Combattants and *Baswahili*: Beyond Ethno-regional Tensions among Congolese Immigrants of Cape Town, South Africa

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the *combattants* (French for "fighters"), a diaspora group from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and their activities in Cape Town, South Africa. While the *combattants* publicly identify as socio-political activists, for ordinary Congolese (especially eastern Congolese) they are simply a Congolese gang because of the violence that characterises their modus operandi. This research focuses on understanding the *combattants*' antagonism toward eastern Congolese, especially in the last term of President Joseph Kabila in office. While acknowledging that the politics of the DRC largely shape the everyday lives of Congolese migrants in South Africa, this paper looks more into the role played by the host country—South Africa—in intra-Congolese migrants' identity conflicts and the formation of gang-like groups such as the *combattants*. This paper stresses the links between the South African migration system that favours some Congolese ethno-regional groups (mainly those from the war zones—the eastern region/Kivu) over others (from the relatively peaceful western region that Kinshasa incarnates) and the hatred the *combattants* have towards eastern Congolese. Focusing roughly on the period between 2011 and 2018, the paper argues that feuds between the *combattants* (from western Congo) and eastern Congolese are also a struggle between the "winners" and the "losers" produced and reproduced through South African migration laws and policies.

Keywords: *Combattants; collabos; Baswahili*; Congolese immigrants; ethno-regionalism; eastern Congolese; western Congolese; Democratic Republic of Congo; Cape Town

Introduction: The Problem and Rationale

This paper focuses on the *combattants* (French for "fighters") from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the causes behind their feuds with compatriots from the eastern region of the DRC. It focuses particularly on the *combattants'* activities in Cape Town in the period between 2011 and 2018—the last term of President Joseph Kabila in office. As one of the most popular Congolese transnational groups (the *combattants*), research has associated their emergence, ideologies and modus operandi with the growing politicisation of Congolese transnationalism and a Congolese diasporic activism "from below," characterised by ethno-regionalim (Demart and Bodeux 2013; Garbin and Godin 2013; Inaka 2016). The *combattants* groups rose to fame during the 2011 electoral campaign in the DRC, during which all contending parties, particularly the opposition leaders, campaigned among Congolese diasporas. The *combattants* emerged first and foremost as a transnational "anti-Kabila" movement (Demart and Bodeux 2013; Garbin and Godin 2013, 116–117). They are mostly Lingala (and to a large extent Tshiluba and Kikongo) speakers from the western Congo region, mostly Kinshasa (*Kinois*). In the post-2011 elections in the DRC, *combattants* became more radicalised in their anti-Kabila campaign and even extra-political activities. As research by Inaka (2016) on the *combattants'* movement in Pretoria (South Africa) shows, among those they targeted as *collabos* (collaborators of the Kabila regime) included people from the eastern Congolese, mainly those from the Kivu region (Kivucians), who are called *Baswahili* (for speaking Kiswahili).

Two facts serve as rationales for this research. The first is that the historical socioeconomic and geopolitical rift between the eastern and western regions of the DRC was exacerbated by the conflict that emerged after Mobutu's downfall (Reyntjens 2009, 243–248). However, little to no research exists regarding how that rift is being reproduced transnationally among Congolese diasporic communities. Secondly, research on immigrants in post-apartheid South Africa has paid immense attention to the shortcomings of migration policies, especially those concerned with refugees and asylum seekers—the migrant categories this research is mostly focused on (McConnell 2009; Neocosmos 2008; Pugh 2014). Among other things, this research demonstrates that South Africa's "migration policies and responses—or rather lack thereof—reveal a negative stigma and encourage xenophobia" (McConnell 2009, 35). However, little to no research exists on how these policies shape intra-immigrant conflicts in South Africa.

Research on Congolese migrants, especially on their diasporic activities in the Western countries and in South Africa, has highlighted the rise of Congolese diaspora activism "from below" that emerged in the President Joseph Kabila era, especially in his last term in office (Demart and Bodeux 2013; Inaka 2016). Scholars such as Demart and Bodeux (2013) and Garbin and Godin (2013) link this radical diasporic activism to homeland (DRC) politics and the politicisation of the Congolese diaspora. Inaka (2016), on the other hand, paid attention to the growing tensions, often turning violent, between the eastern and western Congolese in South Africa. He links these tensions to the rise of

Congolese transnationalism characterised by ethno-regionalism and argues they emerged in the aftermath of the 2011 elections in the DRC (Inaka 2016). This present research adds to the scholarship of Inaka (2016) by focusing on the ways in which South Africa, as a host country, contributes to the rise of ethno-regional tensions among Congolese and the formation of more radicalist groups, such as the *combattants*. It does so by focusing on South African migration policies that sympathise with some Congolese regional groups over others, and by analysing the activities of *combattants* and their tendencies to target eastern Congolese.

The study argues that the importance given to Congolese home identities in determining their migrant status in South Africa exacerbates the production and reproduction of home country political identity discourses and conflicts. The latter centres mainly around the inclusion and exclusion of Congolese refugee identity in the model of that around citizenship and identity that emerged with the Congo Wars and subsequent conflicts since the late 1990s (Banegas and Jewsiewicki 2001; Jackson 2006, 2007; Munyakazi 2018; Ngonga and Alphonse 2001; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002, 229). This research contributes to the scholarship on diaspora, identity and homeland conflicts (Adamson 2012; Baser 2016; Gayer 2007). In particular, it aligns with scholars who associate identity conflicts among diasporas and immigrants in general with "interaction between the attitudes and characteristics of immigrants and the responses of the receiving society" (Fassin 2005, 2011; Phinney et al. 2001).

