

## The Banyamulenge and the Unmaking of the Congolese State: Issues and Prospects

Nicasius Achu Check

At the dawn of colonial rule, several components of African nations found themselves in different countries, thereby creating an international separation between formerly single and centralised nations. The Banyamulenge of the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are a perfect example of this, as a part of the Rwandan nation that found itself on the other side of the international border. The policy brief examines the plight of the Banyamulenge in Eastern DRC and how discriminatory policies against them led to several upheavals in that part of the country and the sub-region as a whole. Though the post-colonial governments in the DRC tried to integrate the Banyamulenge into mainstream DRC society, many of the policies were seen as superficial and not consistent with the political and social status of the Banyamulenge. The brief argues that if the present government does not put in place sound policies aimed at relieving the plight of the Banyamulenge, they could, with the help of Rwanda, destabilise the entire region, as they did in the 1990s.

### Introduction

The idea that ethnic interaction in pre-colonial Africa was characterised by belligerence is both misleading and erroneous. Bozeman affirms that during the pre-colonial era, 'political identities were floating and unstable because they were being shaped and reshaped by belligerent actions from without'.<sup>1</sup> This notion upholds the argument propagated during the colonial era of a pre-colonial Africa where violence was the rule and stable identities the exception.<sup>2</sup>

Chretien, on the other hand, argues that the so-called traditional African civilisations, especially those of the Great Lakes region of Africa, seem

to stand out for their high degree of cohesion, characterised by centralised polities, common religious references, intense human density and similar languages, all of which underline a contrast with neighbouring areas.<sup>3</sup> Though the picture painted by several African nation states during the colonial period was one of conquest, examples abound of nation states coalescing into wider frameworks of social identities. Lemarchand further observes that some state systems were able to persist as distinctive entities for centuries.<sup>4</sup>

The advent of colonialism and the monetarisation of African economies dispersed several members of the erstwhile centralised political entities to areas where they could sell

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The establishment of the Rwandan state internationally isolated the Banyamulenge from their ancestral land.

their labour. The Berlin Africa Conference of 1884–85 arbitrarily separated some of these groups along international boundary lines. One of the political entities that suffered from this arbitrary separation was the Banyamulenge of the Great Lakes region of Africa.

Historically, the Banyamulenge in Eastern DRC were part of the Tutsi ethnic group in Rwanda. They therefore now occupy an artificial nation state created in the heart of the Congo forest by the whims and caprices of their colonial masters. The establishment of the Rwandan state internationally isolated the Banyamulenge from their ancestral land. Two ostensible reasons were given for the displacement of the Tutsi from Rwanda. First was the high tax imposed upon the people by Mwami Rwabugiri, who ruled the kingdom of Rwanda in the later part of the seventeenth century. The second reason could have been the violent war of secession that erupted after the death of Mwami Rwabugiri in 1895.<sup>5</sup> The struggle turned into a prolonged civil war between two clans, the Abeega and the Abanyiginya. The Abeega succeeded after several members of the defeated clans had been killed.<sup>6</sup>

It has, however, equally been argued that with the implantation of a colonial economy in Eastern Congo, several colonial companies were in need of manual labour. As many as 7 000 labourers, mostly Rwandans, were recruited to work in Eastern Congo by the *Union Minière de Haut Katanga*, a mining company in South Kivu, in the 1920s. The social revolution of 1959 in Rwanda also pushed several Tutsi to migrate to Eastern Congo. Thus, several reasons account for the massive number of Rwandan Tutsi in Eastern Congo in the post-independence era.

