A State of (Dis)unity and Uncertain Belonging: The Central African Republic and its Muslim Minority

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Abstract

This article examines how existing in a larger socio-political environment of contested national belonging shapes Muslims’ experiences in the Central African Republic (CAR). We draw on data gathered between 2017 and 2019 from various archival sources and in-depth interviews with Muslim religious leaders and non-Muslims in CAR’s capital, Bangui. We argue that through claims to autochthony a dual logic of exclusion co-occurs which shapes how Muslims experience their minority status. First, national level autochthony debates frame Muslim minority exclusion from the Central African national imagination. Second, at the Muslim intra-communal level, and particularly among religious leaders, autochthony encapsulates debates over “authentic” Muslimhood – fuelled not by contestation over Islamic practice and interpretation, but rather historical contestation based on ethnic exclusion. Specifically, we show that claims to “proper” Central African Muslimhood are premised on autochthony embedded in a dominant myth of primary settlement advanced by certain Muslim leaders.

Keywords

Muslim minority – Christian-Muslim encounters – autochthony – ethnicity – Islam – the Central African Republic
... When Christians were saying Islam is a foreign religion [during the conflict] ... that Muslims are foreigners ... was it a surprise? No ... [we had already been told] to be a leader ... of the Islamic community [you] must be un musulman autochtone (an autochthon muslim) ...

Seven years prior to this interview, in 2013, faith communities in the Central African Republic (CAR) made international headlines as the country entered another cycle of violent conflict triggered by armed rebellion. The Séléka, a coalition of disparate armed groups – predominantly from CAR’s northeast – rebelled against the regime of then-President François Bozizé, ousting him from power in March 2013. With this increased attention came descriptions of religiously oriented violence that positioned CAR’s Muslim minority and Christian majority in conflict. This framing belies the complexity of Christian-Muslim encounters in CAR by implying that doctrinal divides alone or even “religious hatred” fundamentally structure their interactions. Rather, the politics of belonging and representation articulated through autochthony discourses largely frame inter-religious difference and confrontation. Further, assuming these faith communities are unified religious monoliths, each with clearly bounded identities, overlooks the social realities of these communities and, particularly, the interplay between religion and ethnicity within the Muslim minority.

This article examines how distinct, yet related, claims of autochthony by non-Muslims and Muslims alike shape Muslims’ experiences and representation in CAR as a political and religious minority. Drawing on existing scholarship, we conceive of autochthony as an “empty,” extremely malleable identity category.2 Notwithstanding the identity variability and diversity of autochthony, as a signifier, autochthony claims – once crafted – “assume everywhere the same aura of self-evidence.”3 Since Bozizé’s ouster from power in 2013, the

1 191111_1132, Interview with imam, Bangui, November 2019.
question of who is *un vrai Centrafricain* (a true Central African) – a question of autochthony – became a mainstay of public discourse. Although Bozizé instrumentalized autochthony, as his grip on power began faltering in 2011, it was the emergence of groups that came to be known collectively as the “Anti-Balaka” that rendered autochthony issues more visible and pronounced. Composed of various vigilante groups and military forces loyal to Bozizé, the Anti-Balaka positioned themselves as the self-proclaimed defenders of *la patrie* (the homeland) against the Séléka. They claimed to be defending CAR’s “true” population against violence perpetrated by the Séléka rebels, whom they perceived as Muslim foreigners. At the height of the violence, however, their defense of CAR consisted of the targeted abuse and forced expulsion of Muslims throughout the country, notably in southern and western regions. Despite the Anti-Balaka’s varied objectives and ethnic heterogeneity, what united this violent collective was a discourse that conceived of Central African autochthony as inherently non-Muslim.

In the recent political imagination of Central Africans, the claim of autochthony commonly referred to peoples and ethnicities located in western, central, and southern CAR. Increasingly, former President Bozizé’s co-ethnic Gbay, who were heavily implicated in the Anti-Balaka, propagated a discourse of autochthony, making claims to be “true” Central Africans. These claims were not framed in terms of ethnic exclusion in and of themselves but rather crafted around that which brought together the Gbay, one of CAR’s largest ethnic groups, and minority ethnicities in similar geographical areas: their non-Muslimhood. Conversely, for those claiming to be “true” Central Africans, CAR’s northern populations and associated ethnicities, a majority of whom are Muslim such as the Gula, Runga, and Chadian Arabs among others, are framed as *foreigners* or, at times, Central Africans of a lesser pedigree who are to be viewed with suspicion. This discourse functions to reify the north as “Muslim” and the southern expanses as Christian or animist, whereby northerner and Muslim have become synonymous with foreigner.

As crafted, this autochthony discourse works to externalize Islam and Muslims from the Central African historical narrative. In doing so, this discourse largely ignores Islam’s presence in CAR from 1870 onwards, which

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 7.
7 These are not fixed categories, but the current and enduring manifestation of autochthony.
predated that of French colonists and with them the arrival of the Catholic Church and subsequent protestant missionaries. Islam’s pre-colonial emergence stemmed principally from slave raiding expeditions and the related growth of powerful sultanates in contemporary CAR’s central and eastern regions. The sultans not only brought Islam south and westward, from Chad and Sudan respectively, but were also deeply integrated in “trans-Saharan economic and social networks,” which also facilitated the spread of Islam with the movement of traders. Conversion to Islam during this period was multifaceted, which suggests neither a linear trajectory nor a simplified understanding of Islamization as one that was entirely forced. The complex history of conversion largely depended on the area and the social proximity of non-Muslim to Muslims. For instance, wearing Muslim dress could, at the time, reflect “wealth and class as much as belief.”

