"BURYING OUR DEAD IN YOUR CITY"
Interpreting individual constructs of belonging in the context of burial of loved ones in exile.

Research Paper in fulfilment of the requirements of Master of Arts in Migration Studies
University of Witwatersrand, South Africa

Eva A. Maina Ayiera

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In situations of migration and resettlement, a mentally healthy person will create conditions to maintain his inner security by satisfying his need for belonging.

Henry P. David (1970)
"Involuntary International Migration: Adaptation of Refugees"

ABSTRACT

Globalization and an exponential increase in cross-border migration have led to a redefining of belonging and membership. It is argued that the question of belonging is no longer a question of residential geography and ties to location, but one that is constructed in light of a decline of the meaning of fixed place in an ever more globalized world. Globalization has facilitated a rise of alternatives to place-bound identity. Yet, when refugees face the experiences of death and burial of loved ones in exile, they seem to cling to fixed place as the base for asserting their identity and where they belong while in exile. Although where one is buried is important in many African communities, burying loved ones on foreign land does not generate rather a new sense of connection to the foreign land. Instead, refugees repudiate ties to this soil and consciously invoke references to their homeland and geographical locations in describing where they belong. This paper presents a discussion of the concepts of belonging and place in the context of compelling experiences of death and burial in exile for refugees in a globalized world.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the technological diminution of distance have made geographical place less important in how we define belonging and membership. Current literature on migration argues that African cities are increasingly experiencing new orientations to place-making where fixed place has become less important in how migrants construct their identities and where they belonging (see Landau 2006; Bloemraad 2004; Gotz and Simone 2003; Williams and McIntyre 2001; Castles and Davidson 2000; Bauman 1998). Zhang (2001) asserts that the question of where one belongs is less a question of geographical location and more about emotional geography. This has allowed migrants – refugees[1] and voluntary movers alike – to forge spatial affiliations with place. Moreover, within the context of globalization, migrants are able to import their culture and need not assimilate into the new community in their identity formation.

However, as refugees find themselves with no choice other than to bury their loved ones away from home while in exile,[2] their narratives on belonging are laced with strong references to their homeland, underscoring the importance of geographical place as they define where they belong. This paper argues that notwithstanding the march of globalization and increasingly spatial patterns of belonging, fixed place remains a critical reference point in how refugees will define their membership, particularly after the experiences of death and burial in exile. Many communities in Africa place great emphasis on where one is buried as the basis for asserting rights to the 'soil' and where one belongs (see Page 2007; Geschière and Nyamnjoh 2001; Cohen and Odhiambo 1992; Ojwang and Mugambi 1989). For refugees, the experience of burial in exile

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[1] In this paper, use of the term 'refugee' includes those who have been granted formal refugee status and those who are in the process of having their claims assessed (asylum seekers).

[2] Exile and country of asylum are used interchangeably in this study to connote the country where the refugee resides a as a temporary refuge from the factors that caused him to flee from his home country.

prompts them to embrace identities that reiterate their membership to geographically bounded communities in their homeland and distance themselves from the alien soil where their loved ones are buried. The experiences of death and burial in exile accentuate their sense of alienation in the country of asylum and distance from the homeland where their roots are. Burial rites allow them to reiterate their membership to their home communities even while they are away from their homeland. Where they do not fully conduct these rites, it stirs them to assert membership to the homeland as the basis for their belonging rather than seek more spatial basis for belonging and identity.

Although the literature on migration and refugees as an important part of migration in Africa is expanding, there has been little focus on how migration affects them and particularly their constructs of home and he forces that shape meaning for them (see Fábos 2003; Williams and McIntyre 2001). This study focuses on migration on how refugees interpret belonging in the midst of compelling experiences that shape their identity while in exile. My guiding question was do refugees who experience burial of loved ones in exile develop new attachments to the place where their loved ones are buried; do their definitions of belonging become less place-bound.

I focused on a group of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congolese refugees) living in Nairobi. At the time of the study, return to their home country remained elusive, and Kenya did not allow for local integration of refugees. They could neither root in the country of exile nor return to their roots in Congo. My hypothesis was that burial in exile was likely to prompt claims of belonging and affiliation to the foreign soil where their loved ones are buried, given the importance of where one's loved ones are buried, and cause them to place less emphasis on fixed places as they redefine where they belong.

The data I gathered indicates that the refugees are more conscious of belonging and membership when they have had to deal with death and burial in exile than when they have not. The failure to conduct the appropriate burial rituals as per their customs intensified the sense of isolation and being rootless in the country of asylum. Their encounters evoked a need to assert membership based on where they were born, had grown up and their ancestors were buried. Burial rites were an important way of expressing solidarity with the culture and communities that gave them social identity and roots even when they were away from home. Rather than trigger the formation of new attachments to place or weaken the importance of place in defining themselves, death and burial had the reverse effect, prompting the refugees to reiterate membership to their ethnic communities based in Congo. The need to reaffirm membership of communities back home after bereavement and burial in exile was expressed through the refugees' determination to return home and re-enact the customs related to death and burial, thereby preserving their membership to their geographical communities.

This study is part of a larger investigation[3] that explores 'globalization from below': how migrants in African cities affect globalization processes and the politics of the cities, and how their socioeconomic networks across several cities affect the characters of these cities. It contributes to the findings of a core question in the main study:

> *What is the nature of urban migrants' linkages with their countries and communities of origin and how do these ties affect their livelihoods and attitudes towards place?*

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[3] See University of Witwatersrand Forced Migration Studies Programme *Migration and the New African City* research project (http://www.migration.wits.ac.za/UJPbackground.html)

It traces where refugees fall in this discourse, focusing on their individual interpretations of place and belonging in the contexts of displacement and globalization. This paper explores the argument through three sections. The first part reviews current literature on belonging and burial in the context of globalization and the arguments for increasing spatial membership in Africa. The second section highlights the methodology used gather data and interpret the refugees' definitions of place. The third section presents the findings of the study, interpreting the meanings the refugees ascribe to belonging through their narratives and deciphering where refugees fall in the debate on increasing spatial membership in a globalizing world. It contributes to the discussions on migration and cultural adaptation, particularly how migration in Africa affects and is affected by refugees.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Belonging understood in its "traditional sense" (Gotz and Simone 2003) alludes to the historical connections one has to established social spaces underscored by a protracted history of settlement, a cohesive sense of community and stable social institutions. In other words, a person belongs to a place because they are tied to that place by their ancestry and history of residing there, with the right to exclude others. It refers to the connection that gives a group(s) the highest claim to a place, to the exclusion or limitation of others' claims. Belonging invokes a sense of claim to physical space by virtue of defined interests and common identities of culture, nationality, history, and sometimes race and religion.

