Looking for the local:
The politics of humanitarian recruitment in DRC

Abstract

There is renewed energy behind "going local" in the humanitarian sector: transferring power and funding to "local" actors to make aid more equitable and efficient. Yet, this obscures how claims to localness are highly contested. This article examines the tensions generated by humanitarian recruitment of "local staff" in North Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Hiring "locally" is deeply contentious because who is "local" is up for debate. Humanitarian recruitment of "locals" becomes another arena for political struggles over who has a claim to positions of authority and access to resources, based on disputed claims of "localness", which continue to shape, and be shaped by, violent conflict. Humanitarian agencies become embroiled in existing conflicts about who belongs, in contexts where slippery notions of local belonging have long been used as a political resource in power contests, and as a strategy for armed mobilization. Whilst humanitarian agencies look for an imagined "local", representations of the local are negotiated through encounters with external organizations. Pragmatic attempts by humanitarian agencies to hire "for acceptance" concern a simultaneous rejection and embrace of contested notions of ethno-territorial belonging, in a way that ultimately risks reproducing ideas of "the local" that present ethnicity as a rigid and territorial notion. This contentious politics of recruitment reveals how aid agencies can fuel social tensions when the "local" aid category interacts with existing discourses around belonging, authority, and territory. "Going local" is thus not straightforward, but deeply political.

Introduction

The walls of Joel's office are covered in maps, transforming the room into a colorful atlas. The maps chart a web of roads in the rural territories of North Kivu, a province in the eastern

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which has been at the epicenter of violent conflict in the Great Lakes region for the last thirty years. Currently, this region is home to more than one hundred armed groups. That morning, we sat in Joel's office in the provincial capital, Goma, which has become the base for international NGOs and the United Nations. Joel is an experienced Congolese humanitarian who has been working here for international agencies since the early 2000s. As Joel explained, working in North Kivu requires negotiating with multiple authorities: rebel groups, political and customary authorities, businesspeople, the church, and civil society groups. These negotiations are not just about *whether* humanitarians can work in contested areas but involve iterative discussion on the *terms* of their work – the minutiae of what aid work would mean in practice.

Joel got up from his chair every now and again, gesturing to different parts of the wall, tracing different roads with his index finger, whilst recounting his experience "negotiating access." When I asked Joel which topics were most contentious, he did not hesitate: "*ressources humaines* (human resources)," "RH", or as it is jokingly referred to among his colleagues, "*ressources horribles*." He registered my slight surprise; I had not expected internal administrative processes to be at the heart of such political tussles. This, I was to learn, was a significant analytical blind spot. "Recruitment is always tense", Joel went on, "everyone has ideas of who they want us to hire, many want us to hire *autochthones* (supposed sons of the soil). It is sensitive." Hiring "locally" was deeply contentious because who was "local" was up for debate. Whilst the category was used widely in his world of work, the humanitarian industry, Joel stressed that its meaning was far from clear. Recruitment was so controversial, Joel added, that many "security incidents" (attacks on NGOs) were the result of objections to hiring decisions, of perceptions that an NGO has favored one "side" over the other, or of anger at the hiring of so-called "outsiders." Hiring fueled tensions, as humanitarian agencies became part of ongoing struggles about who was "local" with the right to access positions of authority and newly introduced resources.

There have been growing calls over the last decade for humanitarian agencies to "localize" – finally to address unjust and unequal power relations in the contemporary system by transferring power to "local" actors. In 2016, for example, the UN Secretary General argued that humanitarian action should be "as local as possible, as international as necessary", triggering a flurry of reform initiatives - a process termed "localization." This was part of a growing sense that it was time to address North/South power imbalances, and remedy

paternalistic interventions that marginalize "local" actors and fail to support "local capacity" (Roepstorff 2020). This concept of "localization," however, obscures how "the local" – or who counts as "local" – is highly contested. By focusing on humanitarian recruitment of "local staff" in eastern DRC, I argue that hiring "locally" is not self-evident, but politically fraught, generating tensions about who will fill the local "slot" in international organizations, and interacting with disputed notions of "localness" that have long been used to make claims to power and authority. During recruitment, humanitarian agencies become embroiled in struggles about who is "local", as armed groups, political and customary authorities, and civilians jostle for positions of authority and access to resources. Humanitarian agencies are left with a tension between a need to "hire for acceptance" (looking at the personal identity of who is being hired and how this will be perceived), whilst visibly performing the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence (hiring people based on their competencies rather than who they are), both of which are considered crucial to being able to work safely. This involves simultaneously dismissing and embracing existing notions of belonging, in a way that ultimately risks reproducing contested ideas of "localness" which present ethnicity as a rigid and territorial notion. Delving into the politics of recruitment provides insight into how aid agencies fuel social fissures, when the industry's "local" category interacts with existing contested discourses around identity, authority and territory.

I delve into this contentious politics of humanitarian recruitment in North Kivu, drawing on ethnographic research conducted between 2017 and 2022. This involved participant observation at humanitarian offices and projects, as well as nearly 200 interviews with humanitarians, political and military authorities and civil society groups, all in the *Petit Nord* territories of North Kivu. In particular, I draw on 80 interviews with Congolese humanitarians who have worked for one particular international NGO in North Kivu since the early 2000s. I combine this with interviews with senior managers at this agency's "headquarters" in Europe, as well as novel insights gained from studying documents in this NGO's internal archives - the daily reports written by project staff to "headquarters" describing meetings with politico-armed authorities, as well as letters written by civil society groups, political associations, and armed groups to contest recruitment decisions.

The NGO is not named, all individual names have been changed and certain details have been disguised. The research was conducted independently from the NGO, but senior managers informally "approved" the research, meaning that individual employees were allowed, if they

wished, to talk to me about their experiences. Whilst I remained independent from the NGO, I conformed to the racialized stereotype of a young, white European humanitarian, part of a mobile elite moving in and out of the country. This no doubt facilitated my ability to circulate in exclusively "expat" spaces and those of Congolese aid workers. However, this also meant that I was sometimes assumed to be part of the industry that I was studying, causing initial distrust amongst some interviewees. This article, ultimately, is a critical reflection on the way that "the local" is still imagined in such a stratified sector, and the implications for humanitarian intervention.

