

ANTI-BALAKA/SÉLÉKA, 'RELIGIONISATION' AND SEPARATISM IN THE HISTORY OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Henry KAM KAH

Abstract. *This paper examines the employment of religious differences in escalating political crises in the Central African Republic (CAR) with threats of separatism in the country based on this. When Michel Am Nondroko Djotodia seized power through the Séléka rebellion in March 2013 and then abdicated the 'hot potato,' the crises during and after his abdication became intensely religious and on a scale unknown in the history of the country. From then on, there have been repeated threats of separation of Muslims from the predominantly Christian population. The Séléka rebels and fighters who also have some non-Muslims have been associated with Islam, and the anti-balaka is constituted of mainly Christian and non-Christian militias. The tussle for leadership and control of the CAR between the Séléka and anti-balaka rival movements has been motivated by religion. This has contributed in making the CAR a failed state with recurrent scenes of violence, killings, and displacements. Through a content analysis of the literature on the religious dimension of the crisis, we will examine the reasons for and threats of a split in a country with xenophobic religious differences and political volatility.*

Keywords: *central Africa, religion, separatism, partition, conflict, Central African Republic.*

Introduction

Religion is a form of identity for millions of people in the developing world; differences over religion have contributed to the current conflicts. Individuals may be uncomfortable when they perceive that others who share a similar religious identity with them are unfairly treated. Conflicts resulting from such ill-feeling are considered to be identity clashes and involve self-identified, often polarised groups within and between countries. Religious fanaticism and ideo-logical differences based on religion have contributed to conflicts worldwide. The Al-Qaeda

Henry KAM KAH, PhD

University of Buea, Cameroon

Email: henry.kah@ubuea.cm

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and Al-Shabbab terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Somali including other groups like the Boko Haram in Nigeria and AQIM in Mali and North Africa claim religious justification for their activities. Boko Haram in particular is against western education and policies championed by the United States of America (West Africa Insight, 2014; Mantzikos, 2013; Bamidele, 2012: 32-44; Haynes, 2009: 53). While religion contributes to conflict, it has also contributed to the resolution of conflicts (Haynes, 2009: 52 and 56).

Three forms of religious conflicts have been examined in the contemporary period. These include religious fundamentalisms, religious terrorism especially involving failed states and controversies surrounding 'the clash of civilisations'. (Huntington, 1996; Appleby, 2000; Gopin, 2000; Juergensmeyer, 2000, 2005; Haynes, 2003; 2007a, 2007b). These categories of conflicts are pronounced in several African countries with a multiplicity of religious groups such as Cameroon, CAR, the Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Togo, and Uganda. In as much as these conflicts have resulted from religious differences or extremism, efforts have also been made in several parts of Africa and the world to promote peace by religious organisations. In Mozambique, for example, the *Sant' Egidio*, a prominent religious group and a Catholic Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) has contributed to peace-making like elsewhere in the world. This international NGO was extremely influential in resolving the civil war that ravaged Mozambique since the mid-1970s (Haynes, 2009: 58-9 and 63-4). Similarly, the Dhammayietra religious group in Cambodia has played a prominent role in the revival of Buddhism, following the Khmer Rouge's years of depredation and consequent political instability, but also to the possibility of the country developing a post-conflict harmony as well as a shared sense of purpose and direction (Haynes, 2009: 71).

Religious competition between Muslims and Christians seems to be the single most significant political issue in Nigeria, like in other countries, and responsible for political and ethno-religious conflagration (Aleyomi, 2012: 133; Uhumwuangho and Epelle, 2011: 111). In the early political history of Nigeria, religion was used for political mobilisation, legitimacy, and to determine the voting behaviour of the people. Given the philosophy of Islam as a complete way of life for a Muslim, Islam has always been closely attached to politics especially in the Muslim dominated northern part of the country. The implementation of the *Sharia* or '*Shariacracy*' in Zamfara and other northern states of Nigeria generated a widespread uproar across Nigeria. Christians opposed this through mobilisation all over Nigeria (Onapajo, 2012: 42-52; Familusi, 2010: 160). In early 1987 and May and October 1991 there were anti-Christian riots in Northern Nigeria with serious consequences on Christians (Korieh, 2005; Maier, 2001). These conflicts that were based on religious differences have continued to be a challenge to the nation-building process in Nigeria from independence to the second decade of the 21st century.

