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The historical long-term in the politics of the Central African Republic: Insights from the biography of Barthélémy Boganda (1910-1959)

Klaas van Walraven
(African Studies Centre Leiden)

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African Studies Centre Leiden
P.O. Box 9555
2300 RB Leiden
The Netherlands

Telephone +31-71-5273372
Website www.ascleiden.nl
E-mail asc@asc.leidenuniv.nl

The historical long-term in the politics of the Central African Republic:

Insights from the biography of Barthélémy Boganda (1910-1959)[*]

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Abstract

This article investigates the possibility of long-term causation in the political history of the Central African Republic. It does so by looking at the biography of Barthélémy Boganda (1910-1959). It argues that the upheavals of European colonisation at the beginning of the twentieth century – as experienced by Boganda as a child – exercised an enduring influence on his persona and remained relevant for his life and work throughout the later part of the colonial era. Second, the article investigates the persistent relevance of cultural repertoires as ingrained in the religious cosmologies in the region in pre-colonial times for the nature of Boganda's political leadership. It argues that his charisma was articulated through the behavioural repertoires of the trickster archetype, as described in the pedagogical warnings of pre-colonial regional cosmologies. This betrays the continued relevance of pre-colonial notions of political legitimacy as marked by folly, which is an essential element in the trickster figure. While warning against essentialist interpretations of Central African culture, the article concludes that research into political anthropology could reveal how styles of political deportment among Central African leaders (from politicians to warlords) are possibly fed by older (unhelpfully called 'pre-colonial') notions of cunning and brutality, which undergird deeper representations of violence and power.

Résumé

Cet article examine la possibilité de causalités de longue durée dans l'histoire politique de la République centrafricaine. Il s'y attèle à travers une étude biographique de Barthélémy Boganda (1910-1959). Il soutient que les bouleversements induits par la colonisation européenne au début du XXe siècle – tels que vécus par Boganda enfant – ont exercé une influence durable sur sa personnalité et ont continué à avoir un impact sur sa vie et son travail tout au long des dernières années de l'époque coloniale. L'article examine également le fait que les répertoires culturels enracinés dans les cosmologies religieuses de la région depuis l'époque précoloniale sont restés pertinents pour la nature du leadership politique de Boganda. Il soutient que son charisme s'exprimait à travers des répertoires de comportement liés à l'archétype du décepteur ou fripon, tels que décrits dans les admonitions pédagogiques des cosmologies régionales précoloniales. De ce fait, on constate que les notions précoloniales de légitimité politique marquées par la folie, qui sont un élément central de la figure du décepteur, sont restées d'actualité. Tout en mettant en garde contre toute interprétation essentialiste des cultures centrafricaines, l'article conclut que les recherches sur l'anthropologie politique peuvent mettre au jour la manières dont les modes de conduite politique observables chez les leaders centrafricains (des politiciens aux chefs de guerre) pourraient être nourris par des notions anciennes (qualifiées de façon peu

[*] This article is based on a paper entitled 'The life of Barthélémy Boganda as a reflection on the longue durée in Equatorial African history; Workshop 'The Long Term: Tracing Legacies of Violence in French Equatorial Africa'; Libreville, 23-27 November 2018.

idoine de « précoloniales ») de ruse et de brutalité, qui sous-tendent des représentations plus profondes de violence et de pouvoir.

Introduction

It is now just more than 60 years ago that Barthélémy Boganda, 'father' of the Central African Republic's failed nation-state, met a premature death in an air crash (29 March 1959). It created a sudden void in the country's political class, which could only be filled with difficulty. As such it contributed to the steerless state in which Central Africans entered the independence era – European colonisers and missionaries having assaulted, head-on, ancient political traditions, besides subverting subsistence economies and trade networks and impairing regional ecologies. Jan Vansina wrote how the death of the 'Equatorial political tradition', as he saw it, led the peoples of the wider region to face decolonisation without a political alternative undergirded by a common purpose, so that, when independence loomed, insecurity exploded. If his argument referred to the western Bantu cultures of the rainforest,[1] his contention was also valid for the Central African Republic as a whole.

With the country embroiled in crisis for almost three decades now and no end in sight to spiralling violence – despite much investment in peacekeeping and political analysis – it is perhaps warranted to delve into the deeper history of this region and investigate whether there are longer-term issues and causative trends that are of relevance to the present-day crisis. Richard Reid has argued that many of today's conflicts in Africa have nineteenth-century origins.[2] But if it is, indeed, remarkable how especially the north and north-east of what is now the Central African Republic has been subjected to chronic violence ever since the 1850s (save for much of the colonial interlude), this in itself does not mean, of course, that the same issues or processes are involved.[3] The search for long-term historical causation inevitably yields ruptures that privilege the analysis of more recent dynamics in contemporary violence.

