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Berckmoes, L.H.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Displacement as a Cultural Repertoire for Resilience in Chronic Crisis, in Burundi

Lidewyde H. Berckmoes

African Studies Centre Leiden, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

Correspondence: Lidewyde H. Berckmoes (l.h.berckmoes@asc.leidenuniv.nl)

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ABSTRACT

Prior to a new outbreak of violence in Burundi in 2015, more than 10000 Burundians had already crossed borders in search of refuge. The anticipatory displacement signalled the need to rethink displacement as contextualised in the country's long history of conflict and decline. In this article I take a life course perspective based on longitudinal ethnographic research. I show that displacement has become deeply entangled with other forms of mobility, beyond dualities of forced versus voluntary migration or coping versus adapting. I propose that past experiences have realised and transformed the collective meaning of displacement in Burundian culture. Today, displacement should be understood as a sedimented, cultural resource and framework. This conceptualisation enables situating displacement practices in lives and communities in chronic crisis. Rather than displacement being central to life projects, it is a rather ordinary cultural repertoire of action employed for resilience.

1 | Displacement in the Long Run of History

In recent history, Burundi has known many outbreaks of war and political violence. Since the end of colonisation, especially devastating political violence occurred in 1965, 1966 and 1969, a selective genocide in 1972, large-scale massacres in 1988, rebel attacks in 1991, and a country-wide civil war that started in 1993 and lasted until in 2005 a transition government was installed. Ten years later, in 2015, a new political crisis started. Young people supported by civil society leaders and the political opposition took to the streets to protest a third term of the incumbent president, which would constitute a breach of the Arusha Peace Agreements that had marked the end of the long civil war. The protests were violently repressed by government security forces and affiliated youth militia, plunging the country into a new spiral of violence.

These outbreaks of war and violence have caused mass displacement in the region and beyond. In 1972, it was documented that the events 'sent at least 217,000 Burundians ... to refugee camps in Tanzania' (Schwartz 2019 123). During the civil war, again,

hundreds of thousands of refugees fled to Tanzania, while others went to Democratic Republic Congo, and a smaller number to Rwanda. The '2015 crisis' resulted in more than 400,000 people displaced in the Great Lakes region (UNHCR 2018). Currently, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees still registers 256,755 Burundian refugees in this region.¹

Notable about displacement in relation to the last crisis, in 2015, is that in the month prior to the start of the protests and violence 15,000–20,000 people had already fled and applied for refugee status in neighbouring countries. These people are believed to have fled mainly in *anticipation* of electoral violence – the elections had been scheduled for May 2015 (Purdeková and Birantamije 2023). In addition, people crossed borders in this period without applying for asylum, moving temporarily, at least initially, because of a 'sense' that violence might break out. The following fieldwork story, presenting Aloïse's journey into refugeehood, is illustrative for this pre-emptive practice:

Aloïse arrived in Rwanda in the middle of April 2015, a week or two prior to the popular street protests that

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signalled a new political crisis in his home country. Having just ended his university studies, he had registered for a 1-week professional training in neighbouring Rwanda. When violence escalated in his hometown Bujumbura, from 26 April 2015 onwards, Aloïse remained in Rwanda. Retrospectively he argued that his interest in the training was at least partly informed by his 'sense' that something was bound to happen in Burundi. 'I have experienced war up close, I never wanted to experience that again'.

(conversation, 2016)

Aloïse's plans of moving away, were also on the mind of his family and others in Burundi earlier in that year. His family lived in Bujumbura. They also owned land up-country, which they had left behind during Burundi's civil war (1993–2005). In the war aftermath, the people working the land had repeatedly asked to buy it. In March 2015, more than a month prior to the start of the protests, the family finally sought to sell the land. However, the same people were no longer interested in buying it. Aloïse's brother commented to me that they apparently thought the same as their family; that it will be easier to flee with money than with land.

(conversations, 2016)

The temporal ordering of flight and violence in 2015 inspired various Burundi scholars, including myself, to reconsider the ways in which we conceptualise displacement (Purdeková and Birantamije 2023). Aloïse's move to Rwanda, his family's attempt to sell their land, and the land dwellers' refusal to buy the land all took place in anticipation of potential violence. This shows that displacement practices can be more than reactions to occurring disasters. In Burundi, displacement has occurred in wartime and peacetime (Purdeková and Birantamije 2023). I thus argue that we need to understand displacement as a practice that takes shape in the context of 'cyclical conflict' (Baghdadli et al. 2008; Vandeginste 2009).

