

**ANGRY YOUNG MEN IN CAMPS:
GENDER, AGE AND CLASS RELATIONS AMONG BURUNDIAN
REFUGEES IN TANZANIA**

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Introduction

This paper sets out to explore how life in a refugee camp affects gender, age, and class relations among Burundian refugees in Tanzania. More specifically, it focuses on how the relief operation's policy of equality challenges older hierarchies of authority. Through an analysis of refugees' representations of gender relations, relations between generations, and relations between peasants and 'big men', it is shown that there is a general feeling of social decay in the camp. In this situation young men are particularly challenged, as they are at a stage in life where they ought to be finding their place in society as fathers, husbands, protectors, and providers--in short, as men. However, I also show that many of the young, adult men use the opportunity to find other ways to survive, both materially and in terms of identity creation.

It is the intention of this paper to explore what happens to a community and its entrenched social hierarchies, norms, and ideologies when it is so abruptly transferred and put into such an alien setting. I argue that while all refugees find themselves in a kind of limbo, it is the young men that have unique opportunities to trespass into new roles, leaving older generations behind. I further argue that gender ideals do not change significantly, and that the young men are seeking to recuperate the masculinity that they perceive to have lost in the camp.

The paper is based on more than a year's fieldwork in Lukole Refugee Camp in North Western Tanzania. At the time of fieldwork, 1997-98, around 100,000 Burundian Hutu refugees lived in Lukole. They fled Burundi in 1993 and through varied ways ended up in Lukole, where they have limited mobility and limited possibilities of activity. They all depend on the rations from UNHCR.

Equality and hierarchy

In the camp, food and other resources are distributed on the basis of all people being equal and having equal rights. This policy of equality is further promoted by special programmes for women and other disadvantaged groups. However, this ideology is not directly compatible with the ideologies that the refugees brought with them. These ideologies were based very much on hierarchic relations: between the sexes, between generations, and between 'big men' and others. Relations that are built on authority and respect. What happens to the old structures of authority? How does this effect gender relations? How do perceptions of an 'ideal Hutu woman' and an 'ideal Hutu man' change? How are these transformations interpreted and represented by the refugees? These are some of the questions that I set out to explore in this paper. Importantly, the rations in fact come from the World Food Programme (WFP), and are distributed by an NGO but the refugees refer merely to UNHCR. Furthermore, it is not my intention to criticise UNHCR's policy of equality. I merely state it as a factor that influenced refugees' room to maneuver, as well as their coping strategies.

I focus on young men in the camp because I was surprised to find a significant number of young men holding prominent positions that I had not expected (as street leaders, NGO workers, political leaders, and successful businessmen). Originally, I had imagined that young men, in spite of not classifying as 'vulnerable,' would be having great problems finding a sense of purpose in the camp, as they would no longer be able to provide for and protect a family, for instance. I was therefore rather surprised at first to find these young men appear to have conquered territory from an older generation that traditionally held the ultimate authority. How does one explain this shift of power and the apparent 'success' of these young men? Are they merely strategies for gaining material advantages in the camp, or are there other issues involved? Can one, for instance, imagine that these young men are not only taking advantage of the transitional situation that they are in, but are also attempting to make some sense and find an own identity in the camp where old values are challenged by the administration of the camp? In other words, is there a link between young men's feeling of loss and their (successful) attempts to find an identity as men and regain a position in society?

In order to answer some of these many questions it is necessary to explore how refugees in Lukole interpret and represent life in the camp. How do they represent their hopes and frustrations? Who do they blame for their predicaments? I also take a closer look at the coping strategies of successful young men in Lukole, and relate this to shifts in power relations between both the sexes and generations. Does their new position open up for a new ideology of gender, or is the old one reinforced in the camp where, ironically, young men get the greatest advantage of UNHCR and NGOs in the camp?