What is "the local"?

"Local" is a metaphor that humanitarians "live by": it does not just reflect, but also shapes, humanitarian thought and action (Lakoff and Johnson 2008). Humanitarianism is built on an imagined dichotomy between the "local" and the "international," the "local" being a place where intervention may be required, because "space, stuff, staff, and systems" are seen to be lacking (Pigg 1992, Farmer 2014). This dichotomy shapes institutional aid structures, with two key contract types, "international" and "national/local." As Rebecca Peters (2016:498) describes, these categories hold a "foundational, doxic distinction", which is so self-evident that the aid industry "cannot imagine its workers through other means." Each category is homogenizing: the key distinction becomes whether an employee is from "here" ("the field", with imagined social, political, or cultural proximity), or "there" (a globalized elsewhere, without ties to "the community") (Redfield 2012, James 2020).

This distinction has important material consequences. The structure of humanitarian, development and global health interventions is based on profound inequalities between "national" and "international" staff, reflecting and reproducing global structures of postcolonial inequity (Fox 2014, Peters 2020, Carruth 2021). "International staff" have a range of benefits which "national staff" are not entitled to, based on the logic that they have been brought in from "elsewhere" (Redfield 2012). "Internationals", for instance, have access to sophisticated security infrastructures and emergency evacuation (Fassin 2007). Meanwhile, imaginaries of "proximity" to or "distance" from "the field" determine who is trusted to occupy positions of power, with "local" staff considered to be too politically entangled, or at risk, to lead aid operations (James 2020, 2022c). Local labor remains insecure and precarious, reinforcing spatial and material hierarchies (Pascucci 2018). Humanitarianism, Ndaliko (2016)

concludes, is a form of "charitable imperialism," reproducing relations of postcolonial dominance.

There have long been calls for aid organizations to transfer power and redirect funding to "local" actors to make intervention more equitable and efficient (Roepstorff 2020). In 2016, at the World Humanitarian Summit, donors and humanitarian organizations signed the "The Grand Bargain", committing them to providing 25% of global humanitarian funding to local and national responders by 2020. Transferring power to "locals" has become central to efforts to "decolonize" aid. Within international agencies, there has been debate about the need to transfer power to "national" employees (who comprise the majority of staff) so that they occupy key decision-making posts "at home," rather than relying on mobile "internationals" (James 2022c, Fox 2014). Yet, aid can "go local" without actually altering power relationships - simply relying on the labor and risk-taking of "local" employees to implement operations, without transferring real authority (Khoury and Scott 2024). A "local turn" has also taken place in the development and peacebuilding sectors, where donors have embraced the idea of "local" ownership and partnerships to improve legitimacy and effectiveness. Proponents of the "local turn" have criticized top-down and externally-led interventions as being distant from the needs of local people (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). Instead, they call for empowering local people as the main agents of peace. Severine Autesserre (2021), for instance, focuses on conflict in eastern DRC and argues that peacebuilding interventions have failed because they have overlooked the importance both of local grievances and of local conflict resolution, relying on top-down solutions rather than bottom-up strategies that draw on local knowledge.

Despite this renewed energy behind "going local", the concept remains "contested and significantly under-theorized" (Roepstorff 2020:285). What is "the local"? Within aid bureaucracies, "local", like "international", glosses over gender, race, class, ethnicity, or region (Benton 2016, Roth 2015, Pottier 2006, Hirsch 2021, Gomez-Temesio 2024, Kothari 2006). Ethnographic studies have started to unpick the complexity within this "local" category (Martin 2020), by illustrating how "local" aid workers are positioned in society with diverse histories, which may influence their ability to work and mean that they do not fit neatly into "local" or "international" (James 2022a; 2022b). Instead, an anthropological approach reveals the *production* of different identities in aid work, as people "adjust strategically and instrumentally to their ascribed roles" (Rossi 2006:29). Given the advantages of being seen as an "outsider" or "insider" at different times, humanitarians learn to reconstruct their identities for different

audiences (James 2022b, Martin de Almagro 2018). "The local," therefore, is socially produced: such professional distinctions are "instruments of strategic manipulation," rather than accurate descriptions of a workforce (Peters 2016:495).

Yet, as the peacebuilding scholarship on "critical localism" illustrates, "the local" is still often essentialized as an authentic homogenous bloc, tied to territory as "static, rural, traditional" (Mac Ginty 2015:841) and defined in binary opposition to the liberal international (Paffenholz 2015). This assumes that "the local" is already out there, waiting to be "empowered" (Hirblinger and Simons 2015), romanticized as an isolated site of resilience, or virtuous "resistance" against global oppression (Sabaratnam 2013). Crucially, this overlooks the fact that "local" is not a straightforward territorial category but a site of power struggle and an ongoing construction (Mac Ginty 2015, Hirblinger and Simons 2015). Nor can "local" dynamics be so neatly separated from global, regional, or national processes. When analyzing conflict in the eastern DRC, for instance, Autesserre overlooks how local disputes are intimately tied to elite politics: communal conflicts have been provoked and instrumentalized by regional and national actors (Stearns et al., 2017).

Therefore, there is a need to shift from using "local" as a metaphor to examining contested representations of the "local" and how these are used to make claims on political authority and resources. By focusing on local humanitarian recruitment, I draw together these insights on "critical localism" (Mac Ginty 2015) with the conclusions of studies on how contested constructions of ethnic belonging act as a resource in fragmented political environments (Hoffman et al., 2020). This is important because it reveals how the question of *who* should become part of the humanitarian organization becomes another arena for contestation in struggles over "public authority" between different actors (Hoffman and Kirk 2013). Here, "public authority" refers to "the amalgamated result of the exercise of power by a variety of local institutions and the imposition of external institutions, conjugated with the idea of a state" (Lund 2006:686). In these struggles over public authority, ethnicity has become a valuable form of "capital" to make claims to resources and power on the basis of local belonging (Hoffman et al., 2020, Tull 2005). Contested representations of ethno-territorial belonging are similarly employed to make demands for influence and representation within NGOs, and to contest the recruitment of those labelled as "outsiders." In this way, representations of "the local" are negotiated through encounters with international interventions (Hirblinger and

Simons 2015:426), as the aid industry's "local" category interacts with contested constructions of ethnic belonging (Pottier 2006, James 2022b).

