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The Phenomenon of the *Zaraguina* in Northern Cameroon

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Christian Seignobos

The phenomenon of banditry on the roads of northern Cameroon arose with cross-border insecurity. At the beginning of the 1990s, roadside ambushes and kidnappings of cattle herders' children became an endemic danger. The armed robbers are known as *Zaraguina*, and originate from the northwestern Central African Republic. At the decade's end, the highwaymen spread their banditry across Cameroon: to the Adamawa, East, North and Far North provinces. In their jurisdictions, traditional authorities try to put an end to the *Zaraguina*, and the central government has tried to improve its "anti-gang" tools to combat the highwaymen. The troubles have been strongly concentrated around Mbororo herder communities; consequently, the Mbororo appear to be both victims and perpetrators of this plundering. However, the violence generates revenue for the real economy, and this criminal industry also involves others, following an entrepreneurial logic that serves commerce and transportation.

Keywords: North Cameroon, Mbororo, Crisis of pastoralism, Banditry, *Zaraguina*, Vigilance committees, Anti-gangs



A thin strip of land caught between Nigeria and Chad, northern Cameroon has been the scene of cross-border insecurity fed by its neighbors since 1979. Chad, where there have been a succession of violent upheavals, and the Central African Republic (CAR), which has had multiple coups d'état, serve as a continuous source of lost soldiers and light arms that the country cannot hope to absorb. In Cameroon, the early nineties were marked by an endless cycle of insecurity. The opening up to democracy produced a multi-party system that served to crystallize political antagonism in the region and led to a series of conflicts. This triggered a crisis for Mbororo

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pastoral society.¹ With no regard for national borders, they would come into contact with increasingly militarized cross-border banditry. These encounters served to increase the acts of plunder, with the Mbororo both victims and perpetrators of this new outbreak of crime. In this paper, we will focus on the Far North Province of Cameroon in order to outline developments in the security situation between 1990 and 2011, which was seemingly a reprise of the situation in the CAR, where it resulted from the failure of the state.

The Mbororo's Encounter with Criminality The Crisis of Pastoral Society

In the first decades following independence, livestock theft was endemic on the plains of northern Cameroon. However, the Mbororo were never among the groups that were blamed for it. They continued to live in the bush, consistently avoiding any interaction with the government, and remaining to some degree under the authority of a Fulani *lamido*² through the mediation of a leader, the *sarkin saanu*.

However, this society, which was constantly preoccupied with the size of its herds, the condition of their livestock, their transhumance routes, environmental resources, and the make-up of their families, were increasingly being forced to make some major decisions. The urgency was due to an unprecedented crisis in grazing lands, which were degraded by drought first in 1973 and again in 1983–84, as well as by overgrazing and by the encroachment of pioneer crop farmers. The resulting settlement brought with it access to vaccines and regular health care, which led to profound demographic changes. For instance, Angelo Bonfiglioli (1988, 134–135) describes how the toughness of the migratory lifestyle among the Wodaa'be people led to a natural reduction in fertility, while conceding it is difficult to say how intentional this was. Today, the fertility of Mbororo women has skyrocketed, and it seems impossible to support all the children in these outsized families.

Meanwhile, the power of the *ardo'en*³ was also evolving. Their authority was based on their knowledge of pastoral affairs, and could be challenged if poor choices were made that led to losses among the herds under his command.

1 I do not subscribe to the use of any other term than "Mbororo" on the grounds that it would be pejorative. My interlocutors have always presented themselves as such. It is only pejorative in its use by the Ful'be (sedentary Fulani), who judge the Mbororo to be "hardly civilized" and bad Muslims. They would call them "Bush Fulani," "with the hope of better integrating them, eventually, into an Islamic-Fulani party." The Mbororo refer to them as Uya'en, which implies sedentary and degenerate Fulani. In Central Africa,

the Mbororo are divided into several groups: the Wodaa'be, Jaafun, Aku, Bokolo, and Uuda'en, in reference to the breed of cattle kept by each, although today herds are mixed. Moreover, each group is divided into a multitude of sub-groups.

2 Fulani chief who rules a *lamidat*, equivalent to an Arab sultan and sultanate respectively (*laamii'do*, pl. *laamii'be/lamibe*).

3 From *ardaago*: to walk in front (*ar'do*, pl. *ar'do'en*). Refers to a Mbororo chief at the head of a group of related and allied herdsmen. Some

ar'do'en are recognized only by their communities, while others are appointed by the government and are said to "wear the turban."

4 As a guideline, in 2004, the Touroua *lamidat* was home to 37,400 inhabitants and Tchéboa 60,000 (including 3,500 in Ngong) with 15–20% Mbororo in each. Before their dispersal in 2006–2008, the two *lamidats* included 50 encampments shared among some 20 extended families.

The *ful'be* model of power, which arises when the *ardo'en* establish a dynasty, is based on political allegiance and *savoir-faire* in dealing with Fulani *lamibe* and governments. In the 1990s, as insecurity grew, they played a role as catalysts, accelerating processes already brewing in the Mbororo communities. Before going further into analysis of the pastoral crisis, however, further detail about the Mbororo peoples of the Benoue plains will contextualize our observations.⁴

The Mbororo, and in particular the Wodaa'be and Aku subgroups, set up their camps (*waal'de*) in a crescent shape around the vast area of rainy season grazing land in Kalge, which is the cornerstone of pastoral life in the region. The Jaafun are a more urban people and since the 1970s have lived closer to towns, especially to Garoua. The Mbororo take advantage of the grazing on both banks of the Benoue River, and most migrate in a southerly direction, "chasing the clouds" and hence the rainfall. They find themselves caught between two constraints: firstly, starting in 1975, the constant stream of migrants from the overpopulated Far North province, which tripled the population of the *lamidats* of Touroua and Tchéboa between 1990 and 2005; and secondly, the proliferation of designated hunting areas (*zones d'intérêt cynégétique* – ZICs), which now number 26 and from which the cattle herders are ruthlessly expelled, as well as large nature reserves. Transhumance can only take place in the remaining interstitial spaces, which have constantly been shrinking.

The Mbororo have always demonstrated a great ability to respond to changes in their environment, if only by adapting their herds. In response to a shortage of good grazing lands, the Jaafun abandoned their "inherited" cattle breed, the red cattle (*bo'deeji*), replacing them with white cattle (*daneeji*), because the red cattle had proven unable to adapt to eating crop residues and regrowth on fallow lands. This process, which began in 1981, was complete by 1995; but a new change is now underway. The *daneeji* are now being replaced by a still hardier breed of cattle that can withstand drought, the small local *gudaali* of the Ful'be.

In the early 1990s, a balance was sought with the migrants. Agreements between the *lamido*, the sub-prefect, farmers' associations, and the *ardo'en* led to the creation of a network of herders' routes and secure grazing for the rainy season, to the west of the Mayo Douka River. At the time, the only problems mentioned were still those of a classic "farmer-grazer" type. This situation broke down with the emergence of the armed gangs, however, which led to the flight of the Mbororo to Nigeria when insecurity spiked in 2006–2008.

