ITURI, IN THE NORTHEASTERN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

IS ITS SOCIAL HISTORY BEING MISREPRESENTED?

A Duty of Remembrance and Historical Accountability — For the Attention of All Concerned Stakeholders

1. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

For several decades, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), particularly its eastern region, has been affected by recurrent armed conflicts. These conflicts have inflicted devastating consequences upon civilian populations, including significant loss of life, widespread displacement, the destruction of homes, and numerous other forms of suffering endured by innocent communities.

The Province of Ituri has not been spared from this persistent insecurity. Since 2017, the province has experienced a resurgence of violence perpetrated by armed groups, resulting in profound humanitarian suffering and the disruption of thousands of families.

Numerous studies have examined the situation in Ituri. However, their findings and interpretations frequently differ depending on the authors, sources consulted, and analytical approaches adopted.

Such discrepancies may be attributed to several factors:

- The reliance on previously unpublished information that may not have undergone adequate independent verification.
- The limited availability of reliable and verifiable sources of information.
- An insufficient understanding of the historical, social, and cultural realities of Ituri's communities.
- The tendency to attribute isolated actions committed by individuals to entire communities, as illustrated by certain interpretations of the events of 1911.
- The continued reproduction of potentially biased narratives from earlier publications.
- The oversimplification of the conflict in Ituri as an exclusively bilateral confrontation between two ethnic communities.

These divergent interpretations have contributed to confusion within the collective memory and created significant gaps in public understanding of the historical circumstances surrounding atrocities committed in Ituri, including both internal and external contributing factors.

Such gaps risk undermining historical understanding, weakening informed public discourse, and fostering indifference toward the responsibilities of present and future generations. They also raise important questions concerning the historiography of Ituri and its relevance to the province's current circumstances.

Article 23 of the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of the Congo guarantees the right to freedom of expression. In accordance with this constitutional provision, citizens are entitled to contribute constructively to public discourse on matters affecting their communities.

Furthermore, individuals and institutions engaged in humanitarian and social affairs bear an important responsibility to anticipate potential human-induced crises and propose preventive measures informed by a careful examination of historical events and emerging developments.

Considering the prolonged humanitarian and security challenges confronting Ituri, the purpose of this document is not to discredit scholars, researchers, institutions, or individuals who have contributed to understanding the province's history or to advancing its stabilization.

Rather, it seeks to encourage a renewed commitment to rigorous, impartial, and comprehensive analysis of the situation in Ituri, taking into consideration the multiple historical, political, social, and humanitarian dimensions of the conflict.

Those committed to historical accuracy and sustainable peace should not remain indifferent to potentially misleading interpretations, unsubstantiated allegations, or narratives that may deepen divisions within an already traumatized society.

Recognizing the complexity of the situation, this document respectfully calls upon political authorities, academic institutions, civil society organizations, humanitarian stakeholders, and other concerned actors to examine the underlying causes of the conflict within their appropriate historical contexts.

Such an approach would contribute to a more accurate, balanced, and inclusive understanding of Ituri's social history and strengthen ongoing efforts toward reconciliation and lasting peace.

To illustrate the diversity of existing interpretations, the following section examines several explanations frequently advanced by researchers and other commentators, including both scholars originating from Ituri and those from outside the province.

This examination draws upon academic publications, reports issued by national and international organizations, statements attributed to local armed groups, and documents produced by members of Ituri's communities.

2. REVIEW OF HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Professor TUMBA LWABA

Professor Tumba Lwaba traces the historical background of the conflict to 1887, 1911, 1923, and 1966.

He maintains that, notwithstanding certain isolated incidents during these periods, primarily involving land-related disputes that were generally resolved by the administrative authorities or traditional leaders, the Hema and Lendu communities coexisted without major confrontation for nearly three centuries.

It is important to distinguish the events of 1887, which included attacks by local inhabitants against the explorer Henry Morton Stanley, from subsequent intercommunal disputes.

These observations appear in the White Paper (Livre Blanc) authored by Professor Tumba Lwaba during his tenure as Minister of Human Rights of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2001.

Reverend Father AUGUSTIN WILIWOLI

In his 2018 publication, Reconciliation After Violent Conflict, published by L'Harmattan, Father Augustin Wiliwoli identifies ten historical periods associated with conflict between the Hema and Lendu communities: 1911, 1933, 1962, 1966, 1972, 1974–1975, 1981, 1982, 1992–1993, and 1999.

His publication examines these developments in relation to the conflict of 1999.

Thierry VIRCOULON

In his article Resurgence of Conflict and the Failure of Peacebuilding Policy, Thierry Vircoulon identifies Hema–Lendu antagonism as a dominant feature of the conflict dynamics in Ituri.

He refers to the following periods: 1911, 1923, 1966, 1979, 1992, and 1999–2006.

