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The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Cultural transformation for Peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Abstract

The present article explores the role of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo in transforming cultural conflict within local communities. It draws on qualitative research conducted in Goma and its environs, which included key informant interviews and focus group discussions. It employs conflict transformation theory to explain the findings and illustrate how ritual reintegration, gender advocacy, theatre for conflict resolution, and interfaith dialogue influence actor recognition, moral dialogue, and local dialogue while embedded within power hierarchies and interdenominational conflicts. The article builds on the literature by adding ritual and theological ethics to conflict transformation theory while highlighting the negotiated and conditional character of culturally embedded conflict resolution efforts. While the literature on faith-based engagement focuses on its emancipatory character, this analysis reveals the transformative and constraining character of faith-based conflict resolution efforts. Despite the growing recognition of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) as important actors in peace-building and conflict transformation, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how they operationalize cultural transformation in conflict-affected societies and how their religiously informed approaches contribute to the development of peace-building theory and practice, which this article endeavours to unravel.

Keywords: Faith-Based Organizations; Cultural Transformation; Conflict Transformation; Peacebuilding; Eastern DRC

Introduction

The protracted conflict in the Eastern DRC has resulted in one of the most complex and protracted crises in contemporary Africa. Despite all efforts by international actors to establish peace in the region, insecurity persists in North and South Kivu Provinces, characterised by armed mobilisation, territorial disputes, gender-based violence, and fragmented local governance structures (Autesserre, 2010; Reyntjens, 2019). While institutional and geopolitical factors have captured the bulk of the policy debate, recent scholarship suggests that to

understand the long-term nature of violence in the DRC, one must consider the cultural and normative dimensions of social relations, especially at the grassroots level (Appleby, 2000; Said & Funk, 2002).

In this context, Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) are now prominent in local peacebuilding initiatives in Eastern DRC, including mediation, reconciliation, gender, service delivery, and participatory cultural activities. Past literature on religion and peacebuilding acknowledges the capacity of religious actors to play a mediating, moral, and social-cohesion role in conflict environments (Haynes, 2009; Johnston, 2003). Similarly, conflict transformation literature has acknowledged the value of relational, structural, and normative change in addressing intractable conflicts (Miall, 2007; Lederach, 2005).

Nevertheless, despite this rising body of literature, there are three analytical gaps in the understanding of micro-cultural mechanisms, religion and peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and the role of power hierarchies, gender, and culture, which are insufficiently theorized: Firstly, much of the existing literature on religion and peacebuilding has been concerned with high-level mediation or institutional engagement, without adequately exploring micro-cultural mechanisms by which religious practices influence norms and community identity. Secondly, conflict transformation models, notwithstanding their focus on structural and relational change, tend to fail to incorporate elements of religious practices, theological ethics, or religious morality as a working component of transformation (Miall, 2007). Thirdly, existing studies of FBOs' engagements tend to approach religious interventions as either normatively positive or politically critical, without adequately examining the interrelationships among religious practices, power hierarchies, gender, and culture (Reyntjens, 2019; Shah, Stepan, & Toft, 2012).

Eastern DRC can be cited as a particularly well-suited environment for exploring the limitations of these models. In a context where state institutions are relatively fragile and external interventions have been accused of being overly technocratic and externalist (Autesserre, 2010), FBOs occupy a distinct space regarding spirituality, culture, and governance. Their activities are not limited to mediation, but can include activities such as cleansing rituals for survivors of sexual violence (Trefon, 2016), or theatre activities aimed at developing non-violent dialogue (Slachmuijlder, 2012; Deane, 2024), or gender empowerment activities aimed at addressing exclusionary norms (Ludovic, 2021).