The Role of the Mbororo in the History of Rural Crime

Broadly speaking, the historical background to rural crime in the Lake Chad basin is as follows (Saïbou, 2010): banditry adapts itself to new techniques, weaponry, and new political contexts, which are constantly evolving. Over the past two decades the lawless zone has shifted from the border areas to the interior of the country. At the end of the 1980s, cattle theft, which meant that stolen cattle had to be disposed of on the great border markets, came to an end as this difficult and risky practice was abandoned and replaced by roadside

ambushes of people returning from market. They targeted the herdsmen and traders carrying large sums of cash. When the herdsmen began to deposit their cash at money transfer offices such as Western Union or Express Union—not in the banking system, which is seen as untrustworthy—then the marketplace stopped being the ideal target.

The ambushes on the roads never stopped, but in the mid-nineties were reinforced by kidnappings. These are always secured on the herds, as livestock remains the principal source of capital in the region. According to Saïbou: “Although it is a new mode of cross-border banditry, kidnapping is still part of the picture of profiting from the chaos in the region, and points to the emergence of a criminal class of entrepreneurs . . .” (2010, 88). The kidnapping of Mbororo children, generally taken from their *waal'de* (encampment), shows the limitations of this tactic. The children cry, and stop eating; and killing them in cold blood sows dissent among the gang of *Zaraguinas*. The kidnapers thus moved on to target the *ardo'en*, who have a large enough social network to quickly gather higher ransoms, and they may also be subject to other demands, often of a more political nature. *Ardo'en* have been forced to “remove their turban” or to “carry out their decision” (i.e., withdraw a nomination for the post of sub-prefect), in favor of a candidate who will favor the *Zaraguina*.

We have noted several such cases on the Chad border, in Bouéli (2006) and around Figuil (2005). It is hard to speak of borders in Africa without adding the adjective “porous.” Even so, for organized criminals it is wise to establish safe border crossings for themselves that are secured by the presence of herder communities who are either subjugated or won over to their cause.

Organized crime involving the Mbororo began and flourished in northwest CAR in the early 1980s, when the name “*Zaraguina*” originated.⁵ This hotbed of criminal activity, constantly stirred up by the proximity of Chad and the repeated rebellions against the government in Bangui, extended from the west of the CAR to Bambari in the east. The *Zaraguina* were opposed by the militias of both Wodaa'be and Jaafun Mbororo, the “*archers blindés anti-Zaraguina*”⁶ supported by President Patassé. It proved impossible to eradicate the *Zaraguina* (Seignobos 2008a, 39–40), however, and they took over the whole border strip with Cameroon, turning it into a veritable “Zaraguinaland.” The phenomenon spread to Cameroon via the border district of Mbéré, long seen as an area of endemic *Zaraguina* activity. From Mbéré, the *Zaraguina* rot expanded to the Eastern Province, reaching as far as the southern forests. It swamped Adamawa and was observed in the Northern Province from 1995. Finally, it reached the Far North Province, directly across the border with Chad.

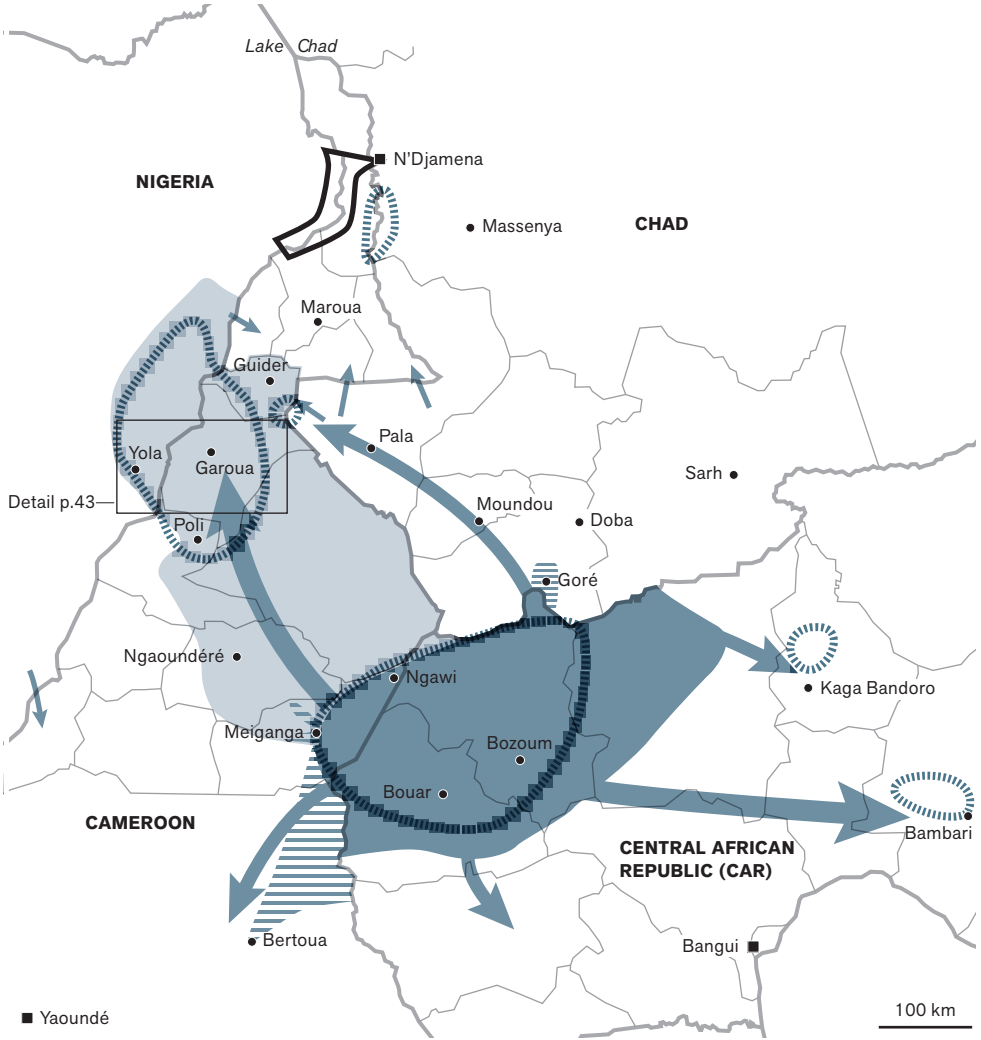
⁵ According to the Hausa dictionary of R.C. Abraham the word 'zaraguina' means 'cubes of washing blue,' an approximation of the literary Arabic *azraq*, meaning 'blue' (the blue of washing powder), which was also

used to mark the faces of robbers caught red-handed in the markets [. . .]. By extension, the word 'zaraguina' has been used in the sense of a masked bandit and highwaymen because their faces are

generally hidden by a turban, or painted blue.” (C. Arditi, *Lettre des savanes*, no. 2 [June 2001], 8).

