PART 3

CHURCH, MISSION AND DEVELOPMENT

Chapter 8

Migration and forced displacements in northern Cameroon: Theological and social responses from Protestant churches

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1. Introduction

Cameroon has until recently been an island of political stability in a region that has experienced civil wars, coup d'états, and violent Muslim extremism. Over the last decade, however, political conflicts and Boko Haram terrorism have also invaded Cameroonian soil. Because of the ongoing crisis in the neighbouring Central African Republic (CAR) (Minfegue, 2019), armed political unrest in the Anglophone regions (Folefac & Ani, 2022), and Boko Haram terror attacks in the Far North (Funteh & Azieh, 2015; Funteh & Ngwa, 2019; Denisova, 2021), Cameroon, by 2024, hosts more than 2.1 million forcibly displaced persons, along with over 400,000 refugees primarily from CAR and Nigeria. Even though there are large refugee camps in the country, run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and assisted by the Cameroonian army, many refugees and forcibly displaced people seek to leave the camps and the conflict-affected areas in order to settle either in the rural areas of northern Cameroon or in the three major cities in the north: Maroua, Garoua, and Ngaoundéré.

Political unrest, being the main driver of refugee flows from CAR and Nigeria, is also the single largest cause of internal displacement within Cameroon. Nearly one million people have been forced to leave their homes in the Northwest and Southwest provinces because of the Anglophone crisis, while close to half a million individuals have returned to the region either from Nigeria or from other parts of the country. The remaining half a million forcibly displaced people, however, have been uprooted as a result of the climate crisis. Over the past decade, the extreme northern part of Cameroon has experienced not only repeated Boko Haram attacks but also several years of drought. The Lake Chad region has become increasingly inhospitable to farmers and herders, prompting entire villages to relocate southwards in search of fertile land.

This chapter is an example of how globalisation and a new ecclesiastical geography has shifted the focus in missiology and world Christianity studies from sending and receiving towards working in collaboration to solve local challenges caused by global developments. It offers a brief introduction to the main causes of forced displacement from the Far North region of Cameroon to the Adamawa region, namely Boko Haram activity and climate change. It further examines how two different Protestant churches in the Adamawa region - the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cameroon (EELC) and the Full Gospel Mission (FGM) - are developing distinct material and theological responses to the arriving population, and leaders from the two churches have become valuable sources that give voice and humanity to the discouraging official numbers and somewhat distanced academic debate about migration and climate change in this part of Africa.

2. The human mobility context

By the end of 2023, the population of Cameroon was estimated by the United Nations (UN) to be close to 29 million. With an annual population growth rate that has gradually decreased from 3.08% in 1990 to 2.63% in 2023,[1] the country's population has nearly doubled between 2000 and

1 Worldometer. [s.a.] *Cameroon population.* [Online] Available at: https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/cameroon-population/ [Accessed: 23 February 2024]

2023. In most African countries experiencing similar population growth, internal migration rates are typically high. This is largely because of the high mobility of younger generations, who often leave rural areas in pursuit of educational and employment opportunities in urban centres. During the 1990s, Cameroon had one of the highest rates of internal migration in Central Africa compared to neighbouring countries (Mberu & Pongou, 2016) - a trend that has intensified because of the circumstances that this chapter will explore.

Most internally displaced people in Cameroon have been forced to leave their homes because of the political crisis, also referred to as the Ambazonia War of Independence, in the Anglophone regions of the country. This conflict, which began in 2016, has deep historical roots tracing back to the aftermath of World War I, when the League of Nations divided the former German colony into a French mandate (Cameroon) and a British mandate area collectively known as the Southern Cameroons. Following the independence of Nigeria and Cameroon in 1960, the UN organised elections in the Southern Cameroons in 1961. The northern part of the mandate chose to federate with Nigeria, while the southern part - with its own prime minister - opted to federate with Cameroon.

In 1972, Cameroonian President Ahmadou Ahijo replaced the federal system with a unitary state via a national referendum. From the perspective of many Anglophones, this marked the beginning of the erosion of their political autonomy. With the election of Paul Biya as president in 1982, tensions continued to build, eventually culminating in the strike led by the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium in October 2016. This strike is widely seen as the catalyst for what is often described as a civil war between the Anglophone minority and the Francophone-dominated state.

Despite numerous international efforts to mediate through political dialogue, the conflict remains unresolved, resulting in several thousand deaths over the past decade. As a consequence of this protracted unrest, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Northwest Province alone - counting returnees - exceeded 422,000 in 2023. The figure for the Southwest Province was more than 385,000 (Willis et al., 2020; Folefac & Ani, 2022).

