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On: 27 August 2015, At: 04:56

Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Contemporary African Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjca20>

Armed mobilisation and the nexus of territory, identity, and authority: the contested territorial aspirations of the Banyamulenge in eastern DR Congo

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Published online: 04 Aug 2015.



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To cite this article: Judith Verweijen & Koen Vlassenroot (2015): Armed mobilisation and the nexus of territory, identity, and authority: the contested territorial aspirations of the Banyamulenge in eastern DR Congo, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/02589001.2015.1066080](https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2015.1066080)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2015.1066080>

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Armed mobilisation and the nexus of territory, identity, and authority: the contested territorial aspirations of the Banyamulenge in eastern DR Congo

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(Received 7 April 2014; final version received 11 September 2014)

The closely intertwined notions of territory, identity, and authority are at the heart of conflict dynamics in the eastern DR Congo. Focusing on the territorial aspirations of the Banyamulenge community in South Kivu, this article looks at the ways in which the nexus of territory, identity, and authority shapes and is shaped by armed mobilisation. Excluded from a customary chiefdom in the colonial era, the Banyamulenge, a community framed as ‘migrants’, have been striving for a territory of their own for decades. These aspirations have fed into armed activity by both Banyamulenge and Mai-Mai groups linked to opposing communities, providing deeply resonating mobilising narratives that are employed to justify violent action. Yet, as this article demonstrates, the links between armed mobilisation and the nexus of territory, identity, and authority are both contingent and reciprocal, as violent conflict also impacts the meanings and boundaries of identities, authority structures and territory.

Keywords: conflict dynamics; armed mobilisation; eastern DR Congo; territory; ethnicity; local authority

In September 1999, the rebel administration of the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD), which at that time held control over large parts of the eastern DR Congo, created a new administrative entity in the mountainous *Hauts Plateaux* area, located at the intersection of the *territoires* (territories) of Uvira, Fizi, and Mwenga in the province of South Kivu. The boundaries of this new territory largely followed the traditional living area of a Tutsi people known as ‘Banyamulenge’, the majority of whom had migrated to the region in the nineteenth century. Formerly subjected to the customary leadership and political authority of other ‘ethnic communities’,¹ the creation of what was called the ‘*territoire* (territory) of Minembwe’ responded to a long-standing wish of the Banyamulenge to participate in local government, which would confirm their status as Congolese citizens. Since the territory was however carved out of what other communities considered to be their ancestral lands, its creation provoked fierce resistance. For these self-styled ‘autochthonous’ groups, the Banyamulenge were recent Rwandan immigrants who tried to usurp Congolese citizenship by appropriating their lands by force. In this manner, resistance against

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the newly created territory came to feed into the wider struggle that the armed groups drawn from these communities, commonly known as ‘Mai-Mai’, were waging against the RCD rebellion, seen as a Tutsi-led ‘foreign invasion’. Thus, from the very moment of its creation, Minembwe territory was a key source of inspiration for armed group activity. Strikingly, after the suppression of the territory in 2007, when the war between the RCD and the Congolese government had formally ended, it remained an important trigger for armed struggle. New Banyamulenge armed factions appeared who presented the resurrection of Minembwe territory as one of their main political claims. This provided fertile ground to violent entrepreneurs from other communities for stirring up agitation against this territorial claim, which would justify continued armed struggle.

This article aims to explain why the Banyamulenge’s territorial aspirations have been so heavily contested and how these contestations have shaped and been shaped by armed mobilisation. It locates the contentious nature and strong mobilising power of these aspirations in the particular ways in which territory, identity, and authority have become intertwined in the Kivu provinces as a result of political and socio-economic processes in both the colonial and post-colonial era. However, as the article demonstrates, the links between on the one hand, the nexus of territory, identity, and authority, and on the other hand, armed mobilisation, are complex and contingent. Although the forms of belonging connected to territory as both a political and an ideational space are primarily defined in ethnic terms, Minembwe territory also became a source of conflict *within* the Banyamulenge community. Moreover, those taking up arms were not uniquely or straightforwardly driven by conflictual forms of ethnic identification and related struggles around territory and authority: rather, armed mobilisation was the outcome of an intricate mixture of factors, including personal ambitions, clan politics, political and economic elite interests, regional and national positioning, and divergent political visions. Thus, rather than being a direct cause of armed mobilisation, Minembwe territory served mostly as a mobilising narrative centred around conflicts related to territory, authority, and identity, which had to rally support for and justify violent action. Furthermore, the article shows that the links between the territory, identity, authority nexus and armed mobilisation are not unilateral, but reciprocal. While this nexus generates the conflicts that violent entrepreneurs draw upon to mobilise for armed struggle, violent conflict again strongly impacts forms of identification, the exercise of authority, and the meanings and sometimes boundaries of territories. This highlights that the notions of territory, identity, and authority are not ossified, but constantly evolve, which contributes to their variegated and contingent effects on armed mobilisation.

The article is structured as follows. After analysing the historical roots of the interlinkages between territory, identity, and authority in the Kivus, which explain the strong political and emotional stakes surrounding territory, we elucidate the early history of the Banyamulenge, and how they came to be denied a territory of their own. We then trace the evolution of the Banyamulenge’s territorial claims in the post-colonial era, which crystallised at first around the *groupement* of Bijombo. In particular, we look at the ways in which political emancipation went on a par with political exclusion and discrimination, and how this increased the attractiveness of a recourse to rebellion to advance territorial claims, as manifested during the First (1996–1997) and Second (1998–2003) Congo Wars. Subsequently, we highlight the counter-productive effects of this strategy, showing the contentious nature of the

creation of Minembwe territory and how this has continued to feed into armed mobilisation after its suppression in the wake of a peace agreement. Lastly, we reflect upon recent events to further illustrate the complexity of the links between armed mobilisation and conflicts related to the territory, identity, authority nexus, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of these links for explaining the Kivus' security predicament.

The article draws on intermittent ethnographic fieldwork conducted in and around the *Hauts Plateaux* area between 1997 and 2014, consisting of semi-structured individual and group interviews, and (participant) observation. Over time, hundreds of interviews have been conducted with different categories of informants, including customary chiefs, village elders and notables, religious and other community leaders, politico-administrative authorities, civil society organisations, members of the security services, and the political and military leadership of armed groups and militias. Research on the *Plateaux* was conducted in dozens of villages in a wide range of areas, including in isolated zones only accessible on foot, such as Bijombo, Kamombo, and Mibunda. A part of the interviews were conducted at weekly markets, like those of Bijombo-Ishenge, Mikalati, and Kalingi, which regroup people from all corners of the *Plateaux*. The information obtained through the fieldwork was corroborated with and complemented by documentary research, including reports from local and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), various agencies of the United Nations (UN), press releases and other political communication of armed groups, academic literature, and unpublished works including master theses from students originating from the *Hauts Plateaux* and surrounding areas.

