



**The Territoriality of Non-Natives as the Foundation of National Unity and Collective Will
to Live in the Democratic Republic of Congo:
Towards a Congolese Theory of Rooted Citizenship and Post-Ethnic Cohesion**

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Abstract

This article demonstrates that the "native/non-native" categorization, inherited from the colonial era, weakens national cohesion in the Democratic Republic of Congo by basing territorial belonging on lineage rather than on the participation, commitment, and responsibility of individuals. Not only does the need for residency within the provincial territory, but also the assumption of high-level power—particularly that of Governor—pose a problem, as this has already been achieved at the level of territorial administrators.

Using a constructivist approach, this study demonstrates that non-natives organize the territory through their skills, social, economic, and civic practices, generating a legitimacy of use that strengthens interdependencies and collective integration. The study thus proposes a Congolese theory of rooted citizenship, defining political belonging as the sustained participation of actors in the shared space, and outlines a post-ethnic model of state consolidation based on inclusive territoriality.

Keywords: 1. Territoriality; 2. Rooted citizenship; 3. Non-natives; 4. National cohesion; 5. Post-ethnicity; 6. Tribal

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1. Introduction

More than just a debate and a procedural matter, decentralization at the provincial level, particularly regarding the appointment or election of governors, remains a subject of debate for some and criticism for others concerning the nature of citizenship based on local roots and the extraterritorial reach of native and non-native residents; a necessary requirement for the capacities and skills required for local governance. We must examine the territorial and political foundations of national unity in the Democratic Republic of Congo through a critical re-examination of the

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categories of "non-native" and "native" residents, which still largely structure access to office, land, political representation, and the local legitimacy of the central government.

In a continental state historically shaped by internal migrations, economic flows, and ongoing social transformations, the persistence of a genealogical and autochthonous conception of territorial belonging is partly inherited from colonial engineering and reactivated by contemporary political strategies, a product of exclusion, land insecurity, community conflicts, and the fragmentation of the nation. By equating territory with an ethnic or tribal heritage transmitted by blood, this logic reduces citizenship to ancestry and hinders the emergence of a genuine collective will to live, hindering the real need for national development.

The decentralization intended as a reform and management model for local entities has sparked debates surrounding local governance, and even the transfer of powers, particularly regarding the identity of the actors involved—governors and vice-governors. Who, between non-natives and natives, should assume responsibility for the power of both national and local institutions? Contrary to this objective interpretation, this research argues that the presence of so-called non-native populations is neither an anomaly nor a threat, but rather one of the constitutive conditions of Congolese history itself. Congo was built through the mixing, exchange, and interdependence of cultures, rather than through the closure of spaces. Territoriality is conceived not as an exclusive inheritance, but as a lived relationship of lasting rootedness, based on actual residence, socio-economic contribution, civic participation, and loyalty to the constitutional order. It is this concrete involvement in the life of the territory, and not genealogical precedence, that establishes political legitimacy ².

Based on this, the article develops an alternative conception of citizenship, termed "rooted citizenship," which replaces ethnic affiliation as a functional principle of territorial integration based on specific criteria. Applied to the management of decentralized territorial entities, this approach recognizes the right of any long-term resident to participate fully in local governance and the conduct of public affairs. It thus aims to transform demographic diversity and internal mobility into positive resources for nation-building rather than factors of division.

Transcending these ethnic and tribal boundaries offers the opportunity to develop a diverse range of human resources in terms of sustainable skills and competencies to support the work of local public administration. Inclusive territorial governance thus emerges as a factor in political stabilization, reducing land conflicts, fostering cultural exchange and economic integration, and contributing to strengthening social cohesion and institutional loyalty.

The stakes of this territorial issue concerning non-natives go beyond the mere legal regulation of internal migration to touch upon the very nature of the Congolese nation. It involves shifting from a logic of ethnicizing the territory to a territorializing citizenship, by rebuilding the national pact on meritocracy, equal rights for all those who actively participate in collective life, and the need for development for all. From this perspective, the nation is no longer conceived as a community of blood or exclusive memory, but rather a community of destiny built through coexistence, shared responsibility, and a common commitment to a political project. National unity no longer rests on the impossible homogeneity of a pluralistic society, but on the institutional acceptance of diversity and the mutual recognition of all present.

² Mahmood Mamdani, 2004. *Citizens and Subjects. The Colonial Legacy of Decentralized Despotism in Africa*, Paris: Karthala, p. 29.

By adopting a constructivist approach to national identity and a broader reflection on the multinational state, narrative sovereignty, and Congolese civilizational reconstruction, this research initially proposes the foundations of a Congolese theory of post-ethnic citizenship. It demonstrates that Congolese cohesion will be built neither through identity politics nor through communal withdrawal, but through the political recognition of the territorial roots of all its inhabitants. Territorialized diversity thus appears not as a weakness, but as the very condition of collective sovereignty and the will to live together. Congolese unity is not built in spite of non-natives, but thanks to them, in the shared experience of a common territory and a future of solidarity ³. This is a way of recognizing certain skills capable of building the nation, based on sustainable development.

To shed light on this issue, the analysis is organized according to a progression that is simultaneously critical, theoretical, and strategic, illustrating the necessity of social mixing to establish a unified whole. The first step will be to deconstruct the ideology of originality while tracing its genesis and uncovering the political mechanisms by which it has progressively served as a basis for practices of exclusion, the politicization of public administration, the hierarchization of affiliations, and the fragmentation of the national body, thus demonstrating that indigeneity is less an anthropological given than an instrumentalized construct.

