

Sparking Powder

When Fanon stated, “Africa is shaped like a gun, and the Congo is the trigger.” he emphasized the importance of the Congo in the regional stability of Central Africa. Ultimately his statement proved true as the region collapsed into chaos with the First Congo War. But Fanon only spoke of the trigger to the gun, which itself asks what were the other ‘mechanisms’ that would spark the Congo War? I’ve identified one such element, the Banyamulenge people of the South Kivu plains. If the Congo is a trigger, then the Banyamulenge people present the ‘gunpowder’, a situation ripe and eager to unleash chaos. When the trigger was pulled on the Congo War, it ignited those tensions of the Banyamulenge people. Those tensions then became the chaos that would envelope the Congo, born out of an already encompassing chaos to a Banyamulenge. But to understand how the Banyamulenge’s regional and ethnic tensions could create a trans-national affair, a broad understanding of their history must be brought to bear. The origins of the Banyamulenge peoples, and the term Banyamulenge indicate a history and culture purposefully manipulated for ethnic and political benefit. Beginning with early migrations from the seventeenth century due to regional tensions, and then colonial migration in due to the *Union Minere de Haut Kantanga*, with refugees pouring in during a subsequent crisis, the Banyamulenge show a clearly complicated pattern of origin. But even in their days of origin clear indicators of a building tension toward the Banyamulenge came as the Simba Rebellion sowed strain between the other local ethnic groups. As well, the Congo government stance on the Banyamulenge set forth administrative trends that kept the group in a state of nationality limbo.

Thus, as the contemporary history of the Banyamulenge people began, they were already a clear group of targeting for some of the surrounding ethnic groups. The official use of the term 'Banyamulenge' becomes a consideration during such time, especially when juxtaposed to the 'Banyarwanda' that hostile ethnic groups used against them. As the Mobutu government set out to more clearly organize the region the Banyamulenge became a topic of hot debate, regarding their history and involvement in regional politics. Political advocacy groups made by the self-identifying Banyamulenge peoples would themselves be subject to ethnic divides between those Hutu and Tutsi identifying Banyamulenge peoples, greatly harming their political solvency. When Zaire president Mobutu began programs of citizenship towards the Banyarwandans refugees the Banyamulenge attempted to distance themselves from the refugees but wound up creating the modern etymology for Banyamulenge as a term for the region's Tutsi population. Local ethnic groups began political push-back as well with the introduction of democracy into Zaire. They attempted to strip the Banyamulenge of their indigeneity through political measures of citizenship. Tensions kept building with the Rwandan Civil War, where many young Tutsi of the Kivu Plains joined with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). In response, Zaire's pro-Hutu government pursued identification programs against the Banyarwanda which served only to further complicate the ethnic divide within the Banyamulenge community. The situation began to ignite when conflict over the political leadership rights began. The government response to restore the order became fuel to the fire as they heavily biased one group. When the Great Lakes refugee crisis began in lieu of the Rwandan genocide the Banyamulenge were a focal point. Here as well as with the Banyarwandans, the opportunity to secure regional political power from interested intervening forces presented. This ultimately culminated into their involvement with

the Congo War, but before we get too far let's start with a brief history of the Banyamulenge and their relationship with indigeneity.

The origins of the Banyamulenge peoples, and the term Banyamulenge indicate a history and culture purposefully manipulated for ethnic and political benefit. During the reign of Rwabugiri in the 1850's, Tutsi migrants came to the South Kivu plains, first due to the high taxes of the kingdom of Rwanda. Then as Rwabugiri died in 1895, the migrant's numbers swelled as many fled the ensuing succession crisis¹. This group were mostly Tutsi identifying peoples, having either been Tutsi or come about to identifying as Tutsi through a client system known as *icyihuture*. This would help avoid initial tensions among the group regarding ethnic divides. This group served as the basis for claiming the Banyamulenge as a Tutsi majority group, but many of those who migrated were Hutu's who became Tutsi through the *icyihuture*. The group's numbers grew steadily during the colonial period. Two main events stand out as significant to the growth of the group, the birth of independent Hutu led Rwanda which prompted an influx of Tutsi refugee's to South Kivu. And, the *Union Miniere du Haut Katanga* employed migrants throughout the South Kivu region². The refugees were initially placed in designated refugee camps throughout while the labor migrants moved into the cities. The Banyamulenge's agricultural group grew as they requested the colonial authority to allow them more suitable land for their new numbers south of their original farming region. A turning point came with the Simba Rebellion where the Banyamulenge people realized their tangible role and position as a major political force of the region. The rebellion's forces began raiding the agricultural

¹ Mamdani, 250

² Mamdani, 240

Banyamulenge communities' farms and stock for supplies in their fight, prompting a response from the group. Granted weapons from the government they fought the rebellion and were rewarded with political positions. The fighting quickly heightened tensions with the Bembe ethnic group however, whose community had supported the rebel and had many of their numbers killed in the ensuing fights with the Banyamulenge³. Emboldened by their political position the Banyamulenge to expand the ethnic groups reach further south. But even with their expanded power they Banyamulenge were classed and treated as refugees by the government. This meant prevented the Banyamulenge from having their own ethnic group leader, a Native Authority. This trait became a subject of debate as the agricultural communities of the Banyamulenge then fell under the authority of other ethnic groups. To further their case as a people indigenous to the region they began utilizing the term Banyamulenge, to disassociate themselves with foreign origins and push themselves closer to the local region's history⁴.