Research Methods

Methodologically, the works of social historians who largely rely on oral history and ethnography were inspiring for this research (Bank 2016; Bozzoli 1991; Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2006; Thomson 1999). In particular, they make use of oral sources because of their capacity to "counterbalance the evidence of the official documents with the political judgment of popular oral tradition" (Thompson 2017, 23). In migration studies, oral history has not only helped with constructing immigrants' life histories, but also in understanding the politics of memory with which they construct and reconstruct their narratives (Baird 2012; Thomson 1999). For this research, being on intra-Congolese relations in South Africa, oral history was needed to help grasp the various challenges the Congolese encounter "when [re]learning to live together" in a foreign land (Brown 2006, 69). In particular, the oral method was useful because it was concerned with "the political, historical, and cultural dynamics" (Jessee 2019, 299) of the everyday life of Congolese in Cape Town.

In addition, in-depth interviews and participant observation were carried out among the Congolese communities of Cape Town. Such ethnographic tools have proven useful in research on "transnational mobility" as well as "conflicts between migrants" (Englund 2002; Xiang and Toyota 2013). Participants, especially primary research informants, were balanced between pro-*combattants* and their opponents. They were aged between 25 and 51 and had been in South Africa for at least 10 years. The majority of them were among the numerous contacts the author established through "trust and confidence"

(MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, 19), not only as a Congolese woman and active member of the Congolese diaspora of Cape Town for over a decade now, but also throughout her years of post-graduate studies that have generally focused on Congolese immigrants in South Africa, Cape Town in particular.

Research on the daily lives of immigrants in relatively developed countries has been inspiring in gathering information for this paper. In particular, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga's work on the Congolese in Paris, both from the DRC and the Republic of Congo, on "activities that are outside, or marginal to, the law" that immigrants, such the *combattants* groups, often engage in (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, 19). Moreover, the works of scholars on their experience of researching in politically tense settings (see, for example, Ansoms, Bisoka, and Thompson 2021; Thomson 2010, 2021; Vlavanou 2021; Vuninga 2021) have guided the author in handling the various ethical dilemmas and challenges she confronted during the fieldwork as a result of her multiple identities and the transnational politics of Congolese migrants in Cape Town.

Eastern and Western Congolese as Regionalised Migrant "Labels" in South Africa

One cannot discuss the *combattants* in Cape Town without mentioning *Baswahili* and *Bato ya mangala* (Inaka 2016), which now stand respectively for Congolese from the eastern region (the war/conflict zone of the DRC) and western Congolese, often simply called *Kinois* (Kinshasa inhabitants). They are also sometimes referred to as *Swahiliphones* and *Lingalophones* (Jackson 2006, 114), some form of linguistic identification referring to Kiswahili and Lingala speakers. These identities, however, are complex and often, language and a fixed geographical territory are not the sole factors in defining them because they also stand as two antagonistic political identities pertaining to the geopolitics of the post-Mobutu era in and outside the Congo.

As De Villers (1998, 92) argues, the war to oust Mobutu (1996–1997) and that to oust Laurent Kabila (1998–2003) led to an opposition between the east and the west of the country, specifically between the region around Kinshasa and the region around Kivu. In addition, De Villers (1998) remarked that the definition of "east" in the context of the Congo wars did not include the Katanga and Haut-Zaire (Upper Congo), the other Swahili-speaking provinces also located in the geographical east of the Congo. He also observed that the west, in Congolese popular discourse after the ousting of Mobutu, also excluded other provinces of the region such as Bandundu, Bas-Congo and Equateur. De Villers posited that in the post-Mobutu era, if Katanga, Kivu and Haut-Zaire constitute the east of the DRC, the west, by definition, should be the remaining parts of the country. However, he noted that, instead, Kinshasa had become the incarnation of the western Congo, while Kivu stands for the eastern Congo (De Villers 1998, 92).

From the late 1990s, most Congolese who sought permanent stay in South Africa as refugees, justified and motivated their migration cases as "violent, forced separation rather than relatively voluntary economic pursuits," citing the Congo Wars and their violence (Lyons et al. 2007, 590). As Lyons et al. argue in their research on the Ethiopian diaspora and homeland conflicts, "territory" is an important definer of identity and shapes differences and conflicts among diaspora migrants (Lyons et al. 2007, 590). "Territory" is important in the post-Mobutu Congo crises, especially the Congo Wars and conflicts since the late 1990s. The Congo conflict is regional in the sense that it mostly haunts its eastern region, the home of *Baswahili*. *Bato ya mangala*, on the other hand, identify with the west, the presumably "non-conflict" region.

As research shows, discriminatory migration policies can fuel intra-national conflicts among immigrants (see for example, Owen 2015; Vuninga 2017a&b; Zetter 1991, 2007). Fassin (2011) argues that specific historical circumstances influence how boundaries manifest themselves among migrants. For example, adding aggressiveness to the policing of immigrants on aspects of their identities, such as ethnicity, can increase tensions between immigrants and the host community as well as immigrant-on-immigrant conflicts (Fassin 2011, 215–216). Zetter's research on refugees in Cyprus shows, among other things, that "latent and manifest processes of institutional action and programme delivery reinforce a disaggregated model of identity," which, in the case of his research, involves distinguishing between "refugee and non-refugee" in Cyprus. Zetter also discusses how, in turn, these "labels" "assume, often conflicting, politicised meanings, for both labelled and labellers" (Zetter 1991, 36). As observed in the case of eastern and western Congolese immigrants in South Africa, the different migration labels they are assigned based on their home regions contribute largely to the diasporic politicisation of regional identities and antagonism between the two groups.

