



UNISCI Discussion Papers

NEW PERSPECTIVES OF THE CONFLICT AT THE GREAT LAKES REGION: THE DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL FACTORS

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1. Introduction

Whenever we try to organize a synthetic but comprehensive bibliography regarding the conflict at the Great Lakes region in Africa, we often find ourselves limited to a pretty spread type of research documents about the Democratic Republic of the Congo (RDC), which collect a huge amount of historical data and often are mistaken in their analysis, because of its assumption of certain commonplaces (confrontation of two clearly different and separate ethnic groups, economic interests monopolized by multinational companies – not put in relation with any criminal activity, etc.).

Nevertheless, the first explosion of violence in Zaire (Kabila changed its name to RDC in 1997, after becoming President of the country) was partly caused by a massive inflow in 1994 of refugees from the fighting in Rwanda and Burundi. From that moment on, the country has gone through several partial (regarding localization and intensity) conflicts, in which other countries -some of them quite distant- have been involved. Moreover, in the territory of the RDC have taken place and still nowadays are taking place violent confrontations belonging to other States and that are aggravating the Congolese problems. That is why this conflict of conflicts has been named “The first African World War”².

In May 1997, the government of former President Mobutu Sese Seko was overthrown by a rebellion led by Laurent Kabila, who was openly supported by Rwanda and Uganda. A few months later, his regime would be challenged by those who first helped him to win the civil war (Rwanda and Uganda back rebellion in August 1998). Troops from Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia, Chad, and Sudan intervened to support the Kinshasa regime. Until a cease-fire was signed on 10 July 1999 by the DROC, Zimbabwe, Angola, Uganda, Namibia, Rwanda, and Congolese armed rebel groups, even though sporadic fighting continued.

¹ Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores. Estos artículos no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors. These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI.

² Reyntjens, Filip (1999): *La guerre des Grands Lacs. Alliances mouvantes et conflits extraterritoriaux en Afrique Centrale*. Paris, L'Harmattan.



At a national level, in 1996 the transition led by Mobutu, the social conflicts in Kivu, the collapse of the State, the insurrection of the Banyamulenge who claimed the rights of citizenship, the fury of the FAZ and the dissatisfaction of the population, etc. The Mobutu's attempt to exploit the massive presence of Hutu refugees coming from Rwanda looking for the international attention in order to go out from the isolation to which he was confined after the massacre of students in Lumumbashi. Those are the reasons that explain the aggression which tried to eliminate the threat of the rebels from Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and Angola, who used the territory from the DRC as base for their armed incursion in their own countries. This political and military "joint venture" has become an authentic hunting of the Congolese treasure.

In order to complete this overview of the conflict, we will stop by the date of 16 January 2001, when Kabila was assassinated and his son Joseph Kabila was named head of State. In October 2002, the new President negotiated the withdraw of occupying Rwandan forces from eastern Congo. Two months later, the Pretoria Accord was signed by all remaining warring parties to set up a government of national unity. A transitional government was set up in July 2003 and, since then, Joseph Kabila remains as president and is joined by four vice presidents from the former government, former rebel camps, and the political opposition³.

Even if too simplified, this is the line of historical facts we must keep in our minds before going forward and backward the multiple factors linked to the probable persistence of the conflict at the Great Lakes region.

Accepting the complexity of the situation that we have briefly presented above, the main objectives of this article are: first of all, pointing some generally unknown perspectives from the social and political realities involved in the development of the conflict. Secondly, making some of the right questions that every researcher should make him/herself while approaching for the first time the crisis at the Great Lakes region. Which means that we are designing kind of a researchers' guide for the not-prejudiced analysis of the African conflicts.

2. Breaking commonplaces : Guide for researchers in African conflicts

2.1. David facing Goliath, or the communication strategy of Rwanda's President to get the Great Lakes Region leadership

By approaching this topic, we are trying to break several commonplaces related to ethnicity and the characteristics of regional hegemony in Africa, while touching issues as the way international intervention is closely linked to African States homeland policy or the role that the media can play in a situation of conflict.