The process of local recruitment, therefore, constitutes another way in which humanitarian agencies are not isolated from politics, but rather become part of the very conflicts from which they seek symbolic distance. Employing "locals" is far from a straightforward process, because aid interventions become part of the struggles "through which representations of the local are negotiated" (Hirblinger and Simons 2015:434). As Luisa Enria (2020:388) highlights, humanitarian organizations too often envisage "local authority" as "something that exists independently of humanitarian interventions." However, this overlooks how authority is "unsettled" - negotiated and renegotiated *through encounters with* humanitarian interventions, which become intertwined with pre-existing power struggles (Enria 2020). NGOs become embroiled in existing contestation about who belongs, in contexts where contested ideas of "localness" are used to make claims to power, and as a strategy for accomplishing armed mobilization. As a result, humanitarian interventions become "enmeshed in longer-standing contestations" over power and legitimacy (Enria 2020:389).

Unpacking "localness" in North Kivu

Rutshuru and Masisi territories are in the *Petit Nord* – the southern territories of North Kivu – and have been at the epicenter of violence in the region since the early 1990s. "Localness" is a site of political struggle. Since the colonial era, ethno-politics has been institutionalized in the Congolese state with the making of ethnic territories (Hoffman 2021). Today, Congolese citizens are still legally attached to a *territoire d'origine,* giving them certain rights and obligations as "*originaires.*" The ongoing construction of ethnic identities and territories has become key to political contestation because they define who belongs where, and who has the right to access which resources (Hoffman 2021). Ethnicity, in short, has become a political resource in struggles over public authority, power, and resources (Hoffman et al., 2020).

"Localness" in this region also draws on "mythico-histories" (Malkki 1995) about territory, identity and victimhood which have used to construct a discourse of *autochthony* (Mathys 2017:476). *Autochthony* refers to the supposed natural belonging of people to the "soil" which establishes their claims to authority (Geschiere 2009). If *originaire* is a claim of being from an ethnic territory, *autochthones* claim to have arrived first. The term has a "naturalizing capacity" which makes it "the most 'authentic,' the most essential, of all modes of connection" (Comaroff

and Comaroff 2001:658-59). The concept, however, is a slippery colonial import which continues to be politically manipulated and highly contested (Jackson 2006). The challenge, therefore, is "to return to history" in order to denaturalize it (Geschiere 2009:28). In eastern DRC, understanding current meanings and political strategies of ethnicity requires an examination of how layers of history, memory and violence have formed "(ethnicized) mental maps guiding interpretations of both the past and social present" (Mathys 2017:467). Intertwined notions of identity, territory and authority both shape, and are shaped by, armed mobilization, as violence continues to alter the meanings of identities and their relationship to authority and territory (Verweijen and Vlassenroot 2015).

Before colonial rule, highly-diverse people lived in the DRC, with varying forms of political organization which shifted over time (Mathys 2021). Belgian colonial rule subsequently transformed the relationship between people and space, remapping DRC into monoethnic chiefdoms, or *chefferies,* whereby territorialized ethnic identity became a means of accessing power, land, and resources in specific "homelands." This had a profound impact on political order and subjectivities, institutionalizing a link between territory, ethnicity, and authority (Hoffmann 2021). The "traditional chief" became an intermediary authority over "*chefferies*", ruling through "custom." These elites helped construct ethnic territories and identities to serve their own ambitions (Hoffman et al., 2020).

As fixed spatialized identities were linked to authority and resources, land competition became a source of ethnic discourse and a means for armed mobilization (Mathys and Vlassenroot 2016). The Kivu region is home to dozens of groups, including some who speak Kinyarwanda (the language in Rwanda), and are known as Banyarwanda, but this group is not homogenous. It is made up of both Hutu and Tutsi who settled in Congo *before* the colonial period, immigrants who were settled in the Kivu as labor under the Belgian colonial administration, and refugees who fled periods of violence in Rwanda since the 1950s (Mathys 2017). The position of this group has long been contested: they are framed as "foreigners" by self-styled *autochthonous* groups. Although Rwandophones lived in Congo before colonial rule, only some were already organized into customary structures. In Masisi, however, Belgian colonizers oversaw mass labor immigration from Rwanda and created a *chefferie* for Banyarwanda on land bought from Hunde for a small sum. This sparked tensions with Hunde who were obliged to leave and considered the land rightfully theirs (Stearns 2012). Over 100,000 Banyarwanda

settled during the colonial period. By 1959, they outnumbered Hunde in Masisi and Rutshuru, sparking fears of "Banyarwanda domination."

After independence in 1960, violence between so-called *"autochthonous"* populations (Nande, Hunde and Nyanga) and Banyarwanda (framed as "foreigners") erupted when leaders mobilized votes through ethnic discourses (Willame 1997). Nande, Hunde and Nyanga elites entrenched their dominance, and began to replace Hutu administrators with Hunde chiefs, leading to violent land disputes (Mararo 1997). Clashes began when the provincial assembly voted to expel all Tutsi and to revise voting laws to disenfranchise Banyarwanda (Stearns 2012). In the 1970s, President Mobutu introduced a land-reform bill which rejected customary titles and made the state the only legal provider of land titles. Access to land became insecure for the poor, whilst wealthy Banyarwanda - who were allies of Mobutu and had previously had difficulty accessing land customarily stewarded by Hunde chiefs - could more easily buy land (Mamdani 1998). In the early 1990s, ethnicity became a technique for Mobutu to divide growing opposition. During democratization, *"la géopolitique"* dictated that national ministries would be based on an ethnic quota system, and that provincial candidates needed to be *autochthonous* to that province (Mamdani 1998). Nande, Nyanga, and Hunde took top provincial posts and used *autochthony* as a banner to mobilize youth against Banyarwanda (Mararo 1997). Violence broke out when the new census for voting cards excluded *"transplantés"* (those settled for labor by the Belgian colonial administration) and their children, and in 1993, officials in Masisi helped mobilize a militia who killed Hutu, as violence spread throughout the *Petit Nord* (Mararo 1997).