The article, published in 2021, examines the renewed violence that began in 2017. Thierry Vircoulon is affiliated with the French Institute of International Relations in Paris.

Professor BUNGISHABAKU KATO

In his article Memory and History in Identity-Based Conflicts in Ituri, Professor Bungishabaku Kato refers to the writings of Mr. N'Dimina-Mougala, identifying episodes of confrontation involving the Hema and Lendu communities during the following periods: 1911, 1921, 1969, 1971, 1981, 1992–1993, 1998–2004, and 2017.

Professor SAMBA KAPUTO

In his publication Ethnicity and Ethnopolitical Conflicts in Postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa, Professor Samba Kaputo explains that certain segmentary societies resisted colonial occupation for more than two decades.

He observes that these societies experienced considerable difficulties adapting to colonial administrative structures and demonstrated resistance to the imposition of colonial authority.

The Ituri Parliamentary Caucus

Members of Parliament elected for the 2023–2028 legislative period, acting collectively through the Ituri Parliamentary Caucus, presented their analysis in a document entitled Contribution of the Ituri Parliamentary Caucus to Peacebuilding.

According to their assessment, the prevailing interpretation identifies at least eight cycles of violent conflict, associated with the following chronological references: 1911, 1921, 1969, 1971, 1981, 1992–1993, 1998–2005, and 2017.

The document identifies the episodes of 1999 and 2017 as particularly devastating.

3. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE TWO COMMUNITIES

3.1. The Lendu Community's Perspective

In documentation prepared in connection with efforts to resolve the 1999 conflict, representatives of the Lendu community indicated that the most openly manifested confrontation emerged around 1974–1975.

The date of 5 August 1975 was reportedly recognized in connection with reconciliation ceremonies and the formal endorsement of agreements.

This historical account was presented during peace consultations held between 29 July and 4 August 1999 in Nyakasanza, Bunia, Ituri Province.

Another document associated with the Lendu community, namely the statutes of LORI, notarized in 1985, refers in its preamble to events in 1911 and 1939, characterized as uprisings against colonial authorities in the Gety area, as well as events in 1943 in the Djatsi area.

These references raise important questions regarding the distinction between resistance to colonial administration and subsequent intercommunal conflict.

3.2. The Hema Community's Perspective

According to the historical account presented by representatives of the Hema community, relations with neighboring communities remained largely peaceful until 1960, notwithstanding occasional disputes between individuals occupying adjacent lands.

This perspective maintains that such isolated disagreements did not constitute organized confrontations between cultural communities.

It further emphasizes that generally positive social relations continued across Ituri until approximately 1975.

Within this interpretation, 1975 represents a significant turning point in the deterioration of relations between the Hema and Lendu communities.

Reference is made to the proceedings of the Hema intracommunity consultations held from 25 to 28 August 2019 at CECA 20 in Bunia, Ituri Province.

4. ADDITIONAL FACTORS FREQUENTLY CITED IN EXPLANATIONS OF THE CONFLICT

Beyond discrepancies in historical chronology, various publications and discussions have identified additional factors that may have contributed to tensions in Ituri. These explanations, some of which remain contested or insufficiently substantiated, include:

1. Migration and demographic narratives: Conflicting historical accounts concerning population movements and settlement patterns, which have at times been presented as contributing factors to interethnic tensions.

2. Perceptions of communal superiority: Allegations that attitudes of superiority, mistrust, or insincerity among certain groups have contributed to strained relations with neighboring communities.

3. Land governance challenges: Weaknesses in land administration, ownership arrangements, and dispute-resolution mechanisms, particularly since 1999.

4. Perceptions of marginalization and inferiority: Feelings of exclusion, frustration, or perceived disadvantage that may contribute to resentment and, in certain circumstances, violence.

5. Mutual prejudice and hostility: Narratives attributing conflict to negative stereotypes, resentment, or hostility between communities.

6. Political manipulation: The instrumentalization of communal identities and grievances by political actors or other interests seeking influence, power, or strategic advantage, particularly from 1999 onward.

7. Collective attribution of individual actions: The tendency to hold entire communities responsible for acts committed by particular individuals, thereby reinforcing collective suspicion and defensive reactions.

8. Allegations concerning religious institutions: Claims that the Catholic Diocese of Bunia has been affected by ethnic divisions or has contributed to tensions. Such allegations have generated criticism of the Church and underscore the need for a careful examination of the historical development of its evangelization mission.

9. Alleged territorial or political ambitions: Narratives suggesting that certain actors seek to re-establish a wider political entity in collaboration with foreign interests. These allegations have circulated since 1999 and have, in some instances, contributed to inflammatory rhetoric and communal hostility.

10. Economic and multinational interests: The argument that the strategic or commercial interests of multinational corporations may have contributed to the violence experienced in Ituri since 1999.

