

Peacebuilding in the Congo: Arguing for Inclusion of the Subaltern Voice of the Congolese Refugee

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ABSTRACT The migrant crisis of displaced populations has taken on astronomical proportions globally. In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa is one of the countries that has drawn an increasing number of displaced people or refugees from other parts of Africa. Refugees such as the Congolese, one argues, become displaced 'subalterns'. This paper contends that recognizing the voice of such transnational subalterns allows one to see that there are levels of subaltern agency as a response to being forcibly uprooted, including having legitimate opinion/s on what is happening back home. This paper attempts to offer a critical survey of the work done in the context of Congolese refugees to South Africa and reveals that while the extant work is extensive, it is also myopic, and shortsighted in not including the voice of the actual Congolese refugees in South Africa. The paper suggests that gaining such vital insights and perspectives from the subaltern Congolese in South Africa, will allow one to cast a more 'grounded gaze' on the motivations propelling South Africa's peacebuilding efforts in the Congo.

INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Republic of Congo: Spawning the Subaltern Refugee

The migrant refugee crisis of displaced populations has taken on alarming and astronomical proportions globally. In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, the refugee crisis is imbricated within contexts of political instability, strife, war and to a lesser extent, natural disasters. More than half a century after colonialism, many African countries remain precariously placed between war and fragile peace. However, this is contrary to what independence is claimed as embodying or meant to embody (see Whetho 2014; Olusola 2014). As a result, "Africa is in the throes of its most serious refugee crisis as conflicts in Central African Republic, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mali have forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes" (UNHCR 2015:1). Ayo Whetho (2014) in his recent study argues that the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is an example of a dysfunctional postcolonial African state where most of its citizens have fled due to unending war.

The first years of DRC's independence were in turn awash with tribal wars, and the main reason being that tribal leaders/rulers had more power than the central government. The first

Congo war led to the ousting of President Mobutu Sese Seko, while the second Congo war highlighted the resource dimensions of conflicts (Taylor 2003: 45; Weiss 2000: 4). Additionally, due to the complexity and profitability of the DRC war, the country has attracted many foreign national armies, rebel groups, grassroots militias and several profiteering networks—*war economics*. There are several militia groups like the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC), Patriotic Force for the Liberation of Congo (FPLC), and National Integrationist Front (FNI) in the DRC.

This has left many Congolese as subalterns and as refugees in different countries across the globe. Forced migrants such as the Congolese have thus, become displaced 'subalterns', to borrow a famously deployed term of Gayatri Spivak (1988). Subaltern agency attempts to illustrate that there are levels and performances of agency that are brought into enactment in a bid to survive through the process and reality of being uprooted and displaced. Although outside the immediate scope of this paper, the various enactments of surviving and active livelihoods by the Congolese in South Africa, bears testimony to this agency. Currently, there is an excess of 500,000 Congolese refugees in South Africa. Most of the refugees, are spatially concentrated in the province of Gauteng.

This paper contends that recognizing the voice and agency of such transnational subal-

terns allows one to see that there are levels of subaltern agency that are brought into play as a response to being forcibly uprooted, and that these subalterns have a valid opinion on what is happening in their home country. This paper attempts to, in turn, offer a critical survey of the work done in the context of Congolese refugees to South Africa, and reveals that while the extant work is extensive, it is also myopic and shortsighted in not including the voice of the actual Congolese refugees in South Africa. The paper suggests that gaining such vital insights and perspectives from the subaltern Congolese in South Africa will allow one to cast a more critical gaze on whether South Africa's peacebuilding efforts in the DRC are structured so as to 'get rid' of the Congolese refugees, rather than accommodate them.