The arrival of thousands of Rwandan Hutu refugees, and then a series of Rwandan-backed rebellions, further complicated the position of Congolese Rwandophones. In 1994, Rwandan refugees arrived in the Kivu region, and the former Hutu regime, which orchestrated the genocide, remobilized in refugee camps. This broke the fragile alliance between Congolese Hutu and Tutsi. In 1996, *L'Alliance des Forces Democratiques pour la Liberation du Congo-Zaire* (AFDL), spearheaded by the Rwandan army, invaded, dismantling the camps and overthrowing Mobutu. In 1998, war restarted when the AFDL turned against their Rwandan backers. The Rwandan-backed *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie* (RCD) subsequently invaded, starting a war that escalated to involve eight countries and more than 25 rebel groups. The former Hutu *génocidaires* reorganized as the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR). The war officially ended in 2003. However, conflict has

continued with recurrent Rwandan-backed rebellions led by Congolese Banyarwanda, such as the *Congrès National pour la Defense du Peuple* (CNDP) from 2005 and 2009, and the *Mouvemente du 23-Mars* (M23) from 2012 to 2013 and since 2021. These rebel groups justify their intervention as needed to protect Tutsi and eliminate the FDLR.

Decades of conflict have produced a new class of actors invested in maintaining the status quo (Stearns 2023). A shifting kaleidoscope of rebel groups operate in the region, and power lies with armed actors and political authorities who position themselves "partly in opposition to and partly in collaboration with" the state (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2008:50). In the discourse of so-called *autochthones*, land sales and mass immigration during the colonial era mark the beginning of Rwandan domination, which has continued with the invasion of Rwandan-backed armed groups led by Congolese Tutsi. In response, dozens of "Mai-Mai" militias have mobilized, claiming to defend those "born from the soil" from Rwandan invaders. Mai-Mai use ethnicity and custom as tools of power, collaborating with customary chiefs and appealing to *autochthony* (Hoffman and Verweijen 2019).

Ultimately, slippery notions of ethno-territorial localness exclude people from access to resources, land, employment, and citizenship, on territorial, provincial and national scales (Jackson 2006). At a territorial level in North Kivu, so-called "*autochthonous*" communities (Nande, Hunde, Tembo, Nyanga) distinguish themselves from Banyarwanda (Hutu and Tutsi), although this is variable, as the position of Hutus continues to be contested (Jackson 2006). In land-related struggles, *autochthones* claim to have "arrived first", whereas populations lacking "homelands" recognized during the colonial era are branded as "immigrants." Rural areas are still organized into *chefferies,* but their boundaries are highly contested and struggles over customary authority are part of broader conflict dynamics (Hoffman et al., 2020). Meanwhile, *autochthony* is entangled with debates about citizenship. This is because the dates before which "peoples" have to be within Congolese borders to be considered citizens have been repeatedly changed over the years, thereby denationalizing Rwandophones (Malengana 2001).

The boundaries of ethnic territories are also contested, with decentralization processes particularly fraught (Jackson 2006; Büscher et al., 2024). In 2006, a new constitution involved the cutting-up (*"découpage"*) of 11 provinces into 26 provinces, and the concept of *"représentativité"* (representativeness) required national and subnational governments to be proportionally representative of the distribution of ethnic groups. This raised the importance of

provincial *autochthony* as a political resource, and new struggles began as people found themselves labelled *non-originaire* or not *autochthonous* to their newly-redrawn areas of residence (Englebert et al., 2021). Ethnicity, territory and authority have been interwoven into the Congolese political order at multiple levels, transforming contested notions of "localness" into a potent political resource and site of ongoing struggle.

Humanitarianism in eastern Congo

International humanitarian agencies arrived in the Kivu region *en masse* in response to the influx of Rwandan refugees in 1994 and have stayed ever since, becoming largely responsible for service provision. Today, the city of Goma is a regional NGO hub, and the base for one of the UN's largest and most expensive peacekeeping missions. Humanitarian presence has radically reshaped the political economy, creating a real estate boom and the dollarization of the economy, with growing urban inequality (Vlassenroot and Buscher 2010). This influx of foreign money has also drawn huge numbers of people into the aid sector (James 2020).

Humanitarianism is underpinned by the idea of an "emergency" - a sudden break from normality that requires an immediate and short-term response, in the name of shared humanity, to alleviate suffering. The humanitarian imperative is thus simultaneously universalist and minimalist, saving lives in the here and now, irrespective of who they are or where they are (Redfield 2013). However, "emergency" intervention in eastern DRC has become protracted over the last thirty years, a norm rather than an exception. Although humanitarians often adopt the symbolic principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence to conduct their work, in practice, their access depends on negotiation with all powerholders, drawing on shared interests and relationships in a web of continually negotiated agreements (Magone et al., 2011). Protracted conflict in eastern DRC has increased struggles over public authority, as the state, civil society organizations, customary chiefs, rebel groups, religious organizations*, and international aid agencies* compete for the power to manage resources and deliver services (Hoffman et al., 2020, Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2008).

This article focuses on the work conducted by an NGO which has been operating in DRC since the 1970s, employing several thousand people. Many of its projects in North Kivu have been running for nearly 20 years. The great majority of fieldworkers are people on "national" contracts: over 90% of staff are Congolese, and many have been working in the sector for decades. Despite this, their role is limited: they rarely occupy decision-making posts out of

concerns that they are too politically aligned and could put the organization in danger, or that they are at risk themselves because of additional pressures (James 2020, 2022c). There is a huge diversity within this staff body, in terms of class, gender, age, and professional background, with a range of social, political, and military networks and histories (James 2022b). The mobility of a great number of "national" staff means that the term "local" obscures, rather than defines, their social backgrounds (Peters 2016). Whilst some employees grew up nearby, others come from different territories in the province, or from different provinces altogether, situated a great distance away. In recognition of this, the NGO has introduced a third tier of employee, "inpats" or *délocalisés*, "national" staff who have been "in-patriated" to work elsewhere in their own country.