⁶ Literally: “anti-Zaraguina armored archers.”

Areas of Insecurity Linked to Highwaymen/Zaraguina, 2011



- Yaoundé
- International borders
- - - Departmental borders (Cameroon/Chad/CAR)
- ⊙ Significant Mbororo presence
- Mbororo refugees from CAR
- Endemic hotspot for *Zaraguina* activity
- Areas affected by insecurity (1990–2011)
- ▭ Former endemic area
- ▭ Benoue Plains

Source: Christian Seignobos

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Sciences Po Cartography Workshop, October 2011

Although the bloodiest aspects of this insecurity continued to affect the communities of migrant herders,⁷ the involvement of the Mbororo themselves in these criminal activities has been clearly demonstrated.⁸ They formed criminal gangs who took advantage of two technological revolutions that arrived with the new millennium: mobile telephones and motorbikes. In 2005, low-cost Chinese motorbikes entered the market. They transformed the countryside, as livestock owners could use them to check on their herders—as could the *Zaraguina*. In response, several governors tried to prohibit the sale of the more powerful models.

The Mbororo are also involved in classic highway ambushes. A small band of highwaymen will focus on secondary roads in order to avoid the risk of being outnumbered by a convoy of vehicles, although they also operate on major routes at specific times of day. Roadblocks are always set up at the same type of location: a curve in the road to place the trap and, on either side of the road, two little bells for warning of the arrival of law enforcement. The best ambush spots are located close to livestock corridors that allow for a rapid and secure withdrawal once the ambush is over.

Sought after by gangs of thugs who pursue other forms of banditry, the Mbororo are linked to “rogue” gamekeepers and river-based poachers in the game reserves of the Upper Benoue, where they poach and sell game on a large scale. They are also to be found fishing using Andrine, a systemic pesticide, in the ponds and backwaters of the Kebbi River, weapons in hand, ready to shoot on any Water and Forestry agents who may appear.

Highwaymen: Recruitment and Task Distribution

Entering into *Zarginaaku*⁹

Young Mbororo males between the ages of circumcision and marriage seek to escape the over-protective context of their society. Normally, sons take turns to watch over the father’s herds, and when an older son is employed with a different herd, a younger one takes his place. Around the age of 15 they would separate from the family herd once they have acquired all the knowledge relevant to livestock herding. The “flight” by younger Mbororo men takes place through a number of activities still connected to livestock, and which open up their first social horizon.

⁷ According to information bulletins from the third military region for the past three years (2009–2011), 40% of attacks are aimed at cattle theft and abductions secured on herds. In terms of roadblocks, 30% are

untargeted, while 23% target market-goers, particularly livestock dealers (7% are classified as “various”).

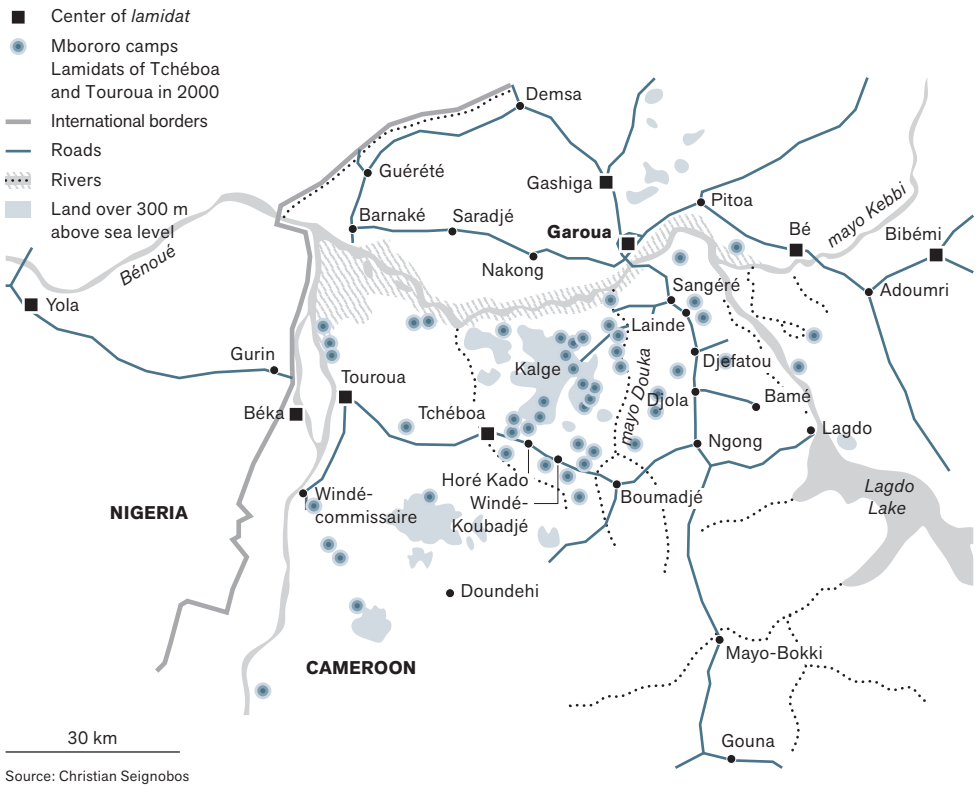
⁸ J.E. Fombasso, “Confessions publiques. Des coupeurs de route

avouent leurs forfaits,” *Dikalo*, February 17, 2005, 5.

⁹ The activities of the *Zaraguina*.

¹⁰ Cf. the *sooro*: flogging contests among the Jaafun and the Aku (H. Bocquené, 1986, 49–53).

Mbororo Encampments and People in the Garoua Region in Southern Benue, 2000



Boutrais speaks of *nderkaaku* (2002, 167–8), this stage of youth, as a real societal problem among the Ful’be of Adamawa. The current flight of young people threatens the transmission of knowledge and the interdependence between generations. He points out that the Mbororo “experience an obsessive fear that their young people will take the same route as those from Ngaoundéré.” Yet, less than a decade later, the concerns of the Ful’be of Adamawa became the reality of the Mbororo of Benoue.

The radicalization of young Mbororo men took place rapidly; they rejected the age-based hierarchy and its chain of subordination (and associated bullying). They no longer wanted to have to wait to become beneficiaries of the system; they were impatient for success. Their exodus towards urban areas was the outcome of a radical break, but there was nothing there for them, and lived on the margins of society, making a living among the petty criminals who hung about the markets. Yet back in the bush they were able to endure fatigue and hardship,¹⁰ and above all they knew the ways of the herders. Their urban wanderings often led them to be recruited by gangs of thugs, and they rapidly became adept at the easy source of enrichment that was highway robbery (and kidnapping of children).

