

Identity and Borders Complex Impact on Conflicts in Africa: Great Lakes Case

مركب الهوية والحدود وتأثيره على النزاعات في افريقيا: حالة البحيرات العظمى

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Abstract:

The Great Lakes in Africa emerges as a critical area for conflict, notably characterized by its ethnically driven tensions that sprawl across multiple nations. The area is engulfed by a variety of disputes, which include internal ethnic clashes and cross-border disagreements, together forming a layered conflict landscape with ethnic regional undertones. These conflicts have persisted for decades, evolving along two primary trajectories: efforts aimed at definitive resolution and strategies focused merely on conflict management without actual resolution. The root of such enduring conflicts lies in the rich ethnic diversity and the distinct societal traits of the region, marked by significant disparities among various ethnic groups.

Keywords: Conflicts, Identity, Great Lakes.

الملخص:

تشكل البحيرات الكبرى في افريقيا منطقة مهمة للنزاع، و مرد ذلك طبيعة النزاع الاثني الواقع بها وامتداده في العديد من الدول المكونة لها، كما أن النزاعات في منطقة البحيرات الكبرى تجمع ما بين النزاع الاثني -الداخلي والنزاع الحدودي الحاصل ما بين الدول، مما يشكلان معا مركبا يأخذ في الكثير من الأحيان بعدا اثنيا إقليميا. كما أن الصفة الغالبة لهذه النزاعات تتمثل في كونها امتدت منذ عقود طويلة لتتخذ مسار دون آخر، الأول متعلق بإنهاء النزاع و حله، أما الثاني فيشمل إدارة هذا النزاع دون حله. وربما السبب الرئيس في كل ما سبق ذكره هو التنوع العرقي الحاصل والممتد على طول هذه الرقعة الجغرافية، ضف إلى ذلك الخصوصية المجتمعية المتعلقة أساسا بجماعات اثنية تمتاز وتختلف في الكثير من المتغيرات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النزاعات، الهوية، البحيرات العظمى

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Introduction:

The African continent stands as one of the most critical and perilous conflict zones globally due to the pervasive and multifaceted nature of its disputes. These conflicts, characterized by a diverse array of determinants, frequently intertwine to form a complex matrix that poses significant challenges to resolution efforts. This complexity underpins the sustained intensity and longevity of conflicts across the continent, enduring over many decades.

Particularly noteworthy is the Great Lakes region, or the Greater Lakes, recognized as one of the most volatile areas both within Africa and internationally. This region, sprawling over a vast area, is endowed with a rich array of resources which inadvertently fuels the ongoing disputes. A pivotal aspect of our study highlights that the region is plagued by conflicts of a dual nature, where boundary disputes intersect with ethnic tensions.

The confluence of these two conflict types often results in deeply entrenched disputes that stubbornly resist efforts towards peaceful resolution or even temporary settlements.

This resistance stems from the intrinsic complexity of ethnic conflicts, rooted fundamentally in issues of identity, belonging, and allegiance to groups that may extend beyond the national borders of one state to involve neighboring states or span across several countries, thus assuming a regional dimension and challenging the conventional logic governed by geographical boundaries. This scenario prompts us to explore the following central question:

“How far does the identity and boundaries variables play an active and significant role in shaping and increase conflicts in the Great Lakes region?.”

In exploring this question, the article will base on:

1. A conceptual overview of the interplay between identity and borders in the Great Lakes region.
2. An analysis of the dynamics of conflict within the region.
3. The dynamics of identity and borders in the genesis and continuity of conflicts.

1. A Conceptual Overview of the Interplay between Identity and Borders in the Great Lakes Region:

Understanding the intricate relationship between identity and borders necessitates a precise definition of the fundamental concepts central to this study. This section outlines the significant aspects of this duality, focusing on the triad of the Great Lakes states, identity, and borders.

1.1- Great Lakes States:

The "Great Lakes Region" typically refers to an area defined by major lakes and includes nations such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda. This designation predominantly carries a political rather than a geographic implication, notably excluding Tanzania, which geographically belongs to the region.

