

# Urbanisation and its discontents: urban refugees in Tanzania

by Marc Sommers

This article explores the different labels under which refugees in Dar es Salaam may be categorised. It identifies and profiles different groups of urban refugee in Dar es Salaam and considers some common assumptions about urban refugees.

There appear to be four distinct categories of urban refugee: (1) the few who are officially defined as refugees and have permission to reside in cities; (2) those officially defined as refugees but lacking legal rights to urban residence; (3) those who have come to an urban area to seek asylum as a refugee at a UNHCR office; and (4) those who claim to be refugees but live without any institutional recognition or assistance.

The article is based on field research in Dar es Salaam in 1990-92 and 1996. In addition to interviewing officials from the Tanzanian government and agencies working with refugees (such as UNHCR and the Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service), and refugees from a variety of countries who had permission to live in Dar es Salaam, I also interviewed Somalis who sought refugee status and the protection and provisions it offered, Burundians from refugee camps who shunned recognition of their refugee identity by others, and Mozambicans who claimed to be refugees without ever seeking official sanction. The following are brief profiles of these four refugee categories.

## (1) Urban refugees with legal sanction

In countries that host refugees, officials from international humanitarian agencies and host governments may assume that the majority of refugees in cities have permission to be there. Most of the international agency and local government officials interviewed in Dar es

Salaam thought this to be true. The registered refugees in Dar es Salaam were from a variety of countries, such as South Africa, Burundi, Uganda, Rwanda and the Comoros Islands. With the exception of Somali refugees - who in 1990-91 were pouring out of their homeland - these diverse groups were small in number but generally united by class. Nearly all of them were well-educated and relatively wealthy members of their respective national communities. In addition, if one only searched out urban refugees at UNHCR offices, which refugees periodically visit to discuss specific issues, one might surmise that most urban refugees were male-headed households, for few female household heads made their presence felt there. Some officials in Dar es Salaam consequently drew a composite of the typical urban refugee as a well-heeled, upper-class family man.

Agency and government officials in Dar es Salaam also tended to assume that refugees from the same country shared similar outlooks about basic issues that affected them all. But the Burundi case in particular demonstrated that this does not necessarily apply. Dar es Salaam's Burundi refugee society, comprising ethnic Hutu, is secretive. Though analysts such as Malkki<sup>1</sup> assume that ethnic solidarity is particularly strong among such Central African Hutu groups, the Burundi refugees in Dar es Salaam displayed a distinct lack of internal cohesion and demonstrated how divided ethnic - and refugee - groups can become. A striking class difference separated refugees with permission to reside

in the capital from those that did not. Unlike the largely educated and politicised Burundians who maintained legal right to urban residence, most who lived in Dar es Salaam illegally were poorly educated and apolitical young men from rural backgrounds.<sup>2</sup>

The separation between these two classes of Burundi refugees also showed itself in their urban professions. Owing to their permission to live in Dar es Salaam, many higher class refugees could obtain employment in the formal sector. Although some maintained that Tanzanians refused to hire them, others found work with international organisations or obtained the necessary legal documentation to run small enterprises in the formal sector. Still, most of the Burundi refugee population in Dar es Salaam, as we shall see, participated exclusively in the informal sector.

## (2) Burundi refugees: urban refugees without legal sanction

Refugees may only be able to migrate to cities from camps illegally. The move may seem worth the risk: despite the potential for danger and uncertainty in an urban life, many refugees can at least leave the institutional and regimented environment that commonly marks refugee camp existence, hope to increase their economic situation, and obtain a measure of autonomy in the process. Urban areas may also provide refugees with the opportunity to re-invent themselves as urban newcomers.