Surveying Scholarship on South Africa's Role Peacebuilding in the DRC

Currently, the literature shows that there is a mounting reluctance and increasing lack of interest of Western countries to intervene in civil and political conflicts, particularly in Africa. This puts enormous pressure on regional powers like South Africa to assume a dominant role in addressing African conflicts, economic deprivation and political instabilities (see Adebo 2005; Olusola 2014). However, a particular category of scholars, have critiqued the relevancy of South Africa's involvement in transforming conflict situations in different African countries (see Pillay 2013). Pillay (2013) claims that because of better military tools and expenditure, South Africa has the capacity to intervene in any African conflict, pointing out that South Africa is the largest military spender in Africa accounting for nearly sixty-five percent of total military spending in southern Africa and twenty-seven percent in Africa. Duncan (2014) argues that if South Africa is to be rid of political and economic immigrants, it has no option but to consolidate its privileged position to stabilize the continent. Moeletsi Mbeki, the brother of former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, has publicly claimed that the mounting migration of other African citizens, especially from war-torn areas into South Africa, is a wake-up call for the country to act. Mbeki mentions the 2008 xenophobic attacks as an example of social ills that South

Africa will continue to face if it does not democratize and stabilize Africa. Being the most 'democratic and developed' African economy, Jacob Zuma, current President of South Africa, in turn publicly informs the country that South Africa has no option but to reinforce a culture of peace, democracy and human rights on the continent.

Other scholars argue that instead of resolving African conflicts, South Africa is using conflict resolution as a tool for expanding its hegemony and enacting a double standard, "as Africa's Big Brother". Cilliers and Schunemann (2013) argue that historically, in some conflict situations, there is some evidence that South Africa had ulterior motives—other than conflict resolution—in its intervention, claiming that Mandela used this crisis to settle his discontent with Robert Mugabe—the then SADC chair. Chingono and Nakana (2009) add that the regime of Mandela played a key role in derailing peace talks in Sudan by supplying weapons to both, the Sudanese government and to the Sudanese People Liberation Movement.

Cilliers and Schunemann (2013) criticize Mbeki's time in the Presidency for using South Africa's conflict transformation strategy as a means of selling South Africa's arms to the war-torn countries of the great lakes and in Algeria and to campaign for the country's permanent position at the United Nation Security Council. Additionally, Whetho (2013) argues that by continuously intervening in the DRC, South Africa is joining a group of both state and non-state actors who scramble for the DRC's vast mineral resources—a major factor that is perpetuating conflicts in the DRC (see Taylor 2003; Whetho 2014).

The foregoing scholars' work in South Africa's role in resolving and transforming African conflicts, especially in the DRC, is thus cumulatively and potentially paving way for more (hopefully new) research trends into understanding South Africa's role in conflict transformation in Africa. However, one asserts that there are also new types of empirically based research that are needed.

Critiquing the Literature on South Africa's Role in Intervening for Peace in DRC

One contends that most literature on South Africa and peacebuilding focuses on the inter-

vener (South Africa), its interests in the conflict situation, humanitarian assistance and integration or repatriation of refugees. However, there is a dearth of literature on what role refugees residing in South Africa can contribute towards South Africa's peacebuilding mission in war or post-war African states. Also, there is scarcity of literature on attitudes and perceptions that refugees from war-torn countries have on how South Africa's involvement in their countries' conflict transformation benefits them or South Africans.

The paper by Stola (1992) highlighted over two decades ago, the sheer size and magnitude of the phenomenon of forced migration in the context of Africa, and traced its historical evolution, "intensity and atrocity in time and space" across Africa. However, more recently, Moore and Shellman point out that the literature on forced migration is dominated by the "idiographic", meaning that it appears to primarily comprise "descriptive case studies, advocacy and awareness pieces, and policy evaluations" (see Moore and Shellman 2004:723). They also point out that the literature is also mainly "systemic" and "structural in its theoretical" stance, protesting that the same is not true for the extant work on voluntary migration. Perhaps the most piercing objection, and one that the researchers wholly accede to, is their claim that "the theoretical literature on forced migration tends to take the country or society as the unit of explanation and seeks to identify macro level concepts" (2004: 724-725), where empirical analyses of data are not overly 'thick' or strong (see also Naidu 2016 forthcoming).

The assertion in this paper, is that offering 'thick' empirical and material contexts of lived experiences of the Congolese, can enhance and deepen the scholarship on understanding the imbricated complexities in South Africa's interventionist stance in the DRC.