As the Anglophone crisis is a political issue that falls outside the scope of this publication, we now return to the other factors contributing to internal displacement in Cameroon. As in most African countries, the largest single driver of demographic change is the general trend of urbanisation. In 2000, the World Bank estimated that Cameroon's urban population was 6.8 million out of a total population of 15 million. By the end of 2023, this figure had risen to approximately 17 million, out of an estimated national population of 29 million. While the population as a whole doubled during this period, the urban population nearly tripled.

This dramatic demographic shift is linked to several factors. As previously mentioned, population growth has led to an increasingly youthful population, and rural areas offer limited opportunities for education and employment. As a result, a steady stream of young people leaves the countryside for the major cities, where universities and a more diversified job market raise hopes for a better future (Afu, 2019). According to UN statistics, more than half of the population now lives in urban areas - and that number continues to grow.[2]

These statistics also help to explain patterns of movement. In 2018, data showed that while 43.5% of the rural population lived in conditions of severe poverty - defined as living on less than $2 per day - only 5.5% of the urban population fell into the same category (Alkire, 2023). Although these figures do not necessarily reflect actual quality of nutrition or overall quality of life, it is clear that urban areas are perceived as spaces of opportunity, where employment rates and cash flow are significantly higher than in rural areas.

3. The Boko Haram crisis

The second political crisis that has destabilised Cameroon over the last two decades, and the one that has attracted most public attention, is what can be broadly described under the umbrella of "the Boko Haram crisis". This movement is often characterised as a radical Muslim group, with its roots

2 https://unhabitat.org/cameroon#:~:text=Cameroon's%20urban%20centres.-,More%20than%20half%20of%20Cameroonians%20now%20live%20in%20towns%20and,in%20informal%20settlements%20and%20slums.

linked to the expansionist politico-religious movements of Uthman dan Fodio and Moddibo Adama, who, in the early 1800s, spread Islam from Nigeria into northern Cameroon and established Islamic hegemony in the country's three northernmost regions: Adamawa, North, and Far North (Drønen, 2013; Anugwom, 2019; Denisova, 2021; Bongoyok, 2023). This hegemony, largely administered by the Fulbe ethnic group, was gradually diminished during the colonial period, as the German (1900–1919) and the French (1919–1960) administrations curtailed the political power of the Fulbe traditional elite. Their influence was further reduced under the presidents Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960–1984) and Paul Biya (1984 to present), both of whom centralised political power in the South. Nevertheless, the majority of government officials and traditional leaders in the northern regions remain Muslim (Azarya, 1976; Drønen, 1998; Adama, 2004; Drønen, 2013:84-89). The religious hegemony of the local *lamibbe* (local kings) and imams was further challenged by the arrival of Protestant and Catholic missionaries, who, beginning in 1923, established schools and hospitals in the region, making Christianity a serious alternative to Islam amongst the non-Muslim population (Drønen, 2013:81-84).

Islam practised in northern Cameroon has, since the arrival of the Germans - who brought an end to the slave-raiding practices of the Muslim Fulbe - been characterised by peaceful religious expression, with the Tijani Sufi order influencing most traditional rulers and their imams. From the 1960s, however, a gradual shift began to affect parts of the Islamic milieu, particularly within intellectual circles connected to university campuses, where Wahhabi tendencies promoting a more 'authentic' Islam began to emerge. This movement gained momentum following the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the rise of 'petrodollar' policies from states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Egypt. It attracted a growing number of young followers through mosques led by learned *ulama* with theological training from the Arab world.

In the decades that followed, the region saw the arrival of numerous grants for students to study Wahhabi theology in Arab countries, alongside the construction of several mosques, health clinics, and Franco-Arab schools (Drønen, 2001). In 1986, Paul Biya inaugurated the university campus

in Ngaoundéré, which was funded by Saudi Arabia and became a full university through presidential decree in 1993.

Despite the historical link between religion and politics in the region, few commentators would characterise the Boko Haram crisis as primarily a religious conflict. The roots of the movement are generally traced to the early 2000s, when the group Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teaching and Jihad) began attracting public attention. It became popularly known as *Boko Haram* because of its strong critique of Western education (Funteh & Azieh, 2015:215-216; Anugwom, 2019).

The first signs of Boko Haram's presence in Cameroon date back to 2009, when members fled the Nigerian army and settled in the Far North region. Even prior to this, Wahhabi and Salafi preachers from Nigeria had paved the way for the ideology spread by Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf, who envisioned a new society based on Islamic law. The newly established mosques, referred to locally as *juulirde*, challenged the teachings of traditional Sufi mosques and created tensions between the historically moderate Islamic leadership and the newly imported militant ideology from Nigeria.

