

The Ambivalence of Religion in the Central African Republic

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ABSTRACT

Since her independence, Central African Republic, (CAR) has endured poor governance, political instability, coups, and underdevelopment. Adding to her minimal population and incredibly impoverished reality, the CAR, is experiencing a deadly conflict. The Government in March 2013, was overrun by a fractious rebel coalition called Seleka, which means Alliance in the indigenous Sango language. Seleka was founded by some members of the Muslim minority in the CAR who lived in the country's isolated northeast. They took advantage of regional and ethnic issues as well as general dissatisfaction with the previous administration. Seleka ultimately oversaw the fall of an already fragile state and the escalation of political and ethno-religious violence while in power. Uncertain motives have led Seleka commanders to supervise what appear to be systematic attacks against Christian villages. Christian-led militias known as "anti-balaka" (or "anti-machete") have viciously attacked Muslims in retaliation, in part.

This paper will discuss the history of the CAR protracted civil war and the brutality committed by Séléka and Anti-Balaka fractions for religious reasons. This paper argues that while religious identity was manipulated by armed actors to justify the violence in CAR, Religious leaders and religious institutions play significant roles in mediation and peacebuilding, protection of civilians and interfaith solidarity, demonstrating the ambivalence of religion. In addition, I will discuss past peacebuilding strategies in the CAR, paying particular attention to the part played by religious actors in the process in early mediation missions, protection of civilians and community dialogue among others. For this will rely study shall rely on secondary sources.

Theoretical Framework

This study will examine the war through the lens of Scott Appleby's "Ambivalence of the Sacred" theory, which contends that religion is employed in conflict to encourage both violence and peacebuilding. Lastly, this essay will critically analyze the religious conflict in CAR using Appleby's theory. The study will also explore the relational peacebuilding and moral imagination of John Paul Lederach, and Katongole's theological response to violence and reconciliation.

Keywords: Central African Republic, Conflict, Interreligious Dialogue, Peacebuilding, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

There has been consistent fighting between different religious and ethnic groups in the Central African Republic (CAR) since the Civil War began in December 2012. Over 2,000 people were killed during the height of the Central African Civil War in 2013 and 2014 due to fighting between Seleka and anti-Balaka militias. According to UNHCR (2017), there are currently over 1.1 million internally displaced people and refugees. Wendy (2016) argues that that the CAR conflict was often portrayed as a religious confrontation in the literature and public discourse due to the disparities in religion across the two main fighting groups: the anti-Balaka militia, which was mainly composed of Christian and animist fighters, and the Seleka alliance, which was nearly exclusively made up of Muslims rebel groups. However, a more thorough analysis of the CAR's past, one can recognize that religious and ethnic cleavages are simply some of the multiple elements fueling the ongoing war in the CAR, whose origins lie deeper in the evolution of the state. Religion has only been weaponized in the case of CAR and not the major cause of the war.

Cardinal Nzapalainga, the Archbishop of Bangui, Imam Oumar K. Layama, the President of the Islamic Community of CAR (CICA), and Reverend Pastor Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou, the President of the Alliance of Evangelicals of CAR, united to condemn attempts by the primary instigators to turn a military and political conflict into an interreligious conflict when factional violence erupted in the CAR in 2013. Religious leaders have been crucial to the CAR during the crisis. Religious leaders have mediated disputes between armed groups and communities since 2012 and offered safety to those in need (Humenberger, 2018).

Brief Historical Background of CAR to Recent Conflict

The former French colony of Oubangi-Chari became the Central African Republic in 1960. Since then, the CAR's postwar history has been marked by a number of military takeovers, elitist power battles, and the establishment of ethno-religious divisions, all of which have hindered the development of a national identity and state. Furthermore, since independence, other parties have consistently interfered, including France, neighboring states, and the international community. In the CAR's brief post-colonial history, at least 10 military or political coups were attempted before the Central African Civil War erupted out in 2012, with the Saleka taking power. The political climate and the growth of the CAR as a state were severely impacted by these coups (Smith, 2015).

Colonial Heritage

Newey (2024), maintains that although many ethno-linguistic groups occupied the territory of present-day CAR for thousands of years, major warfare did not occur in that area until the introduction of European colonialism during the Scramble for Africa. Imperial France founded the colony of Ubangi-Shari as part of their expansion of their empire into modern-day CAR. They leased the property to private firms trying to strip the land of natural resources as rapidly as possible; a share of the profit was then put in the French treasury. Colonizers coerced local residents to gather gold, diamonds, rubber, coffee, and other resources without pay, frequently holding their families hostage until quotas were fulfilled. By 1940, historians believe that about half of the pre-colonial population had perished due to sickness and violence brought on by colonial exploitation (Knoope and Buchaman-Clarke, 2017).