The flight from the family follows a classic model, starting with an act of rebellion, most commonly selling cattle from the father's herd without his knowledge. This act places the young Mbororo man in a situation where he has defied paternal authority and may be brought before the *ardo* to face justice, which most often leads to expulsion from the *pulaaku* and ostracization by society.¹¹ Far from the watchful gaze of his own people, the young rebel goes wild. This very precocious independence from the family explains the astonishment of ambushed travelers at finding themselves face to face with Mbororo boys aged 14 or 15, brandishing Kalashnikovs and high on Tramol (an ecstasy-like, amphetamine-based drug made in Nigeria), totally uninhibited and grinning. Above all, this rebellion is in defiance of the authority of the elders and of the *ardo'en*, who always treated them as social juniors and good-for-nothings.

The *Zaraguina* undertake this rebellion as a kind of warrior initiation in which they see the handling of automatic weapons as a means for them to access modernity. They enter a secret world in these multi-ethnic gangs, changing their names and willingly adopting the marks of the criminal in their form of dress, hairstyles, and the violence of their speech. These associations bring about a profound sense of companionship between the partners in crime, who share the spoils (*soobaku kusel*, meaning both "camaraderie" and "meat"), as well as the same hidden protections and the same risks.

The entry of the Mbororo into the ambushing industry represents a profound departure from their prior heritage. They used to be entirely absent from this activity, but today are considered one of the leading actors. We may, however, point out a convergence of motives and alternative modes of dealing with the adversity of losing herds or the breakdown of the herding or family unit.

We have gathered testimonies from Mbororo in the Poli region seeking to justify without question the legitimacy of the attacks by the *Zaraguina*: it is a banditry by necessity, in their view, as in the past it was acceptable for a farmer who lost his livestock to drought or epidemic to temporarily become a predator, rustling cattle in order to rebuild his herd. There is still the memory of this brigandry in the history of the migratory people's fortunes and misfortunes, creating a kind of shared tolerance among competing groups of herders. The arrival of the *Zaraguina* does not necessarily undermine the code of behavior behind this kind of "bailout action" because, implicitly, anything that serves to preserve the higher interest of the family and their way of life is permitted. Nevertheless, the practices of the *Zaraguina* radicalize this further still, and the recovery of cattle is no longer the final goal.

11 Based on the code of behavior for the Mbororo.

12 Short for "commando." Initially enrolled in the FAT (Chadian Armed Forces), the *codos* took refuge in the

south of Chad following the February 1979 battles in N'Djamena. Some of them rebelled against the FAN (Northern Armed Forces) led by Hissène Habré (1982–1983). In

Cameroon, the *codos* are said to have formed part of the first generation of highwaymen.

13 Fulani language shared by the Mbororo and the Ful'be.

Composition of a Basic *Zaraguina* Unit

The notion of an “organized gang” is a fluid one. However, *Zaraguina* gangs, as already identified in the CAR (Seignobos 2008, 27–8), all display the same basic characteristics. An analysis of the life stories of some thirty *Zaraguinas*, for the most part reformed, suggests four main types. The first of these comprises soldiers on leave, deserters from the garrisons in southern Chad, recently demobilized soldiers, soldiers dismissed for lack of discipline or looting, and rebel fighters who have become estranged from the political wing of their movement that has come to power. These errant soldiers from the civil war in Chad in 1979 emerged from the southern *codos*,¹² the combatants of Hissène Habré, Ahmat Acyl, and Idriss Déby. Even though their military training may have been rather *ad hoc*, they were more battle-hardened than the anti-gang units sent to pursue them. They made use of methods characteristic of the *Zaraguina* fighter, advancing rapidly through the bush, using proven techniques for covering their tracks, and blindly firing their Kalashnikovs as they retreat, while supporting the weapons on their shoulders; they are Arab speakers (Shuwa Arabs, Waddayens, and Hadjerays) aged between 35 and 65, and their expertise in arms and communications makes them the best in the field.



The *Zaraguina*. They love to be photographed with their weapons, striking military poses. This drawing is a composite of two archive photographs of the “*archers blindés anti-zargina*” from the CAR and Mbéré. They would have been taken in 2002 or 2003 on high-lying grazing lands during the rainy season, in an encampment of Mbororo herders. The presence of *daneeji* cows suggests they are from the Aku group. Drawing by Christian Seignobos, 2011.

Alongside these groups is a specific Mbororo group that has been seen to run with the *Zaraguina* from the CAR, the Uda'en. Also from Chad, often from the region of Dourbali in Baguirmi, they speak both Arabic and Fulfulde,¹³ and are almost always implicated in plunder by organized gangs. The Mbororo

often refer to them as the *haaluu'be* (the bad ones), implying they are from their own people. The Mbororo cannot seem to find the cause of their behavior, saying that God made them that way, but could the cause perhaps be found in their past as herders of Sahel sheep? Located at the very bottom of the herding hierarchy, they long experienced a kind of sheep-versus-cow complex. The Uda'en are known for drinking sheep's milk, and for being obstinate and cruel. To this is added a more recent complaint of their being responsible for environmental degradation through the destruction of acacia forests by their livestock. The Uda'en, whose transhumance took them to the edges of the Sahel in Chad, were the first victims, unreported in the media, of the 1973 ecological crisis. They had no choice but to divert their route southwards, close to the banks of the middle reaches of the Logone River. The aggressive posture they developed as a result of encounters with Tubu groups on the Bahr El-Ghazal found a new focus in their criminal enterprises in the CAR and Cameroon. The Uda'en are such a highly distinctive group that they are categorized separately from other Mbororo groups, and their affinity with gangs of ruffians only amplifies this singularity. Employed by the *Zaraguina*, they contribute their knowledge of herding. On average they are aged between 25 and 40, and these two groups—former soldiers from Chad and the Uda'en—frequently form the core or basic identity of these criminal gangs in Cameroon.

The third element comes from a range of origins. They are local informers who enter an agreement with a gang whereby they sell their knowledge of the region—and the *Zaraguinas* work on the basis of information. These are individuals from Mbororo society who lack stable employment, and who belong to the category of reprobates, drinkers, addicts, and gamblers. They include the sons of *ardo'en* who have failed to successfully manage the herds entrusted to them by their fathers, and who live by their wits. They can be very young.

The gang leader, often referred to as the “boss” (*jagoor'do*), is a more ambiguous type of character. He may act as an informer, manage logistics, or be found directing the ambush, weapon in hand. He advances wages, and shares out and repurposes the spoils. Emerging from the underworld of markets and bus stations, his activities are often spread out over several towns. His absences and movements are never suspicious. Whether Hausa, Arab, Ful'be, or Mbororo, gang bosses vary widely in age.

Mobile *Zaraguina* Camps in the Northern Province

Far from following a coordinated strategy, the mobility of these heterogeneous groups of *Zaraguina*, with their varying spheres of activity, nevertheless gives the impression of their exercising real local control, or even of coming to appropriate a specific territory. In the Benoue, the *Zaraguina* encampments (Mayo-Douka/Kalge, Loungo/Mayo-Bokki, Badadji/Bibemi) remained mobile camps even at the height of the troubles (2006–2008), with little in common with the permanent bases strung along the CAR side of the Cameroon border, which were dismantled by the CAR army in March 2008.