In this article, I explore displacement 'in the long run of history' (Purdeková and Birantamije 2023: 10) through a life course perspective. By drawing on longitudinal ethnographic research, I show how different people in Burundi have absorbed displacement practices as a cultural resource and framework for individual transformation – on their path of *becoming* (Collins 2018). Indeed, where Stephen Lubkemann (2016) argued that life projects in particular contexts lead to contrasting patterns of wartime migration, I argue in this article that wartime migration has shaped how people imagine and devise life projects in the war aftermath – sometimes through displacement. By drawing attention to displacement as a cultural repertoire, this article contributes to our understanding of why, where and who may employ displacement practices in contexts marked by chronic crisis. Simultaneously, I propose that the timing of displacement may be best understood as inspired by different temporalities; with historical change, the individual life course and disaster events, actualised or in potential, all interacting and shaping anticipation and realisation of displacement.

2 | Is War Coming?

The first scene of the theatre play portrays a young woman next to a deep grave dug in an otherwise impeccable green lawn, singing a song many Burundians recognise as a funeral song: 'aheza mw'ijuru' – heaven is the good place. In the play, the song turns from one of sadness to one of celebration, telling people not to dread, but welcome death instead. In the scene that follows we see how this message is not all convincing. Rumour is that war is imminent. The actors run around frantically. One, shivering with fear, says in a broken voice that when war arrives, she will hide with her family in a ditch. A man then poses proudly with his chest forward, shouting that he will take up arms trading. When a third reproaches him that that would be illegal trafficking, he justifies that he cannot let his fellow citizens experience scarcity in times of need. As the audience laughs at the cynical reply, the actors run to one point on the lawn and gaze into the distance. The silence that ensues is heavy with negative potentiality: is war coming?

Theatre play by Buja Sans Tabou, 2019

In this article, I propose that the phenomenon of displacement in Burundi has shifted meaning over the course of history, making a longitudinal perspective crucial to understand displacement practices in Burundi today. I argue that rather than simply a strategy in response to triggering events, displacement has become a 'cultural repertoire of action' (Coe 2013) for Burundians. Inspired by Ann Swidler's understanding of culture in action and Cati Coe's further development of Swidler's framework, I see cultural repertoires, 'as a "tool kit" of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems' (Swidler 1986: 284). These cultural repertoires, as cultural resource and framework, predispose a person to act in particular ways. Cultural repertoires are historically informed and may be learned and transmitted across generations. They are also flexible and can be adapted to new circumstances. Therefore, they are open to changes over time (Coe 2013).

I explore these changes drawing on literature concerned with the enduring effects of traumatic events on culture. Julia Dickson-Gómez (2002) wrote about this issue in the context of her research in El Salvador. In El Salvador, she argues, war trauma has become part of culture. This finds expression in, among others, commentaries on news, stories of betrayal, the health syndrome 'nervios,' and mistrustful worldviews. In other contexts, researchers have similarly found that traumatic experiences may have enduring and transformative effects on societies (Lubkemann 2007; Berckmoes et al. 2025). For instance, Elisabeth Wood (2008), with case studies in Peru, El Salvador, Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone (Wood 2008), showed how war may transform social networks in a variety of ways, creating new networks, dissolving some, and changing the structure of others. Marielle Debos (2016), in the context of Chad, described how livelihood strategies among young men altered

in the aftermath of war, and more readily included violence, while De Bruijn and Both (2018), also in Chad, argued that the long history of conflict and hardship has translated into lives lived in 'duress' – where layers of hardship inform a normalisation of hardship and severely constrained agency.

Similar, I propose, are the ways in which people affected by violence learn to 'read' their environment for signs of violence to come (Taussig 2005). Henrik Vigh (2011) referred to this practice as hypervigilance; on the look-out for negative potentiality. In contexts affected by violence, such hypervigilance may become normalised. The short excerpt of a theatre play, above, shows how this hypervigilance has become part of life in Burundi too. The play was inspired by a photography project and presented different scenes as snapshots of everyday life. The scenes described, tap into the emotional pressure of living in a country where for many, death, dressed as violent conflict or abject poverty appears as a possibility to always look out for. For instance, the actors' gaze into the distance reflects the practice of trying to see the trouble ahead, while thinking through potential lines of action should trouble reach.

In earlier work, I have described this practice of hypervigilance in Burundi as 'hearing' or listening (Berckmoes 2014, 2017). It involves a continuous search for information, although often resulting in hypotheses rather than answers (Ibid). Arguably in a similar vein, Aloïse's decision to go to Rwanda, his family's attempt to sell their land, and the dwellers' refusal to buy the land, described in the introduction of this article, were all informed by such anticipatory 'hearing' about potential violence as well, and for them, translated into flight as a possible line of action. In brief, to summarize with Carolyn Nordstrom's words, experiences of collective violence, more than *a past*, may become, '...a determining fact in shaping reality as people *will* know it, in the future' (Nordstrom 2004 59–60, italics in original).

