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"Our Children Are Dead": Past and Anticipated Adversity Shaping Caregiving and Cultural Reproduction among Banyamulenge Refugee Families in Rwanda

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Abstract: It is well known that experiences of extreme adversity strongly impact caregiving and family dynamics. In this study, we explore how caregiving is shaped by experiences of war and displacement among a community experiencing protracted, ongoing conflict and displacement, namely, Congolese Banyamulenge refugee families in Rwanda. The findings are based on six months of ethnographic team research with Banyamulenge refugee families living in semi-urban southern Rwanda. Among the caregivers, including people who arrived several years ago and others who have lived in Rwanda for over two decades, we found a strong longing for home and past cattle-herding life. We also found that caregivers emphasized the transmission of "survival tactics" as well as Banyamulenge identity and culture. We argue that these caregiving objectives and practices speak to the community's experiences of material and existential losses in the past, as well as those anticipated in the unknown future. Second, parental caregiving efforts appear to lead to increased intergenerational dissonance, with children wishing to integrate into their host community. While this finding appears in line with much of the migration literature about intergenerational family relationships and conflict, we find that children's orientation is not only informed by the host environment but also stems from a desire to relieve their parents' suffering from loss and help them invest in more optimistic futures. Finally, while our findings suggest profound changes in social and cultural reproduction in the long term, we argue for caution, as ongoing changes in war dynamics in DR Congo may inform shifts in ideas on belonging among the children. The findings provide new insights for understanding how caregiving may be affected by war and displacement while effecting change in war-affected, displaced communities.

Keywords: caregiving; parenting; displacement; intergenerational relations; Congolese Banyamulenge; refugee families; Rwanda

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1. Introduction

In this study, we explore how war and displacement may affect caregiving and social reproduction, zooming in on the experiences of Congolese Banyamulenge refugee families living in Rwanda. Very often, war and displacement are analyzed through the lens of politics and economics (Auslander and Zahra 2018). Yet, what it means to be human in the context of war, genocide, and other extreme adversities invites reflection especially on the social, cultural, and intimate dimensions of peoples' lives. In this article, we explore these under-researched dimensions with a focus on child care among war-affected, refugee families. From an ethnographic perspective, child care provides an entry point to understanding child development and education, as well as social and cultural reproduction in the longer term (cf. Buchbinder et al. 2006; LeVine 2010).

Research on caregiving during and in the aftermath of disaster, including war and genocide, has predominantly focused on understanding the outcomes for child health and development. These studies show the critical importance of parents and other caregivers for positive outcomes (Masten and Narayan 2012; Sim et al. 2018). During and in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, the presence of parents and other adult carers ensures greater protection of the life and health of children (Leyendecker et al. 2018), while parent availability and acceptance, and close relationships, play a significant role in children's (adaptive) responses to trauma exposure (Masten and Narayan 2012). Yet, to many parents and others, caregiving during and in the aftermath of disaster presents a daunting task. Caregivers may face obstacles in keeping children safe and in ensuring that emotional, educational, and physical needs are met (Peek and Fothergill 2008). They may need to find a new balance between reproductive and productive responsibilities, often troubled by material and human losses and separation from family and community members (Thomas et al. 2020; Wight et al. 2021; Lamp 2024). Caregivers' own difficulties, including emotional distress and trauma, may further hamper their abilities to care for their children (El-Khani et al. 2016; Leyendecker et al. 2018; Eltanamly et al. 2021), leading to what some have called "unengaged parenting" (Cramsey 2024)—although post-traumatic growth may also occur, leading to increased warmth and engagement in some parents (Eltanamly et al. 2021; Stewart et al. 2015). In contexts of displacement, there may be additional stressors that further add to challenges in caregiving (Eltanamly et al. 2021; Tize 2021). For instance, caregiving may be troubled by the "terms and conditions" that often apply to refugees in transit and host communities (Cramsey 2024), the different gender roles and activities refugees encounter in these new environments, and the expectations of what amounts to "good parenting", which may differ between refugee and host communities (Deng and Marlowe 2013; Lamp 2024). Furthermore, caregivers may be confronted with acculturation gaps between themselves and other family and community members, especially their children, as young people tend to integrate more easily (Daniel et al. 2020; Leyendecker et al. 2018), sometimes resulting in intergenerational disconnect and conflict between caregivers and their children (Weinstein-Shr and Henkin 1999; Losoncz 2017; Ayika et al. 2018; McCleary et al. 2019). Moreover, when care is given in a context marked by chronic crisis and adversity, caregivers may adapt their parenting practices to their hostile environments, for instance, by engaging in harsher or more neglectful parenting practices (LeVine 1974; Ruzibiza et al. 2021; Berckmoes 2022; Schuenke-Lucien et al. 2022). In view of this, Robert LeVine proposes that "environmental pressures from a more recent past [become] encoded in customs . . ." (LeVine 1974, p. 226).

