

= Barthélemy Boganda =

Barthélemy Boganda (4 April 1910 ? 29 March 1959) was the leading nationalist politician of what is now the Central African Republic . Boganda was active prior to his country 's independence , during the period when the area , part of French Equatorial Africa , was administered by France under the name of Oubangui @-@ Chari . He served as the first Prime Minister of the Central African Republic autonomous territory .

Boganda was born into a family of subsistence farmers , and was adopted and educated by Roman Catholic Church missionaries . In 1938 , he was ordained as the first Roman Catholic priest from Oubangui @-@ Chari . During World War II , Boganda served in a number of missions and after was persuaded by the Bishop of Bangui to enter politics . In 1946 , he became the first Oubanguian elected to the French National Assembly , where he maintained a political platform against racism and the colonial regime . He then returned to Oubangui @-@ Chari to form a grassroots movement in opposition of French colonialism . The movement led to the 1949 foundation of the Movement for the Social Evolution of Black Africa (MESAN) , which became popular among villagers and the working class . Boganda 's reputation was slightly damaged when he was laicized from the priesthood after marrying Michelle Jourdain , a parliamentary secretary . Nonetheless , he continued to advocate for equal treatment and civil rights for blacks in the territory well into the 1950s .

In 1958 , after the French Fourth Republic began to consider granting independence to most of its African colonies , Boganda met with Prime Minister Charles de Gaulle to discuss terms for the independence of Oubangui @-@ Chari . De Gaulle accepted Boganda 's terms , and on 1 December , Boganda declared the establishment of the Central African Republic . He became the autonomous territory 's first Prime Minister and intended to serve as the first President of the independent CAR . He was killed in a mysterious plane crash on 29 March 1959 , while en route to Bangui . Experts found a trace of explosives in the plane 's wreckage , but revelation of this detail was withheld . Although those responsible for the crash were never identified , people have suspected the French secret service , and even Boganda 's wife , of being involved . Slightly more than one year later , Boganda 's dream was realized , when the Central African Republic attained formal independence from France .

= = Biography = =

= = = Early life = = =

Boganda was born to a family of subsistence farmers in Bobangui , a large M 'Baka village in the Lobaye basin located at the edge of the equatorial forest some 80 kilometres (50 mi) southwest of Bangui . French commercial exploitation of Central Africa had reached an apogee around the time of Boganda 's birth , and although interrupted by World War I , activity resumed in the 1920s . The French consortia used what was essentially a form of slavery ? the *corvée* ? and one of the most notorious was the Compagnie forestière de la Sangha @-@ Oubangui , involved in rubber gathering in the Lobaye district .

In the late 1920s , Boganda 's mother was beaten to death by the company 's officials while collecting rubber in the forest . His uncle , whose son Jean @-@ Bédél Bokassa would later crown himself as the Emperor of the Central African Empire , was beaten to death at the colonial police station as a result of his alleged resistance to work . Boganda 's father was a witch doctor who had engaged in cannibalistic rituals .

During his early years , Boganda was adopted by Catholic missionaries . As a boy he attended the school opened at Mbaiki (the administrative centre for the Lobaye prefecture) by the post 's founder , Lieutenant Mayer . From December 1921 to December 1922 , he spent two hours a day with Monsignor Jean @-@ René Calloch learning how to read , while spending the rest of his time performing manual labour . On December 24 , he was received into the church under the name Barthélemy , in honour of one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ who was believed to have

worked as Christian missionary in Africa . Father Gabriel Herrau sent Boganda to the Catholic School of Betou and then to the school of the Saint Paul Mission at Bangui , where he completed his primary studies under Mgr Calloch , whom he would consider his spiritual father . The missionaries there , encouraged by his intellectual promise and pious demeanour , helped him continue secondary studies at small seminaries in Brazzaville and Kisantu (under Belgian Jesuits) before he moved on to the great seminary at Yaoundé . On 17 March 1938 , fulfilling an ambition he had had since age twelve , he was ordained and became the first Roman Catholic priest native to Oubangui @-@ Chari , as the colony was then called . He ministered at Bangui , Grimari and Bangassou , and in 1939 , his bishop denied his request to join the French Army . He was needed at home , as many Frenchmen involved with the church had been recalled to the metropole to fight in World War II , during which he served in a number of missions .

