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THE IMPACT OF REFUGEE-HOST COMMUNITY INTERACTIONS ON REFUGEES' NATIONAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES: THE CASE OF BURUNDIAN HUTU REFUGEES IN JOHANNESBURG

By Jean Pierre Misago

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to establish the impact of socio-economic interactions between Hutu Burundian refugees (living in Johannesburg) and South African populations on Burundian refugees' national and ethnic identities.

Although this is a case study on Burundian Hutu Refugees in Johannesburg, Rwandan refugees and South Africans were also included for comparative purposes. The snowballing technique was used to identify respondents and in-depth face-to-face interviews were used to collect data. Questions probed respondents' pre-relocation national and ethnic identity loyalties; the nature and frequency of interactions between them and local populations and other foreign nationals; and the respondents' current national and ethnic identity loyalties.

The study finds that despite regular contact with the host populations, refugee respondents maintained their ethnic and national identities, thus challenging the assumption that to become uprooted and removed from a national territory automatically causes people to lose their identity, traditions, and culture. Further, apart from the adoption of some new situational practices particularly by refugee respondents, the study finds no significant 'renegotiation' or 'contestation' of group identities in the cosmopolitan Johannesburg as both South Africans and refugees/migrants in the city seem to be firmly holding on to their distinctive identitive ideals. Although not conclusive, the study suggests that the negative nature of interactions between refugees and the host society, which compromises the possibility of assimilation and integration, as well as other internal and external factors such as the refugees' belief in the temporariness of their situation, may be among important factors that accounted for this maintenance of group identity.