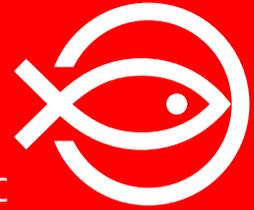


Paths of Peace

Historical Heritage, Culture and Faith in Central African Republic



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Introduction

This research, *Paths of Peace: Historical Heritage, Culture and Faith in Central African Republic*, explores how cultural, spiritual, and historical legacies influence reconciliation and social recovery in post-conflict settings. It examines how communities rebuild trust, address grievances, and heal from violence by drawing on ancestral traditions, religious practices, and shared historical narratives. The study highlights the complex role of cultural heritage, showing how it can serve as a unifying force that fosters social bonds and conflict resolution, while also acting as a potential source of tension when it reinforces historical grievances or exclusionary identities. Situating these findings within broader discussions on historical trauma, cultural resilience, and peacebuilding, the research underscores the importance of understanding the cultural dimensions of conflict and recovery. By looking at the ways oral traditions, rituals, and faith-based initiatives interact with other contemporary peacebuilding efforts, the study offers insights into how cultural resources can be intentionally harnessed to promote justice, reconciliation, and sustainable peace.

Glossary of Terms

Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage includes both physical artifacts (monuments, sites, objects) and intangible traditions (rituals, languages, practices) passed down through generations. It shapes identity and may also include landscapes and biodiversity with cultural meaning.

Rites and Rituals

Rituals are symbolic acts that reflect and transmit cultural values. They strengthen identity and social bonds, often marking key life events or communal moments such as weddings, funerals, and seasonal ceremonies.

Spirituality

Spirituality is a personal search for meaning, purpose, and connection beyond the self. It can exist within or outside religion, offering a flexible path to inner peace, transcendence, or the sacred.

Religion

Religion is a organised system of beliefs, practices, and values that guide individuals and communities in relating to the sacred. It often involves rituals, texts, and community life, yet allows for diverse interpretations and expressions.

Historical Trauma

Historical trauma is the collective, inherited harm caused by major injustices like colonisation, slavery, or forced assimilation. Unlike individual trauma, it impacts whole communities across generations through shared memory, parenting, and culture.

Abbreviations

CAR

KIIs

FGDs

Central African Republic

Key Informant Interviews

Focus Group Discussions

Historical Legacies, Conflict, and Social Fragmentation

Colonial rule and past violence have shaped social relations in Ippy and Bouar. The legacies of repeated cycles of conflict have reinforced intergroup tensions and distrust, shaping how communities interact and approach reconciliation. The 2013 politico-military crisis was widely identified as the most impactful episode of violence, deepening communal fractures and leaving lasting grievances. The cycles of violence have eroded trust within and between communities, with respondents describing heightened suspicion, even towards family members, due to past betrayals and shifting power dynamics. Many communities have become more insular, withdrawing from intergroup interactions, while economic relations have also been affected, with some groups now preferring to conduct transactions exclusively within their own religious or ethnic communities.

The concept of historical trauma remains relevant to understanding CAR's ongoing challenges. The literature suggests that unresolved collective wounding can manifest in ongoing instability, grievances, and exclusion, reinforcing conditions that perpetuate violence. While the study could not establish direct transmission of historical trauma across generations, it highlights the enduring impact of past harms and how they continue to shape social and community dynamics in CAR today. The literature underscores that historical trauma is not only a psychological burden but also a communal concern, influencing social relationships and collective identity over time.

Cultural Heritage as a Resource for Peacebuilding and Social Resilience

Cultural heritage remains a key resource for peacebuilding. Many participants highlighted that traditional rituals, storytelling, and ceremonies provide avenues for restoring relationships, acknowledging past harms, and fostering social cohesion. Rituals associated with ancestral veneration were frequently mentioned as important for maintaining social ties and reinforcing collective identity. In both Ippy and Bouar, participants described how practices such as blood pacts (*pacte de sang*) and purification rites have historically been used to reconcile warring groups and symbolically restore harmony. Traditional rituals have, for instance, played a key role in resolving land disputes between the Banda Linda and Dakpa ethnic groups, where customary leaders facilitated reconciliation through symbolic ceremonies.