The relationship between Muslim (and non-Muslim) communities and the French colonists was equally multifaceted and dynamic. As the French sought to consolidate their control over the territory and pacify local insurrection, notably from Gbaya-speaking communities in the west, they relied on some Muslim communities in the early 1900s. Specifically, colonial administrators were supportive of Muslim traders and the Fulbé, despite the latter’s engagement in extensive cross-border raids into western CAR. The French would later go on to encourage Muslim merchants from Chad to settle in CAR to establish a business class. Islamization continued under French rule, however, the lack of any “Islamic institutional framework” hindered Islam’s proliferation. Nevertheless, Muslims with ancestral ties to neighboring Chad and Sudan (and Fulani communities) remain prominent in CAR’s Muslim community, maintaining historic transborder social and trade networks that have only strengthened Muslims’ economic power in CAR, while reinforcing non-Muslims’ perceptions of an inherent foreignness to this religious other.

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9 Elements continue to exist in CAR’s northeast.
10 Carayannis and Lombard, Making Sense, p. 3.
13 Cordell, Dar al-Kuti, p. 96.
16 Cordell, Dar al-Kuti, p. 162.
Considering that autochthony can encapsulate a multitude of struggles at varying levels and, as a claim-making device, can exemplify multiple forms of inclusion and exclusion, we contend that only part of the uncertain belonging CAR’s Muslims experience is embedded in this nationalized understanding of Central African autochthony. The variability in how Muslims experience their minority status, as the imam at this article’s outset alludes, begins to reveal an additional layer of autochthony claims. Specifically, certain Muslim religious leaders conceive of themselves as Musulmans Centrafricains autochtones (autochthonous Central African Muslims), which has generated parallel processes of inclusion and exclusion within the minority. Potentially construed as an oxymoron in itself given the socio-political understanding of Central African autochthony more broadly, this self-conception reclaims and reproduces elements of this larger discourse by simultaneously drawing on and emphasizing the southern ethnic lineages of these imams and the related reification of CAR’s borderlands. Consequently, it is historical contestation based on ethnic exclusion, rather than contestation over Islamic practice and interpretation, that fuels this autochthony discourse.

These leaders’ ethnicities are broadly linked with Christianity due to pervasive Christian evangelism during the colonial era in CAR’s central, southern, and western regions among various ethnic groups, including the Yakoma, Gbaya, and Mandja. Perhaps most importantly, their ethnicities are not associated with CAR’s Muslim north or neighboring Muslim majority countries. Their Islamic religious identity was largely acquired through later historical conversion rather than ascribed from birth. Consequently, the claim underpinning this parallel autochthony discourse that certain religious leaders advance is one of their “authentic” (Central African) Muslimhood over the “foreignness” of their co-religionists’ ethnic Muslimhood. By engaging in a process of ethnicizing Islam, claims of autochthonous (Central African) Muslimhood by some have precipitated intra-Muslim tensions evident in terms of leadership struggles. These imams sought to exclude a majority of their co-religionist colleagues from leadership positions by claiming that their own perceived authenticity reinforced their legitimacy as the rightful stewards of Islam in CAR.

We argue that CAR’s Muslims, therefore, experience a dual logic of exclusion that shapes encounters between the Muslim minority and non-Muslims as well as intra-Muslim dynamics. In what follows, we probe the logic of this exclusion at two levels, examining how autochthony discourses and associated claims, nationally and within the minority, converge and diverge. We contend

that the construction of these claims in CAR has a long (albeit recent) history. Further, while national debates around “foreignness” have long pervaded intra-Muslim relations, we posit that ethnicity is the locus of exclusion within the Muslim minority. Conversely, considerations of ethnicity are secondary in broader Christian-Muslim encounters. Rather, a person’s Muslimhood is central to their treatment and representation in public discourse.

This underscores the importance of considering several levels of analysis when examining Muslim minorities in sub-Saharan Africa. For CAR’s minority, Islam has not acted as a trans-ethnic unifier, nor has ethnic identity divided the community entirely. We suggest that the state’s tendency to engage the Muslim minority through religious leaders who claim autochthony reinforces perceptions among a majority of the Muslim minority that Muslims are excluded from the national imagination, while simultaneously destabilizing the Muslim religious identity and authority of these self-proclaimed autochthonous Muslim leaders. To craft this argument, we draw on data gathered from archival sources and in-depth interviews with Muslim religious leaders and non-Muslims in CAR’s capital, Bangui. The data were gathered between 2017 and 2019 as part of two separate research projects conducted throughout CAR.

The implications of our argument are two-fold. First, autochthony discourses contribute to and are informed by the on-going identity construction of CAR’s Muslim minority by non-Muslims and Muslims alike. Second, the complexity of state-Muslim relations in CAR underscores the importance of centering intra-minority dynamics within broader analyses of state-minority relations. Minorities, themselves, are dynamic entities and, similar to emergent scholarship on Christian-Muslim encounters, we argue that the interaction points between Muslim minorities and Christian majorities are sites of political contestation.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we problematize how Muslims and their experiences are framed in Africa through a closer examination of Christian-Muslim encounters and how religion and ethnicity intersect. Second, this article probes the first axis of the dual logic of exclusion thesis structuring Muslims’ experiences by examining how Muslims are framed in CAR’s public sphere. To that end, we principally analyze data from Central African print media archives. Third, to analyze the second axis of Muslims’ exclusion, we unpack the ethnicization of intra-Muslim encounters, examining how the politics of these dynamics converge and diverge with national exclusionary discourses. We draw on conversations with imams from Bangui, including those whose mosques were destroyed in 2013/2014, and other prominent Muslim figures such as civil society leaders who provided crucial insights.
on the evolution and ethnic composition of CAR’s Muslim community, notably at the leadership level. We conclude by considering how these dynamics are implicated in emerging patterns of belonging and exclusion as well as the construction of particular understandings of the Central African (Muslim) self.