Similarly, following the departure of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, there was a surge in violence between the Sunni Muslim majority and the Coptic Christian minority. Prior to this,

there had been occasional confrontations between these two religious groups, which posed a security threat to the unity of Egypt. Likewise, the Assad government in Syria has been engaged in sectarian rhetoric and has mobilised the Syrian Alawite, Druze and Christian minorities against the mainly Sunni protesters. His government argues that the emergence of a regime with a Sunni majority would endanger the other minorities in the country. The religious policy of the government has made many Sunni volunteers to join the struggle against the Bashar al Assad's regime from outside. They see it as a religious obligation to the Sunnis of Syria. To further infuriate the Sunni Muslims in Syria, the Russian government is supporting the Christian minority community (Aoun, *et al.* 2012: 2). The Indian government has also expressed grave concern about Islamic extremism. In spite of this, radical Hindu groups in the country are an even greater threat to peace and stability than Islamic radicals (Ibid: 25). In Sudan on the other hand, Islam is the only religion and all other religious groups should be fought against until they convert; in Ethiopia the Orthodox Church is the dominant religion, opposed to the presence of the Catholics in that country (Kasomo, 2010: 24). Apart from Sudan and Ethiopia, other African countries with conflicts that have their roots in religious differences include Eritrea, Somalia, and Uganda (Basedu, 2011: 6).

In spite of the intense competition between Muslims and Christians in some African countries, Senegal is a perfect example of a society that upholds peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. Over 90% of its population is Muslim, and 5% are Christians with the rest of the population representing traditional religions (Francophone West and Central Africa, 2013: 13). In other countries like Mali, Islamists have confronted traditional Islam in the northern part of the country by destroying Sufi Islamic artefacts (Ibid: 16). The unfolding melodrama in Mali is an attempt by the jihadists to militarily take over the country and establish a kind of terrorist state based on the *Sharia* law (Francis, 2013: 2). The example of the religious conflict in Mali clearly shows how members of the same religious group are different in terms of ideology and doctrine. This has led to negative consequences on the people and the religion they claim to defend.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban have tried for years to genuinely establish a religious state and formally institutionalize religious values through the re-establishment of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" (Aoun, 2012: 25). The United States is deeply involved in the country fighting against the Taliban and supporting the Afghan effort to defeat the Taliban fighters. This is not without costs on both the Afghan and American governments. The general upsurge in religious fundamentalism in Afghanistan and elsewhere needs to be understood against a background of global forces and the struggle to sell competing ideologies with the intention of undermining the other.

Although religion has been presented to have played a negative role in the politics and socio-economic life of the African people and others elsewhere in the world, it has also

contributed to peace and stability (Basedu *et al.*, 2011: 7). In Senegal, for example, the *marabouts*, or Islamic holy men who belong to the main Sufi brotherhoods, have been recognised as a source of political influence for decades. Their influence has a stabilising role and promotes dialogue and peace in the country. Politicians too from different countries of the world have from time to time visited places of worship, especially during election campaigns for the purpose of winning elections (Ellis, 1998: 188). When they won these elections, this is among other factors was attributed to the positive role of these places of worship. Unfortunately, in the CAR a political crisis has been given a religious connotation, not for the unity but rather for the disunity and partition of the country into different spheres of influence (Policy Briefing, 2013: 1).

Objectives and Relevance of Study

The objective of this paper is to examine the roots of the present religious-political crises in the CAR and the ramifications on separatism and disunity of this country. The on-going crisis in the CAR is not a new phenomenon because prior to and after independence in August 1960, this country faced various forms of sectarian crisis which included the crisis of leadership, ethnic tensions and military rule. Even after the 1993 elections when, Ange Félix Patassé defeated General André Kolingba, the economic, military and political crises that followed his ten-year rule did not unite the country. Many more cracks developed to challenge the peace and stability of the country culminating in his overthrow from the former Army Chief of Staff General François Bozizé with the backing of Chad and other foreign forces (Kah, 2014).

Nation-building in Africa after independence has remained a serious problem and explains the importance of the study of religion in exacerbating conflict in the CAR. Many governments have been put in place and have functioned on the basis of exclusion, ethnic jingoism and religious differences. A government that excludes others, like the one in the CAR since independence, has only fuelled sectarian conflicts between different ethnic and religious groups, with long-term negative consequences on unity, peace, and stability. Some of those who either seized power or were elected into office in the CAR like Ange Félix Patassé, André Kolingba, Jean Bedel Bokassa and François Bozizé have failed the population. They worked to enrich themselves, their political cronies, and religious groups, and left office without being brought to book. There is need for those who govern in this country and in other African countries to recognise the importance of de-emphasising ethnic jingoism and other sectarian interests to reach out to the population for an inclusive society where people can aspire to positions based on merit and develop a sense of belonging to the country.

This study is also important in the sense that the manipulation of young people for private interests of politicians has often resulted in consequences unforeseen in African countries. This was the case in Liberia, the Ivory Coast, and Sierra Leone during their

respective civil wars. Young people were instigated to destroy property, maim, kill, and abduct others. Others have been forcefully recruited as child soldiers on the pretext of fighting a religious war like in the CAR. Some have often taken matters into their own hands to the extent that the destruction that has often resulted has made it difficult to preach peace and reconciliation to people determined to seek revenge. The present religious and political fracas in the CAR is due to the manipulation of young people in the rural and poor areas of the country. They have wreaked havoc destroying property and brutally killing children and women. There is a need to educate young people during times of peace to be wary of the dangers of war and conflict.