Nevertheless, by looking at the life of Barthélémy Boganda this article argues, in a more general way, the lingering relevance of aspects from an older age – supposedly 'bygone' – for younger (more recent) phases in Central African history. Boganda's contextualised biography[4] shows, first, that the upheavals of the European occupation continued to work themselves out in his *persona* and therefore had indirect relevance for his life and work all through the colonial era. Second, it reveals, in his political style and comportment, as well as in their reception and understanding by Central Africans, the continued relevance of cultural repertoires as ingrained in the religious cosmologies extant in the region in pre-colonial times. The notions and traditions involved may, in turn, provide insight, not in current explosions of violence but at least in the way that, locally, representations of power are formulated and understood. This in itself could be of relevance to the background of the political evolutions in the less distant past.

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[1] The Lobaye region in the south-west of the Central African Republic is part of this. J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, 1990), 247-248.
[2] R. Reid, 'Past and Presentism: The "Pre-colonial" and the Foreshortening of African History', *Journal of African History*, 52 (2011), 135-155.
[3] Even if, perhaps, those regions have had a transitory status between the encroaching Muslim North and the Equatorial zone for very long and this in itself may, perhaps, account for some violent upheavals. See D.D. Cordell, *Dar al-Kuti and the Last Years of the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (Madison, 1985).
[4] Which is the subject of a monograph provisionally entitled 'The Sorcerer-Activist: Barthélémy Boganda and Political Life in French Equatorial Africa 1910-1959' (work in progress).

The significance of Boganda

Barthélémy Boganda was the dominant figure of the era of decolonisation. Merciless in his criticism of racist abuse and colonial exploitation, he became the principal politician of 'Oubangui-Chari' (the Central African Republic's colonial name). In 1946 he won a seat in the French National Assembly, which provided him near immunity from colonial harassment. A gifted agitator, he formulated a unique human-rights perspective on decolonisation. He tried to break the stranglehold of French trading monopolies by launching a co-operative movement and articulated Pan-Africanist sentiments with pleas for the maintenance of the structures of *Afrique Equatorial Française* (AEF – French Equatorial Africa), the federation of French colonies in the wider region. A former Catholic priest, his political practice was exceptional, marked by a syncretic discourse that mixed modernist and Christian elements with notions and concepts from the pre-colonial past. Steeped in the Classics by a missionary education, he had a gift for Latin. He developed into a formidable orator – virulent, cynical at times, and confrontational. Boganda expressed a fierce anti-communism, and while implacable towards settler racists pleaded the preservation of constitutional links with France. It made him politically invulnerable. His present-day legacy, however, is controversial and enigmatic, grounded in the syncretic ambiguity of his demeanour and thought and the way these were understood, as well as in the effects of his sudden demise – itself the object of syncretic interpretation. While he became the obligatory reference point for every Central African leader, his political programme was seldom examined. In fact, his contemporary significance may lie precisely in the memory of his comportment and the widespread ignorance of his ideas.

Violence as context

Understanding the significance of an individual's biography requires contextual reading. A predominant aspect of Boganda's world was the dislocation wrought, in the wider Equatorial region, by decades of enduring violence. This had its roots in the steady encroachment of – and ultimate clash between – the Atlantic trading system coming in from the south and south-west (eventually culminating in the colonial occupation) and the trade and slave raiding from the Muslim North. It made the second half of the nineteenth century into a violent age. Entire regions were enveloped by a spectacular expansion of slavery and slave raiding – pushing before them whole communities and peoples. Spiralling violence emptied entire regions, notably in the (north-)eastern parts of the present-day Central African Republic, in the course of what today would be called a 'humanitarian crisis'.[5]

Of course, pre-colonial governance in the wider Equatorial region (the rainforest zones included) had always had its potentially violent sides. Chiefs in the Kongo kingdom, for example, were expected to be able – and to be seen – to perform acts of exceptional violence in order to demonstrate their right to rule. But as Wyatt MacGaffey has noted, whether this was part of the notion of chiefship as such or more tied to the history of those violent times does not seem entirely clear.[6] In any case, the nineteenth-century violence triggered many new developments, more than ever uprooting entire peoples as 'restricted' wars gave increasingly way to 'destructive' ones (both concepts

[5] Generally Cordell, *Dar al-Kuti and the Last Years of the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* and Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 228 ff.
[6] W. MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2000), 220.

having for long been part of western Bantu societies). It changed the face of social life – and this in the *wider* Equatorial region: among the Oubanguian peoples of the northern savannas dispersed habitats gave way to compact settlement while, just as among the Bantu rainforest communities towards the south, villages became palisaded and marked by sophisticated defence works.[7]