However, the existing literature has not sufficiently explored the extent to which this religiously based cultural intervention refines, challenges, or expands existing secular conflict transformation theory. It has not sufficiently explored the extent to which local-level FBOs negotiate the interplay between inclusion and exclusion, empowerment and hierarchy, reconciliation and politics. The interface between religion and cultural transformation remains conceptually underdeveloped. This article seeks to explore how Faith-Based Organisations operationalise cultural transformation towards peace-building in Eastern DRC. The question this article poses is: What is the interface between ritual practice, theological ethics, and cultural intervention by Faith-Based Organisations and conflict transformation processes within Eastern DRC?

In this study, drawing on data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted in the field in the Goma area, the researcher examines the impact of FBOs on actors' identities,

norms, gender, and governance structures. Using conflict transformation theory as a basis for analysis (Miall, 2007), this article examines the extent to which religious practices can serve as a basis for actor, issue, rule, and structural transformation in conflict-ridden societies.

The article makes several contributions to the existing literature on conflict transformation, religion, and peacebuilding. Firstly, it contributes to the body of knowledge on conflict transformation theory by examining the role of rituals and religious practices in transforming norms in conflict-ridden societies. Secondly, the study contributes to the body of knowledge on religion and peacebuilding by shifting the focus from macro-level mediation to micro-level cultural analysis of conflict transformation. Thirdly, the study provides a much-needed analysis of the Eastern DRC, a region that has not been adequately theorised through culturally embedded approaches to peacebuilding.

By situating religious practice within the broader contexts of cultural transformation and conflict theory, this research moves beyond descriptive accounts of Faith-Based Organisations to offer a theoretical analysis of the role of spiritual and cultural mechanisms in peacebuilding processes.

Literature Review

Significantly, there has been a proliferation of literature on the role of religion in peacebuilding since the 1990s, especially in response to the resurgence of religion in global politics. Traditionally, religion has been viewed as a precipitating factor in identity-based conflicts, especially when political and religious identities blur (Appleby, 2000). However, there has been a significant shift in the literature, in which the capacity of religion to precipitate and mitigate conflict has been acknowledged. In many instances, religious actors have been viewed as mediators, service providers, and moral guides in conflict-ridden societies (Johnston, 2003; Haynes, 2009). In many African societies, FBOs have been viewed as performing functions similar to those of state institutions, including education, health, and conflict resolution (Deng, 2018; McNamee & Muyangwa, 2021).

Yet the area remains far from being consensual. While some scholars highlight the normative potential of religion for reconciliation, others have emphasised the potential for religious organisations to perpetuate the social hierarchies and political economies in which they are enmeshed (Shah, Stepan, & Toft, 2012; Reyntjens, 2019). This has created an analytical tension surrounding FBOs, which are often seen as either agents of transformation or as perpetuating authority. The literature has often portrayed these as competing arguments without exploring the conditions under which they might apply.

In parallel with discussions of religion, conflict transformation theory has emerged as an important body of thought for understanding conflict. Building on the limitations of conflict resolution theory's emphasis on negotiated settlements, conflict transformation theory conceives conflict as an evolving process that holds the promise of creating positive social change (Lederach, 2005; Miall, 2007). Transformation is conceived along several dimensions, from changes in actors' identities to changes in conflict issues, governing norms, and power structures. This approach has been influential in post-conflict reconstruction and civil society work.

This is particularly surprising given conflict transformation theory's focus on relational and cultural changes. Although conflict transformation theory takes culture into account, it rarely theorises the role of ritual, theology, or moral authority as operational tools in conflict transformation processes. Although religious actors are often included as empirical case studies of conflict transformation, spiritual practices are not included within the theoretical heart of conflict transformation theory. Therefore, little dialogue is made between religious peace-building scholarship and conflict transformation theory.

The same phenomenon is seen in the research on participatory and arts-based peace processes. Cultural performance, narrative, and community theatre have been shown to be effective in dialogue, trauma healing, and social learning (Cohen, 2005; Slachmuijlder, 2012; Deane, 2024). These processes focus more on narrative reframing and participation than on elite negotiation. In the African Great Lakes region, for example, participatory theatre has been employed to deal with land, gender, and conflict-related trauma (Breed, 2008; Hawes, 2009). The main idea is that it generates compassion and stops the pursuit of vengeance.