After Yusuf was arrested and killed by police, Abubakar Shekau assumed leadership of the organisation in 2010, ushering in a more aggressive phase. Under his leadership, Boko Haram began targeting Sufi mosques and Christian churches. From 2012, the group intensified its military activity in Cameroon, launching random attacks on military, civilian, and religious targets near the Nigerian border. Beginning in 2013, Boko Haram also started abducting Westerners and political elites, capitalising on media attention and the prospect of large ransoms. From that point onward, kidnappings and village raids became the group's primary sources of income (MacEachern, 2020; Vincent et al., 2017).

This increase in activity prompted President Paul Biya to declare a "war on Boko Haram" in May 2014 - a declaration that led to intensified military engagement. A joint force made up of soldiers from all four Lake Chad nations, supported by US and French military intelligence, conducted extensive operations in which thousands of Boko Haram supporters were

arrested and imprisoned, with significant casualties on both sides. Official statistics list 556 Boko Haram attacks and 77 suicide bombings between 2013 and 2017, resulting in the deaths of 150 soldiers and 1,700 civilians.

The intensified military pressure from the Lake Chad coalition dealt a major blow to Boko Haram, forcing the group to shift from conventional assaults to guerrilla or asymmetrical tactics. This stagnation also gave rise to internal divisions. Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance to Daesh/ISIS[3] in March 2015 led to a split with ISWAP[4] in 2016. Further complicating the picture, a splinter group known as Ansaru, led by Abu Usama al-Ansari, continued to launch attacks in Nigeria and Cameroon alongside Boko Haram and ISWAP (Vincent et al., 2017; Kouma, 2017).

Most commentators agree that these factions should be understood more as political or terrorist organisations than as religious groups with traditional theological agendas. Their attacks on mosques and declared war on Muslims deemed "unfaithful" have caused most Muslims in Cameroon to reject these movements. Ntuda Vincent, Saïbou Issa, and Nadine Machikou attribute Boko Haram's initial success to the dire socio-economic conditions in the region (Issa, 2010; Issa & Machikou, 2019; Vincent et al., 2017). In a context lacking adequate infrastructure, education, and energy supply, many young people were drawn to promises of a better life in a new, just Islamic state. Recruits were offered a motorbike, a sign-on bonus, and a monthly salary. Loyalty was further incentivised with the promise of a future wife - an appealing offer for a generation of unemployed and uneducated youth facing limited prospects for traditional marriage because of economic insecurity.

Issa's research also shows that transborder trade has long been a central economic activity in the region, and this sector became heavily infiltrated by terrorist networks. When the government closed the border, the local

3 ISIS stands for: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (sometimes also rendered as Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham).

Daesh is the Arabic acronym for the same group: *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham*, which translates to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

4 ISWAP stands for Islamic State in West Africa Province.

economy suffered drastically - further reinforcing perceptions of state neglect amongst the population.

While no official statistics on religious affiliation in Cameroon exist, Vincent et al. (2017:14) estimate that approximately 40% of the population is Muslim, 40% Christian (across various denominations), and 20% traditional religious practitioners - particularly in the Far North region. Regardless of the precision of these figures, it is clear that Christians, too, are deeply affected by the region's insecurity. Lang Michael Kpughe and Moussa Bongoyok have documented in detail how churches and local Christians have been targeted. Several churches have been attacked, and many Christians killed, following Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau's public call for Muslims to attack Christians in Cameroon. In the early stages, French and Italian Catholic missionaries were abducted, leading to the withdrawal of all foreign missionaries from the region (Kpughe, 2017; Bongoyok, 2023).

Currently, most Christian services are still held in the presence of armed guards from the police or military. There are no Bible study groups at night, and all public evangelisation activities have ceased. The churches that remain open, however, do their best to care for the IDPs. They constantly collect money and share the little that they have in order to assist those in urgent need after yet another raid by the terrorists. Once a year, for instance, the Protestant Union of Evangelical Churches in Cameroon (UEEC) holds a national campaign to collect funds to support their congregations in the Far North region.[5]

The two Protestant churches that will be further discussed in this chapter have had different experiences over the past decade. The Lutheran EELC has its regional headquarters in Maroua and has no churches in the 300 villages that have been deserted along the border with Nigeria. In the Pentecostal Full Gospel Mission, several members have been killed in two separate attacks around Amchidi and Mora; in both cases, the pastors managed to escape the terrorists. Consequently, they have had to close several churches and relocate the pastors.[6] On a positive note, there have been several acts

5 Interview with anonymous UEEC pastor by means of messages, 5 January 2024.

6 Interview with Bouba Emmanuel, Nagoundéré, 4 January 2024.

of solidarity between the Christian and majority Muslim communities. One example was the meeting of 40 Muslim and Christian leaders in April 2014, which led to the establishment of a youth forum for Christians and Muslims entitled "Young Christians and Muslims Together for Peace and Development" (Kpughe, 2017:9). Another example was the Cameroon Council of Imams and Muslim Dignitaries, which in 2022 held a three-day seminar for 300 imams and preachers on the "ills of religious extremism" (Obia, 2022).