While the above points to the kinds of qualitative research being suggested, other scholars propose theoretical models that can also change the shape of focused work on peacebuilding in the DRC. While conflict resolution has mainly concentrated on the termination of war, its task, one contends, starts with analyzing and understanding conflict. Much of the contemporary literature focuses on three approaches, which are important in conflict resolution: a) conflict dynamics, b) need-based con-

flict origins, and c) rational strategic calculations. Scholars like Ramsbotham et al. (2011:233; see also Doyle 2000) propose a reconstructed model of conflict resolution—a transformative and cosmopolitan model that seeks to privilege local and civilian capacity building and to renegotiate between local and international perspectives. It is the 'inclusion of the civilian' that is potentially exciting and profitable, one asserts. The focus on the 'civilian', in this particular model, in turn brings one back to the empirical contexts and the qualitative and lived experiences that the researchers are arguing for.

The aforementioned scholars' view leads one inevitably to a series of questions, including, "Whose interests should peacebuilding/conflict transformation¹ serve?"

Lederach and Appleby (2010) elucidate that peacebuilding in a war-torn country should empower the 'indigenous', while at the same time should respect and promote human rights and cultural resources within a given setting. Lederach and Appleby add that conflict transformation should attempt to address problems like gender and patriarchy, ethnical divide of civil societies, or pro-violence civil societies. Other scholars argue that conflict transformation in a conflict or post-conflict society should engage with *all actors* to stop violence (Staub 2006; Ramsbotham et al. 2011). Staub (2006) in *Reconciliation after Genocide, Mass Killing, or Intractable Conflict* argues that peacebuilding efforts should serve to correct severed relations, violated norms, distorted identities and absorbed impacts of trauma created as a result of violence. "This becomes an important mechanism of restoring trust for building a shared future thus, averting future violence" (Ramsbotham et al. 2011: 231). Again the question stated above can very possibly be shed light on, by the subaltern voice of the Congolese in South Africa. This kind of scholarship is erected from a grounded 'bottom up' perspective, one argues.

According to the United Nation Refugees Council Report (2015), in global terms, about 45.2 million people are refugees in the world, and as mentioned, forcibly displaced by war, economic situation and natural disasters. Although conflict resolution emerged in 1945 as a critical response to the realist approaches in international relations offering ways to avert occurrence and reoccurrence of violence and war, the (actual and potentially participatory) role of the refu-

gees in contributing to this process in their countries has been given relatively less attention by interveners. In this case, most of the refugees' host countries (due to political, economic and social pressure) are forced to participate in peacebuilding as a way of solving the refugee crisis in their own countries. This being the case, many contemporary peace scholars miss the role of refugees and immigrants in foreign countries, in potentially contributing to their home countries' peacebuilding processes.

While Chimni (1998) and later Chimni (2002) in *Refugees, Return and Reconstruction of 'Post-Conflict' Societies* suggests that refugees should play a crucial role in their countries' peacebuilding, he does not spell out whether or not an intervening host state should consider the attitudes refugees have. In his opinion, in some situations, refugees may contribute positively in the peace process as civil society abroad. This position however, needs to be more forcefully spelled out by him and other scholars. More importantly, more micro level research needs to actually focus on the refugee as an individual 'unit' of analysis, beyond studies on livelihoods and coping mechanisms in host countries.

In the context of Congolese refugees in South Africa, there are a number of contemporary studies that have been conducted about the Congolese refugees in South Africa. One example is the works of Bouillon (1996a, 1996b), *the lives of Francophone Africans resident in contemporary South Africa*, which mainly focuses on how Congolese refugees face discrimination from the South Africans as they settle in. More recent works by Smit and Rugunanan (2014), namely, *From precarious lives to precarious work: The dilemma facing refugees in Gauteng, South Africa*, explore the perceptions and experiences of female refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Zimbabwe with regard to their daily life experiences and survival strategies. Similarly, very recently, Gordon (2014) in his paper, *Welcoming refugees in the rainbow nation: contemporary attitudes towards refugees in South Africa*, mapped the attitudes of the South African population towards granting refugees protection. Lakika et al. (2015) in *Violence, Suffering and Support: Congolese Migrants' Experiences of Psychosocial services In Johannesburg*, describe and analyze the trajectories migrants go through to find help in coping with their suffering due to their traumat-

ic experiences in the country of origin and in South Africa. In a NOREF Report entitled *Africa's Pre-eminent Peacemaker: an Appraisal of South Africa's Peacemaking Role in the DRC*, Tonheim and Swart (2015) show how the DRC case is becoming one of the most important cases for gauging the capacity and the will of South Africa's commitment in the conflict.