Nevertheless, empirical research on arts-based interventions is generally more programmatic than theoretical. It is not always concerned with locating cultural performance within any broader model of structural or normative change. Furthermore, the relationship between religious organisations and participatory cultural practices remains an under-researched area. Are FBOs employing arts-based interventions like theatre or ritual to promote their theological ethics, or are they borrowing from secular methodologies? The evidence doesn't help us make any clear inference.

The philosophical tradition in Africa, known as Ubuntu, further muddies the landscape. The concept has often been invoked in the context of reconciliation and restorative justice, and it emphasises the shared humanity and interdependence that exist (Tutu & Battle, 2009). The concept has had a major influence on peace discourse, particularly in Southern Africa and beyond. However, it is notable that the concept of Ubuntu with regard to reconciliation has largely been stated normatively, and its relationship to conflict transformation theory has largely remained a presupposition. The relationship between theological ethics and secular models of social change has largely remained unexplored.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the most salient cases in which these theoretical contradictions converge. The DRC has been the subject of extensive research on armed mobilisation, regional geopolitics, and international intervention (Autesserre, 2010; Reyntjens, 2019). However, there is still insufficient consideration of the micro-cultural dimensions of social norm reconstruction by local actors. In the Eastern part of the DRC, FBOs are not peripheral actors; they are integral to everyday life, governance, and moral education. They engage in cleansing rituals for survivors of violence (Trefon, 2016), interfaith dialogue, gender advocacy initiatives (Ludovic, 2021), and participatory approaches to peace programming with secular actors.

However, the current body of scholarship does not adequately account for the interplay between these different practices and established models of conflict transformation. While the religion and peacebuilding literature establishes the involvement of Faith-Based Organizations, the theory of transformation offers a multi-dimensional model of change, and the arts-based scholarship offers the potential of narratives and performances, there is an absence of

theoretical work on the interplay of ritual practices, theological ethics, and participatory cultural practices as they intersect and coexist in one conflict environment to influence actor identities, norms, and structural relationships.

Thus, the current theoretical division suggests an integrative approach to the subject matter. Instead of examining religious peacebuilding, participatory theatre, and conflict transformation as separate and distinct approaches, it is beneficial to consider their interplay, both theoretically and empirically. The Eastern DRC offers an environment to consider whether Faith-Based Organisations, embedded in the local culture, simply implement established principles of transformation, or whether they, as spiritually grounded practices, extend established theoretical models.

By situating faith-based cultural interventions within the analytical dimensions of conflict transformation, the present study aims to bridge the two literatures and address the yet-to-be-explored interface among ritual, morality, and change in the context of conflict.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the role of Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) in cultural transformation processes in conflict-affected societies in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The use of a qualitative research approach is motivated by the fact that the research question of interest focuses on meaning-making, normative changes, and experience, which cannot be captured using quantitative measures alone (Flick, 2022). The aim of the study was not to measure the number of activities carried out by FBOs but to explore the meaning of cultural transformation processes.

The data collection was carried out in Goma and the neighbouring regions of North Kivu between August and December 2024. The area was chosen based on the presence of religious establishments, security uncertainty, and the history of armed mobilisation and peacebuilding activities (Autesserre, 2010). The area offers an environment where cultural and religious interventions directly intersect with the experience of ongoing conflict. We uttised purposive sampling to select participants who were either directly involved in or had direct knowledge of faith-based initiatives in peacebuilding. The sampling method did not focus on the general population but sought additional information about the collected data. The participants were selected based on three main considerations: (1) they were actively involved in religious or faith institutions, (2) they were either involved in or had knowledge about peace building, reconciliation, or community leadership, and (3) they had knowledge about local conflict issues.

