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## **The Folklore and the Fury: The Central African Republic's 'Unholy War'**

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It has been reiterated time and again that the roots of the current civil war in the Central African Republic (CAR) stem exclusively from a political and economic origin. Yet, as you read these lines, amulet-toting animist rebels, Christians, and Muslims are targeting and killing each other by the thousands, so one has to wonder how and why the topic of religion is purportedly irrelevant to this crisis.

Though CAR's current crisis was dubbed an 'unholy war' to further propagate the idea that religion is a latent aspect rather than the cause, the focus on proving why the conflict was not founded on a clash of faiths has left the details of the actual religious contentions by the wayside. Though there is sufficient evidence to prove that the conflict did not stem from theological differences, the current religious discourse in the region is characterized by fury, deeply-held group identity, and tribalist folklore.

It is estimated that as of January 2015, there have been over 6,000 casualties of the CAR's civil war, and roughly 25% of the population has been forced to leave their homes. Murder, rape, and other war crimes have been committed by two armed parties: the predominately Muslim Séléka, a rebel militia faction, and the Christian and animist Anti-balaka, the opposing rebel coalition. Experts analyzing the conflict are now cautiously using the word "genocide," predicting that violence will continue to escalate over the coming months and possibly years.

### **Background**

The Central African Republic is a landlocked country bordered by Chad and Sudan to the north, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo to the south, South Sudan to the east, and Cameroon to the west. The CAR's population is divided by followers of

Abrahamic (Christian and Muslim) and tribal (namely that of animism) religions, which at first glance gave the impression to the outside world that a Christian-Muslim conflict was brewing. The northern region of the CAR is predominately Muslim, and the south, Christian. Tom Jackson explains in his article “Central African Republic: What Turns a Conflict 'Religious'?”, “The CAR is a country in which 4.3 million people – half of which are Christian, one-third worshippers of traditional African religions, and 14 per cent Muslim – have lived together in comparative religious harmony for the 54 years of the CAR's independence.”<sup>1</sup> Though the CAR has had a turbulent political history since its inception in 1960 after gaining independence from France, the current conflict began in December 2012, when the Séléka initiated a rebellion against then-president François Bozizé (a Christian) and the CAR government forces.

### **The Players: Séléka and the Anti-balaka**

Séléka, meaning “union” or “alliance” in the Sango language, is a CAR Islamic rebel coalition. Formed in 2012, Séléka is estimated to be 80% Muslim and 20% Christian.<sup>2</sup> The group was born out of frustration with the Bozizé administration and a purported “lack of progress” in the nation since the 2004-2007 peace agreement that ended the Central African Republic Bush War, a civil war between Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) rebels and government forces that initiated after Bozizé took office in 2003. Encompassing several factions, Séléka is comprised of two leading groups: the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) and the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP). Other factions have pledged their loyalty to Séléka, including the Patriotic Convention for Saving the Country, the Democratic Front of the Central African People, and the Chadian group Popular Front for Recovery (FPR).

In March 2013, Bozizé fled the country after the Séléka seized the capital, Bangui, and overthrew the government. Rebel leader Michel Djotodia assumed the presidency (as the first Muslim president) until his resignation in January 2014. Catherine Samba-Panza is the interim president of the CAR to date, and the conflict has continued to ensue under her leadership.

In opposition to the Séléka is the Anti-balaka party, a predominately Christian militia. “Anti-balaka” is the Sango word for “anti-sword” or “anti-machete.” The group is comprised of numerous rebel factions that joined forces to form a collective effort against the Séléka, all operating under the same name. In fact, “Anti-balaka” has become a generic term for anyone resisting Séléka forces.<sup>3</sup> Anti-balaka members practicing animism are unapologetically superstitious. The amulets they wear around their necks – which, in this case, are leather or cloth pouches filled with herbs and small papers – are a testament to their belief in the power of

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Jackson, “Central African Republic: What Turns a Conflict 'Religious'?”, Tony Blair Faith Foundation, [www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/central-african-republic-what-turns-conflict-religious](http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/central-african-republic-what-turns-conflict-religious), (10 Nov 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Reese, “Three wise men from Africa promote reconciliation through interreligious dialogue,” National Catholic Reporter, [www.ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/three-wise-men-africa-promote-reconciliation-through-interreligious-dialogue](http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/three-wise-men-africa-promote-reconciliation-through-interreligious-dialogue), (12 Dec 2014).

<sup>3</sup> “Briefing: Who are the anti-balaka of CAR?”, IRIN, [www.irinnews.org/report/99634/briefing-who-are-the-anti-balaka-of-car](http://www.irinnews.org/report/99634/briefing-who-are-the-anti-balaka-of-car), (12 Feb 2014).

magic.<sup>4</sup> Animism is a traditional African tribal worldview that animals, plants and inanimate objects have a soul or a spiritual essence. The concept of animism predates organized religion and is prevalent throughout the African continent. For indigenous tribal peoples, it is better described as part of a larger belief system rather than an organized religion in and of itself.