Below, I draw on longitudinal ethnography to argue that, in this vein, displacement has been absorbed as a Burundian cultural repertoire of action. In other words, I argue that through repeated experiences of mass displacement in the context of Burundi's traumatic past, people have become predisposed to adopting these practices when seeking transformation – on their path of *becoming* (Collins 2018). Following, I describe the research methodology on which my argument builds. I then delve into three case studies which reveal different aspects of my argument, namely how in Burundi displacement is part of a gendered and generational repertoire of action for life and livelihood projects, how mobility and displacement are deeply entangled, and how these movements are not only about moving away from (potential) disaster but rather concern movements in search of well-being amidst widespread chronic adversity. I thus challenge the conceptualisation of displacement in frameworks of cause and effect, arguing that cause and effect have become context, and that from there, displacement practices have become a rather ordinary option for people seeking wellbeing.

3 | Longitudinal Ethnography

Displacement practices sometimes respond to actual disaster, sometimes to anticipated disaster, and at other times, as I show

below, these practices are less concretely connected to triggering events. In other words, displacement practices do not simply reflect the past, present or the future, but rather 'past, present and future are folded together in the emergence of migrant lives and subjectivities' (Collins 2018 3). And thus, they ask for a longitudinal perspective, centring the life course of potential migrants.

To explore displacement over the life course and in the long run of history, I draw on longitudinal ethnography; mainly ethnographic revisits (Burawoy 2003). As with many longitudinal ethnographic studies, my revisits were most often not planned from the start (cf. Kemper and Royce 2002; Burawoy 2003; Berckmoes et al. 2021). Rather, they followed from my continued interest in the people, region, and themes of earlier studies. Below, I briefly describe the research projects that enabled revisits to Burundi or Burundians in displacement contexts. In retrospect, the research projects have allowed me to study the Burundi context as marked by 'radical and prolonged uncertainty' (Horst and Grabska 2015). They have also sparked questions on the transformative and enduring effects of conflict on culture and society.

I conducted my first ethnographic fieldwork project with young people in a Burundian refugee camp in Tanzania at the end of the civil war in 2005/06. A transition government had just been installed in Burundi. Many youths were contemplating return but waited as they questioned whether the recent peace was going to hold. A few years later, between 2007 and 2011, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the urban periphery of Bujumbura, Burundi. The area was notorious for having served as a primary battleground during the civil war. During the war, the different neighbourhoods were ethnically segregated, and some neighbourhoods had been demolished. Through participant observation and various, mainly dialogical, interview methods, I explored how young men and women living in these neighbourhoods strived to re/build their lives and life worlds in the war aftermath. The research period was marked by relative peace, though one rebel group remained active until 2009.

Between 2013 and 2016 I returned to Burundi and started working with the same generation, young people now reaching adulthood. My focus was on the transgenerational transmission of violence and resilience in families and schools. During the project, the 2015 political crisis started. Some of the young people in their youth or early adulthood who participated in my study, fled to neighbouring countries, while others remained in Burundi. The crisis informed new research projects with Burundian refugees in Uganda, in Rwanda and with diaspora youth in European countries.

I maintained regular contact with roughly two dozen young people I met during my first research visits to Bujumbura (2009/2010). The depth and quality of my contact with them varied over time. Some were busier than others, had more, or less restrictions from caregivers, partners and occupations to meet me, were keener to stay in contact, or we shared an emotional connection. Language was also important, the main language of conversation with my interlocutors being French – next to Kirundi, an official language in Burundi – and sometimes English; a language that I used more in displacement contexts

like Rwanda. In addition, to maintain or reestablish contacts, social media and other communication technology were imperative – and not everybody had equally access to these, especially in the earlier fieldwork periods.

Dependence on mobile communication technology was also informed by the relatively high mobility of many young men and women I had met. To give a sense of this mobility, let me share a few examples: A young woman I met in Bujumbura in 2009, moved to the Netherlands in 2010, where she still lives. Her brother had left Burundi in the wake of the civil war and applied for family reunification in the Netherlands, which took a few years. Another interlocutor I met in 2009, moved to Oman in 2014, and later to Dubai to work as a domestic servant. A third key interlocutor, a young man, found his way to the United States in 2012, his brother moved for marriage to Canada in 2013, and his younger brother went to Asia for studies in 2015. Two young Burundian men I met in Bujumbura later moved to, respectively Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa. They left to find work and escape pressure from the incumbent regime. I saw them again when I attended academic conferences in South Africa in 2015. A few young men moved to Europe – Belgium and Italy – after they married former volunteers in Bujumbura. Another young woman went to the university in Kampala, where I visited her in 2012, and I saw her again after her studies in Burundi between 2014 and 2016. Later, in 2017, she moved to France, where we met again in 2019.