Where "anthropological approaches have conventionally favoured a focus on homogenous, sedentary and bounded communities as the way to study belonging" (Papastergiadis 2002), now more scholars are exploring the subjective meaning of migration and belonging in order to provide generalisations on cultural, identitive, political and economic transformations resulting from migration (Landau 2006; Ahponen 2004; Malkki 1995). There is a growing emphasis on the micro forces that influence belonging and the meaning of home (Williams and McIntyre 2001; Featherstone 1998). Globalization has necessitated rethinking concepts of home and belonging outside the traditional assumptions of the migration-acclimatization-assimilation models of earlier migration studies (Gordon 1964).

The postmodern migrant is in a state of permanent transience by choice (Castles and Davidson 2000), moving as his whim dictates, choosing not to root in one place, but rather using each new place as the launch pad for his onward journey. Place has become less important in how we define where we belong and mobility between multiple

residences has allowed the migrant to belong without roots in one place. The postmodern migrant has adapted by maintaining complex attachments rather than remaining fixed to one centre, and forging identities that reflect overlaps of place-bound and non-place-bound affiliations. Although they may retain perfunctory legal ties and loyalties to their countries of origin, Ahponen (2004) notes that they develop weaker linkages with their places of origin as fixed reference points for their cultural identity. They forge new links as they move.

With a weak emphasis on place, the concepts of home and belonging become transportable. Adaptive strategies and a cultural stretch over distance allow migrants to transport their communal identity and establish new roots, or form no roots at all in their new environments. Castles and Davidson (2000) further argue that though they transport their culture, food, goods, symbols and rituals, this does not amount to a symbolic attempt to return home, but rather to create new definitions of home and belonging that meet their needs. Globalization has given postmodern migrants a keenness to leave their geographical home because it also provides them with the space to forge new affiliations that need not be tied to place. They undergo significant cultural transformations as an integral part of their experience, including the assumption of multiple identities to adapt to their new contexts.

However, even with cultural and identitive transformations in migration, many scholars agree that burial rites are among the most enduring cultural practices, and migrants will strive to repatriate the remains of loved ones to the homeland – whether from urban areas to rural homelands, or across borders. Parkes (1972: vii) remarks,

> *Rites of passage which attend bereavement have remarkable vitality and there is no society known to anthropologists that has abandoned them altogether.*

Burial rituals and customs allow the individual to claim affiliation and express solidarity with a defined community even when they are away from home. They give the individual a link that perpetuates his social identity in connection with his ancestors, the living and the unborn. Indeed, for some migrant communities, conducting burial rites according to custom is so important that they will raise money to repatriate deceased community members even when other social needs remain unmet. Burial societies are some of the best structured social organizations within immigrant communities (Moore 1980).

Even so, migrants who face death away from their homeland are able to separate the importance of repatriating remains of loved ones to the homeland and re-establishing roots in the homeland. They retain the opportunities to continue in indefinite transience and defining the membership spatially while fulfilling customary norms and sending deceased members of the community back to the homeland with the appropriate rituals. But what is the effect on a migrant community that has not choice but to bury its loved ones on foreign soil, without the agency to perform all attendant burial rites? How do the migrants interpret belonging particularly when the option of return to the country of origin is fleeting at best, and their loved ones are interred in foreign soil?

Geschière and Nyamnjoh (2001) illustrate the importance of where one is buried through the study of the *Bamileke* of Cameroon. They narrate the case of a *Bamileke* politician who grew up in an Anglophone district of Cameroon and was rejected by the *Bamileke* community principally because his deceased father had not been buried on *Bamileke* soil. In his desperation to belong, the politician exhumed his father's remains, purchased a piece of land and reburied him among the Bamileke, because "where one is buried determines where one belongs."

Many communities in Africa place great emphasis on where and how their community members are buried. Individuals often strive to repatriate remains of loved ones for burial in ancestral soil, and performance of burial rituals which reaffirm membership of the community. Among the Congolese, most ethnic groups believe in a series of elaborate rituals that allow the spirit of the deceased person to move on to the spiritual realm and protect the living from ill-fortune[4]. How one is buried becomes an important matter for the living and for their welfare. However and wherever community members migrate, they will try either to repatriate the deceased person to the homeland or to conduct the burial rituals where they are, to maintain their identity and connection with their homeland.

CONGOLESE REFUGEES IN KENYA

Many of the Congolese refugees in living in Kenya today are victims of Democratic Republic of Congo's (Congo) turbulent political history in the last 10 years. A number of those interviewed in this study had been in Kenya for over 4 years and did not know when they could return to Congo. Their journey from Congo to Kenya crosses through at least two countries between Kenya and Congo.

Congo lies to the Southwest of Kenya. It does not share a border with Kenya and there is little connective history between the two countries. Malcolm Guthrie's Bantu migration theory of 1971 suggests that Bantu speakers of Africa originated from southern Congo and spread in all directions across the continent. In about 1000 BC, the Bantu migration moved from regions that may include present day Congo and Central African Republic to eastern Africa. In the 15th Century, Arab traders moved through east Africa and into parts of Eastern Congo. With the trade, Swahili spread through east Africa into eastern

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[4] Interviews with respondents in this study

Congo. Swahili is a shared language between Kenyan and Eastern Congo from where majority of the refugees in Kenya migrate.