Re-framing Muslims’ Experiences in Sub-Saharan Africa

In research on religion in Africa, the tendency to privilege the study of Christianity persists, as evidenced by the current preponderance of works on Pentecostalism. Comparatively less academic attention has been paid to Islam and the contemporary lived experiences of the millions of Muslims who constitute significant minority populations throughout Africa. Yet, although the post-9/11 Western security agenda precipitated an increase in scholarship and a policy-oriented focus on Muslims and political Islam in Africa (and elsewhere), critics of this security-centric discourse emphasize its very real potential to distort how we understand Islam and, by extension, Muslims throughout Africa. Relatedly, another point of contention with the security-centric framework concerns how the complexity of Christian-Muslim relations is mostly obscured. The actual encounters between Christians and Muslim are sidelined. Instead, their interactions are often examined “one dimensionally” – that is, analyses have as their express purpose to determine the existence or lack of harmonious and cooperative inter-faith exchanges and dialogue. Evidently, armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa with religious dimensions that engage members of these religious communities persist. However, understanding the totality of Christian-Muslim encounters through a “coexistence or conflict” binary is short-sighted. There are complex

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25 Ibid.
interactions – such as competition, appropriation, rejection, and borrowing – between Christian and Muslim religious actors, as they have become more visible in public and political spheres.26

This study draws on two sets of literature to analyze how CAR’s Muslims experience belonging to a religious and political minority at the national and intra-communal levels respectively. First, we build on an important trend emerging in literature on Christian-Muslim relations, which seeks to examine these interactions within a broader analytical frame by considering the “actual encounters and entanglements between Christians and Muslims.”27 It is necessary, therefore, to locate specific sites or areas of investigation for such encounters. This is where politics, or the political sphere, as Otayek and Soares argue, becomes relevant.28 Studies on both Islam and Muslims in Africa,29 as well as those examining Christian-Muslim encounters,30 converge around the need to consider both power and politics. These studies suggest multiple entry points of the political from which to study these encounters, including micropolitical spaces and debates in the public sphere to more formalized political spaces.31 Of note within this broader conceptualization of the political is the politics of representation in encounters between Christians and Muslims32 that emerge in studies examining their interactions and Muslim minorities’ experiences. In underscoring this complex reality in which Muslim minorities exist relative to their states and Christian majorities throughout Africa, these studies emphasize that Muslim minorities are often positioned as religious and national others.33

Second, we expand on works examining the Islam-ethnicity nexus and, more directly, the ethnicization of Islam.34 Beyond reaffirming that Islam and ethnicity are interrelated and intersect, these studies are crucial for how they highlight that this interconnectedness can function to shape the contours of what is perceived to be “authentic” Muslimhood.35 The ethnicization of Islam can also shape who are the perceived stewards of this proper Muslimhood, as Jourde argues, by introducing an “ethnic hierarchization” among Muslims premised on claims made by one ethnic group that they were the earliest harbingers of Islam.36 Such mythic claims of Islamic primacy by one ethnic group of Muslims in an ethnically plural community, Jourde suggests, serves to imbue their co-religionists not of the same ethnicity with “degrees of ‘Muslim-ness’.”37 These claims and the broader ethnicization of Islam within which they are embedded underscore the complexity of internal Muslim politics by revealing additional points of contention around “what it is to be Muslim.”38 As these studies suggest, sites of contestation extend beyond singular (religious) debates on appropriate Islamic practice, as defining the limits of proper “Muslim-ness.”39 The case of CAR’s Muslim minority both reinforces this argument and extends our understanding of the ethnicization of Islam and, with it, how internal contestation can manifest within an ethnically diverse Muslim community and intersect with broader debates in the public sphere. Specifically, we argue that claims to “authentic” Muslimhood in CAR are premised on autochthony embedded in a myth of primary settlement advanced by certain Muslim religious leaders rather than a “myth of primo-Islamization.”40 As these Muslims claim ethnicities in specific ways, they do so amid (broader) uncertain Muslimness. Their claims struggle to transcend the reality that Muslimhood in CAR serves more generally to shape Muslim-non-Muslim

37 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
encounters by maintaining the minority’s peripheral socio-political status and fueling their representation as social ills by non-Muslims.41

CAR’s Public Sphere and the Representation of Muslims Since the 1990s

Muslims in CAR embarked on a conscious process to increase their visibility in the public sphere in the 1990s, in tandem with efforts to popularize Islam.42 The impetus came from a second, yet modest, wave of Muslim students who sought the “legitimation of Islam.”43 These young Muslims were the second group to study Islam formally and returned from Saudi Arabia, having completed their theological studies at the International Islamic University in Medina in the late ’80s. An earlier group studied at the African Islamic Center of Khartoum ten years prior with bursaries from the Sudanese embassy to CAR.44 It was also during the 1990s that a government minister convert to Islam first advanced the proposal to legally recognize two Islamic celebrations (Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha) as public holidays, which a parliamentary majority rejected – as would be the case for the next decade – in the name of laïcité (secularism).45