In a second stage, the reflection will focus on theorizing the inclusive territoriality of non-natives as a legitimate form of political belonging, by developing the conceptual bases of a Congolese citizenship of rootedness based on residence, participation and contribution to the collective destiny rather than on genealogical ancestry.

Finally, from a normative and prospective perspective, the study will highlight the strategic importance of an inclusive territoriality for the mixing and consolidation of the Congolese multicultural state, showing how the institutional recognition of this territorialized citizenship can become the basis of a sustainable national unity, a post-ethnic cohesion and a genuine collective will to live.

2. Deconstructing the ideology of originality: historical genesis and political production of exclusion

2.1. Indigeneity as a historical construct and not as a natural given

This is a critical reinterpretation of the idea of territorial origin, frequently invoked in the Democratic Republic of Congo to legitimize exclusive rights of access to land, local power, and political representation. Often presented as an obvious anthropological belonging based on the prior existence of ethnic groups, this concept rests on the assumption that each community has historically occupied a space continuously and homogeneously, thus justifying a natural priority over the territory. Historical analysis, however, leads us to significantly qualify this essentialist view. Origin appears less as a stable given of the past than as a social and political construct that gradually crystallized and was then reunified through institutional transformations and power struggles.

The pre-colonial dynamics of the Congolese space reveal societies marked by mobility, trade, marriage alliances, agricultural migrations, and processes of political integration. Large historical entities such as the Kongo, Luba, and Lunda kingdoms were formed through the

³ Habermas, J., 2000. *After the Nation-State. A New Political Constellation*, Paris: Fayard, p. 101.

aggregation and incorporation of diverse groups rather than through the exclusion of outsiders. Territorial belonging stemmed from a pragmatic relationship based on use, coexistence, and participation in a shared political order, and not on the claim to inherited exclusive property. Territory functioned as a socially produced and continually recomposed space, reflecting a relational and inclusive conception of the connection to space ⁴.

The rigidification of territorial identities appears primarily as a result of colonial administrative territorialization, which solidified fluid affiliations into tribal categories assigned to delimited spaces. This bureaucratic codification naturalized previously porous borders and paved the way for contemporary claims of exclusive indigeneity, endowed with a largely artificial historical legitimacy.

The belief in an original ethnic purity is thus more of an ideological myth than an empirical reality, serving to justify current power relations rather than faithfully reflecting history. Deconstructing this ideology allows us to restore the fundamentally mixed, mobile, and integrative dimension of the Congolese trajectory and to pave the way for an alternative conception of belonging. Territory then ceases to be a genealogical inheritance and becomes a lived relationship, based on rootedness, participation, and collective contribution. Such a perspective forms the basis of an inclusive citizenship, capable of transcending the logic of exclusion and rebuilding national cohesion on the recognition of actual presence rather than on ancestry ⁵.

The Popular Movement of the Revolution was conceived as a political organization; thus ensuring the active participation, direct or indirect, of everyone—men and women—in public discussions about the problems of communal life. The ongoing confrontation of interests, needs, and economic or political necessities was the result of constant adaptation to social and economic evolution ⁶. Marshal Mobutu thus dictated a unitarist ideology, whose speeches to the nation advocated unity in terms of "Tata bo moko, mama bo moko, ekolo" (one father, one mother, one man). " Bo moko eeeh. " ⁷His speeches, sometimes a slogan, were a plea and a call for unity and national identity. They remained a vocal argument for competence and ability, even meritocracy, in the organization, management, and governance of the state for all, without tribal, ethnic, or even regional distinctions. This was a way to significantly reduce the idea of separatism between natives and non-natives; the tendency toward rebellion; to put an end to the ever-increasing greed of politicians; and to improve the standard of living for citizens.

This is an initiative for African resistance, highlighting the common origins of a group of peoples through their linguistics. This language is none other than, in this specific case, Bukongo and Kikongo, which are identified with a culture, a people, and a land living in perfect harmony with the ideal of consensual patriotism of all Kongo peoples, with the Kongo Empire extending into the three neighboring and bordering countries of Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gabon, taken as a reference point for cultural unity ⁸and located in the Democratic Republic of Congo in

⁴ Amselle, J.-L., 1990. *Logiques métisses. Anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs*, Paris: Payot, p. 11.

⁵ Coquery-Vidrovitch, C., 1985. *Black Africa. Continuities and Rupture*, Paris: Payot, p. 65.

⁶ Central Committee of the Popular Movement of the Revolution, 1976. *Manifesto of the N' Sele*, Kinshasa: Forcad – IMK, p. 6.

⁷ "**Tata bo: moko, Mama bo: moko, ekolo bo: moko, Bokonzi bo: Moko eeee** ": transliteration of Marshal Mobutu Sese Seko's speech translating national unity into "one father, one mother, one nation, one power and one leader", symbol of the unity of power.