1.2- Identity:

Identity has increasingly become a central theme in political and ideological conflicts, often escalating into a catalyst for violence and extremism. The focus on identity gained

prominence post-Cold War as ideological conflicts waned, and ethnic factors ascended in the realm of international relations, sparking identity-based or ethnic conflicts globally.

Various groups within nations have sought to affirm their cultural uniqueness, precipitating the dissolution and emergence of states. According to “Fredrik Barth”, identity is synonym to ethnicity, which he describes as a lineage-based group sharing core cultural values that are expressed in collective behavior and self-recognition¹.

Identity encompasses a group's shared customs, traditions, language, religion, and distinct features such as origin and physiological characteristics, coexisting within a society with other diverse groups. “Anthony Smith” extends this definition, describing identity as a collective sharing a common ancestry, historical memories, cultural elements linked to a specific territory, and mutual solidarity².

These definitions frame identity as a set of cultural characteristics that differentiate a group, manifesting in daily interactions and contributing to a layered social fabric where micro-identities (such as tribal or clan affiliations) and macro-identities (like religion, language, and nationality) converge and influence each other.

1.3- Borders:

While borders might initially be perceived as merely geographical demarcations, they also possess a significant political dimension. Borders represent the confluence of geographical and political realities, often redrawn post-conflict to reflect ethnic, political, and military considerations. This recalibration of political geography has drawn international focus to border issues, as evidenced by the redrawing of borders following major conflicts such as the World Wars.

Borders represent more than geographical demarcations; it is the manifestation of political relationships between human groups, shaped by either conflict or cooperation depending on the circumstances that define the demarcation process.

It is evident that political borders serve to delineate the boundaries between states, within which each state asserts sovereignty, enforces laws, and exercises exclusive rights of use and exploitation. Moreover, political borders often encapsulate identity boundaries, reflecting the shared characteristics of a nation or ethnic group within a defined geographical area.

However, the alignment of geographical and cultural boundaries is not always consistent. There are instances where a single ethnic group, spread over a vast geographical area, is segmented by political borders. This division often ignites conflicts fueled by the group's aspirations for unification. Conversely, political strategies may exploit identity divisions as a divide-and-conquer tactic, a phenomenon notably prevalent in the Great Lakes region, providing a rich context for analysis.

Consequently, borders can be conceptualized as encompassing two distinct yet overlapping spheres: the geographic-political borders, which are the state's official boundaries delineating sovereignty, and the cultural-social borders³, which transcend the state's official confines to include broader identity characteristics shared across neighboring states.

¹- Fredrik Bath, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, The Social Organization Of Culture Difference*, Oslo, Universitets Forlaget, 1969, p. 30.

²- Anthony Smith, *National Identity*, London: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 39.

³- Abdellatif Al-Moutadayin, *Dual Borders: Identity Conflicts from a Political Perspective*, Al Mustaqbal Al Arabi, Issue 454, December 2016, pp. 60-61.

Groups that share cultural and ethnic traits may advocate for the extension of these borders to reflect their identity, particularly during periods of conflict¹. Often, disputes arise not merely over the physical demarcation of borders but rather over the desire of these groups to achieve recognition and distinct status.

2. An Analysis of the Dynamics of Conflict Within the Region:

The colonial history of Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Belgian Congo) under Belgian rule significantly shaped the current conflict dynamics within these nations. The Belgian colonial strategy exploited ethnic distinctions, particularly between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes, to instigate and perpetuate ethnic conflicts. This exploitation was less pronounced but still present in Uganda.

The geopolitical boundaries imposed by colonial rule were crafted with an eye to identity, effectively splitting the Tutsi and Hutu across three different countries. This artificial division created and cemented ethnic groups with historical animosities within a single regional framework, thereby seeding persistent conflicts that continue to influence the geopolitical landscape of the Great Lakes region.

