

# The Political Economy of the Bukumu chiefdom

(North Kivu, DRC)

Sam Niknie and  
Thierry Rukata

## INSECURE LIVELIHOODS SERIES

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# Introduction

The Bukumu chiefdom is located in the Nyiragongo territory, named after its active volcano, in North Kivu province, Democratic Republic of Congo. Spanning 333 square kilometres, it lies north of Goma – formerly part of its territory – and is bordered by the Rutshuru territory to the north, Rwanda to the east, the city of Goma to the south, and the Masisi territory to the west. Over half of the chiefdom’s land (170 square kilometres) is part of Virunga National Park, while the remaining 163 square kilometres is inhabited by the local population. According to its 2023 annual report, Bukumu’s population density is 2,967.6 inhabitants per square kilometre. Its border location with Rwanda and proximity to Goma drive unique geographic, economic, and political developments.

This report examines Bukumu’s key social, political, geographic, and economic features. Border dynamics, urbanization, and associated tensions around identity and authority shape the chiefdom’s political economy. The report explores how migration and urbanization contribute to conflicts over land between inhabitants and between Virunga National Park and local communities. It also analyses how Goma’s urban expansion affects customary power, why this is contested, and how Bukumu’s position as a border chiefdom impacts social dynamics related to identity, authority, and its political economy. The report concludes by reflecting on recent developments and rising insecurity.

Methodologically, this report is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Bukumu and neighbouring Goma. One of the authors conducted 14 months of ethnographic research in the Munigi *groupement* (a *groupement* is a sub-divisionary administrative unit of a territory). In August 2024, additional data was gathered through 14 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders such as administrators, customary leaders, elected officials, religious leaders, and civil society members. Due to security reasons related to the resurgence of the M23 rebel group, not all areas of the chiefdom were accessible during the data collection. Therefore, the research of this report was mostly carried out in the southern part of the chiefdom.

# 2 |

## A history

Being one of North Kivu's ten chiefdoms, the Bukumu chiefdom's surface equals the entire Nyiragongo territory, making it the only chiefdom in the territory. Administratively, the territory is divided into five *groupements*, which are in turn divided into 46 villages. Furthermore, since 2006, the former Kibumba and Buhumba *groupements* have been turned into *communes rurales* (rural communes) by presidential decree, and as such no longer fall under customary authority, as explained below.

Table 1. Five *groupements* consisting of 46 villages of the Bukumu chiefdom and two *communes rurales*

GROUPEMENT	VILLAGE
MUNIGI	Buhombo, Bugarura, Rukoko, Buhima, Janga, Bushagara, Kabaya, Ngangi I Kiheru, Kasenyi, Ngangi II, Bushara, Byungu, Ngangi III, Murambi and Turunga
BUVIRA	Burambo, Kiguri, Vubiro, Rutagara, Bushwaga and Buhimba
KIBATI	Bujari, Mujoga, Kisheke, Mugerwa, Rwanguba, Mutaho, Bukanda, Kaguri and Buhama
MUDJA	Kalungu, Kanyati, Mukondo, Kiziba I, Kiziba II, Bugamba I, Bugamba II and Mukondo II
RUSAYU	Karambi, Rukorwe, Kalangala, Katwa, Shanguta, Kahande and Kabale-Katambi
Kibumba	<i>Commune rurale</i>
Buhumba	<i>Commune rurale</i>

The area which we today call the Bukumu chiefdom or the Nyiragongo territory was populated long before Belgian colonization. However, its current name, Bukumu (or Bakumu and Kumu), only appears later. The Bukumu chiefdom was only officially created in 1929 by colonial decree, but its history dates back to 1908 with the inauguration of the very first *mwami* (king) of the Bukumu chiefdom, Kahembe Kabungunda Paul (Tull 2005). Originally, Mwami Kahembe came from Lubutu, an area on the border between Maniema province, Walikale in North Kivu and Orientale province.

Several stories about the origins of the Bukumu chiefdom circulate. The most prominent story recounts how, in 1908, Mwami Kahembe came from Lubutu in the neighbouring Walikale territory, from an ethnic group that was referred to as Kumu. Some say that he arrived while hunting. Afterwards, he met with local communities, when Belgian colonizers had already settled there. He was one of the few persons in the region who spoke Swahili – a trade language in the region – making it possible for him to talk to Belgian colonizers. Because of his language capabilities, he gained the trust of the colonial representatives. As the latter were looking for an intermediary ‘local’ authority, he was appointed chief of the chiefdom, after which he applied the name Kumu to the newborn chiefdom, making the inhabitants from then on known as Kumu (Mathys 2014; Büscher 2011; Kniknie 2024).