In her research on the Congolese in Cape Town in the early 2000s, Owen (2015, 40) noted the preoccupation both researchers of migrants and Home Affairs officials had with distinguishing between "refugees" and "economic migrants" among those applying for refugee status in South Africa. For the case of Congolese migrants, the two groups respectively represent the eastern Congolese and the rest, who supposedly hail from non-conflict regions of the DRC. The two categories also stand for two migrant classes that are distinguished by their desirability in terms of economic contribution to South Africa. As Owen explains, economic migrants are often perceived by host countries, such as South Africa, as "responsive and agentive"; thus, a preferred category to refugees, who are often associated with "disempowerment" (Owen 2015, 40). This paper argues the opposite with regard to Congolese migrants. It sides with Zetter who argues that "being a refugee is no longer a basic convention right but a privileged prize which few only deserve and others claim illegally" (Zetter 2007, 184). For the Congolese, the refugee status is not only the most aimed migration status but also the most empowering, especially since the 1990s when South Africa tightened its migration policies toward the Congolese (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, 48).

In South Africa, research shows that being denied refugee status has more to do with issues related to structural xenophobia and corruption within the South African Department of Home Affairs than with the applicants' failing to prove their fear of persecution in their home country (Morris 1998; Neocosmos 2008). Once an immigrant has been denied the applied refugee-related document, they are declared economic migrants by the Department of Home Affairs. In the most extreme case, being labelled an economic migrant means one is denied residence in South Africa. Although this no longer automatically leads to *refoulement* (deportation), it often does not allow the person to explore other forms of legal stay in the country. This situation limits a person from accessing formal economic opportunities, such as employment and even pursuing education in South Africa. Such a fate is mostly endured by western Congolese—the region the *combattants* generally identify with—because that region of the Congo is generally accepted as not part of the war/conflict zone of the DRC.

Who are the *Combattants*?

The *combattants* group was formed in London in 2006 and then quickly spread as a Congolese diaspora movement across the globe, mostly in Western countries and South Africa (Boisselet 2017; Demart 2013; Garbin and Godin 2013, 117). Researchers on the *combattants* in Western countries (such as the UK and Belgium) understand them as "radicalist activists" who emerged as part of the "politicisation of the Congolese diaspora" in the post Laurent Kabila era and as a transnational anti-Joseph Kabila movement (Garbin and Godin 2013, 116–117). In countries such as Belgium, the *combattants* were initially part of the "pressure groups" that emerged in the early 2000s, known to "target the political power in Kinshasa." Other prominent such groups include *Bana Congo* ("Congo's children") and the women's group *Bamama to tolema* ("women let's stand up") (Demart and Bodeux 2013, 83). As a political movement, the *combattants* affiliated themselves with the two main opposition parties, including *Union pour la démocratie et le progrès social* (UDPS) of the late Etienne Tshisekedi and the diaspora-based *Alliance des patriotes pour la réfondation du Congo* (APARECO) of Honoré Ngbanda, a former Mobutuist (Demart and Bodeux 2013, 83). The *combattants* are also known for calling their enemies "*collabos*"—a concept borrowed from the Second World War and which was used to refer to the collaborators of the Nazi regime, especially during the occupation of France (Garbin and Godin 2013, 117). Roughly, for the *combattants*, *collabos* are collaborators of the internal and external enemies of Congo.[1]

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1   *Combattants* define *collabos* beyond being a supporter of President Joseph Kabila's regime. For example, RCD members and supporters are known to be against Kabila but they are *collabos* for being backed by foreign forces such as Rwanda and Uganda; same as Mr Vital Kamerhe and his ANC. Although he is a Kabila *opposant*, he is not accepted by the majority of *Kinois*, especially the *combattants* groups, because he is a Kivucian and rumoured to be of Rwandan origin. *Combattants* generally consider Kivucians to be *collabos,* even when they are known to oppose Kabila.

Inaka (2016), who studied the *combattants* in South Africa in the aftermath of the 2011 elections in the DRC, links them to emerging Congolese transnationalism shaped by ethno-regionalism. He backs his argument by analysing the way in which the *combattants* define *collabos* and how they detect them, as well as how the *combattants* define themselves in terms of Congolese ethno-regional identity. For them, a *collabo* is a Kiswahili-speaker from the eastern DRC, more specifically the conflict zone, which is the Kivu region (Bokamba 2008). The *combattants* identify as Lingala-speakers from the western region of Congo and anti-Kabila supporters. Inaka argues that the "*combattants*/anti-*combattants* (*collabos*)" incarnated the east/west divide and the regional identity discourse in Congolese transnationalism in the Joseph Kabila era (Inaka 2016). However, the *combattants*, who formed in London in 2006 and who rose to fame during the 2011 electoral campaign, were a much more inclusive Congolese diasporic movement.

During the 2011 electoral campaign, most Congolese, regardless of their ethno-regional identities, valued what the *combattants* movement worldwide stood for: raising political awareness from abroad with regard to the 2011 elections and ensuring Kabila's rule was put to an end. They rallied and mobilised through social media in various diasporas to campaign against President Kabila (Godin and Doná 2016). Protesters included "prominent members of the [Congolese] diaspora" such as pastors, community leaders, artists, musicians, students, academics, etc.[2] At this time, these protests were mostly legal in South Africa and Western countries. After the election results in November 2011, the *combattants* movement became more radicalised (Demart and Bodeux 2013, 83; Garbin and Godin 2013, 117) and ethno-regional oriented.