Constituting a “new Muslim elite”46 upon their return, their formal Islamic, Salafist-oriented education – as well as their southern ethnicities and later conversion to Islam – separated them from the leadership and associated centers of power within the minority at that time, which were vested in religious leaders from older generations who controlled Bangui’s mosques.47 In contrast, the older generation leaders’ religious and ethnic identities were tied respectively to prominent Sufi orders and families from Muslim majority countries in West

43 Ibid., p. 75.
44 Ibid.
46 Ibid., p. 82.
47 191020–1549, Interview with civil society leader, Bangui, October 2019.
and Central Africa.\textsuperscript{48} Despite the Muslim minority’s resultant linguistic diversity, Chadian Arabic dominated, notably as the language of Friday prayers.\textsuperscript{49} Unable to assume control of these traditional organizational power centers to popularize Islam, members of the second student wave sought to engage both the state and non-Muslims by establishing Islamic associations and working in majority non-Muslim areas, beyond Bangui’s economic center and majority Muslim neighborhood, KM5. It was members of this second student wave who would not only assume control of the newly established association, the Central African Islamic Community (CICA) in 1992, but also reclaim and reproduce elements of national discourse around Central African autochthony to frame themselves as autochthonous Muslims and claim “authentic” Central African Muslimhood.

The process to increase Muslims’ visibility unfolded within an expanded public sphere dominated by non-Muslims who condition debates on belonging, citizenship, and Muslim representation. They do so discursively and practically by determining Muslim access to the Central African nation and state. A variety of institutions are deeply involved in crafting and reproducing this discourse around Muslim exclusion, including the media, as well as newspapers free of direct state control. Analyzing non-state-owned print media underscores the prominence and power of this exclusionary narrative driven by non-Muslims in shaping Muslims’ representation in public discourse.

\textsc{CAR’s} media landscape comprises a diversity of radio and print media. There is weak government regulation through the \textit{Haut Conseil de la Communication} (High Council for Communication), and a lack of independent oversight makes the sector vulnerable to politicization.\textsuperscript{50} Despite limited human and financial resources, the print press has nevertheless witnessed considerable development since the 1990s.\textsuperscript{51} “Small-scale media companies”\textsuperscript{52} exist, separately producing \textsc{CAR’s} two most prominent and professional mainstream newspapers: \textit{Le Confident} and \textit{Le Citoyen}. As an institution, however, print media is confined

\textsuperscript{48} Filakota, \textit{Le Renouveau Islamique}, p. 89. The most prominent orders are the Tijaniyyah and Muridiyya.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 79.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 21.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
to Bangui. Radio remains the medium that has the largest reach in CAR. Yet, media narratives from CAR’s dominant print media sector are neither entirely confined to the capital (where they are produced and distributed) nor to their literate urbanite readership. Rather, *revue de presse* (press reviews) act as the linchpin between the radio and print media, widening the dissemination of the former’s narratives in CAR through their inclusion in the daily news programming of major radio stations.

Both authors gained access independently to local French-language newspapers archived at *Alliance Française* in Bangui. After building rapport with the staff responsible for overseeing these (non-digitized) archives, we were permitted to make copies of articles of interest. The first author also gained access directly to the archives of *Le Confident* and *Le Citoyen* at their respective offices in Bangui to supplement any missing newspapers. By analyzing available print archives for *Le Confident* and *Le Citoyen* between 2003 and 2018, we underscore how Muslims are positioned as social ills and essentialized in public discourse by media elites, as well as how this media reinforces specific (state) ways of managing issues of *laïcité* publicly.

In Bangui, highlighting the negative behavior of Muslims is normalized. In 2004, a journalist wrote about “*un musulman voleur*” (a Muslim thief). The article details the story of a thief who was beaten to death in Bangui’s fifth district. In documenting the events that transpired, the journalist states that the “thief” was “Muslim” even though the individual’s religious affiliation had no broader relevance. Conversely, when a non-Muslim engages in negative behavior, the media treat the religious identity of the individual as unnecessary. In such cases, a thief is simply a thief. This does not hold true for Muslims. By further presenting the thief as *un musulman de souche* (a typical Muslim), the journalist augments the gravity of the act discursively and reinforces the perceived wickedness of the individual. In French, *de souche* typically locates a person’s origins, which implies *de souche* could mark the subject as a Central African. In CAR, however, a discursive division between *Central Africans* and *Muslims* is common in political and public spaces from taxi drivers to political elites. That the thief is a Muslim *de souche* is a way of essentializing Muslims and rendering their negative traits inherent. A *musulman de souche*, a typical Muslim, is always untrustworthy.

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56 Ibid.
This label is significant for how it denotes for recipients of this newspapers’ discourse that the thief is not Central African. The thief’s Muslim origin excludes him from consideration as Central African. Not only was a Muslim thief caught, which is to be celebrated, but the thief’s violent death is largely justifiable. During a speech delivered, as the Séléka advanced, in December 2012 in Bangui, former President Bozizé mirrored this essentialist discourse by appealing to “citizens... to be vigilant” of “traitors and criminals around them,” and foreigners, while using veiled language referring to Muslims. Such rhetoric was not a new development. Throughout his presidency and, particularly beginning in 2005 when rebellion emerged, Bozizé regularly raised the issue of a “foreign threat” posed by Muslims and the invasion of Islam to construct the boundary of autochthony, nationally, and to further consolidate his grip on power.

