themselves lay off hunting had meant that even "the elderly have a right to a small pension" (AFP 2003). Later that year, the anti-poaching guards caught several people from the village hunting and seized six guns from them. The following night they caught the son of the president of the local conservation committee hunting—he was in *flagrant délit*. Jean-Baptiste Mamang-Kanga, head of Sangba, the anti-poaching base nearest Idongo, at the time, told me how he was washing up for church the next morning when he heard a loud noise. He thought some workers had dropped heavy equipment. He heard the noise again. It wasn't the workers—it was a gunshot from an AK-47! When he went outside, he was confronted by 300-400 angry Idongans, who were busy destroying the radio post and attempting to confiscate the anti-poaching guards' weapons. They were shooting—mostly in the air—and threatening the guards. One man had his clothes ripped from his back and left in shreds. Mamang eventually managed to calm the situation by reminding the villagers that they were in this together: we work together, we eat together; together, we will develop the region.... And the captured Idongans were released. In a surprisingly candid

assessment of this incident, the European Commission employee in Bangui charged with coordinating between the project and its Brussels funders wrote, “In my opinion, a situation like this one is unfortunately confirmation of the failure of the project”²⁷ (Pampaloni 2003b; my translation). It is unclear, however, whether anyone ever read this “*note de dossier*” —the project ended the following year, and when it restarted after a three-year hiatus, new staff members with no knowledge of this or similar incidents took over.

Perhaps it was a coincidence that the Idongans destroyed the radio post. Perhaps it was simply the first building they came to. But the move was also symbolic: the radio was the only means of communication with the other bases and beyond. Destroying it helped occlude what happened here. In the end, the anti-poaching guards and the villagers among whom they worked found ways to avoid direct confrontation while both pursuing their goals. For the anti-poachers, this meant reserving their most brutal tactics for the “foreigners.” The foreigners’ deaths were easier to render invisible in the bush. These killings became the basis for what was effectively low-grade war, and they never resulted in negotiations. That is, they involved the exercise of necropolitical sovereign capabilities, and diplomacy was not a capability either side possessed in regard to the other. For the villagers, this meant “playing the [conservation] game” while developing skilled tactics of avoidance (and occasional, spectacular confrontation) of the anti-poachers (Roulet 2010: 5). The laws and protocols that should govern their behavior

27. “A mon avis, une situation comme celle décrite, est malheureusement la confirmation d’un échec du projet.”

and interactions are not respected by any of the parties. Sometimes, even those who wish to respect the laws cannot. One safari hunting concessionaire explained to me that when he went to buy the export stamp tickets so that tourists could ship home their trophies the entire booklet had been sold under the table to someone operating illegally, leaving none for anyone else. In theory, the anti-poachers should only shoot in legitimate self-defense; in reality, they frequently shoot first. In theory, the villagers should never set foot in the parks; in reality, they need these spaces for food and for sources of income. In theory, the safari hunters should pay subsidies to the people living in the areas around their concessions in exchange for the villagers refraining from hunting; in reality, they know they can get away with ignoring these obligations.²⁸ The laws, then, are platforms enabling a fragile, limited kind of collaboration and the capture of subsidies from international donors and play only a peripheral role in regulating behavior and authority on the ground. They are tools enabling extraversion (Bayart 2000), but they do not determine the range or constitution of people's sovereign capabilities, which are built out of confrontation and negotiation.

5.6 Anti-poachers and extraction

Like the villagers, the anti-poaching guards also hunt, fish, and mine extensively in the parks and other protected areas. Anti-poaching bases lie within or beside the

28. Since if the concessionaires left residents would receive nothing in the way of safari hunting revenues, the concessionaires know they can run their businesses as they see fit, regardless of what laws and protocols mandate. "Many cases of non-observance (registration of animals killed, animals wounded, communication with the village committees, examination of trophies, improvements to the zone, respect for the schedule of payments, production and content of annual reports, etc.) have been demonstrated" (d'Huart 2009: 17; my translation).

parks, offering staff, and the villages that spring up to service the projects, privileged access to park resources. These agglomerations become hubs of hunting, fishing and mining. Without the programs that are, in theory, meant to prevent and patrol these trades, they would not exist.²⁹ In this sense, militarized anti-poaching and conservation in the CAR seems to illustrate the Comaroffs' argument (2006) that increasing (il)legalization leads to an increasing sense of disorder. However, the apparent disorder signals a particular mode of policing founded in historically resonant logics of seizure and spoils (Roitman 1998; 2005).

Militarized anti-poaching institutionalizes seizure as a mode of rule. Under the project (beginning in the mid-1990s), guards received bonuses for all material goods—pumps, bicycles, pots, sleeping mats: a premium for each—they captured from people found in the vast protected areas. Any belongings a park interloper carried could be construed as resource exploitation paraphernalia and could hence become “evidence” in an eventual trial. But during my fieldwork (2009-2010), the regional court never once heard a case because of a lack of judicial personnel, which I was told was commonly the case. In theory, militarized anti-poaching would revive and strengthen various limbs of the state system, like physical therapy. In practice, those “limbs” have little more life than the scattered bones left behind after a large predator has completed his meal. The links between state law and the racketeering and seizure of organized crime have been

29. The base at Bamingui is directly next to a town and the road to Bangui and so is an exception to this statement. Similarly, at Sangha diamond-mining and safari hunting concessions have also drawn people into the area. But the two northeastern-most bases—Manovo and Gounda—lie isolated in the parks.

noted elsewhere (Tilly 1985); what strikes here is how obvious this connection is, and how personalized.

Privilege to seize goes together with privilege to plunder. The people in the villages that spring up to service project bases³⁰ need meat, as do the guards and their families, as do people in far-off cities like Bangui. A combination of factors—chiefly militarized policing and expansion of conservation and safari hunting zones, the rise in cattle thieves/road bandits in Central Africa, and the higher prices fetched at Cameroonian/Nigerian markets—have caused the number of herders who descend to the cities of southern CAR to sell their cattle to plummet (even as the number of herders using the space and then departing has continued to rise). This makes “bush meat” all the more important as a source of nutrition for the burgeoning urban areas. People especially like the meat that comes from the large game of the northeastern savannas.³¹ It has become a lucrative trade and often involves a number of middlemen and financiers, who may supply guns and bullets, as in the case of the Bamingui gendarmerie chief cited above. People on anti-poaching bases are particularly well-placed to enter this business. On the Manovo base in 2009, the director of the primary school was found with a gun and bullets and confessed that he planned to hunt for meat to sell. The bullets’ serial numbers traced back to those dealt to the *conservateur national*, the bases’ hierarchical leader, who blamed his son for the bullets’ circulation. In surrounding

30. Though illegal by virtue of being situated in the parks, these villages have gained official status as villages of the CAR.

31. See chapter four on roadblocks for further discussion of the meat business.

towns, guards sell meat not on the market (a role for women) but through their personal relationships, for instance to their homologues in the Ministry of Water and Forests. In 2009, when poachers ambushed an ECOFAC vehicle on the road near one of its bases, killing five guards as well as two others working for the project, their leader, the *chef de patrouille*, was out fishing and could not be reached.

Some guards take on the role of prospector by financing the labor-intensive digging done by workers and promising invisibility to patrols. Sometimes these collaborations bring profit to all involved, but sometimes the guards' privilege and firepower³² enables them to violate their partners' sense of fair play. In one case in 2009, a *chef de patrouille* sent a team of miners to an area rumored to have been the site of vast colonial-era extractions, deep in the park. The miners dug for several days to achieve deep pits. Once they were ready to "rinse" and pluck out the diamonds, another *chef de patrouille*, accompanied by several guards, burst in and expelled them from the park, taking over the rinsing—and diamond-finding—themselves.³³ The first *chef de patrouille* insisted he had nothing to do with the seizure and that he lost out on the deal as well, but either way the contracted miners never recuperated the equipment that had been seized from them. The anti-poaching guards' ability to police extraction owes to the state-centric model of conservation whose rhetoric they can marshal to augment their firepower. Their privileged access to extraction owes to their ability to manage the

32. Mbembe's "loi de la repartition des armes" (2000b; 2003) operates here.

33. Visibility is crucial to diamond mining itself. Miners generally abide by the *droit d'oeil*—the right of sight—whereby anyone who spots a diamond claims a percentage of the profit, even if that person did no more labor to unearth it than spotting it on someone's shovel.

dissemination of information about what happens in the area. This capability of invisibility does not go unchallenged, as described above. Indeed, contests over visibility are one of the key features of buffer zone governance, whether involving militarized anti-poaching or not.

5.7 Visibility and invisibility

It is this peculiar relationship to visibility that ensures that politics in the zone remain in important ways non-centralized, even as rulers make gestures toward centralizing imperatives, such as the protection of national patrimony. As Scott (1998) has pointed out, it is only by making people, goods, and space visible in uniform ways that centralized authorities are able to effectively expand their zone of control. Thus, functionaries develop standardized systems for reporting and communicating information, and these systems necessarily simplify the diverse forms and types of information that could be collected into only those that fit their dictates and interests. In Scott's view, then, areas where centralized powers had great difficulty penetrating (high mountains, for instance) were places where people succeeded in their desire to maintain this diversity, invisible from the would-be Leviathan's flattening "eyes" (Scott 2009). The buffer zone reveals a gap in this model of centralization and visibility: here, playing with visibility—deciding what to "show" to people outside the area, whether in the capital or in donor hubs like Brussels, and/or deciding what to raise a protest demonstration about, as in the case of Idongo, and what to ignore, as in the case of safari hunting concessionaire non-observance of protocols—is an important way that non-centralized

politics are enacted and maintained. Playing with visibility is a way to keep politics personalized—that is, to perpetuate the importance of the people involved in determining outcomes rather than handing over those decision-making powers to institutionalized rules or customs—and it is this personalization that allows for the flexibility from which people obtain profit.

Hiding is also key to playing with visibility. In 2003, an Italian biologist outfitted three Derby elands with radio collars so that he could monitor their movements and health. Derby elands are found only in CAR and Benin, and their rarity makes them the species safari hunters covet above all others. Over the course of six months, however, first one and then another of these collared elands were killed. Hunters living in the area understood the animals' importance to the struggling safari hunting industry and yet judged it safer to kill the animals because they believed that the collars were in fact tools intended to surveille their own activities, a prospect they could not abide (Pampaloni 2003a).

Playing with visibility is especially important in the case of the anti-poachers' battle strategies. The AT/mercenary whose monologue opens this chapter argued for the importance of spectacular shows of violence—killing tens of cattle and then stopping in the nearest village to calmly eat lunch, for instance—to show how fearless he and his men could be and scare their opponents into submission. (This strategy was arguably not sustainable in the mid- to long-term given the greater numbers of hunters and herders and the fitfulness of anti-poaching project engagement.) But it was also of

utmost importance that he, himself, remain hidden from international audiences that might criticize this violent tactics—for this reason, he would duck out of sight when he saw another white person. (Other white people—myself included—often tried to avoid him as well for fear of being associated with him and his methods.) Similarly, his take on the infamous practices of one of his predecessors is telling. This predecessor, one of the aforementioned Russians, either participated in, sanctioned or looked the other way while his men desecrated the bodies of the hunters and herders they killed. They might lop off a head and leave it in a tree, for instance. An eager digital camera user, the Russian took photos which eventually made it into the French press through the safari hunter establishment, which had soured on the Russians. When I suggested that desecration of bodies might unhelpfully escalate conflicts among those seeking access to open space resources, the AT/mercenary responded with more than a touch of impatience. “[The Russian’s] problem wasn’t that he desecrated bodies. His problem was that he took photographs.” In other words, he should have been more careful about who he allowed to access information about his methods. In a non-centralized mode of operating, there are multiple hubs (Bangui, Brussels, Paris, Khartoum) with which a person or entity bearing sovereign capabilities must manage their relationships, which is done through the management of what information is allowed to circulate and what is not.

Information flows are also determined by what people *want* to see, and what they *do not want* to see. The ways that preconceived notions shape perception, institutional

biases, and desires to be able to disavow knowledge of something that could become controversial at a later date all come into play here. For instance, Enrico Pironio, the Friulian³⁴ European Commission diplomat who has single-handedly organized funding for conservation programs in CAR (sometimes by loudly championing the cause, other times by sneaking it through attached to other, less controversial programs) said that many of his colleagues in Brussels would just cover their ears if he tried to tell them about the difficulties of militarized anti-poaching in CAR. Through the twenty-five years of anti-poaching projects he has organized in the country, about thirty guards have been killed in the line of duty. He rues this toll, but he knows that when news of a Central African guard dying reaches Brussels, there will be some talk about it for a day or two, but then the concern will pass. Were one of the expatriate staff to die, in contrast, the program would immediately get shut down. Given the increasing militarization of the region, this has meant that his top priority in hiring expatriates has been finding people who know how to not get themselves killed—former Special Forces-type guys, or parachutists in the French context. These people have little experience with things like conservation or community development, but their military skills will enable the project to trundle along without attracting undue notice, even though it is especially violent.

34. Friuli is a region of northeastern Italy granted special autonomous status after World War II. Pironio flies a Friulian flag and taught me a few Friulian greetings, such as “Maandi” (live long), which he contrasted with the Italian “Ciao,” which comes from the Venetian word for slave. In this as in so many other domains, Pironio appeared to be seeking the pathways that would grant him greatest flexibility and autonomy. Throughout our hours-long conversation, Pironio smoked a pipe—totally illegal in a European Commission office like his, but his comfort in doing so suggested he had figured out how to get away with it.

5.8 The effects of the teleology of state expansion

Perhaps surprisingly for those who tend to think in Scottian terms, here “the state” (as an idea, as a rationale) helps *hide* what happens because it arouses fewer questions about the legitimacy of what people who claim to be acting on its behalf are doing. In the case of militarized anti-poaching, avowed furtherance of imperatives of statehood (protection of national patrimony) has acted as a screen for what are in fact highly personalized modes of rule that prevent the formation of centralized administration. Self-consciously private actors, in contrast, attract much more scrutiny. For instance, Bruce Hayse, an American doctor, adventurer, and philanthropist, attracted much attention—positive, negative, incredulous—for his decision to launch Africa Rainforest and River Conservation (ARRC), Inc. in 2002, which, under a private mandate from the CAR president, would employ mercenaries and Central Africans to police the eastern third of the country from poachers (see f.ex. Clynes 2002; Lowy 2002). ARRC never ended up conducting a single patrol. Hayse had hired a South African of ill repute to lead the militia, and swarms of rumors (diamond dealing, death threats, embezzlement) quickly clouded around the organization. Its equipment, vehicles, and bank balances disappeared. Still, the group has proven a useful thought experiment for people interested in describing the creation of enclaves outside of state control. For instance, Ferguson called upon ARRC as a demonstration of new enclaves of corporate/private governmentality on the continent (2006). A law review article charted the tangled nest of international and domestic laws that could judge the legality of the

militia's actions and concluded with only a qualified verdict: "If the shooting of poachers³⁵ on-sight were established as murder" [as opposed, for instance, to self-defense or necessary protection of biodiversity], "no similarly persuasive rationale would excuse Hayse's protection strategy for the Chinko Basin"³⁶ (Shanahan 2004: 253). Moreover, Hayse himself could face prosecution for racketeering and/or violation of international human rights law in a U.S. court.

According to international law, these questions of legality shift, and become less troubling to international observers and media, if the militarized anti-poachers claim to be acting on behalf of the state and to strengthen state capacities. This relationship in effect gives them greater leeway to pursue their battles and other projects of profit. The state's existence is premised upon the idea of the need for a supra-authority to regulate and combat criminality in all its forms. A number of African governments have equipped their park guards with standing shoot-to-kill orders—among them Tanzania, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Malawi (Neumann 2004: 814). The coverage of ARRC was silent about how widespread violent anti-poaching policies are. Instead of condemning militarized anti-poaching as such, the articles seemed to find something inherently worrisome about the *private* character of the intervention; were it more formally an

35. One is tempted here to insert the qualifier "alleged"—the quick decision-making required for a shoot-on-sight policy means that assessment of culpability consists largely of rapid assessment of appearance, and no trials or investigations are ever conducted.

36. Shanahan concludes, ARRC's "compassion in coming to the aid of Central Africans in distress, as well as the environment, is admirable. Further, their intentions are just, and regardless of one's position on the legality of their operation, there is no denying their tenacity in tackling such an insurmountable obstacle" (2004: 254). In addition to its litany of moral judgments founded in Western ideas of wildlife conservation, this quote is revealing for another mis-reading of ARRC's operations: by the time Shanahan's article went to press, ARRC had closed its operations in the CAR, revealing their "tenacity" as but fleeting.

organ of the state it would not have drawn the same attention. But this bias misleads. In fact, the remoteness of the terrain and the pronounced ambivalence of the government in Bangui afford all who work there sovereign capabilities, and the battles are always bloody and personal. At the same time as ARRC attempted to establish operations and patrols, a project's (ECOFAC) fighters—funded by EU monies—engaged in this very same type of combat elsewhere in the country, something that the ARRC coverage failed entirely to mention. When ECOFAC hit a funding rupture (2004-2007), safari hunters stepped in to occupy the space of authority it had cleared by using the *Association pour la protection de la faune centrafricaine* (APFC, Association for the Protection of Central African Fauna, founded in 2002), to conduct the military component of ECOFAC's workload. A Russian ex-French Foreign Legion fighter, together with a partner of similar background, led the APFC, and they recruited many former ECOFAC guards. When the EU renewed funding for ECOFAC in 2007, APFC was no longer needed.³⁷ With funding for ECOFAC in peril in 2010, rumors in northeastern CAR suggested that the APFC (led by a French mercenary this time) would step back in. Instead, the EU promised a new program, ECOFAUNE, but its launch was delayed due to salary negotiations.

The difference between Hayse's or the APFC's operations and those of the projects is that the latter situate themselves in a blind spot in the widespread teleological assumptions about states that international donors and other interested parties take as

37. Its leaders had also recently become personae non grata in CAR after the desecration they and/or their men wreaked on the bodies of those they killed became broadly known through photographs that circulated in the French press.

their gospel. That is, the projects claim to be building toward the creation of an all-powerful, unitary state—which the donors take for granted as the optimal outcome—and the dogma that increasing centralization is necessary (just like “progress”) then hides the non-centralized political configurations these projects give rise to. The following “flash note” from the head of the EC in Bangui is telling in its blend of realist analysis and yet continued reliance on an ideal-type form of the state: “I repeat, this situation is indicative of the power void created by the quasi-absence of the Central African state in this sensitive zone (triple-frontier CAR-Sudan-Chad).... It is in this sense that I count on repeating my sensitization efforts with high-level authorities.... Also, it is necessary to insist that this subject be discussed during the next summit between the three heads of state” (Lloveras 2002). In other words, the state has no presence in this zone, and yet the solution proposed is high-level diplomatic discussions between presidents who are doing nothing in the area. This faith in “the state” resembles that of church-goers who remain devout when confronted with scandal upon scandal in their sect; the state, too, is a Utopian project (Graeber 2011).

To understand how “the state” can act as an ideal type without having much of an institutional presence, it is necessary to include the role of the government in Bangui. The government has never worked to expand its effective control over its territory in the ways expected by liberal theory. Pironio, the EC diplomat who led the anti-poaching and conservation charge in CAR and the region more broadly, explained this particularity by contrasting Central African governments with those of West Africa. In West Africa, he

found that government officials frequently meddled and ingratiated themselves into the running of the programs. They wanted per diems, and they wanted to control policies. In Central Africa, in contrast, *“Les gens sont nuls”* (people are useless) and they leave the running of the programs to the expatriates. As difficult as the work can be, Pironio has enjoyed helping to build wildlife protection capacity from scratch, as he sees himself as having done. In this way, Pironio has managed to fashion a career as a self-professed “action man” skilled in circumventing rules and regulations while working for one of the most rational-bureaucracy-obsessed organizations in the world. His ability to do this has turned in large measure on the disconnect between what organizations like his expect the state to be, and what the state actually does, institutionally speaking, in a place like CAR.

The project reports and other documents assembled in the European Commission’s archives in Bangui, especially those written by expatriate staff, offer a multitude of examples of moments when project staff called on the state to act, expected the state to act, and in this interstice of waiting for an expected state response ended up taking on new governing authorities themselves and eventually giving in to the dictates of personalized governance. For instance, the project staff repeatedly asked for reinforcements from the army and especially the Presidential Guard to help them in their war with the foreign hunters and herders. This support never arrived. Similarly, they asked for more weapons and ammunition. As one requester pleaded,

The supply of these materials will be indispensable to augment our firepower and thus effectively fight against the Sudanese and Chadian predators who come

in very large detachments. Powerful strikes are desirable to dissuade them from continuing to come and pillage the riches of CENTRAL AFRICAN lands. It is a question of lateralizing and affirming the authority of the CENTRAL AFRICAN administration over these vast territories that are of such great interest to hunters, and which tend to become sanctuaries for thugs of all kinds" (Horel et al. 2009; my translation, emphasis in original).

But armament, too, was only in rare instances forthcoming. Instead, anti-poaching staff would bring in the equipment by hiding it under the ambiguous budget heading "*pièces détachées*" (spare parts). Though funding for a surveillance plane was not allowed, they could sneak it in by inflating the pilot's salary to the extent that it included the cost of plane rental. Donations from individuals were also useful. The Russians' connections with hunting-loving oligarchs were especially fruitful in this regard. They brought in a mortar³⁸ and some rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers this way. Guards also captured guns from the hunters, and though they said they kept them as evidence, people living in nearby villages knew them to be using these tools to hunt themselves. All these methods attest to how having recourse to the "the state should be doing this" rationale helps give people great flexibility in how they pursue personalized projects of governance.

The state's silence when called on, whether for rhetorical, material or legal support, prevented institutionalized modes of operating from coming into being, even as its existence as a category meant that this silence was never critically evaluated. For instance, inspired by Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources) project, which sought to undo coercive colonial

38. This was mounted on an ultralight airplane left behind by a safari hunter so that they could surveille and bombard from the air.

policies that prohibited people from hunting and instead involve communities directly in the regulation of hunting, beginning in the mid-1990s conservationists strove to find new ways to involve communities in their nature-preservation agendas.³⁹ Two assumptions founded the CAMPFIRE approach: “The assumption that local communities’ hostility to wildlife—historically and at present—lies principally in their exclusion from its economic benefits underlies much writing on CAMPFIRE. So does the assumption that economic returns will solve institutional quandaries” (Alexander and McGregor 2000: 608). These assumptions became the basis for the *Zones cynégétiques villageoises* (ZCV) in CAR. Villages chosen to participate in the ZCV (largely those

39. Over the past twenty years, “community-based conservation” has become the buzzword of choice for environmental projects, especially in the developing world. The de-politicizing effects of development-speak have been noted elsewhere (see f.ex. Ferguson 1990; Englund 2006). What I find interesting about terms like “community-based conservation” is how their buzzword status elevates them to become reference points enabling projects among diverse sets of actors. The meaning of the term is not stable, and yet it becomes the basis for collaborations. Consider Ngoitiko et al.’s discussion of how “community-based conservation” has been invoked in the Tanzanian Serengeti: “Despite the widely divergent interests in Loliondo in relation to land use, wildlife governance and the flow of resource benefits, and the protracted conflicts between many parties for access and control of these, it is highly notable that virtually all parties justify their actions with reference to practising ‘community-based conservation.’ Villagers and their local allies contend that traditional rangeland management practices embody a form of indigenous ‘community-based conservation.’ Tourism companies involved in village-level contracts originally developed those local agreements as a financial incentive for villages to maintain integrated livestock and wildlife land uses and exclude agriculture, and thus defend their arrangements as models of ‘community-based conservation.’ Thomson Safaris, while apparently engaged in a very different type of tourism venture that is not based on supporting extant pastoralist land use practices, nevertheless portrays the Sukenya Farm as ‘a community-based conservation area’ which ‘aims to implement programs for habitat restoration, wildlife preservation, and community empowerment’ (O’Kasick, n.d.). That the company can describe its activities as ‘community-based conservation even while its main interaction with the surrounding communities is characterized by rigorous law enforcement efforts leading to the violent imprisonment of many community members is indicative of both the power and malleability of the set of ideas and imagery that comprise the contemporary ‘community-based conservation’ narrative. Similarly, international NGOs and wildlife authorities describe WMAs as a framework for ‘community-based conservation’ even when the communities themselves reject such a framework due to perceived incompatibility with existing local resource governance systems. Ultimately each actor in Loliondo seeks legitimacy for pursuing their own interests within the increasingly wide ambit of ‘community-based conservation,’ a concept which consequently has become as starkly contested as the lands and resources themselves” (Ngoitiko et al. 2010: 284-5).

villages that lay nearest to safari concessions and national parks, but political intrigues also played a role in selection) would agree to police hunting in the zone and prohibit anyone from killing animals that could potentially bring in revenue as safari trophies. In return, the communities would receive a substantial portion of the revenues generated through safari hunting, which would be used for communal projects of the management committees' choosing, such as schools, health posts, or functionary salaries.

A brief digression to explain the ZCVs. The ZCV system is an innovative model; in many of the areas where the ZCV operate, the only funds the local administration receives are safari taxes, which pay salaries for teachers and other officials as well as other community needs (Roulet 2005). The ZCV sends funds directly to communities. The revenues accruing to CAR communities are greater than those in other places where community-based systems have been attempted.⁴⁰ It merits further analysis but is somewhat beyond the scope of this chapter.⁴¹ I justify focusing on the LAB here because the LAB enables the ZCV. In fact, that is precisely the reasoning that has been used to obtain funding for military operations from the European Commission, which, properly speaking, is a development donor. Without LAB combat safari hunting would lose even its tenuous viability. For instance, in the face of aggravating tensions with cattle herders,

40. For instance, in Burkina Faso, communities near national parks were to have received tourism receipts. But the birdwatchers who visit Burkinabe parks pay fewer fees than the wealthy safari hunters, and the Burkinabe president later rolled back the program to keep even more of those limited monies in the capital.