Elderly community members see traditional rites as essential for rebuilding trust and restoring harmony. Many elders view traditional practices as fundamental to maintaining social bonds and ensuring continuity within communities. They expressed concerns that the decline of traditional rituals disrupts cosmic or ancestral balance, leading to social and spiritual instability. Deeply held beliefs in spiritual causality shape these perceptions, with some interpreting suffering as a test of faith, while others see misfortune as divine punishment or ancestral discontent. Redemption rituals, often performed to cleanse individuals or entire communities of past transgressions, are regarded as crucial for restoring harmony and preventing further misfortune. This reinforces the idea that neglecting traditional rites carries consequences not only for individuals but for the broader community.

Oral traditions play a crucial role in preserving collective memory and reinforcing resilience. In Ippy, *The Tunnel* is a powerful narrative of survival and resistance, recounting how the Pounaba people built a hidden refuge to escape slave raids. The story, passed down through generations, symbolises strength in the face of oppression and serves as a reminder of the importance of unity in overcoming adversity. In Bouar, the legacy of Mbarta reflects how historical figures are honored to sustain communal values. Mbarta, credited with opening key trade routes, is remembered through annual rituals that reinforce the ancestral principle of *zo kwe zo*—"living together." These traditions contribute to peacebuilding by fostering a shared identity, strengthening social cohesion, and reinforcing the belief that past struggles provide lessons for navigating present challenges.

Weakening Intergenerational Transmission of Cultural Heritage

Modern influences have contributed to a shift away from traditional practices. The growing prominence of external influences, including institutionalised religious teachings, has reshaped how younger generations engage with cultural heritage, as younger people increasingly gravitate toward structured religious doctrines rather than ancestral customs. This shift has contributed to the gradual erosion of certain cultural practices. As formal religious institutions expand their influence, traditional belief systems and conflict resolution mechanisms are either being replaced or adapted.

Intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage has weakened. Conflict, displacement, and broader societal changes linked to modernity have disrupted the passing down of traditional knowledge, leaving elders concerned that younger generations are becoming increasingly detached from ancestral traditions. With fewer opportunities to engage in storytelling, rituals, and community-led teachings, cultural knowledge is at risk of being lost. The breakdown of family and community structures has further reduced spaces where traditions are preserved, raising fears about their long-term sustainability. Many elders worry that as these practices fade, communities are losing not only their cultural identity but also the social cohesion and conflict resolution mechanisms that have historically maintained harmony and stability.

Shifts in Traditional Practices and Ethical Concerns

Traditional rituals play a complex role in communities. While some communities continue to use traditional rites such as blood pacts and purification rituals to restore broken social ties, others see them as outdated or incompatible with contemporary peacebuilding approaches. Participants particularly highlighted issues surrounding animal sacrifices, which spark ethical debates, and practices such as circumcision camps and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), which have negative human rights implications. These tensions reflect broader debates relating to social values within communities and evolving legal, ethical, and human rights considerations, which are then manifested within heritage practices.

Shifts in Traditional Practices and Ethical Concerns

Some rituals associated with healing and justice may inadvertently perpetuate harm. Cleansing ceremonies intended to absolve individuals of perceived transgressions can, for instance, involve physically or emotionally distressing practices, particularly when linked to accusations of sorcery or ancestral violations. In some cases, trial-by-ordeal rituals, such as Cigue, require individuals to drink a potion to prove their innocence, with potentially fatal consequences. Similarly, mourning rituals and initiation rites, while deeply embedded in some communities, can place pressure on participants to conform to traditional expectations, limiting personal agency and reinforcing exclusionary hierarchies. These complexities highlight the need for a nuanced approach that acknowledges the cultural significance of spiritual practices while critically assessing their potential to either support or hinder social cohesion and communal well-being.

The Role of Religion and Faith-based Actors in Promoting and Sustaining Peace

Religious leaders often play a critical role in reconciliation and social cohesion. Religious leaders play an important role in reconciliation and social cohesion, using sermons, prayers, and moral teachings to promote forgiveness, unity, and peace. Faith-based practices such as collective prayers and fasting were described as essential mechanisms for coping with loss and rebuilding fractured relationships. Interfaith ceremonies provide opportunities for dialogue, healing, and mutual respect, while faith leaders often serve as mediators in community disputes, facilitating reconciliation and advocating for justice. However, while primary research highlighted their positive influence, the literature also acknowledges that religious leaders have, at times, contributed to social divisions and tensions.