This also occurred among the Ngbaka-Mabo,[8] peoples speaking an Oubanguian (rather than western Bantu) tongue in whose midst Boganda would be born – later, around 1910. In the course of the nineteenth century the Ngbaka-Mabo had migrated, under pressure from slavers, from the east and south-east, into the Lobaye region, an area to the south-west of Bangui (the later capital of the French colony of Oubangui-Chari). This region is covered by rainforest but borders the savanna and is traversed by the Lobaye River. By the 1880s, the Lobaye region, too, had become a world on alert, which had much to do with the pressures of incoming African settlers and resultant clashes – Ngbaka oral traditions of the twentieth-century vividly testify to this.[9]

This was followed by the violence of colonisation on which much, of course, is known to us but whose immediate effects, Vansina has pointed out, are still easily underestimated. The Tsayi people, for example (western Tekes in 'Moyen Congo' – French Congo), virtually disappeared as an ethnic group after all 135 of their villages, save three, were destroyed.[10] The same degree of dislocation if not wholesale destruction occurred in other parts of French Equatorial Africa including the north of Moyen Congo and Oubangui-Chari (the Lobaye region straddled the frontier between the two territories).[11] The havoc created by colonial forces was accompanied by, and deepened with, the forced collection of 'red rubber' and the ravages of disease, notably sleeping sickness,[12] transforming the wider region into a 'heart of darkness' – just as the Congo Free State, on the left bank of the Congo and Oubangui streams. Sparse populations and France's reticence to invest in the administration of its acquired territories made coercion – by taxation and the associated threats and acts of violence – into the modality of government and exploitation, whether by the few administrators dispatched to 'govern' or the personnel of concession companies established to avoid the colonies' looming bankruptcy. Taxes had to be paid in kind (i.e. rubber), and under the circumstances this easily led to violence: lack of means to enforce the new dispensation, coupled with the Conradian conditions of isolation in which Europeans and their West African auxiliaries confronted elusive populations, made terror and atrocities into structural features of the early colonial 'system'. Men who did not deliver on (ever more) rubber or portage were shot, while women were raped or taken hostage together with children to force the men to come forward. On his 1905 inspection tour of AEF Savorgnan de Brazza had to conclude that the kidnapping of women and children was a generalised procedure; in Oubangui-Chari he discovered various 'concentration

[7] D.D. Cordell, 'The Savanna Belt of North-Central Africa', D. Birmingham and Ph.M. Martin (eds), *History of Central Africa*, vol. 1 (London and New York, 1983), 59-72 and Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 80, 229-230 and 281-282.

[8] For an early eyewitness account, see L. Poutrin, 'Notes ethnographiques sur les populations M'Baka du Congo français', *L'Anthropologie* (Paris), 21 (1910), 40. Ngbaka-Mabo is the modern linguistic term by which to distinguish these communities from related groups like the Ngbaka-Minagende in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

[9] J.M.C. Thomas, *Les Ngbaka de la Lobaye: Le dépeuplement rural chez une population forestière de la république centrafricaine* (Paris and The Hague, 1963), 255-258.

[10] Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 244.

[11] In 1933 the Lobaye was attached to Oubangui-Chari.

[12] R. Headrick, *Colonialism, Health and Illness in French Equatorial Africa, 1885-1935* (Atlanta, 1994), ch. 4.

camps'. During the early years of the new century concession personnel (17 Europeans with some 200 African auxiliaries) committed 1,000 to 1,500 murders in the Mpoko concession alone (north- and south-west of Bangui). Porters were worked to death.[13] Thus even if, at the time, colonial forces were very thinly spread on the ground, the havoc they caused made the impact of the European presence profound.

Dislocation in the Lobaye

The Lobaye region, where Boganda would see the light of day, was not spared either. Although at the time it was the most distant part of Moyen Congo, it was close to Bangui, Oubangui-Chari's capital, and thus vulnerable to penetration. Its northern outliers were part of the Mpoko concession, terrorised by a company that in 1910 merged into the 'Compagnie Forestière Sangha-Oubangui' (CFSO). The activities of this firm still came down to, what Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch in her seminal study called 'armed commerce'. While outrages *did* lead to scandals (just as in the Belgian Congo), these were for the most smothered in denial, the blaming of subordinates and the evasion of responsibility. Without commitments to properly invest in administration and development, atrocities were inevitable, grounded in impunity and the belief in European superiority.[14]