Colonial powers often conferred privileges on select ethnic groups, thereby instigating long-lasting divisions and conflicts. In Rwanda, political privileges were afforded to the Tutsi minority, who constituted approximately 20% of the population. This was to the detriment of the Hutu majority, which accounted for 80% of the population².

Such disparities laid the groundwork for severe intergroup violence, culminating in the horrific 1994 genocide. During this tragic period, the Hutu majority launched a brutal ethnic cleansing campaign against the Tutsi.

A parallel scenario unfolded in Burundi, tracing its origins to the 14th century when Tutsi invaders established a tyrannical regime over the indigenous Hutu population. The animosity between these groups intensified under Belgian colonial rule and erupted in the 1972 massacre, notoriously referred to as the "Year of Terror," which predominantly targeted the Hutu elite and precipitated a series of political upheavals³.

Similarly, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the longstanding rivalry between these groups led to repeated conflicts, particularly in the Kivu region. This area became a flashpoint following numerous migrations of Hutu from Rwanda, further exacerbating tensions and violence.

2.1- The Case of Rwanda:

The roots of Rwanda's conflict can be traced back to the 17th century, during significant migratory movements from East Africa by the Gala tribes. Upon settling in Rwanda and Burundi, these newcomers negotiated a social contract with the native populations. Under this agreement, the Tutsi assumed a protective role over the Hutu, who were predominantly agrarian.

During the Belgian mandate from 1914 to 1959, the colonial administrators appointed the Tutsi minority to govern, which fostered a cooperative yet complex relationship with the colonizers. Following Rwanda's independence in 1959, the Hutu majority came to power. The

¹- Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1991, p. 28.

²- Abdellatif Al-Moutadayin, *Op. Cit*, p. 71.

³- Raymond Maher Kamel, *Burundi after the Coup Last July*, *International Politics*, Issue 127, Cairo, January 1997, p. 238.

ensuing political dynamics saw the first military coup in 1973, led by “Juvénal Habyarimana”, a Hutu from the northern region. He displaced the southern Hutu leadership, establishing a regime that was both divisive and fraught with ethnic animosities.

Post-1990, the Rwandan opposition, including the political and military factions of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, began to consolidate power. The civil war officially began on October 1, 1990, an event often described as the "Invasion of Rwanda."

This period was marked by external interventions, with France supporting Habyarimana, while the opposition received aid from Uganda and the United Kingdom. The dynamics of these alliances illustrate the mechanisms through which violence not only persisted within Rwanda but also spilled over into neighboring nations. The devastating 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and their supporters resulted in the deaths of approximately 100,000 individuals and displaced over 1.7 million people, further underscoring the profound and lasting impact of ethnic strife¹.

2.2- Democratic Republic of Congo Case:

The genesis of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, historically known as Zaire, is deeply rooted in the land rights disputes between the Hutu and Tutsi communities in the eastern Kivu region.

During the Belgian colonial period, there was a significant resettlement of Hutu individuals from Rwanda into eastern Kivu. This set the stage for ongoing ethnic tensions that would later exacerbate regional conflicts².

Upon gaining independence, “Joseph Kasavubu” became the first president of the Democratic Republic of Congo. His tenure was marked early by a profound political crisis sparked by disagreements with his prime minister, “Patrice Lumumba”. The assassination of Lumumba further deepened the national crisis. The subsequent influx of Rwandan refugees, especially between 1959 and 1961, intensified these tensions.

Mobutu who came to power through a coup, enacted a presidential decree in 1972 that extended Congolese nationality to all Rwandans and Burundians who had settled in the country before 1950. However, in a stark reversal in 1981, Mobutu withdrew this right specifically from Rwandan Banyarwanda. This region also witnessed a significant migration from Burundi and Rwanda, including around two million people, amongst whom were members of the former Rwandan army (EX FAR)³.