Most Congolese refugees in Kenya live either in Nairobi or in the refugee camps. Kenya enforces a mandatory camp policy[5] which requires that all refugees reside in one of two designated camps: Kakuma Camp in northern Kenyan near the Kenya/Sudan border or Dadaab Camp in Eastern Kenya near the Kenya/Somalia border. UNHCR estimates that there are about 2,400 registered Congolese refugees living in the country.[6] Many others live as illegal immigrants or have not completed the registration process with UNHCR.[7]

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[5] Interview on 27th July 2007 with Head, Department of Refugee Affairs, Ministry of State for Immigration and Registration of Persons

[6] Estimate as at April 2007 received from the UNHCR Public Information office

[7] The UNHCR official estimates suggest that the total urban refugee population stands at about 30,000. However, these figures reflect only those registered with UNHCR, and exclude a larger number who are asylum seekers or refugees but have not formally documented their presence. Ndege, Kagwanja and Odiyo (2002) suggest that the figure is somewhere between 60,000 to 100,000 urban refugees.

METHODOLOGY

As an interpretive study, the goal of this research was to understand and interpret the effect of death and burial in exile on refugees' narrative on belonging. The findings therefore attempt to present an objective interpretation of the refugees' subjective constructs of belonging as they deal with death and burial in exile. I purposed to investigate how these experiences, which ordinarily would invoke claims of membership to the soil where loved ones are buried, affect refugees' sense of belonging. My approach was not strictly limited to establishing causality, but broadly focused on interpreting the respondents' descriptions and narratives.

STUDY POPULATION

I focused on 20 Congolese refugees in Nairobi, 13 who had lost their loved ones in exile and seven who had not lost any close relatives or friends while in exile. The group of seven worked as a control group to help isolate the changes in attitudes to belonging attributable to the experiences of death and burial in exile. Of the 20, six were women and the 14 were men. All were over 18 years. They were from the *Bembe, Buyu, Bware, Emba, Fuleru, Hema, Indo, Kalanga, Lendo, Rega, Uvira* and *Zoba* ethnic groups. I used Swahili to communicate with them. In order to provide interpretive and in-depth analysis of the subject matter, I had to focus on a small group (see LeCompte 1998). However, this limits the ability of the study to be truly representative of the larger population, which is an inherent challenge of interpretive studies.

FRAMING BELONGING

Belonging is a subjective and an intangible variable that is difficult to measure. For the study, my working definition of belonging was the connection to physical place by virtue

of defined interests and attachments that gives the refugees equal claim to the place and a source of identity (see Gotz and Simone 2003; Zhang 2001). To aid in interpreting the refugees narratives and limit the breadth of variance in indicators defining belonging, I focused on three issues:

i) Descriptions of their relationship to the homeland prior to departure. How had the circumstances of their departure affected their relationship with the homeland?

ii) Descriptions of their sense of belonging and relationship to place – both the homeland and the country of asylum. Had burying their loved ones in exile given them a sense of connection to or soil where they were buried?

iii) Descriptions of belonging as regards permanent future plans – were their plans of moving and settling a reflection of their sense of belonging? Where would they want to live and grow up with their families and to be buried?

I used an interview guide with key questions that I posed to all the respondents. None of the respondents was willing to have the conversations recorded on Dictaphone so I transcribed the interviews as they were going on. My analysis and interpretation was continuous during the interviews and after transcribing the interviews (see Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2004; Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte 1999). In the analysis, I identified the normative socio-cultural structures pertaining to death and burial rites as described by the respondents, and juxtaposed these with descriptions of their experiences in burying their loved ones in exile and their sense about place as a result. I interpreted meaning throughout their narratives, in the expressions and words they used to describe place – both the country of asylum and their homeland – before and after their experiences in exile (see Carspecken and Apple 1992).

An important shortcoming of this approach is the possible loss of meaning in the two-way translation. For both Congolese and Kenyans, Swahili is a second language. Although as the interviewer I spoke and understood Swahili well, there is the danger that some expressions and meanings may have been lost in the respondents interpreting their narratives from their original languages to Swahili. To minimize the effects of this problem, I chose respondents who spoke Swahili relatively well.

SAMPLING DESIGN

I used purposive sampling to identify respondents who had lost their loved ones and accidental sampling to identify those who had not lost loved ones in exile. Purposive sampling involves a headhunt for respondents who have information that is uniquely relevant to the research question (see Patton 1990). It is a useful method where the relevant respondent characteristics are uncommon to a study population and found among a few individuals. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, the method was advantageous in ensuring the selected respondents excluded those who had recently lost their loved ones and were still dealing with grief. To achieve this result, I worked with a respected refugee community leader to help identify the relevant respondents. To reduce the influence of bias on the part of the community leader, I included in the criteria for identification a requirement that the respondents must be from different ethnic communities and include male and female respondents. Of the 13 participants who had lost loved ones in exile, four were women.

I used the second method, convenience or accidental sampling, to identify the respondents who had not lost their loved ones in exile. The characteristics required for this subset were more general to the population, and it was likely that the larger number of Congolese refugees in Nairobi fit into this category. I approached the Congolese in

common assembly places and obtained at random seven respondents who had not lost loved ones in exile and were willing to give an interview. Of the seven, two were women.

All the interviews were conducted in Nairobi. On mutual agreement with the refugees, I conducted the interviews in a church compound which was central to the refugees' place of residence, and represented a safe space for them where they could be at ease. Most of the refugees were comfortable answering personal questions away from the immediate vicinity of their places of residence.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

I collected the data on the respondents' perceptions through in-depth individual interviews lasting an average of 45 minutes to an hour. The interviews were unstructured, but were guided by a set of general themes and questions. I obtained consent to interview from each respondent, explaining the nature and purpose of the interview and asking them to sign a consent form to ensure they understood and were willing to be interviewed. I also informed them they were free to stop the interview at any point or to decline to answer any questions they were uncomfortable answering.