Other, less recurrent stories, such as one recounted by Mwami Butsi Kahembe Isaac during our data collection, state that the history of the Bukumu chiefdom dates back to 1478 to a person called Bikumu, whom Butsi considers to be the founder and emblematic ancestor of the Bukumu dynasty, which reigned until 1503. Citing oral accounts and local traditions told to him, Butsi states that Bikumu is traditionally recognized as the founding chief of the Bukumu chiefdom, and played a crucial role in establishing the chieftaincy and structuring its authority.

The degree of truth in the stories of Kahembe’s arrival in the region we now call Bukumu while he was hunting or the Bikumu version is not entirely clear. In all likelihood, both stories serve to provide legitimacy to Kahembe’s presence in the region or the Bukumu chiefdom as such and, subsequently, also legitimize the system of indirect colonial rule it was part of. Mathys (2014)



argues that official colonial accounts of Kahembe's presence try to establish his legitimacy by portraying the Kahembe dynasty as a clan with a long-time presence in the region. In addition, to establish his legitimacy among the already present population of the area, Kahembe entered into marriage with women from villages and clans from Munigi and Kibati in an attempt to enhance his roots in local communities. He married women from Hunde, Hutu, and Tutsi backgrounds. When Kahembe was officially appointed chief of the Bukumu chiefdom in 1913, the Kumu dynasty was more or less created in the area of the present-day Nyiragongo territory. As such, the Kumu chieftaincy is not simply the historical or cultural translation of precolonial polities but at least partly a construction to enable Belgian colonial rule (Mathys 2014).

Because a large part of the chiefdom is part of Virunga National Park, the remaining 163 square kilometres is increasingly becoming crowded and, while still administratively recognized as a rural area, its spatial and infrastructural characteristics more resemble an urban agglomeration. Urbanization is one of the main developments shaping the social, economic, spatial and political landscapes of the Bukumu chiefdom.

This urbanization is largely driven by various waves of migration toward Goma. In the next section, we will explore the consequences of this urbanization and its effects on Bukumu's political economy, particularly regarding land and resource management. As early as 1954, migration waves brought people to Bukumu from several parts of the country. Many were Nande from Lubero territory in the north, along with Banyabwisha from Rutshuru, Hutu and Tutsi from Rwanda, Shi from South Kivu, and Bahavu from Idjwi and Kalehe. One respondent noticed how this influx of people from across the Kivu region influenced both the composition and the name of the chiefdom:

We used to call it the Bakumu chiefdom, but today it has become the Bukumu chiefdom. When we realized that we were made up of several tribes, the ancestors got together and said that since we had more than 200 people, from now on the chiefdom would be called Bukumu. This transformation took place in 1954.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with pastor, Nyiragongo territory, 23 August 2024. The prefix "ba-" in Swahili is used to refer to people, so "Bakumu" literally means "Kumu people". "Bukumu", on the other hand, is a more neutral term that does not refer to Kumu people only.



Whereas the migration dynamics towards the Bukumu chiefdom predate the political independence of the country, they were only reinforced afterwards. Following independence, Goma became the provincial capital, attracting people from rural areas, and population growth surged afterwards during the Rwandan genocide and the outbreak of the First Congo War in 1996. In the mid-1990s, many sought refuge in Goma, which became a safe haven amid regional conflict. These migration patterns persist today, largely driven by ongoing security issues. The resurgence of the M23 rebellion in 2022 triggered further displacement toward Goma and its surrounding areas (Kniknie 2024).

Bukumu has been particularly affected, receiving large numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs). Currently, there are more than five IDP camps in the chiefdom, with thousands finding shelter along the northern axis from Munigi and Kanyaruchinya to Kibati, and in the west in Rusayu. This influx has drastically altered Bukumu's landscape, transforming it from a predominantly rural and agricultural area into one occupied by displaced communities. These migration waves are closely tied to security crises elsewhere in the province, such as ADF activities in northern North Kivu and M23 activities in Rutshuru.