The historical roots of the territory, identity, authority nexus in the Kivus

While territory is by definition imbued with power relations and always has identity-related dimensions (Paasi 1986; Sack 1986), in the Kivus, these aspects have become particularly salient in structuring social and political space. This is in part a legacy of the colonial system of indirect rule. Striving to control vast tracts of territory without the costly endeavour of building up a comprehensive administrative apparatus, the Congo's colonisers harnessed 'native chiefs' as intermediaries of government, capitalising on what was believed to be their 'traditional legitimacy'. In order to maximise the efficiency of this system, the colonisers set out to create relatively homogeneous, territorially fixed administrative units or *chefferies* (chiefdoms). These encompassed what were believed to be distinct 'ethnic groups', organised in a pyramidal manner under the leadership of paramount rulers or *bami* (plural of *mwami*, customary chief) (Mamdani 1998). However, in the face of a multitude of often mobile, intermingled and socio-politically heterogeneously organised groups, the development of such 'tribal homelands' (Mamdani 2011, 31) required significant social engineering. While some groups constituted relatively centralised, well circumscribed and hierarchically structured polities, such as kingdoms, many others were organised in a more horizontal, fragmented, and fluid fashion, lacking a paramount ruler with strong political power and a hierarchical social structure. Similarly, forms of identification were generally not primarily 'ethnic', but shaped by a variety of overlapping allegiances and social positions, including socio-economic and ritual status, and kinship and lineage affiliations (Newbury 1991). Thus, the creation of hierarchically organised, fixed 'tribal homelands' required the re-engineering of social and authority structures, by means of the merging, splitting and shifting around of lineage groups

and (sub)clans, the territorial fixing of previously mobile groups, and the investment and removal of chiefs (Hoffmann 2014; Muchukiwa 2006).

In their attempt to develop new systems of local governance, the colonisers were guided by and produced cartographic, physical-anthropological and ethnographic forms of knowledge, trying to identify and map ‘ethnic groups’, and fix the boundaries between them. In this manner, a body of ‘scientific’ knowledge emerged that strongly informed colonial discourse and administrative and educational practice (Maxwell 2008; Newbury 1978). Through everyday interactions with the colonial institutions, in particular the church-run educational system, the colonial subject was socialised into this knowledge, thus gradually coming to see ethnic identification and related belonging to a territorial unit of governance as ‘normal’ and desirable (Hoffmann 2014; Jewsiewicki 1989). The reification of the link between belonging to a particular ‘ethnic group’ and belonging to a particular bounded space (which could be described as the territorialisation of ethnicity) was further promoted by colonial land policies. Since all land in customary governance units was considered the exclusive property of the ‘tribe’, groups who lacked a ‘tribal homeland’ could only access land by paying tribute to the chiefs of other communities.² Thus, the creation of a system of contiguous customary units accentuated an insider/outsider dichotomy that would become particularly visible in areas that witnessed growing pressures on land (Van Acker 1999). Yet, it would also cause tensions in less densely populated areas such as the *Hauts Plateaux*. One reason for this was that the dichotomy between groups with and those without a ‘tribal chieftaincy’ was also rendered salient by the fact that within the colony, customary chiefs were the predominant form of ‘native’ political representation, as political and legal space became bifurcated into a politico-administrative sphere monopolised by the colonisers and a native sphere regulated by customary authority and law (Mamdani 1996).

In sum, the colonial era had a profound impact on imaginaries of political and social order and related modes of subjectivity. Hailing from an ethnic community with a clearly geographically demarcated ‘land of origins’ came to be seen as ‘the natural order of things’, although the salience of ethnicity as a form of social identification continued to strongly vary per group, era, and situation. Yet, the effects of processes of ethnic and territorial reification were very powerful, as ethnic communities came to be represented as existing since times immemorial and as having a ‘natural right’ to their ‘homeland’ that was justified by their ‘having arrived there first’. Thus, a dichotomy was created between communities identifying themselves as ‘born from the soil itself’, hence ‘autochthones’ who ‘had arrived first’ in a certain area, and those lacking a ‘tribal homeland’, often portrayed as ‘recent arrivals’, ‘immigrants’, and ‘foreigners’, who were not ‘authentically Congolese’ (Jackson 2006). From the late colonial era onwards, this distinction became increasingly salient politically, as it became enmeshed with debates on the right to citizenship and electoral participation. This will be further illustrated by the historical trajectory of one of the groups that came to be represented as ‘foreigners’ with dubious rights to citizenship and political representation, the Banyamulenge (singular: Munyamulenge) in South Kivu.

The Banyamulenge: becoming a ‘tribe’ without a ‘homeland’

The high political and emotional stakes of claims of belonging in the Kivus are well reflected in the contested nature of the history of the Banyamulenge. Undoubtedly

the most controversial issue is the date of their arrival on the territory of what is now the Congo. While Rwandan historian Kagame (1972; quoted in Mutambo 1997, 21) dates this arrival back to as early as the sixteenth century, others locate it in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. For example, based on a survey conducted in 1954–1955, Hiernaux (1965) notes that since their arrival, six generations of what were then called ‘Banyarwanda’ (those coming from Rwanda) have lived on the *Hauts Plateaux* of Itombwe. Despite these differences, there is a relatively broad consensus that the largest group of this cattle-keeping population arrived at the end of the nineteenth century, in a context of ongoing migratory flux related to various political and economic factors, including political turmoil in the Rwandan Kingdom and the search for new grazing grounds for cattle (Depelchin 1974; Muzuri 1983; Weis 1959). Since there were no clearly demarcated international boundaries in that era, it is difficult to label this movement as ‘immigration’. Furthermore, although the Banyamulenge are at present called a ‘Tutsi’ group, at the time of their movement, this designation was not necessarily a salient form of social identification, nor did it have ethnic connotations in the regions from which they migrated, located in present-day Rwanda and Burundi (Lemarchand 1994; Newbury 1988).

Settling first in Kakamba in the Ruzizi Plain (now Uvira territory) the groups that arrived at the end of the nineteenth century soon moved into the *Moyens Plateaux* mountain range. They temporarily settled on a hill named ‘Mulenge’, where the climate was favourable for their cattle. When the colonisers introduced a system of *petites chefferies* (small chiefdoms) which partly echoed existing forms of socio-political organisation, they invested two Banyarwanda chiefs: Kaïla or Kayira, one of the leaders of the Mulenge-based group, and Gahutu or Kahutu, who headed another group of cattle-keepers dwelling in the Ruzizi Plain. Both groups continued to be semi-nomadic, which compounded the levying of taxes. This mobility, in combination with their small size, meant that the colonial authorities deemed a separate entity for these groups unnecessary when they started to further develop the local administration from 1912 onwards (Muchukiwa 2006). In 1924, the group under Kaïla moved to the *Hauts Plateaux* of Itombwe, fleeing the exactions of Mokogabwe, the paramount chief of the Bafuliiru, who had been providing them with access to grazing lands in exchange for tribute. Depelchin notes that although the colonial administration granted permission:

the Tutsi did not move *en masse*. Neither did they all move to Itombwe (...). Those who had the most to lose are probably the ones who sought to put the greatest distance between themselves (and their cattle) and Mokogabwe. (1974, 72)

Thus, the Banyarwanda became scattered over the vast area comprising the *Hauts* and *Moyens Plateaux*, living in mostly kinship-based groups that had relatively autonomous leaders. In certain zones, like Bijombo, there were large concentrations of Banyarwanda villages, causing them to form a demographic majority.