The research conducted a total of forty-four (44) key informant interviews (KIIs) with leaders, workers, and followers from different religious denominations, including Roman Catholic, Protestant, Kimbanguist, Pentecostal, and Islamic institutions. To further enrich the data, five (5) focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, each with 6 to 8 participants, thereby increasing the total research engagements to forty-nine (49).

The gender and generational diversity of the sampled population were taken into consideration. Although some denominational leadership positions were largely held by men, women involved in various church-based advocacy initiatives and community mobilisation projects

were considered to ensure that the discussion of cultural transformation did not remain within the realm of the clergy.

The data collection methods included conducting semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Interview guides were designed to explore four broad thematic areas: the participants' perceptions of the sources of conflict in the Eastern DRC; religious/cultural interventions that FBOs implemented; perceived changes in how people behave and interact with one another; and Institutional constraints. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow participants the freedom to provide information on the themes they perceived as significant, while ensuring that the information collected remained coherent. In focus group discussions, participants were grouped by common characteristics to create an environment that would allow them to express themselves freely without the inhibition that comes with hierarchy.

The analysis was informed by a two-stage coding methodology that drew on inductive and deductive approaches. In the first stage, open coding of the transcripts was conducted to identify recurring patterns, practices, and narratives that emerged directly from the data. Emerging codes were established around themes such as ritual reintegration, moral pedagogy, gender norming, participatory cultural practice, interfaith work, and institutional limitations. In the second stage, the emergent codes were explored in relation to the analytical framework of conflict transformation theory, as outlined by Miall (2007). Four dimensions of transformation were identified: Actor transformation (shifts in identity and social recognition), Issue transformation (reframing of conflict drivers), Rule transformation (changes in norms governing interaction), Structural transformation (reconfiguration of authority and power relations). This hybrid analytical strategy allowed the data to shape initial thematic development while ensuring theoretical coherence in interpretation.

Saturation was checked progressively throughout the data collection period. It was found that after the thirty-ninth interview, no new substantive thematic categories were identified. The final interviews were conducted to ensure the stability of the identified themes rather than to identify new ones. This was a continuous process that helped ensure that the essential dimensions of FBO engagement were adequately captured within the chosen context (Saunders et al., 2017). Qualitative data analysis software was used to manage the coding schemes. However, the data analysis was not conducted using any mechanical or technical process. Several strategies were employed to enhance the analysis. To begin with, triangulation was achieved by comparing data with documentary evidence from religious institutions and international organizations (United Nations, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2021). Further, internal consistency was assessed by examining convergence and divergence across denominations and participant groups. Instead of focusing solely on positive aspects, the analysis sought to explore contradictions and tensions within the data. Thirdly, the analysis sought to be reflexive, and the researcher recorded observations and reflections that might have helped in checking biases in interpretation. As the research sought to explore sensitive areas, including religious authority and conflict, it was important to be careful and avoid overgeneralizations and normative tendencies regarding participants.

Ethical clearance for the research was sought and obtained from the University of Dodoma, and the research was conducted in accordance with national research regulations. The participants were made aware of the purpose of the research, their willingness to participate,

and their right to withdraw at any time. The research interviews were conducted in areas considered safe, given the security challenges at the time. The collected information was stored securely, and the participants' details were removed to ensure confidentiality.

Ritual Reintegration and Identity Reconstruction

One of the most frequently cited practices in the interviews was the use of cleansing and reintegration rituals for stigmatised persons, particularly those who have experienced sexual violence and children born of forced relationships. The interviewees described these practices not only as symbolic but also as necessary for reintegration into the community.One interviewee, a Kimbanguist church worker, said: *"If she returns without the ritual, people look at her differently. After the ritual, she is no longer seen as 'the woman from the bush' but as someone restored."* This quote implies that ritual practices operate at the level of social recognition. The change the interviewee is talking about is not only the individual's healing but also the social group's reclassification of the individual. However, not all the interviewees shared the same view.