The Politics of Recruitment

In a context of violent conflict, this NGO attempts to diminish any political significance attached to personal identities: humanitarians are just humans helping other humans. However, in practice, humanitarians are identified not just by the logo on their T-shirt: their identities are read in relation to notions of belonging (Pottier 2006, James 2020, 2022b). Perceived ethnic identity was one element: it mapped onto discourses of *autochthony* employed by some armed groups, and onto histories of past violence, as well as ideas about the rights of *originaires*. Hunde and Hutu humanitarians from Masisi, for instance, stressed that they were sometimes associated with the armed group "from my community" and thus seen as "implicated in historical violence." Meanwhile, Tutsi employees described great difficulty working across the region in areas with Mai-Mai.

Who gets hired by the organization is deeply contentious. Humanitarian agencies become significant actors in the political economy. As a humanitarian who grew up in Masisi summarized, "NGOs come, and they bring a lot of resources into an area without many. There are a lot of tensions around this, who gets access to what. That's why recruitment becomes so tense." The leader of the *Baraza* – a group of leaders from the province's major ethnic groups who resolve low-level conflicts – explained that much of his work has become responding to requests from NGOs to help alleviate tensions related to recruitment. *"Rien pour nous sans nous"* (nothing for us without us) is a common refrain in the region, a critique of paternalistic interventions that do not include ownership and leadership from "locals". Yet, "localness" - or the "us" in this refrain - shifted depending on who was talking. The identities of humanitarians became politicized using "nervous" discourses (Jackson 2006) of belonging which defined

insiders and outsiders at different levels, as armed groups, customary authorities, and civil society groups contested recruitment decisions.

At a territorial level, the NGO was accused of favoring one "side" over another, shifting the balance of power. This was expressed in ethnic terms, especially when some armed groups employed discourses of *autochthony*, and different identities became associated with histories of past violence. At a provincial level, the NGO faced criticism for the "importation" of staff from other territories or provinces: "*non-originaires.*" NGO employees were seen as people with money: "as an in-pat, people thought I was stealing *their* jobs and *their* money," one humanitarian explained. Ultimately, these tensions culminated in a meeting in Goma in 2012 between the NGO and inter-community *Baraza*. The *Baraza* suggested that the NGO prioritize "local labor" for 80% of the team to "avoid insecurity."[1] But, who is "local"? In what follows, I delve into detail, tracing struggles over recruitment that emerged when this NGO opened projects in two territories – Rutshuru and Masisi – at the start of the CNDP rebellion. These examples illustrate how recruitment became an arena for political contestation over authority and resources, in ways that drew on, and reproduced, historical tensions and competing constructions of ethnic belonging.

Rutshuru

In 2005, the NGO began working in Rutshuru, and established projects in rural areas in the territory. There were chronic tensions centered on recruitment in Bwisha and Bwito *chefferies*, with hostility towards so-called "*non-originaires*" hired by the NGO. Until 2003, the NGO had worked in the *Grand Nord* territories of North Kivu, in a predominantly Nande area. However, when fighting began in the *Petit Nord,* the NGO moved location to the epicenter of the conflict. The NGO brought staff from previous projects in the *Grand Nord* to work in Rutshuru. This made "operational sense," former project coordinators in France explained, given that these earlier projects had closed, and that the NGO was struggling to recruit enough people to fill all specialized positions. However, most of the staff brought in were Nande, a former project coordinator remembered, "and this started the impression among Hutu in Rutshuru that they were being treated unfairly and Nande were being favored." Back in his office, Joel and I pored over the section of the wall map that covered Kabizo, Nyanzale and Bambou, where the NGO had begun to work as violence escalated in 2006. The Hutu population there had protested the fact that "we brought people from other places, most of whom were Nande," Joel explained,

which was seen as upsetting the balance of power in the territory, reigniting historical grievances.

Rebel groups became involved in these struggles over the NGO's recruitment. In 2006, Laurent Nkunda, a Tutsi from Rutshuru, launched his CNDP rebellion, along with ex-RCD Tutsi officers. By 2008, the CNDP had taken control of much of Rutshuru and become the key administrative authority with which humanitarian agencies needed to negotiate. One day, the CNDP sent a delegation to the NGO to discuss their concerns about recruitment. "CNDP discussed how 80% of our staff of Rutshuru comprised people from the *Grand Nord* and they demanded [the NGO] be vigilant in recruitment and favor people *from the zone* (without ethnic groups specifically)", one report summarized.[2] Joel remembered these tensions well; he was one the so-called *non-originaires*. "Their (the CNDP's) objective was clear," Joel explained. "They had a long list of names of people they wanted to be employed, and they said it was forbidden for the NGO to take people from elsewhere. They needed to hire people *from here.*" By defining who was *from here*, the CNDP were making demands as to who had legitimate authority to access employment and influence within the NGO, at a time when the group was trying to improve its image among the population and customary authorities.[3] However, many on the list had links to the CNDP, and as Joel remembers, the delegation informed the team that, "if the NGO brought people who were not from here, then those people would have to pay resident taxes to the CNDP to live in their zones." These struggles over recruitment, then, also became a means for the CNDP to enforce their authority as the new territorial administrators.

The context changed suddenly in January 2009 when a secret deal was made between the Congolese and Rwandan governments: the CNDP was formally integrated into the Congolese army, and a newly-integrated army led by former CNDP rebels engaged in offensives against the FDLR. In areas that saw operations by army units dominated by ex-CNDP soldiers, support for Mai-Mai groups grew. The government tried to get rid of the CNDP parallel chains of command, leading to a mutiny of former CNDP soldiers in 2012, who created the M23. In 2013, the NGO struggled to continue working, as Rutshuru changed hands multiple times between M23 and the national army.