Colonial powers preference for some ethno-religious communities over others for commercial reasons exacerbated ethnic tensions. For example, French settlers granted farmland to Muslim pastoralists Peul-Mbororo, essentially deporting the Gbaya community, who previously lived off the land as farmers (Deiros, 2014, p. 4). As a result, anti-Muslim feeling increased among the Gbaya and other nomadic populations, who were ethnically similar to the Gbaya. Although this partiality from the French colonial powers was commercially, rather than religiously, driven, it ultimately lead to tension and hatred between ethno-religious groupings (Newey, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Scott Appleby *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Violence, Religion and Reconciliation*

Scott Appleby (1999), in *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, he tackles two main issues. First, why and under what circumstances do some religious actors opt for violence, while others seek justice through nonviolent means and try to bring adversaries together? Second, what may be achieved by involving what he calls nonviolent religious militants in peacebuilding? Appleby examines the concept and experience of the sacred in conjunction with people's conflicting reactions to it, which upholds the intrinsic internal plurality of religion. The circumstances in which religious actors defend violence as a privilege or a sacred obligation. Ethno-religious nationalism and fanaticism are addressed at length (Lynch, 2000).

John Paul Lederach: Relational Peacebuilding and Moral Imagination

According to Lederach (2005), the moral imagination is the ability to identify opportunities and turning points to explore uncharted territory and generate what does not yet occur. The moral imagination, as it relates to peacebuilding, is the capacity to envision and produce positive procedures that are based on everyday difficulties of violence but go beyond these harmful patterns. According to Lederach, peacebuilding initiatives should be

guided by the art and spirit of social transformation. Lederach emphasizes art and imagination, which is reflected in his writing style and methods.

This study shall be guided by these theories meticulously. They establish the framework within which we can better grasp the challenge of religion and violence in the CAR and peacebuilding initiatives.

Religious Based Violence in CAR

Seleka Uproar and the State Collapse

Under Bozizé, after signing the 2008 Libreville Peace Agreement, which expected an immediate ceasefire in exchange for broad amnesty, DDR, and political involvement of the three primary insurgent organizations APRD, FDPC, and UFDR, the state's political administration had declined. Bozizé was accused of awarding key positions to his nomenklatura, and there was an increased ethnic polarization of public life, which escalated even more following the elections of January 2011. In the meantime, rebel combatants who had not been properly disarmed, demobilized, and reintegrated into the FACA regrouped themselves and looked for new partnerships in the largely Muslim north-eastern province of Vakaga, one of the CAR's most economically destitute regions (Humenberger, 2018). November 2012 saw the start of the civil war as Seleka rebel forces moved south and quickly attacked the center regions, which were inhabited by Christians.

The rebels wanted to oust Bozizé's regime, arguing that the president still abused human rights and repressed any socio-political criticism. Bozizé's administration originally rejected their offensive movement as unrealistic, but in a matter of weeks, Seleka fighters took control of dozens of towns, including N'Düge, Ouadda, Bamingui, and Bria. Bozizé was forced to negotiate after the Seleka offensive reached the outskirts of Bangui, the country's capital, by late December. In January 2013, a precarious cease-fire deal was negotiated, but it fell apart a few weeks later. On March 23, 2013, Séléka fighters conquered Bangui, established a new president, and effectively expelled Bozizé from the nation (Katz, 2013).

Lombard & Picco (2021) observed that the Séléka took over power and Djotodia declared himself president on 22 March 2013. This marked the beginning for the North Eastern Muslim minority of the CAR ruled the country and seized control over the economy and the country's natural resources. Their group identity came to be defined in religious terms, although the Seleka movement's primary motivation was not religious but political. Until then, the entire population has never been split along religious lines in the CAR's independent existence. The rebel organizations who formed the Seleka group were drawn from the country's marginalized North, which is predominately Muslim. Because of this, the majority of the fighters that toppled Bozizé's government were Muslims. In acts of violence and extortion, many specifically targeted Christians and their properties, escalating tensions within the community.