A Zaraguina camp. Zaraguina camps have been photographed by Paul Bour, camp director of Boubanjidda Park (this drawing is based on one of his photographs). Using his ultralight aircraft, in 2007 he overflew the camps of *Zaraguina* from Chad, and over the herders' encampments in the reserve not far away. The latter—willingly or otherwise—kept the *Zaraguina* supplied with meat and milk. One aerial photograph (reproduced here) from May 2007, the beginning of the rainy season, shows hostages gathered in the center on a single mat. Among the guards, we may identify two *Zaraguina* with Chadian uniforms wearing turbans, and a kitchen area to the rear. Set up in a stand of bushwillow, the *Zaraguina* encampment imitates the layout of Mbororo camps in the rainy season. They cut branches to form shelters, stacking them around the trunks of large trees, and sealing them with plastic sheeting to waterproof them. Drawing by Christian Seignobos, 2011.

In the Garoua region, the most well-known gang emerged on the Kalgé pasturelands, moving between different outcrops of rocks. It held sway over an area equivalent to a sub-prefecture, and comprised between 18 and 25 individuals, both Arab and Hausa speakers, with the usual few Uuda'en, not counting local accomplices. A Thuraya satellite phone enabled them to communicate with their cronies to arrange mutual assistance (*surga*) for the supply of ammunition and drugs. The camp, consisting of a number of plastic-sheeted huts, which are easy to fold up and transport, and mounted on low wooden poles no higher than 1.3 meters, was hard to spot behind the bushes. The chiefs of surrounding villages kept them supplied with meat, while the *Zaraguina* themselves bought rice, maize flour, tea, sugar, and tobacco.

Unlike in the CAR, the *Zaraguina* camps in Cameroon had fewer large-scale hostage-taking operations to handle, except in 2009 and 2010 in certain locations on the border with Chad. The “hostage raids” brought about a ransom process based on a price guide that used a combination of ethnicity, profession,

and age to set the ransom. Hostages who could not be ransomed straight away would be used to carry equipment during moves to fallback positions and to set up camp.¹⁴

The Struggle against Insecurity in Northern Cameroon

Traditional Leaders in the Fight against the Bandits

Faced with the proliferation of criminal activities, traditional leaders decided to organize at the level of each *lamidat* by founding “vigilance committees” built around hunters’ guilds (*gaw* in Fulfulde). Comprising individuals who are thoroughly accustomed to life in the bush, these well-structured groups rely on a morality and discipline that are subject to internal justice. They bond around the same festivities and rituals, and the hunters are credited with occult powers conferred by charms in the form of complex powders handed out by the master hunters (Seignobos and Planton, 1994). One of the hunters is appointed as leader, or *sarkin baaka*, by the *lamido* responsible for the vigilance committee. In the Touroua *lamidat*, for example, this self-defense committee, created in 1994, is composed of some sixty militiamen (*danbanga*) armed with locally manufactured rifles. At their head, a *sarkin baaka* commands six *wakili*, each keeping watch over a small number of villages. All speak Fulfulde and Hausa, while less than 10 percent speak French. Just like the *Zaraguina* themselves, they easily cross the borders. They claim they respond to invitations by the “State Charman” of Yola, Nigeria, to engage in joint operations against the highwaymen.

The vigilance committees supervise the ceremonies that take place in the *lamidat*, firing their “pop guns” to enhance the festivities. They make a little money by accompanying traders on their way back from market. To the north of Benoue, the *danbanga* set up deterrent patrols on the grazing lands in the rainy season, like in Dembo. Each hunter in the vigilance committee is registered either with the police station or the sub-prefecture, and carries a militia card, with numbers varying according to the *lamidat*. They also serve as scouts, sent on the trail of the highwaymen. Some of them carry out missions on the border with Chad, as auxiliaries to Colonel Guillaume Pom’s police forces.

¹⁴ We refer to the testimonies of hostages taken by the *Zaraguina* appended to the UNHCR report (Seignobos 2008a, 113–8).

¹⁵ “Salala” refers at once to festivities, to the hunters’ rituals, and to their power.

¹⁶ In Cameroon “anti-gang” has become a generic term for any force used to target large-scale banditry.



A village vigilance committee. This group is formed by young villagers and hardened hunters equipped with traditional weapons, the *gaw*'s double bow, and locally made rifles or *adaka*. Drawing by Christian Seignobos, 2011.

However, men in uniform reluctant to enter the bush will never get on with these hunters covered in amulets. The *danbanga* often have the same style of dress as the highwaymen, and some sub-prefects would like to lump them all together: vigilance committee by day, *Zaraguina* by night, while the highwaymen may have mingled with the hunters. People of the bush like them swear on their *salala*¹⁵ and brandish their shoes when they meet the hunters to avoid confrontation. The *gaw* do not swear on the Qur'an, but on their sandals, formerly made of roan antelope skin, holding that the "sandal is the Qur'an of the *gaw*" (*padde defte gaw*). This being said, it remains the case that the vigilance committees have played a leading role in the struggle against the *Zaraguina* for two decades.

Fighting Organized Crime: Anti-gang Units in the Rapid Intervention Force

From the early 1990s, the Cameroon government has sought to implement an effective force to combat the armed gangs. A report at the time concluded that the regular army lacked the flexibility required and could not be deployed swiftly enough. The government entrusted anti-gang operations to Colonel Guillaume Pom, basing them in Maroua,¹⁶ with the operation zone following the road that

leads from Waza to Maltam along the Nigerian border (Saïbou, 2004, 85). An anti-gang unit, the multipurpose intervention police force (GPIG – *groupement polyvalent d'intervention de la gendarmerie*), was set up with French support after the Kotoko-Shuwa Arab war of 1992–1994, in the department of Logone-et-Chari. On the ground, this particularly bloody conflict combined clashes between communities and rural banditry, and from 1994 to 1999, unmarked GPIG forces went out into the bush along the border.

The *Zaraguina* phenomenon, which was becoming regional in scale, became a major cause for concern. A headline from the weekly *L'Œil du Sahel*, one of the newspapers that wrote on the subject most frequently, reads “Highwaymen: Government Wants Rid of Them Fast” (no. 8, May 1998). A decade later, the problem had worsened and the security situation, as changeable as ever, seemed to be irreversible. In 1998 a Dutch aid worker was assaulted at gunpoint in Maroua, triggering a state of emergency in which the confiscation of small arms became imperative. Colonel Pom, who had just taken retirement, was recalled. It was hoped that an end to the phenomenon could be achieved by coming down hard on the bandits, but accusations arose about the use of unorthodox methods and extrajudicial executions.

The GPIG was subsequently replaced by the BLI (*bataillon léger d'infanterie* – light infantry battalion), which was deployed between 1995 and 1999 by Colonel Canovas, a Frenchman. The project was then taken up by Abraham Sivan, an Israeli colonel, who created the BIR (*bataillon d'intervention rapide* – rapid intervention force) in 2001, in the context of military cooperation with a strong Israeli-American bent, supported by substantial funding. By 2001 the phrase “secure the country” was becoming a euphemism. The situation worsened in the Achilles heel of some border areas in the north of the country. According to I. Saïbou (2006, 141–2), “the emergence of cross-border multinational bandit groups, the militarization of organized crime [. . .] turned the expansion of insecurity across the region into a problem of national defense for the states concerned.” The repeatedly revived notion of joint security commissions between Cameroon, Chad, and the CAR, encountered difficulties in finding concrete application.

