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## Can migrants and refugees be regional residents in the Great Lakes region?

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Expanding the conceptual toolbox used to discuss regional migration in Africa, Lisa Damon researches the lived histories of Barundi who have made Uganda their home over generations. Building on long migrating experiences forged by travels, habitation and processes of disappearing, we are invited to think beyond identity and boundaries to what it means to be a citizen in the Great Lakes region.

*This blog forms part of the [Idjwi Series](#) which results from a writing retreat on Idjwi Island in Lake Kivu, DRC during which regional researchers gathered to present and refine their own research in November 2019.*

In Africa, the reality of regional migration has once again come under **scrutiny** as a response to xenophobic trends in the global North, assuming itself to be the prime destination for global migration. As the **numbers show**, this is simply not true. Most people move within their regions: the worlds they know most about. And they often do so on and *in* their own terms, circumscribed by context. These terms, I suggest, are better grasped by listening to how migrants theorise their own experiences than by attempting to theorise those experiences for them.

Since debates in migration and citizenship studies stress identity and belonging to explain people's mobility (or its absence), it is worth asking what questions inform the debates migrants themselves have during their travels and residency? Such consideration could expand the conceptual toolbox we use to understand regional migration on the continent, and better differentiate it from migration to the global North. Indeed, the historical and epistemological contexts that produced the contemporary regimes that govern identity and belonging in Central Africa's Great Lakes region are significantly different from those of Western Europe or the US.

Why then should we look at the former through the lenses of the latter? Where do we start to develop lenses particular to the phenomenon of migration in each region? And what is it that materialises the contours of a space as historically relevant for regional mobility?

Below are some of the salient features of the methodological approach I adopted to understand the migration of the **Barundi** (people originally from today's Burundi) to Buganda (the central kingdom of today's Uganda.)

## Embracing the paradox

I began my fieldwork in 2018 intent on focusing only on the life histories of those **Barundi** who had made Uganda their home over generations, by becoming Baganda through marriage, integration or invention of Baganda

clan genealogies; or by settling into local communities as Barundi neighbours. I did not seek to address the **refugee question**.

But what I soon found through interviews with several generations of Barundi living in Kampala, rural towns, villages and settlements was that this differentiation did not hold. Many Barundi held papers that identified them simultaneously as refugees, Ugandans and Burundians. For voting purposes, they used their Ugandan ID; for return trips to Burundi, they used their Burundian *laissez-passés*; and for hard times they used their refugee status to access land and rations within settlements. Although the instrumentalisation of identities is considered commonplace for the elite citizen of the world, it is far less acknowledged as a practice amongst the poor and marginalised. To make sense of the paradox of migrants being simultaneously foreign, native and refugee, I extended my historical timeline to include precolonial mobility and my geographical scope to the whole Great Lakes region.

## Taking migrants at their word

What then were the terms used by Barundi residents themselves to express the identity questions posed by migration? I tried to extract from the life histories they narrated and recurring conceptualisations of their experiences.

For example, while discussions were held in a multi-lingual context (Kirundi, French, Luganda, English, Swahili), one concept came up over and over again in Kirundi as a kind of opening summation, as if the variety of experiences expressed could all be encapsulated within this one verb: *kurobera*, which loosely means 'to disappear for a time'. This could mean alternatively, sequentially or simultaneously: disappearing from one's previous life for shorter or longer periods of time; disappearing from one's Burundian (national) or Bahutu, Batutsi or Batwa (ethnic) identity by 'passing' for or marrying into Baganda, Bakiga, Banyankole or Banyarwanda in **Uganda**; or disappearing by continuing to

move across the region, following the opportunities that life presents. The various meanings attributed to *kurobera* by migrants thus became the analytical framework I used to organise the array of experiential data collected. Instead of differentiating between natives, foreigners and refugees, I was now looking at different practices of disappearing and reappearing.

## Thinking beyond identity and its boundaries

Conceptualising *kurobera* then allowed a different landscape of belonging to emerge: one less based on ethnic and national identities and rather forged by the travels, habitation and disappearing processes enacted by migrants. Over half of the 112 residents I interviewed, both rural and urban, had also resided in other states of the region, for varying periods of time: Rwanda, DRC, Tanzania and Kenya. They had become more polyglot in the process. This meant the relevant geographical scope for thinking about their life trajectories was the Great Lakes region rather than any one country.

Also notable is that 90% had chosen Uganda as a destination because they had heard of its opportunities via networks established by older family members or friends who had *kurobera* before them. This meant that the relevant historical scope for thinking about this practice was one *longue durée*, extending back through the **colonial period** to a precolonial understanding of regional mobility as an enactment of the **political power of the peasant** (both farmer and herder) to move and settle in a neighbouring community when life in his or her own became intolerable.

By working through the paradox that thinking with identities produced and taking seriously the concepts migrants themselves use to think through their experiences, I was able to establish a different kind of analytical lens to study this particular form of regional migration. Bringing this extended lens to bear on the experiences of Burundi residents in Uganda at present requires rethinking the credentials of legal residency

that the region's states impose. In light of this long history of regional mobility, East African Community membership should grant all regional citizens the right to reside in any member state. Although right of residence was theoretically granted within the **EAC Common Market Protocol**, it has yet to be comprehensively implemented. Until it is, *kurobera* will continue to entail, among its various enactments, multiplying identity statuses in order to secure the right to make one's residence home.

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*Photo credit: Gregoire Dubois.*

## About the author



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Lisa Damon is a PhD fellow at Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) and resident of Kampala since January 2015. Her interest in this topic stems from having lived in Bujumbura as a child in the early 1990s. The title of her dissertation is 'The Barundi in Buganda: Not So Migrant Identities based on not so ethnic difference'.

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