Most of the initial moves just mentioned have taken place before the 2015 crisis in Burundi. The young people explained their mobility mainly with reference to 'life chances' (Vigh 2006), which they felt were lacking in Burundi. Yet their subsequent im/mobility was also patterned by potential violence in Burundi, which was deemed especially threatening for some and more so at particular times – especially the years of elections. The young men and women I saw in Rwanda since 2017, in contrast, largely explained their presence in the country as related to the 2015 political crisis. Some of them had registered as refugees, while others did not for tactical reasons – for example, possibilities to visit or return to Burundi at some future point in time. Some of the young people I spoke with had personally been persecuted because of their (alleged) participation in protests or political opposition parties. All had witnessed violence and experienced intimidation and fear. Yet for them too, life and livelihood projects also informed their ongoing displacement practices.

The findings I share below present reconstructed summaries and, like in the theatre play, snapshots of the life stories of three young men. I selected these three stories based on their depth and illustrative power for my more generalised findings about mobility, displacement and resilience. One of these men is currently in Burundi, another in Canada, and a third, Aloïse, lives in Rwanda. In the text below, I ask when, how and why displacement was imagined and/or pursued by the three young men. I show that their mobility and displacement practices are deeply entangled, sometimes informed by efforts to escape present or anticipated situations of threat and violence, and other times in search of improvement against the backdrop of more generalised conditions of conflict and crisis; what Vigh (2008) called, 'chronic crisis.' In other words, their stories reflect how for many young

people, particularly young men, mobility-displacement is part of a collective, cultural repertoire to search for life and life chances to survive and thrive amidst chronic adversity.

4 | Findings: Mobility and Displacement in Young Men's Life Projects

In this section, I describe the life stories of Martin, Laurent and Aloïse, three men now in their mid-thirties and early forties. They came of age on the northern periphery of Bujumbura during the civil war in Burundi (1993–2005). They were raised in different neighbourhoods on this periphery, which were associated with specific ethnic groups.² During the war, ethnic segregation was violently upheld by army and youth militia groups (Muntunutiwe 2013; Berckmoes 2015). Certain neighbourhoods were considered for Hutu only – Martin lived in one of these –, for Tutsi only – Aloïse lived in one of these –, and other neighbourhoods, closer to the city centre, sometimes housed people of various backgrounds who were economically better off – this is where Laurent lived with his family when we first met.

4.1 | Mobility, Displacement and Life Projects: Martin Takes a Chance out of Chronicity

I met Martin in 2010, roughly 5 years after the civil war. He was in his early twenties. Like many young men at his age, he felt increasing pressure to become independent; to reach 'social adulthood' (Christiansen et al. 2006).

He had experienced many hardships in his young life. He lost his mother at the age of 2 and was raised by his maternal grandmother on the outskirts of Bujumbura while the civil war raged. Of Hutu descent, life in this area of the city was tough during the war. Martin still lived with his grandmother when we met, but as he told me then, his father had requested him to come stay with him. Although his grandmother was wary of this proposal, Martin hoped that the request signalled his father's intention to give him a share of the inheritance, as was, at least 'traditionally,' customary for fathers when sons were reaching adult age. He speculated it could be a plot of land, which would help him on his way to independence. Yet, after moving in with his father, much like his grandmother predicted, the two men hardly spoke with each other. To me, Martin blamed his father's present absence on him 'drinking too much.' Instead of continuing living at home and commuting to the nearby school, he thus decided to finish his secondary school as a boarding student. He did not want to return to his aging grandmother, so as not to burden her anymore.

In the run-up to the 2010 elections, he was solicited at his boarding school to become active for the ruling party CNDD-FDD. Although not particularly interested in politics, he felt it was impossible to refuse. The director of his school was an important party figure, and, he feared, especially as a boarding student, not participating might have perilous consequences. The prospect of a reward in terms of a job opportunity, like for many other politically active youths at the time, might also have played a role, although he did not tell me so explicitly (see for instance, Muntunutiwe 2013; Berckmoes 2015). After the 2010 elections, he finished secondary education and was offered a job

at the national post office, which he then explained to me as a reward for his political mobilisation activities.

The pay at the post office was low. When his grandmother passed away a year later, he deeply regretted that he had never been able to return her intergenerational care with a gift. He texted me about his sense of disillusionment, his strong emotions reflected in the many punctuation marks: '[not] even with 20,000 Burundian francs!' (text message, 2012). Some time after, he decided to pursue 'life chances' (Vigh 2006) outside Burundi.