In short, the proximity of the Bukumu chiefdom to the town of Goma has had a significant impact on the movement of people in the region. This movement is driven not only by insecurity and displacement but also by Goma's status as the capital of North Kivu and a key economic hub, offering access to markets, jobs, and services. Consequently, many people are drawn to Goma or its outskirts, particularly in Nyiragongo territory. As a result, Nyiragongo's infrastructure is becoming increasingly urbanized, with asphalt roads and access to drinking water, though these services are often insufficient or of poor quality.

# 3 |

## An urbanizing environment

Urbanization is one of the most important developments taking place in Bukumu, affecting the social, political, economic and infrastructural landscape of the chiefdom. Until quite recently, the landscape of the Bukumu chieftaincy was predominantly a rural and agricultural one. In the past, people residing in the Bukumu chieftaincy lived mainly from agriculture and cattle herding. The economy of the chiefdom was largely based on banana plantations, and the cultivation of potatoes, cabbage, and other vegetables. While most of this agricultural activity consisted of self-subsistence farming, some of its produce was traded and consumed also beyond the country's borders, notably in Rwanda. These products were also used to produce the local beer known as *kasiksi* (banana beer), which was sold in Buhunde, Buhavu and Bushi. One respondent notes:

In addition to being used for the production of beer, bananas were also sold as bananas at the market, and many families earned more money from banana plantations. Culturally, bananas were a key element of social cohesion between families. In the event of a family wedding, awareness was raised in the village and each family was obliged to donate a certain number of banana bunches. All these bunches were given to the groom, and this helped him during the dowry.<sup>2</sup>

The fertile volcanic soil, particularly in the Kibumba area, made Bukumu an important centre for potato cultivation in the Kivu region. Tons of potatoes were exported to Bukavu, Goma, Rutshuru, Masisi, and Rwanda. In addition

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with youth representative, Nyiragongo territory, 17 August 2024.

to agriculture, forestry was also vital to the local economy. Trees were harvested for sale in Goma and used to produce charcoal, which was then transported back to Goma. Another key economic activity was cattle-herding in certain villages.

However, the war significantly disrupted the agricultural and livestock sectors in Bukumu. A local resident recounts:

With the arrival of Rwandan refugees, we lost cattle. The Rwandans would steal goats and cows, taking them back to Rwanda. Then, the M23 war left fields abandoned as farmers feared for their safety. Crops are either stolen by displaced people or left unharvested due to insecurity.<sup>3</sup>

The war also displaced large numbers of people, who occupied agricultural fields, transforming them into IDP sites. This displacement reduced both arable and grazing land, causing a sharp decline in agricultural productivity. Cattle-rustling became rampant, and many farmers sold off their remaining herds. Additionally, recurring volcanic eruptions in 1977, 2002, and 2021 further destroyed crops and reduced farmland. Plant diseases, such as wilt bacteria, devastated banana plantations, compounding the downturn in Bukumu's agricultural economy.

These rural-urban transformations have brought about changes in economic activity and the political economy of the chiefdom. Whereas in other areas in the Kivu region, people have turned towards mining activities to ensure their livelihoods, this is not the case in the Bukumu chiefdom, which is one of the few chiefdoms in the province with no mineral resources. The only raw materials exploited are raw construction materials, including volcanic stone, sand, gravel and wood. These materials are in high demand due to the rapid urbanization of Goma. A large sand mine in Munigi, for example, plays a critical role in supplying the building boom in Goma and other cities in the region, notably Bunia and Bukavu.

Furthermore, because of the proximity of the city and the urbanization of the southern part of the territory, there is a large pool of cheap labour at hand,

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with *groupement* chief, Nyiragongo territory, 12 August 2024.

as is the case in many other urbanizing contexts (Arn 1996; Neilson & Stubbs 2011; Kniknie 2024). Looking to exploit this pool of peri-urban surplus labour, national and foreign investors start to turn towards Goma's northern peripheries. Together with its strategic location close to the international airport of Goma, industrial activity is beginning to emerge here. For example, Lebanese entrepreneurs have constructed a large factory in Munigi for the production of mattresses, which employs 114 workers. Industrial actors are increasingly turning towards the Bukumu chiefdom for production and storage.

The different kinds of transformations – environmental, social, political, economic – have led to increased competition over land access in the Bukumu chiefdom. The transformation of agricultural land into residential land use for a growing population has prompted mounting land prices. Because of this and other reasons that are explored below, the political economy of Bukumu is geared mostly toward, and its related tensions generated mainly by, land access. This has led to a stark increase in land disputes. Below, we explore three different dynamics of land tensions in Bukumu: between inhabitants themselves, between local populations and Virunga National Park, and conflicts over the administrative status of urban and rural land.