The largest group of refugees residing in Dar es Salaam were Burundi refugees, who, during my initial field research period in the early 1990s, were also the largest refugee group in Tanzania. At that time, the entire population was officially estimated at 155,000, but officials working with Burundi refugees speculated that the actual figure was probably 250,000 or more. Most of the Burundi refugees who made it to Dar es Salaam were young men who had grown up in

one of three refugee settlements for Burundi refugees in central Tanzania (Katumba, Ulyankulu and Mishamo). These were refugees from the 1972 'selective genocide' in their homeland.<sup>3</sup> Food was generally plentiful in the settlements but cash was hard to come by. As a result, many refugee parents strove to send their eldest sons to the capital to find work and send remittances back to them. Most of the young Burundi refugee men that I met in town were glad to be there, as migrating to the capital bestowed social status upon them in refugee society, and constituted a terrific adventure as well. Although life was unusually difficult and potentially dangerous in Dar es Salaam, few seemed to regret their shift to the city.

The central problem for young Burundi refugee men in town, in their eyes, was to avoid identification as a refugee. Drawing on their familiarity with Tanzanian society, they presented themselves as Tanzanians. Lacking an identity card to establish their citizenship, they worked in the informal economy and used clandestine behaviour also meant that UNHCR was entirely unaware of their location or activities. Refugees in the group perceived UNHCR officials as the allies of the Tanzanian authorities whom they sought to avoid. The refugee men believed that UNHCR government officials would simply 'triangulate' them to the refugee settlements if they were discovered; they would be at the mercy of the Settlements Commandant, from whom refugees needed an exit permit to travel to the settlements legally.

Based on interviews with UNHCR and government officials in Dar es Salaam, this assessment was probably fairly accurate. The interview also revealed a 'catch-22' sort of contradiction within the framework of early 1990s refugee law in Tanzania. Settlement-seeking refugees needed a permit from their commandant, a Tanzanian government official, to migrate to the city. A permanent shift to town was virtually impossible to obtain, but even temporary permits were difficult to get because the Tanzanian government, with UNHCR support, generally wanted the 150,000 Burundi refugees

living in camps to remain there. At the same time, however, Ministry of Home Affairs officials explained that a refugee who could prove he or she was economically self-sufficient in Dar es Salaam might receive legal permission to reside there. What they did not mention, of course, was that refugees had to break Tanzanian law just to get to the capital.<sup>4</sup>

### (3) Somalis in Dar es Salaam: the asylum seekers

Another common category of urban refugee is the asylum seeker: people who enter a city in search of recognition and support from UNHCR. In Dar es Salaam, if the UNHCR Protection Officer identified a Somali as a refugee, then UNHCR would present the refugee's profile to the Eligibility Committee, which was comprised of Tanzanian government officials of various ministries. On a case-by-case basis, this committee decided who would be granted permission to reside in Tanzania and where they