I paid specific attention in selecting the first category of respondents to ensure none of them was dealing with raw grief or uncomfortable with the subject matter. I was cautious in phrasing the interview questions so as not to offend, given the nature of the subject matter. None of the respondents expressed discomfort or unwillingness to answer any of the questions. One respondent was hesitant about answering questions related to his flight from Congo but this was due to his concern for the safety of him and his family. However, with the understanding that he was at liberty to withhold any information he was not comfortable divulging, and the assurance of anonymity in so far as is possible,

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he was content to speak in general terms of his flight from Congo, without disclosing the present location and circumstances of his family. He did not have reservations discussing his experience of bereavement and sense of belonging.

The inability to record the interviews electronically presented a limitation in data collection since I was in the role of interviewer and documenter simultaneously. As such, it is possible that some of the words and nuances of the narratives were lost in the process. I used the guiding questions to help speed the documentation process as the interviews progressed.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The University of Witwatersrand ethical standards for research on human subjects guided the ethics of this study. Given the relative sensitivity of the subject matter I took precautions to ensure the research process remained within the accepted ethical standards. These included an informed consent form given to each participant before the interview, as well as informing the respondents of their freedom to discontinue the interview at any point or decline to answer any questions without negative repercussions ensuing. I handwrote the interviews rather than record them electronically as the respondents were not comfortable with electronic recordings.

To protect the respondents from recognition through the data collected. I omitted their names on the interview transcripts, having warned them that I would make every effort to keep the data safe and ensure anonymity but could not absolutely guarantee that the information would not fall into the hands of a third party. I also restricted the interview questions to the relevant subject matter without delving into the respondents processing of death and grief. With these precautions, the respondents were at ease and willing

participated in the interviews. None of the respondents approached declined to participate in the research.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

CONSTRUCTS OF BELONGING BEFORE DEATH AND BURIAL IN EXILE

Two subsets of the population were examined in this study: the respondents who had lost their loved ones in exile and those who had not lost their loved ones in exile. The attitudes of the respondents to place at the time they were leaving the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo) are similar for both subsets. Since the departure was involuntary, triggered by flight from life threatening or traumatizing happenings, most of the respondents at the time of departure did not think they would ever return to Congo. At the time of their flight they were willing to sever ties with the homeland and explore new arrangements of belonging, in a bid to escape physical and psychological horrors that prompted their flight.

One respondent vividly recalls his flight from Congo:

> There was so much fighting. Fighting, fighting, fighting everyday; gunshots everywhere for many hours during the day and night – my wife was very disturbed by these gunshots. She would hear the gunshots and it would make her so scared; crying and screaming. One day, when there was so much fighting, it is as if she went mad. She ran out of the house screaming and pulling the children with her. She did not know where she was running to, but in fact she was running straight towards the gunshots. It was as if she was not herself and did not know what she was doing. My neighbour is the one who stopped her before she reached the place where there was much fighting. He pulled her back home and I think that is when she realized what she was doing. I had never seen my wife like this. After this, I took my family and left Congo, I did not think we would ever return.

For this respondent, the significance of geographical location as the place he belonged was diminished by the disruptive factors that forced him and his family to flee.

Similarly, Respondent 8's recollection of his departure from Congo left him certain at that he would never return to Congo, but rather, would move on and redefine where he belonged. He narrates,

> When I left Congo, I did not think I would return. My family, we left at the [height of] the war. There was so much fighting for so many years and I thought it would never stop. I had heard about people who had left their homes to go to the market and never came back. In the homestead next to ours, one of the girls was shot in the leg and I heard her leg became completely bad. We were afraid that our children would get hurt with all the war around us. I didn't want them to grow up with nothing but fighting, fighting, fighting all the time as if this was normal life. So we left.

Majority of the respondents having gone through harsh experiences that forced them to leave home harboured immediate thoughts of severing ties from their homeland in a bid to distance themselves from the traumatic experiences they left behind. Nonetheless, some of the respondents remained conscious that they would eventually return home, despite the factors leading to their departure. At this level, the response of those who had lost loved ones in exile and those who had not lost loved ones was indistinguishable. Respondents from both subsets did not think they would return at the time they were leaving while the others were determined to return home.

It would appear that the departure experiences including uncertainty on whether they could return home had begun to influence their perspectives on place, with many becoming open to developing new ties elsewhere and forging a better life away from home. However, these attitudes to home at the point of flight seem to have been an immediate, temporary reaction to the difficult experiences that forced them from their homelands. After several years living away from home, many of the respondents reported that they did not retain the same determination to sever links with Congo or never to return to Congo.

Respondent 9 had lived with her family in the Uvira forests for two years to escape the fighting that was raging in Uvira, Eastern Congo. She recalls horrific incidents of people kidnapped and turning up dead in the villages and some who fled forests, mauled by wild

animals. She did not think she would ever return to Congo. However, four years into her exile she expressed different sentiments:

> Everything in [Nairobi] requires money. You must pay for housing, pay for water, pay for food, and everything else. If you don't have a job or a steady source of income, you cannot survive. It is like living in the forest but there is no war. When the war ends, I will return to Congo with my family.

Many respondents expressed similar sentiments: at the point of departure they did not think they would ever return to Congo, but after living in exile, they were willing to return to Congo, some indicating they would do so at the first opportunity.

Only two respondents indicated a continuing determination never to return to Congo, despite their experiences in exile. One of them, Respondent 1, vowed never to return, principally because of the conflicts with his family and in-laws, in addition to the conflict that had engulfed his region. Home, for him would be a place where he and his wife, though from different ethnic communities, could live together in peace without the violence and threatens they had endured from their families. Respondent 3 would have liked to return to Congo but he did not think he ever would because his wife was seriously psychologically affected by the conflicts and had not yet recovered. For as long as she remained unwilling to return, he too remained unwilling to return.