4. Environmental crises

What is often referred to as "the environmental crisis" in the Far North region of Cameroon could be better described as a "chain of crises" with various backgrounds that together contribute to the challenging living conditions in the area. The semi-desert Sahel environment has long demanded a delicate balance between fishermen, herders, and farmers from the many different ethnic groups living according to their traditional customs in the region. This balance has become increasingly difficult to maintain because of several recent changes. The most significant development is related to demographic change. This relatively small geographical area is the most densely populated in Cameroon, with 17% of the population occupying only 7% of the total land area. Given that the total population in the country has increased by close to 50% from 2000 to 2023, it is clear that the semi-desert area has been severely affected. Insecurity related to Muslim terrorist attacks and political instability in the CAR has led to an influx of refugees from CAR and Nigeria into a region that is more stable compared to the neighbouring countries, further increasing the population. Refugees with no land and a lack of opportunities to farm the land that they inhabit place additional pressure on food security and drive up prices for imported and locally produced food (World Food Programme, 2023).

The measurable consequences of climate change are thoroughly discussed in local scholarly works (Pemunta, 2014; Foucher, 2023; Magrin, 2016). Three key facts are beyond doubt. First, variations in rainfall and pressure on natural resources create less predictable food security. Several years of drought in the area have made agricultural production a less stable source of

income, and as long as more than 60% of the national population relies on agriculture as their main source of income, climate variation has immediate and severe effects. Even if the total amount of rain shows only minor variations from a long-term perspective, heavy rains over short periods have caused flooding several times in the last two decades.

Second, deforestation, which has been a slow process related to population growth across the Sahel belt, has increased because of rapid population growth and a lack of technological development. Traditional cooking is still performed with wood fires, and it has become increasingly difficult to find wood without cutting down living trees. Electricity is scarce in the region; whereas 71% of the population in Cameroon has access to electricity,[7] it is estimated that less than 20% of the population in the Far North region has access to regular electric power. Gas is expensive and hardly available outside the big cities. Solar energy is slowly gaining traction, but so far it is insufficient for power-intensive cooking and is mostly used for lighting and charging mobile phones.

Third, this human struggle for resources has social and political consequences that make life less predictable. The conflict between farmers and the cattle-owning population is a well-known dispute across the Sahel, and with unstable rains and a growing population, these conflicts escalate. The yearly and seasonal changes that affect the water level in Lake Chad lead to clashes between farmers and fishermen, who need to vary their activities to survive and seek to cultivate land on the former shores of the lake. When farmers, fishermen, and cattle owners are additionally looted by Boko Haram and other terrorists and criminals who frequently raid the area from their hideouts on the Nigerian side of the border, the situation becomes even more complex.

The overall consequence of what might be labelled "the environmental crises" is, first and foremost, that the UN-based World Food Programme, together with several non-governmental organisations (NGOs), has increased its activities in the region, providing annual reports on the variation in food production, political instability, and poverty rates. Secondly, a steady flow of people, often whole villages, is leaving the Far

7 ESMAP [18 December 2024] https://trackingsdg7.esmap.org/country/cameroon

North behind to settle further south, where the land is more fertile and less populated. The fieldwork on which the current chapter is based took place in December 2023 and January 2024 and will provide insight into the social and religious changes that developments in the Far North have brought about in the Adamawa region, with a particular focus on the city of Ngaoundéré and its surrounding areas.

5. Theological Approaches

With a weak governmental administration unable to provide social security for these migrants, individuals and civil society face challenges in integrating newcomers into villages and towns where resources are already scarce (Assana, 2023). In the following sections, we analyse the approach of selected Protestant churches in northern Cameroon and examine how their distinct theological and social perspectives shape their engagement with migrants.

5.1 Full Gospel Mission – the guesthouse approach

The FGM was established in Cameroon in 1961 by the German missionary couple Helga and Hermann Knorr. They began their work in Mutenge on the southern coast and established the Yoke-River mission station in 1963. From there, their efforts gradually expanded, and in 1969 the church, known as Full Gospel Mission (*Mission du plein évangile*), received government authorisation - making it one of the very few Pentecostal churches officially recognised in Cameroon at that time. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the church continued its nationwide expansion, and by the time Pastor Njemo succeeded Knorr as Mission Superintendent in 1979, the church had established a presence in most regions of Cameroon (Akoko, 2004; Drønen, 2013:110-113).[8] In 1985, Bouba Emmanuel, then a government employee, began hosting meetings as the first step towards establishing an FGM congregation in Ngaoundéré, in the Adamawa region. Establishing a Pentecostal church in a predominantly Muslim city in Cameroon during the late 1980s was complicated, and the church was forced to relocate several times before finally building its current impressive

8 Full Gospel Mission Homepage [18 December 2024] *Home - Full Gospel Mission*

church and headquarters in the Bali quarter of Ngaoundéré in 2013. From this centre, the church has established congregations in 20 different towns and villages in Adamawa, with four congregations each in Ngaoundéré and Meiganga. Across Cameroon, there are now approximately 1,000 FGM congregations.