‘UNHCR is a better husband’

Doing fieldwork in a refugee camp can be a daunting task. The Hutu refugees in Tanzania are naturally suspicious towards any outsider asking questions. However, this reluctance and suspicion depends on the subject of the interview— politics, for instance, is a very delicate issue. When the discussion touched on gender relations, on the other hand, everyone, young and old, male and female, joined in with great enthusiasm. Often, heated discussions between men and women would occur.

A recurring subject would be when men lamented that the women no longer respect them. The reason allegedly being that the men no longer can provide for their wives and children. It is the UNHCR - or merely the *wazungu* (white people) - that provides food, medicine and plastic sheeting for building *blindes* (huts). UNHCR provides the same amount to men, women and children alike. 'The UNHCR is a better husband' the women say, according to the men at least.

Through interviews with UNHCR and NGO staff, by attending meetings between UNHCR, implementing NGOs and Tanzanian authorities, and by reading UNHCR publications of various kinds, I found that an ideology of equality was actively being promoted in the camp— with gender equality being specifically emphasized. I will not criticize this policy here, merely state that gender equality was an explicit aim of the relief operation. And, as we will see, promoting gender equality does not automatically imply that anything like equality between the sexes has been achieved, whatever the refugee men may say.

Apart from all refugees theoretically being equal in terms of right to food, shelter, protection, democratic influence, etc., UNHCR and its implementing partners have various programmes to promote women's livelihood possibilities (e.g. vocational training) and their influence on decision-making (e.g., women's committees). In Lukole, for instance, I attended a street leaders' meeting where a young, female UNHCR worker was angering male street leaders (99 percent of street leaders are men) for being reluctant to produce candidates for women's committees. Equally, I experienced a woman from UNHCR busy encouraging refugees to vote for a woman at elections for a new street leader. In spite of her attempts, the most successful woman received eight votes.

I draw on data to highlight points that I also confirmed in group interviews, individual interviews, and casual discussions in the camp. When asked 'Do you see any changes in the relations between men and women, after coming to the camp (state which changes)?' the most common response from male respondents was that women no longer obey or respect their husbands (97 responses). Of these, 45 directly mentioned that women believe UNHCR is a better husband. Naturally, women had another view and were less inclined to blame women for the evils of the camp. However, a considerable number of women suggested that wives are losing respect for their husband's due to UNHCR feeding all irrespective of sex or age (ca. eight per cent of responses). During group interviews I would often confront the women with the men's statements and the typical reply would be that it depended on the wife and whether she was understanding of her

husbands predicaments. A woman NGO employee explained that it was best to give half of her income to her husband so that he will not be humiliated by the fact that the wife is the principal breadwinner in the family. This ideology was more heavily emphasized by expatriate staff than by Tanzanians, although even Tanzanian staff would complain about male dominance and lack of democracy in the camp.

That UNHCR takes the place of the father/husband is quite revealing for Burundi society where the father/husband is ideally the breadwinner. This means that it is the man who gives the orders in the house but it does not mean that he is allowed to treat his wife badly, according to refugees' responses. On the contrary, a good husband and father would give gifts - usually clothes - to his wife and children, and take the right decisions for the family's well-being as a whole. The ideal Burundian Hutu wife, on the other hand, should obey and respect her husband. As one street leader explains:

In Bible men and women are equal and also with UNHCR laws. But it is not good. A man has to give some orders in his house - and when woman is equal to the man that means woman also has to give orders in the house; some orders to the man. In Burundi it is forbidden woman to give orders to the man (Village leader, February 2, 1998).

A good husband is expected to provide for his family, highlighted by giving nice clothes to his wife. At parties or ceremonies in the camp men would show off their wives, so everyone could see how expensive the cloth in their dresses had been. Finally, men's failure to be a real man and provide for his wife leads to women failing to act as a woman ought to, and she stops obeying her husband. The only law they obey is 'UNHCR law'.

