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Panel: Revisiting the 'National Question' as
a Continuing African Challenge in the 21st Century

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Unpacking the complexity of Identity Politics in the
Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the complexities of identity politics in the Republic Democratic of Congo (DRC) as consequences of colonialism and post colonial nation – building strategies. The focus is on ethnicity and citizenship issues that have been among the most important root causes of systematic conflict in the DRC. The paper traces these issues from the time of the reign of King Leopold II of Belgium regime through to colonial leaders Kasavubu, Patrice Lumumba, Mobutu Seseko and “ The Kabilas”) have handled the issue of ethnicity and citizenship. The case study of the DRC is very important because the country has been rocked by numerous conflicts since the 1960s leading some scholars to even doubt whether the DRC really exist as a nation –state. Through this paper the role of external factors in worsening the problems of national building will be discussed. The essence of the paper is that the resolution of the DRC problems and of identity politics remains the Congolese responsibility first. This calls for self consciousness, justice and unity that can help to challenge the neo colonialist and imperialist ideologies.

1. Introduction

Africa must refuse to be humiliated, exploited, and pushed around. And with the same determination we must refuse to humiliate, exploit, or push others around. We must act, not just say words. (Nyerere 1973, 371). In Shivji 2009

The Democratic Republic of Congo formerly known as “Zaire” has been under serious dilemma rooted in colonial policies of divide and which have resulted in a problematic postcolonial state characterised by diverse forms of violence and multilayered conflicts. In the majority of these conflicts rebel groups and insurgency movements have not only attempt to challenge the authenticity of the government regimes at the centre drawing from ideas of autochthony, identity and citizenship concerns. These issues constitute the national questions which breeds local violence, leading to massive human rights violation, degradation of natural resources by outsiders, displacement of civilians’ populations, rape of women, torture as well as the exploitation of child soldiers. It is under these conditions of national liberation question has remained an unfinished project and is being further complicated by competing elite power struggles. In short, DRC has experienced numerous conflicts and various forms of violence whose essence of roots cannot be understood outside a clear analysis of the country’s botched decolonisation process and how its vast resources endowment has attracted external forces that have contributed to national division and systematic instability.

2. Brief Historical background

During the scramble and partition of Africa, King Leopold II of Belgium transformed Congo into his personal possession and a clandestine labour outpost. This period was characterised by not only the exploitation of local population but also by imposition of a dictatorial regime that was mainly used to get cheap labours and exploit precious natural resources of all types (gold, timber, land, markets and free trade zones) resulting in the death of millions of innocent people. In 1884 - 1885 which marked the Berlin conferences, decisions were taken about Africa in general and the DRC in particular without any single consultation of Africans. Officially, local people were considered as mere sources of cheap labour (Santos, 2007).

From 1887 to 1908, under the sponsorship of King Leopold II of Belgium, Henry Morton Stanley overtook the exploration of the Congo basin. This period was mainly characterised by the appropriation of the Congo territory by imperialists: using concepts such as *terres vacantes* (meaning empty lands), *domaine prive* (private property and exclusively of the state, personified in the name of King Leopold II (Emerson, 1979; Olson, 2008). By 1960 because of international pressure and local resistance the Belgium imperialist system could no longer hold onto a political independence.

The independence struggle was spearheaded by the Movement National Congolese (MNC) and Patrice Lumumba was the leader. In 1960, Patrice Lumumba who was appointed as prime minister with, Joseph Kasavubu from the Alliance des Bakongo (ABAKO) the president of the country. Soon clashes between the prime minister and the president plunged Congo into a crisis that took the form of civil war a secession that eventually invited external actors. Lumumba was assassinated, In 1965 -1996, American intervened and supported Joseph Mobutu who was opposed to communism and he became the leader of the country. This era was characterised by human right violations, a cult of personality, corruptions, kleptocracy. From 1997 to the present, the country was invaded by not only Rwanda/Uganda but also "UN peacekeepers, MONUC" which pretends to help the country but in reality is there to steal, violate human rights and in fact exacerbate the situation of the country rather than solving it. This brief historical background portrays how the DRC decolonisation becomes botched, how national liberation was never given chance to take root and how external agents interfered with the country at its best.