In Cape Town, like elsewhere, from December 2011, a good number of Congolese, who believed in the "irregularities" in the elections that led to the second term of President Kabila, joined the *combattants*-led protests (Demart and Bodeux 2013, 73–74). However, by February 2012, the *combattants* changed the course of their struggle and methods from denouncing the power abuse in the DRC to catching and punishing politicians and their accomplices. Violence, physical and verbal abuses, as well as public humiliation became important tools in ridding the DRC and its diaspora of *collabos*. This process is known as *mutakalisation*[3] and it has been in use by the *combattants* of Europe since 2006 on *collabos*, including Congolese politicians, celebrities and even charismatic churches' pastors (Demart and Bodeux 2013, 14; Mbu-Mputu and Trapido 2020, 727). Most of the DRC-based *collabos* were targeted at

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2   In Belgium, for example, it was only "after ten days of clashes" with the police that "public figures" who have been part of the demonstrations "distanced themselves from the movement" because it became very violent with "daily toll" including arrests of "dozens of demonstrators." See Demart and Bodeux (2013, 73–74).

3   "*Mutakalisation*" means undressing someone, exposing their nakedness. For the *combattants*, it consists, among other things, of catching a *collabo* (often from an airport, bar, conference venue, etc.), making them sit or kneel on the floor, forcing them to confess to their (political) sins and making them insult Joseph Kabila while being filmed. The most extreme cases involved literally stripping off a *collabo* naked and filming him to post on their social media.

airports. In Cape Town, the *combattants* attacked their enemies in the streets, shopping centres, Congolese churches, market places or work sites (for security guards and bouncers, in general). They also targeted politicians and businessmen on business trips such as at international meetings/conferences. An example includes the *mutakalisation* of the Congolese Minister of Mines while attending an International Mining Conference in Cape Town in March 2012.[4]

The *combattants* also targeted people on the basis of their ethno-regional identities. Eastern Congolese were the most targeted for two reasons. The first is that they generally blame eastern Congolese for the main unfortunate events that have shaken the country since the fall of Mobutu, including the RCD war in 1998, the assassination of Laurent Kabila (2001) and the conflict that continues in their region (Inaka 2016, 13; Ngonga 2001; Reyntjens 2009). The second is that eastern Congolese are supposedly the ones who voted for Kabila in 2011 because "he [Kabila]) is one of their own" (quoted in Inaka 2016, 13). The fact that many *Baswahili* distanced themselves from the *combattants*' public and private activities at the beginning of 2012, consisting mainly of protesting against Kabila's new term, was further used by the *combattants* to confirm the allegation that *Baswahili* are Kabila's supporters (Inaka 2016, 13–14).

Baswahili as *Collabos*

The *combattants*, as Demart and Bodeux argue, "exacerbated" beliefs around Congolese identity, political affiliations and patriotism (Demart and Bodeux 2013, 86–87). This patriotism was often expressed in the *combattants*' favourite song "*zongisa bango na Rwanda*" (send them back to Rwanda) or "*zongisa ye na Rwanda*"[5] (send him back to Rwanda) (Demart and Bodeux 2013, 882–83; Mbu-Mputu and Trapido 2020, 741). The song was not only used against politicians such as Joseph Kabila and Congolese of Rwandan origin.[6] The *combattants,* in general, derogatorily referred to all Kivucians as *barwandais*.[7] As a transnational Congolese diaspora movement, the *combattants* were preoccupied with drawing a straight line between "traitors" and "patriots" (Demart and Bodeux 2013, 87), which they defined respectively along eastern and western

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4   The *mutakalisation* of Minister Martin Kabolunga in Cape Town can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKjG6JoKvDQ. Accessed July 13, 2021. See also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEKjynhpsHk. Accessed July 13, 2021.

5   See the song "Zongisa ye na Rwanda" being performed during UDPS campaign in Kinshasa here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFcAgCq1ZAI. Accessed July 16, 2021.

6   Demart and Bodeux explain that the *combattants*' struggle to free the Congolese is based on the history of foreign invasions, occupations, and looting of resources in the Congo from the colonial to post-colonial time. In this history, the Western super powers and the "Rwandophones" are the invaders and the Congolese political elite their puppets. See Demart and Bodeux (2013, 87–92).

7   A former journalist from Bukavu, living in London, Oliver Katoto, tried to correct this stereotype in his YouTube channel. One of the comments on his video reads: "I agree *Baswahili* are Rwandans … Go back to Rwanda. Why do you hold onto our country? … Go back to your Rwanda, your country." See the video and comment here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c59GpxMQjJo. Accessed July 15, 2021. On *combattants* calling *Baswahili* "barwandais" see also Inaka, (2016, 12–14).