A) Ethnicity 'A la carte'

The ethnicity is definitely one of the factors intimately linked to the reproduction of this conflict in time at different levels (local, as in Kivu; regional, referred to the Tutsi 'imperial' ambitions, etc.). Even though we must treat this issue with skepticism regarding the

³ First approach to the contextual data with information from the *CIA World Factbook*., in <http://www.cia.gov/publications/factbook>.



commonplaces we are used to find in the media, for example. At the Great Lakes region there are multiple identities, even captured inside the same ethnic group. And we cannot forget either the cultural and political dimension of the ethnicity to mobilize. From this perspective, we could ask ourselves how could it be possible making a clear distinction in between the Tutsi and the rest of the population, while undertaking the genocide. And, of course, we could also understand the difficulties of distinguishing the refugees from the killers that were running away from Rwanda through the humanitarian corridor led by the 'Operation Turquoise'.

Coming back to the times of the Belgian colony, as a consequence of this division of the population, the majority Hutu was excluded from the political decision making process and the control of the economic resources. From that period on, most of the conflicts that ended at the civil war (1990-1994) and the genocide (of the Tutsi and moderate Hutu) have been related to the social and political disadvantage of the Hutu.

To make a synthetic review of the historical facts:

In 1957, the 'Manifest of Bahutu', which revealed the unrest of the Hutu population, was published. In 1 July 1962, Rwanda obtained the independence from the metropolis and his first President, Grégoire Kayibanda, who was Hutu, caused frustration in the Tutsi community. In 1963, there is a civil war which causes the run away of thousands of refugees beyond the Rwandese borders. Even though Kayibanda holds the Presidency. In 1973, as a reaction to the threat of a new civil war, Juvenal Habyarimana gives a *coup d'Etat*, but the situation does not change. In 1986, Yoweri Museveni becomes the President of Uganda and one year later the Tutsi refugees in this country organize the Rwandese Patriotic Front, in order to conquer the power in Rwanda. In 1993, both sides sign the Arusha Agreements. But they fail and after the killing of the formers Presidents from Rwanda, Juvenal Habyarimana, and Burundi, Cyprien Ntaryamira, in 1994, a new civil war explodes and the genocide takes place. The war finishes only three months later, with the rise to power of Paul Kagame and the Rwandese Patriotic Front. By that time, between 1.2 and 1.6 millions of Rwandese refugees have arrived to the DRC, creating new instabilities that nor the Government from Kinshasa neither the international community knew how to manage.

The genocide in Rwanda unleashed a conflict at the heart of Africa that has directly or indirectly affected at least one third of the continent. Regarding the history of the DRC, it was predictable that the flows of refugees caused by the Rwandese civil war was going to exacerbate the social stress of the host country. One of the commonplaces we consume from the media is that the concept of 'authenticity' created at 70s by President Mobutu was mean to exclude the Rwandese immigrants living in the Kivu region from the Congolese nation. Nevertheless, the 'authenticity' was everything but a policy to exclude the immigrants. The appeal to the 'authenticity' wanted to free the Congolese from all foreign alienation, by giving a forgotten value to the Congolese and African traditions inside the "People's Movement for the Revolution".

The manipulation of the ethnicity beginning 1993 was the authentic aggression, increasing the circle of excluded to let the 'Banyarwanda' outside the economic and political game⁴. The

⁴ First we named 'Banyarwanda' (Congolese of 'doubtful' nationality) to those Rwandese living at the Kivu region. This community had several groups inside: the autochthonous (arrived before the colony), the immigrants arrived during the colony, the clandestine immigrants arrived before and after 1960, the Hutu and the Tutsi refugees. In the 90s, the Banyarwanda Hutu and Tutsi fought against one another and with the rest of the population in Kivu, who considered them as a danger for the survival of their traditions, their land properties, etc.



spread knowledge about what happened during the last months of 1993 is that all the efforts of the Government to stop the violence in East Zaire would fail because of the new and enormous flows of refugees running away from Rwanda's civil war. In fact, the key to this failure to avoid the violence was the corruption of the civil and military authorities. The problem was the territorial claim of the "autochthonous" population in a region with an important demographic density, where the lands were monopolized (more or less legally) by the Rwandese owners thanks to the policies from the 70s and the corruption of the authorities.