3. National problem

Drawing my motivation from and among scholars and activists such as Kwame, Julius Nyerere and others who were committed to the African national project and toyed with various strategies on how to build durable African nations autonomous from external hidden powers, the DRC was a disaster from the start. The key questions that cry out for responses include: How can we build our nations in a way that we can solve local, regional and national problems without counting on external interventions? *How can the Democratic Republic of Congo defend their own policy space against global hegemony? How can the DRC emerge without using the master tools and instruments?*

For the Democratic Republic of Congo, various scholars feel that in order to solve the national question which date back to colonisation to post - colonisation, it is important to reimagine the postcolonial nation afresh as it has been undermined, oppressed by colonial regimes during colonisation period and post -colonial regimes have also mishandled the nation building project, making it hostage to self interest and further dividing the people. For Nzongala -Ntalaja (1999, 32) the national question is relate to the existence of a nations and belonging rooted in indigenous histories, cultures and their life, norms and values and possessing national character and perhaps a common destiny. Thus, the notion of national question should be first and foremost important as it not only protect national identity but it also helps in terms of belonging and provide the cultural autonomy to any particular community. Borrowing from Fanonian (1968), epistemology and contributions on national question, he maintained that national *production actually rises rather than declines if people take control*. He went further and emphasises that *"centuries will be need to humanise this world which has been forced down to animal leve"*¹. This calls for bring together different ethnics, tribes and communities that have been carved up by colonial matrix of power hidden in different languages, structures and institutions.

In the DRC, the state has been riddled by ethnic problems, citizenships of nationality questions and systematic poverty, genocide conflicts as well as systematic corruption dating back to colonial legacy and currently exacerbated by post-colonial regime in place since the dearth of Lumumba. In addition, the national question in the DRC is also constrained by practice of photo-copying policies imposed by outsiders to solve local problems such forest resources management. For instance, in 2002, the World Bank endorsed \$450 million economic recovery credit for the DRC (World Bank, 2002). The amount of \$15 million of this was made conditional on the adaptation of the DRC forestry code imposed by the World Bank; while this tropical forest resource represents the basic need for local community

livelihood; decision and policies about it should come from the master because of their financial supremacy. Thus, it is vital for subalterns' and black scholars to never give up and underestimates the impact of colonial power on national question.

4. Impacts of national question on the DRC

As portrayed above, the issue of national question is fundamental for the development and of the Democratic Republic of Congo. A impinges on social development, economic development, political development, its sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as its communal identity as "*Congolese first and as African after*". In other words, they will not be any form of sustainable freedom in the DRC and if the issue of national question is not resolved from the root. As emphasised by Wamba Dia Wamba (1991, 64) "the failure by post - colonial states to eradicate nationality oppression, regional/ethnic hegemonism rooted in colonial legacy, has led to secession, civil wars". This implies that the national question remain essential in any efforts aimed at the resolution of the conflicts violence in the DRC. The unresolved of national manifests itself in the form of weak state that is accountable to external forces rather than to local communities, the use of top -down approaches to that development of nation- building continue to persist even under the umbrella of democracy which in reality is counterfeit. As pointed out by Englebert (2003, 3) "created as the institutional façade of a foreign enterprise of exploitation of ivory and rubber, it reproduced as the instrument of an extractive colonization system, in turns violent and paternalistic".

In addition, the national question in the DRC has also created a tendency of polarisation along regional, ethnic and parochial line. For instance, some ethnics groups such as Lunda abd balubakat of Kantaga see themselves as nationality compared to the Lulua and Luba of Kasai, the Hema and Lendu of the Oriental Province, or the Banyarwanda and most other groups from Kivu. This is also evident through the work of Ndlovu - Gateshen (2011) on 'the logic of violence in Africa', where he underlined that "the violence that is currently haunting the DRC is intermingled with the question of citizenship whose roots are traceable to the time of Leopold II". In addition, the DRC population has also created and developed strong provincial identities. However, all of these ethnics groups coexisted before colonisation. What failed to take from roots in the DRC was territorial nationalism. Nzongala - Ntalaja (1999,33) showed that "ethnic identity construction and mobilisation have increased as result of the economic and political insecurity that many countries have experienced in the wake of severe economic crises and the violent backlash of authoritarian rulers against the democracy

movement". Nzongala – Ntalaja (1999) went further by clarifying that *“overlap and cross-cutting ethnicity, the Congolese have developed strong provincial identities; Katangans and Kasaians have long –lasting grievances vis – a –vis other and the state”*.

The transition from Mobutu regime to that of Kabila regime only led to serious problems rather than solutions. For instance, the existing arbitrariness and poverty with renewed armed conflict, the collapse of central administrative system within the entire country, the marginalisation of civil society. In addition, the Congolese population never had a free opportunity to choose their own leaders or a particular politic system.