## **Land disputes**

First, there is a high number of land disputes between inhabitants of the Bukumu chiefdom, especially in the urbanizing areas north of Goma. The urban peripheries in the south of the Bukumu chiefdom have drawn people from all over the province because of the proximity to the city of Goma and the relatively low-cost access to land compared to other parts of the city. In a context of disputed land access and land management, land conflicts are highly recurrent.

The causes for these disputes are multiple. The pressure on land access increases because of the different migration and displacement waves towards these areas. This significantly raises the price of land, especially land that is used for housing. Furthermore, there are widespread disagreements about land titles and who has the right to access land. Different authorities compete over granting land titles. Whereas customary authorities historically

took up this responsibility, Congolese state institutions and modern courts have taken over. Approximately 80% of judicial cases in Goma concern land disputes (Ferrari & Tshimbalanga 2016). Furthermore, due to long histories of Congolese state withdrawal during Mobutu's rule, many state and judicial agents are prone to corruption generally and specifically when ruling over land matters (Young & Turner 1985; Thill & Muzalia 2023). These factors have created a contested playing field for securing access to land and housing in which those with the most economic, political and social capital eventually survive.

In this field of disputed authority over land access and rising land prices, some actors have sold plots that do not belong to them, or those who do own them sell them to several people at once. One informant notes how the selling and repeated reselling of plots as a form of rent-seeking is a recurring issue:

When the real owner wants to exploit his plot of land he realizes that the plot has been sold to two or three people. Such cases are frequent. A plot of land cannot belong to two or three people. This is the cause of all these land conflicts. Another thing is that plot prices are rising all the time. So if someone had sold his plot for a thousand dollars five years ago and now finds that the same plot can cost ten thousand dollars today, what does he do? He gets around it by selling the same plot to another person and then when the owner arrives to start work on it, he finds another owner. When it's time to complain, the seller says he'll pay back the thousand dollars he paid before. And so the value of the plots accentuates the land conflicts even more.<sup>4</sup>

From 2018, this has led to a climate of mistrust that developed between inhabitants. In many cases, these land conflicts have been read as a conflict between communities, notably Kumu and Nande communities. It is too simplistic to frame these land conflicts only in terms of communitarian tensions (Kniknie 2021). What is at stake is the contestation between different kinds of authorities, obscurity concerning land titles, and the rising pressure on and competition over land access in an urbanizing environment. Still, also amongst inhabitants, the lens of communal conflict often prevails. For example, in 2021, a protest march demanding the departure of the UN's peacekeeping force, MONUSCO, rapidly transformed into a tribal-ethnic

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with youth representative, Goma, 14 August 2024.

conflict because of the tense climate. The intercommunal tensions manifest themselves mostly between the Kumu and the Nande communities, as they make up the two largest ethnic groups in the southern part of the chiefdom.

To resolve these land conflicts-turned-ethnic feuds, an intercommunal discussion platform called the *baraza intercommunautaire* (intercommunal public meeting place; the baraza has important cultural value as public forum) was created (Clark 2008). As a politician and customary chief notes:

When there's a problem of this kind, the baraza undertakes to resolve it amicably. And if the community has already been alerted and you have a problem with someone from another community, instead of trying to involve the whole community, they are advised to refer the matter directly to a member of the intercommunity Baraza, who in turn informs the chef of the *groupement*, who then starts calling all the members and people concerned to resolve the conflict peacefully and more quickly. That's how we handled the Buhene [village of Munigi *groupement*] problem, which was likened to a tribal war, because Kumu were overheated with headlines, and the Nande were also overheated, but when the Baraza met, one of the Nande leaders gave a speech of peace, calling for restraint from the whole community. A Kumu leader, a Hunde, a Tutsi, a Hutu, they all delivered the same messages.<sup>5</sup>

## **Contestation around Virunga National Park**

Second, there is conflict over the exact boundaries of Virunga National Park. This conflict dates back to the park's being recognized as a World Heritage site in 1925. As already noted, the park occupies a large part of the Bukumu chiefdom, covering 170 square kilometres out of a total area of 333 square kilometres. When the park was created, the land of the local communities was expropriated by the Belgians. In return, the park was supposed to initiate development projects such as building schools, roads, markets and many others. Without a written contract, they ceded their land, and years later, no projects had been carried out by park authorities, who served under the jurisdiction of the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN). This colonial history, and its contemporary effects and continuities, continues to cause conflicts today (Marijnen 2022). A *groupement* chief, explains:

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with politician and customary chief, Nyiragongo territory, 8 August 2024.