It has been said that this new war (the one known as the 'First African World War') takes roots at the Tutsi ambitions of ethnic dominance in the region, but we are going to explore next a less pretentious possibility, by paying attention to this demographic factor.

B) The value of the demographic factor at the Great Lakes region

700.000 Rwandese refugees, most of them Hutu, arrived to the DRC between the ending of 1993 and the beginning of 1994. To have an idea of what this flow can mean regarding the native population of East Congo, we can pay attention to the case of the North Kivu, where during the first 90s there were 425.000 Banyarwanda (40% of the population). After the arrival of these last refugees, the Rwandese and the Banyarwanda become the major community in the area. Another important detail to note is the fact that now the alliance between Banyarwanda Hutu and Tutsi is broken.

The information about the unexpected growth of the population in the East Congo, where historically -as a border land- there have been social confrontations, is useful for understanding the reinstatement of the violence in the region, but not enough to explain the structural character of the ethnic confrontation. In fact, it does not give either any key to the comprehension of the spreading of the conflict beyond the borders from Rwanda and the DRC. Concerning this issue, Professor Sabakinu offers some interesting demographic data:

STATE	AREA	POP/1996	DENSITY (km ²)/1996	POP/2025	DENSITY/2025
Burundi	27,834	6.4 mill.	230	10.1 mill.	363
Rwanda	26,338	6 mill.	292	11.7 mill.	444
DRC	2,345,409	44 mill.	19	105 mill.	44

Most of all, the autochthonous justified themselves by accusing the Banyarwanda, mostly the Hutu, of trying to conquer the territory that was supposed to belong to the 'Ancient Rwanda'.



According to her analysis, the Congolese depopulation inherited from the colonial exploitation has made of the DRC an outlet for the neighbor countries' problems of overpopulation⁵. That is one of the reasons why, Sabakinu says, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi (this last one, even if less enthusiastic) helped the rebellion of Kabila against President of Zaire Mobutu for demographic purposes linked to homeland political instability.

In 1995, Mobutu dismantles the camps of refugees in Kivu, because inside there are supposed to be some rebel groups trying to attempt against his regime. This causes new instabilities also in the neighbor countries, that are not ready to receive back such a quantity of refugees⁶. In 1997, Kabila becomes the new President of the DRC, supported by a regional alliance. Afterwards he would break these regional ties because of his economic and political ambitions over the Great Lakes region, by establishing a certain continuity of the Mobutu's policies.

C) Unexpected consequences of the genocide: Rwanda's control of information and a new kind of hegemony

In an exercise consisting of establishing a distance between the researcher and the object of analysis, we are finishing this first part of our guide, by trying to look at the Genocide in Rwanda 1994 from a different perspective. Which means leaving behind the number of killed people or the description of the massacre. In fact, we are going to pay attention to the sharing of power at the Great Lakes region after the genocide which entailed the almost unconditional support coming from the international community to the President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame. This way, a little and impoverished country is about to become the leader State in this wealthy region coveted for so many.

Related to this new situation post-genocide, Reyntjens has known to make the right questions: "Why the international community, who certainly knows to which point Rwanda has been implicated in the destabilization of its neighbor (DRC), leaves this State acts freely? Why the Congolese protests have never been heard?"

It has been said that after the trauma of the genocide, every action against the Kigali regime is perceived as a support to those who committed the slaughter. But we cannot forget another reason that also explains this *laisser faire* of the international community: the lack of information reaching the developed world about the manipulations of the Kagame regime⁷. In fact, the international media have become the main object of manipulation of the Rwanda's Government in order to construct the identity of eternal victim, which allows Kagame to interfere with impunity beyond the State borders. And these interventions and manipulations are at the same time linked to his permanence in power, as pointed Banegas and Jwesiewicki:

There is no doubt that Kagame has the key to a negotiate solution of the conflict, but the withdrawal of its army from the DRC could cost him a lot. More than for Uganda or for

⁵ Sabakinu, Kivilu: "Afrique centrale francophone : dynamiques politiques des identités des représentations", *Revue Canadienne des Etudes Africaines*, Vol. 3, Numéros 2 et 3 (1999).