The Banyamulenge people's tensions began to ramp up following this period of political power. In search of indigeneity with the region their politics began to grind against the other groups. To resolve the growing refugee problem in both the Kivu regions the Mobutu government of Zaire unveiled the 1971 Citizenship Decree⁵. This granted citizenship to the Banyarwanda who had fled to Zaire, but this elicited a response from the administration's members and local governments. They saw this as a threat of Banyarwandan influence in the government and region. In response to this rapidly growing sentiment the Banyamulenge people sought to properly separate themselves from the refugees by petitioning to have the Banyamulenge people classified under one group and popularized the term Banyamulenge.

³ Prunier, 51

⁴ Prunier, 52

⁵ Mamdami, 252

Instead the term became one to refer to all the Tutsi of the Kivu plains, regardless of their origins or history in the region. The sentiment that the Banyamulenge people were becoming a political threat was held similarly by the other ethnic groups of the Kivus. In response they took control of the local regional politics and created the Citizenship Bill in 1981. The bill proclaimed that only those with heritage in the Congo before 1885 could be citizens. The law never came into full effect given its difficulty of enforcement, and instead turned into a more wide-sweeping measure. The Banyarwanda were restricted from running for political office but could vote. This only grew the problem of indigeneity as those who would otherwise qualify for citizenship under the original law had their rights curtailed by the new more widespread measure. Political protests took place among the Banyarwanda populations, furthering tensions. The Banyarwanda formed a political party in response to the tension called the *Umoja* to represent the group politically⁶. However, inter-group tension between the Hutu's and Tutsi's greatly mitigated its political efforts. When Mobutu embraced democracy in the 1990's with multi-political elections, the Banyamulenge lost what support they had from other political groups. As the Sovereign National Conference came to be, the Banyamulenge became a popular scape goat for political rallying among the Eastern Zaire people and were quickly targeted by political parties seeking to grow their strength. In this sense democracy allowed for the Banyamulenge people to be ostracized and targeted, further extending the tensions. This in turn pushed the Banyamulenge towards a more anti-Mobutuist stance. In addition, the Rwandan Civil War began raging just across the border, inspiring many young Congolese Tutsi to cross the border to fight for the pro-Tutsi RPF⁷. The pro-Hutu Mobutu regime sought to restrict the flow of peoples to Rwanda to prevent the RPF from using the Kivu Tutsi as a recruitment ground. They launched the *Mission*

⁶ Mamdani, 252

⁷ Stearns, *Aiding and Abetting*

d'Identification d Zairois au Kivu to identify the citizen Banyarwandan from the refugees. Their selection of the citizenship date being the Berlin Conference restricted many Banyarwandan from being considered citizens further pushing them towards alignment with the RPF and anti-Mobutuist sentiment. Meanwhile the CNS sowed tensions further emphasizing the differences between the Hutu and Tutsi as that of relation to indigeneity. The Tutsi were classified lump-sum as Banyamulenge and were outsiders, while the Hutu's declare themselves more indigenous to the region⁸. As tensions soared even further between the Banyamulenge people and the various actors of the situation, so too did the potential for a devastatingly explosion of this tension. Ultimately that explosion would come and reap a terrible crop for not just the Kivu's but the entire central African region itself in the form of the Congo War.

Throughout the growth of tensions, the question who among the Banyamulenge is indigenous to the region popped up time and time again. Indigeneity for the Banyamulenge served as more than just a trait of the peoples, but a steppingstone to claim political right and self-governance. In clear response, the local ethnic groups pursued and implemented measures to restrict the Banyamulenge's claim to such a trait. This tug-of-war for indigeneity to the region became the sparking point for the tensions, when in 1993 the Kivu's experienced a bout of violence. Indigenous-claiming Hutu's purchased land from other poor Hutu's and Bahunde members in the North Kivu's. This saw them then argue to the local administration in Walikale for their own ethnic leaders, a claim that the indigenous-claiming Hutu's, the Banyanga claimed could only be fulfilled to indigenous peoples. Fighting then broke out against the Hutu's over this claim. In response to the violence the government displaced the *Division Speciale Presidentielle* as a civil protection force to restore the peace in the region. The division was ill-