The ICCN deceived our grandparents by swindling them. They told them they were taking their land, saying they would build roads, schools, they would have access to water and electricity. Since they expropriated these lands where our grandparents farmed, no development projects have been carried out. That was during the Belgian era, when blacks feared whites, and whites tortured anyone who refused to accept that their property belonged to them. Those who tried to enter the park were hunted down and even killed. This explains the conflict between the Kumu communities and ICCN. Today, to exact their revenge, some members of the communities are entering the park to grow crops. The trees on the Rusayu side were destroyed by Rwandan refugees<sup>6</sup>

Conflicts between park guards and communities living next to the park continue. At times, these conflicts have turned violent, not in the least due to the militarization of conservation by Virunga National Park. Park management and guards use militarized force to enforce the (often disputed) borders of the park and prevent people from entering the protected area (Marijnen 2017; Hochleithner 2017). In the areas bordering the park in the chiefdom, these conflicts have great impact on livelihoods and subsequently generate political frustrations over the lack of access to these livelihoods.

## **The expansion of the city of Goma**

Lastly, there is the question of how to integrate the urbanizing areas of the Bukumu chiefdom in the city of Goma – or rather the question of whether that is feasible at all. Since Goma’s demographic explosion, the need for expansion has grown. When the Bukumu chiefdom was created, it was comprised of eight *groupements*: Munigi, Mudja, Rusayo, Buvira, Kibati, Kibumba, Buhumba, and the since disappeared Byahi *groupement*. In 1988, the city of Goma was officially created – its administrative status was that of a *centre extra-coutumier* before – and the Byahi *groupement* became the present-day city of Goma. Consequently, all customary lands were ceded to the city of Goma. Furthermore, at the time of the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD) rebel rule from 1998 to 2003, a large part of Munigi, which is now known as the Majengo district, and parts of Mudja and Rusayu were annexed to the city of Goma.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with *groupement* chief, Nyiragongo territory, 12 August 2024.



Similarly, the Kibumba and Buhumba *groupements* were transformed into *communes rurales* in 2006. Created on 11 July 2006 by presidential decree, these rural communes were established to meet local management and development needs in a strategic region. The aim of creating Kibumba and Buhumba as a rural commune was to improve local administration, facilitate public services and support community development. This commune is still geographically located in the Bukumu chiefdom, but is no longer under its management.

To understand why this is the case and how this relates to political tensions, a brief overview of the different administrative status land takes on in Congo is necessary. During Belgian colonial rule (1885–1960), an administrative distinction was made between urban and rural land. Aware of the potential value and the power of property of urban land, the Belgian colonial system created two separate systems of land tenure through a 1893 land decree (Thill & Muzalia 2023; de Saint Moulin 1974). Urban land was to be governed through modern colonial law and state systems while rural land management was a prerogative of customary law and leaders as a form of indirect rule (Mamdani 1996). This legal duality continued to exist after independence and still exists today, having an important impact on land management and disputes in Bukumu (Kniknie 2024).

In this context, some of Goma’s urban authorities have exercised their authority in the chiefdom, for example by intervening in land disputes. A civil society actor pointed out that up until two or three years ago, when the land registry for the Nyiragongo territory was developed, it was one of Goma’s two urban communes, named Karisimbi, that issued land titles. As a result, these documents issued by the Karisimbi commune make it seem as though the plot is not located in Nyiragongo but rather in the city of Goma. He notes:

[U]p until now, the Bukumu chiefdom’s boundaries have been recognized by the presidential order creating the city of Goma, which was signed by President Mobutu, but there are no other documents authorizing the expansion of the city of Goma...Some of the Bukumu cases are now managed by the city of Goma, and even the urban authorities don’t have a proper grasp of their scope, so they come all the way here. Others do it intentionally. And the customary chiefs and interim authorities have contributed a great deal to this problem, because they are

afraid of being deposed. The chiefdom has only 163 square kilometres, but with the invasion of the city of Goma, the chiefdom will remain with what surface area now? If the chiefdom is annexed to the city of Goma, we'll lose our identity, even though every tribe has its own identity.<sup>7</sup>

The annexation of parts of the Bukumu chiefdom to the city of Goma continues to be a highly contested topic on the political agenda. Although it seems to have been abandoned for now, the annexation is contested by most of the Bukumu customary authorities. For them, annexing Bukumu to the city of Goma is a way of erasing Bukumu's history, customs, and, not least, their customary power over land.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with civil society actor, Nyiragongo territory.