Hence, for long things did not improve in the region. In 1904 the manager of a Lobaye trade factory had the son of a chief whipped to death for not furnishing enough porters. That same year a colonial officer ordered the abduction of 60 women in reprisal for deficient rubber yields. They were transported to Bangui and locked up – most starved to death ('the women of Bangui').[15] Inevitably, these exactions led to resistance, and for much of the century's first decade the Lobaye was engulfed in insurrections that the French had trouble to put down (1902-1908). There were three punitive expeditions, in 1904, 1906 and again in 1909 – AEF's governor-general Merlin having ordered a reconquest, or rather conquest, that would reach its apogee around 1910.[16] A Dutch concession employee later described travelling in the region between 1905 and 1908, seeing village after village destroyed by fire, with bones and skulls scattered about.[17] And outrages would continue – according to Coquery-Vidrovitch there were no years *without* exactions:[18] in 1913 a concession agent had an inhabitant of Bobangui (Boganda's native village) beaten and drowned in a swamp; in 1926 – almost thirty years after the first atrocities – the colonial administrator at Bodembéré (in the savanna just north of the rainforest) ordered African auxiliaries to punish a village for disobeying his orders. They shot men, massacred women and burnt children alive. André Gide visited the Lobaye one year later. Dedicated to the memory of Joseph Conrad, his scandalising travel book, *Voyage au Congo*, listed people's apathy under

[13] C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au Temps des Grandes Compagnies Concessionnaires, 1898-1930* (Paris, 1972), 171 ff.
[14] *Ibid., passim.*
[15] See *Le rapport Brazza. Mission d'enquête du Congo: rapport et documents (1905-1907)* (Editions le passager clandestin: Neuvy-en-Champagne, 2014), 84-88.
[16] P. Kalck, 'Barthélémy Boganda (1910-1959): Tribun et visionnaire de l'Afrique centrale', in Ch.A. Julien et al. (eds), *Les Africains* (Paris, 1977), vol. 3, 108; Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo,* 199-200; P. Kalck, *Historical Dictionary of the Central African Republic* (Metuchen, NJ, & London, 1992), 108.
[17] A. Vermeulen, *De Ingang der Hel: Episode uit het Afrikaansche Pioniersleven* (Amsterdam, 1938), 223-229. For a discussion, see J. Vansina, 'History in Novels and Memoirs: Alfons Vermeulen on Rural Congo (1899-1904)', *History in Africa*, 39 (2012), 123-142.
[18] *Le Congo,* 185.

abuses and extortionate practices redolent of the outrages of the early 1900s.[19] Under the circumstances the Lobaye's economy became dislocated.[20] Its ecology was ravaged by disease – the 1905 smallpox epidemic wiped out villages in the wider region, the Spanish flue of 1918-1919 compounded things further[21] and sleeping sickness continued to plague the area for long.[22] Population losses were dramatic,[23] villages broke up and communities disintegrated. That the Lobaye was, between 1900 and 1920, in the grip of anomie is best illustrated by the increasing number of orphans roaming the forest. Colonial officialdom callously suggested it was Ngbaka custom to abandon such children to their fate.[24]

Childhood upheavals

The relevance of all this lies in the fact that Boganda was born around this time (officially in 1910 but it may have been two or three years later),[25] and that it therefore depicts the circumstances in the region of his birth. Testimonies, which one can trace back to Boganda himself and his family,[26] relate that he lost his parents in early childhood. He probably never knew his father, an affluent resident of Bobangui who allegedly perished in the course of a punitive expedition. It is said that his mother was murdered by an auxiliary of a concession company (presumably the CFSO), perhaps before 1915, perhaps later – which means he also lost his mother early on. His subsequent guardian was said to have died during World War I while in military service in France. Later, an uncle of Boganda – a chief and the father of Jean-Bédel Bokassa – was beaten to death for acts of insurbordination (1927).[27]

If born in conditions of anomie, it is also through a calamity that Boganda would appear in the historical record. In 1920 the orphan contracted smallpox. Aged seven to ten, a brother of his took him to an uncle for care, but on their way in the forest they ran into a colonial patrol. Boganda's brother fled (as Central Africans had by then learnt to do when encountering whites), leaving his brother to face the patrol on his own.[28]

Boganda was brought to an orphanage from where he was taken into care by Spiritan missionaries and embarked on colonialism's redemptive trajectory as embodied in missionary education. He was, by all accounts, a bright and eager student, who enrolled in different institutions across the Equatorial region (Bétou and Brazzaville in Moyen Congo; Bangui; Lemfu in the Belgian Congo; and the 'grand séminaire' of