Congolese identities. This is why the feuds between the *combattants* and the *collabos* have transcended into tensions between *Kinois* and *Baswahili* in places such as Cape Town ever since at least January 2012, when the protests against the Congo election results led to President Kabila's third term in office.[8] During these protests and in this period in general, eastern Congolese were attacked by the *combattants* in night clubs, at work and business places, and their social gatherings were often disrupted or sabotaged. This was witnessed by a large number of research participants. For example, a barber from Uvira (South Kivu), who was one of the people attacked by *combattants* during the anti-Kabila protests in 2012, explained: "They suddenly started shouting at us calling us '*ba infiltrés*!' '*ba collabo*s!' '*ba Rwandais*!'[9] just because they heard us speaking in Kiswahili." Malinga, also a barber from Uvira, was attacked at his shop and called "*Rwandais*" because he intervened in a fight where "some *Kinois*" were attacking his Burundian friend after the latter fired his *Kinois* shopkeeper in Parow, Cape Town.[10]

The *combattants*' attacks were also directed at eastern Congolese networks. A conversation with the leading committee of Amis BK (an association of Congolese from the Kivu region in Cape Town) highlighted that between 2012 and 2015, their social gatherings were constantly sabotaged by the *combattants*.[11] Kivucians regarded these attacks as purely vindictive, having less to do with the Kabilists/anti-Kabilists dichotomy. As a Congolese vendor in Bellville (Cape Town) explained: "Kivucians voted for him [Kabila] in 2006, but we were not the only ones. *Katangais* did too. But you do not see them [*combattants*] attacking *Katangais*."[12] Although not as frequently as the Kivucians, however, other groups such as those from the Katanga region (*Katangais*) were occasionally attacked by the *combattants*.[13] However, the *combattants* considered eastern Congolese (mainly those from the Kivu region)'s gatherings highly suspicious. In particular, *combattants* perceived eastern Congolese political activities in Cape Town as pushing the agenda of the unwanted ruling party in

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8   I had a focus group discussion with seven members of Amis BK associations who were attacked by the *combattants* while partaking in the anti-Kabila protests of January 2012. The *combattants* attacked them physically calling then *baRwandais* just for speaking Kiswahili.

9   The intruders! The *collabos*! The Rwandans!

10   John and Malinga, barbers, Bellville, Cape Town, July 14, 2017.

11   Interview with the President of Amis Bk.

12   Interview with Ombeni, a Congolese artist from Bukavu (South Kivu), Cape Town, 17/02/2016.

13   In 2014, for example, the *combattants*, led by Mike Alomba, sent an ultimatum to Fere Gola about his concert in Cape Town scheduled for 14 February 2014 at a time in which the *combattants* had banned Congolese artists from the DRC and elsewhere from performing in the diaspora. In the message, they also warned Mr Kayembe—a Congolese businessman and owner of Chez Ntemba night club in Cape Town—against his club hosting the musician. The full video can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yi0v6FUbDuw. Accessed July 15, 2021.

the Congo or working on some "'liberation movement' that does not include 'real' Congolese."[14]

What seems to be the *combattants*' appropriation of the monopoly of Congolese diasporic activities, especially politically-related ones, is, without doubt, undemocratic. Congolese, such as the Amis BK association's leading committee members, see the *combattants*' antagonism toward their activities as interfering with eastern Congolese diasporic political awakening. For example, the *combattants* launched an attack on members of the *Force pour le Développement du Congo* (EFD), a political party founded in Pretoria (South Africa) at the end of 2016 by Aimé Bukasa from the Kivu region. The *combattants* attacked members of EFD in the Goodwood Casino on 2 July 2017 during the party's launch in Cape Town. The *combattants* called it "*parti ya ba infiltrés*" (party of the intruders). Between 2013 and 2017, they also constantly attacked and intimidated members of the *Union pour la Nation Congolaise* (UNC) political party of Cape Town because its founder is Vital Kamerhe—a Kivu politician (in)famous for having worked closely with Joseph Kabila during his first term (2006–2011) before joining hands with the opposition during Kabila's second term (2011–2018). The president of the UNC branch of Cape Town, who knew a large number of the EFD members in Cape Town, lamented: "I am not part of this political initiative, but I am deeply offended by the ways in which the *combattants* attacked these men for their political beliefs. It is clear they do not stand for democracy yet they want to change the political regime in the DRC." For the UNC Cape Town leader, "the attacks on EFD prominent members were an attack to all Kivucians" because it is further proof that "Kivucians are not allowed to exercise their political rights."

The widespread rumours about spies of the Congolese government and foreign enemies of the Congo in the diaspora also played a role in fuelling the *combattants'* suspicions against the eastern Congolese and their associations in Cape Town. However, this research is hardly the first to mention the fear of spies growing rampant among diasporas.[15] Moreover, news of spies from or sponsored by home countries' governments or their enemies in Cape Town is not unique to the Congolese diaspora. As noted during participant observation fieldwork research, talks of spies are pervasive in shared business spaces, mostly barbershops, hair salons, and even amongst car guards in commercial centres' parking lots, which are run by migrant nationals from other Great Lakes Region countries. This is confirmed in research by Turner (2008, 742–743), who argues for the "long distance politics" that the Great Lakes nationals, such as

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14 I am quoting *combattant* Pacho explaining how *Baswahili* have always been involved in movement that brought chaos to Congo and how "discreet" they are. He cited how the AFDL started in the Congolese diaspora but never included the fighters of UDPS, who were also in the diaspora and who were engaged in political struggle for years. This idea is certainly rooted in the well-known role of the Congolese diaspora in the formation of what became the AFDL that overthrew Mobutu as well as the RCD, which attempted to overthrow Laurent Kabila in the late 1990s. See also Inaka (2016, 9–11).

15 For example, a 2015 research study among Eritrean migrants in Europe argues for the ways in which "state control transcends Eritrean national borders" (Bozzini 2015).