41. The ZCV record is mixed. Despite some successes, critics have noted that much, if not most, of the revenues remain in ECOFAC's Bangui office and that equipment costs (for instance, a private plane for the expat AT, or t-shirts printed in the US for "World Tree Day") outstripped reasonable expenditures.

who said they had paid taxes to local officials to use grazing land and found themselves attacked by ECOFAC for traversing parklands, ECOFAC closed its Gounda base, the furthest northeast of its four bases, last year. No hunter wanted to take on a concession in such an area. The previous year's concessionaire, too, skipped out without paying the ZCV the taxes he owed (if construed in the most stringent way, these taxes amounted to 50 million CFA, or about US\$100,000). As Neumann has argued (2001), even "participatory," "community-centered" conservation projects like the ZCV system attempt to coerce and discipline peasant ways of life. People complain about the ZCVs' strangulation of their prime cash-generating opportunities—meat and diamonds (now technically off-limits) are the two things for which one can be relatively certain of a market. In fact, many people living in ZCV villages protest violently when prevented from doing this work.⁴² And they argue that the ephemerally-present international NGOs that occasionally pop in build far better schools than ZCV revenues can afford.⁴³

When the ZCV system got underway at the tail end of the 90s, its organizers understood that the first step was to obtain legal recognition for it from the central government. Otherwise, they reasoned, the project could be disbanded at any time, decreasing people's incentive to participate. For more than a decade now, report-writers

42. For instance, Idongo had been put forth as a model ZCV. It was the subject of glowing television and print reporting about the innovative revenue-sharing system (the title of one newspaper: "In Idongo, the elderly have a right to a pension"). However, in 2003 the son of the president of the Indongo ZCV was caught hunting in the park by ECOFAC guards, who arrested him. The next morning, Idongo's 400 residents stormed the ECOFAC base, pillaging, looting and shooting (one person was wounded).

43. During its final year of operations, ECOFAC tried to start a micro-credit program for people in the project area, including Ndele, the main city. However, ECOFAC drew to a close before the program could get off the ground.

have noted that official recognition appears to be on a near horizon—soon, it will be forthcoming. And yet it has not happened. Rather than analyzing *why* it has not happened, they take a resolutely future-oriented perspective: it is *about* to happen. In this way, they can ignore/resolve the disconnect between how they expect the state to act (their idea of the state) and the ways the state, as a loose collection of actors and weakly-institutionalized entities, actually does or does not act.

The silence of the (ideal-type) state has another effect as well: it allows people great flexibility to pursue autonomous projects. The safari hunting concessionaires have become skilled at using this to their advantage. For example, in 1994 a group of hunters from Manovo SA, including the proprietor, a Central African guide, an employee and a tourist, were surprised by anti-poaching guards patrolling Sangha Ecosystem Protection Zone, one of the main areas they cover. Though not a national park, it theoretically has the same protection regulations, i.e., no exploitation of its resources is allowed. The hunters had already killed two baboons, and they were in the process of hanging leopard bait when they were caught. “This transgression is very serious, principally because it was done by a concessionaire and a hunting guide, in an area with the status of national park. We transmitted our report to the Minister, but no sanction has been applied. In contrast, the concessionaire has received his permit to be a hunting guide!” (PDRN 1995: 37; my translation). In this case, expectations about what state officials should do—punish law-breakers—conflicted with what they actually did—facilitate things for people who make it worth their while. Analyzing such disconnects through

the rubric of corruption misses the point, because a corruption framework, too, relies on (the perversion of) an ideal-type conception of the state, rather than on the ways in which ideal types and empirical realities play off each other to construct non-centralized, personalized, modes of rule wherein plural authorities hold sovereign capabilities.

Project documents written by staffers in Bangui and Brussels occasionally recognize this state of affairs. Their word of choice to describe it is “substitution,” which in their view is an undesirable outcome. The head of the EC delegation in Bangui visited all four project bases in 2002. He noted, “The program has largely intervened, and continues to intervene, in substitution and not in complementarity with the functions belonging to the state, notably in the area of protection of territorial integrity. The armed forces do not protect the borders, nor does the Ministry of Water and Forests protect wildlife or the environment” (Lloveras 2002; my translation). Since their mandate is to *strengthen* the state, *substituting* for it constitutes a major failure from the perspective of donors like the EC. Nevertheless, funding for the project continued (with two gaps) for the next decade, and helping the Central African forces to assume these responsibilities remains a key donor goal. All still await the state.

5.9 Violence

But while waiting for the silent state to respond, work gets done. And that work entails massive violence. “*C’est une guerre très, très terrible,*” one guard told me, shaking his head woefully. He then went on to narrate several battles he had recently

participated in, drawing diagrams to help me understand the dangers and strategy. For instance, in May 2009 he, about ten other guards, and the AT/mercenary leading them were on the road between Ouanda Djalle and Sam Ouandja, in CAR's far east. At Tata, a hunter/herder path crosses the main road. He and a few other guards were sent to this intersection to investigate. They saw some hunters and reported back to the AT, who ordered an ambush. The hunters numbered twelve,⁴⁴ and they were well-armed and wore military uniforms and military caps, leading the Central Africans to deem them "janjaweed," a loose term connoting a gun-for-hire from the Chad/Sudan borderlands. They come to hunt when they lack for more profitable work in the region's armed conflicts. The guards felled four of them on site. One guard was shot, but survived. The AT/mercenary went after the one who had done it and killed him, too. The remaining hunters having fled, the guards went on to massacre the pack animals—36 donkeys. The donkeys were laden with smoked meat, honey, *mazindi* (a tree product used for flavoring sauces), *gombo* (dried okra, also used for flavoring sauces), and some wild fruits that do not grow in Sudan. Once they had killed the donkeys and grabbed the downed hunters' guns (including a G-3 and nineteen rounds of ammunition) they quickly left the scene. They knew that hunters rarely travel in such a small group and so assumed that reinforcements would be arriving soon. When they arrived in Sam Ouandja, a base of the UFDR armed group, they told the rebels of the loot available to them at Tata. The rebels went and collected what they could. Another guard who participated in this battle

44. Another guard who participated in the battle said there were only half a dozen

acknowledged the brutality of these fights but argued that it was justified because of the illegality of the hunters' trades. What they're doing is "*strictement interdit*" (strictly prohibited) he said repeatedly. It seemed a weak, perhaps even perverse, rationale given how opportunistically the law is invoked or used to guide action—or not—in the region.

And yet these battles continue. They bear some resemblance to the old anthropological model for raiding: a series of battles and counter-battles in which both sides accuse the other of having launched the first attack, and there exists no institutionalized mechanism to bring the fighting to an end. The anti-poachers keep few statistics on the number of humans or animals killed, though they do try to keep track of the number of elephants and other protected species eliminated by their opponents.⁴⁵ Some of the project's reports contain euphemisms to refer to hunters killed. For instance, many note the number of "foreign poachers neutralized." Another has the heading "*animaux abattus*" (animals slaughtered), under which the report-writer has filled in "02 camels; 08 donkeys; 03 men" (PDRN 1990b). In the early years of the PDRN through the mid-90s, the anti-poaching staff took a hostile attitude toward any and all hunters and others who sought profit in the open spaces' resources. They divided people into two groups: those they could "sensitize" (i.e., lecture as to the importance of conservation) and those they could "sensitize definitively" (i.e., kill). Though the reports collected at the EC archives in Bangui are so vague and probably incomplete as to make it

45. The website of the Africa LAB association contains two misleadingly labeled photo slide shows. One is titled "With LAB" and contains National Geographic-style shots of charismatic animals; the other is titled "Without LAB" and shows those same animals, bloodied and dismembered. Anti-poaching guards are visible in both sets of images.

impossible to determine the total number of people killed, individual anti-poachers are on occasion more eager to boast about their death counts. One mercenary has been known to brag that he shot and killed 263 people in the buffer zone, a tally that, if true, would rank him #30 among WWII snipers. One safari operator (who operates in a remote, elephant-less zone that hunters rarely target and hence has little need for armed guards to protect the concession⁴⁶) described an encounter with the Russians and their militia in 2007. They were staying in the same far northeastern town and spent a quiet evening discussing Russian art. The militiamen departed before dawn. Some time later, the others saw vultures circling. Thinking it meant that big game was nearby, they got in their Land Cruiser and sped off to investigate. When they neared the vultures they saw not the lions they had hoped for but men killed—some chopped in pieces and with body parts strung up in the thorny trees.

A question emerges from these tales of brutality: why do they do it? Many guards told me they fought for vengeance. They had lost brothers and fathers in battles with hunters and herders and now the battles had become personal. (Again, the raiding model is useful here: one can ask who fired first, but both sides will simply accuse the other.) They also fight to protect their own privilege. They express this through the idea of “national patrimony” that must be guarded for the sake of their children, but the sentiment cannot be considered in isolation from the observation that they themselves

46. At least, that was the idea: the campers are now in the heart of territory where the Lord’s Resistance Army hides, and at the time this dissertation was submitted the owner was jailed for having reported finding 12 clubbed-to-death bodies in the bush (a massacre LRA experts said bore all the hallmarks of their technique).

use their position in the parks to hunt, fish, and mine—all the things that are “strictement interdit” and that they describe themselves as preventing. I struggled to make sense of this discord between their espousal of adherence to hardline conservation values and their own tactics for obtaining profit, which so often included breaking those conservation laws. Expatriates with whom I spoke brushed off my interest in this apparent contradiction: “They are lying.” In their view, the anti-poaching militiamen see conservation rhetoric as a useful tool to obtain donor funding but have no deeper connection to it. This view pathologizes a very human tendency: to believe one thing and do another. Thus a racist might count a person of another race among his friends, or an anti-poacher justify taking meat from the parks to feed his family.

The anti-poaching guards are drawn from all over the northeast, and they represent a range of ethnic groups. The largest contingent are Gula, but other main groups include Banda, Yulu, and some Runga until they left to join a rebellion. Though they tend to stick with people from their own villages and environs, and though they tend not to trust those from further afield, this does not stop some from taking up with others’ wives. It does mean that though the AT/mercenary is supposed to be a mere “technical assistant” advising them on what to do, he instead becomes the main—perhaps the only—vector of cohesion among the men. The guards recall the men who have cycled through the AT-LAB position, describing some as more “*efficace*” (effective, read: brutal) than others. They chuckle, with what seems a mixture of ruefulness and respect, at the memory of some particularly hard-fought battles. They share news from

the occasional cell phone conversations they have with far-off former leaders, many of whom promise they are working to return to fight alongside their “guys.” Some do, but most often these promises go unfulfilled. The guards all know that the AT/mercenaries’ tenure among them is likely to be short, and that any time one leaves for a “vacation” he might not return. The AT/mercenaries lament the guards’ lack of initiative in their absence. They are more likely to see it as laziness, rather than reflecting on how their presence makes possible the particular constellation of violence that is militarized anti-poaching.

Ivan, an anti-poaching *chef d’équipe*, explained that he became a guard to avenge both his father, who had been seriously maimed in a battle with hunters, and his brother, who had been killed. His brother had been working for a safari company as their radio operator when he heard the approach of some hunters. Though he ran, they caught him. They broke his arm and beat him, and he died from internal hemorrhaging. Ivan and I sat chatting in front of his house on the Manovo base. His yard was the most neatly-tended of any guard, and he had planted cosmos, marigolds, and sunflowers simply for the aesthetic pleasure they afforded alone. He said that on a visit to Bangui he had seen a house with these exotic flowers out front and liked how it looked; it reminded him of proper houses glimpsed in movies. So he knocked on the door and asked the owner for some seeds, which he took back and planted here. Two small children played nearby, occasionally coming to stand next to their father, pulling at his knee. Ivan named his son after the AT/mercenary who promoted him from guard to

team leader. The AT/mercenary considered him the most straight-dealing of the guards, the one on whom he could most count in battle situations.

Ivan said that when the guards arrest someone in the park, he said, “It is us, the anti-poachers, who benefit,” because they get to keep the meat and anything else they find on the interlopers. But Ivan also spoke of another benefit the anti-poachers draw: the respectability that comes from salaried work. He was proud to have been ranked as the top team leader candidate among the fourteen who tried out for the position. And he hoped that he could continue progressing through the ranks, but he recognized that the fickleness of project funding might frustrate his goal. “Seriously,” he implored, “the European Union *must* continue to finance this project. We guards are all really well-trained. Me, personally, I am capable of training twenty, or even eighty men. We could go and launch a coup d’état, or go into rebellion, or become bandits if we don’t have work. Think of it—there are sixty or seventy of us guards. We could really cause problems if we don’t have work.” He paused a moment. “We are here. And we are here to show to the outside world that we are *working*.” Ivan kept a light tone throughout this speech, but seriousness undergirded it. In any less-militarized and less-remote zone, one might quickly label Ivan a striver. His work entailed thuggish behavior, but he did not see himself as a thug. He saw himself first and foremost as a worker. And one of the surest ways to be recognized (whether by international donors, diplomats brokering peace processes, or the president—in short, by someone “*a l’extérieur*”) as a worker in this isolated spot is to demonstrate a capacity for violence. Violence is the surest strategy

of extraversion (Bayart 2000), with extraversion itself being a privileged avenue to money and status in such an isolated zone.

For his part, Ivan took pride in a job well done, and he strove to learn as many new skills (GPS and map reading, calisthenics, gun care) as he could. This was not, however, the surest way to keep a job. In Ndele, I spent many mornings at the Ministry of Water and Forests office, where I frequently overheard the outbursts of a short-tempered man named Ndabadja, a former project anti-poaching guard fired for excessive drinking.⁴⁷ For instance, one day while I was sitting in the Chef de cantonment's office some Sudanese truckers had been stopped at the Ministry office's roadblock. Ismail, an Ndele resident of Sudanese origin, was trying to facilitate their passage through the barrier and walked into the office. Ndabadja rose from his bench outside and grabbed Ismail by his shoulders, pulling him forcibly from the chef de cantonment's office. He kept yelling, in a mixture of French and Sango, about how Ismail had not "respected the protocol"—he should, in Ndabadja's view, have first passed by him. The yelling and shoving continued for some minutes. Occasionally the chef de cantonment tried, ineffectually, to calm his subordinate ("That's enough, that's enough..."), but it was clear he had little effective authority over him. He succeeded only in convincing Ndabadja to move the yelling and shoving to the porch.

47. Many guards are known for drinking large quantities of liquor. During a party in February 2010, one died and another was gravely wounded when an inebriated compatriot fell on his Kalashnikov and shot them.

A few weeks later, I arrived at the office to find the *chef de cantonnement* busily attending to some paperwork. He apologized for his distraction and explained that he was trying to figure out what to do about Ndabadja. He had sent him on patrol and, though upon return the guard offered only the a single word in explanation—“RAS” (“*rien à signaler*”/nothing to report)—the boss had learned that he had gotten into some fights and other “bad behavior” that he declined to specify further. The chef had decided to confiscate Ndabadja’s Kalashnikov. But when he tried to take it, Ndabadja punched him. It took the rest of the office to restrain the hopping-mad Ndabadja. The chef de cantonnement sighed relating these events. “When the project ends, these guys get sent back to us [the ministry] because if they let them go they are going to take up arms and turn against us [i.e., enter into rebellion]. For that reason they say, ‘OK, Sir, come, we are going to work with you.’ But, because the person is immoral, we cannot....” He sighed again. “It’s difficult. It’s very, very difficult.”⁴⁸ Ndabadja’s temper, combined with the military training he had received as an anti-poaching guard, make for a potent resume in a place like this one. His experience also demonstrates the unimportance of institutional hierarchies. Instead, all is up for negotiation and confrontation, which contributes to the persistence of non-centralized political configurations over centralized

48. As he explained further, he used the expression “On a préféré les responsabiliser” (“They preferred to give them a sense of responsibility”), which demonstrates how the local meaning of “responsabiliser” (to give a job to) has diverged from its French roots.

ones. All three of the chef de cantonnement's adjutants had been trained and then laid off by the anti-poaching projects.⁴⁹

As Hoffman (2011) has argued, besides being a form of destruction and in that sense spectacular, violence is "literal work": "To fight was not so much to take on the enemy as to take up a labor" (41). In other words, in places home to decades, if not centuries, of sedimented militarization, "armed violence is not only an ordinary way of expressing contestation but also a practical occupation" (Debos 2011: 412). Rather than being motivated by ideology or a particular grievance, taking up a gun might simply be a way to make a living. In situations like this, the distinctions between different armed occupations (soldier, rebel, mercenary, bandit) are unimportant, because the locus of morality has shifted from the justness of the reason/structure for fighting to the justness of being able to make a respectable living. A person might serve as a soldier one day and a bandit the next, without the shift entailing any particular cognitive dissonance (Debos 2008). In the case of militarized anti-poaching, a person might work as an anti-poacher one day and a hunter the next. For instance, one project report notes that two "local poachers" had been caught carrying automatic weapons, one of which was traceable to a former anti-poaching guard who had gone on to become part of his town's self-defense group (ECOFAC 2002: 23).

49. Webb, in his study of the Central African state, argues that this pattern of re-incorporating would-be threats is a prevalent pattern in the high levels of the Bangui government as well: "Those who mis-step seldom have significant support outside of the state and are, after a minor punishment, less of a threat if reincorporated into the fold. The preservation of personal power within the government and the bureaucracy, has, since independence through the second Dacko regime, been fused to the preservation of the state elite and has not rested on any critical societal support" (1990: 201).

But practical occupation though carrying arms might be, the call to recognize these prosaic aspects of armed violence, as opposed to paying attention only to its exceptional, spectacular aspects, must not entirely ignore the specificity of arms-carrying, which does, after all, entail the possibility—even the obligation—of taking others' lives. If arms-carriers are workers, they are workers possessing special capabilities, as Ivan made clear. Taking up arms is a means to prosecute projects larger than oneself, and larger than the usual frame of village and family relations. That is, the sovereign capability of organizing and inflicting violence is intimately tied up in the sovereign capability of diplomacy (obtaining autonomy through relationships). An example will clarify how this works: Caliph Yaya Ramadan, the most successful free-lance anti-poacher the buffer zone has yet seen, and also the one whose fall engendered spectacular realignments among those in the region bearing sovereign capabilities.

5.10 The projects anti-poaching enables

The projects' scheme of resource distribution brought new sources of wealth (such as safari hunting revenues and project rents) while also seeking to de-legitimize others (such as charging fees to herders to use the space or working with the hunters). One ethnic group, the Gula, were particularly receptive to the projects' resource distribution schemes (and stood to benefit from them); they comprised the majority of the project's militiamen. Caliph Yaya Ramadan lived in Tiringoulou, a town populated almost entirely by people of the Gula ethnic group. Tiringoulou is important as the birthplace of the Sheikh Dehia, a visionary of Tidjani Islam. From his young age people

observed that Yaya Ramdan possessed many of Dehia's powers. For instance, one day Ramadan and some followers went outside and he pointed to a tree and said that tomorrow they would make a canoe from that tree. The next morning they found that the tree had fallen. No other trees had suddenly died—only the one that he had pointed to. The men promptly began construction of the vessel.

Yaya became the region's Caliph. His formal title identified him as a religious leader, but in fact his role was much broader.⁵⁰ Everyone listened to Yaya. He could resolve disputes, propose policies, and encourage people to work toward a future that he laid out. Many Tiringoulou residents have guns (mostly Kalashnikovs, but some have locally-made rifles and even RPGs as well), and when militarized anti-poaching came to the area, Yaya and a group of about twenty men offered to join in the work. ECOFAC gave them ammunition and fuel for their vehicle as needed so they could police the area as well. They operated out of Yaya's home, the largest house in town, which to this day retains its decoration of stuffed animal heads—trophy from the years of safari hunting glories. (The building now houses a humanitarian NGO; it was where I stayed when in Tiringoulou.)

The project staff could not believe their good fortune in finally finding an ally, and in someone as powerful as the caliph. One report notes that the Gula militia ambushed a group of Sudanese hunters and obtained praise-worthy results: two

50. Among his many positions of authority, Yaya was the local representative for President Andre Kolingba's (1981-1993) political party. He was not outside of state politics because of his far-off location; rather, in this remote place these relationships helped him to claim new sovereign capabilities.

“poachers eliminated” (another euphemism for killed), five camels slaughtered, one horse slaughtered, one heavy weapon seized, and 750kg of smoked meat seized. “This shows that, for the first time since the beginning of the PDRN, the project is not alone in defending the resources of the northern region. Rather than keeping a distance between themselves and the project following this incident, they asked for support from the project to help them get a hold on their region again” (PDRN 1998: 28; my translation).

By taking on the mantle of anti-poaching work, Yaya’s extraversion drew in military aid that strengthened the position of the Gula vis-à-vis other groups in the area. On one level, then, Yaya provides another example of Bayart’s argument that rents generated by dependency enable diverse political projects in Africa (2000). But beyond that initial extraverted alliance, the conflict took on a complicated nest of valences beyond protecting parklands from would-be exploiters of their resources, particularly since they and the project enacted the increasingly-militarized regime without ever explaining the new system to herders, hunters and other interlopers who have long used the space.

On 8 May 2002, Yaya Ramadan was killed in an ambush while on patrol with some of his men and some ECOFAC guards. Less than two days before, Yaya and his men had killed two “poachers” and confiscated 1,500 kilograms of meat. Yaya’s supporters understood the attackers to be Hemat/Ta’isha herders. Gula men (joined initially by members of the region’s other main ethnic groups—Runga, Sara, Kara, Hausa—until suspicions of support for the enemy caused numerous rifts) living

throughout the region (many youth travel to diamond-mining towns to seek their fortune) re-grouped to fight together. Over the course of the next three years, retaliatory battles resulted in hundreds of deaths. Fighters in Chadian army uniforms (not necessarily a sign of membership in the state military) and men on horseback attacked and burned Central African villages. Gula and others rallied to their side, such as members of ECOFAC and on occasion the AT-LAB, massacred herders. Unidentified armed men and Chadian rebels led battles as well (Roulet 2005: 43-47). At two points—in June 2002 and March 2005—leaders from CAR, Chad and Sudan met to negotiate peace. The 2002 dialogue of far-off leaders had no impact on the ground; the 2005 effort ushered in an uneasy peace but grievances over abused terms have festered. According to people in Tiringoulou, Khartoum was to pay them a fine for their losses, but they knew nothing about where that money had ended up. Did Khartoum disburse it at all? Did it end up in the hands of leaders in Bangui with no connection to this zone? They remained clueless, in yet another example of the accountability disconnect between people in the buffer zone and those in the capitals. Indeed, tensions and suspicions between the various groups have only grown in subsequent years, though the death toll has slowed. The Gula militia eventually entered into rebellion, a process described further in chapter six.

5.11 Timeline of key events in the war following Caliph Yaya Ramadan's death

Note: Not all attacks or other violent encounters are included in this chronology. Rather than an exhaustive accounting, it is meant as an indication of the kinds of hostilities that erupted and

spread as a result of Yaya's militarization and death. The events demonstrate how quickly mistrust metastasizes in the buffer zone, especially when the information that one can obtain about any given attack is so partial given the remoteness and infrastructural limitations of the buffer zone.

8 May 2002: Yaya Ramadan killed, apparently by Hemat/Ta'isha Sudanese herders.

Gula, with some Runga and Sara, attack herder camps in the area.

10 May 2002: Armed men cross into CAR from Chad and attack and burn five villages, killing several and also taking hostages. The local population accuses members of the Chadian army of perpetrating these attacks.

18 May 2002: About a hundred Sudanese herders are killed.

27-28 May 2002: A task force is created in Bangui with the objective of investigating the incidents in the Northeast.

6 June 2002: Participants in a tripartite meeting (CAR/Sudan/Chad) decide to pursue a ceasefire.

17 June 2002: Sudanese herders kill one resident of Vodomassa, a village near Tiringoulou, and the fighting begins again. The herders burn five villages.

27 August 2002: The village of Haifa was attacked by Sudanese men on horseback. More than 150 of the attackers and about 25 of the locals were killed in the ensuing battle. Haifa residents benefited from their own local defense forces' valor as well as military assistance from an ECOFAC unit that came to join the battle.

Gula come to suspect that Kara and Hausa residents of Birao and environs provided medical help to injured herders, and this causes the division of allegiances in the prefecture along a north/south line. Gula and Runga also suspect the Yulu who live in along the road between Ouanda Djalle and Sam Ouandja

(in the far east) of supporting the Hausa and the herders, and hostility rises on that front as well.

19 September 2002: Chadian rebels claim responsibility for an attack on a border village. This causes the Chadian army to accuse people on the Central African side of the border of aiding the rebels.

January 2003: Sheikh Tidjani, the most important religious official for people living in the area, visits from his home in Sudan. The one CAR minister from the Northeast tries to drum up support in the government for helping bring an end to the area's violence but does not succeed in eliciting a reaction. (The embattled government of President Ange-Félix Patassé faced its own insurgency at the time, and fell in a coup on 15 March 2003.

2003-2004: The conflicts calm. Herders and hunters seem to be coming into the buffer zone in smaller numbers than previously.

November 2004: About forty unidentified armed men raid the local arms depot, attack Birao, assassinate a Kara leader and his family, and target Hausa businesses for destruction. Some of the attackers are repelled, but others escape on a UN mission plane. The FAO consultants on board were taken hostage. The kidnappers demand to be dropped off at Tiringoulou and from there disappear into the bush.

5 March 2005: Reconciliation meeting in Am Dafok (the town on the border between CAR and Sudan). Sudanese hunters and herders are seen returning to the zone in greater numbers.

May 2005: Three Gula men gathering honey killed by camel-riding Sudanese. Tensions rise and rumors proliferate about coming attacks.