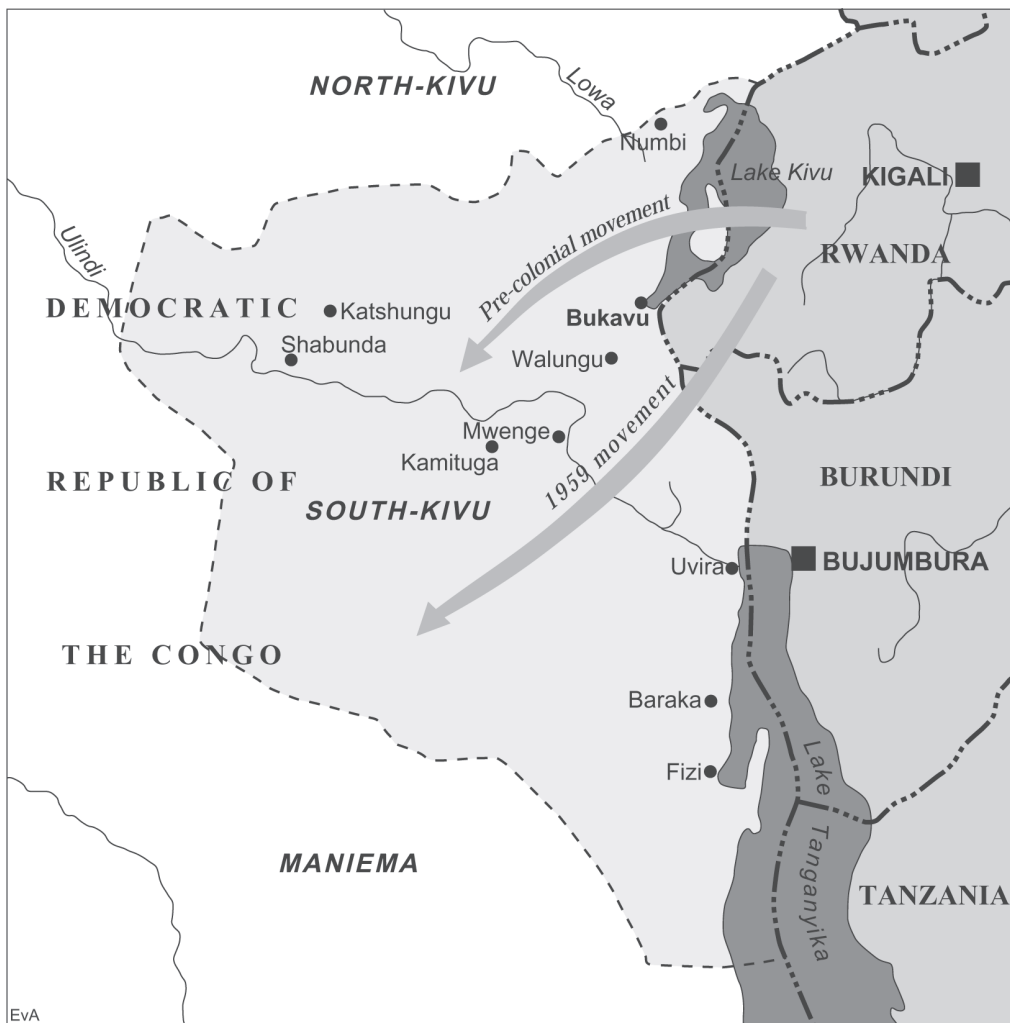
Settled mainly in the mountainous South Kivu province of the DRC, the Banyamulenge were denied Congolese citizenship soon after independence because they had supported the central government against the Katanga secessionist movement. As a result, they retreated deep into the forest with their livestock for fear of victimisation. Secessionist rebels pursued them and killed their livestock. In response, the Banyamulenge joined government forces and the Katanga secessionist movement was defeated in South Kivu.<sup>7</sup> Branded as collaborators with the brutal regime of Mobutu Sese Seko by many other ethnic groups in South Kivu, whose members were killed in the rebellion, the Banyamulenge suffered the wrath of several ethnic groups in the South Kivu province. Because of their collaboration, Mobutu appointed some of the Banyamulenge

into important government positions in the provincial capital, Bukavu.