Tensions increased, especially at a project in Nyanzale. Joel introduced me to his former colleague, Trésor, who worked there at the time. Trésor grew up in Rutshuru territory, and whilst a humanitarian career had never been part of the plan, the newly-opened NGO project was a welcome employment opportunity. Trésor eventually left the NGO, however, because of

what he called "the political contamination of human resources." The NGO had brought Nande staff to Rutshuru, aggravating tensions between Hutu and Nande, Trésor explained. "Nyanzale is mostly Hutu, but there are also minorities of Nande and Hunde," Trésor added, "and the real tensions began between Hutu and Nande because most people being hired were Nande, despite the fact that the majority of the population were Hutu." This was historically significant, Trésor argued, as Hutu in the region felt once again as if they were being disenfranchised, with Nande and Hunde taking key posts, even though Hutu were the majority. These tensions over recruitment needed to be contextualized, he added, explaining that authority was shared in a fragile alliance at the time. He mapped out the relevant actors on a napkin: the Mwami (customary chief) was Hunde (Bwito), the *chef de poste* (the lowest level in the administrative hierarchy) was Hunde, whilst the *chef de groupement* (the second level chief in the customary structure) switched between Tutsi and Hutu. Meanwhile, the NGO needed to negotiate with the national army, the CNDP, the FDLR, and later a Hutu Nyatura rebel group. Whilst Nande and Hunde staff were key intermediaries for the Mwami and *chef de poste*, Trésor described "local, local" (Hutu) staff as central to communication with the FDLR and *chef de groupement*. The so-called "importation" of Nande was perceived as tilting this fragile balance of power, Trésor concluded, with growing hostility from those who he termed "local locals."

By 2011, the *Jeunesse* in Nyanzale - a youth association that helps people find employment and represents people within the formalized political structure - organized protests against the NGO's recruitment decisions. [4] "People started to think the NGO was pro the other group," Trésor explained, "and security incidents began." A series of robberies and kidnappings took place which were attributed to "tensions exacerbated" by recruitment.[5] As other humanitarians from the time remembered, rumors circulated about who might have been responsible. Some thought that a robbery had been organized by Hutu in Nyanzale, as a means of protesting against the fact that Nande were being recruited. Another rumor circulated that a robbery had been organized by Nande with the aim of forcing the NGO out of Nyanzale and encouraging them to return to Nande areas in the Grand Nord. Trésor recounted the various rumors, concluding that ultimately everyone in Nyanzale seemed concerned that the NGO was benefitting someone else, at their expense. The NGO's reports from the time describe how tensions between Hutu and Nande centered on "NGO presence" as both groups "demanded a bigger representation in recruitment". The team concluded that, unfortunately, the NGO "had been used to settle scores."[6]

Years later, Trésor still believed that "things started going wrong when they [the NGO] gave nationals a position of responsibility in human resources." For Trésor, this was a simple case of "Nande favoring Nande," the result of strong ethnic ties among economic elites in the province. Yet, as senior managers from the NGO were keen to stress, Congolese staff did not make final recruitment decisions, precisely to protect them from pressure or accusations of partiality. Other employees from the time remembered how civil society organizations came to the NGO base to give lists of people who should be hired, and to accuse certain staff members of favoring "their own community" in recruitment decisions. "They had got it wrong," one employee explained, "it was a French woman who had done the recruitment, so we needed her to go out and say, 'no, I did the recruitment.' But the problem continued, there were always rumors."

Back in Rutshuru town, the NGO team received anonymous letters objecting to the recruitment of "*non-originaires*", with a different idea as to who was "local." Whilst the "intercommunity" *Jeunesse* representing all groups in the territory objected to the recruitment of people "imported" from outside of Rutshuru, the Hutu *Jeunnesse* made claims based on ethnicity.[7] Strikes took place in the NGO project by Hutu staff who protested the continued perceived favoritism of Nande in recruitment. A coordinator from the time described evacuating inpat staff from several projects who had received anonymous threats. In his office years later, Joel concluded, "as frustration grew, people started to make up stories. Denunciations of staff began, it became confused. The NGO concluded that people who were *'sur place'* (right there/from there) must be privileged, as a security measure."

Masisi

In the neighboring territory of Masisi, the *Jeunnesse* periodically blocked humanitarian agencies from entering the territory in opposition to the "importation of workers" from other provinces or other territories, labelled as *"non-originaires."*[8] At one of these roadblocks in 2016, the leader held up a list of recommendations for NGOs, explaining that if they want to work in Masisi, they need to "recruit here." "This is a group representing people who are unable to find jobs, who haven't been hired by humanitarian organizations. They were trying to put pressure on international agencies," a UN worker from Masisi told me at the time.

The NGO opened projects in Masisi during the CNDP rebellion and received similar letters from civil society groups accusing NGOs of "bringing in labor and not hiring enough local

people."[9] In 2007, the NGO began working in Kitchanga, a town that stretches across the border between Masisi and Rutshuru territories. The *crème intellectuelle* of Kitchanga – a group of intellectual leaders – sent letters to all humanitarian agencies, complaining about the recruitment of "outsiders" who were "stealing jobs" from people in Kitchanga.[10] After receiving anonymous threats in 2010, the NGO in subsequent security plans stressed they had "been asked to hire more local people and avoid bringing in 'foreigners.'"[11] Yet, in 2012, the *crème intellectuelle* wrote again to object to the "importation of labor, even for posts that don't need specialized skills," warning that "the population will take action."[12]

Recruitment also fueled historical tensions *within* the territory. In the 19th century, Masisi was predominantly occupied by Hunde, and the Masisi part of Kitchanga was ruled by the Bashali family of the Bahunde *chefferie* created by the Belgian regime in 1921. From 1937 onwards, however, the Belgian administration settled Rwandan labor migrants in a new *chefferie*, Gishari, erected by colonial authorities on land bought from Hunde. This *chefferie* was then abolished in 1957, with control being given back to Hunde customary authorities. Today, the Masisi side of Kitchanga is the seat of the Hunde Bashali royal family, with a Hunde majority, as well Nyanga, Tembo and Nande. On the Rutshuru side, Kitchanga is predominantly Hutu and Tutsi. Demographic shifts during protracted conflict in the region further fueled historical antagonisms between Hunde and Banyarwanda, as Kitchanga became a strategic location, and a "zone of refuge" for displaced people (Mathys and Buscher 2018:239). During the RCD era, for example, the Hunde customary authority was replaced, with land and resources transferred to Congolese Rwandophones and RCD elites (Mathys and Buscher 2018).