(Adapted from Roulet 2005: 46-47)

In a stunning display of how blind the project staff were to the contentious politics of resource distribution that their efforts instantiated (or, perhaps, in a stunning display of how eager they were to blind project overseers "*a l'extérieur*" to the realities of

their work), one ECOFAC document mourned the Sheikh's death with the following tribute: "Among managers of biodiversity, he remains a symbol of natural resource conservation and a pacifist," (ECOFAC 2001: 21; my translation). To whatever extent the Caliph supported conservation, pacifist he was not. Less than two days before his death, he led an operation in Boromata, an area known as friendly to nomadic herders, who would generally pay a kind of tax to use the land. "This operation ended with nine donkeys and two foreign poachers killed as well as the seizure of thirty 50kg sacks of smoked meat. In searching the bodies, it was discovered on two poachers a document (a kind of receipt) delivered to a herder from Mossabio [this document would have been a 'right to graze' permit]" (Mbitikon 2002).

What are we to make of Yaya Ramadan, visionary and warrior? Like Sultan Sanusi before him, Ramadan inculcated relationships with patrons who could provide him with key resources, notably military resources, that then enabled him and his followers to pursue a range of projects that served their own interests first and foremost. That is, his skill in building relationships—which turned on his ability to present and hide information such that the vision presented would further the collaboration, facilitated his assumption of more, and more powerful, sovereign capabilities, such as waging war. As reference points, ideas associated with state-based rationales (protecting national patrimony, particularly biodiversity) facilitate these loose collaborations, but "the state" as a set of people and institutions does not subsume or control what happens

in the zone, which depends mostly on non-centralized (sometimes shared, sometimes contested) quests for profit and authority, as well as on the use of force.

Instead of a determinative Leviathan, or even a determinative set of state-oriented practices, in the buffer zone a range of competing interests play off each other. One domain that has become particularly contentious concerns the presence of nomadic herders. Some people living in the area's villages see the herders as a resource: they can charge unofficial taxes of the interlopers, which the herders generally acquiesce in not because they are forced to but because it shows them as not belligerent and hence gives them more freedom to pursue their own agendas. But others see the herders as a menace, whether to the locals themselves since where herders go, road robbers tend to follow and since the presence of herders makes safari hunting revenues difficult to obtain. Militarized anti-poaching ramps up these dynamics.

The most notorious recent case of this happened in 2009. (I spoke with several eye witnesses to compile the following version of events, which I think is faithful to how events played out, but some details may be slightly off.) One the anti-poaching guards was wounded in battle. The AT/mercenary leading him brought him to the Doctors Without Borders hospital in Gordil, near the project base there. It was decided that the wounded man should be evacuated to Bangui, so the AT/mercenary, the wounded man and three other guards got into the Land Cruiser and began driving to Tiringoulou, which has the best airstrip. As they were driving through the park, they came across a large herd of cattle. They had to slow down to weave through the beasts. The guards

began egging on the AT—why aren't we shooting them? They are *en plein parc*! The AT agreed, but argued that they could not go after the herders because with only four of them in condition to fight, and needing to get to the airstrip, they would be unable to protect people in the villages nearby in the event the herders decided to take out their anger over the attack on them. They soon arrived at Mele, where the village chief flagged down their vehicle. He implored them to go and shoot at the cattle. Again, the AT said no, explaining why. About twenty armed men then emerged from among the village's houses and declared themselves ready to join the fight. The AT felt cornered: on the one hand, he knew the operation was risky. On the other hand, if he failed to stand with the village now they would lose confidence in the project's will to rid the area of the herders and hunters. In the end, he decided they should put on a show. So the men piled into the back of the truck, taking ammunition from the project stores. When they arrived at cattle a lone young man stood guard over the animals. Though the guards and their new recruits shot in the air, this boy shot at them. One of the villagers shot back and killed the young man. The AT and his men returned to Mele, recuperated the wounded guard they had left there, and continued on to Tiringoulou. The next day, they received word that Mele had been surrounded by "janjaweed"—forty or even eighty of them—who demanded fourteen million CFA (about US\$28,000) in compensation for the unjust killing. The village was held hostage until, by raising money far and wide (even the anti-poaching guards and their leaders got hit up for contributions), they assembled ten million CFA and thus assuaged their captors. The anti-poachers were angry about this

outcome. The herders, after all, had broken the law—they were in the wrong, not the villagers seeking only to defend their patrimony! But this view misses the range of ways that people in the area seek to make profit out of open space resources, which include “selling land” to herders while also collecting taxes from safari hunting concessionaires. Much of the time, the vastness of the space makes it possible to pursue such contradictory projects simultaneously, for one village to benefit from ZCV status while the one next to it, left out of the project, profits from relationships with herders. But these maneuvers can also erupt in violent conflict, as at Mele, when even this vast space becomes too tight when oppositional models for the use of the space become so highly militarized.

Months later, a skeleton crew staffed the anti-poaching base at Gordil. One morning they found the base surrounded by hundreds of armed men and their cows. They did not attack; they simply sought to make themselves visible as the fighting force that they were. The project leadership took the decision to close the base shortly thereafter. Sometimes, making one’s force visible is all that is necessary to demonstrate that—in this instance, at least—their sovereign capabilities trump those of their opponent.

5.12 Conclusion

Some might like to portray the case of militarized anti-poaching in CAR as anomalous,⁵¹ and in certain respects they are correct: the buffer zone does afford actors here greater leeway in playing with visibility and invisibility, and in contravening the terms of agreements entered into with a range of actors. But in fact militarized efforts underlie many conservation projects, especially in Africa, and their coercive orientation has not substantially changed despite the new focus on “community participation.” It is thus important to examine exactly what kind of politics militarized anti-poaching gives rise to. In the Central African buffer zone, it becomes a magnet sometimes attracting and sometimes repelling, sometimes facilitating and sometimes obstructing, a range of projects of profit and rule. Through the anti-poaching projects we have seen that people are loath to give up their hard-won authorities and instead find ways to retain their sovereign capabilities, whether by engaging in violent combat or by making use of the heightened capability of invisibility that the buffer zone offers. Throughout, “the state” stands as an absent, silent abstraction that diverse actors call on in justifying their own assumption of authorities. From this mode of waiting for the state, a non-centralized politics is born.

Throughout my research on militarized anti-poaching, I struggled to separate bravado from truth, to obtain facts and figures as to numbers killed and the magnitude

51. I spoke with a World Wide Fund for Nature representative, for instance, who acknowledged that militarized anti-poaching is a necessary evil that he appreciates while purposely not discussing with funders.

of these conflicts. The AT/mercenary whose monologue opens this chapter understood my difficulties. As he took the final sip of his second large beer, he said, “And if you try to tell anyone this, you’ll have to tell them I was drinking alcohol throughout, and they won’t be able to take it seriously.” That, too, was a strategy for maintaining the autonomy that accrues through invisibility. Unfortunately for him, his story is just one of the many, many I collected attesting to the violence of the conservation complex, and to the difficulties of navigating the buffer zone’s non-centralized politics. Particularly striking is how anti-poaching has given rise to new entitlements, as well as new pretexts for seizure and violence, which have combined to increase the importance of the confrontation as a tactic of rule while also making negotiation more difficult. From the trans-Saharan slave trade onward, violence has marked claims to resource extraction in the buffer zone. With such a history, it was easy for anti-poaching to take root while also branching to include a range of projects its funders and founders had not foreseen.

6. The visibility of rebellion

6.1 Introduction

“It is because of the rebellion that the NGOs came here.” Damane Zakaria, the leader of the *Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement* (UFDR, Union of Democratic Forces for Unity) rebel group, was claiming to have summoned the international groups that had put Tiringoulou on the map. He made his statement so matter-of-factly that it almost did not sound like he was bragging. “Do you know how long MSF and UNICEF have been working in CAR? For a very long time—30 years, or maybe more. But none of them set a foot here.” He repeated,

It’s because of the rebellion that the NGOs came here. But has the population benefited? No—it’s Birao and Ouadda Djalle [towns in the extreme northeastern corner of the country] that have benefited much more than we have here in Ouandja commune. There are robbers, and the population is abandoned. Me, too, I am discouraged, like the population. The Red Cross comes and does distributions [of food and ‘NFIs’—non-food items like tarps and buckets], but they are just small distributions - *ils se moquent de nous* [they are making fun of us].

He spat in derision at these miserly efforts. But he could not resist ending his complaint with one more reminder that he had brought about their arrival: “And yet they never came here until the rebellion.”

The General and I were sitting in the shade of a *paillotte* (a roof with no walls, just posts) late in the afternoon on a peanut-harvesting day in October 2009 in Tiringoulou. Damane’s translator, the head of the local *collège*, sat beside him. In public, Damane speaks only Gula, of which I could only make out some words, such as those coming from Arabic, like “*gurush*” for money. He seemed to understand my French, but he

would never speak it, so instead he always interacted with “foreigners” (people from outside the area) through a translator. Over six feet tall, with a sturdy, stocky build, Damane appears even taller and bigger in the loose, long robes he favors. He is diminished only by his heart disease. The translator, in a suit and tie and carrying a briefcase of documents, looked about half his size. Over the course of this final hour before sunset, Damane recounted the history of the rebellion he led: its genesis, its accomplishments (inciting the NGOs and their largess to alight here in the buffer zone’s remote reaches), and its grievances (the pittance this largess has turned out to be, the failure of the state to protect them).

In taking on the form, postures, and tactics of a rebel group, the armed men led by Damane drew the attention of people beyond this isolated terrain. The group assumed a form that was legible to those who enact a “humanitarian mode of power” (de Waal 1997). In claiming responsibility for the NGOs, Damane showed he understood these mechanisms. By his own admission, when he took up arms he had had no idea what rebellion was. However, many of the men now in the UFDR, including Damane, have a long history of militarized entrepreneurship, primarily as local defense forces but also as avengers, notably of the death of Caliph Yaya Ramadan, a war described in chapter six. This chapter tells how Damane and the men he came to lead learned about and took on the form of “rebels,” and the politics that has resulted from the cycle of rebellion that has taken root. (About five armed rebel groups now operate in and around the buffer zone.) The chapter focuses on the UFDR, based in northeastern-most Vakaga

prefecture, and the *Armée populaire pour la restauration de la république et la démocratie* (APRD, People's Army for the Restoration of the Republic and Democracy), a non-centralized group¹ spread from the northwestern part of the country through to Kaga Bandoro and environs, in the center-north.

Educated, French-speaking people in areas of rebellion refer to the subject of this chapter as “*la mentalité de la rébellion*” —the ways that rebellion has become ingrained as a way of seeking the dignity that comes from a social status as a money-earner, and the lack of concern for the effects of the violence on the other inhabitants of the region. I discuss this mentality, and the relationship between it and the practice of rebellion. The rebellion mentality creeps into the thinking of fighters, diplomats, aid workers, and researchers like me. It became hard to see a way out of it. Antoine, a Central African working for an international NGO in the APRD town of Kaga Bandoro, asked me, “Given all your studies, do you think it is possible to have a revolution in people’s attitudes and behavior? A real revolution?” In contrast to nearly everyone else I met with a similar social status as an earner of a good salary, Antoine had no interest in clothes or fancy mobile phones or other markers of wealth. He was interested in the answer to this question, though, and I feel bad not to have been able offer a positive response.

1. Though they share the name APRD, there has never been much coordination or communication among the various enclaves of this group. Their putative leader, Jean-Jacques Demafouth, a former Minister of Defense, has never spent any time with the fighters (many of whom have only a murky idea of who he is) and exercises little to no command-and-control over them. Instead, each enclave maintains its own capabilities, which it enacts through roadblocks or control over witchcraft proceedings.

All the region's armed groups (at least those that actually exist as groups of men in the hinterland²) say they took up arms to "shock" the government into caring for them.³ The government is unmoved. Instead, humanitarian organizations have stepped in to carry out a range of "emergency relief" and "early recovery" programs, like food distribution and medical care. Diplomats, government officials, and rebel leaders channeled their response to rebellion through the form of negotiations over the modalities of a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program, which, for reasons discussed in the following chapter, never really ended up happening. In short, the transformation the rebels sought never came about. Despite all their lamentations about the deficiencies of "the state," their rebellion has resulted not in a new level of care by an all-powerful, unitary form of rule, but in new responsibilities, and capabilities for themselves. For instance, the rebel groups have taken over witchcraft adjudication processes. These shifts have provided new opportunities for profit. Rebellion has become a form of work, with work defined, as before, as labor that brings remuneration. Whereas others have emphasized armed men's violence as a form of labor, rather than as a collection of aberrant, spectacular events (Hoffman 2011), the experiences of armed men in the buffer zone have very little to do with violence, and

2. Since the cycle of rebellion began, in 2003, with Bozizé's coup, some of the "rebel groups" have existed only in Internet press releases, or else as a dispossessed politician in exile who purports falsely to lead a fearsome contingent of aggrieved youth. The remoteness of the country's terrain, and the extremely limited flow of information in and out of it, means that even an obvious ruse can be successful.

3. They fit awkwardly into Clapham's typology of African insurgencies, which divides rebellions into liberation insurgencies, separatist insurgencies, reform insurgencies, and warlord insurgencies (1998). Buffer-zone rebellions are a hybrid of reformist and warlord tendencies, but these categories suggest greater centralization and coherence than is present.

much to do with waiting and boredom. Fighters are ambivalent. On the one hand, they have new authorities, and a new claim to a status as a worker. But on the other, that claim has not led to outcomes (occasional humanitarian aid is very different from a life-long salary and pension), and they still feel ignored and abandoned. Though rebellion transforms social relations and responsibilities, its liberation potential emerges as fleeting and ephemeral. Gluckman's (in)famous observation that Africans are rebels, but never revolutionaries (1955), can seem frustratingly accurate.

The chapter begins by presenting the recent history of militarization in the buffer zone, and how people like Damane came to learn what rebellion is. It then discusses the reasons armed group members (UFDR and APRD) say they took up arms and begins to explore their frustrations that taking up arms has not led to the protection they desired. A third section looks at what rebels actually do. As explained in chapter four, roadblocks are a big part of rebel work. In this chapter, I will focus on their role in justice and dispute resolution. Mostly, however, what rebels do is wait. In the following chapter, DDR will be discussed as an archetypal mode of waiting. In its theoretical underpinnings, DDR—part of the post-conflict toolkit in many war-torn regions—is spectacularly ill-suited to these buffer zones. Humanitarian diplomats and government officials address the grievances of armed group rank-and-file fighters through DDR channels. (I am tempted to cast aside my anthropological perspective for one sentence and call these programs simply a failure.⁴)

4. This temptation is mitigated by the recognition, in line with recent scholarly interest in the anthropology of failure, that an understanding of an undertaking as failed—that is, knowledge about the

I conducted interviews (with individuals and groups small and large) among armed groups in Tiringoulou, one of the UFDR's two main bases of operations, and Kaga Bandoro, one of the APRD's three main zones. I chose these locales primarily for reasons of access. The UFDR's other main base, Sam Ouandja, was effectively inaccessible due to security. The humanitarian NGO that would have hosted me asked me not to go, because the town was policed by the UFDR, militarized Darfuri refugees,⁵ Ugandan soldiers, Central African soldiers, and intermittently by United Nations (UN) peacekeepers as well. Heavily armed poachers worked in the area, rumors located the Lord's Resistance Army nearby, and the town itself attracted diamond prospectors. This diversity fascinated me, but the climate of mistrust would have frustrated my ethnographic methods. I also sought access to the *Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix* (CPJP, Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace), the rebel group closest to Ndele. CPJP members controlled most of the road leading north from Ndele to Chad, particularly its northern reaches, as well as the market town of Sikkikede, a couple of hundred kilometers to the north and east. However, in the wake of the CPJP's November 2009 attack on Ndele, access became extremely difficult. A roadblock at the outskirts of Ndele stopped anyone who wished to pass north to Akoursoulbak, site of the CPJP's main base. People who attempted to travel north anyway found themselves targeted by soldiers and gendarmes in Ndele, who accused them of traitorous sympathies. (This lack

modalities of failure—is not sufficient to bring about change (Miyazaki and Riles 2005; in a different, but related frame, Masco 2010).

5. In a massive airlift, the approximately 2,000 refugees in this camp were later moved to a town near Bambari, in central CAR, where humanitarian access was easier and cheaper.

of movement had the effect of strangling one of the town's main commercial networks. Previously many had made their living by transporting goods and fish in from Chad.) Soldiers in Ndele were convinced that humanitarian NGOs were aiding rebels,⁶ so even these specially-mobile international actors found themselves stuck. As my fieldwork progressed, Tiringoulou, too, became risky. In September 2010, the LRA attacked the town, and though the UFDR were said to have scared them off, the humanitarians there drew down their presence and reported rumors of planned abductions of white people. Instead, I spent time in Kaga Bandoro, a main operational base for the APRD, and also near another armed group, the FPR (discussed further in chapter four). I worked with a research assistant who, though inexperienced, proved a quick study and diligent. He worked as a pastor and held wide respect in the area. All in all, as seems frequently to be the case with ethnographic fieldwork, my inquiries into the constitution of armed groups were marked by frequent frustrations and set-backs that ultimately turned into useful, surprising ways of gathering information.

6. Solidarités, a French NGO building latrines and wells, had sent two trucks onto the rebel-controlled road the day before the attack. The head of their office in Ndele lost contact around mid-day, despite their having a satellite phone and a radio. That evening, she called the UN coordinator and the head of the army to report the missing vehicles and employees. The employees later explained that the rebels had commandeered the vehicles to move fighters and equipment for the attack. A few days later, NGO staffers retrieved the trucks, and the staff evacuated to Bangui. Then rumors began to swirl. Some said the vehicles had never actually been recovered; the people who went to retrieve them never passed by the soldiers' roadblock to inform them of the situation in the rebel areas, an oversight one described as "*pas du tout logique*." (From the humanitarians' perspective, not informing on the rebels would have been a way to maintain neutrality. From the soldiers', it smacked of complicity.) But the main reason for suspicion was that a driver had been fired by the NGO in the aftermath of these events, and he began telling people that he had been fired because he had wanted to tell the truth about his bosses' helping the rebels. Neutrality is hard.

6.2 Networks?

Before delving more deeply into the situation of armed groups in the buffer zone, allow me a digression to address one way of studying phenomena like contemporary militarization that has become prominent in the past two decades, namely, the network. By now a reader might wonder why I have not used this concept more in the preceding analysis, and why I have favored tracking capabilities—which are claimed and exercised by both groups and individuals—as opposed to speaking of networks of power. My reasons have to do with a set of related biases that tend to characterize the literature on networks, which I will explain here.

Anthropologists were arguably the first social scientists to pick up on the fact that much of the world's population lived in agglomerations that were not centralized in the way that a state is, with a capital and hierarchy that spreads from it. We referred to these groupings as “acephalous” or “stateless” and saw them as organized around family lines, that is, an “ideology” of kinship (Middleton and Tait 1958) or the balancing of interests of different segments of lineages (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940). However, there was another strand in these studies of social organization outside of states and markets, namely the network. Already in the 1950s anthropologists were interested in the workings of networks (Utas 2012). How does social solidarity work in a network? How are disputes resolved?

Moore proposed a methodology for studying legal networks: a unit she called the “semi-autonomous social field”: a grouping that can generate rules, customs, and

symbols internally, but which is also “vulnerable to rules and decisions and other forces emanating from the larger world by which it is surrounded” (1973: 720). To illustrate what she meant by a semi-autonomous social field, she gave the examples of the dress industry in New York City. They work together based on an “ideology of voluntarism” but the norms are nevertheless binding.

Much of the network literature grows out of sociology, whose scholars have used the term to understand the workings of social collaboration that is neither hierarchical nor market-based (Podolny and Page 1998). In a sign of the similarity between anthropological undertakings such as Moore’s idea of the semi-autonomous social field and sociological studies of networks, a notable sociological study of networks concerned garment industry sub-contracting in New York (Uzzi 1997), much like Moore’s dress makers. In their review of the sociology of networks, Podolny and Page offer the following definition: “We define a network form of organization as any collection of actors (N is greater than or equal to two) that pursue repeated, enduring exchange relations with one another and, at the same time, lack a legitimate organizational authority to arbitrate and resolve disputes that may arise during the exchange” (1998: 59). This definition seems open enough to encompass even the flexible, mobile, confrontational and negotiated collaborations between people working in the Central African buffer zone. However, the literature on networks has a tendency to make certain assumptions that I wish to question in this dissertation, and for that reason I prefer to speak of centralizing and non-centralizing capabilities and tendencies rather than use

the language of networks as such. To be sure, there have been fruitful anthropological exegeses on networks; for instance, Riles's discussion of the workings of activist networks (2000) and Utas's discussion of networks in African conflicts (2012). But what has been missing is an effort to draw the history of anthropological efforts to understanding non-centralized politics back into discussion of the constitution of the world today, which, as so many pundits have noted, seems increasingly to be governed by entities other than sedentary, hierarchical structures.

Castells is arguably the foremost proponent of network analysis, and his work reveals some of the key biases inherent in network theories. Whereas Podoly and Page define the network in terms of the people who comprise it, Castells defines networks through their geography:

A network is a set of interconnected nodes. A node is the point at which a curve intersects itself. What a node is, concretely speaking, depends on the kind of concrete networks of which we speak. They are stock exchange markets, and their ancillary advanced service centers, in the network of global financial flows.... They are coca fields and poppy fields, clandestine laboratories, secret landing strips, street gangs, and money-laundering financial institutions in the network of drug traffic that penetrates economies, societies, and states throughout the world.... Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same community codes (for example, values or performance goals). A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance (2011: 501-502).

Castells's definition gives the impression that networks consist of coherent geographical architectures. Even as he writes of de-territorialization and network mobility, he sees networks as growing out of more-or-less fixed "nodes." One of the characteristics of buffer zone organization, in contrast, is that it is not based on ownership of territory as

such, but in the negotiation of access to the resources that happen to be located in territories. The focus is on people rather than on place or the tools available in places. (Castells emphasizes that technology is the starting point for his analysis, and argues that it should be the starting point for all social analysis (2011: 4.)

In addition to frequently carrying over the territorial aspects of centralization/state-building, network theories—at least of the grand, Castellsian variety, if not always of the more-situated sociological and anthropological studies—tend to carry over the assumption that networks, like centralization, will endlessly expand. The notion of progress has always long contained both positive and negative connotations (freeing technological or social advances such as the spread of human rights; but also the dangers of environmental degradation and population overload), and it seems always to bring with it the assumption that social systems are becoming increasingly complex. Castells writes that “While the networking form of social organization has existed in other times and spaces, the new information technological paradigm provides the material basis for its pervasive expansion throughout the entire social structure” (2011: 500). Thus does the Durkheimian theory of expanding organic solidarity live on in even postmodern conceptions of social orders. In the buffer zone, as in the African cities studied by Simone (2004a, 2004b), this increasing integration cannot be taken for granted and might in fact misleadingly characterize what are more open kinds of connections. Consider the case of Norwegian far-right mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik, who described himself as a key player in a vast “crusader network” spread through Europe

and beyond, complete with rituals, ceremonies, and financing. Upon cross examination, however, he was forced to admit that this network was “not an organization in the conventional sense” (AP 2012). It existed, mostly, in a delusional man’s imagination. And yet Breivik did communicate with other people, and did exchange with other people, who to varying degrees shared his politics. By the definitions of network analysis, his is not a network, and yet it manifests the fears and trends that network analysts describe.

Connected to the idea that networks are built to expand is the idea that networks are a more durable, more evolved form of social organization. This characterization has characterized much of the literature on network warfare. The vilification of terrorist networks like Al-Qaeda has to a degree proceeded through the inculcation of fear about the capabilities networks possess that states do not. One of these is the strength that comes from the impossibility of being “beheaded.” Duffield, whose analysis of network war draws heavily on Castells, sum this up approvingly with an idea called “Metcalf’s Law.” Metcalfe, an inventor of the Ethernet, argued that network power is exponentially effective:

The power of networks is equal to the square of the number of nodes it contains: an enterprise with ten nodes or intersections is not ten times stronger but *100 times more effective* than an enterprise with just one. Consistency concerns the extent to which there is a sharing of goals across the network and its components. It relates to the unifying vision that enables the autonomous and even competing components of the same project to pull in one direction (2002: 4; emphasis in original).

The technological metaphor seems here to run the risk of skewing the empirical analysis. No doubt in some cases networks are remarkably resilient and effective. But one must not be overly credulous about the existence of a unifying vision. As Simone (2001; 2004b)

has argued, collaborations can proceed through reference points—ideas—that different actors impute different meanings to. In other words, the competing components of the same project might not be pulling in the same direction. Sometimes, people participate in network forms of organization to pursue personalized or otherwise self-interested goals. There is little reason to assume that the network a more durable form of organization than others. Consider how resilient state capitals and state borders are in retaining their status as such—Somalia comes to mind—despite all evidence pointing against their importance in that ideal-typical sense (Englebert 2009). Or Egypt post-Mubarak: the prototypical “beheading” of a ruler has shown the structure of power he presided over to be remarkably resilient (Steavenson 2012).

In keeping with their bias in favor of the necessity of expansion, grand network theories tend to assume that all the world is becoming networked. This ignores the ways in which centralizing capabilities and desires continue to animate social life, perhaps especially in those places where the state form has failed. One frequently finds people in post-dictatorship locales who long for the control, security, and largess of the authoritarian years. At the same time, these people must themselves engage in personalized struggles to make a living and control their social worlds, which tend to produce non-centralized politics. Rather than being opposed (as, for instance, scholars emphasizing “resistance” to the state have suggested), state modes and their opposites more often exist together in hybrid forms. There is a “double movement” toward

centralization and away from it (Watts 2004b: 280). The relentless championing of the network misses the flexible ways these desires play out.