The Role of Religion and Faith-based Actors in Promoting and Sustaining Peace

Interfaith platforms strengthen community resilience and promote peaceful coexistence. Initiatives such as the Plateforme des Confessions Religieuses have been instrumental in fostering cooperation between religious leaders from different faiths. Through conflict mediation, awareness campaigns, and joint advocacy against hate speech, these platforms have improved intercommunal relations and restored peaceful coexistence. Some faith leaders draw on both religious teachings and ancestral traditions to promote reconciliation and address long-standing grievances. By highlighting shared values and encouraging constructive engagement, religious actors continue to play a vital role in navigating social tensions and supporting recovery efforts

Religious leaders actively support women and youth in peacebuilding efforts. Recognising the essential roles of women and youth in fostering social cohesion, faith leaders have taken steps to empower these groups. Women and youth are actively involved in organising interfaith activities, amplifying the reach of reconciliation initiatives while ensuring inclusivity. By bringing diverse voices to the forefront of peacebuilding, these initiatives challenge traditional hierarchies and encourage a more equitable approach to rebuilding fractured societies.



Discussion

This research highlights potential entry points for peacebuilding in CAR that go beyond political and economic interventions, engaging with cultural, religious, and spiritual dimensions as integral to reconciliation and social cohesion. Cultural heritage, oral traditions, and faith-based practices remain central to shaping collective resilience and identity. Rituals such as purification ceremonies and interfaith collaboration provide mechanisms for communities to restore trust and navigate reconciliation. These findings align with the broader literature that recognises cultural heritage as both a bridge between generations and a tool for peacebuilding. However, leveraging cultural heritage in peacebuilding also presents challenges. While many traditional and religious practices foster resilience and social cohesion, others risk reinforcing exclusion, stigma, or harmful power dynamics. The literature cautions against an uncritical reliance on cultural heritage, emphasising that traditions must be evaluated within contemporary ethical and legal frameworks. For example, while cleansing ceremonies and redemption rituals are regarded as essential for restoring social harmony by many elderly community members, they may also impose restrictive norms on marginalised groups or reinforce

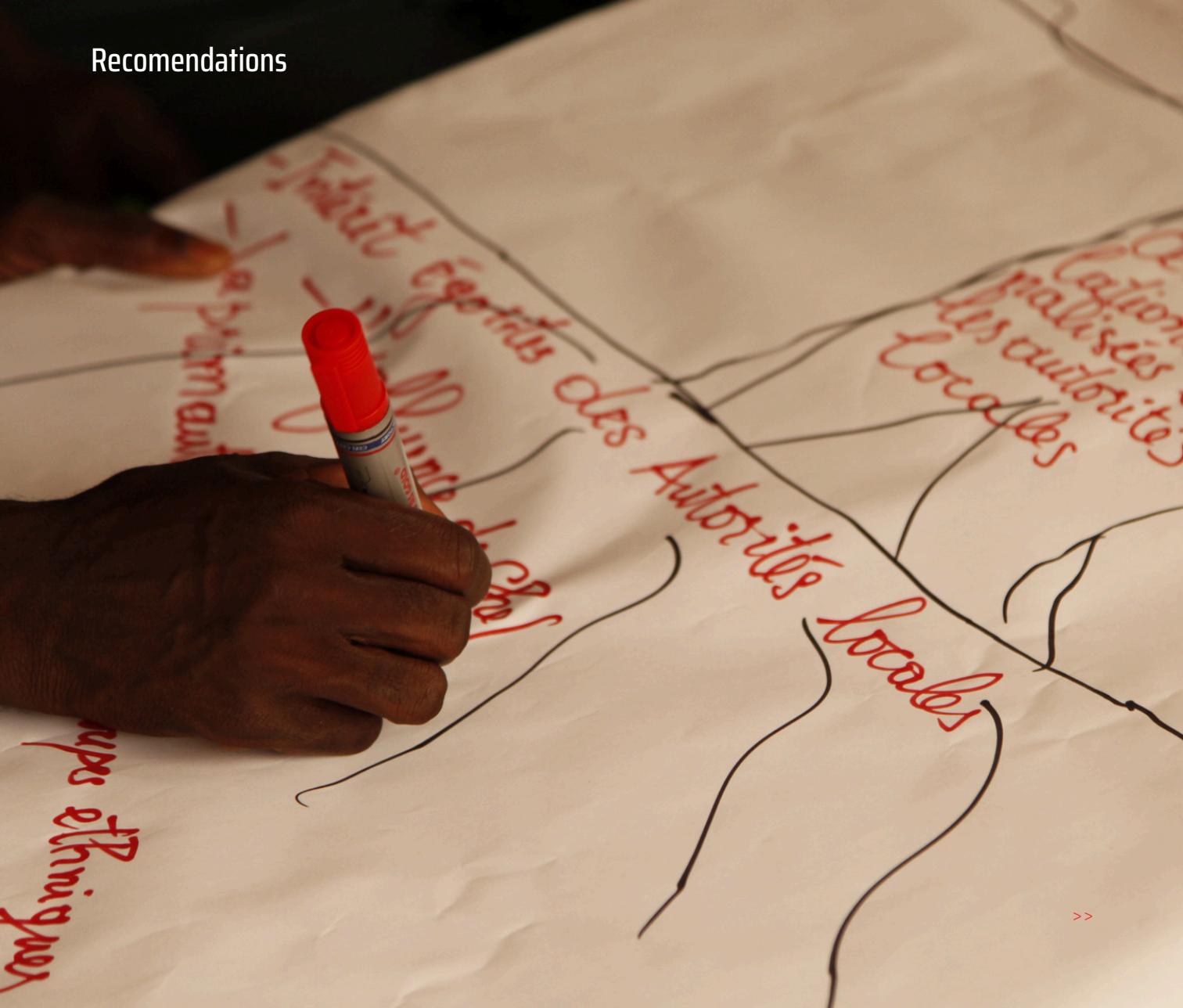
Customary rituals and rites continue to be led primarily by elders, while younger generations — particularly in urban areas — are increasingly disengaging from these traditions. The literature underscores the value of leveraging culturally embedded mechanisms in peacebuilding efforts, recognising that traditional practices are deeply rooted in local understandings of justice and social order. However, research findings also indicate a growing generational divide, as younger people are more influenced by institutionalised religion, modern legal systems, and external interventions. This disconnect complicates efforts to integrate traditional and faith-based approaches into peacebuilding, as younger and older community members often express opposing concerns. Elders frequently blame younger generations for the erosion of community cohesion, attributing ongoing social suffering to their neglect of ancestral traditions. In contrast, younger individuals are often sceptical of customary practices, viewing them as outdated, rigid, or exclusionary.

