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Jeunesse comme ressource des conflits violents: une lecture historique et anthropologique de l'arène politique en République centrafricaine
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SUMMARY

Located at the heart of the African continent, the Central African Republic (CAR) is a vast country of 623,000 km², but underpopulated with around 6,000,000 inhabitants in 2022. Recently occupied (19th century), the territory of today's CAR has a long history of particularly violent (armed) conflicts, despite internal and external attempts in previous decades to break the cycle of misfortune. A number of factors are cited as determining or amplifying this ever-renewed cycle of violence in the country, including a disastrous colonial legacy, poor governance, an abundance of natural resources in an uncontrolled territory that attracts both powerful and predatory forces, greed for power, the collapse of the state, or a combination of all or some of these non-exhaustive factors. However, besides these equally important factors, we need to reconsider the weight of history and the role of young people as constants in these recurring situations of conflict in the Central African Republic.

Indeed, since pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times, young people have been the most desired: first by slave traders in search of "human-merchandise", then by imperialists for portage and forced labour, and finally by politico-military actors or entrepreneurs as weapons in conflicts linked to the seizure of state power and personal enrichment. Even today, the territory of the Central African Republic follows the rhythm of violent confrontations between actors, a context described in this thesis by the concept of the political arena. The arena is understood as a continuous setting of confrontations building up in history. Admittedly, in view of its young, but poorly educated (61% of the population is under 20, and 6 out of 10 can neither read nor write) and unemployed population, young people are omnipresent in the violent conflicts that characterize the arena in Central African Republic. However, in most of the analyses of the conflict situation in CAR, youth are not put central, except to decry the violent excesses in which they are involved. This thesis has put youth central in the arena that is the context of the conflict and recurrent violence in the Central African Republic.

The thesis therefore searches to understand how and why the Central African Republic has become a particularly violent political arena; what role(s) do youth play in a such context, and with what capacity(ies) for action? It is important that we answer these questions in light of historical continuities. Are we not, after all, faced with a perpetuation of the old systems of predation on Central African soil, where the use of young people is similar to the exploitation of natural resources? In other words, haven't young people ultimately become "resources" for the actors of the Central African political arena, in the same way as the natural resources and

“human resources” sought during the razzia era (slaves), during colonization (porters, forced labour), and in the post-colonial era (rebels, militiamen, militants)? These questions raised by this thesis make it possible to explore the importance or weight of history in shaping the political arena in the Central African Republic, but especially, to decipher the capacities for action of young people in relation to other actors in this arena. To do this, we drew on the concept of the political arena, and on the theory of the relation between structure and agent as proposed by Giddens (1984). We consider young people as actors who wage war, but also as innocents, both in relation to the historically grown socio-political structures in which violence has always been present and that has become their normal environment (chap. 1).

Apart from exploiting existing scientific documentation, the data used to trace the trajectories (biographies) of young people during the last conflicts came from two research sites: firstly Bangui, the capital of CAR, and secondly Paoua, a town and sub-prefecture in north-west of CAR. Considered as “hot spots” in terms of insecurity in the Central African Republic, the contexts of Bangui and Paoua illustrate the violent and recurrent conflict dynamics that young people have faced throughout history (chap. 2 & 3).

The thesis addresses a reflection on this political arena by trying to understand the conditions of emergence, fusion, cleavage and perpetuation of armed militias or rebel groups in the Central African Republic. The analysis establishes that militias and armed groups in the Central African Republic are part of a continuity with the past (chap. 4), and that they are in a way a reformulation of ancient traditions of community defence in a context that remains as favourable as ever of political violence. It also shows that these armed groups should not be understood as static structures, but as having the capacity to change and adapt to survive according to the interests of the moment. Yet, when hostilities cease the deeper structures do not disappear, and may inform socio-political actions any moment as they continue (chap. 5).

Using a biographical approach, this thesis also examines the trajectories of young people involved in armed groups. Answering the question “Who are the young rebels and militiamen?”, it sets out to describe the processes by which young people become rebel fighters or militiamen, since despite a context of recurrent violent conflict, not all choose the path of armed violence (chap. 6). Therewith the thesis explores the agency of young people endowed with limited power in society but caught up in an interaction with a constraining context that they in their actions also reproduce. The examination of the interaction of young people with the powerful leaders of armed groups or rebel factions, shows that these children and young people have not only become resources during and after conflicts for their commanders, but

that the latter's power is reinforced by other actors such as child protection workers, for whom these commanders are an obligatory passage to reach the children and young people to be demobilized. This illustrates the complexity of young people's positions in this political arena (chap. 7).

This thesis, which takes advantage of the cross-fertilization of anthropology and history, shows that for a very long time now, young people in the Central African Republic have been object of exploitation in the same way as natural resources were exploited. Being omnipresent in this long history of conflict, young people have become "human resources" for the politico-military in a CAR context that offers them a kind of choice without choice. This thesis therefore establishes that interventions on violent conflict in the Central African Republic, as elsewhere, must necessarily include young people and an in-depth understanding of the historical context in which they evolve in order to breach the trend of their involvement in conflict and reach durable solutions. As such, the thesis hopes to contribute to discussions in the field of conflict studies, policy and peace building.

Key words: Central African Republic, political arena, violent conflict, youth, agency, resource.