5. Nation Building in the DRC and impasse

Since “Unity make strength” – “L ‘union fait la force”, it is under this philosophy that merging national identity through state power is vital to maintain political stability, construction of a country. Nation – building can be explained as the procedure of constructing the national identity of a nation. It appears that this concept has become even the focus point of those concerned with peacemaking in Africa (Paris and Sisk, 2007). This is particularly so for African countries that need to reshape their territory that have been cut into slices by colonial hegemony and as well as by post colonial petit bourgeois leadership. During the years 1950s and 1960s, several scholars became concerned about the need to put together societies with manifold ethnic, religious and racial cleavages (Binder, 1964; Cleman and Rosberg, 1966). The bottom line of nation building here will be on structuring national identity as one of the most important elements in any larger effort to create sustainable peace and human development as well as construction of legitimate and effective governmental institutions.

As it is the case with other developing countries and colonised states, decisions about the reform of the DRC and ultimately policies making are made elsewhere by externals actors and forces. Former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki has warned on ‘*re-colonisation*’ He argued that “ a decision had been taken by the UN security Council to ignore the AU and to decide on the future of the continent without involving African” . He went further and pointed out that “It is like the colonisers are asking: did we leave too early”? In terms of the DRC, it is clear that there are two important factors that constitute a range of dilemmas in engaging nation building processes. These factors comprise: the international actors and the local actors also belonging in the class of petit bourgeoisies. In terms of international actors, these are by constituted by a wide range of international financial institutions and donors as well as humanitarians organisations such as MONUC (United Nations Organisation

Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo), the World Bank and the IMF. Many of these institutions and actors and donors dictate policies that create tensions and contradictions between external expectations and the need and expectations of local communities. This is evident through the illustration of the International Criminal Court (ICC, 2011).

The involvement of the International Criminal Court in the DRC means that to some extent, justice cannot be delayed. However, even here the government has opted to ignore its legal obligation to enforce an ICC arrest warrant on purported grounds that postponing justice was in the interest of peace. In August 2006, the ICC issued an arrest warrant against UPC leader Bosco Ntaganda for the war crime of enlisting and conscripting children under the age of 15 and using them in hostilities between 2002 and 2003 in Ituri.

In terms of local actors, DRC's leaders themselves represent agents for Europeans and Americans forces rather than of their own nations. In other words, if there are leaders in the current DRC, they are accountable to the north and not to the DRC as a nation.

Other key important factors that might lead to the failure of nation building as outlined by Paris and Sisk (2007, 8) consists of over-reliance on external intervention to the extent of outsources national governances.

For instance, Barrios and Said - Abass (2005) state that in the DRC *"in their assistance to the transitional government and to the electoral process, international actors avoided the DRC central bank and other financial state structures for money transfer"* (Barrios, 201, 6).

(2) Foreigners are involved in defining and deciding who is a legitimate local leaders, (3) universal values are promoted as a remedy for local problems (4) state building requires both a clean break with the past and reaffirmation of history, (5) Short - tem imperatives often conflict with long term objectives. In the context of the DRC, one can see that none of these aspects were taken into account when this informs through the process of building the state. This is evident through the work of Fukuyama (2011) who admitted to not having any particular experience in the DRC. He goes on in saying that *"pervasive culture of impunity has been one of the greatest obstacles to sustainable peace in the in the DRC, although numerous peace agreements have taken care to use language explicitly excluding amnesties for war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity in an effort to comply with international law, limited efforts have been made to investigate or prosecute these crimes"*.

For Nzongola (2011), the main problem blocking DRC's nation building, could be attributed to the failing of the state. He explained this as: *"failed state" is often abused. It applies to the Congo; however ... The causes of this failure go beyond the short-sighted nature of Belgian*

colonialism. They lie, ultimately, in the trauma inflicted on the peoples of the Congo basin by Leopold II, King of the Belgians, and his so-called "Congo Free State". The brutalities and disruption brought about by that regime, in effect a private and personal colony whose single purpose was the extraction of wealth without regard to the human cost, were never overcome. The concept of politics has never risen above an image of plunder extorted by force, whether by a king, a European colonial system, a dictator or a regional warlord.