## A border place

Located right on the border with Rwanda, the Bukumu chiefdom is in many ways a border place, not least in terms of social identity and economy (Vlassenroot & Büscher 2013). It is commonly understood that Kumu are the “autochthonous” people of the chiefdom. However, as already hinted at above, the political history of Kumu and the label “autochthonous” are rather disputed. The appointment of Mwami Kahembe as the chief of all Kumu in this area was a colonial intervention, which continues to shape contestation around identity today.

For example, the language of Kikumumu, which is spoken by the Kumu population of Nyiragongo territory, is a mixture of Kihunde, which is the language spoken in the Buhunde chiefdom in Masisi territory, and Kinyarwanda. This language is different from Kikumumu, which is spoken in Lubutu (Walikale), where Mwami Kahembe originally came from. One respondent said that there is no existing link between Kumu of Nyiragongo and Walikale. The ethnonym “Kumu” was applied to the inhabitants present in this area when Kahembe was installed by the Belgian colonial authorities and when the border between Rwanda and Congo was drawn. The presence of people in the region is long standing, but their designation as Kumu is not, dating back only to the early 20th century. The creation of the Kumu label has influenced social and ethnic identities in the chiefdom, not least in terms of the question of to whom customary authority belongs. Furthermore, decades of armed conflict and regional tensions with neighbouring Rwanda have played into this, often creating stark social and ethnic divisions.

## Disputed customary power

The customary power in the chiefdom has been in the hands of the Kahembe family since the creation of this chiefdom. However, two family lineages, the Butsitsi and the Bigaruka, are competing for power. Today, after decades of succession conflicts, power is in the hands of the Lebon Bazima Bakungu, who belongs to the Bigaruka lineage. His power was confirmed in July 2022 by a commission ruling over customary matters and by General Constant Ndima, the military governor in the context of the state of siege (Bahogwerhe 2022).

Mwami Kahembe had two sons, firstborn Bigaruka and his younger brother Butsitsi. Despite the custom that the eldest son inherits the throne, Butsitsi, who was born to a Tutsi woman, became *mwami* in the early 1960s, against customary regulations. Different accounts of this succession exist. Some respondents suggested that Kahembe chose Butsitsi due to Bigaruka's alleged misconduct, while others maintained that Bigaruka, as the firstborn, was the rightful heir. After Butsitsi's death in 1962, Bigaruka ruled for over two decades, after which he passed on authority to his son Bakungu, who died in a suspicious car accident. Power then shifted back to the Butsitsi side of the family during the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre (AFDL) and RCD rebellions, supported by Rwandan influence, with Godefroid Butsitsi and later Jean-Bosco Butsitsi taking power. Jean-Bosco Butsitsi was removed from power in 2016, reportedly losing the backing of the provincial governor, who favoured the Bigaruka family.

During the armed conflict of the 1990s and afterwards, (geo)political alliances played a crucial role in shaping these power struggles, as demonstrated by Jean-Bosco Butsitsi's prolonged rule being supported by the RCD and Rwandan interests. As he belonged to the Tutsi line of the family, Rwandan proxy armed groups considered an alliance with him a safe bet (Kniknie 2024; Tull 2005). His removal from power reflects changing political strategies, notably Governor Paluku's preference for Bakungu, which aligned with broader anti-Rwandophone sentiment during Paluku's rule. As such, more recent political developments related to armed conflict and ethnic tensions have greatly influenced the process of removing and selecting the holder

of the Bukumu chieftaincy, with regional interests and alliances playing a significant role in this border area.

This conflict affects not only the chiefdom itself, but also the *groupements* that make up the chiefdom. Unlike other chiefdoms, where the heads of the *groupements* generally have been related to the ruling family, the Bukumu chiefdom was created as a composition of existing customary entities. When Kahembe arrived and was put into power, he simply brought the entities together under one chiefdom. Before he arrived, each entity had its own customary leader who held control over land and custom. The chief was largely excluded from internal dynamics in these areas and often lacked the moral and cultural legitimacy to intervene in internal power struggles in smaller customary entities.