Yet, in the 1920s, when the colonial authorities embarked upon an effort to territorially restructure the local administration by means of the creation of larger customary structures or *chefferies agrandies* (enlarged chiefdoms, later turned into *collectivités-chefferies*), the Banyarwanda were denied such an entity. As the *petites chefferies* were suppressed, this rendered them subjects of the customary entities ruled by other communities, notably the Bavira, Bafuliiru, and Babembe, although

they did govern their own *localités* (villages) within these governance units. This exclusion from customary governance and lands of their own, seen as a historical injustice, turned into a symbolic point of reference around which future acts of political mobilisation and advocacy would be centred. A first expression of this was the (unsuccessful) request, in 1944, to centralise all the Banyarwanda-inhabited *localités* of the Bavira *chefferie* (Buvira) located in the Bijombo area into a separate Banyarwanda *chefferie*. Due to their fragmented organisation, the colonial authorities had demanded that the Banyarwanda in Buvira designate one leader, preferring to deal with a single intermediary rather than a multitude of *chefs de localité* (village chiefs). This role came to be assumed by Budulege of Kishembwe locality, and later his relative Mushishi Karoli, who gradually came to be seen as a type of acting *chef de groupement* (chief of a *groupement*, a subdivision of a *chefferie*), although they officially had no such entity. This provided an important impetus for efforts to create a separate customary entity for the Banyarwanda in Bijombo, which continue up to this day.

While living amongst other groups, the Banyarwanda remained relatively aloof in a socio-cultural sense, mostly because of their distinct socio-economic status and differing customs. Although they gradually became more sedentary, they continued to live primarily off their livestock. This led them to develop economic interdependencies with other communities, exchanging foodstuffs for cattle and cattle-products. The Banyamulenge also fostered alliances with those communities through forms of cattle clientship, which constitute ultimately asymmetric relationships based on the gift of cattle. Together with the fact that cattle were generally seen as a symbol of wealth, this created the idea that the Banyarwanda were a dominant community that imposed unfair terms of exchange. Their distinct forms of belonging, as manifested in and (re)produced by a divergent lifestyle and customs, only reinforced this social distance. Crucially, their habit to only accept cows as dowry created obstacles to intermarriages with groups owning few cattle, like the Babembe, who came to ascribe the lack of intermarriage to a misplaced sense of superiority. Yet the Banyarwanda could hardly be called an elite, lacking access to local authority and the new economic and educational opportunities opened up by colonialism (Depelchin 1974). This would gradually change in the post-colonial era, when violent struggle would contribute to the community's political awakening.

The post-independence era: struggling for local authority and citizenship

In 1963, the revolutionary fervour that swept the Congo in the first years of its independence arrived in the region of Uvira, then spread to Fizi (Verhaegen 1966). Anchored in an ideology of radical nationalism and anti-imperialism, the egalitarian discourse of the Simba rebels held little appeal to the isolated and little educated Banyarwanda, who interpreted it as '*kngabana inka n'ababembe*' (the free distribution of cattle to the Babembe) (Muzuri 1983, 96). Although initially staying aloof, the Banyarwanda were eventually dragged into the conflict when the Simbas took their refuge on the *Plateaux* in the wake of an offensive of the Congolese army. Once in the mountains, the rebels commenced to tax and then loot their cattle,³ prompting the Banyarwanda to reinforce a nascent self-defence militia called 'Abagirye', derived from the French word *guerrier* (warrior) (Brabant and Nzweve 2013). Trained and supplied by the government forces, this militia came to serve as an auxiliary force in the fight against the insurgents, who were mostly of Bembe, Fuliiru and

Vira origins. In this manner, despite being grounded in non-ethnic revolutionary discourses, the insurgency obtained a strong ethnic dimension, pitting Banyarwanda allied to the government against rebel forces from other communities.

The Simba rebellion and the Banyarwanda response to it had a twin effect on political and social developments. On the one hand, they led to a sharp deterioration of inter-community relations on the *Plateaux*, now laced with memories of violence. On the other hand, they triggered a process of political awakening and a call for emancipation among the Banyarwanda. While some of the Abagirye fighters enrolled in the national armed forces, other Banyarwanda gained improved access to civilian employment opportunities and education. As a result, the community became less isolated and increasingly better educated, allowing for the formation of a politically aware intellectual elite that started to claim political rights (Vlassenroot 2002). In 1966, a part of this elite who had regrouped around Rumenera Sebasonera Obed (or Kabarule), a schoolteacher who had come to play an important role in the administration of the *collectivité-chefferie* of the Bavira during the Simba rebellion, lodged a demand for the creation of an independent *groupement* in Bijombo. This request was however met with fierce resistance from other communities. Additionally, the leadership of Kabarule created divisions within the Banyarwanda community itself. The group around him issued from a new educated elite, who framed the creation of the *groupement* in terms of modernising the local administration. For them, the existing system of customary chiefdoms was an archaic, colonial creation that did not respond to changing socio-economic and demographic realities. Thus, they proposed to create a *groupement* of which the leader would be elected, anticipating favourable outcomes given that the Banyarwanda were the demographic majority in Bijombo. The descendants of Budulege, however, insisted that any future entity had to be inscribed in the customary order, claiming leadership on the basis of their descentence. Crucially, maintaining the customary order would reinforce the Banyarwanda's claims to the status of 'authentic Congolese', reflecting the principle that only communities with a 'tribal homeland' were 'born from the soil' and therefore entitled to Congolese citizenship. In this manner, the conflicts around the *groupement* of Bijombo starkly reveal the tensions resulting from the continuing bifurcated nature of the Congolese post-colonial state, characterized by the uneasy co-existence of the customary-ethnic and state-administrative spheres (Muchukiwa 2006).

The growing political emancipation of the Banyarwanda was also manifested in their efforts to change their name to 'Banyamulenge', or 'those from Mulenge', referring to the hill in the *Moyens Plateaux* where a part of their ancestors had temporarily lived. In a context rife with the politics of origins, the choice for a name linked to a place in South Kivu was highly contentious, for it symbolically communicated the message that they should be considered as an 'original Congolese tribe', who therefore had the right to Congolese citizenship. Thus, although the name 'Banyamulenge' became a commonplace designation in the 1970s, hardliners from other communities refuted it, seeing it as a ploy from the Banyarwanda to 'mask their real origins', and therefore unjustly claim citizenship. This controversy had already become apparent in 1969, when the administrator of Itombwe, with the support of the Mwami of the Bavira and local security services, refused to attribute identity cards to the Banyamulenge. They were countered by the provincial governor, who invoked the citizenship law then in force, saying that 'the Banyarwanda undoubtedly have Congolese nationality of origins, given that they were in Zaire [sic] before 1908' (*authors' translation*)

(Muzuri 1983, 116). A similar scenario risked developing again in 1973, yet met with a firm response from the governor.

Despite the controversy surrounding their name and citizenship rights, the Banyamulenge's efforts to increase their political participation did make some progress. In 1970, the Munyamulenge politician Frédéric Muhoza Gisaro entered the *conseil législatif* (national parliament), the first time in history a Munyamulenge gained access to elected office at the national level. Gisaro energetically campaigned for a separate administrative entity called *collectivité des Hauts Plateaux d'Itombwe*. In 1979, this project experienced a small breakthrough when the authorities formally recognised the *groupement* of Bijombo. This entity had already been created by the Mwami of the Bavira, Lenghe III, in 1971, who had named Sebasonera as *chef de groupement ad interim*, but was awaiting official status. The *groupement* brought together 18 villages, 12 of which were headed by a Munyamulenge chief. However, and against the advice of the Uvira district commissioner and the governor of Kivu, Lenghe III refused to appoint a Munyamulenge as its chief, emphasising that this was a violation of customary principles (Muchukiwa 2006). He therefore appointed a Muvira, whose authority was not recognised by the Banyamulenge. The latter continued to be governed by their own leaders, generating parallel systems of local governance that have never ceased to exist.