Burundians, are involved in. The *combattants* are convinced about spies infiltrating the Congolese diaspora of Cape Town. With the deterioration of the socio-political relationship between the DRC and its neighbouring countries in its eastern region, the *combattants* do not trust *Baswahili* and their diasporic activities because of *Baswahili*'s association or closeness with citizens from other Great Lakes regions.

All Congolese agree that espionage activities have increased in their Cape Town community. *Baswahili* interacted with in this research, however, argued that the *combattants* and their activities are the ones responsible for the increase of these spies since 2011. Many Congolese, particularly those who visit home regularly, are more critical of the *combattants*' activities. Eastern Congolese, in particular, fear they could be interrogated on *combattants*-related political activities when they visit their country, more importantly, their region, the Kivu. The reason includes the fact that the *combattants* are one of those diaspora groups that Baser and Swain (2008) describe as "militant and hard-line diaspora groups" who are known to occasionally fund warfare and compromise peacebuilding in their homeland (Demmers 2007; Baser and Swain 2008). Even though the *combattants* remain a diasporic movement, they have inspired youth militarism in the war zones of the eastern Congo, especially the group known as La LUCHA (*Lutte pour le changement* [struggle for change]), which was founded in Goma (North Kivu) in May 2012—the same year *combattants* were making headlines in the diaspora with their many anti-Kabila protests and attacks on eastern Congolese (Perera et al. 2018).

The *Combattants* Groups as an Atypical Congolese Socioeconomic Network

"Bandits," "louts," and "criminals" are among the names given to the *combattants* (Inaka 2016). The majority of eastern Congolese, however, simply refer to them as "ba gang ya Kinois," which means *Kinois* gangsters or a gang of people from Kinshasa. Indeed, "gang" suits the description of *combattants* if one pays attention to the shifts in their modus operandi from 2012, including the use of physical violence on their victims, humiliation and blackmail, and other the details of their attacks. And just like common gangs, the *combattants* of Cape Town are divided into groups, often operating in rivalry and territorially. They are divided not only on the basis of the Congo politicians they affiliate with, but also on their economic interests and in the ways in which they apprehend their victims. Between 2011 and 2019, the *combattants*' "bosses" in Cape Town included Papy Sukami, Mike Alomba and Christian Sita Mampuya. These leaders, especially Sukami and Alomba, have attacked one another publicly and digitally, each claiming that the others are *collabos*, "corrupt" and have taken bribes from enemies. Mampuya is often the spokesperson for the Congolese diaspora of the Western Cape to the South African media. He is, however, often criticised for his non-violent methods and endeavours to unite and reconcile the eastern and western

Congolese communities in Cape Town.[16] For this, Mampuya is seen by rival *combattants* leaders as "too moderate," "too soft," and "compromised."[17] Alomba, whose influence extends from Salt River to Cape Town CBD, was suspended by fellow *combattants* who accused him of "forging relations with *collabos*" from the Kabila government and being on their payroll.[18] Sukami, who controls the Bellville-Parow area, was subjected to *mutakalisation* in Bellville by other *combattants* groups who accused him of taking money from some "*collabos*."[19]

The name "gang" is used to emphasise the violence of the *combattants*' group. Most participants, however, understand the *combattants*' activities as "cope," meaning an activity people engage in for material benefits. The *combattants* groups are but socioeconomic networks, preying first and foremost on relatively wealthy Congolese, including politicians, businessmen and celebrities. The fact that their use of violence also differs from one *collabo* to another, further proves that socioeconomic gains determine their modus operandi. As noted, most ordinary people whom the *combattants* attack are often just verbally abused and intimidated, usually at their business or workplace (Pype 2020). The rich and famous (including Congolese political elites and celebrities such as leading charismatic church pastors, journalists, actors, musicians, businessmen, etc.) are often captured or shortly kidnapped, and their valuables (such as wallets, credits cards, jewellery and cellphones) seized. These are the *collabos* that the *combattants* are more interested in. In fact, in South Africa, a good number of combattants are involved full-time in the movement as their only occupation, and they depend on it financially. Scholars on *combattants* elsewhere confirm this as they describe them as being of "low social status," having "the low education level of some activists" and their activities as being a "politics from below" (Demart and Bodeux 2013, 90; Inaka 2016).

Further evidence that *the combattants* groups are socioeconomic networks is that despite their known hatred toward eastern Congolese, their activities considerably affect their regional kinfolks, the *Kinois* communities, in which they often operate as debt collectors and settlers of matrimonial disputes, among other things. Many *Kinois* interacted with for this research—church pastors, businessmen, and musicians—argued that they were

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16   Christian Sita Mampuya is also involved in *Baswahili* associations and often attends their sociocultural gatherings. For example, in 2018 at the 10 years anniversary celebration of VIDEFI—a *Baswahili*-founded NGO in Bellville, Cape Town—he was one of the guest speakers as one of the collaborators of VIDEFI and a respected member of the Congolese community of Cape Town. He is considered the head of the Congolese diaspora of Cape Town.

17   Interview with *combattant* Dofi. See also Sita's interview on the protests of Congolese of Congolese of Cape Town of the Minembwe conflicts here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KqcijD5t4o&t=4s. Accessed July 15, 2021.

18   See Mike Alomba's *mutakalisation* by other Cape Town *combattants* in 2014 here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPl1DA8oRT4. Accessed July 15, 2021, and his interview on the accusations: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdMKnBUMwGQ. Accessed July 15, 2021.