= = = Beginnings in politics and marriage = = =

After World War II , Boganda was urged by the Bishop of Bangui , Mgr Grandin , to complement his humanitarian and social works through political action . Boganda decided to run for election to the National Assembly of France . On 10 November 1946 , he became the first Oubanguian elected to the assembly after winning almost half of the total votes cast and defeating three other candidates , including the outgoing incumbent , François Joseph Reste , who had formerly served as the Governor @-@ General of French Equatorial Africa . Boganda arrived in Paris attired in his clerical garb and introduced himself to his fellow legislators as the son of a polygamous cannibal . From 1947 on , Boganda conducted a lively campaign against racism and the colonial regime . Soon realizing the limits of his influence in France (he served in parliament until 1958 but gradually detached himself from its activities) , he returned to Oubangui @-@ Chari to organise a grassroots movement of teachers , truck drivers and small producers to oppose French colonialism , although his previous attempt to set up a marketing cooperative among African planters of his own ethnicity had failed . On 28 September 1949 , at Bangui , he founded the Movement for the Social Evolution of Black Africa (MESAN) , a quasi @-@ religious political movement and party that sought to affirm black humanity and quickly came to dominate local politics . His political creed was summed up in the Sango phrase " zo kwe zo " , which translated to " every human being is a person " . Effectively , he was looking for equal treatment and civil rights for blacks within the French Union rather than independence , at least for the time being . He demarginalised large masses of people ? women , youth , workers , poor cultivators ? with the intent of unleashing the creativity of the Oubanguian people by placing them centre stage in the making of their country 's history .

The movement was more popular among villagers than among évolués townsmen , whom Boganda considered servile and to whom he applied the derogatory term " Mboundjou @-@ Voko " (" Black @-@ Whites ") . Additionally , he created the Intergroupe Liberal Oubanguien (ILO) in 1953 , which aimed to elect an equal number of black and white politicians to the assembly , so that a united electoral college could be established . MESAN 's activities angered the French administration and the companies trading in cotton , coffee , diamonds and other commodities . The Bangui chamber of commerce was controlled by these companies , and the men who gathered at this club strongly resented the demise of forced labour and the resultant rise of black nationalism . They hated Boganda in particular , viewing him as a dangerous revolutionary demagogue and a threat to their " free enterprise " , and they resolved to get rid of him . They also set up local RPF branches to counter MESAN , and the presence of African Democratic Rally (RDA) in the other three territories of French Equatorial Africa posed some menace for MESAN , but by 1958 , although other parties were allowed , they had been reduced to tiny groups . On many occasions , General Charles de Gaulle expressed his sympathy for Oubangui @-@ Chari , which had supported de Gaulle 's Free French Forces as early as August 1940 , and refused to support the violent intrigues of the RPF against Boganda and his men . He received Boganda , by then head of the Grand Council of French Equatorial Africa and pushing for independence , in Paris in July 1958 and was in turn received at Brazzaville in August . The discussions there led to the General accepting Boganda 's demands for independence and the endorsement of the French Community in September

throughout French Equatorial Africa .

Boganda 's attachment to his chosen calling weakened when he met and fell in love with a young Frenchwoman , Michelle Jourdain , who was employed as a parliamentary secretary . They were married on 13 June 1950 , for which Boganda was expelled from the priesthood and cut off from the Catholic hierarchy 's support . Boganda and Jourdain would later have two daughters and a son . The affair caused a minor scandal in Paris , but it did little to dent his popularity with his people . In the National Assembly he continued to battle , often in vain , against repressive features of the French administration in Oubangui @-@ Chari . Arbitrary arrest , low wages , compulsory cotton cultivation , and the exclusion of blacks from restaurants and cinemas were all targets of his rhetoric .