The resistance of Lenghe III foreshadowed the roughening of the political climate from the end of the 1970s onwards, when the Banyamulenge's citizenship, and by implication electoral participation, would be increasingly contested. In 1981 the *conseil législatif* modified the 1972 nationality law, determining that only descendants of 'tribes' established on the Congo's territory in its boundaries of 1 August 1885 would automatically have citizenship (Willame 1997). This change in legislation refocused the discussion on the Banyamulenge's migration, with adversaries arguing they had only arrived after the establishment of the Congo Free State in 1885. These doubts allowed the new law to be used as a tool to exclude the Banyamulenge from electoral participation. In both the 1982 and 1987 elections, their candidates were barred from running on the basis of *nationalité douteuse* (doubtful nationality). In the last case, this prompted them to refuse to vote and to destroy ballot boxes on the *Plateaux* (Ruhimbika 2001).

By that time, a new elite of young, well-educated Banyamulenge decided to take up the case of their community and instituted a number of local development initiatives, which received support from the Banyamulenge wing of the Protestant Church and the Banyamulenge *comités des sages* (committees of the wise), regrouping elders and community leaders. In 1985, two of them, Müller Ruhimbika and Azarias Ruberwa (who later became the president of the RCD rebel movement and then vice-president of the transitional government between 2003–2006), invited all Banyamulenge students to Itombwe to discuss how the position of their community could be reinforced. Rejecting a strategy *par le haut* (from the top down), they decided to promote local development through their own initiatives. Some of the organisations taking up this call would be quite successful in attracting international funding and attention, and played a pivotal role in the further political awakening of the community. As they argued, development depended on the recognition of the Banyamulenge's political rights (to citizenship and territory) and full access to land (Vlassenroot 2002).

Yet, this recognition was not forthcoming. By contrast, in the 1990s, inter-communal tensions would intensify, mostly as a result of national and regional

developments. An announced transition to multiparty democracy generated vigorous competition between political elites, who employed ethnic discourses in their efforts at electoral mobilisation. Thus, the district commissioner of Uvira and Anzuluni Bembe Isilonyonyi, a Bembe leader and deputy speaker of the transitional parliament, launched the umpteenth exclusion campaign against the Banyamulenge. Further adding to the turmoil was the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees mixed with combatants from Burundi and Rwanda in 1993 and 1994, who were fleeing civil war and (anticipated) massacres (Willame 1997). The resulting tensions prompted the transitional parliament in April 1995 to adopt a resolution calling for the expulsion of all Rwandan refugees, explicitly assimilating the Banyamulenge into that category. The Uvira-based weekly *Munanira* responded with enthusiasm:

Finally, the foul play has been unmasked. The Rwandan of Tutsi ethnicity who has immigrated to Zaire since a certain time and who presents himself as 'Zai-Rwa'⁴ after intelligently inventing an ethnicity (tribe or clan) unknown in the history of Zaire, the Munyamulenge, has been identified and exposed. This trickster Zairwa of yesterday is but a Rwandan of a morphology and ideology similar to Paul Kagame (*authors' translation*). (quoted in Ruhimbika 2001, 31)

On his return to Uvira and Fizi, Anzuluni stirred up anti-Banyamulenge sentiments in a number of public speeches, which encouraged the Uvira district commissioner to start executing the resolution voted in parliament. Harassment of Banyamulenge now became widespread, and members of the community started to be denied access to employment and work in the administration, while their development associations were sanctioned (Vlassenroot 2002).

The widespread identification of Banyamulenge with Rwandan Tutsi in this period was reinforced by the recruitment of a significant number of Banyamulenge youths in the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front, which had launched an insurgency campaign against the Kigali government in 1990. Faced with decreasing employment opportunities due to discrimination and economic decline, these youths had responded favourably to the call for arms, with some hoping that a future new regime in Rwanda could help ameliorate their precarious position in Zaire. In 1995, these young combatants started to return to the *Plateaux*, a movement that intensified in July 1996, causing anti-Tutsi sentiment to explode. In September 1996, two major anti-Tutsi protest marches were held in Uvira and Bukavu, with participants chanting slogans like '*Mututsi na imbwa wote ni sawa* (Tutsi and dogs are all the same)' (Ruhimbika 2001, 50) and '*Opération RRR, rendre les Rwandais au Rwanda*' (Operation RRR, return the Rwandans to Rwanda) (Communauté Banyamulenge 2008). This accelerated the cycle of tit-for-tat massacres that had been generated by the infiltration of Banyamulenge recruits, which drew in local militias and the Zairian army. Bembe militias killed over 300 Banyamulenge in Baraka, Banyamulenge attacked a hospital in Lemera, killing nurses and patients, and the Zairian army looted Uvira. Soon after, units of the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) entered the country and started raiding the refugee camps, heralding the advent of a mixed regional-domestic insurgent coalition aiming to topple Mobutu, the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre* (AFDL).⁵ The First Congo War had begun.

The Congo Wars (1996–2003) and the militarisation of (resistance to) territorial claims

The arrival of the AFDL provided the impetus for the large-scale formation of armed groups in the rural areas that operated under the label of ‘Mai-Mai’, which often claimed to defend specific communities and their lands, employing discourses of self-defence and autochthony. Considering the insurgency a Tutsi-dominated ‘foreign occupation force’ due to the heavy Rwandan imprint and strong Banyamulenge involvement, they tried to resist the advance of the AFDL troops, while also multiplying attacks on the Banyamulenge (Vlassenroot and Van Acker 2001). As a consequence, and with the echoes of the Rwandan genocide still resonating, feelings of existential threat took hold among the Banyamulenge. Together with the promise that future regime change offered in terms of improving their situation, this caused many Banyamulenge to flock to the AFDL. Their alliance with the RPA, however, soon proved to be both a curse and a blessing. Although the AFDL insurrection gave them unprecedented access to military and political power, in particular after it toppled Mobutu in 1997, their close collaboration with Rwanda reinforced resentment from neighbouring communities, seeing it as new evidence that the Banyamulenge were in fact Rwandans. It is telling in this respect that the name ‘Banyamulenge’ became in this period a designation with often a pejorative connotation among local actors and international observers for all Congolese Tutsi, including those from North Kivu who had a very different historical trajectory. Importantly, Banyamulenge were increasingly framed as fifth-columnists for the expansionist tendencies of Rwanda, suspected of wanting to annex the Kivus to an enlarged ‘Hima-Tutsi empire’ in Central Africa and in this manner ‘balkanise’ the Congo. This balkanisation plot became an important lens through which the Banyamulenge’s territorial claims were viewed, intensifying efforts to resist their aspirations.