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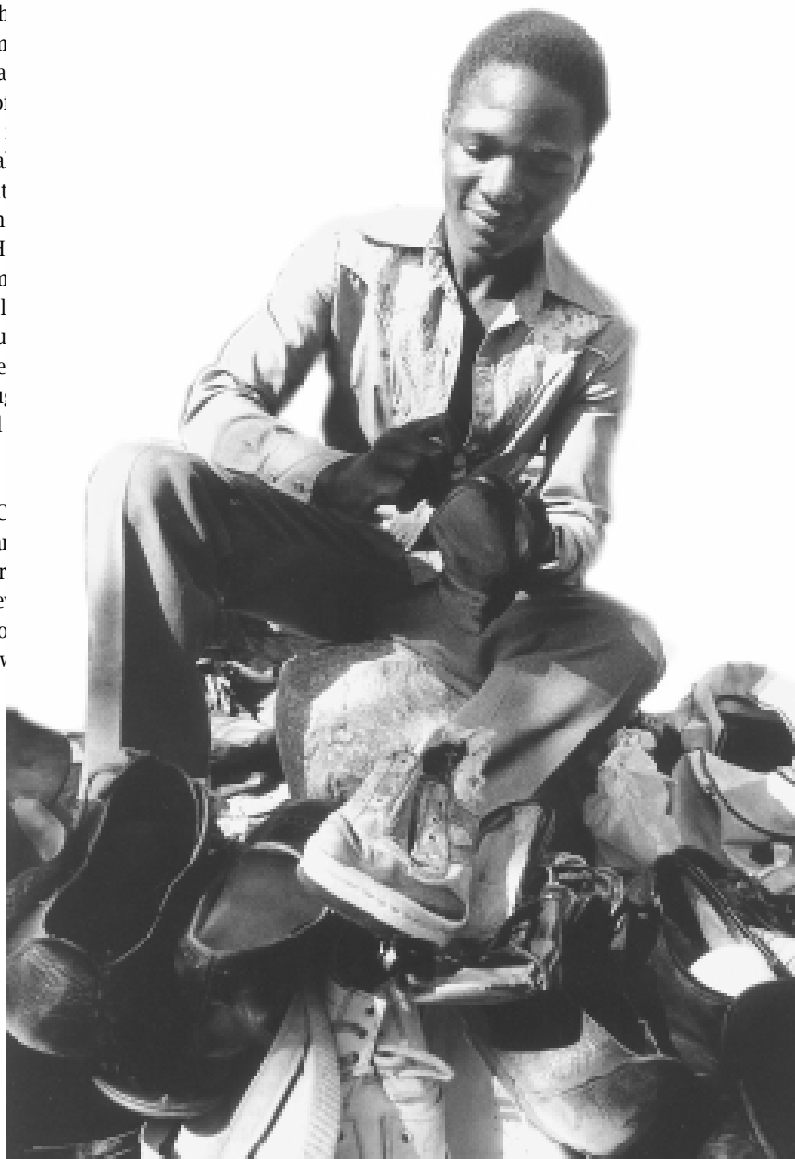
passed while UNHCR officials looked for another asylum country for Somalis who lacked permission to remain in Tanzania, UNHCR provided the Somalis with a weekly stipend until their cases were resolved. In 1990-91, as boatloads of Somalis continued to reach Tanzanian shores, UNHCR officials worried that asylum seekers were occupying an increasing proportion of their limited country budget. This fuelled their suspicion that Somalis who were naturalised Tanzanians were representing themselves as refugees in order to obtain the weekly stipend.

### (4) Mozambicans as cultural refugees

Mozambican refugees in Dar es Salaam differ from those in the first three categories in that the Mozambicans were neither officially certified as refugees nor ever attempted to obtain certification. In fact, although tens of thousands of Mozambicans had been registered as refugees in Tanzania by the UNHCR and Tanzanian government officials, it was well-known that they rarely identified themselves as Mozambicans in Dar es Salaam. Nevertheless, many of the Mozambicans I met in Tanzania's informal economy claimed to be

people as refugees is difficult to be a legal question, investigating this kind of situation is up to the discretion of the settlement commandant and his or her considerations of the situation in receipt with local and national laws and reference, a separate examination of the situation of people who are identified as refugees in the informal economy is needed as a reference frame.

In considering this new endeavour as it exists in Dar es Salaam, exploring the meaning of the term 'refugee' in Swahili (*mkimbizi*), the city's predominant language, is instructive. The word *mkimbizi* itself derives not from the act of seeking refuge, as it does in English, but



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from *kukimbia*, a verb meaning 'to run'. Literally, *mkimbizi* means 'a person who runs', which implies cowardice. Many Burundi refugees despised their '*mkimbizi*' label for this reason. On the other hand, young Tanzanian urban migrants frequently call themselves economic refugees, as the term both calls attention to the dire economic situations in the rural villages that they are running from and asserts their right to reside in the capital.

The ethnic Makonde traditional homeland rests on both sides of the remote and porous border between Mozambique and Tanzania. While crossing this border can be a casual affair - and few Makonde carry passports - in cultural terms the two countries are distinct. The land of Mozambique, which most young Makonde in Dar es Salaam have yet to visit, has been culturally configured as a place where old Makonde traditions continue to be practised, unfettered by the changes of the twentieth century. A 'Mozambican' Makonde describes a person who follows old ethnic traditions, and older Makonde who wear *chalechale*, a distinctive form of facial tattooing, are considered particularly 'Mozambican' regardless of their actual place of origin. Conversely, a 'Tanzanian' Makonde confers a non-traditional or 'modern' description upon a person.