Years later, he summarised his experiences in the following way: A friend had tipped him to go with him to northern Uganda for work opportunities. Arriving there, opportunities were less attractive than anticipated and they continued to South Sudan. He obtained a relatively rewarding job as a security guard for an international business. Yet the job came with danger, and they decided to move further to adjacent Central African Republic (CAR). In view of the ongoing civil war in CAR, Martin and his friend soon continued their journey to DRC. There they were apprehended by police and accused of being Burundian rebels, who were known to be in the country. The two young men were thrown in prison for several months. When finally released, Martin returned to Bujumbura. The journey in pursuit of a better living had been a fiasco, he reminisced (conversation, 2018). Today, Martin still lives in Bujumbura, now married with one child. He makes do with irregular earnings as a long-distance driver.

Martin's story shows how mobility features as a central cultural repertoire in aspirations for 'social adulthood' (Christensen et al. 2006) in Burundi. His story resonates with a large body of research that describes how being young in Africa, due to widespread poverty and other structural constraints, often means being 'stuck' (Sommers 2012) in 'waithood' (Honwana 2012). These studies seek to understand and explain how young people, particularly young men, try to 'expand their horizons of possibility' (Vigh in Christensen et al. 2006 31), which frequently translate into migration aspirations (e.g. Kleist 2016; Huijsmans et al. 2021). In this way in Burundi too, mobility is imagined as a repertoire of action for livelihood possibilities.

This repertoire shows important generational and gendered dimensions, resonating particularly with young men. In patriarchal Burundi, especially young men are expected to achieve financial independence as a youth and take on a provider's role in adulthood. The life paths and projects of young men, consequently, are more explicitly connected to a search of livelihood opportunities – through displacement and mobility. At the same time, especially young men are enlisted for or targeted in political violence too (Muntunutiwe 2013). While young women too imagine, anticipate and enact displacement, they are generally considered more vulnerable to abuse when not 'in place' under the guardianship of their husbands or caregivers.

4.2 | Cascading Mobility Over the Life Course: Laurent Dreams of Success

Although seen as a means for livelihood possibilities, the meanings and outcomes of physical mobility are far from given,

especially because of the insecurity in various contexts in the Great Lakes region. Displacement and mobility, as Easton-Calabria and Sturridge (2025) argue, can be deeply interconnected in often unpredictable ways, with sometimes mobility tipping over and into displacement and vice versa, and other times mobility and displacement folding into each other – leading to 'displacement in mobility,' or 'mobility in displacement.' Even more than for Martin, Laurent's cross-border movements show how, viewed over the life course, it can be difficult to place people and their experiences in either of these categories.

I met Laurent during my fieldwork in Bujumbura in 2010, 5 years after the civil war. He presented himself as a secondary school student and rap artist. Laurent was born in Bujumbura in the late 1980s. Compared to many families on Bujumbura's periphery, Laurent's family was relatively well-off. Of *Ganwa* origin³ and with roots in the historically privileged southern province of Bururi, his family had held important military positions throughout recent history. His grandfather had served the last *Mwami* (King) as a personal bodyguard until the latter was killed, one of his uncles was a powerful figure in the Ministry of Defence during the civil war, and another uncle served as a General when we met. His father too had served in the army, but after the war became a politician. While his older brothers joined the army, Laurent always dreamt of becoming a successful businessman instead.

When we met, Laurent had just returned from Uganda where he had recorded a rap album. He lamented that it was difficult to build a life in the music business in Burundi; intellectual property of artists was not respected, not even acknowledged by law. To finance his aspirations in music, Laurent traded drugs. On several occasions, he was arrested by the police. His family helped him out of these situations, but they were generally unhappy with his 'career' choices and urged him to continue his studies instead.

When I met Laurent again in 2011, he had dropped out of school but also given up his trade in drugs, as, he said, it was indeed very risky. With money he had saved, he started a chicken farm in his family's home province Bururi. His mother and brothers were encouraging him to go back to school, but he was more interested in making money, music, and starting independent householding. He asked my advice about whether he should also try to find a wife?

Although we stayed in touch occasionally, we did not see each other again until January 2015. He summarised what had happened in these years. His father passed away in 2012. His death had been a shock to the family, but they were now 'used to the situation' – they had found other ways to sustain a living. His farm had failed because of a disease that killed most chicken. Music remained his hobby but was difficult to build a life with, so he had now turned to 'trading in minerals.' He collected minerals in eastern DRC and travelled to Rwanda and other east African countries to sell on the black market. He was back in Bujumbura to look for a new market.