Part of the discrimination that CAR’s Muslim minority faces also relates to how successive governments have regulated Muslim access to the state and associated benefits, notably regarding blunt considerations of “proper” citizenship. CAR’s Muslims encounter difficulties obtaining official documents from passports to identity cards, resulting from the community’s perceived “foreignness,” as others have also emphasized. Their lack of documentation coupled with their monopoly over CAR’s commercial sector has made them easy targets for harassment and extortion by security forces, notably at roadblocks but also when leaving Friday prayers. Ethnically, these practices target the Muslim minority indiscriminately and with impunity. What marks these Central Africans as targets is their Muslimhood. Stemming from their treatment and representation, which has reinforced the perception among a majority of Muslims that their Muslimhood excludes them from consideration as Central African, some have sought to balance the weight of their Muslimhood by adopting French “Christian” first names to navigate Central African statal spaces. CAR’s former President and Séléka leader, Michel Djotodia, is a prominent example.

These two newspapers characterize Muslim opposition to their treatment at the hands of state officials as broader opposition to non-Muslims.

58 Vlavonou, “Understanding Autochthony”.
60 19111–1132, Interview with imam, Bangui, November 2019.
Specifically, they position CAR’s Muslim minority not only as separate from the larger community, as troublemakers, but also as virulent opposers of their host community – that is, non-Muslims.\textsuperscript{61} In one article, the author uses this narrow opposition as a foundation from which to describe the existence of a larger “latent crisis [in CAR] between autochthons and Muslims.”\textsuperscript{62} This theme appeared in another headline from 2006 in reference to an area on Bangui’s outskirts in which the publication announced: “... PK-12 experiences extreme tension: Muslim and Central African communities in disagreement.”\textsuperscript{63} This media presents Central Africans and Muslims in CAR as existing in two different realities with distinct origins. These realities seem irreconcilable at the level of public discourse because they are premised on a closed discourse with clearly demarcated limits defining what it is to be a “true” Central African, which is broadly incompatible with Muslimhood.

Bangui’s KM5 neighborhood is also often discussed in these newspapers as problematic. They depict KM5 as a “poudrière” (powder keg), an area where the situation is explosive or – in military terms – where ammunition is stored. One newspaper recounts an incident involving a police officer arresting a Muslim during a routine check.\textsuperscript{64} The latter resisted, brandished a knife, and his corpse was later found at a local hospital. For the journalist, this was proof that “KM5... is a ‘real powder keg’ and a ‘volcano’ likely to boil over at any moment.”\textsuperscript{65} That the Muslim was killed was unfortunate, but a civilian should not brandish a knife. Non-Muslims perceive KM5 as a place where various ills occur, as captured by the following newspaper headlines: “Muslim thieves,”\textsuperscript{66} “violence” in the market,\textsuperscript{67} and a neighborhood in a “state of unrest”\textsuperscript{68} and on the brink of “revolt.”\textsuperscript{69} Muslims and KM5 are seldom, if ever, attributed positive descriptors. Rather, this media treats the neighborhood as an area that needs to be tamed.

\textsuperscript{61} Junior Mokambo, “Musulmans et \textit{faca} se regarde en chiens de Faïence”, \textit{Le Confident}, September 1, 2004.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{63} Harly Schengen, “Le PK 12 sous haute tension: les communautés Musulmane et Centrafricaine à couteau tiré”, \textit{Le Confident}, December 11, 2006.


\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Ibid}.


\textsuperscript{68} D. N. Danguia, “Délestage: KM5 en ébullition y en marre”, \textit{Le Citoyen}, September 31, 2011.

\textsuperscript{69} “KM5 au bord de l’insurrection à cause de l’escroc Samito”, \textit{Le Citoyen}, November 16, 2011.
or calmed, which perpetuates the perception among non-Muslims that KM 5 is a problem the state must address.

In 2011, another event prompted these newspapers to present KM 5’s majority Muslim population against its non-Muslim inhabitants, declaring that Bangui had just avoided a “civil war.” They reported that two adolescents had been found dead in a Chadian Muslim’s car. This event, as others have observed, provoked a specific repertoire of violence in response to the car owner’s identification as “Muslim.” Not only were the individual’s family attacked and accused of witchcraft, Bangui’s wider non-Muslim population reacted quickly; several mosques were destroyed and Muslims killed. As violence erupted throughout Bangui, the government ordered a citywide curfew, and this localized event quickly regionalized when the Chadian government sent envoys to calm the situation.

Coupled with essentializing Muslims and representing them as social ills, non-Muslims also disregard Muslim claims for visibility in the public sphere, as observed in debates around questions of laïcité. Following Bozizé’s successful coup against then President Patassé (r. 1993–2003), the new president initiated a dialogue in September 2003 under the guise of addressing the divisiveness fueling CAR’s repeated politico-military crises before the Central African people. However, Patassé was excluded from this “cérémonie de grand pardon” (grand pardon ceremony), and among the 380 delegates present, most comprised CAR’s political class, including Bozizé co-putschists. More a process to cement alliances than initiate reconciliation, parliamentarians allied with Bozizé along with a majority of the political elites present rejected the recurring proposition to consider recognizing two Islamic celebrations as legal holidays, as was also the case during Patassé’s tenure. It was only with the Bangui Forum organized in 2015 during President Samba-Panza’s tenure that

73 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
agreement emerged to officially recognize these Muslim festivals. The sectarian violence of 2013/2014 had somewhat changed political appetites, following which non-Muslims conceded part of the public sphere in an overt display, recognizing CAR’s Muslims. Though significant, this concession leaves unresolved deep-seated debates on citizenship, nationality, and belonging that frame Muslim-non-Muslim encounters.