By the time that the NGO arrived, Kitchanga was the fiefdom of the CNDP. In response, a dozen Mai-Mai mobilized in the area, in particular the *Patriotes Résistants Congolais* (PARECO), a predominantly Hutu militia who saw themselves as defending "*autochthones*" against "Tutsi domination:" and later, the Hunde faction of PARECO created the *Alliance Patriotique pour un Congo Libre et Souverain* (APCLS). Soon, most of the NGO's projects were in CNDP territory. In response, the organization tried visibly to "balance" its presence by conducting outreach work in non-CNDP areas. In 2009, Kitchanga came under control of the newly-integrated army, dominated by ex-CNDP. During the same period, there was also political struggle over the administrative status of Kitchanga. In 2008, a decentralization law was passed, and a "provincial delegate" was appointed. Hunde in Kitchanga perceived this as an interference in customary authority, especially given that the delegate was an ex-RCD

official who was perceived to be an ally of Banyarwanda (Mathys and Buscher 2018). The 2008 law also indicated that Kitchanga could be transformed into a *"commune."* This would change the way that Kitchanga was governed, diminishing the influence of Hunde customary structures, and potentially shifting power in favor of the Hutu population, given that Hunde are a minority in their own *chefferie* (Mathys and Buscher 2018).

In this context, who was recruited as "local to Kitchanga" by the NGO was particularly contentious and became another site for struggles over authority between Hunde and Banyarwanda. An experienced Congolese humanitarian, Serge, remembered the difficulties of working in Kitchanga during this time, and the sensitivity of hiring decisions. In the context of the CNDP rebellion, he described mistrust within the NGO, as "local staff" were "identified as someone who could belong to this armed group, or that armed group, giving them information." In the NGO team, "it became a Hunde versus Tutsi or Hutu atmosphere," as Hunde staff accused the NGO of preferential treatment towards Banyarwanda, and in particular, Tutsi. In 2013, Kitchanga became the center of violent struggle when fighting broke out between the APCLS and the 812th brigade of the Congolese army, led by a Tutsi colonel with links to M23. Over one hundred people died, and 500 buildings were burned and destroyed – including the NGO base.

The NGO subsequently closed the Kitchanga project, and shifted focus to Mweso, where it had been working since 2008. In Mweso, there were objections to the recruitment of so-called *"non-originaire"* staff, whilst "inpats" from other provinces received anonymous threats. Yet, here too, the NGO became embroiled in historical tensions between Hutu and Hunde, as recruitment became part of ongoing struggles over public authority in Masisi. Tensions increased in 2013, when the NGO's closure of the project in Kitchanga was perceived by Hunde in Kitchanga as "abandoning" them in favor of the "Hutu of Mweso." After robberies of the NGO's vehicles, Hutu and Hunde staff accused one another of an "inside job."[13]

In Goma, I traced these micro-histories with experienced employees of the NGO. They described the chronic tensions during recruitment in Masisi. Grievances centered on the NGO's perceived inadequate recruitment of Hutu. Given that Banyarwanda no longer had customary representation in Masisi, but were the majority in the territory, gaining political control in administrative positions became the only way to gain official access to forms of political authority. This focus on gaining representation in political administrations also applied to

international institutions. Letters were sent to the NGO project and Catholic Church, two of the most significant economic entities in town, on the behalf of the Hutu community, putting pressure on these institutions to give positions to Hutu.[14] In the NGO, Hutu argued that they were being discriminated against. Tensions were so high amongst staff that in one hospital supported by the NGO, rumors circulated that Hutu babies were dying due to negligence by certain doctors.[15] One employee remembered travelling to give "peace talks" to the team. "I tried to talk about unity, based on professional and medical ethics," he remembered, "because otherwise, the hospital would have just become part of the conflict, it could no longer be a place where all sides of the conflict were treated, or a refuge for people in times of conflict."

"Hiring for Acceptance"?

As Dennis Tull (2005:229) concludes, social organizations which claim to transcend political and ethnic tensions in North Kivu often end up mirroring them. By examining ethnic politics within churches in the region, he illustrates how societal tensions are reflected in particular within organizations which, since the 1980s, have come to substitute for the state as key repositories of resources and the "chief vehicle of upward mobility" (Tull 2005:247). As in churches, political tensions were also manifested within humanitarian agencies, where competing demands for resources and employment are often framed in ethnic terms.

Confronted with these tensions over the last two decades, humanitarian agencies in eastern DRC have shifted their approach, with hiring now considered central to organizational "security management" (James 2022b, Pottier 2006). "Acceptance" strategies for security management rely on a positive perception of the NGO's work amongst the public, authorities, and conflict actors, rather than on their armored vehicles or compounds. "Hiring for acceptance" has become key to this, the need to consider who is hired, and how this might be perceived, in order to avoid potential risks. As one NGO security report from North Kivu put it, "it is paramount to remain and to be perceived to be as neutral as possible: in our staffing, in our recruitment processes", with all human resources decisions "visibly taken by expats."[16] Hiring is not just an internal administrative process but is central to how an organization positions itself amidst conflict.

This was illustrated clearly during one of my trips to Masisi, where I met Patrique, who had been working for the NGO for over a decade. He described wearing "two hats" or performing two roles simultaneously - that of customary authority, and of humanitarian. Whilst he was an

NGO employee, Patrique was also known as a relative of the Hunde customary chief or *Mwami*. His overlapping position helped with his humanitarian employer's "acceptance", Patrique argued, because people trusted and confided in him, and customary authorities were respected by Mai-Mai operating nearby. Whilst Patrique had been working in Masisi for years, the "international" coordinator who runs the project rotates in and out, changing every year or so. Each time a new coordinator arrived, Patrique organized a ceremony to welcome them to his "traditional soil." This was a means to show his support and to help protect them: "I give them strength," Patrique explained, because after the ceremony, "people may fear or respect the project coordinator," knowing that he has been blessed by the *Mwami.* If the political salience of chieftaincy is reproduced through rituals and ceremonies (Hoffman et al., 2020:125), then this NGO has been integrated into ceremonies which mark the boundaries of territorial inclusion and exclusion. Staff like Patrique have forms of ethnic capital which become a resource for foreign intervention, and their inclusion in the team has important symbolic value.