Though a sizeable number of the Banyamulenge were integrated into the mainstream economy of South and North Kivu, their distinct physiological and physical characteristics, which differentiate them from other ethnic groups in the region, placed them apart. They traded with their cattle and were therefore considered economically empowered at the end of the colonial era. The surrounding ethnic groups were not happy that 'foreigners' should occupy such high economic positions in their country. There was therefore constant tension between the surrounding ethnic groups and the Banyamulenge. To minimise tension, the term Banyamulenge, which means 'people of the Mulenge' was chosen to avoid being called 'Banyarwanda' and being seen as foreigners.<sup>8</sup>

In appreciation of the help given to his administration by the Banyamulenge during the Katanga secessionist uprising, Mobutu Sese Seko granted citizenship to the Banyamulenge through the 1971 Citizenship Decree. The Congolese inhabitants of South and North Kivu, however, resisted the move and reversed the gains made by the Banyamulenge through the 1981 Citizenship Bill, which stated that only people who could prove descent from someone resident in the Congo in 1885 would qualify for citizenship. Angered by the fact that the Mobutu regime could not implement the 1971 Citizenship Decree, the Banyamulenge increasingly grew to detest the Mobutu administration, and the Sovereign National Conference of 1991 saw an increase in the coherence of anti-Mobutu forces within the ranks of the Banyamulenge.<sup>9</sup>

The outbreak of the Rwandan civil war in 1990 saw several Banyamulenge crossing the border to join forces with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). The Kinshasa administration frowned on this move and decided that all Banyamulenge were foreigners in the Congo and should consider themselves as such. Angered by the decision to consider them as foreigners, several thousand Banyamulenge joined the RPF, while others joined the Alliance of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL), headed by Joseph Desire Kabila. The AFDL, primarily made up of the Banyamulenge, succeeded in overthrowing the government of Mobutu, with the help of the RPF. The situation of the Banyamulenge did not, however, improve, despite the fact that they had contributed to the fall of the Mobutu administration.



**Banyamulenge Movement**

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This policy brief attempts to examine Joseph Kabila's relationship with the Banyamulenge and assess whether this relationship would lead to the Banyamulenge's feeling more accepted as Congolese or continuing to be regarded as 'foreigners', as the previous administrations portrayed them. The idea is to explore the inner reactions of the Banyamulenge and to analyse whether they are likely to support another uprising in the lead-up to the 27 November 2011 presidential elections. The main bone of contention between the Banyamulenge and Joseph Desire Kabila has not been resolved: that of citizenship for the Banyamulenge. If this issue is not resolved by the Kabila regime before the elections, there is a fear that a Banyamulenge uprising might be imminent.

### Conceptualising Nation States in Africa

The scramble for Africa and the partition of the continent was an attempt to destroy African

nation states that had flourished on the continent for centuries. Many of the European states taking part at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 hardly knew which part of the continent was allocated to them, and knew even less about the inhabitants of these territories. As a result, several African nation states were divided between the new countries, making the administration of such peoples difficult for both the colonial administration and the leaders of the fractured nation states in the post-colonial era.

An initial question to ask is therefore: What constitutes a nation? Wendell observes that national forms of identity can be conveniently viewed as stages in the development of the human group, from small face-to-face local prehistoric groups, to large regional units that today link or command large territories or populations.<sup>10</sup> Many have argued that nation states are ethnic groups that can subscribe to the same history, language, religion, geographical location, and are willing to cede part of their liberties to a central authority. The Yorubas in Nigeria, the Zulus in South Africa and the Ashanti in Ghana are examples of large

nation states in Africa. Their leaders command great respect within the circular state and most political decisions are taken in consultation with them. The post-independence governments in the Congo did not regard the various nation states as important political constituencies. This explains why very little investigation was done to understand the culture and socio-political conditions of the various nation states. As a result, the disregard for their welfare led to the failure of the second Congolese Republic.

However, the social contract theory in its various forms can explain why several African nation states have survived despite the continuous blurring of the nation state and the circular state structure. Socrates, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and many other prominent philosophers have put forward arguments for and against the social contract theory, but the theory is still very relevant in analysing social and political phenomena. This theory suggests that a group of self-interested and rational individuals come together and form a contract, which creates society.<sup>11</sup> (For instance, the Banyamulenge, mindful of their foreign roots, were willing to give up some of their freedom in order to create social rules that would protect their self-interest.) The theory reasons that it is in an individual's best interest to voluntarily give up the freedoms one has in order to obtain the benefits of the political order.<sup>12</sup> Although the contract is usually accepted to be a set of culturally agreed norms that will help to maintain solidarity within the group, the elements are not usually known to all the components of the group.<sup>13</sup>

Although the Banyamulenge did not have a central authority, village heads were regarded as leaders and their role as leaders of a group of people in a foreign land was recognised by all and sundry. Post-independence discrimination by neighbouring ethnic groups against the Banyamulenge unconsciously reinforced solidarity bonds within the Banyamulenge families in Eastern Congo. Each village was headed by an appointed leader and there was a national leader of the Banyamulenge who could speak and act on their behalf. On the whole, the concept of social contract became the norm for these people in the post independence era, and it was this social contract that has enabled the nation to survive to date.