Conversely, Christianity and the inclusion of Christian events are not met with the same rejection. In the 1990s, President Kolingba decreed June 30 an annual “national day of fast and prayers.” Bozizé organized national prayer days, as well as days dedicated to fasting. Incumbent President, Faustin Archange-Touadéra, and his cabinet organize regular petit-déjeuner de prière (breakfast prayer gatherings) which are led by a pastor. As these examples suggest, religion and, more specifically, Christianity, is not completely separate from (state) power in CAR. For CAR’s Muslim minority, however, neither they nor Islam receive the same level of recognition or respect as Christianity and Christians despite recent recognition of Muslim festivals. Rather, they feel alienated and discriminated against regarding how they are seen and perceived in public discourse.

When Muslims seek recognition and more inclusion, these newspapers mirror the state’s opposition couched in CAR’s perceived laïcité to delegitimize their claims. In 2006, newspaper articles brandished secularism to undermine the importance of Muslim celebrations, noting that CAR is democratic and secular. However, as an imam of a prominent Bangui mosque noted, “our country is a secular country, but only on paper.” Echoing this sentiment, a

83 1911111132, Interview with imam, Bangui, November 2019.
former Fulani minister agreed, arguing, “one cannot speak of a secular state, equally distant from both religions [Christianity and Islam] and that one does not celebrate Muslim festivals. The state leans towards Christians.”

Religious difference in CAR, as discussed in this media, is not framed in terms of doctrinal differences between Christianity and Islam. Generally speaking, both Muslims and non-Muslims in CAR hold that Christianity and Islam, as religions, are not inherently at odds. Rather, “the religious phenomenon [in CAR] polarizes feelings and conditions social facts.” The social value carried by religion is, therefore, crucial. Within this reality, Muslims carry little, if any, social value and non-Muslims, including Christians and animists, have developed an anti-Muslim discourse that operates as a mode of discrimination employed by those who can access current claims of true Central African-ness. The perceived non-autochthonous status of Muslims compounds their lack of social value. Enduring patterns of discrimination Muslims experience are, thus, normalized and CAR’s Muslim minority interpret their treatment and representation in public discourse relative to their inclusion as indicative of a particular brand of secularism dominated by Christian imagery and representation.

However, the politics of representation in Muslim-non-Muslim encounters operates in complex ways that are, at times, counterintuitive. By centering intra-Muslim politics within our understanding of how CAR’s Muslims experience their minority status, we reveal how elements of broader autochthony discourse pervade this minority, further shaping on-going processes of Muslim minority identity construction.

Ethnicity and “Authentic Muslimhood” in CAR

The contemporary evolution of CAR’s Muslim minority, particularly involving the second Muslim student cohort, witnessed an overt ethnicization of Islam. Though credentialed in Saudi Arabia, these religious leaders sought to re-localize Islam rather than “import” Saudi (Salafist) puritanism. This re-localization,
or “reislamisation from below,” involved these leaders urging the use of CAR’s lingua franca, Sango, in Friday prayers. Notwithstanding the logic of such efforts considering their desire to popularize Islam among non-Muslims, this was part of a larger process to both destabilize Chadian Arabic as the language of influence within the community, and relocalize the Muslim minority’s centers of power in so-called autochthonous Central African Muslims. Rather than bridge existing intra-Muslim ethnic cleavages through the promotion of Sango, this process simply displaced and reconfigured these cleavages by borrowing notions of “foreignness” embedded in representations of Muslims in CAR’s public discourse and the social value of ethnicities broadly associated with Christianity from southern regions. Connecting both, thereafter, to Muslimhood discursively precipitated claim-making over an exclusionary and “authentic” (Central African) Muslimhood that created variability in how Muslims experience their minority status.

A majority of CAR’s Muslim leadership comprising ethnic Hausa, Mbororo/Fulani (Peulh), and Chadian Arab ethnic groups among others were marginalized, imbued with foreignness as perceived non-autochthones. Ethnicities that occupied a minority status such as the ethnic identities among the leadership of the previously mentioned Islamic association, CICA, were claimed autochthonous. CICA’s then president, Mohamed Mahidi Marboua, was an ethnic Mandja, and the former Secretary General (then President) and imam of the Aboubakar-Sidick mosque in Bangui’s eighth district, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, was an ethnic Yakoma from CAR’s southeast. Members of either are among those able to access claims of Central African autochthony. Despite doctrinal and generational divides within CAR’s Muslim minority, it is discourses on ethnicity among Muslim leaders and associated claims of

87 Filakota, Le Renouveau Islamique, p. 74.
88 Ibid., p. 79.
autochthony made in the interests of these and related ethnicities that have come to dominate how the dynamics of belonging are shaped.  

CICA was heavily implicated in advancing these claims following its inception. An examination of mostly internal archival documents from within CAR’s Muslim community, including memoranda, declarations, petitions, and letters written by Muslim (religious) and youth leaders between 2005 and 2009, capture both the ethnic contours and evolution of the debate over Muslimhood and claims of autochthony, as well as its enduring ramifications on CAR’s Muslim minority. After multiple interviews, a civil society leader from Bangui’s Muslim community shared original versions of these documents, which were part of his personal archives and in French, with the first author during a research trip in 2019. Such archives provide a candid image of internal dynamics, as they unfolded at the time, including the verbatim language that the various actors used. This archival data allowed us, therefore, to piece together this watershed moment for CAR’s Muslim community and triangulate this data with interview testimonies, to look for any possible reporting bias from Muslim interlocutors based on ethnicity.