The changing perspectives suggested that the respondent's ties to home remained strong after initial emotions, or could also point simply to a disillusion with life in the country of asylum. At the time of departure from Congo, in addition to fleeing for their lives, they were also moving towards what they perceived as better economic possibilities. Most of the respondents, like many refugees, were hoping for the opportunity of resettlement to third countries where they could pursue better economic and self development opportunities. The re-ignition of their connection to their homeland

could easily be a reflection of their disillusion with the economic possibilities with the country of asylum. As the difficulties of living in exile began to take their toll on the refugees, they became more forgiving of the horrors of that forced them to flee from Congo than accepting of the discomforts that plagued their existence in Kenya. Where they may have initially left Congo with thoughts of never looking back and moving on to resettle in a third country, the frustration of their journeys and plans while in asylum made Congo seem like the better option, the lesser to two evils. However, in the face of death and burial in exile, the narratives of home and belonging began to differ between the two subsets.

BURIAL IN EXILE AND CONSTRUCTS OF BELONGING

The respondents, drawn from 12 tribes of Congo, indicated that their cultures allowed them to bury the deceased where the death had occurred, even away from home. Hence, although repatriation of remains to the ancestral home was important, it remained a question of preference and economic means rather than a cultural requirement. It was difficult to determine from the interviews whether the respondents' acceptance of burial away from home was merely an acceptance of a lack of means to repatriate the remains rather than a reflection of the accommodativeness of their cultures. On the question of the burial rituals, the respondents attached great significance to how the loved ones were buried. These experiences pointed to distinctions in the attitudes to place between those who had buried loved ones in exile and those who had not.

The experience of losing loved ones in exile and the failure to perform all the requisite rituals evoked a sense of alienation and an acute awareness that they did not belong. In addition to the difficulties that they were facing in asylum, the refugees who had buried

their loved ones in exile felt even more isolated when foreign burial laws and lack of economic means supplanted their customs that allow them to bury their deceased as per community. The failure to perform the proper burial rites left many of those who had lost loved ones feeling disconnected from home and keen to reassert their identity and membership to communities at home. Most of the 13 respondents who had lost loved ones in exile expressed a desire to return home and perform these rituals or re-enact the funerals as a way of affirming their connection to their communities hence where they belong.

Respondent 13's narrative emphasizes the feelings of alienation that the refugees experienced from the death in exile and being unable to bury loved ones according to their customs. She left Congo for Kenya in 2004. She is from a small tribe, the *Wakalanga,*[8] found in Bukavu in Eastern Congo. During the flight from Congo, she met a fellow tribesman and they travelled together to Kenya. Because hers "is a small tribe and there are not many of [them] in Kenya" a strong friendship forged between them. However, her friend died shortly after their arrival in Kenya. Of burial rites, she says:

> Among the *Wakalanga*, when someone dies, the body must stay overnight in the homestead. The following day, the people who carry the body must be the same ones to lower it into the grave, and no one else should touch it. After the burial, two women from the village will sit by the roadside on the way to the homestead to wash the hands and feet of the men if the dead person is a man or of the women if the dead person is a woman. When [my friend] died, his body was sent to the mortuary by UNHCR[9] since the agency was responsible for him as a refugee. They organized for his burial in the city burial ground. I felt very bad. I had met him on the way to Kenya but he was like a brother to me because our tribe is very small. I do not know his family back home. Maybe his family have not heard that he is dead. I wish I could have sent his body home. We did not follow any of our customs. I was alone; I did not know any other *Kalanga* people. How could I follow our customs, when I had no money for his burial?

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[8] The prefix "Wa-" denotes "people of", hence *Wakalanga* are the *Kalanga* people
[9] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

The respondent had no sense of closure because none of the customs of the *Kalanga* was followed and she was not able to reach his family in Congo and inform them, since she did not know them. The experience underscored a disconnection, and made her keenly aware that she was part of a small tribe whose members were very few in Kenya. For her, re-establishing a connection to where she belonged and asserting her membership of a group in a situation where she felt alienated meant conducting the *Kalanga* rituals attendant to burials. The inability to do this emphasized her rootlessness and the fact that she did not belong to the place, community or culture in the country of asylum. She also expressed a fear of having let down the *Kalanga* community in Congo. However, she found solace in the fact that her friend received a "Christian burial" which gave her a sense of identity as a practicing evangelical Christian. We shall return to this theme further ahead.

Respondent 10 expressed equally strong sentiments. He was a 26-year-old *Zoba* man from Eastern Congo who came to Kenya in 2002. He had travelled with three cousins who were like brothers to him. In 2005 one of his cousins died after a long illness. He narrated his experience on burial customs while in exile:

> When a person dies [among the] *Wazoba*, the family takes the body and washes it. The water used to wash the deceased is then taken and the [immediate] family members are washed in it. After washing, the body is opened to remove the insides and then left to sleep in the house for two or three days and buried. Before the burial happens, they clean the intestines of the dead one and some things from inside the body are mixed into a porridge which [the relatives] must drink. After the burial, we mourn the dead one for three days. The older men sleep outside and keep a fire burning throughout this period.

The respondent and his cousins were unable to conduct the required burial rituals and this left him very affected. He and his cousins refused to attend the funeral afraid that failure to perform the rituals would condemn them. UNHCR arranged for the body to be

taken to the mortuary for burial preparation in keeping with Kenyan laws. When his parents who were living in Tanzania learnt what had happened, they told the respondent and his cousins to make every effort to delay the burial until they could travel and perform the burial rituals or to send the remains home to Congo. However, they did not have sufficient resources to delay the burial and keep the body in the mortuary, or to repatriate the remains to Congo. UNHCR organized for the burial. Four days after the burial, the respondent went to the grave and planted a small stick inside the grave as custom required, in order to fend off any bad luck that may have arisen from the failure to conduct the proper rituals. The respondent's parents were not pleased with turn of events and dedicated their resources and energies towards arrangements for the respondent and cousins to return to Congo.

For this respondent, conducting burial rituals was a way to state his membership with a determined geographical community with a common culture, even while he was away from home. The failure to perform these rituals left him acutely aware of his detachment from place and the community with which he had grown up. In the end, the respondent averred his unwillingness to remain in exile lest another of his cousins die and they face the same problem again. He was emphatic that he wanted to be buried "in Congo soil". His definition of where he belonged was connected to the place of his birth; where he had grown up, and where his co-ethnics lived and shared a common culture.