This brings up another downside to network analysis: its tendency to see network relations as more fixed or static than they may in fact be. Much sociological literature on networks has attempted to define the factors determining the solidarity of networks and have argued that they include the existence of a “trusting ethic,” “moral community,” “spirit of goodwill,” or a “norm of reciprocity” (Podolny and Page 1998). As Podolny and Page point out, these accounts run the risk of naïve functionalism. They also give the impression that the ties that connect in networks are ties that bind, that is, that they are static. In fact, people activate—or not—social ties depending on the opportunities and constraints that a given situation presents. For instance, many accounts of conflict have explained fighting as a function of ethnic ties, but arguments of this type do not account for why and how ethnicity is important in some circumstances and not in others (Schlee 2004). Markers of identity are not so much static and essential as they are qualifications that can be invoked or ignored as needed. One reason I find a capability-centered approach useful is that it shifts the emphasis off of essential traits joining people in solidarity (whether that solidarity is organized in a centralized or a networked way) and onto the processes through which governance plays out, which rely instead on the situational deployment of qualifications and skills (modes of power).

Network theories have one more downside. Their focus on new geographies still emphasizes centers over peripheries. Castells is explicit about why new centers—nodes—rise to prominence while whole terrains and populations slip from sight:

Dominant functions are organized in networks pertaining to a space of flows that links them up around the world, while fragmenting subordinate functions, and people, in the multiple space of places, made of locales increasingly segregated and disconnected from each other.... The social construction of new dominant forms of space and time develops a meta-network that switches off non-essential functions, subordinate social groups, and devalued territories. By so doing, infinite social distance is created between this meta-network and most individuals, activities, and locales around the world. Not that people, locales, or activities disappear. But their structural meaning does, subsumed in the unseen logic of the meta-network where value is produced, cultural codes are created, and power is decided (2011: 507-508).

Though I, too, would draw attention to the marginalization and isolation of people in the buffer zone, my goal is to describe what buffer zone politics *are*, not what they fall outside of. A focus on networks—“spaces of flows” and “timeless time” where finance is supreme and nature has been entirely displaced in favor of culture, in Castells’s account—does not help me do this. I bring these forgotten places back into discussion of the constitution of contemporary politics worldwide, and I speak back to the center-focused (and node-focused) accounts and show what they have missed. Toward this end, a focus on centralizing and non-centralizing capabilities better captures the dynamics at work than a focus on networks.

6.3 Learning about rebellion

Damane began his career as a diamond miner in the area near Bria. He rose to become a financier of diggers, who did the hard work of prospecting for him. When Yaya Ramadan was killed in 2002 (see chapter five for more on this event and the war

that followed it), he returned to Tiringoulou to help avenge the death. Many people said that Damane, like Yaya, had worked as an anti-poaching guard, but it not part of the story he tells about himself. During these years he also worked as a “*conseiller municipal*” (adviser to the mayor) in Boromata, his home village, which lies to the north, very close to Chad. These advisers’ main task is to collect *taxes de pacage* (grazing taxes) from the herders who migrate in and out of the zone in search of good grass and water for their cows. Damane complained that the herders had become too stubborn. He only managed to collect 1.5–1.8 million CFA (US\$3–4,000) per year during his tenure, and the people attempting this job today gather only a third or a quarter of that amount. The “mayor” Yaya (as I noted previously, he was a man who filled many roles), in contrast, had gathered 8 million every year. If true, this boast suggests that Yaya was as adept at building relationships with a variety of would-be profiteers in the space and then flexibly playing with the terms of their agreements as Sanusi was in his time. In theory, anti-poaching and charging rents to herders should be oppositional lines of work, not complementary ones. In practice, Yaya, like many others, seems to have maintained a synergy between the two—at least for a while.

At the same time as the war that followed Yaya’s death was dying down, a new conflict began to fester. In late April 2006, a plane mysteriously landed at the airstrip near Tiringoulou and offloaded military equipment and armed men, Chadian rebels who disappeared into the bush to the north. When locals alerted the authorities in Bangui to the event, soldiers sent to the area, reasoning that the locals must be complicit

and planning their own rebellion, attacked inhabitants. Soldiers burned houses, killed people, looted, and harassed (ICG 2007).⁷ Emphasizing the absurdity of the soldiers' having jumped to conclusions, Damane said, "Me, at this point, I did not even know what rebellion was." He repeated a variation on this sentiment several times during our conversation. It was a way of showing that he harbored no self-interested aspirations but was rather responding to and learning from events as they unfolded. (His influences were doubtless manifold; on another occasion, he cited John Garang's insurgency in southern Sudan.) Damane blamed the people living in Birao and Ouadda Djalle,⁸ towns lying far to the east, close to the border with Sudan (and now South Sudan as well) for the escalation of hostilities. He argued that they had first incited the "Arabs" (herders) to invade the parklands that were making the Gula rich from safari hunting revenues. Now that the Gula had repelled the herders, their eastern neighbors were telling the government they were rebels—all this, in Damane's understanding, stemmed from their jealousy.

Angry, the Goula militia regrouped, this time drawing others from the region into their ranks. Damane said that he had no thought of rebellion—only of protecting his fellows in the buffer zone. He repeated, "Now, I didn't even know what a rebellion was at this point. But I started to wonder, why has the state abandoned the population?"

7. As documented by Human Rights Watch (2007), abuses against civilians, burning of houses, and other depredations only grew in scope and scale as these conflicts progressed over the course of 2007. Bozizé's heavy-handed tactics may in part have owed to the importance of maintaining a good relationship with his patron in Ndjamená, without whose support he would lose power.

8. Ouaddé Djalle was the "perfectly defensible" base held by Djellab, discussed in chapter two.

Government officials are afraid to come here and take up their posts. But we are Central Africans too!" At the same time as Damane was having these epiphanies about his government's abandonment of his zone, soldiers dispatched to the area were targeting him for persecution. At one point, twenty-five soldiers surrounded his house aiming to arrest him. Luckily, he had been tipped off to their arrival and managed to escape. He hid out in the bush. "Then the youth started saying: it is Damane who kept us from being made into the Arabs' slaves. We should follow him." From Damane's perspective, "I was just doing the job that the state should have been doing. I had no thoughts of power." When he looked around he saw that the population was "discouraged." "We don't even have a road—just a cattle track. People are not cultivating much, because they know they have no one to sell it to. No one here has ever even seen a tractor." In Damane's narrative, learning the logic of rebellion was a process of waking up to and protesting the abandonment of his home by a central government that pursued only a fitful necropolitical relationship with the hinterland (that is, the occasional dispatch of soldiers to torment and target the population).

There was, however, another aspect to his rebellion education, which he did not mention: tutelage and alliance with others from the region with more experience with politics and taking up arms than himself, who had themselves learned from the example of the current president, Jean-François Bozizé, as well as the history of insurgency in Chad. Chief among these teachers was Abakar Sabone, who became familiar with the form and techniques of rebellion while working with Bozizé, whose assemblage of

mostly-Chadian armed men launched first an unsuccessful and then a successful coup. Former “liberator”⁹ Sabone, like Damane from northeastern-most Vakaga prefecture, split with Bozizé when not rewarded as handsomely as he felt his due.¹⁰ Though it is unclear how their alliance came about,¹¹ Sabone and Damane joined forces to “create” the newly-named UFDR. In reality, this was not the creation of a new group but the transformation of an already-existing, loosely-organized local defense force—the Gula anti-poacher/avengers—into an entity more easily recognizable by people outside the area, namely a rebellion. Only Damane participated in the attack that made the group’s existence visible to the world of diplomats and conflict-watchers in Bangui and beyond: a surprise assault on Birao in the pre-dawn hours of 30 October 2006. For his part,

9. This is the term used to denote those who helped Bozizé seize power in 2003; most of these liberators were from Chad.

10. In April 2004, a year after Bozizé’s coup, Sabone held a high position in Bozizé’s state security forces, but the president allegedly passed him over for a ministry post he felt he had deserved. Sabone then rallied the already disgruntled “ex-liberators” he had recruited—those born on Chadian space—to demand the 10-million Central African Francs (F CFA, approximately US\$20,000) they said Bozizé had guaranteed for their help. They voiced their pecuniary grievances through violence, looting seventy-five homes in the capital, setting up roadblocks, and marching on Bozizé’s residence. Attempting to storm the presidential mansion, they clashed with the Republican Guard, and Guards shot several of them dead. Bozizé dismissed them as trouble-making “Chadians,” seemingly an attempt to distance himself from their wrongdoing and provide a pretext for their deportation northward. He refrained from acknowledging the apparent contradiction that just a few days before, many of these “Chadians” had been serving in the CAR’s state security sector. Sabone and the other ex-liberators were transported north, to the Chadian border town of Goré, where each was given one million F CFA (approximately US\$2,000) in a ceremony presided over by, amongst others, Bozizé’s son Jean-Francis, his Chief of Staff of the Ministry of Defense. It is unclear whether the funds came from N’djamena or Bangui. In interviews between the ex-liberators and Marielle Debos, Sabone’s selective provision of information to his recruits becomes apparent. Few of the fighters knew that Sabone had served in the former president Patassé’s presidential guard prior to his return northward and subsequent merging with Bozizé; few can recount the factual unfolding of the rebellion in which they participated with the omniscient stance taken by a journalist (personal communication with Debos, 2007).

11. Sabone later split with the UFDR’s field commander, Damane Zakaria. Sabone described himself as the leader of the Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice (Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice, MLCJ), but, until he formed an alliance with a predominantly Kara defense group in the Birao area, it was unclear who, precisely, his fighters were.

Sabone took the lead in liaising with journalists curious about the battle. “When we were fighting alongside François Bozizé, we were expecting him to bring true change to the Central African Republic. But nepotism, corruption, mismanagement of public funds... are still there. We cannot accept it anymore” (AP, 2006). His was a convincing story, well-pitched to its intended audience in the international community (already on the alert for potential widening of the Darfur conflict). He touched on elements of the “good governance” doctrine that could convince as justification for rebel actions. Sabone refrained from mentioning that as he recited this speech he sat in Cotonou, Benin, some 2,000 km from the site of the fighting.¹²

Damane’s account is in important ways accurate: the rebellion brought the NGOs. The UFDR’s earlier conflicts as anti-poaching avengers (which, to varying extents and for various reasons, they have continued to pursue) were of a higher intensity than

12. Another far-off interlocutor, Michel Djotodia, claimed to speak for the UFDR. Djotodia’s career is even murkier than Sabone’s. People in Vakaga remember him as a prolific practitioner of extraversion. He went to the USSR to study and ended up living there ten years, marrying, and fathering two daughters, and then finally returning to CAR with “ten diplomas” and fluency in a number of languages, which made him useful when it came to representing the UFDR to foreigners and media. People in Tiringoulou tell of one day, long before the rebellion, when a plane of Russian hunters unexpectedly arrived. Upon hearing Djotodia’s rendition of their language, declared him not Central African but Russian and brought him along for their tour of the country. He had political aspirations, and he pursued them fervently. Twice he tried to become a deputy, and twice he failed. The highest post he attained was Tax Director. He also worked to become close to the Sheikh Tidjani, spiritual leader for many in the buffer zone, who lives in South Darfur. At the time of the UFDR’s first attack, he, like Sabone, was in Benin, where he had friends from his Russia days. Like Sabone, he was jailed in Cotonou for his role in the insurgency. But then he becomes harder to track. He had a falling out with the Sheikh when he tried to convince the president’s son to name him consul to Sudan in the Sheikh’s place (though technically Sudanese himself, the Sheikh occupies this post as a result of the respect and legitimacy he enjoys throughout the region). The break in this relationship has made it harder for him to claim to represent people in the area. Damane said that he had pushed him out when Djotodia had attempted to make an alliance with Charles Massi, another sidelined politician aiming for power through the form of insurgency. Whatever the specifics of his fall, people described it as a function of his failure to properly negotiate alliances. This diplomatic capability is central to maintaining power in a place of plural authorities. People surmised that this “intellectual” is now trying his luck somewhere far away.

those they have undertaken as rebels. Whereas hundreds of people died in the battles after Yaya's death (Roulet 2005), perhaps only a hundred died during the UFDR/government hostilities (Hilgert and Spittaels 2009). And yet only the latter drew international attention—humanitarian NGOs, peacekeeping forces, journalists. Of course, many factors collide to create any given outcome, making it difficult to say why CAR's current "rebel groups" have attracted more attention than their predecessors. Indirectly, concern over "spillover" from Darfur meant that diplomats were primed to pay attention to conflict in the buffer zone in a way that they had not been previously. Darfur represented an apogee for humanitarian efforts, appearing as it did a place where people with good intentions could help, at a time when other conflicts, such as the war in Iraq, made people question the possibility of success for that particular kind of altruism (Mamdani 2009). At the same time, a contingent of particularly engaged diplomatic administrators, led by the UN coordinator, Toby Lanzer, were dispatched to Bangui and launched intensified efforts to draw attention and funding to their outpost. But one factor that played an especially important role mediating (Larkin 2008) and making possible this greater visibility for the region's problems was the transformation of entirely non-centralized armed entities into at least superficially/partially-centralized ones through the form of rebellion. Whereas the international community has nothing in its toolkit for dealing with non-centralized armed groups, rebellion offers a chance for them to use a whole range of post-conflict and peacebuilding interventions.

International law organizes conflict into static, state-based categories, such as army, armed group, soldier, or rebel. Fighting forces are either “regular” (a state branch) or “irregular” (non-state). Because international law is organized around the sanctity of the sovereign state (even though its laws intrinsically challenge this principle), the terms are defined by their relationships with each other: the state, and its army, protects civilians’ lives, whereas non-state armed actors (bandits, vigilantes, pirates) are always illegitimate. The rebel group bridges the binary between state and non-state by representing its grievances as political. Though still not legitimate in the unquestioned way that the state is seen as legitimate (regardless of how much it may attack its citizens, as in CAR), rebellion is a form that causes certain humanitarian structures to kick into gear. Humanitarians can negotiate access with rebels, whereas bandits or other entirely non-centralized actors may prove far more difficult to communicate with, and this makes it possible for the aid agencies to disburse their goods. International organizations have developed a whole post-conflict toolkit for rebellion—peace negotiations, DDR, and so forth—whereas for economically- or locally-oriented armed actors they can only entreat the central government to respect human rights in dealing with them through human rights-focused military training. In these ways, the form of rebellion, like “the state,” has become a reference point enabling projects between actors who otherwise would likely not be able to collaborate.

The APRD’s genesis follows this pattern as well. Today, the APRD has explicitly political creation legends, similarly to the UFDR. The events that kicked it into existence

have been elided. Few if any among the humanitarians interacting with the group today recall how, exactly, it began, or realize that its workings in fact reflect long-standing dynamics in the region. Webb, describing the early and mid-1980s, writes that northwestern CAR was home to “armed and semi-organized” elements:

The activities of this portion of the opposition [that is, people from the far Northwest] have ranged from infrequent public challenges to the regime... to the more numerous “bandit” actions aimed at the taxation and disruption of commercial activity. The persistence of this form of opposition stems as much from the economic distress of the region and the physical distance of these two prefectures from the capital than from the efforts of a committed and well-organized core of supporters.... The amorphous quality of the “insurgency” is indicative of both its activity and [a lack of] any identifiable ideology.... Rebel activity could equally be described as banditry, precisely as the government continually does.... The majority of “visible” rebel activity involves stopping government or aid vehicles in the two prefectures and taking anything of value as well as occasional forays into towns during market days (1990: 280-281; footnote 36).

This activity, whether described as “bandit” or “opposition,” was thoroughly tied into the militarization that was spreading throughout the zone as a consequence of the rise of Ndjamena-directed insurgencies and their challengers. Bangui President Kolingba visited the region in 1984, and he and his men were fired on for several hours. He sent an army unit to punish people there, which they did by burning houses and firing on those not quick enough to flee¹³ (Bigo 1988: 280; Webb 1990: 282).

The region’s militarization attracted little further attention until 2005 when, in northwestern CAR, armed men (their identity — whether road robbers or someone else — never became clear) attacked the government soldiers who had been hired to escort a

13. This approach recalls the raiding methods of Sanusi’s bazingirs and foreshadows the attacks that people in the region would face from the armed forces in the wake of the APRD’s emergence, in 2005-2007.

couple of trucks loaded with Sprint cigarettes and made off with the flammable loot. The soldiers retaliated by attacking communities in the area, who in turn rose up in protest at their mistreatment. The area had long been home to loosely-organized local defense forces, usually known as “archers,” a term that denoted the powers they drew from the invisible world of the spirits, such as the ability for bullets to bounce off them. In the wake of the Sprint truck fall-out, these non-centralized entities came under the tutelage of Paris-based Jean-Jacques Demafouth, a former minister of defense under Patassé long known for his political machinations,¹⁴ who sought an armed ally to lend credence to his claims to an entitlement to participate in the Bozizé government. It was only following his involvement that the patriotic rebel name (and all-important acronym) and constitution (seemingly everyone became an officer of one kind or another) came into being. Yet when I talked with APRD members, many said the first they had heard of Demafouth was when he was named as their representative to the Inclusive Political Dialogue held in Bangui in December 2008, which was meant to resolve the grievances among the country’s various armed groups and the government. Throughout, the APRD continued to operate in a non-centralized manner. Leaders in each region had some control over their “*éléments*,” but there was little communication and less command-control between the various regions. I met with APRD officers in Bangui, for instance, who would assure me that their letters of support would open all doors for me in Kaga Bandoro. Instead, if this officer was not from Kaga Bandoro, it was more likely that my

14. For instance, though he was eventually cleared of the charges, Patassé accused him of planning a coup.

interlocutors there would skim the missive skeptically and question the person's identity and real authority. What I must do, they would tell me, is to seek the approval of their leader here on the ground. Doing so would mean navigating through a labyrinth of gatekeeper/facilitators, and even then there was no guarantee of actually meeting the officer I sought. I never met the elusive Colonel Maradass Lakué, the APRD commander for the Kaga Bandoro region. People—both Kaga Bandoro residents tired of the rebellion and rebel fighters themselves—said he was actually Chadian (born and raised over there, and had even served in the Chadian security sector) and was using the profits of rebellion to “build his house”¹⁵ near Sahr, Chad.

Discontent with the Colonel's leadership was growing during my fieldwork. By November 2010, fighters told me that twenty-five of their compatriots had gone to the base and laid down their guns, declaring themselves done with the whole rebellion and tired of endlessly waiting for DDR. One rumor that spread especially wide and deep was that he and a corrupt Cameroonian UNHCR official were in cahoots: since both had found the rebellion profitable (the colonel through the kinds of fees and per diems he could now command, and the UNHCR staffer through the maintenance of a state of humanitarian emergency and hence continuation of his cushy job), both sought to continue it by any means possible. The UNHCR official was thus supplying the colonel with money so he could buy more ammunition, and the colonel was forcing the men to

15. The expression “making his house” has both literal and symbolic connotations. It refers to the building process itself, but it also references a particular social status, namely that of the person who is “at ease.” At the same time, when used to describe the doings of officials it often carries a connotation of corruption (because how else can one build his house if not by siphoning off a bit extra for himself?).

attack another armed group in the region, the FDPC, even though they had no interest in fighting “our brothers,”¹⁶ just so that the humanitarian emergency would continue and the colonel and the UNHCR official would be able to finish building their houses. These rumors played on widespread mistrust of Cameroonians for their mysteriously superior business prowess (see chapter three for further discussion of Central African fears of foreign profiteering), as well as on personal details like the UNHCR staffer’s relationships with women in the area. (I was never able to flesh out the story, but apparently this UNHCR staffer had taken up with some of the rebels’ girls, and this, too, made them despise him and encouraged suspicions of his wrongdoing.)

The control that rebel leaders did exercise over their subordinates came from two main sources: their mastery of the invisible world and their ability to manage flows of information and money to their men. I will discuss the latter factor in greater detail in

16. The frustrated APRD fighters described their FDPC opponents as brothers as a way of emphasizing the unjustness of killing them. They said that though the FDPC started out Chadian, it now consists mostly of Central Africans. On a practical level, this may be true, but on a legalistic level, the group’s members are still largely considered foreign and will therefore not be eligible to benefit from DDR as they had hoped. The FDPC started as a loose association of (former) highway robbers united only in all claiming Abdulaye Miskine as their leader. Most are technically Chadian, though from the border region where nationalities frequently overlap. Miskine (aka Martin Koumta Madji, aka Brahim Moustapha), born to a Central African mother and a Chadian father and raised in southern Chad, began his career leading a group of road robbers. Faced with the likelihood of a coup mounted from the north, President Patassé supplied Miskine with Kalshnikovs so he could transform this gang of 300–350 men into a militia that he called the *Batallion de sécurité frontalière*, a name intended to lend the group’s policing of the Chadian border more legitimate (Berman with Lombard 2008: 26). When Patassé fell, Miskine and his men fled back to Chad. Little was heard from him until the end of January 2007, when he re-emerged in Sirte, Libya to sign a peace accord with President Bozizé on behalf of the FDPC, the armed group he claimed to lead (previously not known as any kind of a cohesive force). The signature benefited both: for Bozizé, it demonstrated his willingness to engage in dialogue with his armed opponents and thereby pave the way for the deployment of UN blue helmets. For Miskine, it offered an avenue of return to a position of power in the CAR government, from which he had been excluded since the Patassé presidency. However, things did not work out this way for Miskine. He is under suspicion by the International Criminal Court for crimes his men committed, putatively in support for Patassé, in 2002–2003 and so cannot remain in exile. He is currently believed to be in Saudi Arabia, but even his men have trouble getting through to him these days.

the section on DDR, below. In terms of the former, I came to appreciate its importance during my conversations with the rank and file fighters. Many of them said that the colonel had omniscient knowledge of everything his men did and said. This was because recruits—at least, “real” recruits, as opposed to those added to the ranks in recent months to bulk up DDR rolls—all had to go through initiations, which people referred to as “vaccinations.” The APRD in Kaga Bandoro had three: one involved drinking a liquid prepared by a healer; a second involved an incision on either the back of the neck or the top of the arm, near the shoulder, and the rubbing-in of dried herbs; and a third involved wearing gris-gris (charms and amulets) around one’s upper arm. People referred to these initiations, and especially the herbal tattooing, as the recruit’s “baptism by fire.” Once a person has undergone it, bullets no longer hold their force—even if one should have met you, it will instead wound whatever is directly behind you, like a tree. And if a bullet does hit you, it is because you did not maintain the *gris-gris* properly. For instance, before battle you must stay at the base and not go home, and you must not greet women. Certain churches, such as Pentecostal ones, will not permit gris-gris initiates to enter, which means they are cast out of the Christian moral community. The arm-amulets will tell you when an enemy is approaching by tightening perceptibly, a sign you should get on your guard. Depending on the gris-gris used by your opponents, they can even cause foes to go crazy and desert the battlefield. However, as one fighter warned, “You have to be careful. This is how they [leaders] are able to control you.” The initiation rites meld into the colonel’s “supernatural powers,” which permit him to

divine anything that is said about him, anywhere. The fighters I met with were therefore concerned that in “denouncing” their leader, in telling the “secrets” of the rebellion, he would immediately know and they would be punished.¹⁷ I told them I did not want to put them in any danger and encouraged them to be cautious, but their eagerness that someone with a “mouth” was listening to them proved too great a temptation for many, who wished their grievances would reach a wider audience. One fighter explained, “*Nous on n’a pas de bouche pour dire au gouvernement*” (we don’t have a mouth that can talk to the government), whereas a *munju* like me had the kind of mouth that could take messages to my ambassador, to the government, to the heads of the UN.

6.4 Why I joined the rebellion

When I asked UFDR and APRD fighters why they joined the rebellion,¹⁸ they generally gave a cascade of reasons.¹⁹ The first reason was poverty. The second was that

17. Sometimes these supernatural powers were invoked as a way of requesting payment for the conversation. The fighter wished to communicate that he was taking a risk in talking with me and that he should be compensated for that risk. It would be wrong to reduce the descriptions of the colonel’s supernatural powers to the pecuniary interests of the fighters, however. People had many stories of the Colonel’s uncanny knowledge.

18. A word of caution to precede the analysis of these interviews and conversations: when an “armed group member” (who likely also occupies a range of other social roles, from husband and father to farmer to miner to teacher) is interviewed by a white person, there is a perhaps inevitable element of performance of the development/humanitarian sympathies that the foreigner is expected to hold. Utas (2005; personal communication) and Coulter (2011), among others, have noted that in the aftermath of the Mano River Region wars people learned to narrate personal experiences of atrocity and victimhood in order to access the post-conflict projects proffered by the NGOs. These narratives were not always true in a factual sense. In CAR, research is very nearly always assumed to be an aspect of aid project preparation, so it seems likely that the accounts presented here are in part what people thought I would want to hear—the interviewer always shapes responses, whether consciously or not (Briggs 1986).

19. In this section, I am describing the responses of “real” rebels—that is, people who fought in battles and/or operated roadblocks and did other forms of rebel work, as opposed to those who joined the rebellions only in the final days of preparation of DDR lists, when officers sought to swell the ranks as a way of bringing in more cash.

government forces had attacked them and their families. The third reason was that the state had abandoned them, and they wanted to wake it up so it would care for them like a state should.²⁰ The order these reasons were given in varied, but the three elements were nearly always there. The last two reasons at first glance might seem contradictory. The reasoning seems to be, “The state has attacked me; therefore, I am taking up arms against the state to force it to care for me.” I argue, however, that they are not contradictory but instead indicate that people differentiate between the institutions of the state, which they experience as haphazard and abusive, and the idea of what the state should be, an ideal type that appears a synthesis of Weber (impartial bureaucracy), Hobbes (powerful responder to threats), and Keynes (the state should provide jobs). Though the theory of rebellion would have it that rebels seek to overthrow the government, in the buffer zone’s cycle of rebellion, the rebels seek rather to get “the state” to pay attention to them.

But the reason they are in this situation in the first place is, in their term of choice, poverty. Rebellion here appears as first and foremost a kind of work.