The counter-productive effects of participation in the AFDL insurgency did not go unnoticed among the Banyamulenge. This awareness led to growing resentment among parts of the community towards Kigali, which, they felt, had instrumentalised their plight. Consequently, attempts by the RPA to convince Banyamulenge leaders to bring their families to safer grounds in Rwanda met with strong resistance. The idea of what was seen as ‘deportation’ was first proposed by the RPA in October 1996, then again discussed between the RPA and Banyamulenge leaders during a meeting in Butare (Rwanda) in December 1996 (Ruhimbika 2001). It testifies to Kigali’s limited knowledge of the dynamics within the Banyamulenge community, mainly considered to be a Rwandan Tutsi diaspora. Within the Congo, these views only confirmed representations of the Banyamulenge as immigrants who had no right to Congolese citizenship, thereby contributing to worsening, rather than improving their predicament. What also provoked resentment among the Banyamulenge, in particular the military, was the continuing dominance of Kigali, which barred Banyamulenge from decision-making and command positions. The mutiny of 300 Banyamulenge soldiers in Bukavu in February 1998 was a clear indication that they no longer accepted exclusive RPA leadership.⁶ In this climate of growing distrust vis-à-vis Kigali, a group of mostly Banyamulenge political actors gathered in Bujumbura, the capital of neighbouring Burundi, in June 1998. On 14 June 1998, they announced the creation of a political movement called *Forces républicaines fédéralistes* (FRF), in which Müller Ruhimbika came to play a leading role. The FRF advocated

political and military independence from Rwanda as the most viable route for Banyamulenge emancipation, believing that their precarious position in the Congo could only be resolved by creating an autonomous state on the *Plateaux* as part of a federated Congo.⁷

While the idea of federalism found widespread appeal among the Banyamulenge, the outbreak of the Second Congo War would prevent the FRF from becoming a major political force, necessitating them to operate underground. In August 1998, a new Rwanda-led rebellion was launched, this time under the banner of the RCD. As political leaders in Kinshasa tried to mobilise the population by employing inflammatory anti-Tutsi rhetoric, anti-Banyamulenge sentiment surged, culminating in massacres of Tutsi civilians and soldiers throughout the country. This made many Banyamulenge painfully aware that they needed Rwanda to ensure their survival, driving them – sometimes reluctantly – into the arms of the RCD. Yet divisions among the Banyamulenge were growing, further fragilising the community. Some political and military leaders joined the RCD voluntarily, hoping that the new rebellion could accomplish what the AFDL had failed to do in terms of securing citizenship and a territory for the Banyamulenge, or embraced it as an opportunity to advance their personal careers. Others, including church leaders and civil society members, tried to distance themselves from the rebellion, hoping to establish a new dialogue with the other communities on and around the *Plateaux*. A third group was the most outspoken in its resistance against the RCD, and instead supported the FRF (Vlassenroot 2002).

Anxious about losing support among the Banyamulenge, the RCD resorted to redrawing administrative boundaries to curry their favour, a technique it employed more widely to co-opt allies who were deemed strategic (Tull 2005).⁸ On 9 September 1999, the RCD administration issued a decree⁹ that created a new *territoire* (territory) on the *Plateaux*, following a formal request signed by 15 Banyamulenge intellectuals and leaders from different localities. This group consisted mostly of ambitious political actors who tried to seize upon the RCD rebellion to realise far-reaching territorial aspirations for the Banyamulenge. In fact, the idea of creating an entire territory had only gained widespread currency in the AFDL era, when the opportunities generated by future regime change seemed boundless (Willame 1997). The reasons forwarded in the request, which had a map with the proposed boundaries annexed to it, are largely similar to those accompanying the earlier efforts for the creation of the *groupement* of Bijombo, referring to identity-related, historical, and political-economic considerations. These included the Banyamulenge's precolonial arrival, their discrimination in colonial times, the underdevelopment of the *Plateaux* due to the scarcity of administrative, road, and communications infrastructure, the under-representation of the Banyamulenge in public administration and their lack of secure access to land. What was called the territory of Minembwe, after the locality that became the seat of the administration, had five new *collectivités-secteurs* (Bijombo, Mulenge, Kamombo, Minembwe, and Itombwe). While some positions in the territorial administration were filled by non-Banyamulenge, the *administrateur du territoire* (territorial administrator) as well as the chiefs of most of the newly created *secteurs* and *groupements* were Banyamulenge. This reflected the demographic realities of the new entity, the boundaries of which were drawn around the traditional living area of the Banyamulenge. Given that a territory is simultaneously an electoral circumscription, this also raised the hopes that the Banyamulenge would stand better chances in any future elections.

In the short term, however, the creation of the territory was a mixed blessing at best, leading to further deterioration of already extremely tense inter-community relations. For the multitude of Mai-Mai groups that waged a counter-insurgency campaign against the RCD in the rural areas, the creation of the territory added fuel to the fire. Being carved out of the territories of Mwenga, Uvira, and Fizi, the self-styled autochthonous communities on whose soil the new entity was located felt deprived of lands to which they felt a deep attachment, considering them to be inhabited by their *mizimu ya mababu* (spirits of the ancestors), and thus an integral part of their heritage and identity as an ethnic group. Furthermore, many lower-level chiefs strongly resented that they were no longer placed under customary chiefs from their own community, being henceforth governed by a Banyamulenge-dominated local administration. Opposition was further informed by the loss of income resulting from the creation of the new territory, which was not only related to the economic value of the lost land and the natural resources that it harboured, including various artisanal gold mines, but also the diminishing access to market taxes (ADEPAE et al. 2011). Finally, resistance against Minembwe territory was fed by the unilateral way in which it had been created, without any form of prior consultation of the other communities, and in violation of the law. In particular the fact that it had been imposed by a rebel administration nourished the idea that the territory was born out of violence, not only rendering it illegitimate, but, in the eyes of some, also justifying a violent response.

Aside from generating opposition against its existence, the creation of Minembwe territory gave rise to a host of boundary disputes among existing and newly created *secteurs*, *groupements*, and *localités*. Furthermore, it placed previously relatively autonomous Banyamulenge *chefs de localités* under a new hierarchical layer of Banyamulenge authority in the form of the *groupements*. This led to frictions among the quite horizontally organised Banyamulenge, in particular since some locality chiefs were now commanded by those previously subordinate to them. Additionally, some *localités* were converted into *groupements*, leading to frustrations among those denied this upgrade in status. Hence the territory of Minembwe did not only create inter-community tensions, but also became a bone of contention within the Banyamulenge community, further tearing open its internal rifts (Muchukiwa 2006).

These growing divisions were to a large extent nourished by conflicting political orientations, including among the Banyamulenge officers serving in the armed branch of the RCD under RPA (Rwandan military) command, who felt instrumentalised, marginalised and unjustly blamed for some of the massacres committed by RCD troops. Mistrust eventually turned into open hostility, with a first standoff in January 1999 in Uvira, where Banyamulenge under the command of Pacifique Masunzu clashed with the RPA.¹⁰ In 2002, Masunzu, who sympathised with the underground FRF party, deserted and took to the bush, soon attracting a larger following (Vlassenroot 2002). The Rwandan government reacted with resolve. When an initial offensive of Rwanda-supported RCD troops failed, it deployed an RPA force of thousands of troops with considerable air support against a few hundred Banyamulenge soldiers collaborating with Mai-Mai groups. This fierce resistance against the RPA/RCD gave Masunzu considerable popularity among the Banyamulenge, and a favourable status with the Kinshasa government, in particular President Kabila. Consequently, when in September 2002, the RPA and RCD withdrew from the *Plateaux* under international pressure, Masunzu and the FRF, to whom he had formally linked his armed

force, were left as the main political and military players. Ironically, this heralded the end of the territory of Minembwe, which got disconnected from the RCD controlled politico-military administration. Yet, while losing its formal existence, its symbolic and mobilising power remained invariably strong.

