

Survival by Loss of Identity: The Power of Names among Burundian Refugees in Tanzania

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Abstract

We investigate Burundian refugee names in Tanzania. The first name, in Kirundi (language of Burundi), reflects a person's future or the parents' life circumstances. Later, Burundians are given a French Christian name. The original name becomes the surname. Both names identify one as Burundian, supporting the idea that names are keys to identity maintenance (Alia 2007). We classify the 1972 Burundian refugees into two categories. Camp refugees stay inside the camps. Returning to Burundi defines their lives. Keeping their Burundian names allows visibility and unity, to remain a people (Malkki 1995). Meanwhile, town refugees manage to leave the camps, becoming invisible within Tanzanian society. For them, changing one's name eases challenges/barriers, while disconnecting one from his/her past. It is common to change the Christian name to a Muslim name, leaving the surname. If the surname is too noticeable, the individual may find a Burundian name that passes for a Tanzanian name. This is a break with the individual's identity as the name presented by the parents must be abandoned. We conclude that if there is a need to change the name, the Christian name is given up first, then the surname, since the latter defines the individual as truly Burundian.

0. Introduction

This paper examines name change among Burundian "Town" refugees (Malkki 1995; Ntahirageza and Duchaj 2008) in Tanzania as well as the implications of this change at the individual and social level.

Burundi is a country in Central Africa, south of Rwanda and west of Tanzania (see Figure 1 – Map of Africa). The two main languages spoken in Burundi are Kirundi, a Bantu language, and French (from Belgian colonial rule).

I. A. Background – Why Burundian refugees are in Tanzania

In 1972, a mass slaughter of Hutus occurred in Burundi. Three hundred thousand citizens, almost entirely Hutu, are reported to have fled into countries neighboring Burundi, especially Tanzania. Later, about 40,000 refugees were repatriated to Burundi in anticipation of the 1993 elections. Nearly 240,000 stayed behind in neighboring lands. Another mass exodus of over 400,000 Hutu refugees followed the October 1993 crisis. While a large number of refugees subsequently returned, a steady outflow of refugees predominantly from the south of Burundi continues up to the present day. There are now about 470,000 Burundian refugees in Tanzania, which represents more than 7 % of the Burundian population.

(See Figure 2 – The troubled Great Lakes Region)

(See Figure 3 – Refugee Migration Map.)

I. B. Background – Native Burundian Names

Traditional Burundian society does not use family names. Within weeks after children are born, they are given names such as *Ndihokubwayo* ('*I exist thanks to God*') that have meaning and significance for their future. Later, when children are baptized, they are also given Christian, usually French, names. Those with one name tend to be looked down upon and referred to as *abapagani* 'pagans'. Christian names have inherent prestige. At the addition of the Christian names, the original names of the children would become their surnames. The Kirundi and Christian names identify these individuals as Burundians and as primarily civilized and secondarily Christian/religious. Rarely does a Burundian in Burundi carry a Swahili/Muslim name (a few exceptions exist for converted Muslims). Therefore, Burundian refugees who carry Swahili/Muslim names acquired them in Tanzania.

I.C. Background – Two Groups of Burundian Refugees

The Burundian refugees who fled genocide are unique. In a previous paper, we classified the refugees into two major categories.

- (1) The **camp refugees** stay inside the camps and have to have a Leave Pass to enter and exit; these Burundians hope to return to Burundi one day.
- (2) The **town refugees** manage to get out of the camps so as to become invisible and not be discriminated against by Tanzanian society. For this group, changing one's name may ease some of the transitional challenges/barriers, while disconnecting the individual from his/her past.

II. Data

II. A. Example Names – Camp Refugees

The table below contains the names of refugees in the Ngara Camp in Tanzania. Of the fourteen subjects listed, all but one retain the French first names typical of Burundians of this generation. More significantly, all of these subjects retain the meaningful Kirundi (Burundian) last name/surname given to them by their parents. This reflects the identification with Burundian society and a conviction that it is to this society that they will return.