The Muslim interviewees had some doubts regarding the use of some of the aspects of the cleansing ritual. A sheikh said, *"We believe in forgiveness and dignity, but some rituals must remain within Islamic guidance."* These differences suggest that while ritual reintegration is widely practised, its legitimacy depends on theological interpretation. Transformation, therefore, is negotiated rather than universally endorsed.

Reframing Gender Norms and Conflict Narratives

Yet another recurring theme concerned the contribution that FBOs could make to challenging the existing gender hierarchy. Several accounts documented the active promotion of women's participation in mediation committees and peace processes facilitated by churches. This was captured by a Protestant pastor who stated: *"Before, women would prepare the food for the meetings, but would not speak. Now, we ask them to speak on land issues and violence."* While the participants pointed to the religious message of equality before God, the contributions of external collaborations with development initiatives with a religious dimension were also highlighted. However, the change was also acknowledged as gradual and uneven. Women who were part of the advocacy processes pointed to the change while also emphasising the resistance that still had to be overcome. This was captured by a female mobilizer for the churches, who stated:*"The message changes, but the culture does not change with one sermon."* These findings, therefore, provide a complex picture of empowerment that complicates any simple narrative of progress towards this end. On the one hand, religious platforms indeed provide opportunities for participation. On the other hand, there are powerful social norms to navigate.

What is also noteworthy, however, is how some respondents attempted to reframe land disputes and ethnic conflicts as moral rather than ethnic issues. In place of the idea that conflicts result from tribalism, for example, some religious leaders pointed to greed and injustice as causes of conflict. This is a significant reframing of the way conflicts are perceived. While the effectiveness of this reframing in terms of actual behavioural outcomes is hard to assess, there is consensus that it offers a new way of talking about conflicts.

Participatory Cultural Performance and Community Dialogue

Participatory theatre has been identified as a separate yet similar mode of intervention. Interviewees from religious and secular organisations reported theatre shows about land disputes, gender-based violence, and recruitment of armed group members. Unlike sermons or meditation sessions, theatre shows were characterised as informal and emotionally engaging. A Catholic youth organiser stated: *"When people see their own story acted on stage, they laugh first. Then they begin to think."* The focus on laughter, thinking, and communal discussion seems to indicate theatre as a platform for a roundabout approach to difficult issues. Several participants mentioned theatre shows in which the discussion after the show seemed to last longer than the actual show itself, as community members discussed alternative ways to address violence.

Nevertheless, there were variations in impact, with some portraying theatre as highly impactful, especially among the youth. In contrast, others saw it as symbolic, arguing that it was not enough without institutional involvement. A Pentecostal leader stated: *"The play opens the heart, but after that, someone must guide the next step."* These narratives suggest that, although participatory performance can lead to change, transformation can only be achieved through institutions.

Interfaith Collaboration and Institutional Tensions

In field data, there were also observations of interdenominational cooperation, especially in programs addressing land disputes and social cohesion. Participants cited examples of interdenominational cooperation, including initiatives involving Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, and Islamic leaders. Cooperation in these initiatives was cited as necessary in a context "where community fragmentation mirrors religious diversity." Cooperation, however, was accompanied by a degree of interdenominational competition, as illustrated by differences in understanding of religious doctrines that affected the practice of reconciliation initiatives. Practices in aid distribution were cited as a possible source of interdenominational tension. A community member stated: *"Sometimes help goes first to members of the church. That can create quite a resentment."* These statements imply that, in practice, FBOs may claim to unite, but their hierarchical structure may make it difficult to maintain a neutral stance amid power relations within embedded structures.