Similarly, when Respondent 11 was unable to fulfil burial rites for his deceased brother, he felt compelled to return to Congo and have the elders perform burial rites so that he and his family can be cleansed. According to the *Lendo*, if a person is not 'sent off' properly after death, his spirit remains to haunt the living. The respondent recalls that he was unable to fulfil funeral obligations because "as refugees, UNHCR [was] responsible

for [their] welfare," which entailed sending his brother's body to the mortuary and organizing for a funeral three days later. The *Walendo* funeral rites require that the deceased's body is washed in burial herbs and anointed in burial oil. The elders speak a word over the deceased and over the family which ensures a proper send off that allows the deceased to rest and the living to go on with their life.

The respondent states:

> I was very disturbed. I did not wash my brother with burial herbs or apply the burial oil on his body. When he was buried he was not wrapped in the traditional thongs, which would have sealed his soul so that he does not come back for the living. Now one of my sons is very sick and I fear that my brother will return for him. I refused to go for the funeral because the entire burial was [taboo]. I must take my family back [to Congo] so that we can receive the herbal cleansing, or else my brother will finish all of us.

He felt unable to settle anywhere until he resolved the 'problem' of his brother's burial and this required him to travel back to Congo. Home was where this serious breach of culture could be corrected and he and his family would be released from the burden failing to perform burial rites. Find absolution

Respondent 9's perceptions were comparable. Her sister died in child birth and the baby girl died shortly afterwards. Among the *Uvira* people, when a mother and child pass away, their bodies are buried next to each other. However, due to cost and logistical obstacles her sister and niece were buried after three days in the mortuary, in different places in a public cemetery in Nairobi, with no headstones and nothing to mark the graves. She had this to say:

> I don't like it that my sister was buried so far away from home. In our custom, we usually cement the grave and place a headstone over it, with the name of the deceased person, her age, and a bit of her life story. This way her children and other generations can see her grave and her legacy would carry on. Where they buried her, there was no marking, nothing to mark the grave and her daughter

> was buried far away from the mother. This is not normal. I feel bad that when I leave Kenya I will leave their bodies here and their graves are not even marked.

Inability to carry out burial customs made the respondents more acutely conscious of their rootlessness and disconnection from their culture that also defined their social identity. For some, the failure to bury loved ones under the requisite rituals hang over their heads as an indictment, in addition to a reminder of their separation from home. It prompted a sense of urgency to return to Congo and re-establish the link to place, and reassert their continued belonging to a place even though they were physically away from that place. Some respondents kept items symbolic of the deceased person, such as hair, innerwear, clothes, soil or a rock from the grave, which they intended to take back to Congo and re-enact the funeral. The fact of interment of their loved ones in the host country did not prompt any sense of belonging to the country of asylum. Instead, the refugees' responses indicated a rejection of the host country. They felt alienated because of these experiences hence they were determined not to remain in Kenya. They felt no sense of belonging even though their loved ones were buried in Kenya. On the other hand, the respondents who had not lost loved ones in exile felt no sense of urgency or obligation to return to Congo. Their desire to return was a response to the difficulties they were facing as refugees in Kenya, and the lack of opportunities for resettlement to third countries.

On the other hand, the respondents who had not lost loved ones in exile continue to allude to a willingness to move and establish themselves wherever opportunities were best. They felt strongly that the concepts of home and belonging were transportable, and as respondent 17 stated, they would always be Congolese nationals wherever they went. This in his view did not preclude them from establishing themselves in a new place, including Kenya if the opportunities were ripe.

INTERPRETING BELONGING AND PLACE

Although the respondents who had lost loved ones in exile emphasized a resolve to return and re-establish a connection with their communities and customs in Congo, it did not necessarily translate into an intention to re-root in Congo. All the respondents found life in Kenya economically and socially difficult which contributed to their view of Kenya merely as a transit country. Specifically, none of the respondents who had lost loved ones in exile was willing to settle in Kenya while at least three of the respondents who had not lost loved ones in exile were willing to settle in Kenya and pursue educational opportunities, if the economic conditions were conducive. They linked rooting to the place that would offer the greatest economic and social benefit.

The fact of burying their loved ones in Kenya did not invoke a sense of right or claim over place, but rather, generated the certainty that they did not belong at all to the country of asylum. Their focus therefore was firmly on reasserting claim to their geographical roots as the basis for belonging. The difficulties experienced in losing and burying their loved ones in exile augmented a sense of isolation which caused them to reject the country that was 'responsible' for these difficulties.

Interestingly, their responses to resettling in a new country were different. The experiences with burial played an important part in influencing the respondents' attitudes to place, but other variables may have contributed to these attitudes. The economic difficulties with which the respondents were living made Kenya an unattractive place to settle. However, their exposure to migration possibilities made onward movement to third countries a strong factor in how they configured their future plans for settling and living. Respondent 3 stated that he did not want to remain in Kenya because the culture

was too liberal, too permissive. He had buried his uncle in Kenya, but he did not want to bring up his children in Kenya. He felt that in Kenya, his children had been exposed too early to sexuality through the music videos aired on public television, and through the generally permissive dress sense and conduct of Kenyans. However, he was willing to resettle with his family in a country where his children had opportunities for self development.

Similarly, Respondents 6, 8, 9, 12 and 13 who had all lost loved ones in exile would not contemplate remaining in Kenya, nor did they feel any connection to Kenya because life was too difficult economically and they did not feel like they belonged, but were merely passing through. Respondents 10 and 11 were emphatic that they would seek opportunities to return to Congo and perform the appropriate rituals, and they were just as firm that they would not settle in Kenya. They, however, remained open to resettling in the West when the opportunity arose.