Throughout the post-colonial era, the Banyamulenge, who were socialised into the idea that having a customary territory is a precondition for being recognised as an 'authentic Congolese tribe', strived to redress their exclusion from a customary chiefdom by the colonisers. Deprived of access to local authority and land of their own, they explicitly adopted a toponymic name linking them to the Congolese soil in order to legitimise their political and identity claims. Yet the same nexus of territory, identity, and authority that informed their territorial aspirations nourished resistance among other communities, considering these claims not only as a threat to their power, but also to their ancestral lands, and therefore their identity. In the 1990s, after non-violent channels to realise their demands were increasingly blocked due to electoral and administrative exclusion, rebellion emerged as an attractive option for securing their position. However, allying with Rwanda, who spearheaded the insurgencies in which they participated, reinforced doubts about their nature as Congolese citizens and caused further social exclusion. Furthermore, the fact that they eventually obtained a territory by manipulating a rebel-led administration fostered the feeling that they pursued their territorial claims by force, which justified a violent response. The bloodshed that took place in the course of the wars only further raised the symbolic and emotional stakes of the Banyamulenge's territorial claims. While for the Banyamulenge, a territory of their own became seen as a precondition for their survival, for other communities, it was a reminder of 'Tutsi aggression and expansionism'. These representations would continue to shape political struggles and armed mobilisation in the post-settlement era, long after the territory had been suppressed.

The post-settlement era: territorial claims as mobilising narrative for renewed armed struggle

In December 2002, a peace accord was signed that announced the formal end of the Second Congo War. It provided for a double political and military power-sharing deal, implying that the ex-belligerents would share positions in the transitional politico-administrative apparatus and integrate their forces into a newly constituted national military, the *Forces armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC). This unleashed vigorous power struggles, both within and between ex-belligerents and their constituencies, who all tried to stake out their claims to the new political order. Masunzu and other Banyamulenge leaders were not exempt from this logic, and tried to consolidate or reinforce their position by a variety of non-violent and violent means.

In 2003, the transitional government indicated it might not recognise Minembwe territory, leading to its ultimate suppression in 2007.¹¹ As a consequence, the most influential politico-administrative authority on large parts of the *Plateaux*, in particular on the Fizi and a part of the Mwenga side, now became the *chef de poste* of Minembwe, formally deployed under the *administrateur du territoire* of Fizi.¹² The new *chef de poste* had been (informally) appointed by Masunzu, who had accepted the suppression of Minembwe territory. One of the main reasons for this was that he was wary to lose his favourable status in the presidential circle, which would imperil his ambition to

become a general. Additionally, Masunzu's camp believed that the government would eventually re-erect the territory, but this time following the correct procedures. Like many other Banyamulenge, they believed that the territory had been created unilaterally, and insisted that any efforts at its resurrection should be preceded by consultations with the other communities living on the *Plateaux*. This reflected the conviction that having a separate territory on the *Plateaux* would be to the benefit of all of its inhabitants, regardless of their ethnic background, as it could lead to better local governance and promote development. Thus, while endorsing the idea of a new territory, Masunzu's camp was critical of the ways in which it had been created by the RCD, which had given off the impression that it concerned a project by the Banyamulenge for the Banyamulenge. Even when sharing this reading of its problematic creation, a substantial part of the Banyamulenge still rejected the territory's suppression, fearing that it would be irreversible. Furthermore, many believed that the final peace accord signed in December 2002 contained a clause that it would not turn back the decisions made by the RCD administration. From this perspective, the non-recognition of the territory was experienced as a betrayal and a violation of the peace accord, feeding hostility towards Kinshasa. These ideas caused the shutting down of the territory's office in Minembwe by Masunzu's troops to provoke highly emotional reactions. Up to today, people memorise this event as a 'putsch' and a 'coup d'état', leading the current authorities to be 'clandestine'.¹³ As one informant explained: 'it's like having a full glass in your hand when you are thirsty, but you are not allowed to drink'.¹⁴

Aside from disagreements over the territory, which played both in pro- and anti-RCD circles, Masunzu's rule provoked other controversies. In an effort to consolidate his power position, he side-lined several influential members of the FRF. He also allegedly reneged on promises to do the utmost to ensure that his troops and officers obtained ranks and positions of importance in the FARDC. When the new nominations of FARDC officers were made public in 2004, it turned out that none of his officers had obtained a rank higher than major. This led to strong resentment, especially since Masunzu himself was eventually appointed general. Furthermore, Masunzu was accused of doing little to advance the political agenda of the FRF in Kinshasa, being suspected of primarily trying to secure his own favourable status in the networks of the president. Discontent with his rule was also fed by his background: coming from a small and traditionally relatively insignificant clan, influential figures from the bigger and more powerful clans found it difficult to accept his leadership. This played out both amongst the RCD stalwarts and those who had rallied towards the FRF.

Thus, personal ambitions, diverging political orientations and clan politics all fed into growing competition between Banyamulenge political-military elites, which blocked efforts to unite the community and rally it behind a coherent leadership that could promote its common interests. Certainly, a united leadership had never existed among the Banyamulenge, who have always had a plurality of poles of power issuing from geographic, socio-economic, clan, lineage, educational, and professional differences. Yet the transition set in motion a more pronounced fragmentation than ever, despite efforts to counter this dynamic. Also, now that Minembwe territory would be suppressed, the Banyamulenge faced bleak electoral prospects. Moreover, they obtained only few positions of importance in the transitional politico-administrative apparatus, and the waning power of the RCD undermined its function as a gateway to office. Therefore, non-violent channels to push through

political demands and realise personal ambitions were increasingly blocked. This prompted some of the competing factions to resort to arms, reflecting the extent to which Banyamulenge politics had become militarised over the years, with military elites taking precedence over political and customary leaders. However, in contrast to the war era, armed mobilisation focused less on defending the Banyamulenge community and its rights than on securing personal and factional ambitions, provoking internecine fighting within the community.