⁶ "La question se pose toutefois de savoir si les autorités rwandaises désirent réellement le retour des réfugiés [...] Selon Honoré N'Gabanda, Kagame 'ne voulait pas des Hutu au Rwanda'". Reyntjens, *op. cit.*

⁷ "In Bagdad or Belgrade the CNN broadcasts alive, in central Africa it is confined to the periphery of the conflict". *Ibid.* and Gowing, N. (1998): *New challenges and problems for information management in complex emergencies. Ominous lessons from the Great Lakes and Easter Zaire in late 1996 and early 1997*. London.



Zimbabwe (this last one allied to Kinshasa), the control of power in Rwanda depends on the continuity of the occupation in Congo.⁸

Following a similar reasoning, Kabunda Badi reminds also that it is indispensable to democratize the DRC, together with the search of a solution to the demographic problems and of the political balance in Rwanda and Burundi⁹. No isolated solutions will be able to bring the peace to the region, which also implies the coordination between the lowest level of the conflict, the populations involved, most of all at the border lines; and the highest one, the international peace keeping forces, as the MONUC.

2.2. Congolese leaders and the MONUC vs. Popular perception of the international community in Congo and the Operation Artemis

The solutions depend widely on the implication of the Congolese populations. It would be necessary to take into account their perceptions of the actors involved in the resolution of the conflict. It indeed determines their degree of cooperation and / or resistance. To the appeal of elites or on their own initiative, the populations opposed with more or less of success both to the internal subjection and to the foreign dominion. In June, 2004, the inhabitants of Congolese big cities struck the opinions by scenes of violence against the mission of the United Nations in Congo (MONUC), the Congolese leaders and political parties. They invested the crisis arisen from the occupation of Bukavu by Mutebusi and Nkunda. They made of the liberation of Bukavu their fight, taking initiatives, taking to party the staff of the MONUC and political parties, plundering their premises and their possessions, doubling heat and courage in front of MONUC and national political leaders surprised by the dimension and the suddenness of the mobilizations. They so estimate to have obtained in a short time the liberation of Bukavu.

The MONUC has to make with the popular resistance today in the fulfillment of its peace mission. It multiplies initiatives of charm with the populations to improve its image and legitimize. In this purpose, it would have even contributed to the emergence of some politico-military leaders. It leads social actions, notably by the financing of the micro projects.

The “popular resistance” plays a crucial role in the dynamics of the Congolese crisis. It is not only an instrument of the Congolese leaders in their fight for the control of the State. It would tend to emancipate, even to turn around against them, notably because of its atomisation, of its multiplicity and of its recovery by the pretenders to the power. It would also be a victim of its “success”, where from it would be very sought by all the political actors and claimed by populations confronted with the reality of the aggression / occupation. It would finally have become a sort of red lantern warning the political actors in Congo of the limits exceeded or not to exceed. The popular representations on MONUC and international society contribute to the maintenance of the myth of the necessary “popular resistance”.

And nevertheless, the display of the soldiers of the peace was triumphantly and unanimously greeted by the Congolese populations through all the country. The UN soldiers were welcomed like a hero by the peace everywhere. They represented the end of the

⁸ Banegas, Richard and Jwesiewicki, Bogumil : "Vivre dans la guerre. Imaginaires et pratiques populaires de la violence en RDC", *Politique Africaine*, n° 84 (décembre 2001).

⁹ Kabunda Badi, Mbuyi (1999): *El nuevo conflicto del Congo. Dimensión, internacionalización y claves*. Colección Casa de África. Madrid, Sial.



hostilities, the departure of the foreign troops, the restoring of the peace and many other things still. They were not doubtless aware of immense popular hopes bearers of which they were. In the course of time and of its (in)action, this important popular capital is going to be affected seriously. The daily contact of the populations allowed these last ones to discover their heroes under another face, more human, with all their defects and weaknesses. The heroes of the peace were demystified on the ground of the action, but also by the wear of time. The enthusiasm, the euphoria, the respect, the eulogies etc. gave up rather quickly the place to the disappointment, to the indifference, even to the antipathy and to the hostility. The image of the blue beret considerably tarnished. How took place this change?