The Anti-Balaka Movement

Before the 2013-2015 crisis, in 2009, a disorganized network of self-defense organizations called the anti-Balaka faction was formed to combat the extortion and insecurity caused by coordinated armed robberies on the highways. At first, it had nothing to do with politics or religion (Welz, 2014). The organization only represented a constrained community response to an insecure environment that the ineffective state security system was unable to adequately handle. People felt that they were responsible for their own safety. These gangs were difficult to manage once they arose in a weak and unstable state like the Central African Republic (Ludovic, 2020).

Einsporn (2014) noted that the majority of Central Africans are ethnically and religiously represented by the Anti-Balaka militias, which were founded in response to the violence and abuse committed by Seleka forces. In a nation of just over 4 million people, nearly a quarter of the people were displaced as a consequence of the extraordinary inter- and intra-community violence that erupted at the end of 2013. The anti-Balaka reappeared as a grassroots reaction to the anarchy that followed the 2013 coup d'état by the Seleka rebels. Anti-Balaka turned Muslims into the primary targets of retaliation, accusing them of being complicit in the crimes committed

by the fleeing Seleka. Since then, many of Muslims have fled to neighboring countries as anti-Balaka parties have terrorized Muslim villages accused of collaborating with the disbanded Seleka.

Theoretical Framework

The Weaponization and Instrumentalization of Religion

The idea that ethnic and religious divisions developed as a result of some elites instigating groups for their own power struggles has been highlighted by a thorough analysis of the CAR's post-colonial history. The motivation for the takeover of power by the Séleka in 2012 was not a religious one but the ambition to rule the country, supported by disgruntled, mostly young people from the poorer, disadvantaged northern provinces. The most recent crises has led to an increasing polarization between Muslim and non-Muslim groups, which has resulted in more recent religious divisions. The ongoing sense of marginalization and prejudice that affected the Muslim population in the northeast was the primary cause of the 2013–2015 crisis rather than a religious split.

A turning point in the crisis was the anti-balaka militia attack on Bangui on December 5, 2013, which drove Seleka out of the capital and the western towns by the beginning of 2014. This was followed by a campaign of persecution against Muslims that lasted for several months; in both Bangui and the west, public outrage led to punitive attacks (mutilations, lynchings, etc.) that aimed to terrorize Muslims, force them to flee, and remove all traces of peaceful coexistence. As documented by the International Crisis Group (2015), although the CAR is a secular state, its politicians and leaders have consistently blended religion and politics. The nation's presidents have exploited religion to further their personal agendas ever since the time of Barthélémy Boganda, the father of independence and the first Catholic priest in the CAR.

A lot of politicians are also born-again preachers. Healing souls is an ideal foundation for a political career in CAR: Many religious leaders are tempted to enter politics. A number of CAR politicians who are part of the born-again churches that have grown in number during the 1990s have shamefully maintained ties with the anti-balaka, either by encouraging them or by giving them material aid. Two preachers who were infamous for endorsing the anti-balaka movement were forced to leave the Alliance of Evangelicals in the Central African Republic (AEC).

Drivers of the Conflict in CAR

Political instability and Absence of Rule of Law

The CAR has undergone multiple military coups and political elites since independence. The unpredictable political scenario made sustainable statebuilding impossible and it was probably owing to political interests among changing elites that the CAR society has remained fractured until today. Especially throughout the post-colonial period, the CAR's leaders struggled to successfully rule the huge area in the heart of Africa. Due to the considerable meddling into domestic issues by the French, the CAR struggled to build up its a brand-new, independent state at first. This state fragility increases ungoverned spaces and fuels resentment and provides fertile grounds for rebellion.

Ethnic Tension and Educational Gaps

Ethnic divisions and fault lines are crucial in fuelling conflict in the CAR. The ethno-regional north-south separation has long been the most significant cleavage in the CAR, much like the current religious division. The CAR society, comprising of 100 ethnic groups, with each speaking its own language, has consistently struggled to establish a national identity that unites all ethnic groups (Michelle, 2015). All previous uprisings and military takeovers were based on this lack of national identity, which is accompanied by extreme poverty, a lack of education, and political leaders radicalizing particular groups.