19   Interview with *combattant* Dofi who also showed me the footage of Sukami's *mutakalisation* in Bellville. The footage no longer exists on You Tube.

the most affected by the *combattants'* operations, even more so than the eastern Congolese groups. Between 2013 and 2016, for example, the news of Congolese women reporting their abusive male partners to the *combattants* was widespread and critically debated in Congolese business places and associations' meetings attended as part of fieldwork for this research. Market women, including hairdressers in Bellville, Parow and Cape Town city centre, often approached the *combattants* to discipline their male partners. "Even for R200, they could beat him up for you," explained a hairdresser in Bellville (see also Vuninga 2017a&b). The *combattants* were also used as debt collectors among security workers and bouncers, and to settle disputes in *likelemba* (rotating credits) groups (Vuninga 2017a&b). In addition, they were often embroiled in struggles with fellow *combattants*. These fights were mostly incited by arguments about who collected money from which *collabos* and who kept it for himself, rather than about who was a political sell-out. More than anything, however, "activism" is what the *combattants* claim their movement is about; but so too do their *Baswahili* counter-parts and their social networks in Cape Town.

Combattants versus *Baswahili* in Congolese Diasporic Activism in Cape Town

In Cape Town, the eastern and western Congolese are in agreement about the crises in their home country and the socioeconomic hardship they face daily in South Africa. However, the two regional groups are more divided over what should be prioritised in this activism and the methods of protests. Consequently, the Congolese struggle to unite in their diasporic activism. Since the emergence of the *combattants* movement, however, there have been many occasions related to world events and home-country celebrations or manifestations that could have brought all the Congolese of Cape Town together, but instead, these events brought divides along *Kinois* and *Baswahili* lines. In 2017, during this research fieldwork, two events were singled out in this regard: World Refugee Day and Congo Independence Day.

World Refugee Day (WRD) is officially observed on 20 June annually (Sandvik 2010). It was established in 2000, based on Refugee Day and observed in Africa since 1975 "under the supervision of the Organization of African Unity." WRD has been important to both the South African government and African immigrant communities, especially since the 2008 xenophobic attacks. The 2017 WRD was one of those rare opportunities for Congolese nationals to come together to discuss or/and expose the many challenges they face as refugees in South Africa, while also raising awareness about the crises that continue to affect their country to claim their refugee rights. Instead, the events divided Congolese immigrants as they failed to agree on how the WRD should be commemorated and about the themes it should focus on.

Immigrants and South African institutions working with refugees had events planned to celebrate the 2017 WRD. In their addresses, some of these institutions did not only highlight their work with refugees and expressed their sympathies regarding the

adversities experienced by refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa, but they also attempted to distribute the blame between the locals and the immigrants for the overall hardship and the xenophobic attitude that immigrants continue to experience in post-apartheid South Africa.[20] The Scalabrini Centre was among the NGOs working with refugees in South Africa and, together with refugees, they "marched to Parliament to deliver a memorandum of appreciation for the protection of refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa."[21] On the same occasion, the South African Department of Home Affairs hosted a "dialogue aimed at promoting social cohesion among refugees, the migrant community and citizens."[22]

While the *combattants*-led groups were interested in exposing the injustices of the South African refugee system, the *Baswahili* associations were more oriented toward showing their gratitude and willingness to integrate into the host community. For example, in the Amis BK meeting of 17 June 2017, the issue of WRD was discussed in relation to how it could be made impactful by using it to introduce Amis BK to other South African NGOs working with refugees. Amis BK even delegated members to represent it at the conference of WRD at the Scalabrini Centre. As usual, Amis BK's "ambassador" role was not only to listen and report back on everything discussed on refugee opportunities, but also to ensure that Amis BK and their main objective—"a peaceful integration of all Congolese in South Africa" (in Amis BK's President's words)—were known to all the other organisations and associations present at the event.

In this meeting of Amis BK, an association known as "Unifarm" was also discussed, which the chair of the meeting described as an "association of *Kinois* of Hout Bay." Unifarm was said to be "resisting the refugee day." Amis BK members were warned against joining activities organised by Unifarm by emphasising that their members were but *combattants* in disguise. This association had planned to use WRD to protest against the ways in which the Congolese from Kinshasa were discriminated against, not only by the Department of Home Affairs, but also by all the other associations that provide services to refugees in South Africa. Unifarm was said to be preparing a protest and a press conference with "xenophobia" as the theme. Amis BK received their invitation, but they decided not to attend for two reasons. The first was that Unifarm were *Kinois*, *combattants* and pro-*combattants*. Therefore, it would not be safe for Kivucians to mix with them. The second was that Unifarm intended to upset the South African government with talks of xenophobia, whereas "we are advocating integration," added

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20 For example, the Scalabrini Centre explained: "Those who hold xenophobic sentiments are often struggling to find work, justice and stability. Furthermore, it has been said in social commentary that rushing to 'assist' those affected by xenophobia can result in those with xenophobic opinions intensifying their beliefs, as it is perceived as another instance in which foreigners are receiving 'special attention'." See https://scalabrini.org.za/world-refugee-day-at-scalabrini-centre-cape-town/. Accessed January 25, 2018.

21 https://scalabrini.org.za/world-refugee-day-20-june/. Accessed September 3, 2017.

22 https://www.gov.za/speeches/home-affairs-holds-dialogue-part-world-refugee-day-20-jun-19-jun-2017-0000. Accessed September 2, 2017.

the president of Amis BK.[23] And so, for Congolese, WRD in Cape Town ended up dividing *Baswahili* and *Kinois* once more because of their differing agendas, as seen again on the celebration of Congo's Independence Day.