A few months later, the political crisis started and Burundi entered a period of widespread violence. Laurent was in DRC and decided to find trade routes other than with Bujumbura. At

some point, he sent me a message from Uganda, where he was learning to make sandals to sell. Not long after, he was in DRC, back into the mineral trade. Yet on one evening, he met serious risk on his route. He texted me that he had encountered 'assailants of MAYIMAYI [Hutu rebel group in DRC].' They stole all the minerals, his phone, wallet and passport. He was left only with, 'a sim card which [he] had in the pocket of [his] shorts ...' He asked me to send him money for him to travel back to his family in Bujumbura. (Text messages, 2015). Early 2016, he seemed back on his feet. He had returned to DRC and continued his efforts to set up a trade connection between DRC and Burundi.

The next time I heard from him, however, in July 2016, he had just fled from Burundi. He was in a refugee camp in Rwanda to recover from the wounds on his fingers, inflicted by the secret service in Burundi. Half a year later, when I was in Rwanda, he told me what had happened. On a late evening when he was at his family home, members of the secret service and the youth militia *Imbonerakure* had knocked on the door. They came to arrest him, as his regular absence and cross border movements made him a suspect of being a rebel of one of the nascent rebel movements in DRC. He was blindfolded and taken away, tortured, and locked up in a small dark cell. After some time, his family managed to pay bail for him. Laurent used the opportunity to cross the border illegally into Tanzania and then Rwanda, where he registered as a refugee.

When we met in Rwanda early 2017, he had moved from the refugee camp to a place he knew well from his mineral trade days, Rubavu, on the border with DRC. He was trying to launch himself into the sandal business there but was failing as the Rwandan government demanded significant investments and taxes. He was also contemplating joining a Burundian rebel movement that was operating from DRC. In his words, mainly out of revenge and 'to protect the women and girls in Burundi.' One of his brothers, he heard, was there too.

In the years that followed, he joined the rebel movement. Initially, his role was to recruit new members and help them cross illegally into DRC, a task that entailed continuous mobility. When the pressure on the battlefield rose, he was asked to join the fighters. During one of the attacks, he survived wounded and had to be taken to a hospital in Rwanda (phone call and text message 2020). After, he did not want to return to the battlefield. Yet he feared accusation of desertion. He fled deep into DRC to escape possible repercussions.

In the place he fled to in DRC, ethnic violence escalated. His background and features made him fear that he would be associated with the 'Tutsi' group there and end up a victim. He decided that he needed to negotiate his way back to Rwanda. His close relationship with a former rebel leader of a 'friendly Congolese rebel group,' residing in Rwanda, helped him, and the man became his business partner in a milk trading business across the border in Goma, DRC. The rising tensions in eastern DRC between the Congolese Banyarwanda and other ethnic groups, as well as between Rwanda and DRC, made trade extremely difficult, however. To give an example, on one occasion their shop and merchandise were looted and destroyed in ethnically targeted violence.

Meanwhile, Laurent's close sister married a Burundian in Canada, and they were starting a process for him to join them. As he was sharing with me the advances they made in the resettlement process, he commented: 'I am very happy maybe my dream of becoming a great businessman will become true' (text message, 2023). It took some more years, but Laurent currently resides in Canada.

Laurent's story reveals how mobility may turn into displacement and vice versa in unexpected ways, with both mobility and displacement deeply connected to livelihood opportunities in the war (affected) economy of the Great Lakes region. Laurent's story also illustrates that past life course experiences with cross-border movements may generate later ones in life. Mobility in his early years as a young man, cascaded into further movements; for example, by being a reason for persecution (his mobility for trade made him a suspect of rebellion) and in enabling his flight (after bail, he used his cross-border smuggling experiences to smuggle himself to Tanzania and then Rwanda). Laurent's life story can be considered spectacular, also for Burundian standards, and his life projects navigated and '... reconfigured in complex, contradictory, and inadvertent ways' (Lubkemann 2016 16). Yet for Laurent, like for Martin, mobility and displacement featured as central in their practices and projects for survival and livelihood – seeking to do well amidst adversity.

4.3 | Onward Mobility and Displacement: Aloïse's Dreams

'Guten Tag,' I hear on the other side of the phone. I start laughing, as I had not expected Aloïse to greet me in German (phone conversation, 2024). We usually speak in English, French, and occasionally, he tests me on my memory of his Kirundi lessons, as he taught me some when still in Bujumbura, in 2014. Aloïse has recently started learning German using a popular internet application. He explains that Germany might be a good country to relocate to with his wife and young children. Over the past few years, each time I talk to Aloïse he seems to be orienting to new places to move to, usually countries in Europe where he might pursue opportunities for further professional specialisation.