This generational divergence on questions related to cultural heritage, faith, and religion raises fundamental concerns about whether peace actors should actively seek to adopt traditional cultural, religious, and spiritual practices as part of reconciliation efforts. On one hand, drawing on cultural heritage-based reconciliation mechanisms could reinforce local ownership of peace processes and provide communities with familiar frameworks for resolving conflicts. When adapted effectively, such mechanisms can create spaces for dialogue and healing that are deeply rooted in local contexts. On the other hand, uncritically promoting ancestral practices risks reinforcing social divisions and excluding those who do not adhere to traditional norms. Certain customary practices, particularly those that violate fundamental human rights or perpetuate rigid social hierarchies, must be critically assessed to ensure they do not undermine broader reconciliation efforts.

However, the study also suggests that there is mutual ground between generations, offering opportunities to bridge some of these divides. Strong spiritual beliefs persist across age groups, and many young people actively engage in religious and cultural practices, though often in evolving forms that differ from those of their elders. While some younger individuals express scepticism towards traditional rites, others seek alternative ways to maintain spiritual balance and fulfil communal obligations. Ongoing debates among younger community members highlight key questions about whether institutionalised faith-based practices provide the same depth of spiritual connection, moral guidance, and social cohesion as traditional frameworks. This suggests that rather than a wholesale revival or rejection of ancestral traditions, there is room for adaptation — where customary practices evolve in ways that retain their cultural and spiritual significance while also aligning with contemporary social realities, ethical considerations and shifting generational perspectives.

While some elders and faith leaders strongly oppose the blending of different approaches, arguing that such integration compromises the spiritual integrity of distinct systems, others recognise that religious and cultural practices have always evolved in response to changing social contexts. This dynamic reflects a broader tension between preserving spiritual purity and embracing the reality of fluid and adaptive belief systems that continue to shape communal life. These differing perspectives underscore the need for structured dialogue between generations and faith communities to navigate the balance between tradition and change.

Recomendations



Promote Appropriate and Inclusive Terminology in Recovery and Reconciliation Efforts

- Encourage conflict-sensitive language use that acknowledges past grievances without reinforcing divisions.
- Train humanitarian and peacebuilding actors on the appropriate use of terminology related to historical trauma, aligning with IASC guidance to avoid direct pathologisation.
- Support training for government officials, community leaders, and media professionals on reconciliation-focused communication.
- Actors: Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission, Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, Ministry of Humanitarian Action, Solidarity, and National Reconciliation humanitarian organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs), media outlets.