Other scholars such as Kevane(2005) highlight that national building policies might also have their banal effect on changing national integration, such as changing the name of the state, capital city or perhaps currency, flags of the countries. Young (2004) noted how "innumerable rituals of state drummed the national idea into the public consciousness: national holidays, national anthems, daily flag-raising ceremonies at all administrative headquarters. In a dozen banal ways, the nation was subliminally communicated through its ubiquitous flag, its currency, its postage stamps, its Identity cards." The Democratic Republic of Congo was similarly named after an indigenous ethnic group, the Kongo; thus President Mobutu renamed the country Zaire in 1971. Eventually, in the DRC, the former dictator Mobutu only amended the capital name from Leopoldville to Kinshasa but also changed the name of other important cities such as Albertville to Kalemie, Elizabethville to Lubumbashi as so on.

By referring to Pan - Africanis ideology which states that "*Africans, irrespective of their affiliation, focused on their similarities rather than on their differences, and there was a consensus amongst the pan-Africanists that the formation of an African union was imperative and urgent*" (Glelawdewos, 2011). Up to date, this is not the case for the DRC as it is still always splited and puzzle by external forces and ultimately creating conflicts amongst different ethnic groups. Power imperatives continue to prevent the absence of DRC into a nation. Ethnicity is open to manipulation in power struggles. Yesterday it was the Bangala and Bangwande ethnics groups , today it is the Ba Shwahili . All of these make it tricky for a nation building to take place in the DRC as wished 'by Pan African past and present epistemology

3. Identity Politics and citizenship as root of violence in the DRC

In analysing the nature of colonial power and how it impinged on the post colony of the DRC, it must be emphasized that the adoption and the embedment of indirect rule systems in which ethnic groups were broken up into small clusters ethnic and subclasses. This is evident through the work of Mamdani (1996) who points out that "the entrenchment of indirect rule system in which subject groups were parcelized into Native Administrative

systems which the chief having executive, legislative and judicial powers entrenched the logic of decentralized despotism in the bifurcated colonial state". This implies modern African ethnicity and identity are social construction of the colonial period.

Identity politics can be portrayed as conduct in which a particular people's politics are shaped by either their identity. This is through race, class difference, religion affiliation and perhaps sexual orientation. The concept identity politics has been used by scholars in political science and development discourses as a mean to attempt to empower the oppressed one. This is in order for them to articulate their coercion in terms of their own incidences.

By engaging manipulation on indigeneity, the colonial states set a process of eternal hidden division between indigenous and non indigenous. As argues by Mamdani (2001), this process indeed set the context in which political violence unfolded in Africa. The difference between indigenous and non indigenous was based on the fact that indigenous people involved those ethnics group or perhaps autochthonous that were originated from local origin and the oppressed while the non indigenous designated the oppressor. In addition, citizenship during colonial and post colonial period was based and constructed on ethnicity criteria's. This means that in order to claim full citizenship, one should at least qualify as belonging to a particular ethnic group and ultimately qualify other groups as inferior and non indigenous. Thus, the understanding of ethnicity as socially constructed focused on it not as a fixed primordial identity but rather as the protean outcomes of the continuous and generally conflict - ridden interaction of political, economic and cultural forces both external and internal to developing ethnic communities (Berman, 1998).

In the context of the current DRC, it represents both the colonial and post colonial instruments in which not only the use of force, fraud, labour exploitation , massacre as well as nepotism through the extraction of rubber and ivory during the colonial period and currently through the exchange of minerals, precious wood , land to militia forces from Rwanda and elsewhere as well as the Euro- American support to maintain their own power through the use of petit bourgeois that represent them locally.

3.1 Ethnicity question in the DRC

Indeed, it is not only through the process of both colonial and posts colonial state violence but also through the process of what was "*civilisation of barbarian peoples*" that some areas of the DRC were characterised by relocation of people from other parts of the country to

provide cheaper labour. Other assumption associated to this was that, the size of the Congo was bigger and perhaps till today some areas have never been either inhabited or ultimately exploited. Thus, come in the ideas to move the minority ethnic groups of people called "Tutsi from Rwanda (Tushi) to the Congo to settle as "Banyamulenge" in areas around Mulenge Plateau situated in the South Kivu closed to Burundu - Congo - Rwanda border. After being working in mining areas and farms for different years, they eventually struggled to gain citizenship of the Congo. Unluckily, this problem was not taken seriously from Mobutu regime to that of Joseph Kabila. Subsequently, this has led to serious dilemma whose ar manifestations have resulted in spates of violence and was. *This leads to question of who's Congolese and who's not? Does Congo really exist as a nation?* Perhaps the answer will be - No if one's has to cautiously look at the characteristic of a nation such as having a common language, common territory, a common economic life and economic cohesion stable community as well as common culture.