The political landscape of the Democratic Republic of Congo has been characterized by a series of regime changes due to ongoing coups, leading up to “Laurent Kabila's” overthrow of Mobutu in 1997. Kabila faced criticism for using ethnic affiliations to his advantage, particularly favoring individuals from Katanga province.

This nepotism contributed to the outbreak of new conflicts in 1998, which persisted with further escalations in 2006, 2007, and 2008.

¹- Khaled Hanafi Ali, The Great Lakes and the Future of Peace, International Politics Magazine, Issue 152, Cairo, October 2002, pp. 153.

²- Ibid, pp 154-155.

³- Ethienne R Usamira, La Dynamique Des Conflits Ethniques Au Nord-Kivu: Une Réflexion Prospective, Afrique Contemporaine, Automne 2003, pp. 146-152.

3. The Dynamics of Identity and Borders in the Genesis and Continuity of Conflicts:

The dominant groups within each country in the Great Lakes region sought, after independence, to consolidate their position in power, which could only be achieved by empowering their members to hold important positions in the state, while weakening other ethnic groups and pursuing policies of extermination against them, as it happened in the Democratic Republic of the Congo when President Mobutu retracted in 1980 the decision he had issued regarding granting citizenship to the Banyarwanda.

Thus, In September 1996, the Governor of South Kivu issued an ultimatum via the state radio station, warning the Banyarwanda of Mulenge to leave the country within one week or face imprisonment and extermination. There were also reactions to the 1981 law that deprived the Banyarwanda of their citizenship and the confiscation of their lands, which were controlled by local Congolese groups.

It's important to point out, whenever actions are recorded against a particular group, the same group revolts in another country because they ultimately constitute a single identity, which explains the situation when a conflict erupts in one country and quickly spreads to other countries where these groups reside in search of support and solidarity¹.

Border issues among ethnic groups arise when events threaten their significant characteristics, in which case the natural defense system against unacceptable behavior is activated, driven by feelings of loyalty and belonging to a single identity.

This behavior would impose a kind of logic that does not recognize the existence of geographical and political borders in particular, and operates according to a logic related to the dissolution of borders and makes them illusory as a result of the group's extension along these borders, which are in reality considered to be compelling dividers for it. Moreover, these groups may move in another direction to demand the redrawing of borders according to an identity-based conception of values that unites the same ethnic groups, which constitutes the essence of the idea of separation and the desire for self-determination.

Furthermore, these groups may pursue an alternative course of action by advocating for the redrawing of boundaries based on an identity-centric value system that aligns and unifies similar ethnic groups. This pursuit encapsulates the essence of secessionist movements and the broader quest for self-determination².

Notably, conflicts that intertwine identity or ethnic dimensions with the geographical-political variable (borders) tend to form a complicated construct that is challenging to navigate due to the persistent influence and pressure exerted by identity on these boundaries. Understanding these dynamics requires an exploration of the factors that facilitate movement to neighboring countries and the strategies employed by these groups in their transboundary activities, all of which are crucial for analyzing the regional context of these conflicts.

3.1- Flow Factors between the Great Lakes Countries:

In examining the dynamics between the Great Lakes countries, several pivotal factors emerge:

¹- Christophe Réveillard, *Les Conflits De Type Infra-Etatique En Afrique, Géostratégiques*, N° 25, Octobre 2009, pp. 194-198.

²- Abdellatif Al-Moutadayin, *Op. Cit*, p. 71.

***Geographical Borders:**

The geographical aspect is instrumental, serving as a crucial link among communities. Geographic connectivity renders states notably vulnerable in instances of conflict within or across neighboring regions.

This vulnerability has been highlighted by “Starre and Most”, who observed that internal conflicts within a state significantly increase the probability of involvement by neighboring states, thereby facilitating conflict’s spreading. This phenomenon is evident in the numerous instances where African nations, sharing cultural ties, have been embroiled in conflicts through alliances and support for separatist movements.

Notable examples include the mutual recriminations between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as the Congolese war that escalated in 1998 into a regional confrontation involving governmental forces supported by Angola, Namibia, and Chad, against rebel factions backed by Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi.