Aloïse, 2016–2025

Like Martin and Laurent, Aloïse (early 1980s), of Tutsi descent, grew up on the northern periphery of Bujumbura. His father had served in the army yet had retired for health reasons before the civil war started. Aloïse was only about ten years old when the war broke out. As a Tutsi living adjacent to a 'Hutu neighbourhood,' this meant that he experienced the war violence up-close. After the war, he finished secondary education and entered the university. When we met, he had just moved into a room at the university campus, not far from his family home.

As mentioned above, when the 2015 crisis started in Burundi, Aloïse had already left for Rwanda, initially with the intention

to stay for a short time only. He had not been politically active but had not held back his criticism to local leaders either. This meant that, even in absence, he was quickly identified as a potential target, with posters of his profile picture at the border. Altogether, the situation made him decide to remain as a refugee in Rwanda.

The first period in Rwanda was extremely difficult for Aloïse. When I was in Rwanda for research in 2025, I asked him again about this first period. He recalled how he had to rebuild his life from nothing. After some months, he found a first job. It was not well paid, but it allowed him to rent a room for himself. He recollected how happy he felt when his first salaries enabled him to also buy 'a small stove, *one* pan, *one* plate, *one* cup and *one* spoon...and I was sooooo happy!' (August, 2025). During the first years in Rwanda, he anticipated and tried to pursue onward migration mostly through a search for scholarships in Europe, but in vain. As time progressed, he secured a relatively well-paid job in Rwanda and started a family with a childhood friend from Burundi.

Despite achieving success in building a life in displacement in Rwanda, Aloïse still orients towards international mobility – though he has become more specific about his wishes. For instance, based on what he knows of the United States, where some of his family members now reside, he does not want to go to there. Belgium is not appealing either, he shared laughingly, as his (dominant) mother-in-law lives there. Maybe Canada, Australia, Germany... – his interests shift from time to time. When I ask about his dreams, he tells me that he hopes moving to Europe will enable him, one day, to take his young family on a 'real holiday' (conversation, 2025).

Aloïse, like many Burundians in their youth or with young families, appears to take mobility in displacement as a cultural repertoire that allows for a chance to do better. While his 'tool kit' include different 'habits, skills and styles' to draw from (Coe 2013) than those Martin and Laurent employ in their mobility and displacement practices, and though his ideas of wellbeing differ considerably from the other two young men too (see Appadurai 2004 on the capacity to aspire), for all three men mobility-displacement serves to overcome present and potential challenges in a life lived in chronically precarious conditions.

5 | Discussion: Anticipating Mobility-Displacement

'But why move at all?,' I challenge Aloïse for the umpteenth time on my most recent visit to Rwanda in August 2025. To me, he seems to have succeeded in life in Rwanda. 'Because security here,' he answers, 'is an illusion.' Yes, Kigali is safe, even by night, he tells me as we walk into Kigali's night. He cherishes the fresh air one can breathe when the city is calm, and how one can watch the lights that decorate Kigali's hills. 'This is very different than in Bujumbura (which he visited a month before),' he adds. In Bujumbura, few people would dare

to stroll freely at night. 'But it is not like in Europe either.' He tells me that security in Rwanda is not 'owned' by the community, like he imagines it is in Europe. Referring to the authoritarian regime of President Kagame, he adds, 'this country is the house of one man only.' He implies that it makes security fragile and potentially temporary. 'This is why I feel that I need to ...' He finishes his sentence with a nudge in my back, pushing me softly forward on the sidewalk to mimic further mobility.

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Large-scale anticipatory displacement in Burundi in 2015 signalled the need to understand displacement 'in the longer run of history' (Purdeková and Birantamije 2023 10). In this article, I adopted a long-term perspective by exploring displacement practices over the life course of young Burundian men, enabled through my longitudinal ethnography with Burundians. This life-course approach allows to explore displacement as a contextualised process, challenging common views of mobility versus displacement, and concrete life projects versus practices in the context of a more a generalised becoming (Collins 2018).

Efforts to understand migration are often caught in dichotomous logics, juxtaposing mobility and displacement. Mobility tends to be associated with agency, longer term strategies and sustainable support. Moreover, for mobility decision-making, futures are often seen as key. Futures can figure as hope (Pine 2014), imagination (Vigh 2009) or aspiration (Carling 2002; De Haas 2021). In line with this literature, the story of Laurent and Martin revealed how mobility serves in young people's life projects, particularly in relation to livelihood challenges in a war-affected economy and region marked by chronic decline. Yet both get caught up in various kinds of violent conflicts, showing how mobility and displacement alternate and interconnect. Where this led Martin to eventually return to Burundi, Laurent continued his search for wellbeing through mobility-displacement. He now lives in Canada. Aloïse on the other hand moved to Rwanda for professional training and in anticipation of potential violent conflict. He anticipates further mobility, balancing his constant vigilance to potential threat with a search for 'opportunities' to improve his and his family's life chances, culminating to a variety of small, yet meaningful anticipatory displacement practices, such as learning foreign languages. In other words, while many migration frameworks emphasise futures primarily in connection to mobility (Easton-Calabria and Sturridge 2025), futures are also unmistakably important for understanding anticipated and realised displacement in the Burundian context.