Economic possibilities were important in how the respondents defined where they would like to settle. Majority of the respondents who had lost loved ones in exile stated they would consider resettlement to a third country especially in the West as a first option rather than go back to Congo. At least two respondents were actively pursuing resettlement. Similarly, most of the respondents who had not lost loved ones in exile were eager to resettle in the West. Distinctly, they were not as keen on returning home as those who had lost their loved ones in exile nor did they feel the need to re-establish a connection with Congo.

When asked where they felt they belonged, all the respondents were unequivocal in their claim to Congo as the place where they belonged. They determined 'belonging' on the

basis of where one was born, the languages spoken, the larger community, and where one's ancestral roots lay. Echoing the sentiments of Respondent 17, Respondent 14, who had not lost a loved one in exile, summarized:

> I am a 'Congoman'. My parents are Congolese, I was born there, I speak at least three of the local languages and French and that makes me Congolese. Even though I may live outside Congo for a while, Congo will always be home to me

Ahponen (2004) suggests that rootlessness has the effect of loosening ties with a one-dimensional fixed culture as the migrants move away from home and interact with different people and customs. He states,

> An elementary condition of our existence is to be in [motion] without being fixed to a specific community which has a certain placement with culturally identifying properties and strict boundaries.

In defining where they belong, most respondents viewed Congo as the only basis for their belonging because this is where they had been born and raised. However, their exposure to migration possibilities awakened a desire to move to better opportunities and a willingness to maintain looser connections with fixed place as they defined where they belonged. The point of departure was that those who had lost loved ones in exile, though willing to migrate to a third country, felt a greater need to assert their belonging on the basis of their geographical home. Burying loved ones in the country of asylum did not inspire any sense of connection or belonging to the country of asylum. Much of their focus was on returning home to restore connections with cultural ties that had been broken through the failure to perform the burial rites while in exile. This inhibited their desire or effort to establish new ties to place away from Congo. The respondents who had not lost loved ones spoke of home as a place of cultural and physical connection, but they also expressed a greater willingness to move on and live away from home.

Their sense of national and ethnic identity, and their definitions of belonging derived from parentage and growing up in the Congo.

Although most respondents were open to resettlement it was evident that resettlement was sought only for the economic opportunities it presented them and their children by way of education, employment and income. Living in the West was associated with economic stability, self-development and peace and these were significant factors in influencing where the respondents would like to live. For those who had lost loved ones in exile, belonging was acutely linked to cultural ties, ancestral roots, place of birth, ethnic membership and other place-bound values. For those who had not lost loved ones in exile, there was less need to invoke place in defining where they belonged. They were more open to moving and establishing themselves away from home

Baumann (1992) observes that often where it is impossible to follow culture strictly a cultural consciousness is kindled more acutely among migrants than locals. The respondents' experiences resonate with this theory. The respondents who had lost their loved ones in exile and did not undergo an "unconditional following" of burial rites identified more strongly with Congo and were keener to assert their belonging on the basis of geographical place. Conversely, the respondents who had not lost loved ones in exile spoke less of an urge to return home or the need to affirm where they belonged with reference to Congo. They spoke of returning home in general terms, and were particularly keen on pursuing resettlement and re-establishing themselves elsewhere. They did not have the same sense of obligation to return home but showed a firmer determination to move to better opportunities. Their sense of belonging was complex, and the simple assertion that they were born and raised in Congo was sufficient to

define their national identity while their migration allowed them to forge new definitions of belonging.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION

An interesting finding in the study was the role that religion played. Religion helped to cushion some respondents against the strong sense of alienation that accompanied a failure to perform burial rituals. In some instances, it provided alternative rites where ethnic burial rites had failed.

One Muslim respondent pointed out that in Islam, burial of the deceased within 24 hours is mandatory, and because of this, he felt no need to insist on traditional burial rites to be performed or that the body to be repatriated to Congo. Respondent 13, a professing Christian, lost a tribesman who had become a friend during her journey to Kenya. She could not perform burial rituals for him and did not know his family in Congo. However, her faith and religion provided a soft landing for her against self recrimination. She said,

> I believe that God gives all land for burial. I am a Christian. I feel that because there was a Christian church service and graveside prayers, my friend will have a place in heaven. I am satisfied with this.

Goździak and Shandy (2002) suggest that religion is a strong formative factor in defining refugees' and immigrants' identities and it offers substantial emotional support. All the respondents who had lost loved ones in exile sought first to conduct ethnic burial customs, and upon failure to do so, some fell back on religion and their faith. Religion then provided a surrogate culture for them.

Respondent 2 was in deep anguish when he lost his uncle in 2002. However, he found reprieve in ensuring his uncle was buried according to Muslim norms. The Muslim

Brotherhood assisted him and ensured his uncle got a proper Muslim burial. This also allowed him to define where he belonged on the basis of the Muslim community. When Respondent 5's brother died, he tried to follow his ethnic customs regarding death but Kenyan law prohibited keeping a deceased body in the house overnight. In his culture, the elders must slaughter a goat or sheep over the grave of the deceased so that his spirit does not return to haunt the living relatives. He could not follow his customs so he asked the elders in the Church to speak a blessing over his brother and the surviving family. The Church also assisted in obtaining a piece of land in an area out of town where his brother was buried. He remarks that he felt absolved in burying his brother according to Christian values.

Respondent 6 lost his twelve year-old son and had no money for mortuary fees and other funeral costs. Church elders helped him to organize a burial for his son, including providing a piece of land within the Church compound to bury the body. Although his culture required that the body must remain in the house for at least three days, he was content to bury his son according to Christian principles. Respondent 12 indicated that according to the beliefs of the *Waindo*, a body should be buried in an upright position, so that when the "Last Trumpet" sounds at the end of time, all the dead will be ready to resurrect and go to heaven. Respondent 13 felt that as long as she was buried by the Church, she would not be particular about where she was buried.