For me, it’s because of poverty²¹ that I joined the rebellion. I saw that my friend had a car and was eating well. I asked myself, what am I going to do to get

20. With these explanations, Central Africa’s men-in-arms offer further corroboration of Bøås and Dunn’s argument that “most of the current rebel groups [in Africa] seem more like manifestations against the ‘machinery’ of dysfunctional states, their equally fragmented and corrupted institutions, and the uneven impact of globalized modernity.... War is a social drama over the distribution of ideas, identities, resources, and social positions, and it often forces the disadvantaged to design alternative survival strategies” (2007: 5).

21. Some of the fighters spoke French, while others spoke Sango, which itself is a mixture of words derived from French and “pure” Sango. Even for Sango speakers, certain words always stayed in French; in this context, those were *pauvreté* (poverty) and *soutenance* (support system, usually referring to having a relative who can look after you financially, especially when it comes to paying school and exam fees). One of Kaga Bandoro’s nicest bars, in the center of town, has a large mural painted across the back wall that

money? If I join the rebellion, at the end there will be DDR and DDR will pay me. So it was poverty that pushed me. (APRD member, Kaga Bandoro.)

It was poverty [that made me join the rebellion]. I tried to get into the FACA [Central African Armed Forces] five times, but I never succeeded. I took the test for the gendarmerie twice but was not picked. I even went to Bouar [military training site] and had my head shaved and everything. Colonel Ouandé²² was there. But I was struck from the list of army recruits. I wanted to do things, but I had no money and no luck. I wanted to do commerce. If I'd had a relative to look after me, then I could have gone far by now. I could be a functionary. But I didn't. I wanted to do commerce but didn't have the means. So I joined the rebellion. (APRD member, Kaga Bandoro.)

It was poverty. I come from a poor family, and I have no relatives to look after me. [He repeated several times during this conversation "*Soutenance apé*," meaning that his support system was not there.] I was promised that when the rebels take power there will be *postes* [government jobs] for us. (APRD member, Kaga Bandoro.)

It was poverty. I have a wife and kids, and I have no way to support them. I heard that there were some members of the APRD who had died, and that Colonel Lakué was looking for people to fill the hole they left. I thought it might be a way to get some money.... I joined to make a living. (APRD member, Kaga Bandoro.)

Me I had just gotten a *note de service* [employment offer] from the Water and Forests Ministry. The head of the department recruited me, but then he left, and my file was forgotten. Then the Presidential Guard came here. I showed them the *note de service*, but they just shot at my family and me. (UFDR member, Tiringoulou.)

It was the conditions we have to deal with here that pushed me to join the rebels. One day the road cutters came and tried to kill my whole family. Only God protected us that day. I don't know how to find money to pay for my family's needs and clothing and all the rest. So I joined the rebellion to make a living. (APRD member, Kaga Bandoro.)

I used to be a farmer. With the rebellion and all the fighting that was going on, it wasn't safe to farm anymore, so I joined the rebellion. I was forced to enter because I had no work. Also, I saw that Bozizé had trained his men [the

reads, "*Celui qui a un parent bien placé ne peut pas souffrir*" (He who has a well-placed relative cannot suffer), which seemed to summarize this attitude toward the necessity/desire for a *soutenance*.

22. Infamously, whereas Bozizé ranked second-to-last at the French military academy in Libreville, Ouandé ranked last.

liberators] when they were in rebellion with him and then they went to Bangui and now they are in the army and have jobs. So I joined in hopes of getting a job. (APRD member, Kaga Bandoro.)

In all these narratives, the men describe the lack of employment opportunities as one of the main reasons they took up arms. People in the region used to be able to make a living growing cotton (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 1997). But when the Chadians who took power for Bozizé in 2003 returned home, they destroyed the cotton processing facilities and other infrastructure related to the industry. Years passed without the state cotton board showing up to purchase the crops, and this neglect caused a heretofore-unknown level of destitution.²³

Though rebellion offered no guarantees, it struck these men as a better option than sitting around and doing nothing. A priest in Kaga Bandoro described this reasoning as “If you don’t join, you definitely won’t get anything”—so better to give it a shot. But many, if not most, of these armed group members were pursuing other projects at the same time—one worked in a photography studio, many farmed, one worked as a part-time moto driver, one worked as a children’s rights liaison (mostly without pay, except for materials like pens and paper and per diems) for a humanitarian NGO, and so forth. This was especially the case of the UFDR members I spoke with, almost all of whom described having attempted other lines of work, especially diamond digging, anti-poaching patrolling, and various forms of commerce. Rebellion was one possible strategy of extraversion (Bayart 2000), and one that happened to be more open than most

23. Northwestern CAR has had more of a state institutional presence than the northeastern buffer zone, as the discussion here suggests. Still, even in the northwestern part of the country the activities and influence of state agents is extremely limited (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 1997a).

others. Exams and university, for instance, required more of an up-front financial investment that most people could not afford.

At the same time, people lamented how the government was not protecting them, and that in fact its forces attacked them more often than it helped them. UFDR members stressed that they took up arms in “legitimate defense.” This thinking blended into the third reason for rebellion, namely that “the state” was not doing enough to help them, with the two ideas very nearly sharing the same sentence. Again, it indicated that they differentiated between what people in the government did and what a state *should* do. Taken together, there is a strong current of hope—conviction that things can improve, a Utopian sentiment—amid bitterness and frustration.

I was a miner working in Sam Ouandja, but when we went to town to sell the diamonds to the buying offices, the gendarmes say that we are Sudanese, and they steal everything we have. When the Presidential Guard came here to Tiringoulou they shot my father-in-law.... They also burned about 100 houses, all the way to Vodomassa. They stole people’s stuff. (UFDR member, Tiringoulou.)

I used to be a guard for the anti-poaching project. Then a safari company hired me. They gave me a uniform, and when the Presidential Guard came they saw that uniform in my house and they accused me of being a rebel and burned my house. This made me angry. (UFDR member, Tiringoulou.)

The Presidential Guard burned my kiosk in the market. Everything that I had bought in Sudan to sell here was burned or stolen. (UFDR member, Tiringoulou.)

I was on my bike, which was loaded with fish that I was going to sell in Sam Ouandja. Then the Presidential Guard came and attacked me and took everything. (UFDR member, Tiringoulou.)

I was studying at a Koranic school in Khartoum and had come home to visit my family when the Chadian rebels came here. Then the Presidential Guard came and they just shot all over. We took the precaution of informing the state about the rebels, and they took it as us being rebels and just came and attacked. Twelve people were killed—or was it fourteen? (UFDR member, Tiringoulou.)

Ouandja commune [of which Tiringoulou is the seat] is rich. We have wildlife, but the poachers come and take it all and the state doesn't care. The state must come and exploit the resources here. But the state doesn't even think of it. (UFDR member, Tiringoulou.)

I joined the rebellion because we have no security [*sécurité ay d'apê*]. The road cutters were everywhere—they would even come all the way into the village and take people's belongings. And the army was never sent to protect us. So I joined the rebellion to protest my discontent.... Also, the government negotiates projects with the international donors, but these projects are never sent here. They are sent to other regions. Meanwhile the youth want to work, and there are no jobs here. (APRD member, Kaga Bandoro.)

The government never sends any projects to our region, but they send them to other zones. Work is a problem [*kwa a'ke problème*]. There is poverty. We are farming, but we are just using the old, traditional methods. And there are no jobs for people. I was forced to enter the rebellion to get money. (APRD member, Kaga Bandoro.)

Before joining the rebellion I was a farmer. But there were too many road cutters—they even came into the village. If you tried to go out and hunt you would be taken hostage for a ransom. That is why we joined the rebellion—to protect the population.... What the government does is not normal. They negotiate projects, but the projects go to other regions. There is no work here. There isn't even any money here. (APRD member, Kaga Bandoro.)

We are Central Africans. The state has not brought us anything. Do you see a single trace of the state here? That's what pushed us to take up arms. We took up arms so that the state would do something. (UFDR member, Tiringoulou.)

We the merchants have to go to Chad to buy goods to sell because the road to Bangui is so bad. Why don't we have a road? The government says that we are Chadian, or Sudanese [and thus discriminates against us], but we're not—we're Central African. (UFDR member, Tiringoulou.)

After recounting the way the government forced them into rebellion—from the armed group members' perspective, a history of government troop exactions that they had no choice but to avenge, with vengeance inextricably linked to protection—the armed group members spoke of their expectation that taking up arms against the government should shock it into caring for them. Partly, this care would take the form of

infrastructure, such as better roads. But the contemporary NGO “human potential agenda” —schools and health care—(Piot 2010) was peripheral to their accounts. The APRD members emphasized the need for more “projects” (major aid programs, along the lines of those seen in previous decades) and related moneymaking opportunities. The UFDR members nearly all used a French expression—“*prise en charge*”—to describe their demands on the government. Signing the peace agreement was supposed to bring with it a *prise en charge*. *Prise en charge* refers to responsibility: one person or entity has agreed to care for another. When I asked the UFDR members what the *prise en charge* should consist of, they replied, frequently with some frustration at my ignorance, as Colonel Tarzan did: “Uniform, food, per diem, training, vehicles—all that!” The most thorough statement of the elements of a *prise en charge* comes in the form of a list of recommendations that Damane, the UFDR spokesperson Hamad Hamadine, and an adviser wrote to present to the Inclusive Political Dialogue in Bangui in December 2008. The document contains both short- and long-term goals, and it details the elements of a *prise en charge*, much like Tarzan did. But its expectations are broader than that and blanket all residents of Vakaga prefecture, not just the armed group members. For instance, it stipulates that everyone from the area who graduates from the University of Bangui be immediately integrated into the public service. Until the early 1980s, this was an official policy of the government. In the first years after independence, there was an utter dearth of educated Central Africans to fill government posts, and so university graduates were hired as quickly as they could remove their commencement robes. For

the most part, these new officials stayed in the capital and did not exercise much reach into the hinterlands (Webb 1990). But, in those comparatively flush years, they drew salaries. One of the times I met with Damane, he asked his translator to pull a typed sheet of paper from his briefcase, which he then presented me with. He explained that it was a list of the names of 52 Vakagans who had graduated from the university but had not yet been integrated into the public service. He said that when he had last visited with the president he had given him this list and demanded to know why they had not yet been taken on. A few were later given posts, but Damane remained unsatisfied. For him, and for Hamad Hamadine, the fact of their signing the peace accord made integration an expectation, not a request.

There is a temptation to view the armed group members' requests as a desire to go back in time. The project mode of development aid that the APRD members spoke of dates to the 1970s and 80s, when France and the European Union, the two biggest donors at the time, would channel aid through government ministries, who would then undertake the "projects" that they otherwise had no resources for. Project money inflated the ministries. But few traces of these projects remain today, with the exception of the anti-poaching projects started in the late 1980s (see chapter five). The hiring of most or all university graduates was similarly widespread in the post-independence decades on a continent left with scant educational resources after the official departure of the European rulers. However, though the armed group members' expectations and desires stem in part from this history, it would be wrong to assume that these policies

worked as smoothly at the time as people now portray them as having done. Major frustrations characterized those early-independence years, too, and the fruits of salaried posts were far from equally shared. As Zoctizoum, a Central African historian, noted, following independence “the governors had simply changed skin color, and it is deservedly that people called the members of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie the ‘*moudjou voko*,’ that is to say, the whites with black skin” (1983: 11; my translation). The subtitle of Zoctizoum’s history — “the violence of development, domination and inequality” — gives a sense of how this mode of rule was felt. Bokassa’s “projects” (funded by the French) included the erection of “model villages” that would benefit from agricultural improvements like fertilizers and tractors. They also entailed forced communal labor: peasants were expected to be in the fields from five in the morning until seven at night, with a two-hour lunch break. Gendarmes were posted to these model villages to ensure that everyone remained in the fields, which was an effective continuation of the old “boy cotton” guards the colonists relied on (Webb 1990: 142), who were frequently violent and ignored laws meant to protect workers’ rights (Brégeon 1998).

The incidents of violence and repression that armed group members today cited as among their reasons for taking up arms against the government are nothing new. To the extent that people in the buffer zone have felt the physical presence of state agents, that presence is violent and repressive.²⁴ Memories of these incidents remain close to the

24. There is an intriguing parallel between Graeber’s description of the Shilluk kingdom of Sudan and the workings of the state in CAR. Graeber explains that though people expected Shilluk kings to make displays of “absolute, arbitrary violence,” the means the kings had “at their disposal were extremely limited,

surface. And yet at the same time, there remains an un-trampled faith in the form of “the state,” as reflected in the desires for infrastructure and development, and the expectations of integration. This form of the state is part ideal type, but in part its contours remain undefined. It diverges so notably from the practices of actually-existing functionaries and soldiers that people are hardly referring to the same assemblage of institutions and ideas at all. And in fact, in simultaneously castigating and calling for “the state,” the armed group members end up taking on new authorities, making the creation of the centralized, unitary authority they say they desire less likely. The explanation “only the state can do that” provides a rationale for not undertaking certain centralizing tasks or projects on a local level and prevents a state (that is to say, an expanding sphere of administrative integration) from being constructed from the bottom up. Rebellion has become a form of work. The connections it brings about do not map neatly onto the map-lines of state borders but sometimes reflect the focusing of rebel energies inward, onto their own communities, and sometimes outward, onto multiple nodes in the region, and never seem to result in the establishment of a single, centralized system. The following section looks at what rebels do, with a focus on their role in adjudicating disputes. It shows that in addition to the sovereign capability of violence, much of armed group members’ sovereign work consists of managing visibility and invisibility.

and most of all, they found themselves checked and stymied whenever they tried to transform those displays into the basis for any sort of systematic power” (2011: 10).

6.5 What rebels do

Part of being in an armed group is participating in battles. One morning in Kaga Bandoro, I sat with one APRD officer listening to a cassette recording he had made of a recent attack. I heard gun shots, static, and occasional cries, cheers, and orders. The blustery, peeved narrative style I had come to associate with him quieted, and he calmly recounted what was happening at different moments: “That’s when the lieutenant got killed.... That’s us moving the body.... That’s the colonel telling us to advance.” Once we had turned the tape off, he said, “We were all sick after [two days of fighting]. We had the taste of the blood of the people we killed in our mouths. We didn’t even want to eat anything. IRC [the International Rescue Committee, an American NGO working in the area] gave us each five packets of milk powder so that we could get the taste out of our mouths. It was the odor of the guns—there are powders that come out when you fire, and they get in your mouth.”

But, especially compared to other conflicts, the number of battles was few.²⁵ The death tolls never rose to the levels that some statisticians use to determine whether “war” has occurred. The Correlates of War project, begun in 1963, for instance, uses the

25. As Bøås and Dunn (2007) remark, war is not just about fighting but about crafting survival strategies and making claims. It is about the platform of visibility that the form of rebellion provides. For instance, Lucien Mbaigoto of the APRD had not even risen to the rank of lieutenant in the armed forces, but in the rebellion he was now a “captain.” He declared that “hurting people is not something I want to do,” but that he hoped that now that his rank had risen he would be able to travel to the American and Chinese embassies in Yaounde and obtain a military exchange visa.

threshold of 1,000 battlefield deaths/year,²⁶ which, of the buffer zone's recent conflicts, only the Caliph Yaya fall-out came close to reaching. Without minimizing the destruction and trauma caused, it is notable how "friendly" these rebellions have been. While in Kaga Bandoro, I got to know some of the officers helping the regional peacekeeping force, MICOPAX, with the verification of ex-combatants in preparation for DDR. Chatting in the shade of their base *pailotte* late one morning, a Burundian officer nodded at the dozing Site Commander, sitting across from him, and explained, "We are from Burundi, Zaire—we know war. What is particular about this place is that it is a peasant rebellion. They have traditional guns, not weapons of war. There are clashes, but not a real war. They are fighting the road cutters, not really the government. After the Libreville accords, you had FACA and rebels conducting operations together. We saw them riding around in the same vehicle, FACA alongside rebel!" In Burundi or Zaire—sites of "real war"—this would have been unthinkable, peace agreement or not, he asserted. While traveling in northwestern CAR in late 2007 (before the signature of the peace accord) I passed a rebel roadblock and a soldier roadblock placed only about two hundred meters apart. Both seemed to be doing as brisk a business as possible in place with so few travelers.

This offers a clue as to what the rebels' work consisted of, if not fighting: roadblocks are the occupation of many of those who see themselves as rebels. As

26. Another widely-cited statistical database, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/International Peace Research Institute, Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset, uses the threshold of only 25 battlefield deaths/year but notes that they are tracking not war but "armed conflict."

discussed in chapter four, roadblocks are one of the main forms of governance in the buffer zone. For the APRD, part of becoming a rebel was leaving one's family and joining a base. Though they were not entirely tethered to the spot and could travel when needed (such as to the hospital in Kaga Bandoro for medical treatment, or to visit an ailing family member), there was nevertheless the sense that this was their place of work. Since they were not farming, they needed to support themselves, and roadblocks were a way to do that. In describing this work to me, they were careful to always stress that the payments were "voluntary" (an idea that was always expressed using the originally-French "*volontaire*") and that people paid as a way of showing their appreciation for the work the rebels were doing.²⁷ For its part, the UFDR operated barriers at Boromata, Tiringoulou, Ouandja, and Sam Ouandja. The UFDR's *chef d'état major* qualified that they run their barriers well (in contrast to those of the state), so they don't stifle commerce. They just ask for enough so that they can "do their work and buy soap for their families."

Non-rebels contested the UFDR's portrayal of roadblocks as a fair way for selfless protectors to get enough to feed and bathe their families. One priest in Kaga Bandoro summed up the critical point of view, speaking of the APRD: "Roadblocks: for the rebels they're legitimate. They have found their profit in rebellion. They say that what they get is given voluntarily, but it can't be voluntary when it's at the point of a gun." As

27. To give the rebels credit, they do indeed have accomplishments to point to: in addition to "bringing the NGOs," they forced out many of the road cutters whose presence in the region had become crippling by 2007. However, they did not much stress this aspects of their work in their interviews with me.

explained previously, people's opinion of roadblocks was conflicted. The barriers were legitimate for the rebels, but most people had a greater or lesser degree of frustration with them. In any event, the roadblocks primarily targeted travelers. In towns, rebels asserted their authority in another way: by intervening in cases of "spiritual insecurity" (witchcraft) (Ashforth 2005). Given that the invisible world (the realm of "*toro*," or spirits) presented such grave threats to people's daily lives, adjudicating these issues is one of the main needs felt by communities in the buffer zone, and it is a need that the rebels have taken it upon themselves to fill. By taking on this role, they demonstrate their sovereign capability of managing invisibility. Whereas others have emphasized the ways that insurgencies have called on and exhibited their mastery of the spiritual realm to place themselves in opposition to the imposed, colonial state (Lan 1985), in the buffer zone the insurgencies' claims to effectively manage sorcery were not tied to traditional figures of authority and their established practices. Instead, they relied on improvisation: existing practices were transformed and made new by rebels intent on making their mastery visible, in procedures that were only somewhat regularized and systematized. Part of rebels' ability to awe lay in their hewing only partially to prescribed practices and occasionally exceeding them, especially through violence.

In March 2010, I arrived in Tiringoulou the day after a particularly serious incident: a penis snatching. The culprit, a traveler by some accounts Chadian and by others Nigerian, had aroused no suspicion at first. The Sudanese transport truck he arrived on pulled into town fairly early in the morning. The women climbed off the

over-laden vehicle, careful to keep their veils in place and not to upset the baskets of millet they carried, and sat in a row in the shade of a fence beside the market. Some of the men, like this traveler, made their way into the market to buy refreshments. The traveler found a tea seller and handed him a 100 CFA (about US\$.25) coin in exchange for a small glass of the sticky-sweet brew. At some point, he touched the tea-seller on the shoulder and shook his hand. The tea-seller felt an electricity-like tingling and soon felt something even more stranger: he could no longer detect his penis. When he looked down, he saw that it had disappeared.

News of a similar incident nearby, in the market town of Sikkikede, had reached Tiringoulou a few days before. In that case, the victim was a woman. The rumor²⁸ of penis snatching has spread through West, Central, East and southern Africa over the past twenty years or so. It has generally been studied as an urban phenomenon, and as a response to the particular challenges of sociality in African cities²⁹ (Bonhomme 2009).

28. Scholars have struggled to find an appropriate vocabulary for talking about witchcraft. The crux of the problem is that whereas the scholars generally understand witchcraft to be a belief, their interlocutors understand it to be an action (Ashforth 2005). It becomes difficult for the scholar not to present their interlocutors' way of understanding the world as in some measure delusional. To get around this conundrum, some have presented witchcraft as a "discourse" (Geschiere 1997), while others have made an analogy between witchcraft and the writing of ethnography itself (West 2007). In referring to penis-snatching as a rumor, I am not purporting to have a way out of this impasse, but am rather leaning on the framework adopted by Bonhomme (2009) to refer to the ways that genital theft epidemics infiltrate social life in contemporary Africa.

29. Fears of genital theft are not unique to Africa, however. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, a late-fifteenth-century religio-legal text published in Nuremberg and intended to convince people that witchcraft was a real and major threat to the Christian world, includes many cases of genital theft ("the way in which they [witches] take away male members"). The thieves were often women known by the male victims—frequently jilted lovers. A difference between the African and European cases is the importance the authors of the *Malleus* place on explaining the apparent visual impossibility of penis-snatching. They are careful to explain that they verified these facts with their own eyes. But while they assured their readers that penis-snatching was a very effective "illusion," they filled their account with spectacular tales: "As for what pronouncement should be made about those sorceresses who sometimes keep large numbers of these

Witchcraft in the village has generally been understood as intra-family and a way of resolving tensions and jealousies in the family. In the city, where people are physically detached from family in the village, the stranger has become an object of fear and suspicion. In cases of genital theft, the thief is always someone unknown, usually a foreigner, and he does his work in a crowded, public place, like a bus stop or market. His occult powers are so great that he has only to touch you for the deed to be done.

Bonhomme's overview of the phenomenon is a useful guide to the ways that genital theft responds to and pushes the challenges faced by Africans in new social settings where they cannot resolve problems with networks of the village and family. However, his discussion is shaped by his data: he relies almost entirely on newspaper reports, which present almost exclusively urban news. He thus sees genital theft as an entirely urban phenomenon, whereas the cases of Sikkikede and Tiringoulou show that this rumor is active in villages and small towns as well,³⁰ which raises the question of what else might have been left out of the analysis as a result of Bonhomme's data set.

members (twenty or thirty at once) in a bird's nest or in some cabinet, where the members move as if alive or eat a stalk or fodder, as many have seen and the general report relates, it should be said that these things are all carried out through the Devil's working and illusion. In this case, an illusion is played on the viewers' sense of perception in the ways discussed above" (Mackay 2006: 327).

30. In fact, rumors are always constituted through circulation among city, village, and town (Piot 2010). When I asked a group of men gathered at the home of the penis-snatching victim how they had heard of the phenomenon, they rebuffed me: "We don't lack for news here." They hear stories from travelers, and they also travel themselves. One man had worked in Cameroon (in his description, a land of skyscrapers and businessmen but also of taxi passengers whose hair turned into roiling masses of snakes—"You see how advanced they are? It's because they are so strong in commerce—including in scalps and penises"), where he had seen many cases of penis-snatching firsthand. In one memorable story, reminiscent of the nests of penises described in the *Malleus*, he told of a woman who arrived at the airport in Yaounde, on her way to Europe to sell a load of penises. The airport guard sensed something fishy about the woman and decided to thoroughly go through her hand luggage. He saw that she had packed some baguette sandwiches and asked if he could have one. The woman assented and made to hand him the one on top. But he persisted in

In Tiringoulou that day, the tea-seller quickly recognized himself as having experienced the same risk factors and symptoms that he had heard other genital theft victims had experienced, and he called out an alarm. In seconds, the traveler found himself surrounded. A crowd gathered in the wide shade offered by the horizontally-sloping-branched tree at the edge of the market. Swarms of bees frequented the tree, and their arrival would send people scattering, men and women alike shrieking as they struggled to outrun the threat of the vicious stingers. Today, that scenario was reversed. People emerged from their houses holding weapons at the ready—Kalashnikovs and, in the case of the launderer/cook at the house I stayed at, a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.³¹ Some of the men at the front began beating the man, pausing for questioning. *Chef d'Etat Major* Zoundeiko, second-in-command to Damane (who was out of town at the time), oversaw the proceedings. The traveler denied all wrongdoing. But eventually he admitted his guilt. He said that he had denied because he was afraid the townspeople would punish all the travelers if he admitted. Zoundeiko ordered the assembled crowd not to target the other voyagers.

Zoundeiko explained to me what happened next. First, he said that he intervened so as to assure that the situation would be dealt with “correctly,” rather than by vigilantes. He was especially worried about the women’s reaction—they would have

reaching deeper, deeper into the bag and picked one from the bottom. Now the woman became agitated. He unwrapped it and found that, though butter leaked from the edges to make it look innocent, a row of penises was lodged between the loaf’s halves. A penis-butter sandwich. Not to be eaten.

31. People in the area are known as far better-armed than their southern compatriots, for whereas the latter generally rely on traditionally-made guns, those in the far northeast have access to the weapons markets of Chad and Sudan. However, they frequently lack ammunition.

torn the man limb from limb, given how grave a threat he represented to procreation in the area and beyond. Zoundeiko and his subordinates brought the man to the rebel-gendarmes' holding room and locked him inside. When they returned to check on him that evening, the door remained lock but the man had disappeared. Zoundeiko left the matter hanging in a way that led me to believe that it was the thief's occult powers that had permitted him to escape. Other witnesses said otherwise. They said that the man was promptly executed by the UFDR. So grave a threat could not be tolerated, and, moreover, if they had not taken action, the women would have.