Furthermore, the assassination of former President Juvenal Habyarimana from Hutu ethnic in Rwanda in 1994 sparked a genocide which led to mass migration of Tutsi and Hutu to the East of the Congo (Young and Turner, 1985; Tuner, 2007, Nzongola, 2004; Berman, 1998). But, the Congo constitution of 1964 refuted citizenship to anyone who entered the country after 1908; this was under the colonial period. During the dictatorial regime of Mobutu Seseko's in 1972, the regulation granted citizenship to all migrants living the country prior to 1950(Mamdani, 2001, Trefon *et al*, 2002). Despite this generosity of Mobutu, when Laurent Kabila overthrown Mobutu regime, obviously with the support of all Rwanda , Burundi and Uganda regimes, the Banyamulenge also supported this agenda and ended Mobutu regime. For Nzongala's(1999) there are three types of ethnic identity that can lead to violence. These types of ethnic identity comprise: (1) inter -communal violence over economic and social space; (2) rebellions by oppressed minorities and (3) ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The DRC is haunted by political for ethnic cleansing. The trouble which occurred in Kinshasa between 1992 -1994 targeting Rwandese from the North Kivu and people from Kasai province living and working in Katanga is a case in position. In these two situations, the former dictators Mobutu Seseko and his cronies were indeed utilising what Nzongala called "*ethnic card*" to divide the population and thus deteriorating the democracy system. While people affected in one of these provinces/areas seek refuge in another antagonist place, they were expelled. Subsequently, many of them died from hunger, exhaustion, attacks by ferocious wild animal and killed by insanitary conditions. As well as killed by the armed militia of the Katanga provincial Governor Gabriel Kyungu wa Kumwanza. Later on, the

same *Kyungu genocidare* become the DRC Ambassador to Kenya. How one can explain this? It shows that *ethnic preference* play major role in political appointments in the DRC.

3.2 *Secessionist Movement*

The DRC is also haunted by treats of cession aimed at recreating a separate state which began in with Katanga 1960's. One significant war occurred which involved an army of white mercenaries and a group of Congolese defending Katanga secession. One of the most important leaders of this trouble was Moise Tshombe, corrupted and manipulated by a group of white colonialists from Belgium, Britain and France, who attempted to maintain the mineral – and the richest economical province as a separate state. Only after the assassination of Lumumba the “dominant metropolitan interests abandoned Tshombe and the settlers (Nzongola, 1999, 52). From this, one can see that colonialist forces have been trying to use different means to split the community of the DRC and as a result this has led to current severe troubles.

Nevertheless, all these above mentioned crises, the Kabila's “*monarchy*” appear not to be solution than his predecessors. This is evident through various aspects. These include: human rights violation, the inappropriate use of precious mineral such as gold, diamonds, copper and Zincs, degradation of natural resources and particularly tropical forest precious timber and non timber products as well as the use of child soldiers (Taylor, 2003). Amongst DRC leaders, Mobutu attempted to bring the idea about national identity in the Congo but this failed eventually because of his autocratic state. This is evident through the work of Kevin (2000, 235) who highlighted that “after his second coup on 24 November 1965, Mobutu sought to change Congo's image under an authenticity campaign aimed at reclaiming the nation African tradition”. This shows that Mobutu was trying to present a new image of a post colonial African grounding itself on in the ancestral history. For Laurent Desire Kabila, affiliated of Lumumba Ideology, was assassinated in 2001 by one of his body guard and did reach his aspiration. For Joseph Kabila, although he has attempted to bring the country to the election process although ‘corrupted’, but in reality the main problem of the country such as human right as well as the national question remain challenges since he cannot identify himself as Congolese.

4. Conclusion

In the light of what have been discussed above with regard to identity politics, it is important to conclude that identity politics plays crucial role in complicating the current situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo as it relates to political, economic and social identity. In other words, the future of DRC lies in civic re - imagination of 'Congolese citizenship into inclusivity and building confidence about who they irrespective of where they come from. The specific questions of nationality, identity politics as well as citizenship need urgent attention. The nature and role of the state needs to be fully decolonized and also satisfied. Lessons must be drawn around from historical background of the DRC to inform future planning of the nation and the state as it contributed to conflicts and prevention of coalescence of the people into one nation. Over - reliance on the affairs of the country must be avoided as it contributed to conflicts and prevention of coalescence of the people into one nation. The urgent task for the DRC is to rebuild the nation - state on democratic lines to enable participation of the people in the process.

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