⁸ Fansaka Mpia A. and Bikini Matwa, L., 2024. Bukongo and Kikongo: Culture, People and International Language of Central and West Africa for a Consensual Patriotism in "Culture, Language and Education, Three Essential Vectors for the Culture of Patriotism"

the provinces of Kwilu, Kwango, and Kongo Central . It is chosen and spoken in the West Central African region, consisting of the Republics of Angola, Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of Congo, then the Lunda Empire (Northern, Central and South Lunda Group), the Ruund Kingdom covering the former Katanga province going towards the Kasai provinces, northern Zambia and eastern Angola, planning a great expansion which managed to extend from Kwango to beyond the Luapula, following the migration from Kinguri in the west to Kiniamba in the east ⁹.

Some internal tensions weakened the existence of these empires and saw the emergence of new peoples such as the Chokwe, and increasing pressure from Arab and European merchants caused internal tensions until their decline, so that they no longer existed as mini-states.

2.2. Territorial coloniality and rigidification of identity

Despite the nature of colonization, many homogeneous pre-colonial identities existed; so much so that the decisive break introduced by colonization in the modes of territorial and identity organization of the Congolese space. While pre-colonial configurations were characterized by population mobility, the permeability of affiliations, and a relational territoriality based on use, cohabitation, and the gradual integration of groups, the Belgian administration imposed a radically different logic by classifying, locating, and assigning populations to fixed categories.

Through bureaucratic processes of mapping, ethnography, and administrative division, colonial power transformed fluid social realities into closed ethnic entities, supposedly homogeneous and naturally linked to delimited territories. This administrative production of identities substituted abstract borders for lived territorialities, converting spaces of contact and interdependence into exclusive enclaves.

The reorganization of local power through chieftaincies recognized as customary authorities reinforces this rigidification by freezing previously flexible hierarchies, codifying traditions, and establishing community affiliation as the central criterion for access to land and power. Identity then becomes a status assigned by the state rather than a negotiated reality, while territoriality is reconfigured as the patrimonial property of a group deemed indigenous. This administrative naturalization of origin erases the memory of historical intermingling and permanently establishes the idea of exclusive precedence ¹⁰.

The effects of this colonial construction extend into the postcolonial period, to the advantage of local leaders, where the categories thus established continue to fuel land conflicts, political exclusion, and rivalries surrounding indigeneity. By transforming flexible affiliations into fixed identities, colonization produced the structural foundations of contemporary fragmentation. Understanding this territorial coloniality therefore allows us to deconstruct the supposed self-

, **Theme 2: Language, Culture, Civilization and Patriotism**, 9th Edition of the Scientific Days of the Faculty of Letters, Languages and Language Sciences, FLSL, International Colloquium in Mali, Mali-Bamako: University of Letters and Human Sciences of Bamako, p. 2.

⁹ Ndaywell è Nziem, I., 2008. *New history of the Congo. From the origins to the Democratic Republic*, Tervuren: Le CRI- Afrique Editions, p. 129.

¹⁰ Omasombo Tshonda, J., 2013. *Democratic Republic of Congo. Power and territories*, Paris: L'Harmattan, p. 55.

evidence of origin and pave the way for a more inclusive conception of citizenship, based on rootedness, participation, and lived legitimacy rather than on ethnic ascription ¹¹.

2.3. Contemporary instrumentalization of originality in the DRC

There is an analysis of how the colonial legacy of rigid territorial affiliations has been reshaped in postcolonial Congo to become a central instrument of local political struggles. Origin no longer functions as a simple marker of identity, but as a veritable political technology strategically mobilized to organize differentiated access to power, land, and public resources. Indigeneity thus transforms into a criterion for administrative and land-related legitimation, effectively establishing a hierarchy of citizenships where genealogical ancestry takes precedence over actual residence, economic contribution, and civic participation. So-called non-native populations, despite their long-term settlement, remain perceived as temporary or suspect, which fragments public space and converts territory into an exclusive communal patrimony.

This instrumentalization fuels land tensions and communal violence, particularly in the east of the country, where the categories of native and non-native are used to ethnicize socio-economic rivalries and justify exclusion, political disputes, and expulsions. The electoral and administrative spheres are not exempt from this logic, with the argument of origin frequently being used to restrict access to representation and transform democratic competition into an identity-based confrontation. Origin thus becomes a form of political capital, allowing certain elites to monopolize positions of power under the guise of historical legitimacy, weakening the universality of law and fragmenting national sovereignty ¹².

While the Mobutu regime temporarily fostered forms of territorial mixing through administrative mobility and state centralization, contributing to the normalization of the presence of non-natives in local governance, this integration remained authoritarian and insufficiently institutionalized. With the weakening of the central state, the logic of indigeneity resurfaced, revealing the fragility of a cohesion not underpinned by inclusive legal foundations. It follows that native origin, far from constituting a viable principle of political organization in a state as pluralistic as the DRC, generates more exclusion than solidarity. The situation thus calls for a paradigm shift based on inclusive territoriality where rootedness, participation, and contribution to the common good become the true criteria of political legitimacy, the only ones capable of sustainably rebuilding national unity ¹³.

3. Theorizing the territoriality of non-natives for a Congolese citizenship rooted in tradition

3.1. Theoretical frameworks of lived territoriality and political belonging:

The governance of local government in the Democratic Republic of Congo raises a fundamental debate surrounding the transfer of powers, particularly in response to a need for human resources. This debate revolves around concentrating participatory efforts from all

¹¹Young, C., 1976. *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, p. 36.

¹² Vlassenroot, K. and Raeymaekers, T., 2004. *Conflict and Social Transformation in Eastern DR Congo*, Gent: Academia Press, p. 23.