Other subjects that the refugees mentioned in group interviews and in the questionnaire concern changes in the social structure, such as old men marrying young girls and old women marrying young boys, people generally marrying too young, infidelity, polygamy and prostitution. All these indicators of social disintegration relate to gender relations. Many of them also relate to age. Other changes in relationships between age groups are also often mentioned, for example that the youth no longer respect the elders or that parents no longer bring up their children properly.

A good wife is quiet and shy and obeys her husband. Loud-mouthed young women are considered prostitutes and find it difficult to find a husband. Whether infidelity, prostitution, divorce, polygamy, selfishness and dishonesty have actually increased is virtually impossible to estimate. In the responses, it is interesting to note how women's infidelity or casual sexual relations are depicted as prostitution while men's extra marital affairs are depicted as polygamy. There is no doubt that the structural conditions for the family unit have drastically changed since leaving Burundi. With these changes the (ideal) family was threatened, and this threat is strongly felt by the refugees. In other words, there is a feeling that things are not as they used to be and insecurity about what

the future has to bring. There appears to be a general feeling of loss: loss of certainty, of absolutes, of taken-for-granted structures of authority.

The threat to authority is also perceived in other fields of social life. Class positions are difficult to maintain in the camp where everyone is equal before UNHCR. As a young school-teacher explained to me, 'big men' in the camp cannot maintain their authority vis-a-vis the 'small people' because they live side by side with them without any fence between.

But in Burundi teachers lived in their home and children came little to visit that area. Here we live together, and maybe children are my neighbours and then they don't respect me well. I can give an example. When we go to get food, I go there, and I meet my pupils, and they say this is my teacher. (Young school teacher, June 18th, 1997)

The children can see into his *blinde* and discover that he is eating the same food as they. Again we see that equality is not a desirable state. The physical structure of the camp does not permit men, 'big men,' or elders to maintain the illusion of their superiority. For example, the teacher can no longer hide the fact that he also eats beans and maize. Nor can the father allude that he is the main provider by controlling cash incomes and occasionally buying a nice *kanga* for his wife. Finally, the elders' knowledge and experience of local history, customs and families is of little or no use in the camp.

One might say that we are witnessing a challenge to the unquestioned authority of the patriarchy. Refugees in Lukole are experiencing these changes over an extremely short period of time. In addition, the process is to a large degree controlled by external factors, or rather a detectable actor, UNHCR, who can be blamed for the 'evils of social decay'. This is most obviously seen by the fact that refugees in Lukole depict UNHCR as the father or husband; it takes the place of the patriarch and it deprives people of any control over their own lives. This is illustrated in the following response in the questionnaire to the question on changes in people's behavior:

There is a change. People are not taking care of their own life. They are just living like babies in UNHCR's arms. (Mar, 27 years old)

In the following sections we investigate how young men seek to recuperate their lost masculinity through various strategies, thus ironically undermining the attempts of the UNHCR to promote equality.

Young men

The impression we get from the above discussion is of a community in despair. Old values and norms about essential issues such as relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and rich and poor are being challenged by the camp regime. Old authorities are losing their grip and a new authority - represented most strongly by

UNHCR - is in control of resources, livelihoods, and ideological formations (e.g., the ideology of equality between men and women).

In many ways young men are heavily affected by these changes. They are at a junction in life where they are supposed to be creating a family for which they can protect and provide. They are also expected to find a place in the hierarchy among the other men in their community; men's relations to other men are extremely important for understanding male identity. Around the world, the state of being a 'real man' is always precarious and uncertain, a 'state that boys must win against all odds'. (Gilmore 1990, p II). One does not automatically become a man, one has to fight for it, and one has to prove oneself to the group - always with the risk of being labeled 'unmanly', 'effeminate' or 'child-like'. Thus, not being able to live up to manhood-ideals means one risks being stripped of one's gender identity as such. This process of identity creation has been disrupted at a vital stage by flight and life in a refugee camp.