Sample names of Refugees from Ngara Camp, Tanzania

Source: IRIN News, <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=57695>

First Name	Language	Meaning	Last Name	Language	Meaning
1. Louis	French	_____	Ndaruseheye	Kirundi	<i>I am bringing [the baby] for it [death]</i>
2. Chantal	French	_____	Nizigiyimana	Kirundi	<i>I hope in God</i>
3. Sabine	French	_____	Nshimirimana	Kirundi	<i>I thank God</i>
4. Fidele	French	_____	Manirambona	Kirundi	<i>God watches over me</i>
5. François	French	_____	Ndikubwayo	Kirundi	<i>I am alive thanks to God</i>
6. Athanase	French	_____	Barutwanayo	Kirundi	<i>He is bigger than them [people]</i>
7. Pierre	French	_____	Sabimbona	Kirundi	<i>I ask the One [God] who sees me</i>
8. Tereza	Borrowed from French	_____	Bucumi	Kirundi	<i>The tenth child in the family</i>

9. Louis	French		Ndaruseheye	Kirundi	<i>I am delivering for it [death]</i>
10. Chantal	French		Nizigiyimana	Kirundi	
11. Maria Jeannette	French		Mpawenimana	Kirundi	<i>I was awarded by God</i>
12. Nestor			Havugukuri	Kirundi	<i>It is truth that speaks</i>
13. Ernest			Habakana	Kirundi	<i>A small child lives there</i>
14. Oseki*	Swahili	_____	Nsengiyumva	Kirundi	<i>I pray the One [God] who hears me</i>

*Counterexample, due to school enrollment

Table II. A. Camp refugees retain their names

II.B. Example Names – Town Refugees

The following table contains examples of names of refugees originally from the Kinasi camp in Tanzania but now living outside of it. The subjects shown, like those in the previous section, are all from the generation containing two names, which falls between a one-name generation and a three-name generation (Ntahirageza and Duchaj; in progress). Among these refugees, thirteen of eighteen carry English or Swahili first names, atypical of Burundian citizens. However, the desire for invisibility is shown more significantly in the former camp residents who now exhibit Swahili *surnames*. This break with family and cultural tradition is a more difficult one to make, illustrating the extent to which these refugees will disguise their origins in order to survive in Tanzanian society.

Sample names originally from The Kinasi camp

(source: http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/burundi_42062.html)

First Name	Language	Meaning	Last Name	Language	Meaning
1. Zena	Swahili		Niyogushima	Kirundi	<i>God should be thanked</i>
2. Frank /fræŋk/	English	_____	Havyarimana	Kirundi	<i>It is God who gives birth</i>
3. Varieta	English (?)	_____	Ninkiza	Kirundi	<i>It is God who cures me / provides wealth to me</i>
4. Schola	English (?)	_____	Bayubahe	Kirundi	<i>Let them respect God</i>
5. Feliki	Swahili	_____	Kabura	Kirundi	<i>The sixth child</i>
6. Sudi	Swahili	_____	Manirakiza	Kirundi	<i>God cures/God provides wealth</i>
7. Saidi	Swahili	_____	Itangishaka	Kirundi	<i>He [God] gives when he wants to</i>
8. Shabani	Swahili	_____	Mvuyekure	Kirundi	<i>I come from far (implies suffering)</i>
9. Ali	Swahili	_____	Ndikumana	Kirundi	<i>I am alive thanks to God</i>
10. Djumatanu	Swahili	_____	Simuyobewe	Kirundi	<i>I know him/her</i>
11. Jeannette	French	_____	Nsengiyumva	Kirundi	<i>I pray to One [God] who listens</i>
12. Wilfred	English	_____	Hekima ya Mungu	Swahili	<i>God's blessing and guidance</i>
13. Hockton	English	_____	Wema wa Mungu	Swahili	<i>God's goodness</i>
14. Sheta	Swahili	_____	Upenda	Swahili	<i>Loving</i>

15. Asha	Swahili		Mpondeka	Swahili	_____
16. Batholomeo	Borrowed from French/English		Hezroni	Swahili	_____
17. Nicholas	French/English		Kalamia	Swahili	_____
18. Agnes			Oswald	French/English	_____

Table II.A. Retention of Kirundi names

III. Results and Discussion

For the **camp refugees**, the original Burundian name, both first and last name, is usually kept. A rare exception exists in the case of some boys who are sent to school. For refugees in the camps, there is neither a need nor desire to change one's name.