= = = Increasing popularity and move toward autonomy = = =

On 29 March 1951 , Boganda was sentenced to two months in prison following his arrest on 10 January for " endangering the peace " after intervening in a local market dispute (the " Bokanga incident " in Lobaye) . His wife was sentenced to 15 days in prison , but neither served their terms . On 17 June , he was re @-@ elected to the National Assembly with 48 % of the vote despite the obstacles placed in his way by the administration and strong opposition by the authorities , colonists , and the missions , with two prominent French candidates seeking to oust him . At this time , he emerged as an extraordinarily popular messianic folk hero and his country 's leading nationalist ; MESAN became the majority party in the Territorial Assembly elections in March 1952 . In this period he divided his time between his coffee plantation , his emancipation work and new political positions . In April 1954 , an incident that would showcase Boganda 's talent and appeal with crowds erupted at Berbérati . A white public works agent , who had recently been reprimanded for his brutality toward Africans , announced that his cook and the cook 's wife had died . A riot broke out and the governor sent in parachutists while armoured vehicles patrolled the streets . Boganda hesitated to appear in a village that was not one of his strongholds , but did so anyway and declared before the rioters that justice would be the same for blacks and whites . Upon hearing Boganda 's words , the crowd became calm and dispersed .

He played a crucial role at the beginning of internal autonomy (1956 ? 1958) , although the relatively conservative Boganda remained sympathetic to French interests and still did not advocate immediate independence . For Boganda , the 1956 election , in which he took 89 % of the vote against another Oubanguian , was an uncontested speaker 's platform with which the colonial administration had come to terms ; the French had realised that opposing him would be dangerous and sought to accommodate him . That year he agreed to European representation on election lists in exchange for the financial support of French business leaders , and on 18 November , was elected as the first mayor of Bangui . On 31 March 1957 , MESAN won all seats in the Territorial Assembly election ; on 18 June , Boganda was elected president of the Grand Council of French Equatorial Africa (a forum he used to broadcast his views on African unity) and in May was appointed vice @-@ president of the Oubangui @-@ Chari Government Council (the French governor was still its president) .

A pragmatist , Boganda spoke before the local assembly on 30 December 1957 in praise of the new Comité de Salut Economique , which envisioned joint administration of the economy between French colonials and MESAN territorial councilors (he called it " the union of capital and Oubanguian labour ") , but lack of French investment and opposition by Oubanguians soon led him to turn away from the idea . With the numerous declarations of independence being made in much of Francophone Africa , Boganda advised that an independent Oubangui @-@ Chari would face major economic problems from the onset . Instead , he advocated the independence of all of French Equatorial Africa and its integration into a United States of Latin Africa comprising the former French , Belgian , and Portuguese colonies of Central Africa ; he intended for Oubangui @-@ Chari to become a federal unit within that structure . However , such a federation proved unrealistic , foundering on the rocks of regional jealousy and personal ambition , and Boganda came to accept a constitution covering only Oubangui @-@ Chari as the Central African Republic . Thus , after 1

December 1958 , when Boganda declared the establishment of the Central African Republic as an autonomous member of the French Community , the name was applied only to the former Oubangui @-@ Chari . On 8 December , the CAR 's first government came into being with Boganda as prime minister ; a French governor remained in the country but was now called high commissioner . The new government began by adopting a law banning nudity and vagabondage , Boganda 's missionary education still showing through . Its main task , however , was to draw up a constitution , which was democratic and modelled to some extent on that of France ; this was approved by the assembly on 16 February 1959 . Formal independence came later , on 13 August 1960 .