In a private CICA memorandum to then President Bozizé in 2005, imams who claimed autochthonous status appealed for assistance in advancing CICA’s “policy of the central africanization of Islam.” They called for “regulating the treatment and respect for imams of our country” and for “Muslim autochthons” to lead in renewing links between CAR and the Middle East. To that end, they argued that the minority status of Muslims in CAR had persisted due in large part to the very identity of the Islamic leaders who had a monopoly on leadership positions. It was because of their ethnic identity that Islam had continued to be a “taboo.” These imams continued, contending that the “stranglehold” non-autochthonous imams have on CAR’s mosques and, by extension, Islam has entrenched its stagnation. In doing so, they overlook how the representation of Muslims by non-Muslims in CAR’s public discourse has shaped perceptions of Islam and Muslims and the visibility of this religious

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92 Archive Document 5882–5885, (private) Memorandum, Des Imams Centrafricains autochtones à la très haute attention de son excellence monsieur le Président de la République Chef de L’état, p. 3, emphasis in original.
93 Ibid., our emphasis.
94 Ibid., emphasis in original.
95 Ibid., p. 1.
96 Ibid.
(and political) minority. They emphasize instead elements of Islam’s historical emergence in CAR, underscoring the limits of their colleagues’ Muslimhood, as stewards of the faith, and interrogating the authenticity of their (Central African) Muslimhood. For these imams who claim autochthonous status, there is little difference between their Islamic colleagues at the leadership level in contemporary CAR and those persons from Chad, Sudan, Cameroon, Niger, and West Africa generally who brought their Islamic faith with them through trade and slave raiding.

The inability of “these traders, herders, and warriors,” write “autochthonous imams,” to advance Islam through efforts to call non-Muslims to embrace Islamic teachings and oversee the creation of a well-established, flourishing religious community lies in their lack of competencies as both missionaries and as readers of Islam. Relatedly, in an extended version of this private memorandum, published in an independent newspaper and signed by 106 public figures and six self-proclaimed autochthonous imams, these same leaders frame their Muslim colleagues from Hausa, Gula, Runga, Mbororo/Fulani (Peulh), and Chadian Arab ethnic groups among other majority Muslim ethnicities, as part of an “immigrant Muslim” class with no intention to propagate Islam throughout CAR. They note that any previous attempts made to call non-Muslims to Islam by these leaders has been done using nothing more than “des prêches élémentaires” (elementary sermons).

It is their lack of autochthony that should exclude these Muslims for any stewardship of CAR’s Islamic community. More directly, as those imams who claim autochthonous status write, “nowhere else in other neighboring or Islamic countries are the leadership or positions of responsibility for Islamic affairs or Islamic worship vested in non-autochthones ... [which] ... is in the best interest of their nation.” The result, they argue, is a Muslim community defined by “disunity” facilitated predominantly by “tribalism.” For these leaders, the embodiment of this “tribalism” was the principal imam of Bangui’s Central Mosque at the time, Moussa Naïbi, who they accused of engaging in an enduring struggle to reign supreme over CAR’s Muslim community. They further accused Imam Naïbi of doing so while “always referring to himself as

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97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
103 Ibid., p. 3.
[Peuhl] Cameroonian” even though “he had Central African citizenship.”104 Some self-proclaimed autochthonous imams petitioned Naïbi in 2005, citing “threats” and “irresponsible and un-Islamic discourse” heard at the Central Mosque during which Muslim leaders stated “there [were] no autochthone Central Africans as such,” which was “applauded by the Hausa, Foulbé, Foulata…” present.105

Embedded in the above ethnictized appeals is an awareness of the elements comprising the broader exclusionary discourse that frames Christian-Muslim encounters in CAR. So, too, is there an awareness of the perception among non-Muslims that Muslims and, specifically, those with Chadian and Sudanese ancestry pose a potential threat. Yet, the aforementioned attempt by imams who claim Central African autochthony to reclaim a space within the national imagination is limited to Muslims from specific (ethnic) categories. Such appeals do little for a majority of CAR’s Muslim minority whose ethnicities are not among those associated with autochthony in public discourse and, notably, those part of recent migrations from Chad and Sudan who are denied such status. Additionally, the desire to central africanize Islam specifically reveals a double standard vested in the “who” or “whose community” should have a monopoly on conversion activities and calling non-Muslims to Islam more generally. Aware of broader representations of Muslims in CAR’s public discourse, it also reveals an attempt by self-proclaimed autochthonous Muslim leaders to reduce the perceived threat among non-Muslims associated with the proliferation of Islam by couching proselytization in autochthony.

Importantly unlike the first axis of exclusion around which broader, national-level dynamics revolve, encapsulating Muslim-non-Muslim relations in CAR, Muslim leaders who claim autochthony do not fully deny the Central African citizenship of their coreligionists who they frame as non-autochthonous. To do so would be to duplicate and reinforce national discourse and, thereby, participate in their own externalization from the Central African nation and state. Nor are those imams who are perceived as non-autochthonous completely stripped of their Muslimhood. Rather, it is their “immigrant background” first, which can transcend generations, that precludes their access to a particular claim of Central African autochthony, the essence of which is both currently claimed and ascribed to ethnicities emanating from CAR’s southern, central, and western regions in a mutually reinforcing process by certain powerholders in the Muslim minority.

