

# Being in Between?

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Exploring Identity Construction Among Rwandophone Congolese

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## Abstract

This thesis is a compilation of a 'Kappa' (with six chapters) and four articles. It explores how civilian Rwandophone Congolese construct their identity in various settings in the North Kivu area. To achieve this aim, the thesis investigates how Rwandophone Congolese position themselves in relation to: the armed groups that claim to protect them, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and other ethnic groups through their everyday experiences of exclusion and discrimination. The study is based on original field data collected from 106 respondents in Rwanda and the DRC between 2011 and 2014.

The belonging of Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese (hereinafter called Rwandophone Congolese) as citizens of the DRC has been an ongoing question. It became more acute with the re-emergence of the autochthony discourse and the participation of Rwandophone Congolese armed groups in conflicts during the 1990s and thereafter. In investigating Rwandophone Congolese identity, the thesis draws on sociological theories of identity construction, especially those that focus on discourse and representation. The thesis develops its conceptual ideas through and in relation to interviews with Rwandophone Congolese.

The study finds that identity among Rwandophone Congolese is ambiguous, fluid and contested. It is vital to understand these dynamics of belonging in order to comprehend conflict in the Great Lakes Region. More particularly, the findings show uncertainty among the civilian Rwandophone Congolese towards the Rwandophone armed group M23 (Mouvement du 23 Mars). Also the study shows support for non-military solutions to the conflict.

The findings also reveal ambivalence in relation to the autochthony discourse, in the sense that Rwandophone Congolese identity is articulated in multiple ways and varies according to the contexts at play. In addition, the lived experiences of the people interviewed provide new knowledge, in terms of processes of identification of Rwandophone Congolese in relation to the conflict dynamics in the Eastern DRC. Theoretically, the study contributes to existing literature on identity by strengthening the understanding of identity construction, especially Rwandophone identity. Empirically, the thesis is unique evidence derived directly from Rwandophone Congolese themselves.

**Keywords:** identity, conflict, Rwandophone Congolese, M23 armed group, autochthony discourse, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda

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