Zoundeiko had participated in international organization trainings and seminars as a leader of a "politico-military movement" (the current term of art for a rebel group), and he had been interviewed and briefed by human rights researchers and employees of the International Committee of the Red Cross. He knew that summary execution is reviled by these circles. Throughout our conversations, he frequently asserted "It is international opinion that will judge us." The government in Bangui, which promised DDR and so many other things but never made them happen, remained silent, and, as a result of its own misdeeds, had no authority to judge. But "international opinion," which Zoundeiko invoked in a way that reminded me of how some people will refer to divine judgment, would show they stood on the right side of history. Whether the UFDR locked the suspected thief up or executed him, they effectively dealt with the grave threat that had presented itself in their midst. They had qualified themselves as bearers of that sovereign capability that cover the occult: the management of invisibility,

whether in its prosaic or spiritual form. In the buffer one, this capability gets to the heart of questions of justice, which so frequently turn on interactions between the world of the spirits and the world of the humans and the un-knowable and knowable relations that join them.

As for the man whose penis had been taken, he had a long convalescence. The region's Caliph, who was traveling at the time, sent several verses from the Koran back that would help the man heal. He spent days lounging in his courtyard, attended to and kept company by friends, resting and praying that he would recover his "force." The town doctor³² explained that the penis had "come out again" but that it remained drained of all strength and potency.

Like the UFDR, the APRD also took on the responsibility of adjudicating spiritual insecurities. Scholars of witchcraft in Central Africa have long emphasized its deep importance in organizing social relations. This can give the incorrect impression that the occult is a hegemonic, blanketing kind of force. Instead, it manifests in highly localized ways. The particular modes of witchcraft that strike fear in a given place vary widely. In certain parts of western CAR, *ngbin* is the major threat. Ngbin entails the capture of others' labor power. During the night, the evildoer captures neighbors' spirits and puts them to work for him or her in the fields. That person's fields prosper, while those of the victims languish, for their proprietors are too tired to properly tend them. Ngbin is a variation on the zombie/vampire rumors and scares that flourished in Africa during the

32. A native of the town and brother of Yaya Ramadan, the doctor's salary was paid by the international humanitarian NGO that kept the hospital running.

colonial period, partly as a way of making sense of the violent new forms of labor and profit that the colonists erected (White 2000).³³ According to the law (article 163 of the Central African constitution, which prohibits *pratique du charlatanisme et sorcellerie*, known by its acronym, PCS), witchcraft accusations should be prosecuted through the state courts. And in those few prefectural seats home to functioning tribunals, PCS cases comprise the majority of the docket. In APRD-controlled areas, the rebels laid claim to this work.

In Kaga Bandoro and its environs, witchcraft frequently took the form of *urukuzu*, or metamorphosis. Urukuzu is a way of making money, and it involves transforming a person into an animal that can be sold for money—a cow, a large fish. The person who has been transformed mysteriously begins behaving like that animal. He might eat grass or crawl around on all fours. If the person does not react, as soon as the witch sells the animal the victim will sicken and die. To save himself, the victim has to go to the rebels, who put a tincture of leaves and herbs over his eyes. The service costs between 2,000-5,000 CFA (US\$5-10), and it allows the person to see who has transformed him. Rebels then find and arrest the witch, who may be a man or a woman. They bring the accused to their base and perform a number of secret ceremonies that strip the person of his or her magical powers. The witch's family must pay a ransom to bring the

33. Geschiere (1997) describes a similar form of witchcraft in neighboring Cameroon. The Danish Refugee Council, an NGO working in CAR, became enmeshed in an ngbin scandal. As part of an agricultural development project, they encouraged people to form cooperatives. One of the cooperatives fared better than the others, and its members were accused of ngbin; two of them were killed. The NGO decided to employ an anthropologist who studies witchcraft in CAR to manage a program pushing for respecting the rights of those accused of occult misdeeds.

(former) witch home. The ransom might range from 150,000 to 200,000 CFA (US\$300-400), but if the family has no money and fails to mobilize any from kin and neighbors, they can pay in foodstuffs, like honey or goats or manioc. It is a high price, one rebel acknowledged, but justified, for the family is paying to “save the life” of the witch, who has him- or herself become entrapped by witchcraft. Moreover, those practicing urukuzu are “the enemies of development” and must be dealt with harshly. That week alone, he said, the rebels had found and dealt with four metamorphosing witches, all living in a few nearby villages.

When I asked people about the rebels’ treatment of witches, I received divergent and conflicted responses. Those inclined to highlight the positive aspects of rebel justice explained that before the rebels claimed authority over these cases, *anganga* (healers/diviners), in collaboration with village chiefs,³⁴ would deal with such incidents. But the witches’ capabilities had overtaken those of these leaders, and the witches were killing men, women, and children with abandon. The rebels’ “effectiveness” (heavy-handedness) in dealing with the threat witches represent had acted as a deterrent, and the rates of witchcraft had dropped. But others simply shuddered when asked to reflect on the rebels’ practices. Everyone had heard stories of rebel brutality, and many had seen

34. The village chiefs have little authority besides what they are able to shape for themselves based on their personal capacities. They are not associated with any “traditional” or aristocratic legitimacy, and “the state provides practically no resources for chiefs to exercise the role it has assigned to them. They do not have access to official disciplinary structures, for example, in the form of a local police force. They have few ways of imposing sanctions against the inhabitants of their villages and, following the elimination of the poll tax, the state does not provide them with any direct funds whatsoever. In effect, the chiefs have to exercise their influence by participating in a permanently informal process of negotiation” (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 1997a: 445).

these actions firsthand. A trope that resurfaced again and again was that of burying people alive: first the accused must dig her own grave, then jump into it, and then she is covered with dirt until her screams can no longer be heard.³⁵ This happened to three women in Paoua (another nuclei of APRD control) in 2008.³⁶ One had been returning to her house after a nighttime walk when she crossed the path of a few rebels who had just endured a major battle with road robbers. Despite his protective gris-gris, one of them had been shot in the leg. When he saw this woman—a suspicious figure, for who walks alone in the middle of the night if she is not up to no good?—he began to suspect that her sorcery lay at the root of his injury. The men arrested the night-walker. They beat her, and she confessed, naming two other women as accomplices. The rebels made a spectacle of their punishment: the town was made to assemble and watch as the women dug their graves. One witness to this ordeal still can barely bring herself to talk of such a horror. Unlike state laws, which can be endlessly flexible, the APRD's laws cannot be contradicted. To whom could a person complain?

APRD judicial interventions draw out two sovereign capabilities that are especially important to their authority: violent coercion and the management and navigation of visibility and invisibility, in both their prosaic and their spiritual senses. One evening before supper in Tiringoulou, I sat with the young men from Bangui

35. Scholars of insurgencies elsewhere in Africa have emphasized that among the most traumatizing effects is the imposed inability to ensure a proper burial for victims (Jones 2008). Burial alive is among the most brutal of these travesties.

36. This case was related to me by a researcher working on the local-level dispute resolution research project that I helped organize.

working for International Medical Corps, the town's one humanitarian NGO, cracking peanuts and listening to them tell stories in the dark. One had previously worked for another international NGO near Kaga Bandoro, and he told of a man from the area who had gone to Bangui and falsely claimed to be a rebel officer. Upon return, rebels, who knew of his lies because of their occult powers, assigned him the punishment of 100 lashes. On the ninety-ninth strike, the young man cried out in pain, a mistake punishable by starting the count over from the beginning. My fellow peanut-eaters burst into raucous laughter at the tale while I sat mute, somewhat bewildered.

The rebels may not have held a monopoly on violence, but they certainly demonstrated their control by exercising it in those situations they deemed required it. These powers were further activated by their mastery of the invisible realm, which they impressed on people partly through highly-visible punishment ceremonies. But how did the rebels obtain this capability of managing the occult? One rebel told³⁷ of how he had gone into the forest a bit over a year before when he suddenly found himself moved by the spirits, who pointed him in the direction of various plants and herbs and filled him with their knowledge of what these plants could do, and what they would allow him to see and to fix. Soundlessly, they told him how to scarify bodies and rub tinctures in the wounds and how doing so would let him diagnose even the most troubling maladies. He boasted that in the past three months, 357 people had come to him with illnesses they wished for him to resolve; in the past year, he had healed at least 900. His success

37. This interview was also conducted under the auspices of the local-level dispute resolution research project cited above.

had quickly garnered him a reputation, and respect, as the person to go to for the resolution of illnesses and other troubling, unfortunate events. No one I asked wished to speculate as to where Colonel Lakué had learned his occult powers, except to say, vaguely, that they stemmed from his education as a man-in-arms in Chad. (*"Ils sont très forts, les tchadiens."*) Force and reputation, two ways through which authorities are made visible, emerge as inter-linked elements of the rebels' capabilities.

Law, in its broadest sense, is all about controlling the threats that a community or society deems so grave that they compromise the foundations of sociality itself (Malinowski 1926). Both the nuclei of APRD spread around Kaga Bandoro and the contingent of UFDR at Tiringoulou founded their authority by laying a claim to being the forces that could most effectively deal with those gravest of challenges to the social order, namely witchcraft in its diverse guises. At the same time, the rebels still found themselves locked in battles over the exercise of other sovereign capabilities. In the bush north of Kaga Bandoro, for instance, the FPR (described in chapter four) claimed power to police road cutters; the FPR's very presence, its sophisticated weaponry and classy uniforms, became a kind of rebuke to the claims to unitary control made by APRD members, who were decidedly rag-tag in comparison. Road cutters also abounded in the region. And another group of rebels and road cutters, the FDPC, lurked not far to the north. In the case of the UFDR, they found themselves in alternating negotiations, confrontations, and a mutual tactic of ignoring the armed hunters and herders who used their space. They also fought intermittent battles with another rebel group based in the

vicinity of Birao, a group that started as a Kara self-defense group and later, after making an alliance with the militia-less militiaman Abakar Sabone, became known as the *Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice* (MLCJ, Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice). In short, both these groups found themselves surrounded by other actors claiming capabilities of force, taxation, and extraction, and drawing on related capabilities of flexibility, mobility, and invisibility. But to exert their dominance in towns and villages, as opposed to in open spaces or on the road, rebels had to prove themselves adept at managing the threats of the occult. Using both force and spiritual power, and achieving results people both lauded and decried, the rebels did so.

6.6 Conclusion

At the same time as the APRD and UFDR members were busy blocking roads and prosecuting witchcraft, their representatives to the government (again, to call these people “leaders” perhaps misstates their importance given that these groups were loose associations, not neatly hierarchical, and those who appeared as leaders were more properly conceived as “those who have a mouth that can talk to the government”) were involved in a meandering peace process. By the time the Inclusive Political Dialogue (the third such dialogue held in a decade, with each supposed to be definitively inclusive but instead creating new incentives for armed opposition, in a pattern described by Tull and Mehler (2005) as one of the “hidden costs of power-sharing”) in December 2008, all the armed groups had signed on to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the details of which had been hashed out in Libreville earlier that year.

No sooner did the Dialogue conclude, though, than a new insurgency popped up in the vicinity of Ndele. Charles Massi, a sidelined politician, claimed to be its leader, but fighters on the ground disputed this.³⁸ In fact, the CPJP's origins were similar to those of the APRD and the UFDR, which is to say that they had little to do with political rebellion at all. Runga fighters who had joined the UFDR later split off, feeling sidelined by the majority Gula. Many headed south to the Bria area to try their luck at diamond mining. In October 2008, government troops in alliance with UFDR fighters attacked and pushed the Runga from the zone they had come to occupy. They fled north, passing through Ndele, where they plead with both the sultan and the humanitarian NGOs to open a dialogue with the government on their behalf. (The NGOs chiefs explained that, being "neutral," they could not help.) The Runga called themselves Camp Noir at this point. Their grievances centered on desiring protection from the UFDR and trials for UFDR officers for their crimes. While they waited for negotiations to begin, they installed a base at Akoursoulbak, north of Ndele near the Chad border, the Runga heartland. In the midst of the sultan's diplomatic endeavors, a contingent of Presidential Guard troops surprise attacked Akoursoulbak from the north, making Camp Noir doubt that the dialogue was in good faith. On their way back to Bangui, the soldiers burned some houses and massacred (shot or decapitated) twenty-one people in the village of

38. Massi had served in government posts for decades. After holding some plum ministerial posts, he had most recently been relegated to the role of Minister of Rural Development. In search of more power, he claimed to represent the UFDR. When that did not work out, he aligned himself with the group that eventually became known as the CPJP. He had no connection to them other than his desire to use the threat they represented as a form of leverage in obtaining a better post. He left France in late 2009 and went to Chad. While there he was arrested and brought back to CAR, where he is believed to have been killed by state security forces. It is unclear whether they were following orders or taking their own initiative.

Sokounba. It was this series of events that caused a shift in Camp Noir and its adoption of the classical trappings of rebellion, such as a properly patriotic acronym in place of a cryptic, action-movie-like moniker. And it was at this point that the CPJP declared its opposition to the government and described its rebellion as an attempt to shock the state into paying attention to the Runga zones. As the year went on, the CPJP established another base at Sikkikede, like Akoursoulbak a market town very close to the border with Chad. Abdulaye Issene made overtures to the humanitarian agencies in Bangui. He bemoaned that Sikkikede had not seen a single government functionary in nine years and that, despite being by far the largest town in the prefecture, it was not included on most maps.³⁹ The town now appears on the humanitarians' maps; the government has yet to issue any new ones. Though there have been steps toward the CPJP joining the peace process, the group has also continued to battle the UFDR, and it remains in limbo.

Rebellion does indeed entail fighting, but the fighting is a means to an end, namely a way of attracting attention to their claims to better representation and more work. Armed group spokespeople I met proudly displayed the business cards of the journalists they had met—from the BBC, Radio France Internationale, and other outlets. Never before had foreign journalists alighted in Tiringoulou or Kaga Bandoro or other remote buffer zone towns. As Damane said, the rebellion brought the NGOs, and it also

39. The CPJP is currently believed to have three main branches that operate more or less independently. Like the APRD and UFDR, it is not a centralized entity but rather an assortment of actors all of whom find it useful to describe themselves as inhabiting the underside of the CPJP umbrella, but whose activities surpass that mandate. For instance, some branches of the CPJP (such as those who attacked Birao in late 2010) are known for discipline, whereas others are known as rapacious road cutters.

brought the journalists. The media saw a story—an event—in rebellion that they did not see in seemingly apolitical violence like road robbery, which was more quotidian. But though the form of rebellion can attract attention, it is a short-lived kind of attention. Part of the problem with emphasizing form over content, as Hecht and Simone (1994) characterize Africans as doing is that the *forms* of conflict pass to the *forms* of post-conflict without substantive changes in inequalities or the marginalization of those in hinterland areas. DDR, the subject of the next chapter, offers a case study of how marginalization happens.

7. Waiting for the State: Disarmament, circulation, and the deferral of accountability

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed two of the main spheres over which the rebels strove to establish sovereign capabilities: the taxation of circulation, and the management of (occult) threats to the social order. These tasks kept them busy. But there is no escaping the observation that the rebels' busy-ness consisted in large measure of waiting. Most of the time on the roadblock, rebel workers sat or lounged in whatever shade they could find and roused themselves only in the rare event of a passing traveler. And witchcraft, though rampant, was an event, not a continual state. Much of the rest of the time, they found themselves waiting. Some—especially in the UFDR, since their fighters largely remained close to home—still farmed, but many did not. As rebels who had signed a peace agreement with the government, they awaited their due. In showing themselves a threat to the central government, they made themselves visible as a constituency. Now that they were no longer marching on the capital, they felt themselves fading from sight. The traveling post-conflict toolkit favored by international organizations gave them a form through which to channel their expectations: DDR. However, as months dragged into years, it became clear that DDR was simultaneously raising and displacing their expectations and stood no chance of fulfilling them.

This chapter argues that DDR works as a lever contributing to the maintenance of a divide between, on the one hand, the capital-government and international bureaucrats, and, on the other, people—especially dispossessed youth—in the buffer

zone hinterlands. This divide manifests as a lack of accountability, in this case a lack of accountability between those with access to aid and those the aid is theoretically intended to benefit. Partly, this lack of accountability occurs because the ideal-type notion of the state that founds DDR is so far from how politics in this zone actually work. Steadfast faith in and adherence to the state as a form, despite so much evidence that this neither reflects current politics nor realistically could be expected to do so in the near future, blinds aid givers to the ways that this helps accountability be continually displaced. And partly, the lack of accountability has to do with inequalities in circulation: both the relatively free mobility of the project staff and other DDR leaders, compared to the rank and file who are supposed to benefit from it, and the difficulty with which information circulates. Communication is fraught for a range of reasons: the displacement of authority (“that’s above my pay grade,” when it is in fact in the person’s job), bad faith, the logistical and infrastructural challenges of such a remote zone, and problems of translation between the project-leader class and intended beneficiaries. It becomes difficult to see how this non-centralized state of affairs might one day give way to a situation in which the various people with governing power, such as armed group and government officials, and aid project staff, could be held to account by the people they purported to represent and help.

7.2 DDR in theory and expectations on the ground

In the post-Cold War moment of widespread civil war and other types of insurgency, international organization planners conceived of DDR as a way to deal with

the high levels of militarization that characterize post-conflict settings. Specifically, DDR was seen as a way to help former armed group members rejoin their communities as productive, unarmed workers.¹ The theory quickly becomes problematic once it meets the complexity of specific situations, however. There is no clean break between “wartime” and “peacetime.” Rather, these phases usually blend together, with ongoing insecurity and violence after the signing of peace agreements (Richards 2005). Moreover, DDR proceeds from the faulty assumption that to bring about security the post-peace agreement state has only to *regain* its monopoly on violence. This assumption is flawed because in most of the settings described as “post-conflict,” the state generally never held such a monopoly in the first place.² The lack of monopoly is especially apparent in the Central African buffer zone.³ Here, as described above and throughout this dissertation, a range of non-centralized armed groups, many if not most of which fall outside the scope of state-based peacebuilding efforts, dispossess and make profits: from the increasingly-fragmented LRA to other amorphous armed robber gangs, from the

1. DDR became part of the post-Cold War “post-conflict reconstruction orthodoxy”; for a critical, yet ultimately supportive, analysis of DDR, see Muggah (2005).

2. Klute and von Trotha refer to this tendency to assume a degree of stateness that never actually presented the “planning fallacy,” which “blusters about the reintroduction of the state monopoly of violence or a national policy of power sharing and is doubly blind. It overlooks the power processes at the local level which can simultaneously promote peace and yet contradict the aims of the national peace program. It fails to see the connection between peace-promoting measures and the processes of local power-building. It conceptualises these connections as pathologies which are commonly attributed to the ‘traditionalism’ of local communities. It is blind to the dynamics between peace-promoting measures and the creation of new forms of rule” (2004: 111).

3. The Forces Armées Centrafricaines count only about 1,500 decently-trained soldiers among their ranks. International state-builders who look to these forces—more often predatory than protective—to secure the country’s territory and people tend to downplay or ignore how long-term, not to say unlikely, such an outcome is.

heavily-armed hunters to the “janjaweed,” guns-for-hire from the Chad-Sudan borderlands who frequently serve as security agents for the herders. In such a context, self-defense-groups-cum-rebels are communities’ best hope of protection. Transforming rebels into tailors or carpenters or shopkeepers or “improved” farmers by taking away their guns and giving them short-term trainings so that the state can resume its Leviathan position, as the theory of DDR proposes, is thus spectacularly out of sync with the realities in places like the buffer zone. Moreover, few of the people who join rebellions are full-time rebels. As is the case with participating in a local defense force, for most rebels taking up arms is only one of a range of roles that they take on to make a living and further other life projects. The idea that these people require help to be transitioned out of their arms-carrying roles relies on a far more static notion of identity than is actually operative here.

As contrary as DDR’s premises seemed to be to the realities of life in the buffer zone, however, rebels and would-be rebels became enchanted and ensnared by its promises. Rebel leaders dangled DDR as a major pay-off for the work done by armed group members. The “Bozizé model” came to loom large in armed group members’ minds: like the fighters who helped Bozizé seize power, they were encouraged to join armed groups with the promise of material rewards. These rank-and-file would discuss amongst themselves how much cash they would receive—800,000 CFA? One million? Two million? (about US\$2,000—4,000)⁴—and, when faced with the infrequently-present

4. There is a precedent for such high figures: in 2004, in a ceremony presided over by Jean-Francis Bozizé, son of the CAR president, in Goré, Chad, some of the former liberators received pay-outs of one

DDR officials, pester them to hear the final figures. Though news media sources are not as widely available in these remote locales as they are elsewhere, Bangui broadsheets—simple, 8-page mimeographed affairs—occasionally make it to rebel areas and circulate among the fighters, and radio news (comprehension of which requires heroic struggles through static) gets passed around as well. These sources sometimes contain references to donor funding promises, such as for DDR, and these figures fly through towns, causing all sorts of speculation and calculation. If x billion CFA have been pledged, the most common calculation is to divide x by the number of rebels and arrive at the figure that each should personally receive. DDR staffers, especially the well-compensated expatriates, roll their eyes in frustration at the fighters' reasoning, implying how ridiculous it is for a fighter to receive what is essentially one of these employees' monthly salary.⁵

Expectations of DDR swelled the ranks of the armed groups (at least on paper). At the time of active hostilities with the government, estimates placed the size of the APRD at about 1,000 (Spittaels and Hilgert 2009: 12) and the UFDR at some 600. Those counts rose during the Libreville peace conference in 2008 (the UFDR, for instance, then

million CFA each (Debos 2008). The money was quickly swallowed by some spectacular parties and other needs of life and family.

5. The point that international organization and NGO staffers receive exponentially higher pay than their agencies' local staff has been made many times before (see, for example, Englund 2006). Quite frankly, global inequalities of this nature are such a systemic fact that it almost seems unhelpfully unrealistic. In the case of DDR in CAR, however, where the program never even happened, the contrast between how easily cushy expatriate salaries could be justified and how difficult it was to disburse funds to the fighters nevertheless bears remarking on. As frustrated as the expatriates were with their work—and they lamented the inefficiencies and perverse incentives to no end—when they completed their posts they left the country knowing their bank accounts had been regularly replenished.

listed its ranks at 1,240 fighters), and again during the process of developing the lists of DDR beneficiaries. According to the initial lists prepared for DDR, the APRD contained some 6,000 fighters. Field commanders accepted payments as compensation for placing someone on their list, and they also called on people who had lost a relative to APRD fighting to join to claim the rewards of the fallen. Officers encouraged new recruits because they could claim a percentage of whatever assistance that person eventually received as a fee for the service of putting the person's name on the list. Rather than shrinking the armed groups, the promise of DDR made them larger. Similarly, despite its theoretical justification of reducing militarization through quelling the circulation and use of small arms, on the ground, DDR is not about collecting guns (generally, few workable pieces are collected—the broken rifle gets presented for DDR, while the working AK remains at home) or demobilizing. It has taken on a different meaning, partially divorced from the content implied by the terms that make up its acronym: namely, the promise of patrimonial largess as a way of tiding over youth who see themselves as abandoned.

DDR organizers have recognized the development of markets around their programs as a problem for almost as long as the programs themselves have existed (Muggah 2005). (Early programs offered cash for guns and effectively stimulated the black market for small arms.) Each iteration of DDR relies on new strategies that are at once described as globe-spanning “best practices,” while also being experimental. While

not eager to take the “Africa as laboratory” metaphor too far,⁶ (all policy is on some level experiment, after all) it is interesting to see which lessons get learned from one iteration of DDR to the next, and which patterns remain in place. DDR staffers, who rarely if ever stick around for more than one program in a particular place, tend to see the current project as a clean slate, a totally new (and better) effort, and forget that theirs is but the latest in a series of related undertakings around a common theoretical form. When one reviews the various DDR programs in CAR over the past decade, it becomes clear both that these programs have created an incentive to take up arms using the form of rebellion, and also that the expectations thus aroused are never satisfied. That this state of affairs does not lead to more violence and more rebellion than it does should offer evidence of a widespread distaste for armed conflict, which has such deleterious effects for people living in such precarious circumstances.

7.3 Lessons learned?

DDR is an important element of what brought me to CAR in the first place, in 2003. I made a brief visit to the country to assess the socio-economic impacts of small arms use and prevalence as a consultant to a Geneva-based research institute, the Small Arms Survey. Several other trips to the country had a disarmament focus, notably a 2007 visit to help with the independent evaluation of the *Programme de réinsertion et d'appui aux communautés* (PRAC, Program for Reinsertion and Support to Communities), as the

6. In particular, some of the future-directed claims of this line of analysis seem hard to justify on bases other than hope (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011), and if calling Africa the future is hope, that is a strange kind of hope indeed.

2004-2007 iteration of DDR was known. This work involved interviewing PRAC staff and beneficiaries (individually and in groups), reviewing the reams upon reams of program documents and reports, and visiting project sites to verify that the proposed projects had been carried out.

To call the PRAC a failure would be an understatement. Anthropologists generally prefer to study the social construction of success and failure rather than assigning these labels ourselves. But in this case the management was so inept, and the expectations created so poorly addressed, and information circulated with such difficulty, that it is difficult to take a relativistic stance. What is noteworthy, then, is that this thorough failure was in large measure forgotten in the drive to start the next DDR program. I return to the details of the PRAC here to draw out the effects of institutional amnesia. What is forgotten from one program to the next, and what is remembered?

During the army mutinies that wracked Bangui in the mid- to late 1990s, then-President Patassé created militias for his own protection. For the most part, these were the groups the PRAC intended to disarm, together with people who had participated in former president Kolingba's failed coup in May 2001 and Bozizé's liberators. There were four principal pro- Patassé militias: the *Karako* (peanut), *Balawa* (shea nut), *Sarawi* (people of Sara ethnicity), and that associated with his *Mouvement pour la libération du peuple centrafricain* (MLPC) political party. These militias were based in the Bangui neighborhoods home to people with family ties in the northwest, where Patassé himself came from. In my interviews (in August 2004) with people who were mobilized to fight

with these groups, they explained that they were all recruited between 1996 and 1998, at which point they had been given a gun and some kind of training (usually for a couple of weeks). By the end of 1998, the government had collected all these weapons.