The foregoing studies and reports however, are critically lacking in seeing Congolese refugees as party to peace (building) in the DRC. Most of these studies view and refract the Congolese refugees as those in need of humanitarian assistance, psychosocial help, in need of a good reception in their host countries and to be repatriated back to their homes at the end of the conflict. This has left them (the subaltern refugee) vulnerable, both in the DRC and in South Africa, and to have no role in peacebuilding of their country. Such arguments assume that all Congolese refugees are people who are preoccupied with only the immediate concerns of supporting themselves and eking out a living while in South Africa.

Such studies lack the recognition that there is also a particular group of Congolese refugees and Rights groups (intelligentsia, academics and activists) whose concern is a better DRC and an all-encompassing South Africa's peacebuilding process in their country.

This paper suggests that research needs to draw on the aforementioned (intelligentsia, academia and activist) insights on South Africa and peacebuilding in the DRC, and the influx of the Congolese refugees. In doing so, these kinds of studies can potentially explore the attitudes and the perceptions of the Congolese refugees towards South Africa's intervention in the DRC on one hand, and on the other hand, it can explicate the capacity and the interests of South Africa's peacebuilding mission in the DRC.

While there are scholars like Smit and Rugunanan (2014) who have contributed to knowledge on the role of South Africa and peacebuilding in the DRC, such studies have not interrogated the attitudes Congolese refugees residing in South Africa have on this issue. Given the pervasive label of 'parasite' and misconceptions that the Congolese refugees and other African immigrants are associated with in South Africa, the issue of their role in South Africa's peacebuilding mission in the DRC thus remains an important one in conflict transformation and peace studies.

From an empirical point of view, there are a number of organizations that researchers can work with in order to generate qualitative research from the DRC refugees themselves. As pointed out, there is in excess of 500,000 Congolese refugees currently in South Africa. Most of the refugees, as mentioned, are spatially concentrated in the province of Gauteng. One organization that is potentially valuable as a research site for future scholars working in South Africa, is the Jesuit Refugees Service (JRS). The Jesuit Refugees Service is a Catholic religious organization located in Yeoville, in the Gauteng province, that provides assistance to refugees in camps and cities, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, and to those held in detention centres. The JSR has a large number of Congolese refugees whom they offer services to. Additionally many activist Congolese, are part of the organization themselves. Another organization is the Muslim Refugees Relief Association (MRASA). Like the Jesuit Refugees Service, the Muslim Refugees Relief Association is a non-profit Islamic organization that seeks to uplift the religious, social, morale and academic standards of refugees and asylum seekers. They too have many Congolese refugees that they cater to.

While the aforementioned organizations are broad and attempt to assist all refugees, the Cultural Orientation Center in Gauteng is more specifically a Congolese organization that provides basic information about Congolese refugee arrivals. In Gauteng, the Cultural Orientation Center acts as a background service provider to both new and old Congolese refugees. This organization is run by several Congolese activists and can potentially offer valuable research participants for grounded qualitative studies seeking to consciously include the perceptions and insights of Congolese refugees in South Africa.

Research on conflict transformation has narrowed much work on the efforts of peacebuilding by focusing largely on how to 'use short, medium and long-term processes of either averting or rebuilding war-affected communities so as to reduce the likelihood of occurrence or recurrence of war and/or violence' (Ramsbotham et al. 2011: 199). Lambourne (2004) suggests that if one is to reach the desired goal of conflict transformation, focus should be on building and rebuilding the political, security, justice, social

and economic fabric or institutions of a society in war or those emerging from conflict. Other peace scholars suggest that the root cause of conflict needs to be addressed by promoting social and economic justice as well as putting in place institutions of governance and rule of law, which will serve as a foundation for peacebuilding, reconciliation and development (Nkhulu 2005; Botes 2001: 43). In many of these studies, there is the scholars' perception of the powerlessness of refugees from countries ravaged by war to contribute towards building and rebuilding peace in their countries. This paper in turn recommends and stresses the need for studies to include the seemingly forgotten role of the subaltern transnational refugees in peacebuilding, by focusing on the refugees themselves.