When I ask Bouba Emmanuel, founder of the Ngaoundéré congregation and now pastor in Meiganga, about the success of the church, he smiles and states that the strength and the weakness of the church is that it has become a church for passers-by. After some reflection, he adds:

> Yes, that's it, like a guesthouse. Some come, and at some point they leave, and others come too. So that's the work we're redoing. Every time we do it, and we do it again. Well, by the grace of God, we continue to preach so that the locals will believe and that they themselves take matters into their own hands. Because others come, and they leave. So, we need the locals. Well, we pray to the Lord because there are some who are also behind the pastors. We need tourism so that others come too, so that it is stable.

Studies on the arrival of Pentecostalism in the region (Drønen, 2013) show that what Bouba refers to is a well-established pattern amongst these churches. They are often founded by clerks employed either in government or private companies, and in this way, Pentecostalism has spread from the city centres in the South and from cities in the Southwest, where Nigerian Pentecostal influence is particularly strong. Over time, this has fostered a certain light-footedness that has shaped the practical organisation of the church and its theology. Pastors, like Bouba, are constantly on the lookout for new opportunities. In his own town of Meiganga, where the church was only recently established, there are already four congregations. Bouba has recently acquired a new plot of land near the public high school and is now seeking ways to finance the construction of a new church building - a process that may take time, as FGM churches follow a recognisable architectural style across the country.

The guesthouse approach also influences how weekly services are conducted. While most Protestant churches in Cameroon include a brief segment during announcements for newcomers to introduce themselves, in the FGM this part of the service is especially emphasised. Newcomers are

warmly welcomed and are consistently followed up by the pastor, elders, and members of the congregation responsible for Bible groups and other church activities.

Bouba notes that migrants frequently attend their churches in the Adamawa region. There are occasional refugees from conflict-affected countries such as Gabon and Congo, but the majority come from Nigeria and the CAR. In relation to the broader concerns of this chapter, Bouba explains that it is primarily political unrest - stemming from rebel activity in the CAR and Muslim extremist violence in Nigeria - that has affected their church communities. Several members of their congregation in Amchidé, near the Nigerian border in the Far North, were killed during a Boko Haram attack. Along with another church in the area, the Amchidé congregation has since been abandoned following the destruction of its buildings by terrorists. The continuous influx of migrants into Ngaoundéré caused by these conflicts has reinforced the importance of the guesthouse approach in the church's everyday ministry.

One example of this approach is the church's engagement with migrants and refugees through its work in hospitals and health centres. Most refugees from the CAR are Muslims from the Mbororo ethnic group - a semi-nomadic people of the Fulbe origin, for whom Islam is a central part of their cultural identity, known as *pulaako*. To reach these communities effectively, Bouba explains that it is essential to understand their language and culture. Only pastors and evangelists who speak their language are equipped to carry out this work.

> Well, it's true that we have that in our action plan. And since we have health centres, we tried, especially in Garoua, Ngong, Toubourou, we tried to do what we call chaplaincy. So, when these people come, the pastor who speaks well, in Fulfulde or Hausa, we can take them aside. We try to talk to them and so on. And while we're doing that, those who believe, we're following them. In peace, in secrecy. Because if others find out, they will be threatened. We bless God because there is one of the mbororo who believed, who is even a pastor today. And there is also another hausa, the pastor, who is [responsible of] the chaplaincy. And there is also another hospital in Garoua.

Through this work, one of the Muslim converts is now serving as a pastor and leads the evangelism team connected to the health centres. As public conversion is highly sensitive amongst the Mbororo, Bouba explains that this ministry is carried out discreetly. Many refugees involved in this initiative have formed a support network that helps them to begin new lives as farmers in Cameroon, having been forced to leave their cattle behind when fleeing from the CAR.

As a small church with limited resources, Bouba expresses a desire to do more in collaboration with other Pentecostal churches that meet regularly through the Corps de Christ network. These are churches that share the FGM's guesthouse model - places where travellers, passers-by, migrants, and refugees can find rest and are welcomed.

What is most surprising by the FGM's approach towards Muslim migrants is the theological and missiological reflections shared by Bouba Emmanuel. Studies on Pentecostalism in Africa (Gukurume & Taru, 2021) show that the dominant approach to mission is often framed in terms of spiritual warfare, where the analogy of a crusade is frequently invoked. Examples from neighbouring Nigeria reveal that such aggressive attitudes amongst Pentecostal missionaries have led to tensions with Muslim communities - sometimes resulting in violent conflict and casualties (Onapajo & Usman, 2015).