In 2007–2008 the influence of Colonel Sivan strengthened to the extent that he took over control of the BIR and the GP (presidential guard).¹⁷ The BIR became a state-wide force, intervening in all the areas experiencing insecurity (the three northern provinces and the coast). The BIR, which answers directly to the president's office, was no longer an “alternative security force” to the

17 Presidential security was the responsibility of three men: a Cameroonian general, Blaise Bénaé Mpéké (head of the presidential private military cabinet), French general Raymond Germanos, and Israeli colonel Avi Sivan. The first died

in 2007 and the second left Cameroon in 2008, leaving Colonel Sivan with sole responsibility.

18 On November 22, 2010, Colonel Avi Sivan, Paul Biya's “Mr. Security,” died in a helicopter crash near Yaoundé (www.jeuneafrique.com,

December 9, 2010). The charismatic colonel was replaced in June 2011 by an Israeli general, R.S. Zukerman, with the title of “supervisor” of the BIR.

army, but behaving as a fully-fledged intervention force. During the 2008 hunger riots in southern towns and cities, its troops secured the capital. No longer described as a special force, the BIR now meets the criteria of a combined force, and increasingly appears as what it is: an “army within the army.”

The BIR relies on the youth of its troops and their superior equipment, especially with the Galil assault rifle. In the last three years, they have undeniably been reaping success. As of 2011, the eastern region has been secured, and the Adamawa region also appears to be secured, even though the *Zaraguina* fire continues to smolder. The borders of the Far North Province continue to pose problems. As for the plains of Benoue, the security operations have made positive headway, kidnappings have ceased everywhere except the Bibemi and Guider regions, and the highway ambushes have fallen in number. One wonders whether the BIR can maintain its positive image, however.¹⁸

On the ground, the BIR is encountering logistical difficulties. The young troops, set loose in the bush, seem to be abandoned to their own devices, so that the village chiefs have to help them. Following the model of the vigilance committees, tolls are set up to fund the BIR’s fuel requirements. The well-armed elite troops give the impression of being all-powerful in some remote villages, and the people come to them with all kinds of problems, including troubles with their neighbors and land disputes, along with requests to support candidates for chieftdom, and a number of excesses have seen them brought before the military tribunal at Garoua. Nonetheless, newspapers such as *L’Œil du Sahel* (no. 203, November 3, 2008) denounce the numerous failures of cooperation between the BIR, police force, and vigilance committees. Does the government not have any other card to play in the struggle against rural crime than the BIR?

The Ambiguous Role of Local Government and the Defiance of the Population

The government of the Northern Province is overly confident in the effectiveness of the new tool offered by the BIR, whose mission is in line with its talk of security. Acknowledging the existence of the vigilance committees means admitting the powerlessness of the State to fulfill the foremost of its duties as a sovereign entity: security. Added to this is the fear posed by possible derivatives of vigilantism. In late 2005, before the BIR had even taken up all its positions or got settled in, the prefect of Benoue decided to disband all the vigilance committees. This ban remained in place until 2008. Regardless of the significance of this stance, how it was perceived was a much more complex matter.

Behind the decision to disband the vigilance committees is a repudiation of the *lamibe* and their responsibility for security. They had been an “auxiliary administration” since colonial times, and their status as such was reaffirmed by a 1977 decree. During electoral periods, they function as guardians of the ballot boxes, playing the legal role of the government. There was no longer any room for misunderstanding. Although the traditional authorities were responsible

for the security issue and land management, in the middle of the last decade, they found themselves on the point of losing control over both: their militia were being disbanded and, as for land, the sub-prefects were openly getting involved, having found it to be a major source of additional revenue.¹⁹

At this time, the provincial government, which was partly composed of people from the south of the country, showed a complete lack of understanding with regard to the Mbororo. They displayed all the main anti-nomad biases: the “multi-card”—and therefore stateless—Mbororo cannot be trusted; they will only deal with the *lamibe*—which is true; they even mistrust the government’s livestock service, which sometimes exploits them; and they are a vehicle for insecurity.

The inaction of both the government and traditional authorities, who do not dare oppose the directives of the prefecture, gives the armed gangs free play. The Northern Province is thus experiencing a period of troubles where highway robbery and kidnappings occur at a hitherto-unseen rate. The highwaymen are everywhere and operate at the very gates of Garoua, between Djéfatou and Ngong, between Garoua and Gashiga, and between Pitoa and Bé. The population decries the lack of intervention by the police who, despite the situation, remain more concerned than ever with their own highway racketeering, which whole sections of the force use to support themselves.

Ardo'en and *lamibe*, forbidden to act by the government, do not hesitate to express their powerlessness to their people. At the end of 2006, after having received all the *ardo'en* who demanded arms to defend themselves, the *lamido* of Tchéboa, Moussa Boubakary, did not know which way to turn. He called prayer meetings with all the *mallum* and priests²⁰ to try and get to the bottom of what everyone saw as a crime epidemic.²¹ They also abandoned their bush *waal'de* to be closer to the villages along the Ngaoundéré-Garoua route.²²

At the very beginning of 2007, their fears were heightened by the Jaafun Mbororos fleeing the CAR with what remained of their livestock and crossing the region on their way to Nigeria. They told of the massacres still being carried out in the northwest of the CAR. So the same expression came to be heard among the Mbororo from Benoue as a few years earlier in the Central African Republic: “I have exhausted knowing what to do” (*mi tampi koo mi wadata*). To stay or to leave? They wanted to flee. A first contingent left in July 2007, in the middle of the municipal and legislative elections, thousands of cattle crossing

19 In the past, land disputes could be taken to various desks (chieftain, sub-prefecture, police station, courts). Nevertheless, faced with the complexity of land disputes, the sub-prefect and the police often ended up sending the complainants to the *lamido*. Today, the sub-prefects do not get into the complex issues of land disputes and operate a policy of simplified judgments by limiting the number of admissible arguments.

20 The Catholic mission of Ngong was not involved because its “peace and justice committee” has for several years been in open conflict with the *lamido*, whom it criticizes for a number of abuses against migrant Christians.

21 After these demonstrations of devotions, the herder communities hardly appeared to be reassured. Mocking themselves, Mbororo quote this proverb: “The squirrel said, even

though Allah is present, it is better that the termite mound remain close” (*Jiire wii, koo Allah 'don boo, ndikka waande mado*).

22 Kossoumna Liba'a (2008, 253–5) reported in January 2007 on the attack and hostage-taking on Mbororo camps in the Benoue and their flight to roadside villages including Djola, Djéfalou, and Ngong.

the bridge at Garoua to the complete indifference of the government. They fled to Nigeria via Nakong and Barnaké, with some returning three years later via Béka. It was an event that highlighted the complete disconnect between the migrant herder population and the national context.