***Common Identity:**

Cultural specificity, manifested in shared origins, languages, and loyalties, significantly contributes to the propagation of conflicts across national borders. This propagation occurs either through direct material support or indirectly by acting as a non-direct participant in conflicts.

“Douglas Woodwell” substantiates this, noting that the presence of a common ethnic group across two states, one as a majority and the other as a minority, increases the likelihood of recurrent violent conflicts¹.

***Right to Self-Determination:**

Numerous ethnic groups, dispersed across several nations, often invoke the right to self-determination. They strive to unify their dispersed populations into a singular sovereign state that mirrors their shared traits. This drive for unity is represented by various separatist movements, such as the Moucha movement in Uganda, which seeks to consolidate disparate groups under unified governance.

3. 2- Flow Mechanisms among the Great Lakes Countries:

There are several mechanisms that can transfer conflict from one country to another. “Rotchild & Lake” identified two primary forms: spreading and escalation. “Oana Tranca” agreed with them but added another mechanism, which she termed contagion.

***Spreading:**

This mechanism involves the migration of conflicts from their points of origin within national borders to adjacent regional borders. A prime illustration is the ongoing strife among Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. “Manus Midlarsky” elucidates that spreading, in an ethnic context, involves specific behaviors stemming from the interactions between an ethnic group and various elements of its socio-political environment².

***Escalation:**

This term describes the intensification of conflict from a lower to a more severe level of hostility, which exacerbates the situation and draws additional actors into the fray. Historical instances include the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the 1999

¹- Douglas Woodwell, Unwelcome Neighbors Shared Ethnicity and International Conflict During The Cold War, International Studies Quartely, Vol 48, pp. 200-205.

²- Edward Heyman, Observation On Why Violence Spreads, International Studies Quartely, Vol 25 N° 2, 1980, p.300.

conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which attracted international support for differing factions¹.

***Contagion:**

Contagion refers to the indirect influence exerted by one group on others in different countries, facilitated through methods such as incitement and mobilization.

In summary, the integration of these factors and mechanisms vividly illustrates the complex reality of conflicts in the Great Lakes region.

These dynamics significantly underscore the role of identity as a potent driver in broadening conflict zones, often overriding the constraints imposed by geographical and political boundaries.

Conclusion:

The widespread and persistent conflicts in the Great Lakes region reflect a reality fueled by numerous factors that form a unified whole that combines temporal and spatial variables. Furthermore, the identity variable has come to drive many ethnic conflicts, making them fundamentally based on cultural determinants related to societal specificity in which many influences overlap.

These conflicts are fundamentally rooted in cultural determinants that reflect the unique characteristics of societal groups, influenced by a myriad of interacting factors.

Furthermore, the variable of identity does not merely initiate ethnic conflicts; it also propels their expansion and intensification, ushering these disputes into a broader regional context. This evolution is in concordance with the sophisticated concepts of complex regional security and community security, which represent innovative and leading theories in contemporary security studies.

Additionally, identity as a critical determinant in these conflicts has broadened its influence from a local to a regional scope, effectively surmounting formidable obstacles posed by political borders. These borders become permeable and almost illusory in the face of the robust forces of identity-driven violence, which seeks not only to dissolve these borders but also to reconfigure it in a manner that fulfills the desires and aspirations inherent to these identities.

It is crucial to acknowledge that despite the intense pressures exerted by these identity groups to realize their objectives, governments remain alert to such challenges and strategies. They deploy various measures to mitigate these pressures before they intensify. When conflicts escalate, governmental bodies frequently turn to military interventions as a primary response to ensure containment and resolution. However, the efficacy of these responses can vary, often contingent upon the specific dynamics and interactions between the involved groups and the governing authorities.

¹- Oana Tranca, La Diffusion Des Conflits Ethniques : Une Approche Dyatique, Etudes Internationales, Vol 37, N° 4, Décembre 2006, p. 506.

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