¹³ Geschiere, P., 2009. *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 25.

stakeholders, both local and, especially, non-local, to achieve local development. This requires adapting the local environment to its resources, means, and cultural and social values. A multi-level participatory governance strategy allows for a concentration of efforts, commitment, and accountability among local entities, starting with the mobilization of stakeholders to revitalize the economy ¹⁴.

For a sound analysis of lived territoriality and political belonging, we propose a theoretical shift aimed at moving beyond the ideology of exclusive origin by situating the Congolese debate on indigeneity within a more fundamental reflection on the nature of the nation and citizenship. The central question is no longer that of genealogical precedence, but rather that of the legitimate criteria for political belonging: should the national community be founded on blood and heritage or on participation and a shared development project? By drawing on contemporary theories of the nation, this text demonstrates that national belonging stems from a historical, symbolic, and civic construction rather than from biological continuity.

The perspective of the nation as an “imagined community,” developed by Benedict Anderson, emphasizes that unity arises from shared narratives and practices, while Renan’s voluntarist approach insists on the collective will to live as the foundation of political cohesion. Habermas’s theory of constitutional patriotism extends this orientation by grounding belonging in adherence to common legal and democratic principles rather than in cultural homogeneity. This construction of the nation becomes a synergy, a joint effort of forces united around projects of development and emergence.

This is to say that, to compensate for the precariousness of human existence, we live and can only live in society. Humans are therefore social, working animals, that is to say, condemned to live in society (with others) and to work (using their intelligence) in order to live in relative security. Thus, humans choose neither their origins, nor, even less so, their parents. It is a gift from God (believers would say) or a quirk of nature for a person to be born into a particular pre-existing community, to which they are expected to contribute additional strength in exchange for their very existence (the product of a relationship) as well as the social protection that no one can do without. It follows that the sacred and inescapable dialectical relationship that binds humans to their community rests on a bio-psycho-sociological foundation that must be analyzed to understand the rationale for collective living ¹⁵.

Applied to the Congolese context, these perspectives lead us to relativize, for a nation yet to be built or constructed through twinning efforts, the radical argument of indigeneity and to favor a civic and inclusive conception of citizenship, founded on residence, participation, and loyalty to the established constitutional order to legitimize political action. This approach also finds echoes in pre-colonial African political traditions, marked by the gradual integration of foreigners, political hospitality, and the negotiation of affiliations. The long history of the Congo, characterized by successive mobilities, alliances, and aggregations, confirms that plurality and incorporation have been the norm rather than the exception. Consequently, political legitimacy cannot derive from a mythologized origin, but from concrete engagement in collective life.

¹⁴ Fansaka Mpia, A., 2022. *Decentralisation and local self-sufficiency in the Democratic Republic of Congo. A plea for participatory governance in the development of the Kwilu province*, Doctoral thesis, FSSAP, Kinshasa: University of Kinshasa, p. 379.

¹⁵ Bongeli Yeikelo Ya-Ato, E., 2020. *Political Sociology, African Perspectives*, Kinshasa : L'Harmattan RD Congo, p. 111.

Citizenship thus appears as a relationship of territorial anchoring, defined by habitation, work, contribution, and sustained coexistence.

The lived territoriality of non-natives thus ceases to be perceived as an anomaly and becomes the very expression of a modern civic nation, offering the theoretical bases of an inclusive Congolese citizenship capable of overcoming ethnic divisions and rebuilding national cohesion ¹⁶.

3.2. Territoriality as a social practice of integration and a foundation of legitimacy

Political belonging is neither an abstract proclamation nor a genealogical inheritance, but a gradual anchoring in the concrete experience of the territory. It is built over time through the ordinary practices by which individuals live, work, invest, socialize and participate in collective life.

Institutional stability is linked to the stability of objectives. Everyone is expected to agree on the principle that should lead to "a national project of civilization and development" in Congo. This will allow all differences to be silenced, to be brought to a halt in order to achieve the desired result ¹⁷. The territory thus ceases to be a mere inherited surface and becomes a relational and productive space, shaped by those who contribute to it materially and symbolically. Long-term residency creates attachments and solidarity, economic engagement makes the resident a co-producer of local wealth, social integration integrates them into daily interdependencies, and civic participation reflects their loyalty to the institutional order. From this interweaving of actions emerges a legitimacy based on contribution rather than on precedence, where rights derive from assumed responsibilities.

From this perspective, territoriality appears as a performative process of integration that transforms presence into belonging and use into citizenship. It allows us to move beyond the opposition between natives and non-natives by replacing the patrimonial logic of indigeneity with a functional logic of participation in the common good. Applied to the Congolese context, this conception redefines so-called non-native populations as constitutive actors of development and local stability, whose economic, social, and political involvement establishes a fully legitimate exercise of citizenship. The territory then becomes a common good administered by those who inhabit it, paving the way for inclusive governance where the nation is built through the daily practice of living together rather than solely through the memory of origins ¹⁸.