Why, then, this shift in attitude amongst FGM evangelists? Bouba Emmanuel explains:

> No, but the relationship with Muslims, well, maybe at the beginning we could see them as enemies, or we could say that they don't understand. But we have changed the attitude towards them. These are people that God has created. They need the truth. They need to understand. So, our attitude and our gospel toward them has changed. We're not going to say, "you sinner", you don't know God. No, that's not the case anymore. We are all created by God, we are children of God. ... And with this wisdom, we commune with them. Because when we do ceremonies here, when we invite the Lamido, he comes. He sends his representative, even to Meiganga, the Lamido comes. Even the imam of the great mosque, we are together, we share. That's kind of it, without touching on the problems there are between them and us.

In my earlier work on the development of Christian-Muslim relations in Cameroon (Drønen, 2013:69-84), I demonstrated how a political culture - initiated by the French colonial administration and continued under the Ahidjo and Biya governments - has shaped the country's religious landscape. The colonial administration imposed strict limitations on Christian and Muslim missionary activity, favouring moderate religious institutions such as the Tijāniyyah Sufi order and the mainline Protestant and Catholic churches. In contrast, radical Islamist groups and various Pentecostal churches were denied official recognition, ostensibly in the interest of maintaining public order. It was only in the early 1990s, driven by the World Bank's push for democratisation, that civil society organisations - including religious groups - were granted the freedom to gain official recognition from the state. This political culture has significantly influenced Christian churches and Muslim communities, contributing to more peaceful Christian-Muslim relations in Cameroon than in many neighbouring countries in Central and West Africa.

During our repeated fieldwork amongst Pentecostal churches in 2008 to 2009 and again in 2023 to 2024, our research team did not observe any public preaching against Islam across the nearly 60 Pentecostal services that we attended. These findings align with two key observations in Haustein and Wilkinson's edited volume *The Pentecostal World*. The first concerns the importance of local contextual factors in shaping Pentecostal practice globally - in this case, the role of political culture in Cameroon. The second is the increasingly fluid and diverse nature of Pentecostalism itself, to the extent that the term has arguably lost much of its definitional precision.

My own experience, tracing the development of Pentecostalism in northern Cameroon from 1996 to the present, supports this perspective. Pentecostalism has moved from being regarded as a "sect" by mainline churches to becoming part of the religious establishment. Today, Pentecostal pastors are invited to speak at mainline church events, government receptions, and even Muslim celebrations.[9]

At the same time, many mainline churches - including the Catholic Church - have experienced waves of Pentecostalisation, particularly amongst the

9 Own observations, interviews with Bouba Emmanuel and Iya Moussa.

younger generation (Akoko, 2004; 2007). The FGM's approach towards Muslim migrants, therefore, appears more closely aligned with a Catholic theology of inculturation - where conversion from Islam to Christianity is encouraged as a discreet, non-public process - than with traditional Pentecostal crusade-style missions, which often frame religious opponents as spiritual adversaries.

5.2 The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon (EELC): An eco-theological approach

As the largest Protestant church in the region - with nearly 4,000 congregations across Cameroon, the majority located in the northern part of the country - the EELC has a strong presence in many small communities affected by waves of migration from the Far North and the CAR. Consequently, the church has been responding to migrant-related challenges for over two decades and has developed various diaconal approaches to welcoming newcomers.

In the eastern part of the Adamawa region, more than 250,000 refugees from the CAR have entered areas where the EELC maintains a substantial presence, including numerous congregations, two hospitals, several primary and secondary schools, and its theological college. This influx of migrants attracted global attention, and as early as 2003, the UNHCR and Doctors Without Borders began operations in the area, establishing camps to house refugees (Minfegue, 2019). However, in addition to the most vulnerable refugees who registered in the camps, many others have settled outside of them, seeking support from the local population. Given that the majority of these refugees belong to the Gbaya and Fulbe ethnic groups - whose languages are widely spoken amongst EELC members - it has been natural for the church to take an active role in relief efforts directed towards these communities. As explained by Baïguele Jean, the national bishop of the EELC:

> Yes, the Church has done a lot in this area. It must be said that the Christian villages welcomed the migrants. Yes. There are Christian families who have even opened their homes to those who have arrived. And given them plots of fields to cultivate. There was also the Lutheran World Federation … which started to give away

> manioc seeds, they shared it with the refugees, who made large fields. Now, these refugees have become traders. You see, people have made hectares of manioc fields, hectares of corn fields. They started investing, building houses and settling permanently… And it also means that the communities have experienced great growth.[10]

According to the bishop, the key to the success of the relief work lies in the minimal cultural barriers between the local population and the migrants. They share a common language and similar traditions related to agriculture, religion, and other ethnic cultural practices. After twenty years of continuous migratory waves, it has become difficult to distinguish between migrants and autochthonous residents in the area.