Second, exploring displacement practices over the life course reveals the need to see the migrant not 'as a utility-maximising individual...' (Collins 2018 2) who may aspire to migrate or to stay (Carling and Schewel 2018), but rather explore displacement-mobility in a broader context. The stories by Martin, Laurent and Aloïse show that their mobility-displacement practices are situated in a context where 'conflict, violence and abject poverty' have become deeply embedded in the social fabric (Das 2006), 'forcing [people] to make lives in fragmented and volatile worlds' (Vigh 2008 8). In this context, 'crisis' has come to serve as the

'normal' frame of reference (Vigh 2008; Roitman 2017), although seen in quantitative terms as that which is most prevalent rather than in a normative sense. Indeed, the three life stories exemplify that for young people in Burundi, 'their act of moving illustrates refusal to live in such [crisis] conditions...' (Horst and Grabska 2015 2). Notably, mobility-displacement has, however, very uncertain outcomes. Displacement practices are frequently employed in reactionary *and* anticipatory ways, in relation to actualised and potential events, but also more generally, I propose, perhaps reflexively, for seeking to do well amidst chronic adversity. Instead of strategies for coping or adapting, then, I propose to look at mobility-displacement as culturally scripted resources for resilience (cf. Kirmayer et al. 2011).

Resilience is generally understood as 'bouncing back' or 'doing well amidst adversity' (Zraly and Kagoyire 2021, *italics mine*). Resilience gained interest and traction to understand why many people in contexts marked by extreme violence, nonetheless, seem not to succumb to these circumstances. Early research, primarily in the field of developmental psychology (Garmezy 1991; Garbarino 2003) highlighted how individual traits and characteristics could facilitate positive adaptation in the face of adversity. Later research argued for an ecological perspective on resilience instead, and pointed to the importance of social, cultural and political resources that may foster resilience. Reflecting on the stories of Martin, Laurent and Aloïse, I find particularly relevant the studies that highlight the importance of 'collective and cultural terms' that may serve as resources for resilience (Kirmayer et al. 2011; Theron and Liebenberg 2014). These studies call attention to the locally rooted understandings and practices that may be mobilised to improve well-being. In Burundi, my findings show, mobilised for resilience, particularly among young men, are the historically emerged, locally rooted understandings and practices of displacement.

How resilience is imagined, differs across groups and individuals. Notable, for instance, is Aloïse's response when I probed on his dreams: he wants to take his family on a proper holiday – not because he has experienced holidays in his own life, but rather as he imagines people in Europe often do. His answer is revealing for how the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2004), to dream, is relational; shaped by class, positionality and through interaction with others. From this perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that Martin, from a long-term marginalised group in Burundi and modest family background, at some point decided to settle for precarity in Burundi, whereas Laurent, from a very differently positioned lineage and family history, continued to pursue grand dreams, despite the risks that these entailed. As noted before, mobility-displacement represents chances for survival, livelihoods and, sometimes, success particularly for young men.

In brief, in this article, I approached displacement practices as emerging in the encounter of different temporalities – the long run of history, the life course, and in relation to disaster events. I have combined theory and concepts on enduring effects of traumatic events like conflict and displacement, cultural repertoires, entanglements of mobility and displacement, and resilience to make sense of why and how displacement practices take shape in the lives of particularly young men in Burundi, sometimes in anticipation of disaster. I argued that understanding how different temporalities interact, enables understanding displacement practices in chronic crisis; and seeing

displacement not necessarily as central to life projects, but rather as a sedimented, cultural repertoire of action employed for resilience.

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Endnotes

¹Last updated 31 August 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/burundi?id=212>, consulted 10/09/25. The number includes some 37,000 people who left prior to 2015 but excludes refugees and asylum seekers who receive no UNHCR assistance or only within country-level programs.

²In Burundi, the meaning of ethnicity, *ubwoko* (sing.) in Kirundi, is highly contested. As people of different *amoko* (pl.) largely share the same language, religion and cultural symbols, various scholars have proposed that ethnicity in Burundi is perhaps more akin to castes or classes (Berckmoes 2014).

³Baganwa (pl.) are sometimes referred to as an ethnic group, alongside the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa in Burundi. However, the name mainly refers to princely ancestry.

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