= = = Death and aftermath = = =

Boganda was poised to become the first president of the independent CAR when he boarded a plane at Berbérati for a flight to Bangui on 29 March 1959 , just prior to legislative elections . The aircraft exploded in midair over Boukpayanga in the sub @-@ prefecture of Boda (about 160 kilometres (100 mi) west of Bangui) , killing all passengers and crew . No clear cause has ever been ascertained for the mysterious crash and no commission of inquiry was ever formed ; sabotage was widely suspected . The nation was shocked at the death of its revered leader , whose funeral on April 2 at the cathedral of Notre @-@ Dame de Bangui saw a great outpouring of grief from thousands of Oubanguians . The 7 May edition of the Paris weekly L 'Express revealed that experts had found traces of explosive in the wreckage , but the French high commissioner banned the sale of that magazine edition when it appeared in the CAR . Many suspected that expatriate businessmen from the Bangui chamber of commerce , possibly aided by the French secret service , played a role . Michelle Jourdain was also suspected of being involved : by 1959 , relations between Boganda and his wife had deteriorated , and he thought of leaving her and returning to the priesthood . She had a large insurance policy on his life , taken just days before the accident . According to Brian Titley , author of *Dark Age : The Political Odyssey of Emperor Bokassa* , there are good reasons for suspecting her involvement in the plane crash .

Abel Goumba , the vice @-@ premier and finance minister whom Titley describes as " intelligent , honest , and strongly nationalistic " , emerged as Boganda 's logical successor . However , his close confidant and cousin , interior minister David Dacko , more likely to lead a regime deferential to foreign interests , was backed by the high commissioner , Colonel Roger Barberot , with the support of the chamber of commerce and Michelle Jourdain . He thus brushed aside Goumba and by 1962 had shut down the opposition , with MESAN becoming the country 's single party . The events after Boganda 's death are strongly evocative of other French efforts to maintain economic domination by ensuring that compliant leaders came to power in its former colonies . It also robbed the country of a charismatic leader in the Houphouët @-@ Boigny or Senghor mould , whose prestige alone might have sufficed to retain civilian rule , which ended when Bokassa deposed the unpopular Dacko in 1966 .

= = Legacy = =

Boganda is not only considered the hero and father of his nation but also as one of the great leaders of decolonization in Africa ; the historian Georges Chaffard described him after his death as " the most prestigious and the most capable of Equatorial political men , " while political historian Gérard Prunier called him " probably the most gifted and most inventive of French Africa 's decolonization generation of politicians . " Among the places named after him are an avenue in Bangui , one of the city 's largest high schools , a Château Boganda and Barthélemy Boganda Stadium . March 29 , the anniversary of his death , is Boganda Day , a public holiday . Boganda was also the designer of the flag of the Central African Republic , originally intended for the United States of Latin Africa .

Boganda is one in a long line of African political leaders who , in an attempt to develop specifically national political cultures , were presented (or presented themselves) as the great national leader , glorified and sometimes nearly deified . They were hailed as the fathers of their nations and

considered wise in the ways of understanding the best interests of their peoples . Others who became particular objects of hero @-@ worship include Léopold Sédar Senghor , Félix Houphouët @-@ Boigny , Moktar Ould Daddah , Ahmed Sékou Touré , Modibo Keita , Léon M 'ba and Daniel Ouezzin Coulibaly . Boganda did little to discourage wide circulation of tales about his supernatural powers , putative invulnerability and even immortality . Shortly before his death , a large crowd waited on the shore of the Ubangui River to see him cross by walking upon the waters . He did not show up , but apparently a good many people still believed that he could have made the miraculous crossing . More than just a charismatic political leader , he was seen as the " black Christ " , a great religious figure endowed with extraordinary powers . Along with Congo @-@ Brazzaville 's Fulbert Youlou , who remained a priest while president , Boganda was not particularly concerned with his religious mission once he entered politics , but he unabashedly used the enormous popular respect for the Church and the cloth to political advantage . He successfully manipulated religious symbols (clerical garb , crosses , baptism , disciples , acolytes , etc .) for political purposes .

Once he died , his mystique grew : he was a national martyr , and miracles were regularly attributed to him . The Boganda myth continues to exercise a strong hold on many people in the CAR , and it has frequently been used by his successors in their appeals for national unity . Those who were related to him even tenuously , such as Bokassa (who was from the same village and minority ethnic group , was the son of his mother 's uncle , justified his coup using Boganda 's name and created a cult of Boganda as founder of the party and state) , or Dacko (who posed as the ideological successor of Boganda by championing for " national reconciliation " during the 1981 election) were able to capture some of his aura and use it to their advantage .