104 Ibid.
105 Archive Document 5889, Pétition, Collectif des Centrafricains Musulman Autochtones, September 18, 2005.
This convergence of Islam and ethnicity, therefore, functions to shape both the contours and content of what these Islamic leaders perceive as “authentic” Central African Muslimhood. Claims of and access to such Muslimhood are premised on an autochthony that is embedded in a myth of primary settlement and advanced by religious leaders of these ethnicities, which pervades this religious minority and shapes both intra- and inter-communal interactions and encounters. Further, it is the intra-community politics of the Muslimhood embedded in this myth and the perceived legitimacy to lead that it confers on those with access to these claims that have fueled intra-Muslim tensions and a persistent sense of exclusion for some, eclipsing any broader contention around Islamic practice.

Claims to be the first settlers in an area is a powerful trope and difficult to prove in most cases. In CAR, fierce debate exists regarding which ethnic groups were the first inhabitants, exemplifying the danger of pursuing autochthony tropes. The claim to autochthony advanced by some Islamic leaders in CAR’s Muslim minority – as with any autochthonous claim – is not impervious to discursive shifts or disruption. However, the perceived non-autochthony of the Hausa, Kanuri, Mbororo/Fulani (Peulh), and Chadian Arab ethnic groups among other majority Muslim ethnicities remains largely stable due to how this second axis of exclusion within the minority converges with elements of broader debates of national belonging that CAR’s Muslims experience collectively – albeit varyingly – as a religious and political minority.

This ethnicized discourse and the steps taken on behalf of CICA’s policy to central africanize Islam precipitated a crisis among Muslim religious leaders. As religious leadership and many in the wider Muslim minority cemented their alliances with Bangui’s Central Mosque, ties to CICA frayed and in some cases broke entirely. Over twenty imams, principally from Bangui’s largest mosques in KM 5, and those on the capital’s outskirts, collectively resigned from CICA and its associated structures. In citing three principal reasons for their resignation, these imams underscored what they perceived as CICA seeking “the absolute domination of a certain category of the [Muslim] faithful over others...
These sentiments extended beyond Muslim religious leaders to various grassroot associations affiliated with CICA. Writing in 2006 to Imam Naïbi, as "guarantor of Islamic cohesion," these associations protested the "xenophobic" tones underpinning the desire of CICA’s Executive Board to revise the organization’s governing statutes and, by extension, the Muslim minority’s leadership.

This rupture within CAR’s Muslim minority has endured, continuing to shape contemporary intra-Muslim politics and Muslim-non-Muslim encounters. The current government’s tendency to engage CAR’s Muslim minority on issues around conflict resolution and social cohesion through dialogue with specific religious leaders whose ethnicities are broadly associated with autochthony and Christianity has done little to minimize the uncertain belonging experienced by a majority of Central African Muslims. This tendency has simply reinforced notions of the continued marginalization of a majority of CAR’s Muslim minority from the national imagination. As one imam from a prominent mosque in Bangui’s KM5 neighborhood argued in 2019, "they [the current government] have chosen [who they prefer to work with]." This, in turn, has served to further destabilize the “Muslimness” of religious leaders who can access claims to autochthony (and those who work with them irrespective of ethnicity) in terms of both religious identity and authority, by reinforcing their perceived status as Islamized Central Africans among a majority of CAR’ Muslim minority and not “true” Muslims, as was the case of the late Imam Kobine.

**Conclusion**

Studying Muslims’ experiences as political and religious minorities in Africa through a narrow post-9/11 security-centric framework obscures the complexity of their experiences, which often shape and are shaped by the multi-ethnic societies in which they exist. Debates within CAR’s Muslim minority are not dominated by contestation over religious practice. Relatedly, encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims are not conditioned by perceptions of a broader doctrinal incompatibility between Christianity and Islam. Rather, a

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109 Ibid.
110 Archive Document 5890, Association de base affiliées à la CICA, Protestation contre la révision des Statuts à caractère xénophobe par le Bureau Exécutif National (BEN) de la Communauté Islamique Centrafricaine (CICA), April 18, 2006.
111 190727_1026, Interview, Bangui, July 2019.
discursive division between Muslims, on the one hand, and Central Africans, on the other, is commonplace. The inescapability of this division in contemporary public discourse, as it relates to questions of belonging and debates on citizenship and nationality, continues to dominate understandings of state-Muslim minority relations and everyday encounters between Muslims and non-Muslim.

By centering the politics of intra-Muslim interaction within our examination of these dynamics, however, we underscore how ethnicity manifests as an additional – and central – point of exclusion. In parsing the elements of the two axes structuring the double logic of exclusion thesis that shapes Muslims’ experience in CAR, this article not only reveals that they co-occur, but also how these axes converge and diverge. In national public discourse, CAR’s Muslims are largely framed as existing beyond the limits of who is considered to be a “true” Central African. Within this discourse, Muslims of Chadian and Sudanese descent are not only externalized from the national imagination along with other Muslims, but also framed as nefarious. As we argue, however, the variability that exists in how CAR’s Muslims experience their religious and political minority status is also shaped by intra-Muslim politics and the ethnicization of Islam.

How Islam and ethnicity intersect are implicated in intra-communal patterns of belonging and exclusion as well as the construction of particular understandings of the Central African (Muslim) self. Enduring perceptions of marginalization among CAR’s Muslim minorities are embedded in a powerful autochthony discourse that makes it challenging to belong, as Central Africans, nationally, and divides the Muslim minority, as certain Muslim leaders have sought to reclaim a space only accessible to some Muslims.

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