⁸ Mamdami, 245

supplied and forced to conduct themselves with the support of the local population. With their supplies controlled by the rich Hutu landlords, they were coerced into supporting the Banyanga position on the matter and appeared to support the non-indigenous populace against the historically indigenous populace⁹. This greatly expanded the conflict both in region and scale, as the fighting escalated between the two groups. The situation further complicated itself with the arrival of refugees from the various crises of Central Africa. With the Rwandan Genocide, the Great Lakes refugee crisis was declared by the government and the situation rapidly evolved. While previously the Banyamulenge fed into the RPF forces for the Rwandan Civil War, the Hutu genocidaires had come to the Kivu's for refuge from the RPF in Rwanda. Congolese Tutsi now faced threat from these refugee camps while the Tutsi government in Rwanda gave them a convenient place to flee. In this moment, the Vangu commission from the Zairean government sent in Mambweni Vangu to evaluate the situation and quickly come to a resolution. This group known as the Vangu Commission held anti-Banyarwanda members who used their position to create a list of Banyamulenge to be expelled from the country as 'refugees from Rwanda'¹⁰. As government officials began appropriating Banyamulenge owned property and lands, the Banyamulenge began to seek for methods to respond. The RPF was eager to construct information networks along the Kivu plains to keep tabs on the Hutu refugee camps, and to create a regional militia in pursuit of their future of deposing Mobutu. The Banyamulenge began crossing the border to train in RPF camps before slipping back into their hometowns, ready as sleepers for their now coming fight. Native authorities of the Banyamulenge also worked closely with the RPF forces in exchange for training for their militia forces. When the Congo War broke out and AFDL forces began sweeping in from the east, the Banyamulenge joining them on their

⁹ Mamdani, 252

¹⁰ Mamdani, 253

march, driving the Hutu refugees west-ward¹¹. The Banyamulenge's involvement with the AFDL is emphasized in due part by their significant proportion of members within the AFDL administrative corp. As the Banyamulenge swept towns after town with the AFDL their old grudges followed suit. Banyamulenge took back what they saw as revenge against Hutu populations and other ethnic groups while on their warpath. As the first Congo War ended the Banyamulenge position had shifted greatly. Now the favoring group of the winning belligerents of the war, the Banyamulenge showed no mercy to those they deemed as contributing to the genocides. When the second Congo War kicked up, the Banyamulenge again found themselves at the center of the spark¹². The Kabila led government began utilizing the concept of indigeneity to fight against a perceived Rwandan dominance of the nation. The Banyamulenge were grouped among those 'occupying' forces such as the Rwandan RPF. Kabila armed the indigenous groups against the occupiers, many of whom now aggressively targeted Banyamulenge. Just as Banyamulenge became a catch-all term for the Congolese Tutsi, those 'indigenous' forces armed by Kabila's government fell under a catch-all term of Mai Mai¹³. As the situation grew dire, the Banyamulenge split with their RPF ties over the nature of the situation. The Banyamulenge then contended with the Rwandan backed Rally for Congolese Democracy-Goma (RCD) for influence in the Kivu region. As fighting over the Kivu's intensified the Banyamulenge became unable to help controlled the logistics flow from the Eastern Central African governments to their respectively supported forces. As such they merged forces with RCD after a Banyamulenge-favoring leadership took power. And this brings us to modern situation of the Banyamulenge, a people denied claim to their perceived ethnic homelands. A people grouped by

¹¹ Stearns, *Many Wars in One*

¹² Stearns, *One War Too Many*

¹³ Mamdani, 258

sentiment and politics into that which they are not. Ultimately the Banyamulenge in modernity serve as a sparking powder to debate over the Congo War. Their contributions and involvement are cited as one of the many reasons why the war began in the first place.

The Banyamulenge present a challenging case of ethnography. Their history and culture are subject constantly to the reigning perspectives and powers. The group itself may claim itself to be clearly Congolese citizens, but way of their migration into the area in colonial times. But the modern Banyamulenge history tells a radically different tale. Mired in the question of indigeneity to the land the Banyamulenge sought to secure themselves enough power to assure themselves of their origins and citizenships. But in the pursuit of this claim they created opportunity for outside forces to entice the Banyamulenge for their own political goals. Their citizenship crisis would become the origin of the Congo War, though led by fighters of today, was inspired by the situation of the past. So, I turn back to Fanon's quote "Africa is the shape of a gun, and the Congo is the trigger." But a gun is far more than just a trigger, it needs springs, actions, chambers, and more to fire. One of these things needed was a sparking powder, built and ready for a release of pressure. The Banyamulenge clearly served as the sparking powder to Africa's gun.