Religious extremism and fundamentalism are on the rise in different parts of the world and are a threat to peace and stability. Some of the hot spots of religious intolerance in the world include Ireland, Somalia, Mali, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and Egypt. This has been expressed in the form of bombings, hostage takings, and destruction of homes. The more the fight against these forms of extremism extends, the more such cases like the Islamic state (ISIS) in Iraq arise, which is threatening the peace of the entire Middle East. The present scuffle between the *Séléka*¹ and anti-*balaka*, with a religious hue, is a manifestation of such extremist views. This study emphasises the importance of religious tolerance and moderation so that the world can become a safe place for human habitation, and disunity be discouraged.

Religious Configuration of the CAR

The CAR, like other African countries, has a plethora of religious groups, many of whom are foreign, and others are indigenous to the people of this country. Among the missionary groups evangelising the country, there are the Catholic Church with Nine dioceses, the Association des *Eglises Baptist Evangelique Centrafricaines*, the Baptist Committee, the Baptist Churches of West Central African Republic, the Baptist Churches of the Central African Republic, the Central African Evangelical Church, the *Eglise Evangelique des Freres*, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Central African Republic, the Evangelical Mission, the Evangelical Revival Church, the Protestant Church of King Christ, Seventh Day Adventists, the *Union des Eglises Evangelique Elim*, the *Union Federation Eglise Baptiste* and Islam (Pastoor, Open Doors International: 21-22). Generally speaking, indigenous religious groups account for roughly 35% of the population, Protestants represent 25%, the same as the Catholics, while Muslims represent 15% of the population of the CAR (Arieff, 2014: 2). It has also been argued that

1 The term *Séléka* is used throughout this paper to refer to the coalition of forces that seized power in the CAR on 24 March 2013 and that was disbanded in September 2013 by transitional president Michel Djotodia and became ex-*Séléka*. When this group was banned, their leaders rejected the ban and continued to operate as if this were a legally recognised group.

the total percentage of the Christian groups in the CAR is 76.3 and the Muslims 13. Whatever percentage is attributed to indigenous religion, it is important to note that indigenous religious beliefs and practices have a great influence on the population who usually incorporate these in their Christian and Islamic practices (Pastoor n.d.: Open Doors International: 20).

The estimates of the United Nations indicate that 80% of the population of the CAR are Christians. Among these are 51% representing Protestant churches and 29% Catholics. The Muslims represent 10% and 'animists' 10%. There is often a misleading expression that Africans who do not belong to either of the foreign religions are animists. This somehow implies that they not believe in the existence of a supreme being. African people believe in the existence and works of God in their lives (Mbiti, 1989). The conflicting figures representing the different religious groups in the CAR given by the United Nations, Pastoor and Arieff may be an indication of the difficulty of getting clear statistics on the religious configuration and re-configuration of this central African country. These religious groups lived relatively at peace with one another until the coming to power of General François Bozizé in 2003 after toppling Ange Félix Patassé. In the course of his administration, Bozizé started using religion as a political weapon to chastise the Muslims. When the Muslim dominated *Séléka* swept through the country from December 2012 and overthrew him on 24 March 2013, they started paying back Christians in the same coin through killings, abductions, destruction of churches, homes, and crops, among others. The religious crisis between the *Séléka* and anti-*balaka* movements can be understood through their origins and composition.

Origins and Composition of the *Séléka* and Anti-*Balaka* Movement

Séléka is a sango word for union or coalition. It was a coalition of about five separate rebel groups and these were the *Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement* (UFDR), the *Convention des patriots pour la justice et la paix* (CPJP), the *Convention patriotique pour le salut Wa Kodro* (CSPK), the *Front démocratique du peuple Centrafricain* (FDPC), and *Front populaire pour le redressement* (FPR) which was a Chadian group. This rebel movement consists of about 90% Muslims, and the local population is about 80% Christian who are fighting against them. They are composed of kith and kin from Sudan and Chad with the aim of gaining political power by subduing infidels and kafirs or Christians. It has been stressed that only 10% of the *Séléka* rebels were actually citizens of the CAR. The leadership of the *Séléka* includes many people from the Vakaga and Bamingui Bangoran prefectures, which are two Muslim-majority regions of the North East of the CAR (Pastoor n.d.: Open Doors International: 5; *Le Démocrate* No. 3017, 17 September 2013). The *Séléka* also included many non-religious rebels, other bandits and opportunists who joined in the looting and vandalism that followed their control of different parts of the country. This composition of the *Séléka* is a clear indication that reducing the conflict in the CAR to a religious conflict is simplistic (Marima,

2014). It is political and also economic considering the enormous natural resources that the country has.