Perceived Outcomes and Limits of Transformation

While changes in dialogue, hostility in some areas, and willingness to mediate were common themes across interviews and focus groups, most were based on perception rather than actual evaluation. Very few of the organisations had monitoring mechanisms in place to measure the changes in behaviour. Several people noted that the changes were fragile and could be easily undone. Renewed violence in the areas just outside the community was often cited as something that could undo the changes. One Muslim community elder said: *"Peace here is like planting in dry soil. It needs constant watering."* This metaphor captures the conditional and ongoing nature of transformation in Eastern DRC. Religious interventions appear to influence identity recognition, discourse, and communal interaction, yet they operate within a volatile structural environment beyond their full control.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine the interface between ritualism, theological ethics, and cultural participation of Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) and conflict transformation

processes in the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Based on the findings of this research, it is evident that the role of FBOs in the Eastern DRC cannot be fully understood through traditional notions of conflict resolution and service delivery. Instead, there are culturally embedded dimensions of intervention that influence identity recognition, moral dialogue, and power structures within governance systems. From the findings of this research, key challenges emerge for dominant notions of religion and peacebuilding, as well as for conflict transformation theory.

Firstly, the study's findings align with the broader literature that acknowledges religion as a source of moral legitimacy and social cohesion (Appleby, 2000; Haynes, 2009). Ritual reintegration practices were clearly identified as a mechanism for the restoration of social belonging, particularly for those who experienced sexual violence and stigmatised social groups. Such a finding supports the argument that symbolic and spiritual practices can affect actor-level transformation by altering individuals' perceptions within a social group (Miall, 2007). However, the study's findings also indicate that the legitimacy of ritualistic practices varies across religious groups. Intra-religious differences create boundaries to the universality often implied in Ubuntu-inspired reconciliation approaches (Tutu & Battle, 2009). Rather than supporting the idea of a seamless fusion between the cultural and the spiritual, the study's findings indicate that religiously inspired transformation is subject to interpretation.

Second, the study adds to the ongoing discussion on gender transformation in religious peacebuilding efforts. Although the participants reported a progressive increase in the inclusion of women in mediation and community dialogue, it is a limited transformation. This study aligns with other literature on religion's capacity to transform or challenge existing societal norms, as argued by Johnston (2003) and Ludovic (2021). However, it contrasts with other literature on the progressive empowerment of women in religious peacebuilding efforts. Therefore, the study suggests that religious discourse can transform existing norms, although it may not alter structural inequality. Therefore, the study contributes to the development of conflict transformation theory by highlighting the distinction between transformation and reconfiguration.

Third, the use of participatory theatre supports the literature on arts-based peacebuilding, which suggests that theatre can create spaces for empathy and promote dialogue (Cohen, 2005; Slachmuijlder, 2012). The results supported the literature in demonstrating the potential of such initiatives to change interactional norms, as described in Miall's model of rule transformation. However, the results also indicate a temporal dimension to theatre, suggesting that it lacks an independent life force capable of creating and sustaining change without institutional support. This is an important consideration in overly positive evaluations of participatory theatre and its potential to create and sustain peace.

Most importantly, the study sheds new light on the Janus-faced character of structural transformation in hybrid governance environments. In the context of interfaith cooperation, the FBOs' potential to transform the structures of authority and create alternative conflict-resolution platforms has been revealed, as suggested by the literature on hybrid governance environments in fragile states (Deng, 2018; McNamee & Muyangwa, 2021). At the same time, evidence of discriminatory allocation of assistance and denominational rivalry undermines the assumption that FBOs are, by default, inclusive actors. In fact, the religious factor, which can

be both unifying and subtly stratifying, might be seen as existing on a spectrum, with FBOs neither exclusively emancipatory nor exclusively political actors.

