



Borders versus People - Part II: Congo - A Classic African Tragedy

By Kalundi Serumaga



The borders between Uganda, Congo and Rwanda were drawn in the early 1900s. This was not an African decision. A joint team made up of officials representing the German, Belgium and British empires surveyed the hills of the region and made a decision. It was not a simple matter. At one point, they were attacked by a party of rebels led in 1911 by the anti-colonial Nyabinghi warrior Muhumuza, who ambushed a joint Anglo-Belgian-Germany Boundary Commission. It was to be her last operation. She was injured, captured and imprisoned by the British in Buganda for the rest of her life. Forty of her fighters were killed.

But that is the story for Part III of this series.

For now, the story is this: Those white man's borders still eat African lives. On 27th March this year, a Rwandan national named Elizabeth Mukagarukwiza collapsed and died on the Ugandan side of the closed border while running from Rwanda security officials trying to take her back to Rwanda. She was reportedly in search of medication related to her pregnancy.

On May 24th, two men, one Ugandan, one Rwandan, were shot dead after being intercepted on a goods run into Rwanda. Like many others, they were not carrying anything ordinarily illegal.

First, as usual, it will be the peasants. The rest of us, all things remaining constant, will be caught up

with later.



Read Also: Borders versus People - Part I:
The Tribe Conundrum

Both incidents were immediate victims of the increasingly absurd bouts of megaphone diplomacy between the two countries. At one point, in a bid to deny their border incursion, some Rwandan officials even found themselves claiming that the smugglers - one Ugandan and one Rwandan - had been shot dead inside Rwanda, despite their bodies being found on the Ugandan side.

Overall, the crisis has enabled us to more clearly discern two things previously held tight by the now unsettled inner circles.

First, the people of Rwanda, for all their country's reported developmental progress, remain seriously poor. Many will continue living outside their country, or seek to do so, for economic reasons, rather than political ones.

Second, President Yoweri Museveni's support to the 1993 Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebel invasion of Rwanda, and the eventual overthrow of the regime in Rwanda was much more extensive and explicit than many thought at the time.

Third, that the enmity between these two hitherto sister regimes is rooted in their joint sojourn in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Having been repeatedly assured that Eastern Africa's future lies only in ever-greater regional integration, the sight of the principal proponent of this view, and the principal product of its attempted implementation standing now at loggerheads, will be most confounding to those genuine Pan-Africanists in support of that great expression of their ideals - the East African Federation.

Let me put it this way: Who holds the legitimate voice of the various peoples of East Africa? That question is critical to the future of the idea of a regional integration.

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First, who exactly is in conflict with whom, in this instance? Clearly, it would not be correct to call this a conflict between Uganda and Rwanda for the simple reason that despite grand claims to the contrary, neither government can prove they actually represent the will and aspirations of their

citizens. Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Paul Kagame of Rwanda came to power through armed might, relying on narrow ethnic-favouring armies, and have been energetically stage-managing presidential elections - not to mention constitutional controls on their tenures - ever since.

On the other hand, neither can we call this a conflict between two men. Clearly there are interests broader than the personal views of the two principals involved, not to mention the hundreds of minions that have been scurrying about in their name, arresting, deporting, vilifying, abducting, counter-deporting and spaying on each other.

This is a clash of regimes, and the corpus of the respective crony interests that have built up around them over the decades.

Ironically, it is also unavoidable, given that both leaders chaperone exactly the same competing global ambitions and interests in the Great Lakes region, which is exactly what led to the great falling out between their respective armies in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Until then, it did not seem possible to imagine any kind of disagreement ever-emerging between them or their leaders, certainly not in the Pan-African mind.

Congo: Heart of dark foreign forces

But Congo is not the “heart of darkness” of Kurtz’s rendering. Congo is the beating heart of Africa, long excised from her body by a series of venal occupiers: first King Leopold of Belgium, then his state, then Marshal Mobutu as the *nyapara* for Western corporations there. Finally, our liberators moved in, and the real story of the Uganda-Rwanda border is actually the story of whether they ever actually left.

In that sense, Congo is the heart of light, in that it illuminates all the dark places of a person’s soul, and lays bare their true character, as Joseph Conrad’s Congo did with Kurtz. Ugandan and Rwandan armies entered the DRC as liberating heroes. Today, they are rightly seen as the villains who brought the place to final ruin.

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It is this centrality to the continent, bordering nine other countries that led Frantz Fanon to call Congo the “trigger” for the coming African revolution. The whole bounty of Africa’s riches seems to lie within her reach.

Along with its current membership of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Congo, if it so wished, could be a member state of the East African Community (EAC) and technically even of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Its size seems to match only its sheer known mineral wealth, upon which this historical procession of predators feast.

If there is one population on the entire continent least deserving of further depredations, robberies and violence, it is the people of the DRC.

Before even Leopold, so much of its population was fed into the ships of the transatlantic slave trade

for centuries that there is even a location called “Congo Square” in what is now the American city of New Orleans, in which the building blocks of American jazz were shaped by enslaved Africans on their occasional days off.

There followed a slavery-in-place, as Belgium’s Leopold organised the extraction of rubber and cocoa through forced labour camps.

William Lever, the British industrialist, was so impressed by the economic efficiencies of the slave labour system that he went into partnership with Leopold for the steady supply of the palm oil he needed to massively expand his soap manufacturing business.

This classic African tragedy, however, did not stop the two great Pan-African armies from clashing there three times, and in the process, basically laying waste the eastern city of Kisangani. Some truly epic levels of energy were expended in the stealing of minerals, lumber and other valuables from the DRC. This progressed from the mere looting of mining company stores to the taking over or establishment of artisanal mines, and even the importation of slave labour made up of “idle” ghetto youth swept off the ghetto streets from as far away as Kampala.

The International Court of Justice’s 2005 ruling against Uganda, as well as a United Nations report on Rwanda, carries the outlines of the criminality, despite furious denials from the culprits. The 10-billion-dollar penalty against Uganda remains unpaid, but the wider crime is to have created the conditions that have led to the deaths of an estimated six million Congolese people.

It would be a mistake to see any of these crimes as events that happened a long time ago, and far away. Lever’s company lives on today as Unilever. Find a moment to go and check how many of the manufactured items on your kitchen and bathroom shelves are made by this company. Congo’s long misery put Unilever in a position to be able to put them there.

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And by taking the role of Mobutu, these two friends’ occupying armies and proxy militias have enabled other Western corporations to hold Congo in that position ever since. The quarrel is about which of these twins will be the principal instrument in the facilitation of this plunder, with more than a little benefit to itself.

Either this Pan-African idea does not really exist, or these leaders have never believed in it.

This is simply the story. Now we need the story behind the story, which I will explore in Part III of this series.

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