However for those who remained, even though they took refuge near villages along the road, the attacks and kidnappings continued. A particularly bloody episode stands out from the long list of kidnappings: in February 2008, children from the Ardo Ndajo family were abducted from the Jaafun camp near the village of Israel (the name having been given by Christian migrants) near Karewa. To free them, a poorly planned intervention went awry. Panicked, the *Zaraguina*, to the cry of “*anti-gang waari!*” shot at the hut in their camp where the children were being held, “tied up like calves,” and 14 out of 18 were killed.

This massacre, together with the repeated prohibitions on paying ransoms, led the remaining herders to leave for Nigeria. Those who tried to sell their cattle did so at a loss, and in the markets this is lost on no one. Any dealer knows that a head of family getting rid of heifers or bullocks does so only under duress. The dealer profits from it, and the market agents and local officials are notified. The delivery of the ransom is tracked and the brigade commanders seek to claim their share. For not having obeyed the order to suspend the payment of ransoms, the children freed by the *Zaraguina* are arrested, but this time by the administration, and returned on payment of a large fine.

Thus, ten years after the CAR, on the plains of Benoue, we are witnessing the exact repetition of a measure that led to the collapse of the herder communities.

The *Zaraguina*: A New Type of Bandit or a New Economy of Adversity?

The existence of the highwaymen should be seen simply as the consequence of a lack of social and legal security and of the economic crisis, as stated by President Paul Biya on February 19, 1987: but this is implicit. However, the pastoral crisis would appear to explain the *Zaraguina* phenomenon as specific to the Mbororo, implying as it does an overlapping series of crises. We could also attribute the *Zaraguina* phenomenon to an inherited “lifestyle” of the fighter-pillager from the area of Chad, assumed by combatants in later wars and emulated by young Mbororo men. However, the *Zaraguina* gangs have something else: the irrationality and violence resulting from a long bottling-up of the past of these Mbororo men, exposed as they have been to the harshness of the herding life, being the target of potential (and often actual) hostility by neighboring peoples, and encountering a total lack of understanding on the part of all forms of government. The *Zaraguinaaku* fail the rationality test, as well as the economic argument and that of historical heritage: it is a combination of all these elements that, to varying degrees, underpin it. The question remains about the destruction of the pastoral sector, and as a corollary, the question of who profits from the ransoms and the pillaging.

Destruction of the Pastoral Economy and Pillaging in the Bush

Everything began with the breakdown in migration circuits resulting from attacks on the fixed rainy season camps, as well as the mobile camps of the dry season. As in the CAR, the kidnappings of children led to a rapid decapitalization of Mbororo herds in the Benoue until they were no longer viable, since a family could find itself having to pay ransoms multiple times. This chaotic period led to a kind of resignation among the herders, who only attended to the health of the remaining herd. Treatment to prevent sleeping sickness prior to departure for the southern migration was abandoned; only sick animals were given attention.

The provincial delegate for livestock, Daïrou Djalla, provided a “report on the extent and consequences of insecurity faced by herders in the Northern Province” (June 20, 2007). The figures gathered from livestock centers in the province take into account part of the year 2006, up until June 2007. It lists 143 people killed—including many children—354 hostages, and 110,017 head of cattle, who had to leave the region, mainly to Nigeria. The ransoms paid amounted to a sum of 1,343,885,000 CFA francs.²³

The vet Albert Doufissa indicates that in the region he is from, Guider, the insecurity caused the abandonment of livestock farming in just a few months. He analyzes the overlapping nature of the security threats that together affected the herders and farmers, who suffered at the hands of the same gangs.

The agricultural service, which gave up trying to provide reliable figures a long time ago, have made even less of an attempt to quantify the impact of the insecurity on farming. Only SODECOTON, a parastatal company that for fifty years has been the mainstay of development in the province, along with certain development projects, can claim to possess some scant records. Nevertheless, the insecurity has been treated like the outbreak of a disease and has only led to local accounting, without there being anything amounting to an overview. Some of the most violent outbreaks were well documented, like that which took place in 2002, shaking the Touboro region, the most significant area of internal displacement in Cameroon (with 38,000 migrants). The systematic extortion of villages was denounced. The deputy director of SODECOTON, H. Gruzon, wrote to the provincial governor: the desperate flight of the “planters” to the towns along the Ngaoundéré-Garoua highway in the face of this pillaging has the effect of “reducing to nothing all the advances of the development projects carried out by the State in this region” since the late 1970s.

23 This year the price of meat shot up, doubling and even tripling in the markets of the Garoua region.

24 In 1985, SODECOTON stopped paying its planters in the markets and began paying in installments. This

date corresponds to the end of the takeover of southern Chad by the FAN of Hissène Habré, when many small arms crossed the border into Cameroon.

25 Practice described by M. Thézé, SODECOTON (December 2009, Garoua).

Elsewhere, all the “successful” farmers were targeted. Easily identified in the context of the cotton markets and their purchasing monopolies, the “planter” who produces “a case of cotton or more,” or who has sales of more than one million CFA francs, is at risk. Since 1995, SODECOTON’s remuneration of its 300,000 producers—of whom a large majority live in the north—became a headache.²⁴ Faced with the proliferation of violence, SODECOTON had to repeatedly change its payment methods. The markets were places for evaluating everyone’s wealth in both sales and purchases alike. Likewise, the producers of peanuts or other produce were also targeted for robberies. The demands of the *Zaraguina* had to be proportional to the level of solvency of the extorted families, but in this chaotic period the *Zaraguina* got carried away, and the demands began to disregard the ransom-payer’s ability to pay. A crowd of motorbikes from Garoua might encircle a store in a village at night. The owner would be summoned to present his receipt for sale of cotton, and to hand over the money corresponding to the goods sold. If he did not cooperate swiftly, they would cut off one of his fingers.²⁵

The weekly markets, despite their slow dieback, today remain inexhaustible targets because, even though impoverished, these farmers still represent relative wealth. So they continue to be attacked regularly. These “levies” raised in the countryside, more widely dispersed and carried out using a range of different methods, earn greater sums than those targeting the herders.

A Crime-Inducing Economic Engine

To amass capital, the *Zaraguina* take necessarily violent shortcuts, using their Kalashnikovs as their “tools of production.” Faced with the scarcity of banking structures and a failing system, which does not seem to subscribe to the principle of banking secrecy; faced with the bankruptcy of all the microcredit agencies set up in the smaller towns (Guider, Ngong, Lagdo), the mistrust of the herders, and of traders alike, is understandable. How are they to access credit? Cash is obtained along the highways, in the markets, and by extorting herders or farmers. However, this armed violence on the highway and in the bush does not supply the same amounts. It has two faces and reflects two kinds of actors: those for whom pillaging supports a certain lifestyle, and those who hoard the money.