3.3. Non-natives as producers of national cohesion

Reducing "non-natives" to figures of administrative, land-related, economic, or cultural threat stems from a defensive and rigid conception of territory that conflates collective identity with community closure. Such an interpretation obscures the fact that the history of modern states has been built less on homogeneity than on the circulation of people, practices, and exchanges. By reversing the focus—that is, by looking at the will to build a nation—mobility appears not as a factor of fragmentation but as a silent matrix of integration, a mobilization toward national cohesion. Through their presence, non-natives introduce a social mixing that defuses the logic of exclusivity, produces economic interdependencies that make coexistence rationally necessary, and

¹⁶ Kymlicka, W., 2001. *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Montreal: Boreal, p. 17.

¹⁷ Ndaywel -è- Nziem, I, op. cit., p. 356

¹⁸ Habermas, J., 2000. *After the Nation-State*, Paris: Fayard, pp. 101–102.

fosters a cultural hybridization that weakens myths of pure identity. Their integration into work, exchange and social networks weaves cross-cutting links between communities, dissolves closed enclaves and transforms symbolic borders into spaces of contact, exchange, sharing of experience, communication and above all, work.

Thus, far from being foreign bodies, they become objective actors between groups, vectors for the circulation of norms and practices, contributing to the emergence of more composite identities and a broader political consciousness at the national, provincial, and local levels. They are actors, a kind of conduit and driving force behind a policy of growth and emergence, moving beyond the logic of local origination and toward transcendence that strives for cohesion.

Social heterogeneity thus emerges as a strategic resource for the state, as it fosters more inclusive institutions and a unity based on the interweaving of affiliations rather than uniformity. In the Congolese context, marked by long-standing dynamics of mixing and community aggregation, non-natives concretely embody this relational integration: their daily participation in economic, social, and cultural life expands the space of the common good and consolidates a shared citizenship. Diversity therefore ceases to appear as a weakness and becomes the invisible infrastructure of national cohesion, demonstrating that the modern state is not strengthened against human mobility, but through it ¹⁹.

However, a policy and administration of non-natives at the head of territorial entities would be one of the opportunities that local governance could gain in performance if instituted at the head of these entities. This policy, established by President Mobutu Sese Seko, was admired for its social integration and pooling of skills due to local governance. The real problem is no longer residency on national territory, but rather the potential assumption of power at the highest levels of governance, as this has already occurred at the level of territorial administrations. For the sake of excellence, Ngoma Binda listed certain criteria required for being considered favorable, if not ineligible, for the pantheon of power. Regarding power, for essential reasons, he defined four (4) criteria, some of which have been mentioned, that non-natives must meet to provide a sound testimony on political and administrative governance ²⁰; among others:

- Residence (relatively long, and admissible for a proven knowledge of the environment with possibly "evidence" of integration or "achievement");
- Competence (expertise);
- Morality, the case of Khonde Vila Ki Kanda taken as one of the models of governance outside his native province which is Kongo central);
- The capacity or willingness to be accepted by the population to administer, because beyond the migrations and mixing of the past, it is logical to consider that there are already objectively "crystallized" spaces.

The perspective of the nation as an "imagined community," developed by Benedict Anderson, emphasizes that unity arises from shared narratives and practices, while Renan's voluntarist approach insists on the collective will to live as the foundation of political cohesion.

¹⁹Elias, N., 1975. *The Dynamics of the West*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, pp. 210–2011.

²⁰ Goma Binda, P., 2025. *The Shadow of Political Poverty: An Essay on the Signs, Sources, and Way Out of a Radical Evil*, 2nd ed. Review, Kinshasa : Publication of the Institute for Political Training and Studies, Pifep, p. 129. (Read Ngoma) Binda P. in full, pp. 113-162).

Habermas's theory of constitutional patriotism extends this orientation by grounding belonging in adherence to common legal and democratic principles rather than in cultural homogeneity. This construction of the nation becomes a synergy, a joint effort of forces united around projects of development and emergence.

4. Inclusive territoriality as a strategic foundation for Congolese national unity

Congolese national unity cannot be founded on a closed conception of territory inherited from the Westphalian model, which associates sovereignty, cultural homogeneity, and indigenous exclusivity, because such a vision contradicts the historical and sociological reality of the Congo, shaped for centuries by migrations, alliances, and the intertwining of communities. The Congolese territory was constituted not by the juxtaposition of watertight identity blocs, but as a space of circulation and interdependence, rendering ineffective any attempt to anchor political legitimacy in anteriority or exclusive rootedness. Faced with this contradiction, inclusive territoriality appears as the strategic foundation for lasting cohesion, replacing the patrimonial logic of inheritance with a logic of contribution, where belonging stems from effective participation in economic, social, and civic life.

The territory then becomes a common good co-produced by those who live, work, and invest in it, transforming presence into a right and commitment into legitimacy. This recognition corresponds to the concrete reality of Congolese cities, markets, production centers, and institutions, already structured by the constant mixing of populations. By securing mobility and normalizing plurality, inclusive territoriality reduces exclusionary dynamics, eases land disputes, and fosters economic interdependencies that make national stability materially necessary. Simultaneously, it contributes to the emergence of a detribalized citizenship, where civic status takes precedence over ethno-territorial affiliation, recentering political loyalty toward the state rather than toward primary communities ²¹.

Far from being an exogenous innovation, this approach, on the contrary, reactivates ancient regional traditions of integration through alliance and aggregation, extending historical practices of hospitality and coexistence. In the contemporary Democratic Republic of Congo, marked by the aftereffects of identity conflicts, it thus presents itself as a genuine peace strategy, capable of transforming demographic diversity into a resource for unity. Heterogeneity then ceases to be perceived as a threat and becomes the very basis of cohesion. National unity no longer arises from the closure of territories, but from the relational openness of the territory, conceived as a shared space where each contribution strengthens the nation and reinforces sovereignty. Inclusive territoriality thus appears as the foundation of a more legitimate, more stable, and more sustainable state, because it is rooted in the real plurality of Congolese society.