Insight into the social and cultural consequences of war and displacement on caregiving has been growing, yet it is still hampered by the challenges associated with research in contexts marked by extreme adversities (Masten and Narayan 2012). Consequently, much remains unknown about how, as Sarah Cramsey put it, "we as human beings sustain, cherish, and honor life through care . . . even in the midst of forced displacement" (Cramsey 2024, p. 1). In this article, we seek to increase insight into "the invisible work" (Ibid) associated with care, and how this, under the pressure of war and displacement, may engender long-term social change. We achieve this by exploring caregiving and its consequences among a community that has experienced repeated outbreaks of war and arguably, genocide, particularly since the 1980s, namely, Congolese Banyamulenge. Many Congolese Banyamulenge are currently displaced, some of whom have sought refuge in neighboring Rwanda, where we conducted fieldwork research for this study.

2. Ethnographic Fieldwork Research in Huye, Rwanda

The central questions in this article concern how Congolese Banyamulenge refugee caregivers perceive and practice caregiving in the context of war and displacement and how their children understand and experience the care. We conducted research among Congolese Banyamulenge families living in exile in the Rwandan southern border district of Huye. The district has a dynamic urban center with many small companies involved in

commerce and trade. Nestled amidst rolling hills, agriculture remains the most important activity for Huye's economy, particularly the farming of coffee, tea, and bananas. Formerly known as Butare, Huye is also renowned for its cultural heritage. The colonial period left an imprint, particularly in the realm of education, and Huye still serves as an important educational hub, hosting the University of Rwanda's Huye Campus. Huye is religiously diverse, accommodating Muslims and followers of various strands of Christianity, including Methodism, to which many Banyamulenge adhere. The majority of residents are Rwandan, though the area has attracted a significant presence of refugees and other migrants. The district hosts a camp for refugees from DR Congo, and an estimated 360 Congolese Banyamulenge families live in Huye city.[1] This research was carried out with families who identified as refugees in Huye city.

This study was part of a larger ethnographic team research project and involved fieldwork for six months in the first part of 2023.[2] Ethnographic field research consisted mainly of family visits, during which participant observation and informal conversations and interviews with parents, and later, also with children, took place. The combination of participating in daily activities and speaking with parents and children allowed for a multisided perspective, enabling insight into views and practices of caregiving and into children's responses to parental care. The fieldwork research was conducted by two junior researchers from Rwanda, who were supported by a senior board at the University of Rwanda and a junior and senior researcher at Leiden University. The two Kinyarwanda-speaking junior researchers visited Rwandan and Congolese Banyamulenge families together. One of them, the first author, was responsible for documenting and partaking in the analysis of the findings collected for the present paper. Identification of themes and systematic coding were conducted by the first two authors, while all three authors contributed to the analysis and writing of the final manuscript, with the most substantive writing by the last author.

Ethical approval for this project, including interviewing minors, was granted by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Rwanda. Subsequently, permission for this research was requested from local authorities at the district and village levels. After obtaining the required permissions, we asked a Banyamulenge community representative in Huye for help in identifying families who would be willing to participate. Based on these introductions, as well as referrals by participating families, 15 Banyamulenge families agreed to participate, 10 of whom we eventually visited intensively. For most families, in addition to participant observation and parent interviews, one or two interviews were conducted with at least one child.

3. War and Displacement among Congolese Banyamulenge

Congolese Banyamulenge form an ethnic community with their origin in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The term "Banyamulenge" originates from the Kinyarwanda language spoken by the community as well as in Rwanda, and is commonly understood to refer to the "people of Mulenge", the latter being a mountain range in South Kivu (Vlassenroot 2013).[3] Banyamulenge possess a unique cultural and historical background that distinguishes them from many other Congolese communities (Saibel 2014). They lived relatively isolated until colonization and are renowned for their pastoral traditions (Rukundwa 2004).