The name anti-*balaka* is anti-sword or anti-machete in the local languages of Mandja and Sango. This was often used to describe self-defence units set up by communities to fight against bandits, cattle raiders, rebels and poachers (Marima, 2014). It also alludes to the French word for bullets of an automatic rifle (“balle AK”) because the people of the CAR were against the bullets of the AK 47 or the Kalashnikov assault rifle which were often used on them. Anti-*balaka* is also a generic term for those resisting the brutal *Séléka* insurrection. Anti-*balaka* roughly means “invincible” which is a kind of power purportedly bestowed by the charms that hang around the necks of most members. This term gained currency some five or six years ago when it was applied to self-defence units set up in the absence of effective state security forces to protect communities from attacks by highway bandits or cattle raiders in different communities of the CAR (Muellenmeister, 2014). A self-styled spokesman for the anti-*balaka*, Sebastien Wénézoui, pointed out that most of its members are from Christian or ‘animist’ communities. Following the coup of 24 March 2013, many members of the former government army, *Forces armées centrafricaines* (FACA) joined the ranks of the anti-*balaka* to attack, kill and force the *Séléka* insurgents out of the country. In the Lobaye district of Bangui, all the commanders of the anti-*balaka* are former members of the FACA. Two former members of the Bozizé government, namely Patrice Edouard Ngaïssona and Joachin Kokate, claim to be the anti-*balaka*’s national-level political and military coordinators and that it is committed to ‘pacification and normalisation in the CAR’ (Muellenmeister, 2014).

The Anti-*balaka* groups have a long history in the CAR. Originally it was composed of local self-defence groups and every village had its own militia. During the Bush War of 2004-2007 the anti-*balaka* was composed of vigilante groups that resisted the abuses of the main rebel formation, that is, the *Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la Démocratie* (APRD) (Marima, 2014). This is today manipulated by politicians for their egoistic reasons. One of the spokespersons of the Anti-*balaka* Emotion Gomez said of the Anti-*balaka* that:

Our movement has a long history, anti-*balaka* have traditionally hunted down bandits and arrested them. That was before Bozizé came to power. But once Djotodia had taken over and the Seleka started shooting and ill-treating us, we decided to regroup and fight them (Deutsche Welle website, 2014).

If we were to take the statement of Gomez as gospel truth, then the Anti-*balaka* group did not start as a religious group but emerged out of the need to provide security to the population against bandits or highway robbers. Today, the majority of anti-*balaka* fighters are youths without any schooling, sometimes children as young as ten. They are motivated by their thirst for revenge. Thousands of the young men and women were

given knives and machetes. Drugs and mystical charms or fetishes were administered to convince the young that they were immune to the bullets of the *Séléka* rebels (www.dw.de/anti-balaka-thirst-for-revenge-in-central.../a-17486273). The politico-religious dimension of the anti-*balaka* was somehow triggered by the atrocious activities of the *Séléka* when they seized power from Bozizé on 24 March 2013 (Kah, 2013). This coalition of mostly Muslim recruits, some of whom came from Chad and Sudan, became a target of attack by Christians and non-Muslim groups. There is a basis for the religious differences in the CAR.

Bases of Intense Religious Differences

The religious differences between the *Séléka* and anti-*balaka* today in the CAR have their roots in the past. The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in what was then CAR in the pre-colonial times forms the basis of the crisis that is today not only political, but also religious. Muslim groups during this period raided for slaves among the people of the South and other non-Muslim groups. Non-Muslims during this period suffered from the pangs of the Muslim slave dealers and this left scars which are still in social memory today. French colonisation also encouraged a hostile view of Islam to avoid anti-colonial uprisings and also to create a bulwark against its enemies in Senoussia and Ouadai areas (Societies Caught in the Conflict Trap, 2013: 43). While the French encouraged a hostile attitude towards Islam, they also gave priority to Muslim pastoralists. From 1931, they assigned farmland in Bouar region in the West of the CAR to Peul to graze their cattle. This made the Gbaya, who represent about 29% of the population of the CAR, develop ill-feeling against these Muslims (Deiros, 2014: 4). It was only logical for this to be used to good effect following the overthrow of Bozizé and the conflicts that have followed his downfall.

This crisis in the distant past was however economic and not religious as it has been branded today. After independence, southerners and Christians dominated politics in the CAR, and this led to resentment or disenchantment among many northerners, mostly Muslims. They felt that their region was neglected, marginalised, discriminated against, and they were also denied full citizenship. The frustration of Christians in the control of prices and access to capital has been compounded by the fact that Muslim communities have used their cross-border mobility and family ties to dominate commercial and trade networks in many areas of the country. Besides, the counter-insurgency of the FACA between 2005 and 2008 in the North of the CAR seemed to have laid the foundation for the subsequent mobilisation of the *Séléka* in 2012 which led to the overthrow of President François Bozizé and the consequences on Christian groups that followed the *coup d'état* of March 24 2013 (Arieff, 2014: 6-9; Pastoor n.d: Open Doors International, 20).