The support of various NGOs - amongst them the Lutheran World Federation - which have provided financial assistance in the form of seeds and other agricultural inputs, has also been crucial in easing the burden on local communities. Like the FGM, the EELC has utilised its hospitals to assist migrants, while also using these health facilities as points of contact with people from non-Christian backgrounds.

> With the integration of migrants, the Garoua-Boulaï hospital has contributed a lot. Especially teenagers, infants, babies, have had a special price of care. Children and migrants were taken care of. There's a fund ... it is given by an NGO ... It is a fund for orphans. So, with this money, when the hospital receives it, this means that it compensates for the care we give free of charge to the children of migrants. And that's why it's an additional help that also helps them integrate into the church.[11]

In recent years, other EELC congregations have been challenged by new waves of migration, as insecurity in the Far North region - caused by climate change and Boko Haram attacks has forced entire villages to relocate to the Adamawa region. In the subdivision of Mbé, which had an estimated population of around 43,000 in 2017, more than 20,000 migrants have arrived in recent years (Assana, 2023:481).

10 Interview, Baïguele Jean, Ngaoundéré, 4 January 2024.

11 Interview, Baïguele Jean, Ngaoundéré, 4 January 2024.

In the absence of a coherent state policy for receiving IDPs, the responsibility for integration is effectively shared between the local government administration (headed by the *préfet* and *sous-préfet*), traditional chiefs, and a range of civil society organisations - predominantly churches and mosques. When asked to comment on the situation in the Mbé region, Baïguele Jean responds as follows:

> The last ten years, we have had a lot of concerns. Migration is causing us a lot of problems. When you take the corridor that leaves Chad as far as Ngaoundéré, in reality, I often have worries, fears. Because the immigrants who come, come to settle in our villages. Because there is drought in the far north. When they arrive, they are welcomed by the community. But then tensions begin. Because habits change, they cut down trees, but we have to share the same land. What is problematic is that those who have moved, have been in one way or another, with Islam, in contact with radical or fundamentalist Islam … and so begins the intolerance towards Christians. To the point where the Christians who welcomed the migrants in their villages are starting to get into friction. I went to see the area with a pastor the other day… and we saw, didn't we, it's like a whole new village there. It was the people of the Far North who came to settle there. Quite simply, on the whole plain.

The same concerns are shared by Thérèse Nocke, who is responsible for the environmental projects within the EELC, though her perspective adopts a slightly different focus. The project that she leads is grounded in principles already outlined in the church's revised constitution of 1996, which affirmed the Christian responsibility to "care for the whole of creation". However, little concrete action followed at the time, apart from an initiative by the church's women's organisation, Femmes pour Christ, which launched a tree-planting campaign aiming to plant 10,000 trees - a project that yielded limited results.

It was not until 2014 that the church received funding from the Norwegian Mission Society to launch the current environmental project. Since then, Thérèse has been able to study the region's environmental challenges more closely (Tomren, 2021). What began primarily as an effort to combat deforestation gained significant momentum when Thérèse realised that

raising awareness amongst women was the key to shifting local attitudes. The initiative gained traction quickly as women embraced the introduction of environmentally friendly cooking stoves. Thérèse explains:

> So, women were taught how to build these at home. And it really saves 70% of the wood they consume on a daily basis. That's where we had more results. Because women feel more concerned. Because the problem of climate change affects women much more. Because they have to travel miles to get wood to cook … and especially young girls too, maybe they don't go to school much anymore. Or they will quit school because they have to fetch water first, fetch wood. The fact that we now show them how we can save wood has really reduced a lot of costs. ... Because they were travelling five kilometres to get the wood. And it was every two days. Well, now, when they were taught how to use the stoves, how to build and how to use the improved stoves, they fetch wood only once a week. So, you see that really helped.[12]

Projects related to reforestation, however, proved less successful. As a voluntary-based civil society institution, the EELC sought to mobilise its members and residents of villages where the church had influence to participate in tree-planting initiatives. Yet, the effort collapsed, ironically, because the government had secured external funding to pay people further north for the same work - undermining the church's unpaid volunteer model. Interestingly, it was the attitude of arriving migrants from the Far North that ultimately shifted local perceptions.

