

Rwanda, The Epicentre of the Great Lakes Conflict System

Frank Rusagara¹

¹ Rwanda High Commission, Defence Affairs, London, UK

frank@ambarwanda.org.uk

As the events leading up to the 1994 Rwanda genocide were unfolding, one of the biggest misunderstandings in the region was that this was merely an internal and perennial Rwandan conflict. The region, therefore, was caught flatfooted as the presumed internal Rwandan “ethnic” conflict spilled over and engulfed the entire Great Lakes. The price of these assumptions is still being paid today.

Great Lakes scholars in conflict management acknowledge that a country must, as a rule, have a necessary confluence with its neighbours, together forming a regional entity in a complementary system. A system in this case is defined as a set of patterned interactions, also described as having both ‘a rhyme and a reason.’ From this, conflict in a regional system can be explained, tracing its course to an epicentre from which the conflict finds its root.

In the case of the Great Lakes, the epicentre of its conflict system can be traced to Rwanda, whose connections with her neighbours is historical, cultural and linguistic among Kinyarwanda and Kirundi speakers found within all the countries in the region. Though Rwanda has a population of just over 10 million, as a linguistic and cultural group, the Kinyarwanda/Kirundi speakers are kith and kin with the same social structures, and are estimated to number well over 25 million in the Great Lakes Region.

The paper will demonstrate the regional connections, their history and Rwanda’s place in the ongoing conflict in the region that dates back to the Belgian colonial rule. The paper will argue that Rwanda’s destiny depends on its ensuring regional stability, given the volatile historical, cultural and linguistic ties in all the countries of the Great Lakes.