The broader theoretical implication of the findings is that, despite being sensitive to relational and structural change, conflict transformation theory under-theorises the role of ritual, moral narrative, and spiritual authority in shaping transformation processes. The findings indicate that cultural transformation in Eastern DRC can be achieved not only through institutional change but also through reclassification, reframing, and moral dialogue. This extends the analytical vocabulary for transformation from the domain of structural governance to the domain of socially embedded meaning systems. The study, however, refrains from a normatively celebratory account of transformation, as the transformation achieved by the participants remains precarious, uneven, and susceptible to a return to violence. Many of the findings are perceptual rather than measurable. The findings indicate that FBOs can influence the quality of social interaction and identity recognition. However, their ability to influence macro-level conflict processes remains constrained by broader political and economic forces.

In terms of scholarly contribution, the current research makes three distinct contributions. Firstly, the current research connects ritual practice/theology of ethics and conflict transformation theory by demonstrating how spiritual practice functions as an operational element of actor and rule transformation. Secondly, the current research synthesises the fragmented literature on religion, PC, and transformation into a single body of work. Finally, the current research provides contextual knowledge from the East DRC, which is normally discussed from a geopolitical/security perspective rather than a micro-cultural perspective. Ultimately, the findings of the current research demonstrate that cultural transformation within PC settings cannot be discussed from a secular or theological perspective alone; rather, there is a negotiated interface between spiritual authority, PC, and structural constraints. From this perspective, a more nuanced understanding of peacebuilding in contexts where religion is not peripheral but constitutive can emerge.

Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to explore the role of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in conflict transformation in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo by examining how cultural practices, theological ethics, and participatory interventions are used in this context. The study shows that conflict transformation is a gradual process in the Eastern DRC, where institutional changes are not necessarily catalysts; rather, it is the gradual recognition of social changes and how these affect the way people interact with one another.

Ritual reintegration practices redefine social identities; gender discourses within religious spaces reframe women's social positions in dialogue processes; the use of participatory theatre challenges how people communicate with one another; and interfaith dialogue redefines authority structures in conflict-affected areas. This is not to imply that the drivers of conflict are being mitigated; it is simply a matter of viewing, discussing, and experiencing conflict differently. Significantly, the findings transcend the risk of valorising or trivialising the role of faith-based engagements. The religious institutions in Eastern DRC function as sites of moral reform and hierarchical integration. While the former allows them a certain degree of influence, the latter restricts the degree and scope of reform. The cultural shift is viewed as being negotiated, ambiguous, and potentially reversible in the face of renewed insecurity. The dual

nature of these sites points to the need to conceive of FBOs as neither liberatory nor instrumental sites of political power, but as sites of hybridity in complex societies.

From a theoretical perspective, the research further develops transformation theory by clarifying and conceptualising the role ritual and moral narrative might play in conflict transformation processes. While transformation theory has primarily emphasised the relational and structural dimensions of conflict transformation, the research findings indicate that symbolic reclassification and theological discourse are constitutive dimensions of processes that redefine social interaction. As a result, the research findings extend the scope of transformation theory beyond the structural dimensions of conflict transformation. The implications of the research findings for peace-building processes are also complex. External actors operating in a fragile context, such as the Eastern DRC, should be aware of the relational access and interpretive authority that religious institutions hold. However, partnership approaches should also account for internal hierarchies, gender, and denominational differences. Supporting faith-based initiatives without critical engagement might reproduce exclusions and reconciliation. However, certain areas could be further explored. Longitudinal research could be beneficial in exploring whether the changes in discourse and rituals observed in this research can be sustained as behavioural changes. A comparative study of the DRC, specifically across regions or between the DRC and other contexts of protracted conflict, could shed more light on the circumstances under which faith-based cultural interventions are most effective. A more integrated approach to incorporating political economy studies with cultural transformation research could shed more light on the interplay between spiritual authority and economic considerations.

The case of Eastern DRC illustrates that cultural transformation is not an accidental or peripheral feature of conflict environments. Instead, it is an essential aspect of cultural life marked by complex interplays among ritual, narrative, and institutional authority. The interplay between these dimensions of cultural life is essential to understanding the cultural dimensions of peacebuilding, including the moral discourses of coexistence.

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