To my surprise, I found that a large amount of street or village leaders were very young (down to the age of 20). Other young men appeared to enjoy a lot of influence through working for NGOs and UNHCR as security guardians, medical assistants, social workers, and teachers. Others started businesses, ranging from hairdressers to bicycle taxi drivers to buying and selling food rations, while others were active in clandestine politics. This is not to argue that life in a refugee camp is less disruptive for young men than for elder generations or for women. They are equally in a state of limbo and their sense of loss is at least as great. Whereas women seem to try carrying on as things were in Burundi, cooking, child caring, fetching firewood, etc., elder men appear to be paralyzed by the situation, while (some) young men make use of this suspension of social structures and try to change things to their own advantage.

Coping strategies

I now take a closer look at the coping strategies of young men in Lukole refugee camp and see how these relate to the challenges that the family faces as well as the general feeling of a breakdown of norms and values. Before describing some of the more 'successful' coping strategies, I would like to emphasise that a large group remains - probably the majority - who pass their time playing cards or *urubugu* (a game played with stones or seeds and holes in the ground) or just hanging around the *blindes*. The reason for focusing on the successful refugees is thus not due to their numbers but rather due to their possibility of changing existing power structures and perhaps even dominant ideologies.

When I first arrived in the camp I was surprised to see very young men among the street and village leaders. In a survey of 62 (out of a total of ca. 100) street and village leaders I found that 17 were between 24 and 29 years old while only two were above 50. The rest being in their thirties (26) and forties (17). I have also met some that were even younger. In fact, one looked so young that the UNHCR representative, present during his

election, doubted whether he was eligible to vote, let alone be elected. He claimed to be 21. In theory, everyone in their street/village above the age of 18 elects them. A leader does not receive a salary from UNHCR.

Street and village leaders attend meetings with groups like the UNHCR, NGOs and Tanzanian authorities (the Camp Commandant and the police) on a regular basis, where they are to present the problems of the refugees. They also make sure communication goes the other way. For example, they pass along information on anything from how to build pit latrines to encouraging people to restrain from political violence. Their other main task is to solve disputes involving people in their constituency. Below them are the 'block leaders' and above them is the 'camp chairman'. Parallel to this set-up we have the *abashingantahe*; the traditional council of elders who solve problems between neighbors. Furthermore, I observed an informal network of 'big men' whom one could address if one had problems.

Why are so many of the street and village leaders young men? The refugees say that it is because it is necessary to be mobile in order to reach the offices of the UNHCR and the NGOs or the police post within short notice. One may also have to give a message to the whole community, which involves walking through the whole area shouting people up. Old men cannot manage that, they argue. Similar reasons are given for women not becoming street leaders. They cannot manage that while carrying a small child, taking care of the household, and often being pregnant. Furthermore, leaders have to be literate to some degree to be able to take notes during meetings. Some of these young men would constantly carry a notebook and a pen with them as if to mark their superior position. Language is also mentioned as an asset. As opposed to Burundi, where Kirundi and French are the official languages, knowledge of English or Swahili is a great advantage in the camp in order to communicate better with Tanzanians and foreigners working for NGOs, the UN, and the Tanzanian authorities.

Young men would explain how they had learned in the camp not to be 'shy'. They are no longer shy to approach a *muzungu* or to say their opinion in a meeting, in front of elders, officials and foreigners. Just as women are supposed to be shy and timid towards men, so are young men supposed to be shy towards their elders. There is also an ethnic twist to this as shyness is often related as a Burundian Hutu trait. Tutsi are 'good at speaking', dishonest and cunning, while Hutu are honest, modest and shy. The refugees clearly have an ambivalent relation to these Hutu virtues as they realize that they are constantly losing out due to their naive timidity. Burundian refugees see the advantages of such behavior. And after spending some time with Rwandan Hutus in the camps or as refugees in Rwanda, they claim that they are learning to be assertive like the Rwandans. 'Because Burundese used to live with Rwandese some have adopted their behavior. Because Rwandese are not shy. So some Burundese now are digging outside the camp. They began to act as Rwandese.' (Village F2, January 1998).