For the **town refugees**, a change of name may be necessary to disappear unnoticed into Tanzanian society.

If there is a partial change to the name, the Christian name only is given up. In the case of females among the town refugees, it is not necessary to change both names as women are not expected to be in public life.

IV. (Re)construction of Identity

Le Page's (1997) Acts of Identity Hypothesis states that individuals model their speech/behavior on those with whom they wish to be identified at certain times, as well as to distinguish themselves from others. They are more or less successful in this modeling according to select constraints, such as the access they have to the group they wish to be associated with and their ability to decipher what the other group is doing. Although this theory generally applies to speech (usually dialect or code), we can apply it in this study to how one names oneself. A name is a powerful symbol of identity, perhaps the most powerful. However, when necessity dictates, refugees are willing to replace them for survival purposes. For the town refugees, the Burundian name becomes a handicap they must rid themselves of. Individuals in refugee situations such as this must (re)construct their identity according to the goals they possess:

- (1) Do I wish to return to my society? Do I wish to retain my original identity completely?
- (2) Do I wish to become "invisible" in my new surroundings, surrendering completely my original identity?

V. Invisibility and Survival Strategy, not Acculturation

It is particularly important to realize that the Town Refugees do not wish to become Tanzanian or attain Tanzanian citizenship. One such subject said:

"I do not like the name 'refugee,' particularly here in town. That is why I have even changed my name. If you ask for me by my Christian name (Albert) here, they will say that they do not know him. For now, my name is Hamisi. This name, I like it, but that is not to say that I am a Muslim; it is only a fashion of living. I go to mosque often. If I do not go, it might be known that I am a liar. To be a citizen... I would like to be a citizen in my country [not here],

but I simply hide myself as a means of living.” His friend added, “He does not want to be a citizen of here, but hides as a citizen to protect himself.” (Malkki 1995)

This orientation towards disappearing into Tanzanian daily life by the Town Refugees can be seen as an individual pursuit as opposed to an orientation towards the collective group by Camp Refugees. Malkki (1995:169) states:

“These aspects of identity among the town refugees stood in vivid contrast to the historicity and collectivization of identity in Mishamo [refugee camp]. Among the camp refugees, identity was drawn from an essentialized, collective unit, a people, and personal identity was scarcely separable from this collective one. Operating as a fundamentally oppositional construct, it entailed judgments of good and evil. In Kigoma [town], the play of identities operated on a more individual basis and was thought of as responding to the practical needs of the immediate, lived present.”

VI. To return or to naturalize, that is the question

In 2007, the Government of Tanzania indicated its intention to close the Old Settlements of the so-called 1972 Burundian refugees. Tanzanian president Jakaya Kikwete has recently announced that all three settlements established in western Tanzania for Burundian exiles, Ulyankulu, Katumba and Mishamo, will close by 2010. The retention of the Burundian name will be valuable during the process of social reintegration. About 20% of these refugees opted to repatriate to Burundi. The vast majority of these refugees had retained their Burundian names (some of these are listed in table II. B). These names will be valuable during social reintegration.

VII. Conclusion

The Burundian town refugees in Tanzania live in a situation in which they (particularly males) may have the opportunity to disguise themselves as Tanzanian in order to improve their situation. For these individuals, a name change may be one of the best ways to become invisible and therefore achieve their goals. At the individual level, however, they are still Burundians; the name change does not imply acculturation.