In the 1990s, some citizens of the CAR who felt neglected by the state organised themselves into self-defence committees to fight against those who erected roadblocks to extort from the population. What has become anti-*balaka* today were partly groups

mobilised by Bozizé in 2003 after seizing power from Patassé to protect rural communities from machete-wielding bandits from Chad and Cameroon. They became part of a national programme and brought some security to rural areas (Central African Republic Troubles, Briefing 28 July 2014). These groups were reactivated by Bozizé in 2012 and 2013 to confront the Séléka and help keep him in power until general elections in 2016. When he observed that the Séléka were not relenting in their resolve to overthrow him, in December 2012, Bozizé began to play the card of religious hatred and called young people of the outskirts of Bangui to fight the “foreigners.” His children namely Socrate and Jean-François, distributed knives to civilians, and one of his aides Levy Yakete, created the Citizens Coalition of Opposition to Armed Rebellions (COCORA as French acronym) with the aim of protecting his regime (Deiros, 2014: 11).

From 2011, the government of General François Bozizé carefully orchestrated a phobia for Muslims and encouraged a national discourse to chastise them. There was constant reference made to the presence of Sudanese *Janjaweds* and other Chadian Islamists in rebel movements and the Séléka coalition. There was also the persistence of a fundamentalist discourse by churches in the CAR against Islam for over thirty years. In attendance in these churches were many of the cadres of the Bozizé administration. Some members of the Bozizé government even made allusion rightly or wrongly to a supposed “Wahhabi” Séléka funding and to the presence of elements of *Boko Haram* in Séléka. These accusations were probably meant to provoke western intervention in the CAR in order to preserve the collapsing regime of Bozizé but this did not work out well for him and his egoistic and gullible supporters (Deiros, 2014: 6; Societies Caught in the Conflict Trap, 2013: 43).

The anti-Muslim rhetoric did not help to unite the people of the CAR. It rather widened the hiatus that already existed in the country, especially between the government and the several armed groups that emerged to defend the interests of their leaders, as well as countries like Chad and Sudan that were involved in the crisis directly and indirectly. How could Bozizé’s government play the game of developing hatred for the Muslims when it was a Muslim dominated Chad that aided him to overthrow the government of Ange Félix Patassé in 2013? It was an error which only resulted in the resolve of the marginalised and neglected Muslim area of the North East and their leaders to seek to overthrow the government. This overthrow was violent and was quickly followed by reprisals on the innocent non-Muslim population of Bangui and other major towns of the CAR like Bouar, Bangassou, among others (BBC News, 2013, 21 March; BBC News Africa, 2013; Azikiwe, 2013; Besseling, 2013; Global Times, 2013, 16 April; Ngoupana, 2013a, 2013b; Vatican Radio, 2013, 16 May; Vatican News, 2013; Vircoulon, 2013; and VOA News, 2013).

The emergence and seizure of power, accompanied by war crimes committed by the Séléka through the killing of many civilians mostly non-Muslim, contributed to the eventual emergence of the anti-*balaka* to fight back the predominantly Muslim-led

Séléka group. When Djotodia became the first Muslim leader of the CAR in March 2013, the peaceful co-existence of Christians and Muslims began to wane because religious-motivated attacks committed against civilians became a regular occurrence. *Séléka* commanders supervised the systematic attack on Christian communities which was partly a response to the actions of the Christian-led militia, the anti-*balaka* on the *Séléka*. In retaliation Christian militia groups were formed which increased sectarian violence in the country (Arieff, 2014: 1; BBC Central African Militia 'Killed' Children, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2013; Testimony from "Pre-genocide" to Genocide; Sawyer, 2014; Marima, 2014; Upholding the Responsibility to Protect, 2014: 2; Central African Republic Red Cross Reuters, 21 August 2014). The Christian militia group stepped up attacks on Muslim civilians aided by supporters of ousted president Bozizé (BBC Central African Republic Religious Tinderbox, 2013). It is important to understand that religious differences were not at the origin of the present crisis in the CAR. The crisis reflects a struggle for political power and also complex tensions over the access to resources, control over trade and national identity (Arieff, 2014: 1).

Following the *Séléka* seizure of power and governance in the CAR, there were accusations of Muslims for leading a religious war by several religious groups. Christian churches were desecrated and Christians raped, robbed, kidnapped, tortured and murdered. Some Muslims, including some ethnic Peuls, directly participated in *Séléka* violence. In some cases, when Christian homes were looted, Muslim homes were left untouched (Amnesty International, 2014: 7). In what became the Bangui Declaration of 6 October 2013, barely two months after Michel Djotodia was sworn in as president of the CAR, prominent Christian leaders described events in the CAR "of a jihadist nature" and the *Séléka* as a coalition as "90% consisting of Muslim extremists from Chad and Sudan." The *Catholic Herald* had earlier quoted that inter-religious unity was "harshly tested by the deplorable complicity shown by some Muslims towards atrocities by *Séléka* fighters, who continue to kill, rape, pillage and ransack with impunity" (*Le Démocrate* No. 3017, 17 September 2013; *Catholic Herald*, 15 August 2013; Pastoor n.d.: Open Doors International, 15 and 17). The intensity of fighting has consequences on the unity of the CAR.