4.1. Towards a post-ethnic citizenship

No nation exists without citizenship. A consciousness is born, recognizing that an ethnic group is a human group sharing a common language, a common religious system of rites and beliefs, and a set of shared techniques corresponding to a form of societal adaptation to its environment; living on the margins of the world for centuries or millennia, and that physical

²¹Agnew, J., 2005. *Sovereignty Regimes: Territoriality and State Authority in Contemporary World Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 32.

intermingling is so widespread that racial criteria can no longer be considered decisive. All these elements—religion, language, and the techniques of these groups, which are therefore autonomous elements that combine and blend to form a more or less stable whole—manage to transform, each at its own pace, before dissociating and combining with other forms of the same elements, thus giving birth to new ethnic realities. All people imagine that they have always lived in the same way, according to ancestral laws, with techniques inherited from their ancestors, and according to the rites bequeathed by the founding ancestor. Thus, few people admit to having changed and, when they do admit it, it is often for the political purpose of asserting superiority over neighboring groups ²².

Citizenship must be a civic force; this is not simply a given, a matter of possessing nationality. Rather, it means becoming aware of one's rights, duties, and responsibilities, and above all, of the fact that collective improvement begins with the improvement of the individual. Citizenship and conscience are so intimately linked that they are inconceivable without each other. However, a real challenge of will arises in reconciling them. Furthermore, it is the externalization of the country's resources that deprives us of what we hold most dear: our inner life. We must rise to a new perspective, to a new conception of life. Our lives must change if they are not to perish through their own fault. Only through a deliberate upward revision of the scale of human values can our nation rise above this underdevelopment that taints our humanity ²³.

The consolidation of Congolese national unity cannot be based on an ethno-genealogical conception of citizenship that subordinates rights to ancestry or indigeneity, because such a logic transforms political equality into a hierarchy of affiliations, fuels exclusion, and perpetuates recurring conflicts over land, representation, and resources. Inherited from colonial categorizations and prolonged by postcolonial identity politics, this vision appears profoundly ill-suited to the historical reality of Congo, shaped by migrations, cultural mixing, and regional interdependencies. Faced with this contradiction, the emergence of a post-ethnic citizenship is a strategic necessity, shifting the foundation of political legitimacy from lineage to concrete participation in collective life.

From this perspective, national belonging stems less from the depth of one's roots than from effective integration within the territory, understood as a shared space of existence, work, and contribution. Living there permanently, producing goods, paying taxes, educating one's children, and participating in institutions become acts that establish a right to citizenship and confer civic legitimacy independent of origin. The territory thus becomes the foundation of an equality of presence where each resident shares the same political status. However, the persistence of legal ambiguities and administrative practices marked by indigeneity further undermines this promise of equality, creating civic insecurity for those perceived as "internal aliens." A truly post-ethnic citizenship therefore requires normative and institutional clarification that unequivocally affirms that origin cannot restrict access to rights.

Beyond legal considerations, this shift produces decisive socio-political effects: by dissociating citizenship from primary affiliations, it fosters the emergence of cross-cutting identities and shifts political competition from the ethnic arena to that of programs and public

²² Magnant, J.-P., 2003. Ethnic consciousness among the Sara populations in Chrétien, J.-P. and Prunier, G., *Ethnic groups have a history*, Paris: Karthala, p. 331.

²³ Bongeli Yeikelo ya Ato, E., 2020. *Political Sociology. African Perspectives*, DR Congo-Kinshasa: L'Harmattan-Kinshasa, pp. 528-529.

performance. The state, recognized as an impartial arbiter, sees its legitimacy and the loyalty of its citizens strengthened, thereby consolidating its sovereignty and its capacity for cohesion. In a vast and pluralistic country like the Democratic Republic of Congo, national unity cannot arise from an impossible homogenization, but rather from a territorial inclusion that transforms diversity into a shared resource. By substituting rootedness and contribution for ancestry as the principle of belonging, post-ethnic citizenship thus provides the foundation for a more stable, just, and sustainable political community, capable of embracing its plurality without fragmenting as a result²⁴.

4.2. Inclusive territoriality and consolidation of the Congolese multinational state

The consolidation of the Congolese state cannot rely on the classical model of the homogeneous nation-state, which presupposes the coincidence of cultural, territorial, and political unity, because such a theoretical framework fails to recognize the historical reality of a Congo constituted not by uniformity, but by the progressive aggregation of diverse communities, linked by movements, alliances, and interdependencies. The Congolese state is thus less a culturally unified nation than a multinational state shaped by several internal migratory movements and the intermingling of past influences, whose stability depends not on reducing plurality, but on its political organization. Beyond migrations and the intermingling of past influences, it is logical to consider that there are already objectively "crystallized" spaces.