This has, for example, been the case in the most southern *groupement* of the chiefdom, Munigi. In 2021, a long-standing succession conflict between two families turned violent when a member of the Kifende family proclaimed himself as the rightful chief of the *groupement*. Guarded by armed men, he occupied an important place of customary authority. Within days, he was killed when police and Congolese army forces intervened (Murhabazi 2021). Afterwards, Tuishi Muhire Kakoti Olivier was ousted as head of the *groupement* in favour of Mutumishi Amini Kifende by decision of the North Kivu provincial government (Kombi 2022). Nearly two years later, a judge, through the intervention of the Ministry of the Interior, Security and Customary Affairs, ruled in favour of Tuishi Muhire Kakoti Olivier, who returned as customary chief of the *groupement* (La Fortune RDC 2024). The lack of a chief at the level of the chiefdom who could intervene in such matters has made this succession conflict drag on for several years.

## **A border economy**

The location of the Bukumu chiefdom right on the border with Rwanda has significant consequences for its political economy as well. The border between Rwanda and Congo – drawn by colonial authorities – was not a fundamental marker of social or political difference before colonization (Mathys 2014). Also, after independence, relations between Rwanda and Congo in the region were

relatively peaceful, marked by continuous cross-border trade. However, the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the ensuing series of armed conflicts from 1996, involving Rwandan proxies, strained these relations. One respondent notes:

At first, under President Habyarimana as Rwandan President and Mobutu as President of Congo, then Zaire, we lived as one people. We could cross anywhere without any controls. We crossed either where there was a border or where there wasn't one. There were just boundaries to show that here is Rwanda and here is Zaire, but there were no problems between us Zairians and Rwandans. We could arrive in Rwanda and even spend the night there for days and months on end without being checked, only this conflict arose when President Paul Kagame took power with the outbreak of the genocide. It was then that relations began to deteriorate.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these tensions, the importance of cross-border connections remains. The dynamics described in the previous section – urbanization, the reduction of agricultural land due to volcanic eruptions and population displacement – have led to the rise of the importance of small commerce in creating livelihoods. This kind of small-scale trade has become the main activity for the inhabitants of the chiefdom, is often the only source of income, and is deeply embedded in the political economy. In many cases, this small-scale trade is also deeply interwoven with cross-border dynamics and migration. As one customary leader notes:

Today, if you even look at the types of construction here in Bukumu, you'll see that he manages to build a house on his plot and in front of it he builds stores, especially if it's on the side of the road. It's a policy that's really gaining ground everywhere. Some people go to Rwanda, Uganda and even Butembo to buy items that they stock in their stores. That's what's gaining ground today. They even buy flour, tomatoes, onions, spices and other items, which people on the avenue buy in the morning, noon and night.<sup>9</sup>

As such, the geographical location of the Bukumu chiefdom influences much of the outlook of its political economy. Family and kin ties between Nande people living in Bukumu and their communities of origin in the northern part of the province play a large role in this. Its location on the road between Goma,

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with pastor, Nyiragongo territory, 23 August 2024

<sup>9</sup> Interview with politician and customary chief, Nyiragongo territory, 8 August 2024.

the provincial capital, and the second and third largest cities of Butembo and Beni in the north makes it an important point of passage. Furthermore, the strategic location on the border with Rwanda turns it into an important trading hub. Trade continues to take place alongside the dozen kilometres of border with Rwanda, despite the recurring armed conflicts between the two states. At least a part of this trade consists of illegal border trafficking and happens along the entire border of the Bukumu chiefdom, often at night.

Although different security services – police, army, and customs on both sides – are responsible for guarding the border, illegal crossings occur at several border posts because the security services take bribes in exchange for passage, for example, small-scale traders. As such, these borders are prone to infiltration from both sides. As a customary chief described in an interview:

Our borders have been very complicated ever since the wars of aggression [*sic*] started a long time ago, and it seems that there are no soldiers on our borders, and they're not secure. Just realize that today, two of our groupements are under rebel control, namely Kibumba and Kihumba. Not long ago, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, Security, Decentralization and Customary Affairs went to border terminal number 13 in the Buvira *groupement*. At this border terminal, products easily cross the Congo into Rwanda and vice-versa, escaping the control of security services and officials. Unfortunately, in Nyiragongo territory, the borders are open to everyone. Our military and security services, who should be guarding the border, are not doing so. The FARDC soldiers and security services are there, but in small numbers. The infiltrations that we talk about every day, that Rwanda is attacking us, I'd say that's where everything is played out, even in terms of the military strategies of war.<sup>10</sup>

## Rising insecurity

More recently, the Bukumu chiefdom has been severely affected by the M23 rebellion. Several of the *groupements* are occupied by M23, which has severely intensified internal displacement within the chiefdom. As people are both fleeing and settling, the chiefdom is affected in many ways. One local administrator noted:

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with politician and customary chief, Nyiragongo territory, 8 August 2024.