Strengthen the Role of Faith-Based Actors in Peacebuilding

- Support diverse faith actors – including youth-led and women-led groups, in promoting social cohesion, justice, and reconciliation.
- Ensure faith-based mediation efforts are non-exclusionary, addressing power dynamics within religious communities to prevent marginalisation of certain groups.
- Build mediation and psychosocial support capacities for religious leaders and community faith groups.
- Actors: Interfaith platforms, Ministry of Humanitarian Action, Solidarity, and National Reconciliation, religious leaders, pastors, imams and priests, youth- and women-led faith groups, CSOs, donors.

Strengthen Intergenerational Cultural Transmission

- Establish structured platforms for elders and youth to share cultural knowledge through storytelling circles.
- Engage scout clubs, faith-based youth groups, and community organisations to reinforce cultural transmission through extracurricular activities.
- Support parental clubs that help families foster intergenerational dialogue, equipping parents with tools to discuss history and identity with their children.
- Actors: Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, schools, scout organizations, faith-based groups, traditional leaders, CSOs, NGOs.

Engage Communities in Dialogue on Traditional Practices

- Facilitate local discussions on the evolving role of cultural rituals, balancing respect for heritage with human rights considerations.
- Strengthen community-driven initiatives that address harmful traditional practices while reinforcing positive rituals.
- Actors: Local CSOs, faith and traditional leaders, Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, NGOs.

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Localise and Sustain Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Efforts

- Ensure peace initiatives are rooted in local partnerships, with CSOs and faith-based organisations as co-designers.
- Strengthen national and local-level exchanges to enhance coordination and impact.
- Encourage NGOs to act as advisors rather than supervisors, focusing on capacity-building and sustainability.
- Support insider mediation by engaging trusted local actors, including traditional leaders, faith leaders, and local authorities, within a conflict-sensitive approach.
- Actors: NGOs, CSOs, local governance committees, Ministry of Humanitarian Action, Solidarity and National Reconciliation, donors.

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Ensure Youth Inclusion in Peacebuilding

- Support initiatives that bridge intergenerational divides, including awareness-raising among community representatives on the importance of youth participation in peacebuilding and reconciliation.
- Ensure youth engagement in peacebuilding respects their agency, allowing young people to determine their level of involvement rather than imposing predefined roles.
- Develop youth-led mediation, leadership training, and peer-to-peer learning opportunities that reinforce a sense of purpose and community belonging.
- Integrate MHPSS and livelihoods support into youth-focused peacebuilding programmes to address underlying drivers of exclusion and disengagement.
- Actors: Ministry of Youth, Sports and Civic Education, Ministry of National Education, local authorities, CSOs, faith-based organisations, youth groups, private sector, development partners, donors, UNDP.

Strengthen Women's Role in Conflict Prevention and Resolution

- Support the establishment of gender-inclusive peacebuilding frameworks that intentionally acknowledge women's critical role in reconciliation and conflict prevention.
- Ensure women's meaningful participation in decision-making at all levels, with proactive inclusion of young women and recognition of diverse experiences.
- Engage men as allies in fostering an enabling environment for women's leadership and participation in peacebuilding initiatives.
- Actors: Ministry of Gender Promotion, Protection of Women, Family and Children, Ministry of National Education, local governance committees, CSOs, religious leaders, traditional chiefs, women's networks, UN Women, donors, international NGOs.

Integrate Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) into Peacebuilding

- Incorporate MHPSS into peacebuilding efforts to support communities in addressing and processing collective grievances.
- Use culturally relevant approaches such as storytelling, artistic expression, traditional healing methods, and religious counselling to facilitate healing.
- Train local mediators in psychosocially informed conflict resolution approaches.
- Ensure that MHPSS initiatives are inclusive, considering the specific needs of men, women, and young people, particularly those with limited access to mental health support.
- Actors: Ministry of Public Health and Population, Ministry of Humanitarian Action, Solidarity and National Reconciliation, mental health practitioners, religious leaders, NGOs, CSOs.



Expand and Institutionalise Interfaith Dialogue Platforms

- Secure sustainable funding and formalise collaborations between religious leaders and communities.
- Acknowledge the political influences on some interfaith platforms and frame their role in justice advocacy carefully to maintain neutrality and effectiveness.
- Extend initiatives to rural areas and actively involve youth in interfaith efforts.
- Actors: Religious leaders, Ministry of Humanitarian Action, Solidarity and National Reconciliation, international NGOs, donors.



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