Another strategy for young men is to find a job in one of the relief agencies, operating in the camp. With limited education these young men (and quite a few young women) have the opportunity to hold quite influential posts which would have been reserved for people

with higher education and better connections in Burundi (read: Tutsi). To get these positions much of the same abilities are needed as for street leaders: i.e., mobility, adaptability, 'not being shy', languages, and literacy. However here the emphasis is more on language and literacy and less on good relations with the community as a whole, as they are not elected. On the other hand, it is useful to have good relations with the right people in the right places. I have been told that a person who can get another person a job with an NGO sometimes gets to keep half of that person's salary as payment for the favour!

Employees of NGOs receive meager salaries of between 14,000 and 22,000 shillings per month (US\$ 23-36). In addition to the wage, they have the possibility of various windfalls. To work in the feeding centre for malnourished children is, for instance, considered very attractive, as much of the meat, fish, and milk ends up in the stomachs of staff. Others have been involved in selling blankets that were supposed to be distributed to the elderly. Apart from direct corruption, the jobs have other indirect benefits. The employees occupy strategic positions as intermediaries between relief agencies and the beneficiaries. The camp population's access to essential recourses like medical help, education, and security against theft and robbery, goes through these intermediaries. It becomes important to be on good terms with an NGO employee who can ask favours in return, thus creating the basis for a classic patron-client relationship. However, these strategies are not merely avenues to self-enrichment, as the following example illustrates.

Jean (fictitious name) is 21 years old and works as a 'community mobilizer' for African Education Foundation (AEF). He used to hold a supervisory position and invested most of his wages in bicycles that were used as bicycle taxis. In this way he managed to increase his income and was able to fund his younger brother's school fees at the refugee-run secondary school. He also saved up to go to Nairobi where he wanted to continue his studies. His trip to Nairobi and Kampala had been a failure. At the time of the interview he was saving money again, and trying to find a way of getting a Burundian or a Tanzanian passport. When asked how other refugees reacted to his attempts to leave the camp, whether they would think that he was running away from the problems, he gave the following reply:

Yes as you know all people are not to the same level of understanding. There are some who can understand that, as you say, that I am running away from problems. But there are others that see that it's better to try because later I can be someone who can help to solve the problems.
(Jean, September 1997)

We see here how it is important to relate to the expectations of other refugees; his strategy that at first sight looks like an entirely selfish one is legitimized through its relevance to 'the struggle'. In other words, Jean's choices are subject to peer group evaluation, and furthermore he feels a certain belonging to the group and its broader objectives of supporting the 'Hutu cause.'

Another strategy used by young men to avoid feeling lost and to find a new sense of purpose was to become involved in politics. Political activity in the Tanzanian refugee camps is strictly prohibited, something the Tanzanian authorities reiterated many times at meetings with refugees while I was in the camp. However, Lukole is saturated in politics. The main problem is the rivalry between the two main political parties in the camp the Palipehutu (*Parti pour la Liberation de la Peuple Hutu*) and CNDD (*Conseil National pour la Defense de la Democratie*). This political rivalry has at times resulted in political murders. People from the wrong party (or merely assumed to belong to that party) have had to move from one part of the camp to the other for fear of their security).

Mousa is a good example of a successful young man who has managed to build up an informal network, giving him a sense of belonging and a sense, not only of being in control of his life in the camp, but also of contributing to the future of his country. He was out of work when I first met him. He had previously held various high positions with the different agencies that had operated in the camp, and had a very easy-going way of interacting with Europeans (he speaks English) and Tanzanians (being an urban Muslim he speaks very good Swahili also). Furthermore, his interaction with refugees of any social status is equally easy-going. He was 30 years old and was contemplating starting up some business. The income would be higher and he would have more time to discuss politics with his friends.