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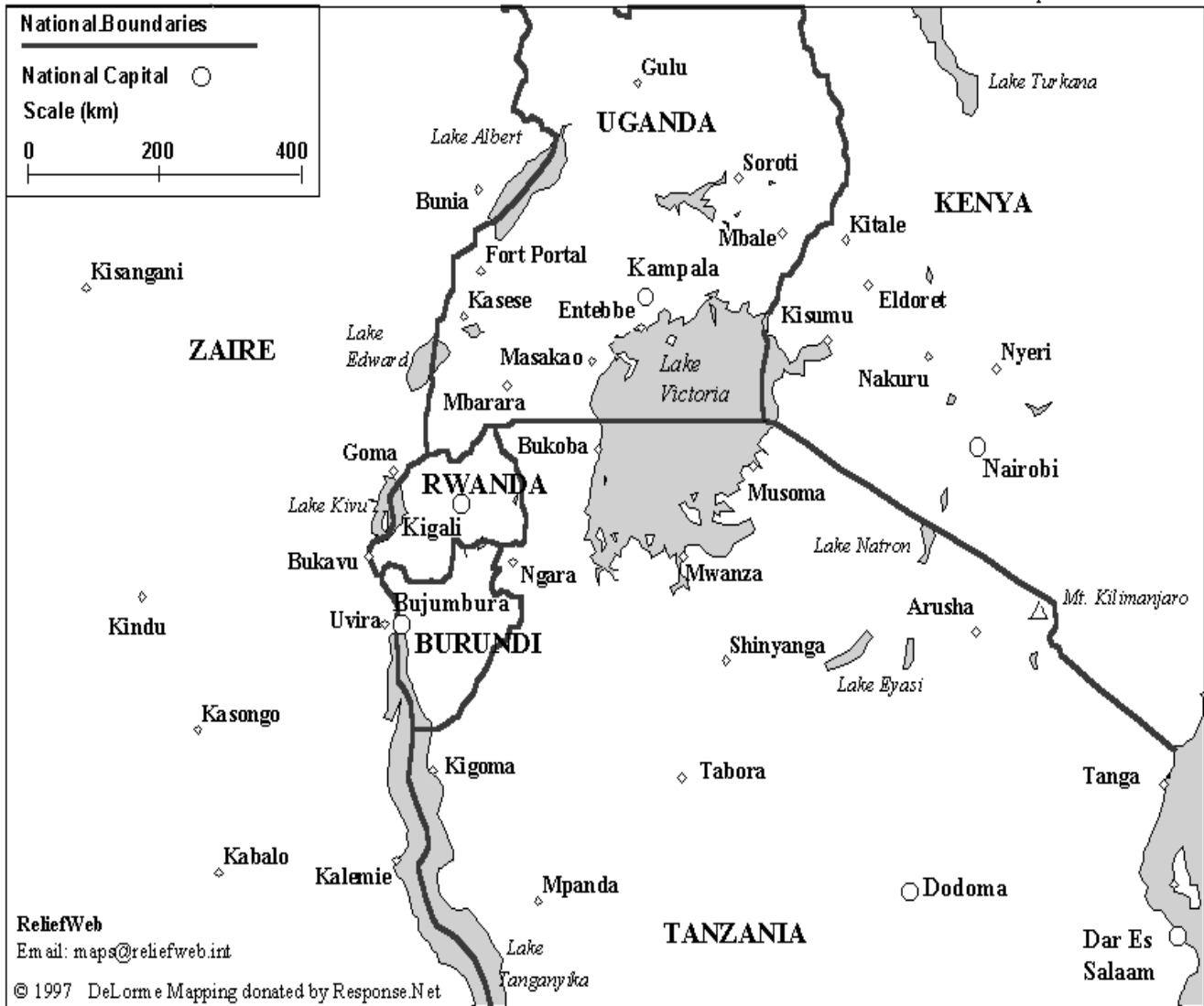
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Figure 1