Goździak and Shandy (2002) correctly point out that in some situations, religion easily becomes a crutch for many immigrant communities helping them cope with loss, tragedy and trauma. In this case, religion cushioned some respondents from the sense of isolation and alienation from a determined community. Chambers (1994) concurs, stating that cultural meanings are sometimes exchanged and negotiated in intracultural

attempts to find solutions to problems. Religion provided both a crutch and a surrogate

culture for the refugees.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to present an interpretation of how refugees negotiate the experiences of death and burial in their definitions of home and belonging; how important is fixed place in interpreting where they belong. Whether burying a loved one on foreign soil invokes a sense of claim to the 'soil' where the loved one is buried.

It emerges in the findings that the initial hostility in how the Congolese view Congo at the time of their flight from Congo, ranging from rejecting outright the notion of return to ambivalence about eventual return, are more emotional responses to the trauma and do not necessarily indicate a severance with the homeland. At this point, the responses to place and belonging are barely discernable between those who had lost loved ones in exile and those who have not lost loved ones in exile. Nonetheless, having been forced to flee with the possibility of never returning, it allows the refugees to begin considering new orientations to defining belonging that are not linked to place.

The difficulties experienced in exile influenced their attitudes to place. The refugees enjoyed significantly greater latitude in managing the socioeconomic and legal difficulties while in Congo, than in the country of asylum, which also made them more forgiving of the difficulties experienced in Congo than in the country of asylum.

When faced with death and the burial of loved ones in exile, these experiences evoked strong responses to place. While most respondents were not particularly distressed by the burial of loved ones away from home, they were affected by the inability to fulfil burial customs. Burial rituals, in addition to facilitating rites of passage into the spiritual world, reaffirmed their membership to a geographically located community even when away from the community. The failure to perform these rituals produced a keen sense of

alienation and dissociation that left them unsettled and determined to assert where they belonged. The experience of burial in exile did not prompt a connection to the place where their loved ones were buried. On the contrary, it prompted a firm rejection of the country of asylum and many respondents sought to re-establish connection with place (Congo). They construed belonging in their ability to practice the cultural values that defined their communal and individual identities. Hence, the inability to practice burial customs in the country of exile evoked a near sense of desperation in some respondents to re-establish connection to Congo where they 'belonged'; where their cultural, ancestral and family roots lay. The interviews with the two groups – those who had lost loved ones in exile and those who had not – revealed that the experience with death and burial in exile distinguished the groups significantly. Those who had gone through death and burial in exile were more emphatic about their links to Congo and returning home some day, than the respondents who had not been bereaved in exile.

The respondents' rejection of the country of asylum and seeking to re-establish connection with the country of origin did not, however, preclude a desire to resettle in a third country that presented economic- and self-development possibilities. This goes back to Baumann's (1998) assertion that both the "tourist" (voluntary migrant) and the "vagabond" (involuntary migrant) desire to maintain an existence of continuous movement, except that the "vagabond" is unable to move at will. The respondents who had not lost loved ones were equally if not more enthusiastic about the prospect of resettlement. Both groups viewed migration to a new place with better opportunities was an economic strategy, and not an attempt to define where they belong. They defined where they belong in reference to fixed place: where one is born and where his roots lie. Their claim to place was based on what Gotz and Simone (2003) have described as

belonging in its traditional sense: having historical connections to a place, a protracted history of settlement, a cohesive sense of community and stable social institutions.

The refugees who had not lost loved ones in exile felt that they belonged to Congo indisputably because they regardless of where they lived, they were born in Congo, spoke the language, had ancestral links to the place and could be buried there if they desired. Their pursuit of resettlement opportunities and a life constantly on the move were not in conflict with where they belonged. As nationals they belonged to Congo as the central nucleus. Their migration allowed them flexibility to settle elsewhere and define new forms of belonging that were not necessarily tied to place, without diluting the centre, even if their departure from home had been forcibly instigated.

Those who had lost loved ones in exile felt the need to reiterate their belonging to a geographical place that sheltered their communities, culture and values. The argument that fixed places have a diminishing importance in identity formation and belonging (see Ahponen 2004; Bloemraad 2004; Gotz and Simone 2003; Castles and Davidson 2000; Bauman 1998) was found wanting in the case of those who had lost loved ones in exile. The respondents drew a distinction between where one belongs and where one migrates to pursue economic opportunities. From the findings, these respondents defined belonging on the basis of a fixed place and the attendant cultures, values, history and social structures that lent to their identity wherever they were. They interpreted identity and belonging alongside connection to a fixed place – Congo.

Ahponen (2004) asserts that persons on the move who interact with other cultures experience a loosening of ties with their physical home and community culture. In this study, this concept seemed to work in reverse. The experience of death and the inability

to 'unconditionally practice their culture' (Baumann 1992) in relation to death heightened a sense of rootlessness in the country of asylum and invoked a stronger identification with the country of origin, or the soil where they were born and share a common culture with others.

Belonging was the source of their identity and remained constant wherever they went. It was a portable concept that derived distinctly from their relationship to a location and its people, culture and history. Unlike the Bamileke in Geschière and Nyamnjoh's (2001) narrative, these respondents did not lay emphasis on where one is buried as the determinant for where one belongs. Where one was born and his real links to that place outlined the basis of his membership. Hence, the refugees were not particular on where they should be buried in the event of their death, but they were particular that they would like their children to be brought up in "Congolese ways", learn their languages and the history of their country, wherever they lived.

This study suggests that for the Congolese refugees living in Nairobi, losing loved ones in exile did not significantly affect their sense of belonging since their cultures already allowed for burial away from the home country. However, burial rites were a powerful expression of belonging and connection to the home country, a connection which many of the respondents who had been bereaved in asylum were keen to maintain. Although religion provided a surrogate culture for some where burial rites had failed, it did not provide a substitute for belonging. Rather than weaken the connection to the country of origin or strengthen the connection to the country of asylum, the effect of burial in exile was to deepen the desire to maintain a connection with the country of origin while heightening the sense of rootlessness and alienation in the country of asylum. After the experience of burial in exile, geographical place and particularly the homeland where

their communities resided became a strong reference point in asserting where they belonged. How they construct belonging when they have resettled in a third country where they have economic, educational and self development opportunities, invites further study.

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