In an armed Mbororo gang the budget is, by their own admission, divided into three parts: one third for the rental of weapons and vehicles, one third for the purchase of collusion and occult protection from *mallum* chaplains working to validate their criminal enterprise, and one third spent on luxury goods in the large hotels near the markets. This budget and its division are comparable to that of the “highway bandits” (*soongo’be*) from the high colonial period (Saïbou 2010, 16–7).

The second face of the *Zaraguina* is that of people who no longer come into direct contact with violent actions but who finance and/or plan them. They are said to have “taken the path back to the mosque,” laundering the income

from the pillaging in their own businesses. This criminal class of entrepreneurs plows it back into shops, purchases of merchandise, bush taxis, and so on.

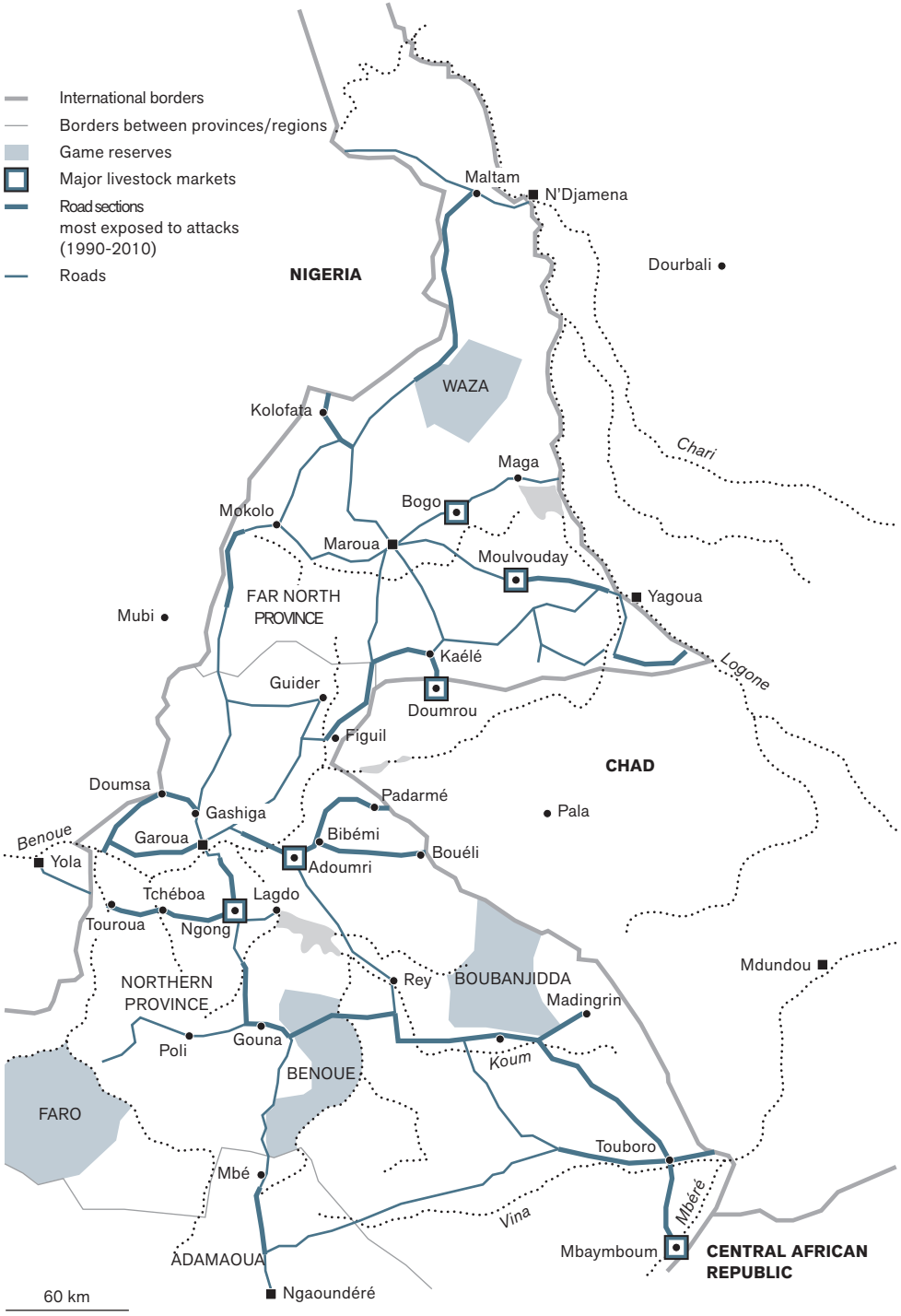
Lacking mentors and political support, young traders seek to find a place for themselves and to “get ahead.” Corporate cohesion is inefficient at opposing these newcomers who do not threaten the dominant businesses. Meanwhile, the cosmopolitan milieu of the markets closes people’s eyes to their criminal activities. Even though sudden enrichment is noticed, it is not disapproved of. The *omertà* of the markets and bus stations is well known, and everyone has a dodgy little deal to keep secret. The major traders themselves, who establish a “syndicate” of the powerful, all started out with illegal activities, generally trading in contraband. And then, according the expression “to ‘fix’ is not to steal,” the “basic” fixer of the markets creates a tolerant mindset towards the “armed” fixer, provided it is with a view to investing. What good is it to denounce the practice in a context where it is more effective to pay off a judge than to hire a lawyer? But apart from this fear of speaking out, there exists the possibility for everyone to one day take his share of this endless plunder, which is said to be born of the general disorder. Indeed, many situations may be observed that still fluctuate between “aberrations for survival”—illegal activities carried out swiftly as an exception—and the complete integration of a parallel model of accumulation.

A criminal engine has to become established in a short time in order to inject funds into a parallel economy that is increasingly frequently referred to today as the “real economy.” It becomes systematic thanks to the large sums involved, the extent of the phenomenon, and the number of traders from the markets of Garoua, Pitoa, Ngong, and Adoumri who have played a role in these criminal enterprises.

Meanwhile, faced with these cash flows, representatives of the state government and the police have sought to take their cut from those who seek to escape justice or regain their liberty. They seem in no hurry to combat the criminal activities that provide them with an income on the side. However, it would be going too far to say that they are the patrons of these criminal enterprises. They are profiting from a period of disorder, in a province that is not theirs, rather than responding to a new situation.

Mbororo pastoralists have twice paid the price for the insecurity as victims, but not just as victims. When they knew what was happening in the CAR from the 1990s, they thought they were protected in Cameroon due to existence of the rule of law there. Did the Mbororo from the Central African Republic not seek refuge in Cameroon? When they first started to be harassed by the *Zaraguina*, they felt caught in a trap, which explains their erratic flights, in which they only succeeded in losing their herds. But they have also been victims as predators, by proving unable to launder and invest the “dirty money” in activities to which they do not—or barely—have access. These events are then interpreted by the Mbororo communities as feeding into their status as perpetual victims.

At the Crossroads, Insecurity in the North of Cameroon, 1990–2010



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