

## “Where do we belong?”

### Identity and autochthony discourse amongst Congolese Rwandophones

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#### About the author

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#### Acknowledgments

I thank the Aegis Trust's Research, Policy and Higher Education program for the funding for this policy brief production. I am thankful to Dr Etienne Ruwebana for his constructive comments on the draft. I extend my gratitude to all interviewees who shared with me their narratives.

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#### Executive summary

In the context of conflict in the DRC, the concept of autochthony is used to deny citizenship and belonging to Congolese Rwandophones because they are considered as not “sons of the soil,” hence outsiders.

Experiences from the Congolese Rwandophones raise questions about the uncertainty of belonging, given that citizenship right is a matter of political manipulation and a tool to legitimise exclusion and discrimination.

Given the power of autochthony discourse in legitimising and denying belonging, Congolese Rwandophones, on the one hand, use the same discourse that represents them as not Congolese, and, on the other hand, challenge belonging that is based on the relationship with the soil, a particular territory.

Autochthony as a concept needs to be reconceptualised, as it faces a crisis in its operationalisation. As evidenced in narratives from Congolese Rwandophones (also elsewhere in Africa and Europe), the very “son of the soil” is excluded or included in some situations, given the context (or interests) at play.

Significantly, a degree of ambivalence is present in claims of belonging articulated through the autochthony discourse. This impacts on the meaning of being a Rwandophone to the extent of causing a multifaceted and uncertain construction of identity on the one hand and the understanding of conflict dynamics in the Great Lakes Region on the other.

Autochthony discourse within the Rwandophone group poses pertinent questions about political space and the possibility of successfully framing belonging otherwise in the current context of the DRC. This discourse is particularly problematic, as it is emotional and most saliently directed against the Rwandophone community.

## Introduction

In many conflicts, narratives around the politics of origin, articulated through autochthony discourse, play an important role in the politics of inclusion and exclusion. This is the case in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where the citizenship of the Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese (simply “Rwandophones” in this policy brief) has constantly been debated. The Congolese Rwandophone population comprises members of the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa so-called ethnic groups. Some of these Rwandophones prefer to be identified under names denoting their territorial belonging, as in Banyabwisha (or people of Bwisha). The composite ethnic group interviewed for this policy brief have defined themselves as Congolese Rwandophones and have been living in the DRC for quite a long time. Some settled in the country before the demarcation of African boundaries at the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885. Others emigrated to the DRC in different waves during and after colonisation of territories of origin and destination. Despite the fact that the group has lived in the DRC for a long time, their belonging to the DRC has been questioned. Given ways in which nationality laws kept changing, a Rwandophone who was recognised as a Congolese citizen at one point in time (Law N° 72 – 002 of January 5th 1972) was considered a foreigner in another amended nationality law (Law N° 81 – 002 of June 29th 1981).

The concept of autochthony refers to “son of the soil.” It allows a person to claim certain rights over territory by asserting that he or she is an original inhabitant of that territory (Boas and Dunn, 2013; Geschiere, 2005, 2009). Moreover, autochthony discourse plays a virulent role in the context of conflict or electoral process where a group represents a danger.

This policy brief offers a summary of key findings on autochthony discourse, identity construction and conflict dynamics in the Great Lakes Region, as depicted in Congolese Rwandophones’ narratives and experiences of exclusion, discrimination and conflict. It also offers recommendations for policy makers. Narratives from Congolese Rwandophones were collected from four different sites: Goma (DRC), Rubavu, Kigeme and Gihembe refugee camps (Rwanda). Thus, interviews in Goma and with Rwandophone refugees living both in the camps in Rwanda but also outside the camps (in Rubavu) were taken into account. Narratives were collected between 2011 and 2014. Given the transboundary implications of the subjectmatter of conducted research, it can inform policymaking in the wider Great Lakes Region.

## Ambivalence of belonging under the autochthony discourse

The notion of belonging to the DRC is articulated among other discourses through autochthony discourse, which links identity to space. In making claims as citizens of the DRC, the majority of Congolese Rwandophones have expressed their belonging through various characteristics of attachment to land, ancestors, blood linkage to customary chiefs (Mwami) and places of birth. These aspects of attachment that allow one to claim belonging to a given territory are quite similar to how autochthony discourse is conceptualised.

However, belonging through autochthony discourse was challenged by the same Congolese Rwandophones. They evoked the legalistic aspect of belonging as one way that provides grounds for claiming to belong to a state. In this case, belonging was translated as the possession of an electoral card, the provisions of successive constitutions (1964-2006) and nationality laws (1971, 1972, 1981 and 2004), and yet they are considered and treated as *Congolais de seconde classe*.