Unemployment, Militia and Natural Resources

Another source of conflict is the state's combination of low economic development and fragility, despite its substantial national resource assets. Different armed factions developed tensions over the exploitation of mineral resources. Numerous armed groups control routes in mining areas, allowing them to collect taxes, steal ivory,

and exploit timber to fund their operations. The majority of these groups are breakaway groups from the previous Sautéka and anti-Balaka militias (Bollen, 2013). In conclusion, when analyzing the causes of the conflict in CAR, economic underdevelopment and the loss of control over natural resources are critical elements. The weak economic state of a nation that has an abundance of natural resources is the root cause of the current militia issue. Furthermore, one of the factors that prevented the implementation of ambitious peace agreements and DDR procedures in the past was the state's limited budget (Sachs and Warner, 2001).

The Interfaith Religious Platform in CAR

The Interfaith Religious Platform is the nation's oldest social cohesion initiative. Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga, president of the Episcopal Conference, Reverend Nicolas Guerkoyame-Gbangou, leader of the Evangelical Alliance, and Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, president of the Islamic Community, worked together on the project. Associates of the Platform have started projects to reconcile the hearts and minds of Central Africans, and the Platform has traveled throughout CAR to promote interfaith dialogue. They have established community peace committees in Haute-Kotto, Bangui, Haut-Mbomou, Mbomou, and Vakaga prefectures, and they have made radio appeals for moderation and forgiveness. In March 2014, platform members traveled to Washington, the United Nations, DC, the Vatican, Geneva, and Berlin to raise awareness of CAR's predicament within the international community. They support hosting Muslim and Christians Sunday celebrations simultaneously and intend to build interfaith schools, faith-neutral health facilities, and cooperative farming initiatives (Fiedler, 2014).

The Bangui statements October 2013 and the February 2014, are the primary declarations traceable to the Interfaith Platform. The two statements were joint appeals by the Christian religious authority in the Central African Republic. The profound ambiguity of CAR inhabitants on the role of religion as a catalyst for conflict is reflected in their language. The Bangui I Declaration concludes with an appeal to the international world to fly rapidly to the rescue, to prevent the country from falling into the hands of extremists and religious fanatics, arguing that Muslims and Christians have always coexisted peacefully in the CAR (Brown and Zahar, 2015).

Local Religious Leaders in Peacebuilding CAR

When religious attacks started in 2012, religious leaders were among the first responders¹⁶⁰, and they were crucial in keeping citizens safe throughout the entire 2013–2015 crisis. They offered "food, water, and health services, and in one instance helped in the safe evacuation of communities at risk," in addition to shelter and a place to hide. Regardless of their religious affiliation, religious leaders intervened throughout the crisis to safeguard civilians from violent attacks by mediating with armed groups and providing basic necessities to internally displaced individuals.

Religious leaders from different groups, both Christian and Muslim, gathered in December 2012 to talk about how they could help ease tensions and lessen the impending conflict. The Platform of Religious Confessions of the Central African Republic (PCRC, or "Interreligious Platform") was established by the leaders of the three major religious communities in the CAR, Imam Omar Kobine Layama, the Catholic archbishop who is currently Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, and Reverend Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou of the Protestant faith community, in order to foster interreligious dialogue, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence (Conciliation Resources, 2018).

Neal (2014) narrates that by spreading messages of peace and tolerance to reduce tensions between various faith groups and condemn the use of religion as a tool in the political-military conflict, this Interreligious Platform emerged as a vital tool in the fight against religiously motivated violence. These peace messages played a significant role in keeping the population under control following violent attacks in the CAR, where people are typically very religious, in order to prevent further escalation of violence. At the local level, the Interreligious Platform has reached more than 200 religious and community leaders, creating spaces for dialogue within and between communities.

The Interreligious Platform quickly achieved international notoriety during the crisis. Imam Omar Kobine Layama and Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga were among the first to urge the international community to

intervene with a peacebuilding mission. They also participated in discussions organized by international think tanks and wrote articles for international newspapers to advocate for international support. The UN Security Council negotiations that ultimately resulted in the deployment of MINUSCA with a more comprehensive mandate than the previous AU-led peacekeeping mission MISCA are thought to have been sparked by the advocacy efforts of the heads of the Interreligious Platform (Chatham, 2014).