The Anti-balaka “swear an oath of secrecy and carry ‘gris-gris’ (amulets) they believe make them immune to bullets and protect them from harm,” according to *The New York Times* writer Graeme Wood, who experienced the conflict first-hand while in the CAR. Even president Samba-Panza stated that “witchcraft is real,” confirming the prevalence and importance of witchcraft and tribal religions in the nation. Samba-Panza, who was a lawyer before her current post as president, went on to explain that sorcery is against the law. In fact, the CAR’s legal system is overrun with charges of “practice of charlatanism and sorcery” (referred to as P.C.S.), which, allegedly, is the most commonly prosecuted crime in the country. The importance of magic is apparently so integral to the group’s identity that “sorcery shapes the fighting ethic of the Christian militias, known as the ‘Anti-balaka’.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Role of Religion**

Political injustice is the primary factor that fueled the raging fire of the civil war, but the justice that the Séléka and Anti-balaka were both fighting for has become a lost cause due to extreme religious tensions and discriminatory violence. The Archbishop Nzapalainga of Bangui stated, "In our country, Christians and Muslims have always lived together peacefully. The people are not fighting for religious reasons. They're not saying, 'We're fighting for the Bible,' 'We're fighting for the Quran,' or because of our Muslim clothing or Christian clothing. They're fighting because of wealth, riches. They're fighting for gold, for diamonds, and because they want to have power."<sup>6</sup>

For a conflict that is not at all religious in its formation, the violence and tension between Christians and Muslims has nonetheless escalated significantly since 2013. Ongoing reports of rape, murder, arson and other atrocities committed against innocent civilians caused an exodus of people – most of them Muslims – to flee the region. There is unfathomable confusion in attempting to determine whether Christians or Muslims are more at risk, though Lotte Hoex, a researcher at the International Peace Information Service (IPIS) in Belgium stated, “There seemed to be from the start a slight discrimination in terms of violence towards Christian people.” She commented further, “Though the initial violence was not religiously motivated, during their march from the northeast to the capital, the Séléka certainly killed more Christians

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<sup>4</sup> Graeme Wood, “Sorcery at War,” *The New York Times*, [www.nytimes.com/2014/05/19/opinion/sorcery-at-war.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/19/opinion/sorcery-at-war.html) (18 May 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Graeme Wood, “Sorcery at War,” *The New York Times*, [www.nytimes.com/2014/05/19/opinion/sorcery-at-war.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/19/opinion/sorcery-at-war.html) (18 May 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Reese, “Three wise men from Africa promote reconciliation through interreligious dialogue,” NCR Online, [www.ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/three-wise-men-africa-promote-reconciliation-through-interreligious-dialogue](http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/three-wise-men-africa-promote-reconciliation-through-interreligious-dialogue), (12 Dec 2014).

than they did Muslims.”<sup>7</sup> While reports have been mixed since the beginning of the conflict, it was stated that as of early February 2015, the Muslim population of the CAR has almost disappeared entirely due to the extreme and unbearable violence, with some describing the mass departure as an “ethnic cleansing.” Of late, Muslim civilians with no association to the rebels have been the primary target. Concerns of genocide have intensified over time as the Anti-balaka militias are “increasingly organized and use language that suggests their intent is to eliminate Muslim residents from the CAR,” according to Human Rights Watch. As of October 2014, more than 85% of CAR’s Muslim population fled the country.<sup>8</sup>

### **Regional and Psychological Factors**

This war is a byproduct of opposing political ideologies and regional identity clashes. Much of what appears to be bigotry is actually locality. “Most Séléka members were Muslim, chiefly because Islam is the more prevalent religion in the marginalized northern areas where rebel groups sprang up.”<sup>9</sup> Hypothetically, if populations in the north and south were all followers of the same faith, the violence pertaining to the CAR’s political woes would likely have escalated and worsened over time in a similar fashion. Violence between Christians and Muslims resulted from uncurbed suspicions and distrust, which led party members to assume that followers of Christian or Muslim faiths were part of the problem when in reality they had little to no connection to the Séléka or anti-balaka.

Unsurprisingly, there is a psychological element to religious identity when examining large, emphatic, homogenous groups. Psychologist Steven Neuberg and his research team at the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict at Arizona State University found that the concept of “religious infusion,” which is defined as the “extent to which religious rituals and discourse permeate the everyday activities of groups and their members,” can “exacerbate intergroup conflict.” This suggests that the Séléka and anti-balaka may have strengthened their religious identity and intolerance toward each other over time simply because the majority of their respective group members were of the same faith.

It is apparent that this conflict has lost its initial purpose and evolved into a hateful, violent, and counter-productive civil war. Fury became violence and group identity became extremism; a clear focus on justice for the CAR, instead of adhering to radical separatist ideologies, would be the nation’s saving grace.

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Jackson, “Central African Republic: What Turns a Conflict 'Religious'?", Tony Blair Faith Foundation, [www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/central-african-republic-what-turns-conflict-religious](http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/central-african-republic-what-turns-conflict-religious), (10 Nov 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Amanda Taub, “A brief guide to one of the world’s least-understood crises: the Central African Republic,” <http://www.vox.com/2014/10/29/7078285/car-human-rights-explainer>, (29 Oct 2014).

<sup>9</sup> “Briefing: Who are the anti-balaka of CAR?”, IRIN, [www.irinnews.org/report/99634/briefing-who-are-the-anti-balaka-of-car](http://www.irinnews.org/report/99634/briefing-who-are-the-anti-balaka-of-car), (12 Feb 2014).

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