[19] A. Gide, *Voyage au Congo: Carnets de route* (Paris, 1927), 81-109, 159, 186. Pierre Kalck, an administrator after World War II, still saw people in the Boda region whose ears had been cut off by concession personnel. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo*, 185-186.
[20] Thomas, *Les Ngbaka de la Lobaye*, *passim*.
[21] Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo*, 191. On Spanish flue, see Afrique Equatoriale Française – Colonie du Moyen Congo. Affaires politiques. Année 1919. Rapport d'ensemble du 1er trimestre; Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereinafter as ANOM), GGAEF, 4 (2) d 25.
[22] Headrick, *Colonialism, Health and Illness*, *passim*.
[23] Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 369 n. 1.
[24] Notice circonscription de la Lobaye (n.d. but 1921). Ecoles. Œuvre des orphelins de la Lobaye; ANOM, GGAEF, 4 (2) d 30.
[25] J.D. Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda. Ecrits et discours. 1946–1951. La lutte décisive* (Paris, 1995), 19–20; J. Serre, *Biographie de David Dacko. Premier président de la république centrafricaine 1930–2003* (Paris, 2007), 281.
[26] David Gbanga, 'L'interview du général Sylvestre Xavier Yangongo', Grands événements radiophoniques, Radio Centrafrique, 28 March 2008 (no longer accessible).
[27] He had freed villagers taken hostage to enforce rubber collection. P. Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda 1910–1959: Elu de Dieu et des Centrafricains* (Saint-Maur, 1995), 51 and B. Titley, *Dark Age: The Political Odyssey of Emperor Bokassa* (Montreal etc., 1997), 7.
[28] Note 26 above.

Yaoundé in Cameroun). The first African from Oubangui-Chari to enter the latter institution, Boganda would also become the first in the colony to enter the Catholic priesthood (he was ordained in 1938).[29] This meteoric rise came at the cost of a troubled mind and a fractured worldview.

The private sphere of Boganda's life

It is not difficult to see how the chaotic conditions of Boganda's childhood days acted themselves out in terms of his later private life. Being taken into Western care at the age of ten, possibly a bit earlier, meant, first of all, that Boganda did not undergo Ngbaka rites of passage.[30] In the wider Oubanguian world such ritual took place by way of circumcision/excision in combination with complex ceremonies by which the young were initiated in secret knowledge. This was required in order to become – and to be considered by society as – an adult. A fundamental part of the social fabric, missing out on rites of passage led to problems for the uninitiated, who would have trouble finding a spouse and more generally could become the target of mockery – at gatherings among the Banda people an uninitiated 'man' could not speak.[31]

Naturally, with the transformations of colonialism initiation rituals would undergo adjustments anyway, but there are reasons to argue that Boganda developed an enduring complex about women and that, more generally, his 1920 'capture' in the forest amounted to a rupture whose consequences would manifest themselves throughout his life. One should, of course, be wary of biography that purports to provide insight into the psyche of the *persona*. Fundamentally, one may question whether one can actually *know* what goes on inside someone else's mind – rules of evidence in psychology/psychiatry differ from the empirical demands of historical scholarship. More specifically, the traumatic childhood is something of a trope in biography and bears the risk of ignoring later ruptures or turning-points. Fortunately, however, we have at our disposal personal diaries that Boganda kept all through the late 1920s to mid-1940s, and many of their entries allude to his state of mind.[32] They contain, for example, pained references to the mother figure that point clearly to his childhood loss. Naturally, it was common for seminaries to encourage acts of devotion to the Holy Virgin and female Catholic saints (as a non-libidinous sublimation of femininity),[33] but in Boganda's case this went well beyond the celebration of angelic women. In one diary consacration to Mary he pleaded:

> Be my mother, my counsellor, my help … Give me back my innocence … help me to overcome the infernal powers.[34]

And in a prayer to the Holy Agnes, patron saint of virgins, Boganda opined that

[29] Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda 1910–1959*, *passim* and B.B. Siango, *Barthélémy Boganda. Premier prêtre oubanguien. Fondateur de la république centrafricaine* (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, 2004), *passim*.
[30] Siango, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 43.
[31] D. Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique* (Paris, 1988), 27; P. Vidal, *Garçons et filles: Le passage à l'âge d'homme chez les Gbaya Kara* (Nanterre, 1976), 117 ff.
[32] Deposited in the Archives Générales Spiritaines (hereinafter as AGS), Chevilly-Larue, SF-242.1/113539. For a discussion, see K. van Walraven, 'The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda: Priest and Politician in French Equatorial Africa (1910–1959)', *History in Africa*, 44 (2017), 237–264.
[33] Harry Leyten (former Catholic priest), e-mail to author, 13 December 2015.
[34] 'Soyer ma mère, ma conseillère, mon aide … Rendez-moi mon innocence … aidez-moi à vaincre les puissances infernales'.

> [l]ike me you have passed through that valley of tears, like me you have been the target of the fury of hell and the world.[35]

– with 'hell' defined in another diary entry as a 'little child wrested from the caresses of its mother'. Set against his childhood experience these prayers, most from the 1930s, may not just be ritual celebrations of the Catholic faith but also express deeper feelings, such as a longing for the mother figure (just before he penned down his definition of 'hell' he had suffered from 'a serious depression' – as he confided in correspondence –, thus indicating the personal aspect involved).