### **The Normative Framework of the Banyamulenge Nation**

The primary objective of the Banyamulenge

migration from Rwanda to Eastern Congo was not to conquer or subjugate existing ethnic groups, but was firstly to work in colonial factories, and secondly to run away from the Hutu social revolution of 1959. They brought with them the art of rearing cattle, which became a symbol of social mobility. A cow is the most important possession of a Banyamulenge and in many circles they considered cattle as something next to man.<sup>14</sup> Rukundwa observes that apart from the milk and meat which form the community's staple food, the horns of cattle were used as water containers, the skin for clothing and mats, and the urine as a disinfectant.<sup>15</sup> The cow was therefore a benefactor to the Banyamulenge community and this culture has been maintained over the decades.

The Banyamulenge maintained all the traditional practices they brought from Rwanda, including living in hamlets in areas that were suited to their livestock. Thus the health of their livestock determined whether the Banyamulenge would stay in a particular place or not.<sup>16</sup> The norm within the Banyamulenge community was that when death and poverty were linked to a place, family heads would quickly remove the family from the area. Kinship descendents would generally build their houses in the same area,<sup>17</sup> linking the area to other hamlets to form a huge village.

Most of the Banyamulenge, for fear of victimisation by other ethnic groups, moved onto the slopes of Mount Kivu, while others moved onto the Ruzizi plain, where a few became chiefs among the Barundi through gifts of cattle. The aim was to live happily with their neighbours, and in order to remove the stigma of being foreign they changed their name from Banyarwanda to Banyamulenge, to signify their attachment to the Congolese state. However, the name change did not remove the perceived 'foreignness' of the Banyamulenge, and their alienation from Congolese society has been the hallmark of post-independence Congo.

The Banyamulenge also brought with them to the Congo the client/master relationship. Some of the local people were given cattle, and through a relationship of paternalism the local peasant became the client and the Banyamulenge the master. Over time, this relationship angered many local peasants, who could not see the reason why a foreigner should be a master. There was therefore constant tension between the Banyamulenge and the local peasants. The Banyamulenge also maintained family ties with Rwanda, and each time there was a problem in Eastern Congo, some Banyamulenge would rush to Rwanda for assistance.<sup>18</sup>

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## The Unmaking of the Congolese State

At first the presence of the Banyamulenge in Eastern Congo was of little significance to the political establishment in Kinshasa and the provincial administration in Bukavu, after 1960. However, the killing of Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the Congo, in 1961 set in motion a series of conflicts between the various ethnic groups in the Congo. Although the conflicts were ethnically based and politically motivated, the neutrality of the Banyamulenge could not be ascertained by the provincial administration in Bukavu. Several government emissaries were sent to the leadership of the Banyamulenge who, after much persuasion, agreed to join the government in fighting the other ethnic groups. The Banyamulenge succeeded in pacifying the entire Eastern Congo and thus assisted in the process of consolidating the power base of the Mobutu regime. Nevertheless, the Mobutu administration did not appreciate the work done by the Banyamulenge in quelling the uprising and instead insisted that they should go back to Rwanda. The Banyamulenge retaliated by massively joining the Alliance of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL) led by Laurent Kabila, which eventually led to the overthrow of Mobutu in 1996.