11. The death of a Carmelite priest in Drodro: References to the death of a priest belonging to the Carmelite Order at the Catholic Parish of Drodro as a possible contributing factor to the resurgence of violence in 2017. Some accounts have alleged insufficient transparency by the Catholic Diocese regarding the circumstances surrounding the incident.

12. Historical allegations of preferential treatment: Claims that colonial authorities and the administration of President Mobutu extended preferential treatment to members of a particular community. Such claims require rigorous historical examination and credible supporting evidence.

13. Representation in public administration: Concerns that important positions within public institutions have been occupied by individuals perceived as originating from outside Ituri.

14. Conduct of security forces: Allegations that harassment or abuses by military personnel contributed to grievances and uprisings associated with the violence of 2017.

15. Limitations of previous peace initiatives: The argument that shortcomings in earlier stabilization, reconciliation, and peacebuilding processes contributed to the resurgence of armed violence in 2017.

These factors illustrate the multidimensional character of the conflict and highlight the importance of distinguishing documented historical facts from perceptions, allegations, and politically motivated interpretations.

5. KEY OBSERVATIONS

A comparative examination of the historical accounts and analytical perspectives presented above gives rise to several important observations.

First, the chronological references employed by researchers and commentators are not always consistent. These discrepancies may reflect differing interpretations of historical events and, in some cases, an insufficient distinction between colonial resistance, localized disputes, and organized intercommunal violence.

Second, while certain accounts identify eight cycles of conflict beginning in 1911, Professor Tumba Lwaba refers to events dating back to 1887, whereas Father Augustin Wiliwoli identifies a broader range of historical periods.

These differences raise a fundamental methodological question: **How many distinct cycles of conflict has Ituri experienced, and what objective criteria should be applied to determine their number and duration?**

In several publications, chronological references are provided without sufficient contextual information concerning the geographical scope, nature, participants, or circumstances of the events in question. Consequently, the criteria used to classify particular incidents as distinct cycles of conflict are not always clearly established.

Third, the frequent identification of 1911 as the beginning of intercommunal conflict does not necessarily correspond with the historical interpretations presented by representatives of the communities concerned.

If 1911 is to be recognized as the starting point, further clarification is required regarding the subsequent periods identified by different authors, including 1921 or 1923, 1966 or 1969, and 1933. Such discrepancies warrant closer examination to establish a more coherent and evidence-based historical chronology.

Fourth, the continued circulation of interpretations that may be inaccurate, incomplete, or insufficiently substantiated risks distorting public understanding of Ituri's history. Such narratives may also reinforce mistrust, perpetuate resentment, and deepen divisions among communities, particularly where access to reliable historical information remains limited.

Fifth, existing peacebuilding and reconciliation mechanisms appear, in certain instances, to have concentrated primarily on the immediate manifestations and consequences of violence rather than systematically addressing its underlying structural, historical, political, and social causes.

Finally, many issues raised during peace consultations and reflected in the documents reviewed are recurring and evolving in nature. Some may represent legitimate grievances requiring appropriate institutional responses, while others may be based on unverified claims that have subsequently been exploited to justify confrontation or advance divisive agendas.

These observations demonstrate the importance of adopting a more rigorous, transparent, and inclusive approach to historical research and conflict analysis in Ituri.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the magnitude of the security and humanitarian crisis caused by local armed groups in Ituri Province, there is an urgent need to undertake a comprehensive and impartial examination of the various issues frequently presented as the underlying causes of the conflict.

Such an examination should seek to distinguish historically verified facts from unsubstantiated assertions and to address misleading narratives that continue to appear in academic publications, public discourse, and other accounts of Ituri's history.

Failure to undertake this process risks perpetuating a cycle of ineffective peacebuilding initiatives, particularly where the underlying causes of violence remain insufficiently understood by the stakeholders concerned.

A sustainable approach to reconciliation therefore requires the systematic identification of divergent historical interpretations, followed by the development of practical, evidence-based, and mutually acceptable solutions.

Once these areas of disagreement have been clearly established and appropriate recommendations formulated, the competent public authorities, working in collaboration with relevant institutions and stakeholders, should consider formally endorsing the agreed resolutions through an official framework.

Such a framework should promote accountability, equitable implementation, mutual respect, and adherence to principles conducive to social cohesion.

Ultimately, these efforts should contribute to strengthening peaceful coexistence, rebuilding trust among communities, and establishing the foundations for lasting peace throughout Ituri Province.

Bunia, 27 April 2026

Jean BOSCO KISOKE

Community Notable and Specialist in Socio-Humanitarian Affairs in Ituri

Email: boscokisoke2025@gmail.com

Telephone: +243 820 649 847 / +243 998 766 617

Translator's note: This diplomatic English translation preserves the author's historical positions. Contested interpretations are presented as claims rather than verified facts. The handwritten date in the source has been interpreted as 27 April 2026.