Although he held no official position in the camp he was often called upon when people in his neighborhood had problems; be it a lost ration card, an armed robbery, or a fight between neighbors. He also attended meetings called by the Camp Commandant when the latter wanted to address serious problems such as the security situation in the camp. There was no doubt that Mousa had influence and knew people in the right places. Once I took a *maybobo* (street child) with an infected foot to the hospital. With a lot of handshaking and chatting with the staff, Mousa made sure we skipped all the queues and the boy received exceptional treatment.

Mousa is an example of how the political leadership constitutes a tight network with the elite that works for NGOs, and to some degree with the street leaders. It is in this way that the political leadership has such an influence in the population. Especially the CNDD leadership has managed to find many jobs with NGOs for various reasons. Their privileged access to UNHCR and the NGOs means that their version of events becomes the accepted truth, thus dismissing Palipehutu's version and reinforcing the picture of Palipehutu as a bunch of extremist hooligans. Palipehutu sympathizers would complain to me that it was virtually impossible for them to get a job, in spite of qualifications, due to CNDD nepotism. Their 'appeal' to the population lies less in their strategic positions in NGOs and more in their promise to fight the Tutsi with any means. And equally important they vow to fight the corrupt, self-serving NGO workers of the CNDD who are living the easy life, mingling with *wazungu*.

In conclusion membership in a party gives access to resources such as jobs. The two parties in the camp are struggling to gain access to the resources that exist in the camp. Being a member of a party is also more than that. It is a way in which young men gain a

sense of purpose. One persistent complaint about the camp is boredom and laziness. And as the quote earlier in this paper shows, there is a feeling that refugees are not controlling their lives: 'they are just living like babies in the arms of UNHCR'. Again we must remember that UNHCR is not necessarily to blame for this. It merely becomes the focal point on which they can concentrate their frustrations. This sense of not being able to act is equally caused by being unable to influence the course of events in Burundi, so vital for their eventual return. By joining a political party and perhaps even doing some kind of physical exercises or military training, these young men show that they are not just being fed by the UNHCR or being 'like someone buried' (Mandazi Baker, February 1998). They are taking their future in their own hands, they are acting, and they are showing strength. Politicians are treated with respect and even fear in the camp. They dare defy the laws of the Tanzanian government and the UNHCR and play by their own rules. In other words, they are recuperating the masculinity that was taken away from them by UNHCR.

New opportunities - new ideologies?

We have seen how UNHCR's ideology and practice of equality together with the nature of living in a refugee camp has challenged structures of authority. We saw how this feeling of upheaval was often interpreted by the refugees in terms of gender and, to a lesser degree, in terms of age and class. The main understanding is that UNHCR has taken the place of the father, thus leaving refugees as helpless women/children who obey the UNHCR and have no control over their own lives (in spite of UNHCR promoting democracy and participation for all refugees). Finally, we have seen how some young men have managed to take advantage of this situation by creating new spaces for themselves that they would not have been able to achieve in Burundi where they were under the control of elders and Tutsi.

The question of gender relations is complex. It appears that, in spite of UNHCR and NGOs encouraging the 'empowerment' of women and in spite of refugees complaining that women no longer obey their husbands, men still dominate decision-making authorities. Street leaders are still men, influential NGO employees are men, politicians are men, etc. Furthermore, and more importantly, the ideology of gender relations does not seem to have changed much. It is still considered shameful for a man not to be able to provide for his family and women are still supposed to obey their men. In fact, due to the breakdown of the patriarchal authority of old men and 'big men' in the camp, and a sense of social decay, young men are breaking the monopoly of 'old men' and 'big men' to some degree, while maintaining a male identity. The goal of these young men's strategies is to regain control of their lives and to take back their place as providers that UNHCR had taken from them. Ironically, they often use the avenues created by UNHCR in their struggle.

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