Several factors would be on the base of this process. The evolution of the political situation (the departure of the foreign troops, the territorial reunification of the country, the pursuit of the Rwandan raids and the confrontations in Ituri, the occupation of Bukavu by Mutebusi and Nkunda, the war of Kanyabayonga, among others) would have contributed to the degradation of the image of MONUC. The MONUC seems powerless to protect the civil populations and gets numerous failures. Certain members of the MONUC behave as in colony, in defiance of the local people and of their laws and customs. MONUC has to face not only a little disproportionate popular expectations, but also poisoning and disinformation of certain local leaders. MONUC practically forced to lead operations of seduction in the direction of the local populations. These last ones consider that the foreigners want it to them for their fabulous resources.

The MONUC showed itself unfit of protecting the populations repeatedly in the east of Congo since its display in 2000. In Kisangani, it nearly missed all the occasions to rescue the populations: on one hand, during the wars having set at least twice the Ugandan soldiers to those from Rwanda for the control of this strategic town, and on the other hand, during the "mutiny" of May 14th, 2002 when a commando group come from Goma scattered the death under the command of Nkunda and Amisi. In Bukavu, in spite of its 800 blue helmets, it did not prevent Mutebusi and Nkunda from investing the city and from appointing uncountable exactions from 2 till 9 June 2004. Even in Ituri where it intervenes under the chapter 7 of the Charter of the United Nations, it is not rather brilliant in operational terms. It had even needed protection, notably in Ituri in 2003. Under ultimatum of the militia group "Union des Patriotes Congolais" (UPC) requiring the departure of all the UN officials of the Ituri, MONUC has been able to escape the humiliation of the retreat only thanks to the multinational intervention Artémis come to its rescue at the request of the General Secretary of United Nations. It was the first European military intervention led outside Europe. France was the "nation cadre", notably to avoid joining the Americans in Iraq.

Number of Congolese does not understand that MONUC is often powerless in spite of its means and its mandate. A soldier of the FARDC asserts that if the FARDC had the means of MONUC, they would come at the end of the militiamen in Ituri rather quickly and would also restore the peace in Kivu. The reasoning is bearable when we consider, for example, the results obtained in Ituri by the multinational force led by France. In the space of some weeks, the multinational force managed to stabilize Bunia and its neighborhood by fast and muscular interventions and communication with the populations. This success was such as many people kept an excellent recollection of the operation Artémis. Concerning its means, MONUC has a budget of \$709 123 200US for the period going from July 1st, 2004 till June 30th, 2005 and 16369 people (among which 15447 soldiers, 730 observers, 192 policemen on March 14th, 2005), 972 international employees, 490 volunteers as well as 1354 national employees. What



can seem important in comparison with the budget of the DRC exercise 2005 which amounts to approximately 1.832.808.510 US \$, is 2.5 times only that of MONUC.

Politicians, elites and Congolese media often consolidate the opinion in the perceptions of the impotence, even the incompetence of MONUC. On this subject, they miss no occasion to slander the failure of MONUC in protecting people: the MONUC is so obliged to explain. An internal report of the United Nations following the occupation of Bukavu by Nkunda and Mutebusi in June, 2004 ends in the failure of MONUC to protect the populations at the critical moment. Published by Financial Times of March 23rd, 2005, this very critical report was widely diffused by certain Congolese media. The incapacity of MONUC to protect the civil populations is often interpreted as the result of its alliance or its complicity with the enemies of Congo. Several Congolese are convinced that there is a vast international plot against their country. Even well educated persons share this conviction and propagate it. Rwanda and Uganda, regional allies of Washington with which they signed agreements of military cooperation, would benefit from western helps to destabilize Congo. The USA would be the conductor of this plot. They are also renowned for imposing their sights on United Nations, being the world superpower. As they are besides one of the main financiers of the MONUC whose leader is an American, it is only strengthening the assumption of complicity of MONUC. Any slightest fact or speech of MONUC can be interpreted as a proof of its implication in the war against Congo.