In 2005, two new Banyamulenge armed factions appeared on the *Plateaux* with what were initially unclear agendas, except for a refusal to integrate into the FARDC, personal frustrations about having been attributed low ranks in the FARDC, and discontent with Masunzu's leadership. Over the following two years, these two factions clashed intermittently with the 112th brigade FARDC headquartered in Minembwe, which was an all-Banyamulenge unit directly controlled by Masunzu. In 2007, in spite of having quite a divergent political outlook and history, the leaders of these two factions, pro-Kigali RCD stalwart Venant Bisogo and anti-Kigali, anti-RCD activist Michel 'Makanika' Rukundwa, eventually decided to join hands. The FRF political leadership, leading a marginal existence after having been sidelined by Masunzu, saw this as an opportunity to re-establish itself on the political scene, this time with a military wing to help push through its demands. In this manner, and quite in contrast to the spirit of some of its founding fathers, the FRF was once more reconstituted as a political-military movement. In order to find a common platform and obtain popular support, it adopted as one of its most salient political claims an issue that continued to stir the spirits of many Banyamulenge, being seen as a precondition for improving their plight: the resurrection of Minembwe territory. This became particularly visible during the Amani peace conference held in Goma in January 2008, which was attended by nearly two dozen armed groups (some only created or reinstated for participating in the conference to get a share of the 'peace dividend') as well as representatives from the different ethnic communities of the Kivus. Like all other armed groups, the FRF presented a *cahier the charges* (list of demands) outlining the conditions on which they would lay down arms. One of the points on this list was 'granting Minembwe the statute of territory. This is a demand of all the ethnic groups who live in that part of the Republic (*authors' translation*)' (Gasore 2007). This resonated with the speech of the representatives of the Banyamulenge community, who listed as key recommendation 'recognising the territory of Minembwe for reasons of at once political representativeness, bringing public services closer to the people and the development of the *Hauts Plateaux* (*authors' translation*)' (Communauté Banyamulenge 2008). Furthermore, they emphasised that 'those opposing it [the territory] inscribe themselves purely and simply in the logic of extremists who fight against the political emancipation of the Banyamulenge (*authors' translation*)' (Communauté Banyamulenge 2008).

Born as a coalition of strange bedfellows, the FRF thus adopted advocacy for Minembwe territory as a mobilising and legitimising narrative that strongly resonated among broad layers of the Banyamulenge community. This befitted the movement's growing role as local governance actor, which was triggered by its obtaining de facto control over the Mibunda and Kamombo areas of the *Plateaux* following a cease-fire agreement signed in October 2007. Developing a more comprehensive political branch with departments like social affairs, environment, justice, and political propaganda, the FRF now started to emphasise good governance and development

in its discursive and some of its social practices, organising, for example, the construction of a road from Mikalati to Kabara and a bridge over the river Lwelila. Yet involvement in local governance also allowed the movement to more effectively repress opponents, and to increase its sources of income by implementing an elaborate system of market, mining, and road taxes (UNSC 2009). Furthermore, despite more political activism, the military branch continued to dominate the movement. This was strongly evidenced by negotiations with the group undertaken in the framework of the Amani process, in which the modalities of troop integration into the government forces took centre stage. Above all, FRF officers, meanwhile including two self-appointed generals, demanded that their rebel ranks be recognised in the FARDC, that they would be paid ‘salary arrears’ since 2004, and that after integration, they would continue to be deployed on the *Plateaux*. These demands reveal the heterogeneity of the projects driving the new-style FRF, born of a power struggle between political and military Banyamulenge leaders who contested the dominance of Masunzu out of at once personal ambitions, clan and factional interests, and diverging political visions, including on Minembwe territory. Thus, while Minembwe territory figured prominently in the FRF’s political communication, being an important narrative to mobilise support for and legitimise taking up arms, this did not imply that it was the sole or main driver of the FRF’s rebellion.

A similar complex and fluctuating relation between the narrative of Minembwe territory and armed mobilisation can be detected among the variety of Mai-Mai groups that remobilised or continued fighting in the post-settlement era. Similar to the FRF, these groups would discursively justify their refusal to integrate into the FARDC by referring to the territory of Minembwe. However, they invoked its potential reconstitution, rather than its suppression, as the main cause of their dissidence (Verweijen forthcoming). But this was not the only reason for continued armed struggle. As was the case for the Banyamulenge, the transition unleashed important power struggles between and within often already heavily divided war-era factions, all hoping to gain access to positions in the military or the politico-administrative apparatus. In this climate of competition and mistrust, certain Mai-Mai groups refused to abandon their fiefs and integrate their troops into the FARDC. These groups feared becoming marginalised in the military, which many Mai-Mai perceived to be dominated by Tutsi and Hutu belonging to the ex-RCD (Baaz and Verweijen 2013). These fears were only reinforced by the emergence of the Bisogo and Mekanika factions on the *Plateaux*, seen as a confirmation that the Banyamulenge continued to have bellicose intentions, threatening other communities’ lands, livelihoods and very existence. Consequently, in the course of 2006–2007, a host of new Mai-Mai groups appeared on the scene, in majority composed of war-era fighters. In order to justify their dissidence, many of these groups referred to the Banyamulenge’s demands for the re-institution of Minembwe territory, and the non-integrated Banyamulenge armed factions on the *Plateaux*. Explaining why he withdrew from the army integration process in 2007, Mai-Mai leader William Amuri Yakotumba stated:

we were in conflict with an aggressing people [*peuple agresseur*]. So we said ‘if these forces [of Bisogo] leave the *Hauts Plateaux* and when the *chefs de localités* can recover their power over the entire territory of their entities like before, we are ready to leave the bush.’¹⁵

The groups' political leader Raphael Looba Undji added:

the biggest problem is that they, the Rwandans, want to install other entities of local governance. We cannot accept that a native chief [*chef originaire*] is subjected to the orders of the chefferie of a so-called 'Munyamulenge'. 'Native' [*originaire*], this notion has a lot of importance to us.¹⁶

These convictions were also reflected in Mai-Mai groups' political propaganda, in which they portrayed Minembwe territory as the symbol of Banyamulenge hegemony, expansionism and aggression, and as a justification to take up arms. For example, at the 2008 Goma conference, a representative of the *Mai Mai réformé* (as Yakotumba's group was then called) stated that one of their main goals was 'resisting any forced integration of Rwandan Tutsi refugees under the cover of having an autonomous territory in our territory of Fizi because the Banyamulenge do not exist in DRC but there are Rwandan refugees and immigrants (*authors' translation*)' (Assanda Mwenebatu 2008, 6). In a *cahier de charges* issued in 2011, this same group states that:

the government knows that the erection of MINEMBWE as *Territoire* and the entry of foreign forces will provoke a fire that will last and will thus continue to burn with intensity as long as there will be straw, that is a second Palestine in Africa. (*authors' translation*) (Mai Mai Reformé/Groupe Alleluia/Yakotumba 2011, 4)

This clearly illustrates how even after its abolishment, Minembwe territory continues to stir the spirits, occupying a pre-eminent place in the discursive frames of politico-military entrepreneurs. In addition, it shows that although article 10 of the 2006 constitution bestows Congolese 'nationality of origins' (*nationalité d'origine*) upon all persons from ethnic groups living on Congolese soil at the moment of independence (1960), Mai-Mai groups still cast doubt on the Banyamulenge's right to Congolese citizenship.

A similar complex relation between identity-linked claims for territorialised authority and militia activity has continued to shape developments in the *groupement* of Bijombo, where parallel systems of governance and conflicts related to the *localités* created as part of Minembwe territory have persisted. Erratic governance by the Mwami of the Bavira, who has simultaneously appointed a number of *chefs de groupement*, and the tendency of groups to not recognise the authority of the chiefs of other communities, have created a volatile situation in which there is a variety of sometimes changing chiefs who each control different groups and different parts of the *groupement*. Furthermore, chiefs of different communities have relied on armed groups to reinforce their position, in some cases also to guarantee access to the revenues of market and other forms of taxation. While many Banyamulenge in Bijombo previously supported the FRF and now its successor movement headed by 'colonel' Nyamusharaba Shaka, the Bafuliiru and Banyindu have maintained ties to different Mai-Mai groups, such as those of Pandisa, Makuba, and Mahoro. Although these armed groups only sporadically confront each other directly, they are a crucial part of the ongoing conflicts around territory, identity, and authority in Bijombo, which provide them with mobilising narratives and support both from leaders in conflict and populations in search of protection. At the same time, the presence of armed groups has changed the dynamics of these conflicts, in part as armed actors also pursue their own interests and ambitions, and raise the stakes of disputes by creating

additional grievances. Moreover, their presence entices people to take recourse to armed actors to solve private disputes and settle scores. Finally, by having many youths in their ranks, armed groups contribute to altering social identities and relations, socialising youth into the practice and logic of violence.