Beyond internal migration, it is necessary to consider ethnic groups, in the interest of clarity and truth, when building a multinational state, as human groups founded around certain aspects, including a common language, a shared religious system of rites and beliefs, and a set of common techniques corresponding to a form of societal adaptation to its environment. Conversely, migration, driven by the need for survival and the improvement of living conditions for all peoples, justifies a movement back and forth in all directions: horizontally and vertically, from North to South, from East to West. Conversely, migration creates a wave of uncertainty regarding the accommodation of living conditions for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity. There is thus a voluntary movement between communities: the Baluba of Greater Kasai towards the Baluba of Greater Katanga, the Bakongo of Greater Bandundu and the Bahumbu of Kinshasa towards the Bakongo of Central Kongo, the Bazombo of Angola, the Bangala of Kinshasa towards Greater Equateur then the Swahili in its Swahili-speaking majority inside the Eastern zone and outside towards the border regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

To these three elements, language, the same religious system of rites and beliefs, a set of common techniques are added, for some, a racial element based on somatic traits particular to all members of an ethnic group; considered as the most isolated human groups, then the mixing or physical twinning for others considered as among the determinants capable of thus living for several millennia.

Ethnicity in itself is therefore a complete cultural reality. But this cultural reality is extremely unstable, conducive to all kinds of adaptation. Whether it be religion, technology, or language, each of these constituent elements of ethnic reality shifts independently of the others during the establishment of cultural contacts: one can become Muslim without becoming a nomadic herder and without adopting Arabic, just as one can adopt the plow without learning French or becoming Christian. The religion, language, and technologies of the human groups that

²⁴ Kymlicka, W., 2001. *Multicultural Citizenship*, Montreal: Boreal, p. 17.

form an ethnicity as a cultural whole are thus all autonomous elements that combine and blend to constitute a more or less stable whole before transforming, each at its own pace, dissociating to combine with other forms of the same elements and thus giving birth to new ethnic realities. Of all these languages, techniques and religions, it remains favorable under these conditions that an ethnic group "in itself" constitutes itself in subjective reality, as an ethnic group "for itself": it will be composed of all the men who consider that they are similar to each other and that they are different from their neighbors, even when the foreign observer sees no major difference between said groups²⁵.

In this context, inclusive territoriality emerges as the strategic principle capable of transforming ethnic diversity into a factor of cohesion and positive integration into a shared life. It conceives of territory not only as an assemblage of exclusive community strongholds, but also as a common space of co-presence, cooperation, collaboration, and participation, open to the emergence of all citizens and conducive to sustainable development. By dissolving claims of identity-based appropriation of land, this conception reaffirms the indivisibility of state space and normalizes residential, economic, and social mobility, fostering daily interactions that forge concrete solidarities and render fragmentation irrational. It helps defuse land conflicts by replacing heritage rivalries with impersonal legal rules, de-ethnicizes local governance by orienting public action toward the general interest rather than the defense of community interests, and transforms demographic plurality into a resource for innovation, exchange, and collective resilience. Diversity then ceases to be perceived as a threat and becomes the invisible infrastructure of national stability.

Understood in this way, Congolese unity stems neither from the erasure of differences nor from the imposition of a fictitious homogeneity, but from the organized interweaving of identities within a shared institutional framework. Inclusive territoriality constitutes the spatial expression of this civic pact: it allows associated peoples to coexist, cooperate, and co-produce the state. Far from weakening sovereignty, the regulated opening of the territory strengthens it by broadening the basis of inclusion and legitimacy. National unity thus appears not as a single identity, but as a relational bond, born of mutual recognition and shared participation in a common destiny.

4.3. Territoriality, narrative sovereignty and collective will to live

Inclusive territoriality is not limited to the legal or institutional organization of national space; it involves a symbolic and narrative dimension essential to any state consolidation. For the state does not hold together solely through its administrations or coercion, but through its sovereignty, which empowers national institutions to produce a collective meaning, a collective morality and history, and ultimately a shared narrative through which heterogeneous populations recognize themselves as members of the same political community. It is, in fact, built through a shared history, a shared city—that is to say, the translation of multiculturalism into a founding act of twinning, of integration with other ethnic groups, in the ideal of a collective will to live. In the Congolese context, marked by the plurality of ethnicities, peoples, languages, and migratory trajectories, unity cannot rest on the myth of a common origin nor on the sacralization of exclusive territories. It must be built as a project of shared destiny, rooted in the lived experience of a common territory. National belonging then stems less from lineage than from participation in a history being made for the restoration of a people's dignity.

²⁵ Magnant, J.-P., *op. cit.*, p. 331.

The recognition of non-natives thus takes on a foundational significance within the territorial sphere, affirming that the nation is an open construct where every legitimate presence contributes to expanding the circle of "us." The territory becomes a lived space where shared memories, solidarities, hardships, and hopes intersect, transforming mere coexistence into shared belonging. From this daily experience arises a diffuse awareness of a shared destiny, lending social depth to sovereignty. When this inclusive narrative takes hold, political loyalty shifts from community affiliations to the State, and the nation ceases to be an administrative fiction, becoming instead an internalized reality.

Understood in this way, inclusive territoriality constitutes the material foundation of a narrative sovereignty: it allows diversity to be articulated within a shared imaginary without being denied, and makes Congo not a juxtaposition of identity enclaves, but a community of relational life. National unity no longer stems from resemblance or purity of origins, but from the collective will to inhabit the same space and build its future together. It is not homogeneity that founds the Congolese nation, but the conscious sharing of a common world ²⁶.