The outbreak of the Rwandan civil war provided the Banyamulenge with an opportunity to support the Tutsi in Rwanda, who, everything being equal, would support them in their quest for recognition in the Congo. The genocide was a painful episode in the history of the Great Lakes region, but it provided an opportunity for Tutsi forces in the Great Lakes region to consolidate their forces for any eventuality. The opportunity came in 1996, when the leadership of the Banyamulenge supported Laurent Kabila in his bid to overthrow the government of Mobutu. The entire rebellion was made up of Banyamulenge and some members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).<sup>19</sup> By 7 September 1997, the Banyamulenge had succeeded in installing Laurent Desire Kabila as the president of the Congo and in the process unmade the Congolese State built by Mobutu Sese Seko.

## Prospects for Another Rebellion in the DRC

Who would have thought that Mobutu Sese Seko, the most feared statesman in post-independence Africa, would be overthrown by a group of people

determined to maintain their culture and socio-political institutions in a country they now called home? Mobutu's half-hearted policy moves aimed at improving the lives of the Banyamulenge were seen as superficial and inconsistent. These inconsistencies pushed the Banyamulenge to seek help from their ancestral home in Rwanda, and this help came in the form of supporting the 1996–97 rebellion which overthrew the government of Mobutu.

However, despite their role in the overthrow of the Mobutu regime, their political and social status did not improve. Laurent Kabila refused to recognise the important role the Banyamulenge had played in his accession to power and also reneged on an important promise of recognising them as Congolese. As a result of the tension between Kabila and the Banyamulenge, Rwanda, an ally of the Banyamulenge, invaded the Congo, and this led to the second Congo war, which eventually led to the killing of Laurent Kabila. Laurent Kabila's death has not been linked to any Banyamulenge, but his refusal to recognise them as Congolese may have contributed in some way to his demise.

Laurent Kabila's administration had failed to put in place concrete policies to appease the Banyamulenge. After the transition of the presidency from Laurent Kabila to his son, Joseph Kabila, several Banyamulenge army generals refused to join the integrated *Forces Armees de la Republique Democratique du Congo* (FARDC).<sup>20</sup> These included Colonel Jules Mutebusi, General Lauren Nkunda, General Patrick Masunzu, and many others. Their refusal to join the regular Congolese army was based on the deteriorating social and political conditions of the Banyamulenge in Eastern Congo. The conditions were exacerbated by the attacks on the Banyamulenge by the Hutu population in Congo and the Hutu-dominated *interahamwe* militiamen and members of the former Rwandan army, who had committed the genocide in Rwanda.<sup>21</sup>

Rwanda therefore supported the Banyamulenge soldiers within the Congolese army to help them to protect themselves against the *interahamwe* and the caprices of the Kinshasa administration. Realising the importance of an alliance with Rwanda, Joseph Kabila initiated a series of meetings with the Kagame administration, and in late 2008 the two governments agreed to launch a joint military offence against the Hutu rebellion in Eastern Congo.<sup>22</sup> These initiatives by the Kabila regime were aimed at reducing the influence of the Banyamulenge in Eastern Congo and enticing Rwanda to establish diplomatic relations with

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## The prospects for a destabilisation of the Congo by the Banyamulenge now seem slim.

Kinshasa. The deal seems to have worked, as General Laurent Nkunda was neutralised and placed under house arrest in Rwanda, and several of the Banyamulenge army generals and their armies joined the regular Congolese army.<sup>23</sup>

There is a general feeling within the Banyamulenge community in Eastern Congo that Joseph Kabila's administration has done much to ameliorate their socio-political and security concerns. Massacres of the Banyamulenge, which were a regular occurrence in the last decade, are a thing of the past. Several thousand Banyamulenge soldiers have been integrated into the regular Congolese army and a majority of them have been granted Congolese citizenship. The international community is also very keen to alleviate the plight of the Banyamulenge, as they have been recognised as a catalyst for instability in Eastern Congo.

It should be understood that after several hundred Banyamulenge were massacred in the Gatumba camp in Burundi in 2004, after they had been resettled there by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the survivors were resettled in the United States.<sup>24</sup> With the rapprochement between the DRC and Rwanda and Uganda now a reality, the prospects for a destabilisation of the Congo by the Banyamulenge now seem slim, primarily because Rwanda and Uganda were the main supporters of the Banyamulenge in the rebellion against the Kinshasa administration. Rwanda, it has been understood, is the main purveyor of instability in Eastern Congo, as such a situation would give it leeway to attack the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) camps in the area. The FDLR are the main threat to the stability of the Rwandan state, and it is incumbent upon the Kagame regime to make sure that this threat is eliminated. If this is not done, Rwanda might continue to support the Banyamulenge militia in Eastern Congo, as such support would act as a bulwark against the FDLR threat and even, it might hope, establish a friendly regime in Kinshasa that would be sympathetic to the Rwandan cause.

### Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

From all indications, the Joseph Kabila regime has done more to integrate the Banyamulenge into mainstream Congolese society than his predecessors. Thousands of Banyamulenge have joined the civil service in Bukavu and one of the vice presidents is a Banyamulenge. The

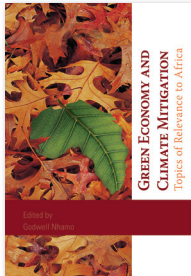
rapprochement with Rwanda has been hailed as an important milestone on the road to ethnic reconciliation in the Great Lakes region. The fact that Rwanda does not see the administration in Kinshasa as a puppet regime that could take care of the *interahamwe* that carried out the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda is a great achievement. Rwanda should instead institute dialogue with the *interahamwe* in order to restore peace and dignity in the region. If the *interahamwe* are not integrated within mainstream Rwandan and Congolese society, peace will be hard to achieve in the region.

Kinshasa has on the one hand guaranteed that it would not allow the Hutu militia operating in Eastern DRC to threaten the security of Rwanda. Rwanda, for its part, will stop its sporadic forages into Eastern DRC to counter the Hutu militia, which pose a serious threat to the security of the Rwanda state. As a result of relative peace in Eastern DRC, several policy options are available for the present Kabila administration:

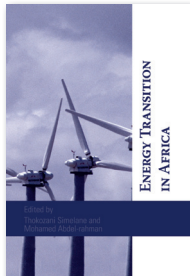
- It should grant full citizenship to all Banyamulenge and many other ethnic groups in Eastern Congo. The government should also recognise minority rights and make sure that such rights are enshrined in the constitution of the country.
- The administration should continue to maintain cordial and fraternal relations with its neighbours, especially Rwanda and Burundi. These two countries have a huge Tutsi population and they would not hesitate to act if the security of the Tutsi population in the DRC were threatened.
- The Kabila administration should invest heavily in infrastructure development in Eastern Congo. The roads and telecommunication infrastructure should be improved; the mining companies operating in this part of the country can be called upon to contribute to this development.
- The issuing of mining rights should take into consideration the rights of the local inhabitants. Mining companies should endeavour to recruit locally, and in areas where technical skills are lacking, training should be provided.
- All these recommendations will come to naught if the Kabila administration does not ensure that the forthcoming presidential elections are free, credible and fair. Any undemocratic move may reverse the gains which the administration has garnered for several years.

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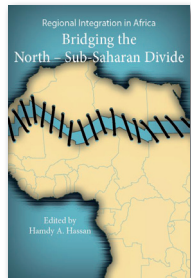
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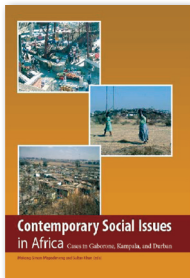
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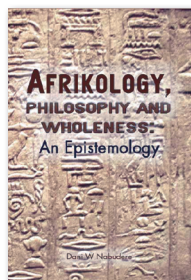
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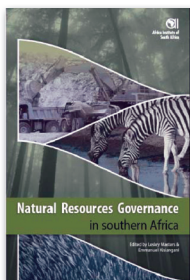
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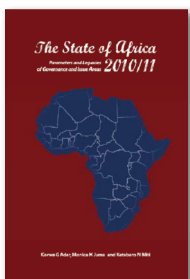
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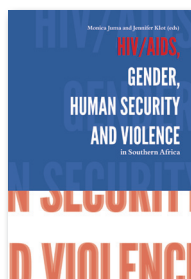
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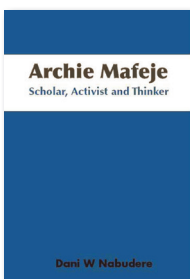
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