Kolingba's supporters told a similar story: the period during which they were mobilized was quite short, and after the hostilities had wound down they needed to continue their lives and search out new opportunities to make money—as always. In sum, the main groups that the PRAC targeted for demobilization had not existed for four to six years when the program began. In other words, it was necessary to *re-mobilize* people to *demobilize* them. (In the case of Bozizé's liberators, as described above, most received their pay-out directly from the president's son in 2004.) There were four other groups that were to benefit from the PRAC, but their constitution was even harder to discern. For example, the "parallel police": in all my interviews, no one could tell me who this group was, how it came into being, or what it did. The main theme that emerges from this overview is that DDR runs parallel to the problems of militarization and insecurity in the country, problems that are simultaneously too fluid and too structural to be resolved by a single program, especially one as poorly adapted to the local context as DDR.

In discussing these observations with the PRAC staff, they recognized that there were some disconnects between the theory of DDR and the context they faced in CAR. However, like the armed group members themselves, these officials believed that once it has been created, an armed group has a right to a disarmament program, even if the

group has already disarmed, demobilized, and “reinserted” itself, without international support. Though not always explicitly stated, the idea that “ex-combatants” (the term of art for DDR participants) must be bought off in some form or another to prevent them from again turning against the government is one of the tenets that founds DDR. And since CAR was a member of the World Bank-funded Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP) and there were funds that needed to be spent, a DDR program is what the country would get. As it was planned and rolled out beginning in 2004, the PRAC represented the vanguard of DDR policy. Unlike previous projects, which targeted only ex-combatants, the PRAC also offered assistance to their communities in the form of collaboratively-decided upon projects, like the rehabilitation of a school or the building of public latrines. Assistance was a new idea, and it responded to the criticism that in favoring “perpetrators,” DDR created new jealousies and mistrust among the “victims.”⁷ However, very few of these projects ever came to fruition;⁸ the community component was by far an afterthought.

With the PRAC, a lack of experience being part of a large, hierarchical bureaucratic organization combined with a lack of shared understanding about what the program is and how it should work resulted in a nightmare of poor management, and growing mistrust. Many of the people who had been chosen to fill project posts did not

7. I put the terms perpetrator and victim in quotes because the terms give the impression that the groups are exclusive, when in reality they are extreme points on a spectrum, with most people lying somewhere in the middle; that is, they have both victimized and been victimized themselves.

8. Sixty-nine community projects were initially planned; the PRAC claimed to have finished forty-one of them. The independent evaluation team visited thirty-five of these and found seventeen in completed condition and eighteen abandoned underway (Clément et al. 2007: 28).

have the experience or technical skills to manage a program of this sort, with its computer databases and complicated procurement policies. At the same time, many of the staffers seemed not at all to feel responsible for actually carrying out the work of the project. For instance, project beneficiaries were to receive foodstuffs in exchange for showing good efforts in their farming and other reintegration projects. The people who should have checked on their progress never did, and the stock-houses of beans and corn spoiled. Project staff then burned the goods, a bonfire seen for miles around. The ashes fell like metaphorical spit on the faces of those living in the area. I interviewed a group of women who had participated in the PRAC (none of them were “real” ex-combatants, though they had stories to recite of having labored and loved for the Congolese militia led by Jean-Pierre Bemba, the *Mouvement des libérateurs congolais*, or MLC) who told me that they appreciated the HIV test they had gotten as part of the program. Most said it had offered them relief—their tests were negative. But one young woman, her facial features characteristically gaunt and her posture characteristically weak, quietly murmured that it had brought her bad news. In theory, all those found to be positive were to benefit from free anti-retroviral therapy courtesy of the Global Fund, but in reality these connections were not made and they never received any pills.

The first goal of DDR is disarmament. The PRAC “disarmed” 7,556 people; that is, 7,556 people officially passed through the stage of disarmament, even if the PRAC did not in fact collect guns from them. The program collected only about 400 guns, of which fewer than 200 were in working condition (Clément et al. 2007). If the goal of

disarmament is to reduce the number of small arms in circulation, the PRAC can only count as a failure. In the process, the meaning of the term “disarmament” shifts. The project planners may still conceive of it in its theoretical sense, but on the ground, it takes on a new meaning not linked to the collection of weapons and instead tied to the process of being accepted into a program of this sort, which usually involves the management of a range of relationships and particular styles of self-representation (self-qualification). Given that the groups to be “demobilized” did not actually exist as such at the time of the PRAC, the people who ended up participating in the project were not necessarily (former) members of these groups but were rather those who had ties to those recognized as commanders or other gate-keepers, such as program staff. The PRAC thus infused the former commanders, diminished by their inability to be providers of work, with a fresh puff of authority and importance. In some cases, they made money by selling slots in the program. In other cases, the benefits they drew were more symbolic, or tied to their social position. The point is not that it is inherently bad that they found creative ways to profit from participation. Though from the perspective of those planning and paying for “demobilization” the term refers to the severing of bonds between commanders and their fighters, it has been recognized in diverse contexts that the opposite is frequently the case (e.g., Hoffman 2004). In Liberia, it has even been suggested that *re-mobilization* (specifically, re-organizing some of the former fighters to carry out community-based patrols) might be the best way to bring about reconciliation and security amid the broader “no peace, no war” context (Persson 2012).

The point is, rather, that it is crucial to track the various meanings that come to be ascribed to seemingly straight-forward terms, and their associated processes, like “disarmament” and “demobilization” and to pay attention to the kinds of collaboration that are possible across these divergent meanings and the kinds of collaboration that are foreclosed by them.

Though the PRAC operated outside of Bangui, few people in the towns where it was to work had actually participated in armed conflict. But because the project technicians were looking for “beneficiaries,” it was necessary to find some. One day in Bozoum, a PRAC site, I sat chatting with the town mayor. In an attempt to make conversation and also hopefully progress in figuring out who else to talk to, I asked him about the number of people in the town who had been members of armed groups. The mayor shook his head vigorously — “No, no!” He seemed dismayed that I would think such a thing of the town. “But there are ex-combatants?” I clarified, this time using the project’s term of art for former fighters. “Oh yes,” the mayor replied. “We have a lot of ex-combatants.” This conversation indicated that the term associated with the project — ex-combatant — had taken on a new meaning in this setting, one that was not synonymous with the meaning intended by the program organizers. Technical program-speak is not simply a de-politicizing, bureaucratizing force. Its terms can also become reference points enabling projects among diverse actors, who have a shared sense of purpose even though the understandings of the various people involved about what the terms mean and their practical implications vary widely. What are the consequences of

this? Looking at the final phase of the PRAC, “reinsertion,” offers some (troubling) clues, which I will then follow into the present and the case of the perpetually waiting APRD and UFDR.

It is fair to ask whether it is a problem that the people who participate in DDR are not necessarily those who have been members of armed groups. International organization redistribution in the form of trainings and other projects, as the “R” part of DDR entails, increases the goods and services available on the market and injects some cash, at least in the short-term, which helps sellers as well as purchasers. It can be a small-scale stimulus project. Though that was theoretically possible, it was at best one among a range of actual consequences. Ex-combatants complained to no end about the project’s reliance on imported goods, which the ex-combatants said were more expensive and worse quality than equivalent goods made locally. Though it is doubtful that cheaper wares are made in CAR (very little is manufactured in CAR—certainly not the kinds of buckets and pans the PRAC distributing as part of its “reinsertion kit”), it draws out the ex-combatants’ preference for cash, which they can choose how to spend themselves, over an assortment of household goods, which included t-shirts with lopsided, poor-quality printing identifying their wearers as “ex-combatants,” which carried a stigma of belligerence that they then had to live up to or struggle to live down. PRAC ex-combatants could choose which reinsertion training they wished to go through: agriculture, livestock, small business, carpentry, tailoring, car repair, and so forth. (PRAC staff decided upon these options with no effort to determine whether there

was a market for more carpenters, tailors, or mechanics, or whether these were in fact the vocational options that people wanted.) The trainings varied hugely in terms of quality and length. In Bozoum, a popular choice was small business, a training provided by the staff of the Catholic mission, who taught their students basic book-keeping and related skills. At the end, each ex-combatant received a small sum of money to use to purchase goods to sell on the market. All the female ex-combatants with whom I discussed (and many of the men as well) reported that they had tried to make the journey to the big market at Mbaiboum (Cameroon)⁹ to purchase wares. Whether on the way there or on the way back, their vehicles were stopped by road cutters, who dispossessed them of all they had. Others had all their goods seized by state agents because they did not possess the necessary *patentes* (licenses) to sell in the market (Clément et al. 2007). Clearly, the problem of insecurity in the region is not something that “disarmament” can resolve.

Both through the PRAC and through radio reports about other countries’ DDR programs, youth in CAR have learned that adopting a belligerent pose can be a way of attracting the attention of the international community and garnering financial assistance for oneself. The lesson learned, in the words of a Catholic priest in Kaga Bando, was that “If you’re not in [an armed group], you won’t benefit.” Hoffman (2004) describes a near-riot at the disarmament center in Bo, Sierra Leone, which will not let in all the ex-combatants who wish to enter. He reports that one yells, “This is how

9. In Cameroon but close to CAR, Chad, and Nigeria, Mbaiboum is one of the key commercial hubs in the broader region.

anxious the *kamajors* are to disarm! This is how much we want peace!” (332). Even in his quest for peace, this ex-fighter found it necessary to perform his force to get the officials to pay attention to his plight outside the gates. Similar scenes characterized the length of the PRAC. On one level, they were a symptom of the failures of communication that ran through every facet of the program.¹⁰ On another, it draws out a dynamic whereby people in/from remote places, or otherwise lacking in the kinds of capital that are necessary to be heard (with dignity) in centers of power, have learned that a performance of force is their only option. The PRAC staff liked to say “our door is always open.” Though that may have been true, they neglected to acknowledge that those open doors lay inside a walled compound with a tall metal gate, all of it topped with razor wire and guarded by a security company whose agents decided who to admit.¹¹ Both PRAC staff and ex-combatants accused each other of being liars, through and through. Frustrated ex-combatants would protest and riot outside the gates—sometimes for months at a time. Our only option, they said, was to “look for a fight” (Clément et al. 2007: 5).

10. With funding and oversight from the MDRP, World Bank, and United Nations Development Programme, and with the program run by a semi-independent entity, the PRAC, with guidance and collaboration from the National Disarmament Commission, it is perhaps inevitable that communication among so many entities would be fitful, more absent than present, rather than free-flowing. Even allowing for that, the number of break-downs, bottle-necks, and times that information “communicated” never got heard was impressive.

11. Partly, the decision to admit turns on such issues as being able to present an ID to serve as collateral while on the premises, and partly it turns on other markers of wealth and status, such as skin color (whites, the purse-string-manager class, are never turned away), whether the person arrives in a private vehicle, how clean the person is (does the person smell like he or she has just walked a great distance?), and what the person is wearing (a proper suit, proper shoes?).

Rebellion is a mode of self-styling (Bayart 2000) that has proven uncommonly good at making oneself visible to donors. Whereas the “human potential agenda” (Piot 2010) currently in vogue among development agencies emphasizes communal goods like education and health care, DDR is a rare example of a project that donors see as imperative *and* that entails payments—in cash and goods—to individuals.¹² From an economistic perspective, what is surprising is that there are not *more* people who find that prospect sufficiently tempting to cause them to find a way into an armed group, whether as a fighter or as an “ex-combatant.”

The PRAC began in 2004. In 2005 and 2006 “post-conflict” CAR saw the appearance of new armed groups, notably the APRD and the UFDR. For this reason , already before the conclusion of the PRAC in 2007, government officials and international donors were already discussing the modalities of the next DDR program. Though intended as a one-time, definitive effort, DDR in CAR has become an expected, if not always attained, part of the ongoing cycle of rebellion. The PRAC was an important part of how people learned to have these expectations. Other sources included rebel leaders and news reports from other countries in the region with DDR programs. In bureaucratic report-writing, the “lesson learned” carries the implied “recommendation” and the intention to do things differently the next time around. But it

12. There is discussion in the aid world about the effectiveness of cash transfers as development assistance, and they have been tried in a number of countries with considerable success (as measured by development agencies’ regression analyses of outcomes), but there remains some discomfort about giving the “gift” that is development aid in the form of cold, hard cash (Farrington and Slater 2006).

is more a convention of the form than a description of what ends up happening.¹³

Writing does not translate into action so smoothly.¹⁴ Instead, program staff change. To the extent they are aware of the projects that precede their efforts, their knowledge remains partial, rumor-like. They descend with their own lessons learned from their previous postings (in the DRC, in East Timor), as well as whatever tenets are circulating as part of the current iteration of “best practices” in the field. And they are rapidly enmeshed in their own problems, their own staffing issues, their own deadlines, all of which make it difficult to take the time to gaze back at the rear horizon.

7.4 The business of waiting for DDR

The new DDR initiative certainly had to deal with its share of challenges, only some of them related to the difficulty of running a “post-conflict” program in a place where new rebellions were still springing up, and where the fiction of the state’s monopoly on the use of force is so far from the reality.

This time, DDR would not be led by a project agency in collaboration with a national disarmament committee. The national disarmament committees, a “best practice” of five to ten years earlier, had proven notorious for corruption. Instead, it would be led by a steering committee. The composition of CAR’s DDR steering

13. As Riles has pointed out, report-writing conventions are key to the establishment and maintenance of networks, perhaps more so than the content of the reports or the actions they inspire (2000).

14. The great puzzle for me as I plowed through thousands of pages of PRAC documents, was how so many evaluations could be carried out, so many recommendations made, so many time lines with specific tasks and objectives constructed, and yet none of them made it off the page and into practice. How, then, would this final evaluation be any different? What might it take for the “lessons learned” to change policy and practice? I am afraid I arrived at no definitive conclusions.

committee was determined at the Libreville peace conference, in 2008. It is chaired by the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations Peacebuilding Office in CAR (BINUCA); 1st Vice Chair is Jean-Jacques Demafouth, President of the APRD; and 2nd Vice Chair is Cyriaque Gonda, Minister of Communications. Representatives of the other “politico-military groups” that remain party to the comprehensive peace agreement (APRD, UFDR, MLCJ, UFR), government representatives, the European Commission, the African Union, the World Bank, France, BINUCA, and UNDP round out the rest of the committee (UN 2009a). The theory behind the steering committee model was that it could address all the “sensitive” political questions surrounding DDR—how funds would be disbursed, and by whom; the criteria for the selection/verification process; and so forth. Meanwhile, the expatriate and local DDR staff working for UNDP would handle all the “technical” aspects of the effort—the day-to-day management and operations.

Although seemingly sound in theory, the division of the political from the technical essentially displaced accountability for pushing the process forward. The technicians prepared procedures and policies and reports and complained that the steering committee made none of the decisions necessary to be able to implement the program. The steering committee met for hour after hour, its members occasionally accusing the technical staff of meddling in “sensitive political” issues (such as how many combatants would need to be disarmed, and the quantity and type of weaponry they might be expected to hand in), and failed to resolve the major points of contention. The

chair, Sahle-Work Zewde for most of the committee's tenure, could have stepped in to force action, but instead she presided, largely mute, over the proceedings.¹⁵ Each meeting (they were held every three weeks or so, depending on schedules and cancellations) lasted most of a work day. They generally started at least an hour late, and they would frequently drag on for six hours or more. Hours would be spent debating small changes in word choice (should it be "...but the youth..." or "...so the youth..."?) and grammar, while all remained silent on the big questions about how the DDR process would work. Some committee members complained that others frequently arrived drunk to these morning meetings. Many times, meetings were canceled at the last minute, leaving staffers scrambling to organize a time when all these VIPs could commit to meet again, usually several weeks hence. It was, in short, a very effective exercise in frustration.

A particularly fraught topic was the *Prime Journalière d'Alimentation* (PJA), an auxiliary payment that was not actually part of DDR, though armed group members

15. The criticism that Special Representatives in CAR do not take strong enough political stances has dogged everyone who has held the post. Though one might expect that in a country of as little strategic importance as the CAR it would be easy for the diplomats to set aside diplomatic niceties, the opposite seems to occur more often. To advance in political positions in the UN, one must above all never rock the boat. Rocking the boat in a place of as little account as the CAR would be a double folly because it would not even win many friends. When I have spoken with Special Representatives (I interviewed Lamine Cisse, SRSG in Bangui from 2001 to 2007, several times, Sahle-Work Zewde once, and participated in a conference with Margaret Vogt, the current SRSG), they emphasized the delicate situation they were in. On the one hand, human rights organization critics expected them to take a hard line and force the government to change its ways of operating; on the other hand, the principle of sovereignty meant that they had to treat their government interlocutors with the deference and respect they demanded. Zewde described her job as a continual quest for an elusive "equilibrium." The word choice is telling because it indicates that though she sees the UN's role as midwifing a more-functional state, she expected to achieve this change through equilibrium, which, as any old-school anthropologist could explain, is a model founded on downplaying the importance of change through time.

generally considered is as such. (Funding for it was to come from the government, from monies given by CEMAC, a Central African regional organization.) Over the course of six months, the steering committee members debated the details of the PJA. How much should each ex-combatant receive? Should officers, or people who had been in rebellion for longer, receive more? For how long should they be supported? And, perhaps the most important consideration, who should hand out the money? The government thought its agents should, as that would help build allegiance toward them and establish their authority, while the armed group leaders were adamant that they should have this responsibility, for otherwise their authority would be unacceptably compromised. The DDR technical staff suggested that they could do it, but neither side accepted the technicians' claims to neutrality. There are no banks in the parts of rural CAR home to rebellions, so that was not an option; it would have to be person-to-person transfers. Finally, after more than half a year of discussion and several "missions" by steering committee members to visit "their" men on the ground, it was decided that the PJA should be 21,000 CFA (about US\$42) per month for three months. The field commanders would have control over the distribution of the funds.

After all this debate, after such heated discussion about the quantities and details, what armed group members on the ground actually received bore little relation to the final sums determined in the meetings. APRD in the Kaga Bandoro area who had been in the group for some years reported they received one installment of 10,000 CFA (about US\$20) and then never heard another word about the PJA. Those who had joined

more recently received just 5,000. (The money that left Bangui was all in 10,000 and 5,000 CFA notes, so, given how hard it is to make change, it never would have been feasible to give an uneven sum like 21,000 anyway.) It remains unclear what happened to the rest of the money that could have been used for the PJA, or how much the commanders themselves received. The rank and file were convinced that the commanders had “eaten” it. Colonel Lakué’s house in Chad was said to be progressing nicely—a full-on villa at this point, not just a house.

Through all this time—nearly two years—the members of the steering committee and the expatriates responsible for DDR benefited from comfortable per diems and/or salaries as a function of their posts. The Economic Community of Central African States (known by its French acronym, CEEAC) sent military observers to verify the ex-combatants and oversee the disarmament phase. They should have stayed a maximum of six months but they, too, found themselves waiting for the steering committee to make the decisions that would let them do their work. They were in the country for nearly two years as well, at a cost of millions of dollars.¹⁶

At the same time, the fact that the members of the APRD, which should have been the first group to be disarmed, presented almost no weapons (two percent of the people who showed up carried a gun) when they stood before the military observers to be verified contributed to the growing miasma of mutual mistrust that surrounded the whole idea of DDR. In many cases, the mistrust was personal. As with the APRD

16. The military observers cost approximately US\$1.3 million per six months (UN 2009b).

members who did not trust the UNHCR employee they were sure was corrupting their leader (see chapter six), it seemed that everyone was sure that specific others were up to no good. From the perspective of armed group leaders like Demafouth, the people not to be trusted were the UNDP technical staff, who from his perspective meddled unacceptably in politics—in short, doing work that was not theirs. Of the Balkan UNDP DDR coordinator, Demafouth, a lawyer in Paris when not working to further his political career in CAR, complained to me,¹⁷ “He speaks French poorly. He deforms the words, and that distorts the ideas. And his summaries [of the steering committee meetings] are terrible. And he brought a girl he worked with in Ivory Coast who went to Paoua [one of the APRD towns] and spied on us! She wrote reports on the APRD: the weapons, the uniforms, the mentalities—that’s not her work!” Demafouth argued that the whole UNDP expatriate team must be replaced. It would only take a week, he figured, to find new people and bring them in. “[The coordinator] is a spy. Oh, we put him in the hot seat during the last meeting! We told him that he did a bad summary [of the previous meeting]. He told us that he had recorded it! He never even told us that he was recording! He must have hidden the machine somewhere. They must all be replaced.” A favored criticism leveled against the diplomatic/technical staff was that they were “not neutral” when their stance did not further the objectives of a particular person. And from the UNDP coordinator’s perspective, the armed group and government steering

17. I first met Demafouth in Paris in 2003, when I helped interview him about the small arms held by the Central African Armed Forces. During the DDR proceedings, he made his home at the FOMAC (a regional peacekeeping force present in CAR for a decade, under various auspices) base, near the airport in Bangui. From there he prepared his (thoroughly unsuccessful) presidential campaign.

committee members did nothing but stall. He recorded the meeting because otherwise they would deny promises or concessions that they had made the previous time they met.

According to the UNDP DDR team, the armed group commanders lied and misrepresented to suit their pecuniary interests. First of all, there was the fiction that there were five armed groups to disarm. Two of them, the MLCJ and Union des forces pour le rassemblement (UFR, Union of Forces for Unity), were known not to really exist. In the case of the UFR, the leader, Florian Ndjadder, was the son of a Patassé-era military leader, but it was unclear why anyone ever believed his claim to be leading a force of dispossessed rural youth. Nevertheless, he signed the Libreville Peace Agreement on the UFR's behalf, and so everyone went along with the story. In the case of the MLCJ, it was a name picked by Abakar Sabone, who found himself without any fighters when he split with Damane (see chapter six). In 2009, Sabone managed to sign up a predominantly-Kara self-defense group in the Birao area to represent his on-the-ground military presence, but this group had never actively fought the government, as rebel groups are expected to have done. A third armed group, the FDPC of Miskine, was known to consist primarily of Chadians who, as foreigners, would not be eligible for DDR in CAR. Then there were the "real" armed groups, the APRD and the UFDR. If only 1,000 or 1,500 APRD members were "true" ex-combatants (i.e., had fought), the remaining 4,500–5,000 on the lists reflected opportunistic inflation, in their view. (The UFDR was also understood to have been inflated since signing the peace agreement, but to a far

lesser extent than the APRD. The UFDR was never verified, so the figures are harder to pin down.) The staffers told of observing the verification of ex-combatants and noticing that people who presented to participate in the process could not even recall their own names. This was taken as a sign that the person was being verified under a sobriquet, perhaps the name of someone who had not paid the commander to participate or had died in the period between the generation of lists and the verification itself. People who forgot their aliases would be taken aside and beaten afterward. One staffer recalled seeing a white-haired old man come forward and state a birth date that would have made him twenty-one years old. The expatriates told these stories with amazement at the hoaxes, but they did not see it as their job to police the practices. In other countries, to be verified for DDR a person had to demonstrate some familiarity with a gun (taking apart a Kalashnikov and cleaning it, for instance) or otherwise prove “real” combat experience, but in CAR most fought with locally-made weapons, and few ever received any training, so these usual criteria could not be used. In any event, the question was political and thus surpassed their mandate. Had they tried to take a stance, the armed group members and/or their superiors might have mutinied. The military observers, too, abnegated responsibility for deciding who should be accepted into the program and who should not. They did not see taking a stance as part of their job description, either.

In 2011, after more than 50 of the interminable steering committee meetings and with all the political problems remaining unresolved, UNDP's funding for DDR¹⁸ had all been spent—this before a single activity on behalf of the ex-combatants had taken place. The “preparatory phase” was expected to start in April 2009 and last for six months (DDR Steering Committee 2010a); by early 2011 it still was not completed. Much of UNDP's funds had gone toward expatriate salaries. For the ten expatriates working on the project, annual salaries ran to US\$2.04 million per year (US\$192,000—240,000 per employee per year); for the sake of comparison, the non-personnel costs for the entire disarmament component ran to less than US\$500,000, and demobilization US\$1.761 million (DDR Steering Committee 2010b). The Steering Committee was also expensive, especially the trips its members made to visit the ex-combatants. A brief mission to Tiringoulou or Paoua (by plane) cost around US\$10,000 (DDR Steering Committee 2010b).¹⁹ Steering Committee representatives of the politico-military groups each received an indemnity of US\$1,000/month, and government representatives received US\$200/month. For the project budget to stay in the black required that activities move along according to the expected pace. Instead, the project never made it out of the

18. DDR was expected to cost a total of US\$27 million. The UN Peacebuilding Fund and UNDP, especially its Office for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, contributed the majority; CEMAC and CEEAC contributed as well.

19. In theory, missions to the hinterland are not supplemental income for the participants. Per diems are designed to be subsumed by food, lodging, and transport. In reality, they are accepted as a way of making supplemental income, because these amounts are always far higher than what is required. In Bangui I sat with a UFDR spokesman, resplendent in a magenta, West African-style boubou, who had just been “on mission” while he fielded requests from compatriots for a share of his earnings—a person who has been to the provinces is expected to have cash reserves at the ready. He explained that there were new rules in place and that remaining money had to be returned; the supplicants shrugged but seemed unconvinced.

preparatory phase. The people focused on operational aspects of the program had simply to wait.

The DDR staff did not sit around doing nothing. Though the UNDP team had to defer to the Steering Committee's decisions on most matters, they worked long hours (staying at the office until after 8p.m. was common) preparing various "technical" aspects of the program. Deadlines hung like heavy weights suspended precariously just above their heads. A boss would say that a certain project absolutely had to be finished by the end of the week, which the employee would struggle to do, and then the product would not get used for weeks, if ever. For instance, employees developed a sophisticated database that would allow a user to sort ex-combatants based on a range of demographic and other identifying characteristics. Each person's photo would be uploaded into the system to verify that the correct person was presenting for each distribution. This would also allow for the tracking of data such as whether someone who presented for verification with a Kalashnikov eventually ended up handing that weapon in. Designing a database of this type requires not just the attention to detail of the computer programmer, but also skill in thinking through all the possible configurations of personal data that could arise so that every situation is accounted for in the database's decision tree. In a place like CAR, it is especially complicated to do so, because the data is frequently incomplete (last names or birth dates or similar details are frequently missing). The system they eventually came up with was recognized by higher-ups in New York as a model of elegant design, and the employee who started it

went on to a job traveling between different countries with DDR programs (Liberia, DRC) to develop similar databases. In CAR, however, the system was never put to use.

