

Narrating the Banyamulenge's Plight in DR Congo: False Equivalences, False Dichotomies, and Underreported Violence

**A presentation further addressing
the complexities of conflict in eastern
DR Congo**

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*Photo: Banyamulenge men at a herder's funeral.
(ALEXIS HUGUET/AFP via Getty Images)*



Main thesis of presentation

- Coalition of ethnic-based Mai-Mai militias fighting armed groups representing the Banyamulenge community.
- Divergence of interpretations > “intercommunal conflict”, “ethnic cleansing” or genocide.
- Banyamulenge have been ‘stuck in a cycle of persecution and insurgency’ (Stearns et al., 2013)
- Analysis and arguments in scholarly literature and official reports on the conflict reinforce two issues:
 1. False equivalences overlooking the conflict’s asymmetries and Banyamulenge’s specific victimhood.
 2. False dichotomies between genocide and complex violence; between different factors of violence.
- This argumentation reflects three broader issues in the fields of genocide and conflict studies:
 1. Common assumptions and disagreements about the applicability of the term genocide.
 2. Dilemmas facing “impartial” humanitarian/peacebuilding actors handling complex crises.
 3. Context-specific perceptions of underreported violence in Congo in international reporting.
- The paper seeks to unpack these arguments and reconcile divergent perspectives on the conflict.

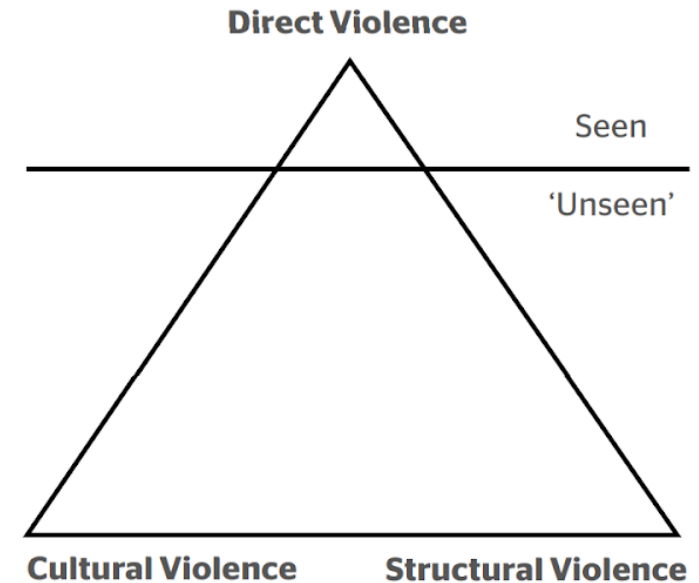
Perspectives on Congo, Conflict, and Genocide

Some explanations for misreporting and non-recognition of the Banyamulenge's plight:

- Focus on numbers > 'simplistic comparisons between complex and singular historical events' (Renshaw, 2021).
- Western actors/media have historically dismissed/downplayed genocide e.g. tribal violence" in 1994 Rwanda.
- Dilemmas facing "impartial" international organisations protecting relation with host governments e.g. the UN.
- Belgian colonisation > construction of Congo as inherently violent > normalised violence (Autesserre, 2009).
- Fein (2000) challenges assumption that genocide "demands an innocent victim".
- Shaw (2007) > misconception that conflict is only either war or genocide > often a false dichotomy.
- Blum, Stanton et al. (2008) > "ethnic cleansing" a euphemism for genocide.
- Hinton (2012) defines genocide as 'the more or less coordinated attempt to destroy a dehumanized and excluded group of people because of who they are'.
- Renshaw (2021) emphasises importance of a group's 'right to exist and [...] acts that threaten its survival'.

Multilayered experiences of structural violence in DR Congo

- Structural violence sustained by global market demands (Exenberger and Hartmann, 2007; Marriage, 2018).
- Structure of militarization/predation in eastern DRC > militias fill vacuums of fragile state (Perera 2017).
- Banyamulenge and “Rwandophones” face *additional* structural and cultural violence (discrimination/racism) in Galtung’s conflict triangle.
- Large-scale victimization in DRC > colonial-era myths and exclusionary politics targets Banyamulenge and “Rwandophones”.
- Inclusion of Banyamulenge in politics and security services > precarious, tokenistic, false sense of security.
- Post-war 2004 nationality law includes “Rwandophones” but is contested in practice.
- Hostilities related to creation of Minembwe commune > framed as a conflict over local authority; rather a struggle for equality.



Galtung's conflict triangle (UK government website)

False Equivalences & Asymmetries in Conflict Dynamics

- Armed groups have contrasting names and ideologies > Mai-Mai espouse “autochthony”; Mai-Mai ‘*Biloze Bishambuke*’ (‘If we have to destroy, let’s destroy’) vs. *Twirwaneho* (“Let’s defend ourselves”), *Gumino* (“Stay here”).
- Crop-trampling by Banyamulenge cattle often framed as a factor of violence > reflects community’s structural marginalization; cattle-looting destroys Banyamulenge culture/livelihoods.
- Similar violence/counter-attacks between communities > different implications for each community.
- Armed groups on both sides attack internally displaced persons (IDP) camp; Mai-Mai attack Banyamulenge besieged in Minembwe from multiple directions; some call the IDP camp a “concentration camp”.
- UN report equated incitement to Banyamulenge genocide with “incendiary” Banyamulenge claim of genocide.
- Kivu Security Tracker (KST) > vague, potentially biased, focused on limited types of attacks.
- Report by UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO, 2020) > 171 abuses by armed groups in the Plateaux (February 2019 to June 2020) > numerical asymmetries are only *indicative* of conflict dynamics, necessitating more in-depth analysis.
- *Collectif des Avocats* > 1,500 Banyamulenge deaths from 2017 to 2022.

Complexified and Dichotomised Conflict Dynamics

- Dynamics dichotomised in the literature: transhumance, cattle-looting, local authority, competition over taxations/mining > argument that violence is 'not ethnic' (Verweijen et al., 2021); ethnicity mobilises groups (Sungura et al., 2021).
- Material grievances e.g. crop-trampling make conspiracy theories relatable to farmers (Verweijen, 2015).
- Ndahinda and Mugabe (2022) identified multiple incidents (2021-22) where online genocidal rhetoric by Mai-Mai leaders accompanied Mai-Mai operations that 'cleansed' Banyamulenge villages.
- Despite volatile relations among Twirwaneho, Gumino, and Mai-Mai, *autochthony vs. "invader"* division prevails.
- Regional dimensions overshadow community experiences, e.g., Burundi and Rwanda accusing each other of backing rebels (FNL, RED-Tabara, RNC); Rwandan-backed mainly Tutsi M23 vs. government "Wazalendo" (patriots) militias.
- Despite simplicity of "conflict minerals" narratives, DW found that Mai-Mai fund anti-Banyamulenge attacks by selling gold.
- Solutions to conflict and persecution > addressing a mix of structural conflict drivers and the ideology of autochthony.
- Genocide of a minority underlines need to tackle normalised structural violence and militarization affecting all civilians.

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