Studies on internal migration in Cameroon (Mberu & Pongou, 2016; Assana, 2023; Minfegue, 2019) have thus far failed to provide sufficient insight into how internal migration is managed by the government. According to Thérèse, there exists "formal" and "informal" migration. The first wave of newcomers was organised in the following way:

> So, in fact, it seems that the president of the National Assembly, who comes from the area where there have been many conflicts, there was this problem of Boko Haram, the population could no longer live there. The population had to be moved. So, he came to an agreement with the Lamido [the traditional chief] of Mbé. He asked the lamido

12 Interview with Thérèse Nocke, Ngaoundéré, 17 January 2024.

> of Mbé, was it possible to accommodate 500 families in the district of Mbé? The lamido agreed. The lamido summoned all the other village chiefs to tell them that, well, here is the president of the National Assembly who wants to move his population here. And you are the owners of the villages, so, who is ready to welcome the newcomers? Each leader proposed the number he could accommodate.

Even the formal policy of internal migration in Cameroon is, as the citation shows, based on personal initiatives amongst the elites rather than on government policy. Most village chiefs were interested in population growth because it could also affect their rank in the regional hierarchy, which in turn influences the chiefs' economic support from the government. However, the chiefs were unprepared for the conflicts that would follow the first wave of migrants. Thérèse explains:

> But after that, it didn't go as it should. When the first people arrived and settled, they really found that it was, I don't know what term we can use, if you understand the word, Eldorado. That is to say, it was truly a very blessed land. They had good harvests. And that's how they went to get the brothers now. "Come on, we've found a good space here". But they no longer went through the chiefs. And that's when conflicts emerged. Conflicts over land, conflicts over natural resources. Because with their [the migrant's] presence, they were cutting down so many trees. Their culture wants them to have no trees. So, when they arrived, they started to devastate all the forests. And it started to create conflicts with those who were there.

Thérèse Nocke and Baïguele Jean both highlight the ecumenical challenges which they encountered in this project. The newcomers were either Muslims or Christians from other denominations who were initially sceptical of the Lutheran church. The environmental project thus evolved into one with significant theological implications - aiming to foster Christian unity on the one hand, and interreligious dialogue with Islam on the other.

The migrants had fled regions rendered uninhabitable by climate change and terrorism, while local government structures lacked the resources to respond adequately. In this context, the EELC's environmental project was reinterpreted in light of the church's constitutional emphasis on evangelisation as the promotion of God's sovereignty over creation, and of

the Gospel as a message for the whole of creation - body, soul, and spirit. Faced with the realities of migration from the Far North, this theological framework compelled the church to step in and actively seek solutions in the midst of escalating conflict.

The scale of the crisis suggests an urgent need for government intervention. The village of Wack, originally home to about 500 residents, has received several times that number in incoming migrants, who have settled on the plains a few kilometres away - and the flow continues. Yet, even in this situation, Thérèse believes that the church still has a vital role to play, as people's attitudes are beginning to shift in response to the growing tensions and the visible disappearance of the surrounding trees.

> But more and more, individually, people are much more interested. Because people want... They have large fields that they want to protect at the same time. Because they have understood that the tree is a way of protecting the land. It's like a land title. When you come to find a plot of land with trees, you can't come and touch this land. And many have understood this. … So, whenever someone needs them, they come, I give them plants. But in a collective way. Because we prefer people to work in groups.

The church's engagement with environmental issues has, over time, developed into a project where theological reflection intersects with practical diakonia, becoming integral to the very core of the church's mission.

6. Concluding remarks

Migration and forced displacement have significant social impacts on any community experiencing such shifts, whether as host or as recipient. As we have seen throughout this chapter, this has certainly been the case in northern Cameroon. Because of political unrest, terrorist attacks, and climate change, the region has undergone profound demographic changes. These developments have caused considerable suffering amongst displaced populations and placed host communities under immense strain.

In the absence of a strong state response and with limited support from the international community, much of the burden has fallen on local populations and the civil society organisations active in the area. In the

Adamawa region, we have observed that Protestant churches have played a proactive role in receiving and integrating migrants and forcibly displaced people. At the same time, it has become evident that their approaches to the newcomers are shaped by the specific context of each church - particularly in relation to size, institutional capacity, and theological orientation. In the growing literature on migration and religion, in Africa and beyond (Frederiks & Nagy, 2016; Haug, 2018; Eriksen, 2021; Maxwell & Burlăcioiu, 2022), it is increasingly evident that churches play a vital role as civil society actors, taking on broad responsibilities in creating a sense of home for people on the move. Through our examination of the daily activities of the FGM and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Adamawa region, we have seen that welcoming newcomers, offering healthcare, resolving disputes, and promoting eco-sustainable awareness are amongst the key ways in which these churches engage migrants and IDPs.

These glimpses contribute to our understanding of the relationship between the state and civil society organisations in sub-Saharan Africa, and they shed light on the multifaceted role of religious communities in conflict-affected regions. Through the FGM's guesthouse approach and the Lutheran Church's eco-theological strategy, we have examined how religious institutions operating at the micro level of society have emerged as significant civil society actors in contexts of displacement and social transformation.

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