It is worth noting that for more than two decades (since the country was renamed DRC after Laurent Désiré Kabila took power), no identity cards were issued in the country. In relation to legal aspects of citizenship, Congolese Rwandophones express their indignation when it comes to the issue of (de facto) double citizenship that does not apply to Congolese Rwandophones. While Congolese law in force does not accommodate dual citizenship, a cause for their indignation is that several Congolese are known to have both Belgian and Congolese citizenship without being in trouble. However, when you are a Rwandophone and you are caught up with another citizenship, especially a Rwandan identity card or passport, you have a serious problem – grounds for non-recognition as Congolese, and hence, not belonging to the DRC. The right to citizenship has been a recurrent unsettled issue for the Banyarwanda ethnic group. Congolese citizenship is organised in the various constitutions (see article 6, Cons.1964; article 10, Cons. 2006) and the nationality law of 2004 (see articles 6 to 47) in a way to allow various interpretations and sometimes discrimination. For instance, the term *nationalité d'origine*, as articulated in article 6 of the nationality law of 2004, bears distinct interpretations regarding the group considered not to be *Congolais d'origine*. Additionally, the nationality law in the DRC has frequently been modified to suit the will of the government in place. Thus, the belonging of Congolese Rwandophones as citizens of the DRC is kept uncertain, as their Congolese nationality has been highly politicised to the extent that it gets to be switched *off* and *on* at a certain point in time. Congolese Rwandophones' experience of exclusion, discrimination and conflict through autochthony discourse reflects a situation of being in between.

### **Conflict, autochthony discourse and identity**

In the context of conflict in the DRC, the autochthony discourse is used against the Congolese Rwandophones. It frames them as foreigners and warmongers, based on the fact that several episodes of armed hostility in the eastern

provinces of the DRC have opposed armed groups dominantly composed of Rwandophones to the regular Congolese army (*Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo*). Importantly, Rwanda's support of the Rwandophone armed groups, as reported by the UN group of experts (2008-2012), intensified the use (and misuse) of the autochthony discourse against Congolese Rwandophones. Besides this involvement in armed hostilities, Congolese Rwandophones are popularly portrayed as Rwandans because of shared linguistic and cultural attributes.

In 1996, the Congolese Rwandophones largely supported the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie*, an armed group fighting against exclusion, discrimination and insecurity. They have articulated their claims in terms of rights to citizenship, to political participation, to land access and other politico-economic rights.

It is important to underline the fact that the autochthony discourse in the DRC has stressed similarities between Rwandans and Congolese Rwandophones to make claims for belonging to DRC illegitimate. This shows how much autochthony discourse in the DRC has been used as a strategy not only to support conflict in the DRC but also to delegitimise Congolese citizenship of Rwandophones that the group has possessed over time. Hence, the Congolese Rwandophones' status of being sons of the soil becomes difficult for them to legitimise themselves, given the ways in which the autochthony discourse has been used. In addition, these Congolese Rwandophones have questioned the autochthony discourse as the ultimate way to Congolese citizenship, since their belonging to the DRC has been manipulated for the interests of political power. In fact, the autochthony discourse per se is simply a strategy, especially in the context of conflict in the DRC, where a group is blamed for the conflicts and consequently deserves to be excluded when various interests are at stake.

## Understanding conflicts and belonging

The findings presented in the above sections show ways in which belonging was expressed by Congolese Rwandophones in their narratives, which provides insight into how being identified with the DRC is surrounded with uncertainty, given the fact that citizenship laws have been manipulated by Congolese politicians. These findings offer an opportunity for policy makers to revisit existing laws in relation to citizenship to ensure that arbitrary contestation of belonging to the DRC will not find room. In addition, findings from this research suggest that Congolese Rwandophones should not be blamed as causes of conflict in the DRC, as has been expressed in the popular autochthony discourse in the DRC. A dialogue between policy makers and the Congolese Rwandophone refugees living in Rwanda would constitute an important departure towards a sustainable policy that addresses discrimination and exclusion. A better understanding of conflict dynamics, especially in the Eastern DRC, could be provided by taking into account the absent voices of Congolese Rwandophones, for whom this research has provided space and uncovered new knowledge.

## Conclusion

Based on narratives collected from Congolese Rwandophones, this research showed that a particular discourse such as autochthony can both be embraced and refuted by those excluded. The findings in the study demonstrated that autochthony discourses need to be understood within a general trend of negative nationalism in Africa, where belonging is used as an instrumental tool to rationalise conflict and to exclude those perceived as foreigners. Findings revealed how claims of belonging are quite ambivalent, and heavily shaped by feelings of exclusion, which have made Rwandophones' positioning towards the autochthony discourses both reactive and assertive.

The use of the autochthony discourse is analysed by scholars such as Geschiere (2009) and Boas and Dunn (2013) as a post-colonial tool for the construction of the Congolese nation and as a sign of state failure. Hence there is a need to create an environment in the region in which resentment against Congolese Rwandophones and Rwandans is decreasing. The study indicated that policy measures to address autochthony in the DRC have to take into consideration the fact that both Congolese Rwandophones and the Congolese state seemed to be caught in the powerful grip of the autochthony discourse. This invites, on the one hand, a renewal of dialogue and collaboration (and trust) between Congolese Rwandophones and other ethnic groups in areas such as the North Kivu provinces where most of them live(d), which should be facilitated by leaders at all levels. On the other hand, a better relationship between the DRC and Rwanda is necessary to suppress feelings of distrust, and to let this happen, there needs to be a dialogue between both countries that goes beyond furtherance of political and economic exchanges to encompass the fate and future of Congolese Rwandophones.