Building this sense of "we" is a collective effort that requires combining efforts and working towards a common goal. This is possible and achievable through a shared ideal, the development of a project that addresses the needs of the entire population. The participation of everyone in conceptualizing a program that supports the local development plan fosters a pooling of efforts. The contribution of non-natives amplifies the meaning of work and local governance, providing support in human resources, complementarity, and strengthening the capacities and skills of provincial authorities and territorial managers. It is then that territorial sovereignty and the will to live together are considered to be ensured.

5. Conclusion

This analysis concludes that the presence of non-natives in the Congolese territory can no longer be interpreted as a social anomaly, a demographic disruption, or an identity threat, but rather as a convergence toward harmonious governance and power. We are faced with a division of power within the same territory by malicious political actors seeking political repositioning, leaving the population adrift without knowing where it is headed. This predicament fails to provide them with the basic necessities of daily life.

Such an interpretation, inherited from the notions of exclusive indigeneity and colonial categorizations of settlement, rests on a fixed and patrimonial conception of territory that corresponds neither to the long history of Central Africa nor to the contemporary reality of Congolese society. It confines the national space within a logic of closure, fragments the political community, and perpetuates ongoing conflicts surrounding the legitimacy of living together. However, throughout this reflection, it has become clear that what is presented as a problem actually constitutes the very condition of possibility for the Congolese project of local governance.

The territoriality of non-natives reveals a deeper sociological truth: Congo has historically been built through circulation, mixing, and aggregation rather than separation. Its cities, economic hubs, cultural spaces, and institutions are the product of intersecting mobilities that have woven a dense national network of interdependencies. Far from weakening national unity, these multiple non-natives foster development and create the human, economic, and symbolic bridges without which no political community of such scale could exist. It is these

²⁶ Mbembe, A., 2010. *Sortir de la grande nuit*, Paris: La Découverte, p. 77.

transversal links, not homogeneous enclaves, that make coexistence possible. Plurality is therefore not a deviation from the Congolese norm; it constitutes the original matrix of national unity and the unity of power. The reflex to the doctrine and political philosophy of Mobutuism, "Tata bo moko, mama bo moko, ekolo" (one father, one mother, one father), is a response to this. "Bo moko eeeh" as an illustration was a desire to strengthen national unity, which needs revisiting at present. It had held firm for a long period, during which the twinning of non-natives with natives constituted a strength in local governance.

From this perspective, inclusive territoriality emerges not as a pragmatic concession aimed at managing diversity, but as a structuring principle of genuine state consolidation. By recognizing the legitimacy of permanent settlement, by separating rights from ethnic affiliation, and by guaranteeing equal access to land and political participation, the state replaces identity-based rivalry with a rooted citizenship, based on lived presence and contribution to the common good. This post-ethnic citizenship does not deny cultural affiliations; it transcends them within a broader civic framework. It thus transforms inhabiting the territory into a source of equality rather than a cause of exclusion.

This shift is crucial for the country's future. Recent history shows that the pursuit of a pure identity, whether expressed through discourses of indigeneity, exclusive claims of ancestral land ownership, or communal withdrawal, generates more fragmentation than protection. Closure does not secure the nation; it erodes it. Conversely, regulated openness, mutual recognition, and the institutional organization of coexistence produce stability. The more intertwined populations are, the more their destinies are linked, the less conceivable rupture becomes. Cohesion arises from relationship, not separation.

From this perspective, inclusive territoriality fully aligns with a civilizational conception of the Congolese nation as a community of shared destiny. Congo is defined neither by a single genealogy nor by the illusion of cultural homogeneity, but by the sharing of a lived space and a common political project. It is a narrative and historical construct where different peoples choose to build a world together. This collective will to live does not stem from resemblance, but from the daily decision to coexist, cooperate, and recognize one another as members of the same political community. The territory then becomes the crucible of this shared narrative, the place where belonging is concretely forged.

Thus, the initial problem is definitively reversed. Congolese unity is not built despite the presence of non-natives, but thanks to them. It is their movements, their settlements, their exchanges, and their contributions that strengthen the nation and connect its various components. Where exclusion fragments, diversity forges bonds. Where enclaves isolate, interdependence unites. Territorialized diversity ceases to appear as a vulnerability and becomes the very condition of collective sovereignty. It becomes one of the elements for reinforcing the awareness of a shared belonging and the necessity of embracing this identity, far removed from a system of dependence, constraint, and imposition, based on the participation of all actors, regardless of their origin, through their competence and capacity to work towards building a democratic Congo as a state and a nation ²⁷.

The future of the Democratic Republic of Congo lies neither in identity cleansing nor in communal withdrawal, but in the lucid invention of a rooted, inclusive, post-ethnic, and territorial

²⁷ Ndaywel -è- Nziem, I, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

citizenship. It is by fully embracing its plurality, in strict accordance with the principles and laws of the land, by institutionalizing it and transforming it into a political resource, that the multinational Congolese state will be able to consolidate its internal cohesion and assert its external sovereignty. For, ultimately, it is not uniformity that holds a nation together, but the capacity of multiple differences to coexist sustainably in the same space and to collectively envision a shared future.

In From this perspective, the projection of an identity mixing, without offending the identity of non-natives, would facilitate a mixing of forces, capacities and skills to promote the well-being of citizens of rootedness, of decentralized territorial entities; or even the local environment through which power wishes to be organized.

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