Fruits of Interreligious and Intercommunity Dialogue Initiatives in CAR

Creating dialogue mechanisms and measures to ensure peaceful coexistence are essential for successful conflict resolution and preventive peacebuilding initiatives. As the detailed analysis of the roots and drivers of the CAR conflict reveal, the nature of the conflicts has become very complex in the last decades, and then often a combination of various factors constitutes the basis of different nation-wide and community conflicts. Religious identity was one of the primary causes of violence in the CAR due to the intentional instrumentalization of religion and the creation of group polarizations. Therefore, in order to address issues at the national and local levels, discussion methods and other activities that promote peaceful coexistence of religious communities are crucial. In order to maintain societal cohesiveness and peaceful cohabitation, religious leaders play a very important and vital role. They can actively engage the local community by, for instance, planning ecumenical prayers and joint celebrations of Christian and Muslim holidays as symbols of the necessity and value of religious tolerance. On the one hand, they can serve as role models and encourage religious tolerance (Conciliation Resource, 2017).

As demonstrated by the following example of Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga's involvement in the facilitation of intercommunity dialogue in Yakolé, a town 200 kilometers northeast of Bangui, religious leaders' involvement in the CAR has previously led to the resolution of numerous community disputes. Religious leaders initiated interreligious dialogue programs in addition to mediating and facilitating disputes between communities in order to further advance religious tolerance and thereby avert conflicts in the long run. Initiatives for interreligious dialogue are crucial in demonstrating that the CAR crisis resulted from years of group fragmentation and political leaders utilizing religion as a tool to further their own agendas rather than from a religious conflict political motivations.

Religious leaders became de facto first responders because so many people sought safety in churches and mosques. They offered food, water, shelter, a place to hide, medical care, and in one case, support in the safe evacuation of communities in danger (HPG interviews). In addition to interacting with armed groups and acting as a mediator between communities and armed groups, these actors were in a good position to alert NGOs to the possible humanitarian repercussions of violence, as well as to provide information about the whereabouts, numbers, and needs of displaced people (Barbelte, 2015).

Application of Theories

The Ambivalence of the Sacred is particularly applicable in the Central African Republic. The main tenet of Appleby's thesis is that, depending on a nation's sociocultural, political, and economic circumstances at the time of war, religion can serve as both an originator to conflict and a tool for peacebuilding and de-escalation. Religion is typically seen as a conflict multiplier in the context of the Central African Republic Civil War, but recent advancements from faith-based organizations like PCRC demonstrate that interreligious collaboration is both feasible and effective in CAR (Newey, 2024). Both military officials and political elites in the CAR have clearly used religion to incite fear in the populace and provide justification for strikes on the opposing militias. Conflict is intensified and retaliatory violence against the communities that armed organizations represent is encouraged when religion is confused with different militant groups (Basedau & Schaefer-Kehnert, 2019).

However, compared to the programs run by diplomatic, government-level, track-one players, and contemporary religious peacebuilding efforts in the CAR have been far more successful. Local communities are greatly inspired by religious rhetoric and community leaders since, as this study has previously indicated, religion plays a significant role in daily life and identity for all Central Africans (Collins, 2020). Furthermore, most citizens view government officials as crooked and harbor a great deal of mistrust. As a result, religious actors bear a heavy

burden of containing and resolving local strife. A number of religious institutions have effectively reduced violent conflict by using their influence.

One of the most frequent victims of civil conflict is the network of social ties that bind individuals, groups, and communities. The fabric of civilization is shattered by war and weakened by violence. Building or restoring this social fabric through reconciliation is essential for peacebuilding according to Lederach. This is evident in CAR as we see communities which once lived together now torn apart by violence.

CONCLUSION

The past of the Central African Republic Civil War is complicated, and the future is much more uncertain. Millions of people have been internally displaced, thousands have died, the conflict has lasted for eleven years, and numerous ceasefire accords have failed. Additionally, there is little indication that the violence will abate, particularly as foreign players become militarily and financially involved in the conflict. Due to its political origins, the problem can only be resolved by diplomatic efforts, track-one discussions, and political change. It is evident from R. Scott Appleby's theory on The Ambivalence of the Sacred that religion has been weaponized and confused with other facets of identity to promote a "us-versus-them" mentality among civilian populations, militant organizations, and the political elite. But Appleby argues that religion may also be effectively used to advance peace, and this is clearly clear in CAR. The conflict is mediated at the grassroots level when religious leaders utilize their power to promote interfaith understanding and prevent possible bloodshed.

Although religion has been viewed as the main cause of the conflict in CAR, we have discovered that religion is just weaponized or exploited by political class and elites to advance their political agenda. Despite this, there is sufficient evidence most especially through the interfaith platforms to show that religion is a necessary tool for peacebuilding in CAR. At this point, one may wonder what will be the outcome if CAR had a state religion.

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