Yet, the approach of "hiring for acceptance" is far from straightforward. It involves a tension. On the one hand, the NGO stresses the importance of being "neutral, impartial, and independent" in the choice of candidate. In a context of violent conflict, recruitment decisions need to be based on competency, rather than who the person is: hiring is, in effect, presented to onlookers as "identity blind" during ongoing power struggles where identities have been linked to authority, access to resources, and armed mobilization. The agency holds regular "awareness raising" sessions with armed combatants and civil society organizations – re-explaining its charter triage system, and the independence of its hiring.[17] In effect, the humanitarian principles are seen as symbolic tools that need to be performed to onlookers as a matter of security, especially during recruitment processes.

On the other hand, this approach to security also requires careful analysis of the ethnic identities of staff to avoid accusations that the NGO is benefitting one side over another, in recognition that "relief workers in conflict zones do not (and cannot) shed their ethnic identities" (Pottier 2006:162). As one security plan explains, "staff composition, both in terms of tribal affiliation (locally) and from the perspective of moving staff into areas foreign to them (i.e. in-pats) needs to be carefully mapped."[18] Experienced NGO employees described this as "balancing" team composition, in order actively to demonstrate organizational impartiality, as a matter of security. "Hiring for acceptance", then, concerns a simultaneous rejection and embrace of notions of ethno-territorial belonging: a rejection of the importance of ethnic labels based on a

universal ethos, whilst also analyzing and adopting contested notions of territorial "localness" with the aim of achieving "a balance" for organizational security. Or, as a security report summarized, the NGO's approach requires "hiring per competence, but also good to be aware of even representation of different subgroups in society. Correct representation of ethnicities is paramount…to make us less vulnerable."[19]

This appears to be another attempt (at least symbolically) to isolate humanitarian intervention from its political environment, "balancing" so that aid intervention leaves, or is perceived to leave, "local authority" untouched (Enria 2020). This overlooks the fact that local authority is not static, but constantly renegotiated and remade, including through interactions with external institutions (Enria 2020). NGOs cannot somehow isolate themselves from these political struggles, as aid agencies become just another "non-state actor" in struggles over public authority, shaping the political orders that emerge. Indeed, it is not possible for humanitarian intervention to have a totally "balanced" impact on political struggles for public authority when representation in an NGO becomes another site for contestation.

Rather, looking for "the local" to achieve "acceptance" can interact in counterproductive ways with existing discourses of belonging which are highly contested. Critical analysis of NGO recruitment in eastern DRC highlights the precarious labor of Congolese humanitarians and the risks they face, whilst racialized imaginaries of expertise and "neutrality" continue to exclude them from positions of decision-making power (James 2022c). But in this case, by foregrounding "local perception" as central to "security", there is a risk that humanitarian agencies adopt notions of "the local" at face value, adopting ethnicity as a rigid and territorial notion (Mathys 2017). By aiming to hire "locals" for "acceptance", and labelling staff as a certain ethnic group and therefore "*local*" (or not), humanitarian organizations risk reproducing contested spatial imaginaries of ethno-territorial belonging, in ways that overlap neatly with the humanitarian category of people as "local" to a fixed "field."

This veers into what Geschiere (2009:31) terms an "essentializing view of identity," which takes "*autochthony*'s deceiving self-evidence for granted, thus neglecting its constant shifts and reorientation." Long histories of mobility throughout the frontier zone of eastern DRC mean that very few can claim to be original inhabitants of areas in the Kivu (Mathys 2021). Notions of *autochthony* slide across different scales and are based on deeply selective readings of history (Mathys 2017, Jackson 2006). This pliability and ambiguity results in a "nervous"

discourse: any concrete attempts to define who is truly "local" gives rise to fierce disagreements and suspicions of fakery (Jackson 2006, Geschiere 2009). Rather than self-evident, appeals to "the local" trigger chronic clashes over who *really* belongs, and who does not.

Contesting "the local"

"Local" is a shorthand used in aid to describe people, staff and places of "the field," rather than an "international" elsewhere. Recent calls for a transfer of power to "local" actors are an important critique of the profound inequalities in the aid sector. Yet, "localization" risks treating "the local" as a panacea (Roepstorff 2020), when "the local" is relational rather than rigid, a practice rather than a fixed descriptor, and ultimately, highly disputed (Paffenholz 2015, Martin 2020, Martin de Almagro 2018, Peters 2016, James 2022b, Mac Ginty 2015). Therefore, as Hirblinger and Simons (2015:434) conclude, it is instead critical to examine the processes through which "the local" is renegotiated during global encounters.

The recruitment of "local" staff by foreign NGOs is a particularly stark example. Recruitment sparks tensions because "the local" is contested: slippery constructions of "local" belonging become a resource in ongoing political struggles. There is no uncontentious "local" for humanitarian agencies to find, nor is there a purely "balanced" way to intervene during struggles over political authority, when constructions of "local" identities are used to make claims for access to power, resources, and land at multiple levels (Hoffman 2021, Tull 2005). Instead, humanitarian recruitment is another locus for political conflict over who has a legitimate claim to authority and resources, based on ethno-territorial imaginaries that continue to shape, and be shaped by, violent conflict. The politics of humanitarian recruitment is therefore another example of how political authority is renegotiated through interactions with external agencies, in ways that can spark societal conflict.

The boundary between the "local" and the "international," then, is porous (Paffenholz 2015, Sabartnam 2013). "International" intervention does not operate in a politically isolated space, but instead shapes "local" political orders. Meanwhile, conflicts over local authority also shape international humanitarian practices, structuring recruitment processes and the decisions that draw the boundary between what is "internal" and "external" to an international NGO. Whilst humanitarian agencies adapt by trying to "hire for acceptance" amidst violent conflict, this approach risks reproducing notions of ethnicity as static, in ways that fit neatly with the

humanitarian idea of some staff as "from here" - "local" to the "field." In an era of increased energy behind "localization", it is essential to unpack the slippery concept of "the local," and to approach recruitment in aid institutions as another site of potential power struggle, especially when contested ideas of "the local" already hold such political appeal. "Going local," therefore, is not straightforward, but inherently political, involving decisions which dictate how aid intervention influences existing power struggles. An ethnographic approach illustrates the complexities behind the internal categories of "Aidland" (Apthorpe 2005), but it can also reveal how and why such categories ignite broader historical struggles about who *really* belongs.

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