Farmers used to go as far as Kibumba and Buhumba to grow potatoes, but now they no longer go there because they fear for their safety. The rebels occupy this whole area. There's nothing left to sow in the community. At the beginning, we used to sow beans, maize, sweet potatoes and potatoes, but it's either the Wazalendo or the displaced people who harvest for us. Even all the trees in Rusayu are cut down to build shelters or for firewood.<sup>11</sup>

Besides the M23 occupation, the increased presence of so-called Wazalendo combatants causes high levels of insecurity. Wazalendo is the name for a variety of non-FARDC armed units that claim to be fighting M23 in the Kivu region. On the southern side of the front, in Kibati, Wazalendo groups claim to defend their country against M23 next to FARDC units. While officially claiming to defend the local population, Wazalendo units pose a security threat to civilians as well.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with administrative authority, Nyiragongo territory, 12 August 2024.

The Bukumu chiefdom's political landscape is profoundly shaped by its geographical border position, historical dynamics, and the complexities of customary power. In recent years, urbanization has emerged as one of the most significant developments affecting Bukumu's social, political, economic, and infrastructural landscape. Traditionally a rural region, Bukumu's economy relied heavily on agriculture, particularly banana and potato cultivation, which was vital for local consumption and trade. However, war, insecurity and displacement have severely disrupted these sectors, leading to a decline in agricultural productivity. As agricultural lands were transformed into sites for internally displaced persons, competition for land intensified, resulting in increased land disputes.

Additionally, the urbanizing environment has transformed economic activities within the chiefdom. With Goma's proximity driving demand for building materials, local raw materials such as volcanic stone and sand are now in high demand. Industrial activities are slowly emerging, creating a new economic landscape but also heightening competition over land access. These dynamics have sparked numerous land disputes among inhabitants, with rising prices and conflicts over land titles complicating the situation.

Moreover, the political economy of Bukumu is marked by tensions related to Virunga National Park, whose boundaries were established during colonial times. Local communities feel marginalized and deprived of their livelihoods due to the park's militarized conservation efforts. Additionally, the annexation of parts of the Bukumu chiefdom to Goma has further complicated local

governance, with urban authorities encroaching on customary land rights and leading to a struggle for identity and control over ancestral lands.

Urbanization, population displacement, and environmental challenges such as volcanic activity have further accelerated the shift toward small-scale commerce as a primary livelihood strategy. Bukumu's position along key routes, connecting Goma to northern cities such as Butembo and the Rwandan border, reinforces its role as a commercial hub. As a border economy, Bukumu's proximity to Rwanda has significantly influenced its political and economic fabric, with cross-border trade and migration remaining crucial despite intermittent tensions and armed conflict. This trade, often informal and illegal, reflects the porous nature of borders imposed by colonial powers. The intertwined nature of trade, corruption, and conflict highlights the fragility of local economies in regions marked by violence and geopolitical rivalries.

At the same time, the power struggles within Bukumu's customary leadership have compounded the chiefdom's instability. The competition between the Butsisi and Bigaruka lineages for control of the chiefdom, with shifting allegiances to external actors, underscores the entanglement of local governance with broader regional politics. Rwanda's historical influence, particularly during the AFDL and RCD periods, and the subsequent backlash against Rwandophone interests, exemplifies the ongoing external pressures that shape Bukumu chiefdom. These succession disputes have not only affected the chiefdom itself but also destabilized the *groupements* under its authority. The inability of the chiefdom to intervene in conflicts within its subentities further demonstrates the limits of customary authority in a region marked by both internal divisions and external pressures.

In sum, the Bukumu chiefdom exemplifies the broader struggles facing border regions in the eastern DRC, where the legacies of colonialism, ethnic divisions, regional geopolitics and conflict continue to shape local governance and economic survival.

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