Concluding remarks

In January 2011, the FRF officially ended its armed struggle and agreed to integrate into the FARDC. The peace deal that was struck was primarily tuned towards the needs of the military leadership, promising them high ranks and positions in the FARDC, and control over a newly created operational sector on the *Plateaux*. The realisation of the group's political demands, including the revival of Minembwe territory, enhanced political participation at the provincial and national level, and socio-economic development and the improvement of infrastructure on the *Plateaux*, were deferred to future negotiations. To date, the progress made on these demands has been rather limited, causing disappointment among many of the FRF's supporters. One of the reasons has been infighting among the political leadership, more pre-occupied with realising their personal ambitions than the FRF's political agenda. This reflects a long-standing problem among the Banyamulenge community: the lack of a coherent political leadership that can advance its claims and regulate its conflicts through non-violent channels. At present, the most influential Banyamulenge at the national and provincial level are found in the security services. The community has no provincial or national members of parliament, and only one provincial minister. Thus, military elites continue to take precedence over political leaders, causing political participation to remain relatively limited. This is an important reason why the desire for the resurrection of a separate territory-cum-circumscription on the *Plateaux* remains strong among the Banyamulenge, and continues to be seen as a precondition for their political emancipation and socio-economic development. The pending transformation of the locality of Minembwe into a *commune rurale* (rural community), a decentralised territorial entity with an elected council that has considerable decision-making power over local affairs, will not do much to solve the issue, although it is generally welcomed as a step forwards. In January 2013, the Minister of the Interior announced that Minembwe will obtain the statute of *commune rurale* as part of the ongoing decentralisation process. Yet, the *commune* will only cover a relatively small surface around Minembwe, thus being of little benefit to the Banyamulenge living in other parts of the vast *Plateaux* area. Furthermore, it will not help improve the Banyamulenge's electoral chances. For these various reasons, the need for a separate territory continues to be strongly felt.

Violent entrepreneurs continue to feed off these sentiments, whether advocating for or contesting the territory. After the FRF disappeared in 2011, none of the Mai-Mai groups that had claimed for years that the presence of the FRF and its claims for restoring Minembwe territory were among their main reasons for being in the bush laid down arms, with the exception of a small fringe of the Mai-Mai Kapopo. This shows how Minembwe territory served more as a mobilising narrative than a primary cause of these groups' armed activities. However, this does not indicate that conflicts surrounding territory, identity, and authority merely serve as a pretext for opportunistic violent entrepreneurs: because of their identity dimension and connection to memories of past violence, these conflicts are deeply felt. Moreover, disputes

surrounding local authority strongly influence local governance, and therefore have considerable effects on people's everyday lives. This is very palpable in the *groupement* of Bijombo, where conflicts around territory and authority framed in identity-based terms continue to be intense. It is therefore no coincidence that the last remaining Banyamulenge armed group, that of Nyamusharaba, which is formed by ex-FRF dissidents who refused to integrate in 2011, has its primary base of support and operations in that part of the *Plateaux*. Yet ultimately, it is not these conflicts in themselves that push people to create and support armed groups: the engine behind armed group proliferation is a militarised logic that makes appealing to force in order to strengthen the position of one's community and oneself seem a justified course of action. Armed groups and their supporters therefore also have more particularistic interests in perpetuating the militarised system that this logic produces. This again blocks non-violent solutions for conflicts around territory, identity, and authority. In this sense, conflicts and violence constitute an almost self-enforcing cycle of militarisation. However, as territory, identity, and authority are not unchangeable phenomena, despite the ossifying effects of their reification, this cycle can potentially be broken.

Notes

1. While we are aware of the problematic connotations and essentialising effects of the term 'ethnic community' (Brubaker 2004), we have chosen to still employ this term, as it is a crucial form of social identification and frame of reference within the research context. Furthermore, we explicitly highlight the constructed nature of and internal divisions within different 'communities'.
2. Land not controlled by customary chiefs was declared vacant, and was governed by colonial regimes of land access based on individual, rather than customary, communitarian ownership.
3. As Simba rebels testify:

There was fighting in Malanda on 4 July 1966. For the cows of Malanda, we haven't found a single one. We went searching among the Wanyarwanda on 23 June 1966, we have attacked the Rwandans and we have taken 500 cows. (*authors' translation*) (Gérard-Libois and Verhaegen 1967, 399)

4. Phonetically *Zairois* (Zairian), but spelled *Zai-RWA* to emphasise Rwandan origins.
5. The various massacres in this era, including the attacks on the refugee camps, are documented in the UNOHCHR (2010).
6. The direct cause of their mutiny was the order to be redeployed to Kasai and Katanga, which was experienced as an attempt by the RPA to fragilise Banyamulenge military capacity (Sages des Banyamulenge 1998).
7. The idea of federalism does not only stem from the specific situation of the Banyamulenge, but is informed by a wider political vision on centre-periphery relations and the configuration of the Congolese state, notably the idea that Kinshasa is too distant and absent in far-flung areas and the government 'must be brought closer to the people'.
8. In response to political claims of the Batembo community, the RCD instituted a second territory in Bunaykiri, which cut off the Batembo inhabited regions from the Havu dominated territory of Kalehe.
9. It concerns *arrêté départemental No.0011/MJ/DAT/MB/ROUTE/1999 d'organisation administrative portant création à titre provisoire du territoire de Minembwe dans la province du Sud Kivu*
10. The involvement of Banyamulenge troops in the Makobola massacre at the end of December 1998, during which hundreds of civilians were killed by the RCD military, was a direct

trigger of this confrontation. In the wake of the massacre, the RPA arrested and transferred a number of Banyamulenge commanders to Goma to restore order. This fostered widespread resentment, as it was seen as an effort to lay the blame on and marginalise Banyamulenge troops. What also played a role was a personal conflict between RPA commander Major Gapfizi and Munyamulenge commander Pacifique Masunzu, who increasingly opposed RPA dominance.

11. A similar decision was taken in relation to the territory of Bunyakiri, causing fears within the Batembo community for renewed exclusion.
12. However, in reality, the *chef de poste* of Minembwe operated largely autonomously from the Fizi authorities, for example withholding a share of the market tax revenues. Thus, the new authority set-up essentially perpetuated a long tradition of de facto local self-government for the Banyamulenge.
13. Interview, representative of Banyamulenge student association, Minembwe, 7 March 2010.
14. Interview, president of Banyamulenge *mutualité* (self-help/social insurance association), Uvira, 10 April 2014.
15. Interview Mai-Mai leader William Amuri Yakotumba, Fizi, December 2011.
16. Interview Raphael Looba Undji, Fizi, December 2011.

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