Scuffles and Separatism

Since the overthrow of Bozizé by the Djotodia led *Séléka* coalition on March 24, 2013, the political crisis turned religious has faced dangerous scenes of scuffles for control of different regions of the country, natural resources like timber and minerals and also the exile of Muslims. Some of these scuffles have not been between the *Séléka* and anti-*balaka* but against the civilian population (Weber and Kaim, 2014: 2). Among the scuffles that were unleashed in September 2013 was the attack on Christians and churches in the Western region of the CAR. There has also been serious fighting in the North West, which is the home region of former President François Bozizé. Bangui has

turned out to be a melting pot of ethnic groups and tensions. There have also been large-scale cases of killings, looting, torture, and destruction of homes and places of worship in different parts of the CAR (Arieff, 2014: 4-5), which have strengthened the determination of each side to inflict pain on the other.

When François Bozizé was overthrown in March 2013, the Borab District of Bangui, the constituency of Bozizé, came under rebel attack. Many of his body guards and political allies living here were ferociously attacked by the *Séléka* and this resulted in a lot of looting, while women became victims of rape and many other people were shot and killed. The district is today a stronghold of the anti-*balaka* militia as they launch counter-attacks against the *Séléka* and Muslim population in the capital city Bangui. Anti-*balaka* militia in Borab are adorned with such objects as bullets, tin cans, locks and chains which they believe are charms or fetishes with special power that will keep them safe from the bullets of the enemy.

The anti-*balaka* Christian militias have been ruthless in their attacks on the Muslim population. Amnesty International has documented large-scale and repeated attacks of the anti-*balaka* on the Muslim population in places like Bouali, Boyali, Bossembélé, Bossemptélé, Baoro, Bawi and the capital Bangui. Other areas that have been ransacked by the anti-*balaka* include Yaloke, Boda and Bocaranga. Some of these attacks have been a revenge for previous killings of Christian civilians by the *Séléka* forces and other armed Muslims (Amnesty International, 2014: 5). In December 2013, clashes erupted between militants associated with the now-dissolved *Séléka* alliance and anti-*balaka* groups composed of armed fighters that opposed the *Séléka* forces. This resulted in the death of about 1,000 people in Bangui alone. Most recently, Muslims, many with no connection to the rebels, have been targeted in reprisals by anti-*balaka* and civilians and these attacks have led to a mass exodus of Muslims in their thousands from the CAR. The PK 12, PK 13 Miskine and Kilo 5, all former Muslim strongholds in Bangui, capital of the CAR are now ghost towns without Muslim residents. In Mbaiki, one anti-*balaka* told IRIN reporters that people with appropriate skills would be selected to take over the shops that were abandoned by fleeing Muslims (Central African Republic Complex Emergency, 2014: 5; Muellenmeister, 2014).

Several bands of young men, some of them armed with everything from machetes and homemade firearms to military-grade equipment continue to roam the country. They call themselves the anti-*balaka*. They are accused of slaughtering Muslim civilians as revenge for atrocities committed by the Muslim *Séléka* rebel coalition during its nine months in power (VOA News, 18 February 2014). The anti-*balaka* also carried out attacks on the African Union peace-keeping forces known as MISCA in Bangui, Boali, Berberati, Kaga-Bandoro and other places in the country. Tensions and confrontations have also taken place between anti-*balaka* and *Séléka* forces in the interior of the CAR particularly in the central prefectures of Nana-Grebizi and Kémo. There is also a grow-

ing threat which is directed at Muslims in West and central parts of the CAR especially by self-proclaimed representatives of Christian and Muslim communities. The result is that towns which used to have people of diverse religions have been emptied of their Muslim communities, (Central African Republic Crisis and its Regional Humanitarian Impact, 2014: 7; Upholding the Responsibility to Protect, 2014: 3) a clear example of separate existence of the Christian and Muslim population.

The intense scuffles or fighting across the CAR between militia groups of the anti-*balaka* and *Séléka* have in fact created a separatist scenario between and within the Christians and Muslims unprecedented in the history of the CAR until 2013 and 2014. Due to continuous fighting, the religious militias are increasingly fragmented into small autonomous units obeying no higher command. The anti-*balakas*, for example, are divided into several groups and one of the 'Bozizistes leaders,' the self-proclaimed political coordinator of the anti-*balaka* movement, is Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona and former Minister of Sports. Following the summit of the *Séléka* in N'dele in May 2014, the anti-*balaka* also held theirs and appointed Sebastien Wénézoui, an engineer and a former civil servant as their new coordinator. Ngaïssona refused to recognise Wénézoui who threatened to kill him (Deiros, 2014: 12). This separatist tendency is not very healthy for the unity of the CAR because it will need a full-scale reconciliation within these militia groups claiming to represent Islam and Christianity before reconciliation between the Christian and Muslim militia groups (Weber and Kaim, 2014: 2). These episodes show how far the present religio-political crisis has gone and how complicated it is to have the problem solved. Force against force is only making matters worse for the peace, unity, and stability of this natural resource rich country.