This kind of focus also potentially highlights subaltern refugee voice and agency, and as individuals who often live in multiple worlds, the world they are forced to flee (Democratic Republic of Congo), and the world they are forced to inhabit (South Africa).

Lin's (2012) rather powerful paper probes the "patterns of dynamics that arise in different subaltern contexts, examining the different tactics subalterns devise to manage the intersection of multiple worlds and the consequences for their agency" (2012: 2). Although set in a wholly different context to migration or internal displacement, Lin's paper offers semiotic signposts and compels one to consider the possible ways in which the thoughts and actions of subaltern individuals allow one to recognize different forms of less visible agency and voice (Lin 2012: 13).

CONCLUSION

This paper suggests that particular qualitative and ethnographic studies, by drawing in the experiences, insights and arguments of the empirical realities of the subaltern Congolese refugee community, can substantively contribute to the knowledge of peacebuilding in the DRC. Additionally, these studies can potentially seek to probe the assumption by many scholars that South Africa is using its participation in the DRC peacebuilding processes to consolidate its position among the world's powers to seek a permanent seat at the United Nation Security Council and as maintaining hegemony in the DRC, rather than intervene for positive peace in the DRC.

The notion of 'subaltern' is perhaps most popularly known through the work of critical theorists, the seminal thinkers—Gramsci, Guha, and Spivak. However, there are contemporary contexts of the subaltern, such as that of the displaced 'refugee'.

What is the point of recognizing that the displaced person, such as the Congolese refugee, possess 'voice' (and therefore agency) and need to be included? Well at the most basic level, for starters, it allows one to recognize that,

The subaltern can speak.

It also reminds one that,

Whether anyone listens is a different matter...

Thus, an argument to include the subaltern voices of the Congolese refugee in South Africa, cannot but deepen the discourse on how South Africa's peacebuilding initiatives are perceived by the refugees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends and stresses the need for studies to include the seemingly forgotten role of the subaltern transnational refugees in peacebuilding, by focusing on the refugees themselves. Such studies could potentially focus on,

1. Identifying how the Congolese refugee (the activist and intelligentsia) *themselves* see their role with the South African peacebuilding mission in the DRC.
2. Probing and identifying how Congolese refugees' contribution to South Africa's peacebuilding mission in DRC may or may not contribute to positive peace.
3. Interrogating and identifying *with the Congolese refugees themselves*, and some of the national and international interests that Congolese refugees consider to be shaping and influencing South Africa's continuous intervention in the DRC's conflict.

It is suggested that such a focus seeks to ascertain if the involvement of Congolese refugees can offer a grassroots based contribution to South Africa's peacebuilding mission in the DRC. For example, in 2012, Congolese refugees who were protesting against the questionable reelection of Kabila questioned the way in which South Africa was conducting its peacebuilding affairs in the DRC. They accused the role of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in training Congolese Battalion whose aim was

to crack down dissidents of Kabila and post-election protesters. The Congolese refugees also protested against the manner in which South Africa quickly accepted the reelection of Kabila in the disputed election. This demonstration by the refugees clearly indicates that they have some perception on the dynamics of what breeds the DRC's conflict and how South Africa should carry out its peacebuilding mission in DRC.

Qualitative studies of the events such as the demonstration cited above, this paper suggests, will in turn offer empirical reference points to the discourse. Gaining such vital insights and perspectives from the Congolese in South Africa will allow one to in turn, cast a more critical gaze on whether South Africa's peacebuilding efforts in the DRC are structured so as to 'get rid' of the Congolese refugees. This kind of focus, questions, *from a qualitative perspective*, with the refugee Congolese voices included, whether the ongoing participation of South Africa in the peacebuilding process of the DRC rests on the imperative of what the former will benefit and not for the benefit of the Congolese themselves. This kind of focus potentially highlights subaltern refugee voice and agency, and reveals them as individuals who often live and straddle multiple intersecting worlds, the home country (DRC) and the host country (South Africa).

NOTES

- 1 The dichotomy between conflict transformation and peacebuilding is blurred. While conflict transformation tends to deal with conflict itself: causes and how to terminate it, peacebuilding deals with addressing structures (political, social and economic) within which the conflict was embedded in and how to find its long term process (Ramsbotham 2011:288).

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