Besides the powerful symbolism of motherhood, Boganda's diaries alluded to problems with his libido; one entry lamented that his imagination was like a 'dormant piglet'.[36] The unisex world of seminarian life formed, from the perspective of his non-initiation in Ngbaka rites, a double punishment that forecast his later struggle with celibacy (which he would lose) and perhaps fed his disapproval of polygamous practices over which he would regularly clash with his priestly flock in the 1940s. Finally, Boganda's personal history also puts into sharper relief his marriage to a French woman, in the late 1940s, even if it led to his eviction from the priesthood (and other forms of prestige may have been at play here in the context of an emergent political career). In any case, it hurt that Frenchmen ridiculed him for this and that Africans also made fun of it, as witnessed in a politically charged song of the 1950s:

> Boganda you have just lost the village in spite of us.
> Boganda you have just made us feel bad in spite of ourselves.
> You want to make the priest and you put a woman in your bed.
> You take a wife among the whites and you make her pregnant.[37]

It cruelly exposed the alienation from his African milieu – Boganda would remain defensive about his marriage.[38]

Boganda as political leader

If the havoc of the colonial occupation exerted enduring influence on Boganda as a private person, aspects of Equatorial Africa's so-called 'pre-colonial' cultural universe would, conversely, affect the nature of his political leadership – giving rise to a curiously syncretic blend of 'modernist' and 'traditional'[39] styles of agitation and politicking. A boy of around ten by the time he was picked up in the forest, Boganda must have been exposed to some extent to the beliefs and values of his people as

[35] 'Comme moi tu as passé dans cette vallée de larmes, comme moi tu as été en butte à la fureur des enfers et du monde'.
[36] Van Walraven, 'The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda', 254-255 ('1 petit enfant arraché … aux caresses de sa mère'; 'un petit cochon qui sommeille').
[37] Boganda's first legitimate child was born in 1950. Quote based on French translation of Ngbaka original: 'Boganda tu viens perdre le village malgré nous; Boganda tu viens nous rendre foutu malgré nous; Tu veux faire le prêtre et tu mets une femme dans ton lit; Tu prends épouse chez les blancs et tu la mets enceinte'. Rapport sur la mission d'inspection effectuée en Oubangui-Chari par l'inspecteur général des affaires administrative de l'A.E.F., no. 101/IGAA/CF, Brazzaville, 20 March 1951; ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2253.
[38] Rapport sur la mission d'inspection effectuée en Oubangui-Chari … 1951.
[39] For an analysis of the contentious (if not unhelpful) distinction between the terms 'modernity' and 'tradition' in twentieth-century Equatorial Africa, see f.e. F. Bernault, 'Body, Power and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 47 (2006), 207-239.

embodied in the cultural repertoires of Ngbaka cosmology.[40] Part of his early upbringing must have consisted of the recitation of stories and fables that were part of an oral tradition still alife in Ngbaka society by then.[41] These embodied not only a range of moral lessons (such as on losing the support of family, the disfavoured youth who prevails through cunning, or the travails of the supernatural saviour),[42] but also prescribed behavioural patterns that involved advice on how to tackle particular issues, as well as an interpretative cast providing recognisable meaning of the resultant comportment to a wider audience. As noted, as a political personality Boganda was extraordinary, and some aspects of this may be given greater lucidity by reference to these cultural repertoires. Since much of this has been discussed elsewhere,[43] a limited number of examples must suffice here. At the same time, they illustrate the lingering relevance of precolonial cultural notions and concepts in the context of the 'modernist' politics in the late colonial age, and possibly beyond.

Thus, when Boganda was sent to preach among the Banda peoples in the centre of Oubangui-Chari (1941–1946) he came in the habit of couching his activities partly in the cosmological idiom of his flock (even if he clashed with locals over the modernist aspects of his proselytising and behaved violently towards aspects of traditional local beliefs):[44] he prided himself, for example, that people explained his priestly severity by calling him *mourou*, leopard – that Equatorial symbol of political force and violence –, and hoped that this would enhance his effectiveness.[45] In turn, he made sure that village 'sorcerers' (an incorrect translation of *wama* – community healer) obtained formal management roles in his co-operative movement (1948),[46] and he reinforced the intensity of his political agitation later, in the 1950s, by protesting that Oubanguians should be given back their *séssé* – 'earth' in the Sango language[47] but also in the mythical sense of Earth as the metaphysical fount of power. In a territory that still endured the cultivation of cotton this message reverberated through the electorate, and Boganda reinforced it by extolling 'peasant virtues' and the so-called bucolic life of the pre-colonial age.[48] It intimated, in turn, an organic connection with the peasantry. Crowds wanted to be physically close to him[49] – the disfavoured youth who materialised as the supernatural saviour of Ngbaka myth? By the same token, Boganda's famous doctrine of *zo kwe zo* ('every human being is a person') spoke to the ideal of equality ingrained in the Equatorial political tradition as posited by Vansina.[50] And all this alternated with a liberal use of Latin proverbs and expressions in his public

[40] Child development studies show children build knowledge of morality and internalise notions of right and wrong as well as religious ideas when between three and seven years of age. K. van Walraven, 'Barthélémy Boganda between Charisma and Cosmology: Interpretive Perspectives on Biography in Equatorial African History', in K. van Walraven (ed.), *The Individual in African History: The Importance of Biography in African Historical Studies* (Leiden and Boston, forthcoming in 2019).