Besides, the *Séléka* rebels, many of whom come from neighbouring Chad and Sudan, have been seeking to establish an Islamic State and impose a leader as president of the Republic. Nourreddine Adam, leader of the *Convention des patriots pour la justice et la paix* (CPJP), the second in command to the *Séléka* coalition, for example, was seen to be the man of Chad and promoter of the secessionist project of the CAR northern regions (Francophone West and Central Africa, 2013: 12; Smith, 2014; Deiros, 2014: 7). This craving for an Islamic State was given a boost by the letter of Michel Djotodia addressed to the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) requesting support to institute the *Sharia* Law. Although he refused to admit to having written a letter to the OIC, he is quoted to have said that "Even if we fail to hunt Bozizé, we will transform a part of the Central African Republic, Chad and Darfur into a new Islamic Republic" (Pastoor n.d.: Open Doors International, 16). It has also been reported that former president and ex-*Séléka* leader Michel Djotodia was reported to have declared northern CAR an independent secular state called "Dar el Kouti." The declaration was made on 17 August 2014 in Birao, Vakaga province in the north central region of the CAR (Jane's Intelligence Review, 19 August 2014). Other hardliners like General Abakar Sabone who controls

the far north Vakaga region has said partition is inevitable if Muslims are denied a role in the government of the CAR (Braun, 2014).

Whatever the arguments for a separate Islamic State, one thing is certain: the belt that stretches from northern Nigeria through Cameroon, Chad, Sudan and South Sudan is rife with religious and other forms of sectarian conflicts which only lend credence to the craving for the establishment of a Muslim free state. This is the all the more so considering that since independence, the CAR has been governed, and very badly too, by Christians to the disadvantage of the Muslims. Once Michel Djotodia came to power in March 2013, the Muslims thought rightly and/or wrongly that everything should be done to give the country an Islamic orientation, meaning that a separate territory could be carved out of the present country for a Muslim state. Islamic leaders, during the *Séléka* insurrection, were honoured while Christian leaders were not. This was a kind of separatism through selective treatment of people based on their religious affiliation. Human Rights Watch reported that the *Séléka* evicted and looted Christian rural populations in a bid to “create space” for certain nomadic communities and their cattle. This was separating the country according to cattle grazing and non-cattle grazing groups (Pastoor n.d.: Open Doors International). It turned out that a majority of the cattle grazing communities were Muslims, and non-cattle grazing communities were Christians.

There is a form of separatism promoted by the anti-*balaka* in the CAR today. This separation is the forceful eviction of Muslims or their escape out of the country for their own safety. Repeated attacks and threats on Muslims by the anti-*balaka* and their supporters have forced the Muslim minority out of the country. Many of them have escaped to Chad for fear of being exterminated in the CAR. Those who, for one reason or another, have not been able to make it out of the country have been sheltered in churches and mosques, but they are still desperate for evacuation because they remain insecure in these churches and mosques (Amnesty International, 2014: 6). Others have escaped to the northern and eastern parts of the country. Due to the escalating crisis, these two regions of the CAR are virtually cut off from the rest of the country (Message des Eveques, 2014: 5). For many years, the government has had little presence or control beyond the capital Bangui. This alone has separated the capital city from many other administrative regions of the country and made administration to be limited to some parts of the country only.

Generally speaking, the Muslims who are fleeing Christian mobs say a new state is needed. They are overwhelmingly calling for the establishment of a new country as a radical solution to the worsening sectarian conflict. The *Séléka*, who retreated to their northern fiefdom on May 10, 2014, held a summit in N’dele. The final statement of the summit announced a “parallel administration” which included all the structures and positions that composed the military and security structure of a state. They appointed

an Army Chief of Staff, one for the Police and a chief of the Gendarmerie. In the final statement, the *Séléka* leaders even asked the international community to facilitate the partition of the country. The sentence was only recently crossed out in the copies that some journalists received. The international community is, however, opposed to the creation of a state for the Muslims, fearing that it might become a safe haven for mercenaries, armed groups and terrorists from neighbouring conflicts, including members of the *Boko Haram* in northern Nigeria (Deiros, 2014: 9-10) and AQIM in northern Mali.