Whereas the technical staff saw these systems as a way to take politics out of the program, the steering committee members saw them as challenges to their authority. They preferred to keep things personalized. For instance, once the PJA details had been more or less hashed out, the UNDP DDR coordinator suggested that the money could be dealt with by ECOBANK, a regional bank with several branches in Bangui known for its cutting-edge (by CAR standards, anyway) policies. ECOBANK would prepare an envelope for each ex-combatant with his/her name on it. These sealed envelopes could then be transported north and one handed to each ex-combatant, and the distribution process would be more transparent. The steering committee greeted the suggestion with silence. It was not mentioned again.

Throughout all this, the armed group members waited. They received the leaders and DDR officials who descended from the sky, often unannounced, to make pronouncements about the state of the program, cordially. When the officials left, usually later the same day or the day after, the armed group members began complaining. They saw themselves as hostages to their leaders' false promises, and as further constrained by the difficulty they had obtaining any additional information about what was going on. No one told the UFDR, for instance, that, owing to the compromised security situation, which would have made transporting and delivering equipment like demobilization or reinsertion kits to such a remote zone extremely

difficult, in their case DDR was indefinitely on hold. By March 2010, they had received Demafouth twice. Stanislas Mbangot, Minister of Reconciliation, had come once as well, as had Prefect [governor] Raymond Ndogou. Cyriaque Gounda, co-Vice President of the steering committee, had come and promised projects for women—soap making and shea oil production. He gave them three million CFA (about US\$6,000) in “coffee money”—a thank you for attending the meeting. But, as the UFDR *chef d'état major* recognized, that is not how it is supposed to be done. To be official, a money transfer must include paperwork signed in Bangui. The way Gounda had done it they had no way of knowing whether they had received the full amount they were due. Gounda had given them forms to fill out on which each person should indicate what profession he wanted the reinsertion to transform him into: soldier, gendarme, carpenter, livestock raiser, and so forth. They completed the forms and sent them to Bangui. Since then, silence. (When I asked DDR officials about these forms, they responded, baffled, that they had no idea what I was talking about.) Nothing remained after these visits but silence.

One morning in Tiringoulou in March 2010 I stopped by the UFDR-gendarme post to talk with the people staffing it about their work. The previously-animated men went silent as I walked in. The UFDR spokesman, Hamad Hamadine, was there, together with four other men. Hamad explained that they had been discussing their frustration and their “top secret” plans about what they would do in the event that DDR did not soon start. You face so many threats here, and you are the only ones protecting

the population, I said. Do you really want to hand in your guns? The men agreed that no, they would not. Then they returned to denouncing the sloth of the DDR process. In my discussions with armed group members about DDR, they repeated this sentiment: they did not expect to give up the tools and capacities they had as men-in-arms—but they felt entitled to a pay-out. Where this pay-out came from, exactly, was unclear. Zoundeiko, the UFDR Tiringoulou *chef d'état major*, told me of a recent visit to Bangui and how he had asked the Vice President of the Steering Committee, Demafouth, about how much money people on the ground would get and when. Demafouth's response was "that's above my pay grade." If the head of the steering committee did not know, who would? One of the distinctive traits of non-centralized governance is that the abnegation of authority/responsibility is accompanied by the arrogation of personalized governing capabilities. When Zoundeiko returned home to Tiringoulou he told his men to stay calm. "It is international opinion that will judge," and for the UFDR to be vindicated, they must maintain their discipline and patience.²⁰

All in all, there was a stalemate: whether there was DDR or not, the armed groups were not going to give up their guns and would effectively retain governing authorities in their areas of operation; this seemed to suit the president, as the central government had never had much of a reason to establish its unitary authority in these

20. Damane, who was not a member of the steering committee, took a similar approach. When I met with him at his (old) house in Tiringoulou, he said, "I'm here with my arms crossed [waiting]. This story of DDR is not a story of one day. It's a story we've been hearing for four years—for four years people have been singing about DDR. I see the investments that the European Union and others have made, and people in Bangui are building their houses [with those investments]. But what can I do here? Me and my men we take care of our fields, and we're ready."

remote zones. The idea of the state was the wedge that kept this fragile state of affairs from breaking apart, because it could serve always as simultaneously the problem and the solution, and yet did not exist as such. From the perspective of the rank and file, it was, yet again, “the state” that had disappointed them. “The state does not have the will [to do DDR],” I heard, over and over, as explanation for why they had not yet received their payments and other assistance. “DDR is a business for the state,” was the bitter analysis of one UFDR member: “the state” makes promises to the armed group members and in the meantime rakes in money from donors, which “the state” keeps for itself. It is true that government officials made money from DDR. Much of the funding (particularly for the reinsertion component) came in the form of a grant from CEMAC that carried no legal stipulations as to what it had to be used for, only a tacit understanding that if it was not used for reinsertion, no more money would be given. Rumor had it that most of this money was used for Bozizé’s 2010-2011 presidential campaign. But an examination of the DDR program itself shows a different coterie of profiteers. The armed group representatives to the steering committee made fully five times the “indemnity” that the government representatives did, and the expatriate UNDP staff made many times more than anyone. DDR is indeed a business, and to call it “the business of the state” is accurate: it is a certain ideal-type conception of the state as the unitary authority within its borders and holder of a monopoly on violence that makes DDR logically possible. And yet “the state” that benefits from this business is entirely different from the ideal type state and instead consists of an assortment of non-

centralized holders of sovereign capabilities. I found myself frequently mulling a line that one UFDR member had repeated: “That DDR smells bad to us.” Or, less metaphorically, from an APRD member, “People are discouraged [*azo ake découragé*]. We are worn out from waiting.”

The DDR was to have been completed before the March 2010 presidential elections. The concern was that if the elections were held prior to DDR, then if the rebels’ candidate of choice did not win they could renew their militarized struggle against the president. From the perspective of the international organizations funding the elections, the goal was “inclusiveness” so that the cycle of rebellion could be brought to a definitive end. In the end, both the elections and DDR were repeatedly postponed. In the early months, President Bozizé held forth on the necessity of DDR prior to elections in many of his speeches; it was one of the main reasons he cited for the delay in holding the polls. Finally, a date was set for the elections: the twenty-third of January 2011. Around this time, DDR dropped from the president’s speeches.

The armed group members I spoke with around this time vowed that if DDR did not take place before the elections, they would revolt. Elections would lend the president a workable patina of democratic legitimacy and make their grievances even less audible outside the bases and bars where they met to hang out, discuss, and rant. After listening to a cassette recording of a recent battle, one APRD member became reflective. His voice, previously militant as he shouted his and his compatriots’ demands, lowered. He

switched from French to Sango. In a rambling monologue, he laid out his somewhat contradictory desires and frustrations.

Everyone knows that we have opted for disarmament. Everyone wants the disarmament. But if we get to the point where the president does not want to have a dialogue with us, that indicates that he has opted for war. Everyone knows that the FDPC is for Ziguele [an opposition candidate] and Patassé, who is independent, but suppose that after these elections Ziguele, Patassé, and Demafouth all lose are you sure that the FDPC is going to put down their guns or will they rather make recourse to their guns? That's why disarmament has to happen before the elections.... The northern areas will become ungovernable.... Seriously, the president is a big idiot [*Vraiment lo 'ke idiot mingi*]. That's why things are going so slowly. He does not have the capacity to manage things. I'll give an example: he knows that all the parties are in agreement on DDR but he should take up the duty and say come out with your guns we are going to identify you and give you ID cards indicating that you're ex-rebels. When things are clear we'll be able to do things....If we fight it's because we want money and once we have it our hearts will be in peace [our hearts will be cool, content]. And once we're in that position you'll see that whoever wins there will be peace. It doesn't matter! There will be peace if we have money.

Here, the young man has emphasized the pecuniary interest he has in rebellion: it is a form of work and should be compensated as such. If it is not, they can always threaten war. But he also spoke of a more subtle contention, specifically that they be treated like men, rather than continually displaced with promises. He was tired, too, of what carrying a gun made of him.

Now, even if we are not demobilized and reinserted and all, what is important is that we have to get rid of these guns that we possess. The guns have to be collected because having guns pushes us to go and do something—to steal, to kill.²¹ ...We have to stop killing each other because the people who are getting killed are people who could contribute [who are able-bodied]. Therefore it is urgent that these guns get collected even if the money that has been set aside for us was used for villa-construction for other people. The big people arrive on the ground and they say that we are going to get a given sum and then when we finally get money it's less than promised. With the rest they build their houses—it's a business! ...The president must come and take the weapons that we are

21. He is referring implicitly to their leaders' gris-gris and other powers of making them follow their orders, even if they do not want to.

holding. For money or not. The first thing is that he must leave behind the white people's money—he must come! He must come personally and discuss with us like men. That would definitely change our behavior.²²

The young man's about-face from demanding payment—the prototypical angry-young-man rebel—to saying that what was really important was that the president come and talk to them like fellow men shows how ambivalent people in the buffer zone are about the non-centralized political configuration they inhabit. On the one hand, they seek to use it to their advantage to make claims; on the other hand, they would rather be taken care of in a more peaceful way, if only “the state” would take on its responsibilities. He finished his speech with a plea, directed at me:

I tell you, this white woman who is among us and who has listened to all the people in charge of this movement must go to her embassy and tell them what we have told her so that the ambassador will force the president to do the disarmament before the elections. This white is like our spokesperson.... The president he is African like us. The money that the European Union is going to give he must use it as intended. We say that this white woman should go to her embassy and the EU and tell them not to give any more money. They know that the money is not being used as it should be. He who fights only to protect his wallet, he will lose. [A reference to the Bible.] Because the Bible says that he who fights only to save his own life will lose but he who fights for others will win.²³

He closed by saying that the ambassadors should shut down the airport so that the kota azo could not jet off to France or elsewhere when things got tough and would have to stay and work things out. His conception of the Bangui government's power was thus inherently relational and founded in capabilities—capabilities that could be abridged or furthered by others with sovereign capabilities. Unfortunately for him, the ambassadors,

22. An idea underlying this comment is that physically being together—for instance, to eat the same food—is an important marker of solidarity and a recognition of a common humanity.

23. As my research assistant later noted, coming from a rebel who had caused much violence, this quote was unintentionally ironic.

even those who saw themselves as pushing the government hard for inclusiveness, were bound by the international legal definition of sovereignty, which renders the measures he advocated for illegal, which, though not making them impossible, nevertheless served as a convenient screen protecting the status quo.²⁴

7.5 Conclusion

January 2011 arrived, and Central Africans voted. President Bozizé won in a decisive victory marked by, in the words of the unusually-critical and plainspoken EU head of delegation, “massive fraud” and “terrorization of voters and certain candidates by state officials and security forces” (Samzun speech).²⁵ Demafouth won just two percent of the vote. The president did not assign him a ministerial post, either, preferring

24. This has not always been the case. The French government has repeatedly stepped in to alter the course of Bangui politics. For instance, their 1979 Barracuda Operation removed Bokassa from power, and in 2006 their military intervention proved the decisive factor in arresting the UFDR's descent on Bangui. It would arguably be more accurate to say that though they did not much care for the president, these diplomats had decided that he was the least bad option and should therefore be supported. Coups cost in time, money, patience: government officials are all shifted out and replaced with people unfamiliar with the workings of the bureaucracy.

25. Other factors militated in favor of the incumbent's victory, such as the fact that though the official campaign only lasted for a few weeks prior to the vote, he and his KNK party had unofficially campaigned for over a year. I participated in occasional visits of party chiefs to the hinterlands, where they handed out sugar and soap and funded dance groups and made promises about the next term in power. In Tiringoulou, they promised oil. The area has substantial, though far from Saudi-level, reserves of crude. For nearly a decade, the oil was unexploitable because of legal struggles over the concession. An American, Jack Grynberg, had bought the concession just before Patassé's ouster. Was the purchase still valid following his removal from office? In the end, the International Center for the Settlement of Investment Disputes decided that Grynberg had lost his claim due to failure to exploit the oil but was due damages, which his company estimated to be in the billions of dollars. The CAR government refused to pay. Now, the president has been negotiating with Chinese petroleum corporations. Thus the KNK representative in Tiringoulou made the center of his speech the promise that “before we leave office, this oil will be exploited!” Massive infrastructural (and other) hurdles remain before that happens, though, so the comment—which elicited cheers—can be read two ways: first, as a statement of the president's commitment to economic activity in the zone; or second, as a statement that, term limits notwithstanding, he has no plans of relinquishing office. To date, there is more evidence for the latter.

to pack the ministries with his close associates.²⁶ Though they had promised major uprisings in the event that the elections were held without DDR, and though they had warned that they might again march on the government if caught up in the siren speeches of armed group leaders, the APRD and UFDR made no “noise” (one local euphemism for violence) that was audible outside their areas of operation. Bozizé held his inauguration on the 15th of March, the eight-year anniversary of his successful coup.

In June 2011, with international DDR funding mostly dried up, Bozizé decided to launch his own DDR initiative. He flew to Bocaranga, an APRD town, where he addressed an assembled crowd. Speaking in Sango, he chastised the people of the north for having “destroyed their own house” by rebelling against him. (In fact, government forces, especially his own Presidential Guard, were responsible for the burning of thousands of houses in the region (HRW 2007).) Now that the women who had left their husbands had returned (in my interviews and conversations, I heard far more stories of men deserting women and children), he said, it was time for peace and for rebuilding. This entailed taking down the roadblocks (*“abarriere ti mungu ye na maboko ti azo”* — literally, the barriers that take things from people’s hands), which prevent the smooth flow of commerce. He said that he had come to pay the debts he owed them (*“futa akiri”*) and that now that he was doing so it was time for them to “have hard eyes” (*“le ti ala akpengba”*) that is, to not be so foolish anymore. In just a couple of months, the presidency announced that thousands had been “disarmed,” though they gave no

26. Only two opposition candidates made it into the new government, announced in April 2011, and they were promptly disowned by their parties for collaborating with the president.

details about what “disarmament” actually entailed, which left the question of whether any weapons were collected open.

Despite the steering committee’s failure to make DDR happen, the head of the UN in Bangui, Margaret Vogt since May 2011, used her December 2011 briefing of the Security Council to advocate for more DDR funding. She framed her plea as a story of progress that a lack of UN money could derail. “The Government is listening to and responding to advice from national stakeholders and the international community. However, lack of funding to complete the DDR ... could put CAR on the brink of disaster. Failure to consolidate security in the CAR would increase its attractiveness as a safe haven for regional brigands and rebel groups operating in the region.” She estimated that US\$19.3 million were needed for the reinsertion phase, and that disarmament and demobilization required another US\$2.6 million (UN News 2011). Though she pitched her tale as one of increasing government will for DDR, recent events suggest that the government has retracted its role, not stepped forward. Recall that throughout the steering committee’s operations, it had been understood that the government would handle the reinsertion process and had obtained funds that could be used for that purpose from CEMAC. Vogt, whose job entails drumming up funding, was understandably silent about this.

Less than a month after Vogt gave her speech, the APRD—the group Bozizé had declared disarmed!—and the UFDR pulled out of the peace process in protest over Demafouth’s arrest in Bangui on suspicion of planning a coup. Though pitched as a

once-and-for-all solution to the “problem”²⁷ of militarization, DDR has instead become a lever contributing to the continuation of rebellion amid a broader context of a capital-government detached from people in the hinterlands. DDR has become a key element of the “mentality of rebellion.” DDR looks like a door opening onto a range of claims that people who have taken on the role of rebel push on in hopes of arriving at their utopia of cared-for employment and global connection. However, here in the buffer zone that door seems only to lead to another dead end, because the ideal-type state theories that underlie DDR are so thoroughly out of sync with the actual, non-centralized dynamics of politics, and conflict, in the area. To varying degrees, those who threaten and those who protect position themselves in relation to an ideal type state, but this ideal type model serves as a platform for other projects, not as a bordered framework determining their actions.

What other effects does DDR have? The class of people organizing—or attempting to organize—DDR make some money out of it, and, in the case of the PRAC, ex-combatants (whether former armed group members or not) did draw some material benefits, though these were generally short-lived. What interested me in hearing armed group member’s narratives about their lives in arms was the way that DDR had become a mode for expressing hope and aspiration. All around them, they saw stagnation and rising poverty. Simple things like clothing a family were experienced as newly

27. By putting problem in quotes I do not mean to imply that people are happy about the ways that armed violence has seeped into and punctuated their lives, but to again call into question whether “bad” militarization can be separated from “good” militarization (state security) in the way that disarmament theory seems to think it can.

challenging, and life itself as newly precarious. DDR was a dream of being recognized through being chosen as a worker. It was a vision of a place-in-the-world (Ferguson 2006) more connected than the one they found themselves in.²⁸ My real frustration with DDR, then, is not so much the wasted money as the way that it seems, always, to fail at bringing about those visions of inclusiveness, yet without losing its appeal, whether on the level of the buffer zone's fighters or on the level of the international organizations that fund it. Instead of starting from the model of the ideal-type state, might it be possible to develop a vision of inclusiveness that would grow out of non-centralized networks? And what would such a project look like? These are the questions that might lead buffer zone residents off the precipice they see themselves as inhabiting.

28. "Does a person become invisible if he or she does not have a Web page? This appears to be increasingly the case in the world today" (Starn 1999: 30). More than a decade after this observation, peasants like those of Central Africa are among the most invisible, as countless humanitarian entreaties to fund aid for Central Africa's "forgotten conflicts" suggest.

8. Conclusion

Shortly before I left Ndele for a trip to Bangui, I stopped by the sultan-mayor's office to say goodbye to Ahmed Senoussi, son of the absent sultan-mayor and the person who represented his father while he was away. He had been the one to ride a motorbike north to the rebel base at Akoursoulbak to attempt to re-start negotiations. Ahmed sat behind a tall desk with a hand-drawn map on the wall behind him. Papers—handwritten and typed—floated on the desk. One was a note summarizing a radio transmission originating with the Iranian embassy in Kinshasa, which was attempting to verify a passport application from someone claiming Iranian citizenship and birth in Ndele. Another was a request for a contribution to the local International Women's Day celebrations.

We chatted briefly about goings-on in town. Then Ahmed changed the subject. "I want to go to the United States. I dream of it every night." He would go to America and meet President Obama. They would talk, and President Obama would install Ahmed as president of CAR, in which position he would rule for 15 years—two terms of seven years. Then he would extend by a year so he could change the laws and stay in power longer. The Americans would guard him and do the governing. He had even worked out a revenue sharing scheme for the as-yet-untouched oil reserves in the Northeast: 70 percent of profits to the Americans and 30 to the Central Africans. He seemed entirely serious.

I expressed skepticism. Eventually Ahmed suggested a more modest start: what, he asked, would it take to go study social sciences in America? I explained that the hardest part is the expense—it could be US\$30,000 per year. We were sitting in an office with one typewriter that was shared and coveted by all the office's employees, a warped-topped desk, and no electricity. "That's nothing!" he replied. Ahmed tended to grin while speaking. Now his smile was the broadest I had ever seen it.

"I can have that much money in minutes," Ahmed said. "I know the procedures to follow. You can have fifteen million in minutes if you know the entry points and procedures for illicit wealth from the state or other sources." He assured me he knew many who had done this. "*Les portes sont là!*" It was just a matter of a little *mic-mac* (he accompanied this term with a fish-like wiggle of his hands to indicate agility) and knowing the right doors, and that would be it: he would have his money, his trip to the United States, and eventually his country to rule. Whenever I saw him again, he reminded me of his Obama dreams.

In this encounter I saw both the pluses and minuses to thinking flexibly about profit and authority. Ahmed saw opportunities—hope, and dreams—where I saw none. I see no reason to buy a lottery ticket, because I am almost mathematically assured of failure. Ahmed reminded me that someone always wins—and that there are ways to play the system.

The invisibility of sources of wealth (Appadurai 2006) was frustrating. During the same conversation, Ahmed told how Qadhafi had organized a meeting for all the

sultans of Africa, which unfortunately sultan-mayor Kamoun had been unable to attend due to ill health. They did not know what had become of the money that should have been his due (per diem and such). Did Qadhafi give it to the president, who then ate it? Did he forget to give it at all? “We do not know.” I heard many stories of promised money that mysteriously disappeared. The UFDR spokesperson, Hamad Hamadine, had lost a leg while fighting. Though he lived in a village a day’s journey away, I met him in Tiringoulou because a collection had been taken up to buy him a prosthesis, and the person who held it lived in town. Upon arrival he found the man had traveled to Bangui for a funeral. Where was the money? Hamad did not know. He was waiting and hoping the man would return. In the end, he returned to his village with no news.

But the invisibility of sources of wealth was also reason for hope. Access to wealth might appear opaque, like a wall, but that meant that one had only to know where the door was. The faith that there is a door somewhere is one of the advantages of keeping authority, and the profit that comes with it, personalized, rather than institutionalized and determined by rules. People in the buffer zone were adept at finding doors. Anti-poaching guards hunted despite interdiction of exploitation in the parklands. They still felt abandoned, however, and despite their remote location were acutely aware of money, technology, and other opportunities that the buffer zone was missing. Some profited, and most lived in precarious material circumstances. No one saw a way out of what Hardin has described as a “lucrative but likely unsustainable situation of rival resource use regimes” (i). That would likely require giving up

sovereign capabilities of flexibility and invisibility that are currently the main sources of profit and authority in the area, together with violence and extraction. And what would replace them? “The state” seems unlikely to emerge magically in the form it takes in people’s imaginations and desires. This loop of “rival resource use regimes” — that is, of various actors claiming sovereign capabilities — may not be sustainable, but it is surprisingly durable. Gluckman (1955) made this point in describing conflict in his native South Africa, which had just begun Apartheid. High levels of conflict and division, rather than bringing about “fragility” or “collapse” (two terms used by donors to describe dysfunctional polities in recent years), might actually produce their own strife-ridden cohesion (164),¹ albeit a cohesion that is continually changing and riven with injustice.

In this dissertation, I have argued that the politics of remote places like northeastern CAR are best understood not as vacuums or voids—as those who idealize the unitary state would assume—but as a buffer zone in which a range of rulers dispossess, profit, and exercise authorities over others, while drawing strength from managing relationships with people outside of the area. The capabilities of any one of these actors do not add up to the totalizing system that political-theological models of sovereignty suggest—not because of deficiency on the part of the buffer zone, but because those political-theological models themselves misrepresent how fundamental

1. Gluckman wrote that he always thought “research into the causes of peace would be more profitable than research into the causes of war” (1955: 139). I thought of this conviction anew when my friend Aziza in Ndele said confidently that “Fear is peace, not so?”

relationships and contest are to the constitution of political authorities. Rather than look for this sovereign ideal type, I suggest looking for its constituent capabilities. People have lived in polities with varying degrees of centralization, so these capabilities might have centralizing *or* non-centralizing valences. The mistake of the anthropologists who earlier studied what they labeled “acephalous” societies was not in noting the extremely limited degree of centralization and differentiation of governing roles but in downplaying the fact that “stateless,” too, is an ideal type and that systems are always hybrid, with some tendencies toward consolidation and some toward fracturing. The Central African buffer zone is a place where non-centralization reigns to a greater extent than elsewhere. But where else might non-centralizing tendencies be present, but unrecognized? We may find them even in the largest, most connected cities.

I have suggested a way to analyze and account for the diversity of political organization in the world, a way that does not merely label some systems as “failed” versions of an ideal. But I hope also to have shown how tenacious that ideal can be as a Utopian desire, and how people wish for more expansive forms of collaboration and connection. Sometimes, the same person might lament that things remain personalized and situationally-determined, but also profit from their staying that way. So far, this ambivalence has proven too powerful to allow the “revolution” imagined by my friend Antoine, who wanted social science to show how to escape the mentality of rebellion. I have arrived at no solutions, either. The riddles remain.

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Biography

Louisa Nicolaysen Lombard was born in Peterborough, New Hampshire. She received a diploma in Culture, Society, and Ideas from the Nansen Academy in Lillehammer, Norway, in 1999. She earned her AB *magna cum laude* in Development Studies at Brown University in 2003. She began doctoral studies at Duke University in 2006, receiving her MA in 2009 and her PhD in 2012. She is a contributing author (with Eric G. Berman) to *Central African Republic and Small Arms: A Regional Tinderbox*, published by the Small Arms Survey in 2008. She has published “Rébellion et les limites de la consolidation de la paix en Centrafrique” in *Politique Africaine*; the entries “Central African Republic” and “Inclusive Political Dialogue, Central African Republic,” in Lavinia Stan and Nadya Nadelsky, eds., *Encyclopedia of Transitional Justice*; “A Constant Threat: Armed Groups in West Africa,” in the *Small Arms Survey Yearbook 2006*. She has also published numerous policy papers and briefings for non-governmental and international organizations, as well as several reviews and popular articles about her research. At Duke, she was a University Scholar and a J. B. Duke Fellow and was awarded Duke’s International Dissertation Research Fellowship, the Dissertation Travel Award, and the Summer Research Fellowship. She received the Social Science Research Council’s International Dissertation Research Fellowship; the Wenner-Gren Foundation’s Doctoral Dissertation Fieldwork Grant; the National Science Foundation’s Dissertation Improvement Grant (awarded jointly by the Law and Society and Cultural Anthropology divisions); the United States Institute of Peace’s Jennings Randolph Dissertation Peace Scholar

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