[41] Many of these could still be registered in the 1950s-1960s. See J.M.C. Thomas, *Contes Ngbaka-Ma'Bo (République centrafricaine): Proverbes, devinettes ou énigmes, chants et prières* (Paris, 1970), 2.

[42] *Ibid.*, stories 2, 4, 7, 17, 19, 20, 21, 24, 26-28, 30-32, 34, 35, 38, 39, 46, 48 and 49.

[43] Van Walraven, 'Barthélémy Boganda between Charisma and Cosmology', *passim.*

[44] He could be physically violent. Van Walraven, 'The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda', 245 n. 33. Also see A. Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme en Centrafrique: L'imaginaire de la possession en pays banda* (Paris, 2014), 234 ff.

[45] Journal de Grimari, 10 February 1943; AGS, SF-241.14/113537.

[46] Arts. 29-30 Société Coopérative de la Lobaye SOCOLO; ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2254.

[47] L. Bouquiaux, *Dictionnaire sango-français* (Paris, 1978), 587.

[48] These views had great historical depth. Van Walraven, 'The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda', 255.

[49] J. Petitjean, L'Oubangui autonome, February 1960 (confidential colonial report); AGS, SF-241.15/113538, 9.

[50] *Paths in the Rainforest*.

speeches, greeted by an uncomprehending audience sure to witness someone initiated in secret knowledge.[51]

Still more intriguing were aspects of Boganda's behaviour when confronted by opponents. In the mid-1940s, for example, he got into a row with a colonial administrator over his construction of bush chapels that the official feared could interfere with the social peace. He had imprisoned one of Boganda's catechists who had built a chapel without the approval of the local chief. Enraged, Boganda treated the administrator in his correspondence to a barrage of arguments, challenging him to show under what legal provisions the official had acted (obviously the latter had taken action under the 'indigénat'), lecturing him on the state of the law in AEF, treating him to virulent cynicism, and showing off his knowledge of the Classics to boot. Boganda also confronted him with a racist remark he had made. He verbally obliterated the administrator (a 'bush administrator' less endowed than him) – the latter later had to explain himself to his superiors. Having outsmarted the officer, Boganda likened him in his logbook to 'the devil' (ironically the man's surname was 'Dieu'), noting, perhaps not without contentment, that the furious administrator had apologised.[52]

Of course, character traits pertaining to the specifics of Boganda's personal past may have played their part here, and the confrontation could be seen, more generally, as the typical conflict between late-colonial officialdom and emergent African elite consciousness. Yet, when set against the various cultural repertoires extant in the Equatorial region, it seems that Boganda's comportment also betrayed something of the behavioural casts of the trickster figure – a myth depicting how humans became embroiled with the gods and, through cunning, stole their learning. Is it inconceivable that Boganda, or his wider African audience, cast his daring of the white gods in such political-cultural frame or archetype? The trickster represented a central, constitutive myth in Ngbaka cosmology (and the wider Oubanguian world), elucidating the Promethean opposition between heaven and earth (and thus the origin of man and the social order), thereby specifying the measure for the legitimacy of power as cunning combined with force.[53] Moreover, the trickster (*Tô* in Ngbaka-Mabo) also fed into folk tales and their underlying morals, and at that level prescribed behavioural patterns by demonstrating a range of negative human attributes that served as a pedagogical warning but also made him the object of sympathy and fun. *Tô* was, thus, impudent, gluttonous and boastful. He was no stranger to vanity or averse to cheating. And while his attempts to mobilise magical powers usually rebounded, he remained incorrigible and stubborn. With these frailties *Tô* also cut something of a burlesque figure.[54]

Boganda, too, was stubborn – never letting go of an opportunity to correct or criticise when an administrator strayed in the application or representation of the law, even in minor ways; he was immoderate in this (as well as in showing off knowledge) – thereby exasperating the French. It is true that frustration over continuing racist abuse played a role here (the 1940s-1950s still saw many incidents in this regard, and Boganda himself was the victim of racial discrimination or condescension on more than one occasion: his wife would later refer to him in her reminiscences as that 'poor negro

[51] Van Walraven, 'Barthélémy Boganda between Charisma and Cosmology' and Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 42.

[52] Journal de Grimari, 30 June 1944 and draft letter, 10 July 1944; AGS, SF-242.1/113539. More details in Van Walraven, 'The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda', 258-260.

[53] In both metaphysical and worldly terms. Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 216.