The date of 2 July 2017 was chosen by Amis BK as the day to celebrate the DRC's 57th Independence anniversary.[24] On this occasion, another association known as the Joe Slovo community played a soccer game with Amis BK. At the game, members of Amis BK called them *Barundi* (people from Burundi) because of the nationality of the majority of the members of the Joe Slovo community. As observed since the early 2000s, relationships between the diaspora from the Great Lakes Region in Cape Town have deteriorated as a result of the persisting conflict in the eastern Congo. However, it was the watchful eye of the *combattants* that put an official end to the sociocultural *collabo*rations between Congolese and nationals from their eastern neighbouring countries that had existed since the 1990s. In particular, the *combattants* did not tolerate *Kivucians* gathering with "Rwandans" (as *combattants* in particular, and most Congolese in general, often call Rwandans, Burundians and Ugandans) (Lemarchand 2006; Reyntjens 2009).

The Joe Slovo community was not the only "foreign" association wanting collaboration with Amis BK on Congo's Independence Day in 2017. On 27 June 2017, Amis BK received an email from an association called African United FC, asking them to contribute with an amount of R500 for "the manifestation commemorating our countries' accession to independence: The Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi as well as Rwanda on 30 June, 1 July and 2 July, respectively." Indeed, the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi are all former Belgian colonies.[25] The letter was signed "your brothers, African United FC." This invitation could not be handled by the president of the Amis BK association alone, knowing how some members would interpret his decision to team up with those nationals, especially in celebrating Congo's independence. Hence, he forwarded the letter to the association's committee members so they could decide together how to reply to the African United FC, which was another pro-Burundian and pro-Rwandan association. It is not surprising that the so-called "*La Diaspora Congolaise de Cape Town*" group, largely made up of *Kinois* and members of the *combattants* groups, had not received any emails from associations such as the Joe Slovo community and African United FC.[26]

These two events show that both groups—from the east and the west—felt the need to use these events to raise awareness of the socio-political situation in their home country and their life as immigrants—mainly refugees and asylum seekers—in South Africa.

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23   Amis Bk committee meeting, Cape Town, 17/ 07/ 2017.
24   The actual Independence Day is on 30 June, but given that it fell on a Friday, a working day, the majority decided that Sunday (2 June) was the best day to celebrate.
25   That is how the dates appear in the email. But Rwanda and Burundi got their independence on the 1st of July 1961.
26   Interview with *combattant* Dofi.

However, they could not agree on methods to use because each group was guided by its relatively unique experience in South Africa. This unique or rather different way in how eastern and western Congolese are treated in South Africa, among other things, determines whether they would show gratitude or protest against the host country in commemorations such as the ones discussed above. *Baswahili* (in opting to show gratitude through engaging with topics concerning integration and collaboration between their associations and the local South African ones) were certainly guided by the fact that they are the most sympathised as a Congolese regional group from the conflict zone of the DRC. *Kinois,* on the other hand, wanted to expose the injustices to immigrants (especially the western Congolese) from the South African migration and refugee system. With less to lose, western Congolese, led by the *combattants*, made use of the South African working-class style of protesting. Eager to protect their socioeconomic statuses, the *Baswahili* are sceptical of joining these *Kinois* protests led by the *combattants* under the labels of the "Congolese Diaspora of Cape Town" or "Congolese Diaspora of the Western Cape" because they can provoke or worsen xenophobic attitudes of the South Africans.

Conclusion

Homeland politics and the politicisation of the Congolese diaspora are not all ascribed to tensions between eastern and western Congolese that *combattants* and *Baswahili* feuds incarnated in Cape Town in the last term in office of President Joseph Kabila. More than anything, the *combattants* groups, their activities and modus operandi point more to them being socioeconomic networks, atypical for their use of violence and preying mostly on their compatriots. Targeting eastern Congolese, however, has less to do with the homeland politics and ethno-regional politics of the Joseph Kabila era, and more to do with the host country (South Africa) that tends to favour some Congolese groups—mainly those hailing from the war/conflict region of the DRC—over others. This paper argues, therefore, that South Africa as a host country and its migration policies on Congolese migrants (especially refugees and asylum seekers) have, to a large extent, informed the *combattants*' hatred for eastern Congolese. These migration policies, in particular those informing refugee status decisions, continuously discriminate against Congolese from the western region—the region the majority of the *combattants* identify with.

Tensions between the *combattants* and *Baswahili*, this paper argues, are also a radical class struggle stemming from the challenges that translate into structural injustices that some Congolese face in their endeavour to integrate socioeconomically into South Africa, because they do not hail from the conflict zones of the DRC. The *combattants*' engagement in bringing about socio-political changes in their home country (as they expressed in their numerous anti-Kabila protests) is mostly to raise awareness about several issues or problems—beyond the violent conflict in the eastern region—which qualify them and other non-eastern Congolese for refugee status in South Africa. Therefore, differential treatment given to Congolese refugee migrants in South Africa

on the basis of their home region does not only contribute to an inter-group conflict of ethno-regional nature, but also overlooks the extent to which the conflicts in the eastern Congo have crippled the entire country at various levels. The paper, therefore, contends that the exacerbation of tensions between the *combattants* and *Baswahili* in Cape Town, during the last term of President Joseph Kabila, is also a struggle between the "winners" and "losers" of the South African migration politics (Adamson 2006, 197).

Acknowledgements

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