There is not only its impotence and its slowness to be able to tarnish the image of MONUC. Different practices of certain members of its staff also contribute to it. Many people do not make distinction between the individual behavior and the institutional functioning. They often make the mixture. Certain employees, international or national, would make traffics of the titles of journeys in the planes of MONUC, exchanging them to the public. Others would practice the traffic of the natural and cultural resources of the country by taking advantage of their immunity. Others else would abuse their attendants whom they would tyrannize, sometimes there by racist acts / comment. Graver still, members of the mission of the UN are involved in sexual abuses, including against children. All the Congolese leaders and their allies as well as number of Congolese agree on a point: to slander MONUC for impotence, incompetence, sexual abuses, ineffectiveness etc. MONUC feels practically obliged to work to improve its image: different social and humanitarian actions are so initiated. What relieves the Congolese leaders- who rub hands- and targeted populations. Conceived originally to finance humanitarian micro-projects in favor of the local populations, the Quick Impact Projects (QUIPs) became a real instrument of political marketing of MONUC. They aim henceforth at improving the image of the mission with the Congolese.

Nevertheless, even the Congolese leaders having taken a wide advantage of the failures of the MONUC by stigmatizing them have to learn also to deal with the emergent popular leaders. The integration of the leaders of the popular resistance is not enough to maintain them in ranks. Some of them indeed seem to have used their instrumentalization in best of their interests in the point to become emancipated, at least partially. Emancipation in the point to be imperative on the political scene and to become the forces with which to count henceforth. Some of their actions would threaten even the fragile current peace process. The ambiguity of certain Congolese leaders playing the nationalist fiber (xenophobe?) and of the manipulation

10 The annual budget of the RDC was of \$1.026.563.829us in 2004 or 1,4 times that of MONUC.

11 Mobatelli, Angelo: "Insecurity east of Rdc: MONUC accused of failure (defeat) in the protection of the civil population", *The Potential*, Congolese Newspaper appearing in Kinshasa, 25 March 2005.



often consolidate the popular resistance. This last one would so be hijacked, subverted in the point to turn around against the established order.

The strategy of the integration of the elements of the subordinate categories and the potential contre-elites shows so its limits. The political leaders seem taken in their own trap. Seeing all these requests of the politicians, "Resistance fighters" make rise the bids to re-negotiate in the full price their statutes and their return in ranks. They do not want to content any more with playing supporting roles. They are proud and boast of their exploits. They disdain the Congolese rebels presented as traitors. They require to be recognized as separate political actors, the recognition by the homeland. Certain militiamen *maï maï*, for example, do not hide their contempt of the Congolese armed forces. They blame them for having failed in the defense of the country. They congratulate with having fought the enemy whom they would have worn out the forces. Such guests' surprised raid brings its lot of problems to the fragile current peace process. Some people estimate not to have been rewarded in their just value: such is the case of the leader *maï maï* Bukuyu operating since the beginning of 2005 on the road Kisangani-Lubutu, forbidding the traffic on this road. Bukuyu asserts having been a victim of a grave injustice during the allocation of the military ranks.

Therefore, it is important to note that since the 90s, the popular resistance does not stop developing in DRC, in particular in the east of the country, the zone renowned rebellious to the central power. Its development has a considerable incidence on the normalization of the national political and economic life. It tends to become emancipated from political leaders who manipulate it and to autonomize. It arranges its own agenda and pursues its own political and economic objectives. That is why its alliances seem extremely fluctuating. Its atomization constitutes a trump card this way. Its geographic expansion comes along with an extension of the base of recruitment. It is rural and peasant, urban and intellectual today. We also assist at a redefining of the objectives and the strategies of these groups of popular resistance. These objectives and strategies vary not only in the time and the space, but also and especially according to the actors and to their interests. Even in the regions of tradition of resistance to the central power, new strategies develop and objectives which are not defined still clearly or definable and which have to see nothing more with those initially implemented or declared are pursued. Certain members of the popular resistance so assert fighting against the aggression / occupation to protect the territorial integrity whereas the others claim working to secure civil populations or to fight the internal oppression. However, both have to fight in the same way for the survival (individual or collective, economic or political), what does not go without rising of problem in their relations with their social and human environment. The militiamen so commit numerous exactions and some tend even to criminalize.