The name which has been suggested for the new country of the Muslims is the Republic of Northern-Central Africa. In 2014, a design for a national flag has been circulating by mobile phone in the dusty town of Bambari. This town is highly strategic because it divides the CAR's largely Christian south from a northern region now controlled by the mostly Muslim *Séléka* rebels (Smith, 2014). The mass evacuation of Muslims from the South, especially Bangui to Bambari and other parts of the north of the CAR is like accepting a partition of the CAR. This was conceded to by the CAR's Minister for Reconciliation and Communications, Antoinette Moutagne. She argued that the evacuation of Muslims from Bangui to the north was tantamount to accepting the partition of the CAR (Braun, 2014; Smith, 2014). When the anti-*balaka* militia groups drive Muslims away from the south and destroy their mosques, this is a call for the separation of the country. While in Bambari, the Muslims have called for a partition of the CAR due to threats of religious violence from Christian militias, the anti-*balaka* (Braun, 2014).

There has also been an international outcry on the separatist tendencies in the CAR based on religious differences. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon warned in 2014 that the religious violence in the country between Muslims and Christians risked a "de-facto partition" in the CAR. This is because Christian militias are "waving a revenge cycle of bloodshed" largely in response to abuses by previously ruling Muslim *Séléka* rebels. The persistence of revengeful acts of the anti-*balaka* groups have hardened the hearts of the *Séléka* who while retreating to the north have also inflicted pains on the Christian and non-Muslim populations.

There is also a language suggestive of separatism in the CAR. Human Rights Watch argued "the anti-balaka militias are increasingly organised and using language that suggests the intent to eliminate Muslim residents from the Central African Republic" (Muellenmeister, 2014). The term "foreigner" is often used by southerners and non-Muslims in the CAR to refer derogatorily to north eastern ethnic groups which have cross-border family ties. Many of them more or less have been stripped of their national identity (Arieff, 2014: 6; Deiros, 2014: 5). Such language of describing Muslims as foreigners is provocative and invites to retaliatory moves on their part. By referring to them as foreigners, they are treated with disdain to the extent that their collective existence in the country is in jeopardy. Again, since the launch of the *Séléka's* insurgency in December, 2012, the north-west region of the CAR has been besieged with continuous

raids, kidnappings, and killings. This has led numerous militias made up of Christian vigilante farmers to combine their disparate units against a common and largely Muslim enemy (Marima, 2014).

Conclusion

We have examined the objectives and justification of this study pointing out the negative and positive role that religion has played in different parts of the world. Some religious wars have been more ideological and fundamentalist rather than simply being religious. While religion was used to build peace in countries with religious diversity, it has also led to war and instability with greater consequences on the population and property. The CAR has a variety of religious denominations, but the different Christian denominations form the majority while Islam is practised by a minority of the population of the country. There is, however, religious syncretism because people still adhere to their traditional religious practices.

In this paper, we have demonstrated that the present religio-political conflict has its roots in the history of slavery, when Muslims enslaved non-Muslim communities. After independence, the policies of the different administrations led by non-Muslims created rifts in the population through their socio-economic and political reforms. The insecurity that became part and parcel of the administration of this country from 1993 onwards led to the emergence of armed groups to defend the community and egoistic interests. Other groups were formed to fight highway banditry and farmer-herder conflicts in some parts of the country. The government of François Bozizé armed some of these groups to maintain his hold on power, and there were utterances which were divisive on religious terms. Matters were compounded when the *Séléka* coalition seized power, essentially not on religious grounds, but to participate in the plunder of state resources. Unfortunately, the reprisals mostly targeted Christians, in some cases with the support of Muslims. The mass killings, rape, torture, and abductions, as well as massive destruction of homes and crops by these *Séléka* insurgents, met with a determined resolve of the non-Muslim population and Christians to counter this. Within their ranks were former members of the FACA and other discontented former members of government.

The ouster of transitional president Michel Am Nondroko Djotodia on 10 January 2014 through pressure from the Economic Community of the Central African States (ECCAS) led to an intensification of the counter-insurgency of the anti-*balaka* formed to fight the brutal *Séléka* administration. Both armed movements are now locked in a war that has led to threats of a partition of the CAR into two; the northern part for the Muslims and the south for the Christians and non-Muslims. The presence of the African Union, French, and the United Nations peace-keeping forces is still to prevent the carnage associated with attacks and the separatist tendencies between the *Séléka* and anti-*balaka*. They each held conferences starting with the *Séléka* and then the anti-*balaka* to declare

that they did not need the other. Religious differences, it should be noted, were not the primary origin of the crisis in the CAR.

Although local religious leaders across sectarian lines have been vocal proponents of peace and reconciliation (Arieff, 2014: 8-9; Message des Eveques, 2012), this is still not yielding the required results because there is a rift between the Muslim and Christian populations, due to their respective war of reprisal. Deiros (2014: 1) argued that in the CAR, religion and more broadly, national identity, have been manipulated by elites behind the *Séléka* and anti-*balaka* to further political and economic goals, taking advantage of the failure of the state. Such is what is taking place in the CAR resulting in the emergence of separatist tendencies and the culture of exclusion of the other. What is embarrassing today, as rightly pointed out by Stein (2014), is that Muslims who once lived freely among the Christian majority have now fled Bangui which has more or less been declared a no-fly zone for them by the Christians and other people who are neither Christians nor Muslims.

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