Regardless of the perceived distinctions between Mozambican and Tanzanian Makonde, most Makonde still consider Mozambique their true homeland. Thus, they told me in 1991, only after Mozambique's then-warring parties - Renamo and Frelimo - made peace would Tanzanian Makonde return 'home' to Mozambique.

Makonde claims to a national and refugee identity are therefore made on an entirely different basis than any of the other refugee groups discussed above. Even the Burundi refugees who were born within Tanzania's borders can claim Burundi nationality because their parents received their refugee identity from UNHCR when they entered Tanzania in 1972-73. But a combination of factors has created a kind of international informality for the Makonde living along the Mozambique-Tanzania border, allowing the Makonde room not only to claim national affiliation on their terms but, in some cases, redefine the meaning of refugee.

## Conclusion: challenging assumptions about urban refugees

Early in this paper, I reviewed three common assumptions held by officials who interact with urban refugees: (i) that most refugees in cities have legal sanction to reside there; (ii) that urban refugees are mainly comprised of upper-class men and their families; and (iii) that refugees who come from the same country or ethnic group tend to have similar perspectives on issues of shared concern. The findings provided here argue against two additional commonly-held assumptions about the identity and behaviour of urban refugees.

First, it is usually assumed that refugees seek the rights, protections and provisions that an officially recognised refugee identity can provide. Such supposed entitlements do not necessarily arrive. UNHCR's ability to protect refugees is limited - a UNHCR protection office of two or three people may be responsible for protecting hundreds of thousands of refugees. Living in camps as refugees may actually turn people into targets of exploitation from which they have no protection. Burundi refugees living clandestinely in Dar es Salaam, for example, frequently spoke about Tanzanian government officials who took advantage of them in their refugee settlement homes. For them, it was better to live in a city, be seen as a Tanzanian national and conceal their troublesome refugee identity. At the same time, some ethnic Makonde interviewed in the early 1990s had left a war zone in Mozambique and could have qualified as refugees in Tanzania. Yet they had no interest in seeking such official recognition even though they openly claimed to be refugees.

Second, it should not be assumed that 'refugee' only means what the official definition contains, or what it should contain. For as the cases of the ethnic Makonde and the Tanzanian rural-urban migrant reveal, vernacular meanings of 'refugee' differ from the internationally accepted definition. In Tanzania, for example, a person can claim to be a refugee without ever crossing a border: the 'fear' a migrant may feel arises from economic hardship, not political persecution or war. At the same time a Makonde can become a 'refugee' as a matter of personal choice, since it confers a connection to their perceived homeland across a nearby border.

It is also a matter of personal choice that leads so many refugees to cities in the first place. Refugees are victims, but they do not seek to remain victimised. Instead of passively waiting for years or decades to return to their homes, most refugees try to make the best of things during their forced exile, often accepting great risks. In Africa, this increasingly means sneaking into cities, and it is in this light that the rise of urban African refugee populations should be seen: as a dramatization of the strong desire among increasing numbers of Africans, and their like-minded counterparts across the globe, to urbanise. Refugees who migrate to urban areas are actually a particularly vulnerable kind of urban migrant - migrant refugees, perhaps - and they should be considered in a way that accounts for their aspirations, their rights and their connections to the larger host nation community where they reside.

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**His forthcoming book, entitled *Fear in Bongoland: Burundi Refugees in Urban Tanzania*, describes the attractions of Dar es Salaam, or "Bongoland", to young migrant and Burundi refugee men and details the clandestine lives of Burundi refugees residing there. It is scheduled to be published by Berghahn Books in late 1999.**

### Notes

1 Malkki, LH 1995 *Purity and exile: violence, memory, and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

2 The context and implications of this issue are addressed in detail in: Sommers, M 1995 'Representing Refugees: Assessing the Role of Elites in Burundi Refugee Society' *Disasters: The Journal of Disaster Studies and Management* 19(1): 19-25 (March).

3 Lemarchand, R & Martin, D 1974 'Selective genocide in Burundi' (Report No 20). London: The Minority Rights Group.

4 The relationship between the Tanzanian government and all refugees residing there is currently undergoing changes, as the Tanzanian government prepares to enact still tougher, more restrictive laws for refugees.