The Great Lakes Region

Last updated 19 Nov 1997

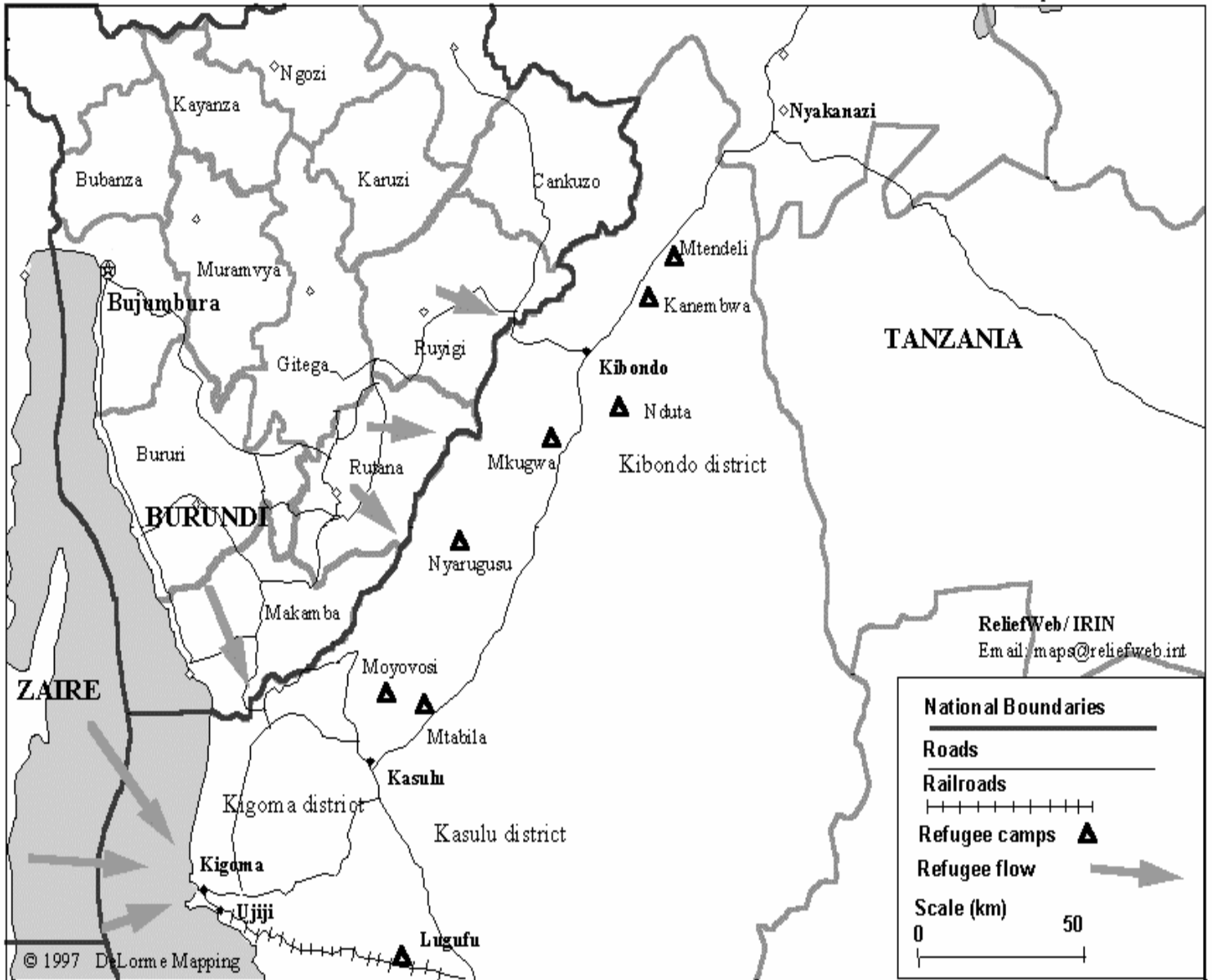


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Figure 2

Kigoma region: refugees

Last updated: 21 Mar 1997



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Figure 3.