[54] Thomas, *Contes Ngbaka-Ma'Bo*, 31-34; S. Arom and J.M.C. Thomas, *Les Mimbo: Génies du piégeage et le monde surnaturel des Ngbaka-Mabo (République centrafricaine)* (Paris, 1974), 33; M. Henrix, *Croyances et rites des Ngbaka-Minagende (RDC), passim* (Ghent, 2009), 19; generally D. Paulme, 'Typologie des contes africains du Décepteur', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 15 (1975), no. 60, 569 ff.

humiliated for too long').[55] But all this also fuelled his provocation of his opponents. Outraged by French attempts to drive his co-operative project into the ground, at one time he challenged a French gendarme in the public road (January 1951), telling him to his face:

> To hell with you, to hell with you, to hell with you! And if you dare to enter my property I will bash in your face, yes, I will bash in your face.[56]

His wife had to restrain him. If his behaviour was a bit silly, or at any rate excessive, his Ngbaka on-lookers loved it. As they showed in their songs, in Boganda they recognised weaknesses – such as gluttony ('You want to make the priest and you put a woman in your bed') –, frailties that contrasted sympathetically with the perfection of the gods. It may have been precisely in his daring of the powers that be – like *Tô* – that his popularity lay, rather than in his political programme.

Concluding remarks

Boganda's practice was rooted in the traumas of his childhood endurance of the colonial catastrophe, besides religious-cultural notions and repertoires that stemmed from the pre-colonial age. Both demonstrate the long-term influences of the events and structures of so-called 'bygone' epochs, with Boganda's biography in this sense unifying an historical period stretching from the later nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. This in itself nuances Vansina's sombre conclusion about the death of the Equatorial tradition.[57]

But it does not mean that the notions and repertoires that helped form Boganda's politicking would still be automatically relevant today. What about Central African politics and society since independence? In one sense Central Africans were left leaderless by Boganda's premature death, though his demise on Easter Day 1959 sealed, if anything, the process of his deification[58] and consolidated his enduring significance. That he is both a point of reference and an enigma in the political society of the Central African Republic has probably much to do with the uniqueness of his comportment, as described above, besides the abruptness of his passing – already during his life he was seen as the instrument of a divine plan: Boganda blended the charismatic leader and the trickster into one prodigy whose guile Central Africans recognised as the weapons of the weak. He did what they could not do.

Boganda's importance is, in that sense, not dependent on the reading of his prolific writings – one may harbour doubts about the benefits of his programme, parts of which (such as his plea for a return to the land, the emphasis on hard work and his ideas on Pan-African integration) lent themselves to abuse or were contrary to what the ideals of the Equatorial tradition stood for.[59] Caught in between two different civilisations he

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[55] Michèle Jourdain to Father Frison, 12 November 1989; AGS, SF–242.1/113539 ('un pauvre nègre trop longtemps humilié').

[56] Le chef de district de M'Baiki à Monsieur le gouverneur, chef du territoire de l'Oubangui-Chari s/couvert de Monsieur le chef de région de la Lobaye, Bangui, 13 January 1951; ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2254 ('Vous m'emmerdez, vous m'emmerdez, vous m'emmerdez ... si vous entrez chez moi, dans ma propriété, je vous casse la gueule ... oui, je vais vous casser la gueule').

[57] *Paths in the Rainforest*, ch. 8. For which he was criticised. See f.e. MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 226 but also Bernault, 'Body, Power and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa', 237.

[58] See for rumours that Boganda would still be alive f.e. Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme en Centrafrique*, 73 and J.P. Tuquoi, *Oubangui-Chari: Le pays qui n'existait pas* (Paris, 2017), 164.

[59] Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 42 and Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda. Ecrits et discours*, 9.

was, moreover, a deeply tragic figure, whom Central Africans may not always have taken seriously. After all, was he, the uninitiated – culturally – a man? It is therefore difficult to say why Boganda would be more a point of reference than, say, Jean Bédel Bokassa.

Nevertheless, political styles such as exhibited by Barthélémy Boganda could perhaps provide insight in the predicaments of the Central African Republic in later days. These styles betray, at a deeper level, notions on force and power that may not have disappeared abruptly. That folly, for example – as an element in the trickster archetype – does not have to rule out the attribution of political legitimacy becomes clear in Central African associations of Bokassa's later orgies with the tragicomedies of the jester figure.[60] It would therefore be interesting to investigate whether and how styles of political comportment among Central African leaders (from politicians to warlords) are fed by much older (unhelpfully called 'pre-colonial') notions of cunning and what we would now call brutality. Naturally, one must guard against falling into essentialist traps; societies and cultures are not unchanging or organic wholes. But further research in political anthropology may clarify whether there is, in this sense, an enduring *longue durée* in the representations of violence and power.

[60] Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 218 and 222-224.

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