Banyamulenge are considered to be affiliated with Tutsi, historically also present in neighboring countries Rwanda and Burundi. Despite substantial evidence of Banyamulenge's centuries-long presence in Congo, colonial racial categories have contributed to their portrayal as non-native inhabitants. As a consequence, Banyamulenge were categorized as immigrants from Rwanda, with their citizenship contested since the 1960s (Vlassenroot 2013). Since then, Banyamulenge have sought socio-political recognition and power and faced recurrent episodes of violence and persecution (Vlassenroot 2002, 2013). The acts of violence included besiegement, impoverishment, and inhumane treatment, accompanied by attempts to erase all traces of their presence (Stearns and Verweijen 2013). Some have argued that Banyamulenge have been targeted in a "slow genocide" by Mai Mai militias

and other ethnic groups in DR Congo (Ntanyoma and Hintjens 2022). The community has also been accused of involvement in two major wars from 1996 to 2003, in which many neighboring countries, including Rwanda, took part (Reyntjens 2009). Over time, the violence has led to waves of displacement both inside the DR Congo and to neighboring countries. Many Banyamulenge have sought refuge in Rwanda and other countries in the Great Lakes region, while others have moved further to Europe and America (Verweijen and Vlassenroot 2015).

4. Congolese Banyamulenge Families in Huye

Congolese Banyamulenge refugees arrived in Huye mainly during the First and Second Congo war (1996–2000) and most recently from March 2020 onwards, after the movement M23 re-emerged as a significant rebel group in eastern Congo.[4] The families in Huye city are generally large, with three to ten children, and live in both nuclear and extended households. In the families we visited, the father and mother are usually the main caregivers, although older siblings and grandparents contribute as well. Caregivers span a range of ages, with many between 30 and 50 years old, while the eldest are parents and grandparents over 75 years old. Some children were born in DR Congo and fled with their parents, while others were born and raised in Rwanda. Sometimes (adolescent) children were sent to study and live in Rwanda before their other family members, including their parents, were forced to join them in exile.

The families have established a diverse array of income-generating activities. They engage in the sale of maize flour, clothing, charcoal, and milk, offer tailoring services, or rent out property. A few caregivers have found employment as teachers in primary and secondary schools and in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). There are also caregivers who remain unemployed and rely on financial support from adult children or other family members working in Rwanda, in the region, or in Western countries—underscoring the vital role of the diaspora in aiding and sustaining the community in Rwanda. Children, after completing their secondary and university educations, tend to seek employment in Rwanda, and neighboring East African countries like Kenya and Uganda, or move to live, study, or work in Europe and America.

Notably, Banyamulenge families share many socio-economic characteristics with their Rwandan neighbors. However, the particular experiences of war and displacement from eastern Congo have a firm "presence" (Kidron 2009) in their everyday family life. In what follows, we describe findings concerning this "presence" of war and displacement in the family home environment and in caregiving. The findings are organized around the following four main analytical themes that emerged from our analysis: the experience of loss and ongoing war in the daily family environment; the teaching of survival tactics in anticipation of more war and displacement; parental effort to transmit Banyamulenge identity; and children's orientation towards life in Rwanda. In the subsequent section, we reflect on how these findings not only reveal caregivers' tactical responses to war and displacement but signal how adaptations in caregiving give way to profound discontinuities in social and cultural reproduction, which caregivers particularly struggle to accept.

5. Inhabiting Loss and Ongoing War in the Daily Family Environment

> "The wars are still in our families as refugees. We walk and step over the wars, we eat and swallow the wars." (Nyambuga[5], arrived in Rwanda in 1996)

In the families we visited, parents and grandparents, especially when they had arrived in Rwanda many years ago, often reminisced about the good life they lived before in DR Congo. Having abundant land and cattle, close kinship and community ties, and the freedom to live their lives in the way they saw culturally and morally correct, were common topics of conversation within the family and with guests. In flight, some parents were able to take belongings with them, such as a stick to herd cattle or a knife that was used to fabricate these sticks. These now served as decorations and memorabilia, as their function was no longer required. Others had pictures readily accessible on their phones.

For instance, one father, showing pictures of his former home, maize on a plate, and a jug for milk, explained: "We hope to be back there anytime. With those pictures, I remain attached to my homeland" (Kayobe, in Rwanda since 2000). Like other forcibly displaced communities, Banyamulenge parents mobilized nostalgic memories of home (e.g., Taylor 2013). For them, everyday objects and pictures of objects took significance beyond their material form (Peristianis 2024). Magnified in meaning, they served as "tools . . . to adapt to change or loss" (Volkan 1999, p. 173) and "as repositories of individual, familial, and collective memories of dislocation" (Auslander and Zahra 2018, p. 15; Kevers et al. 2023).

The objects, particularly those referring to cows and milk, also pointed to the painful decline in economic status many were confronted with in Rwanda (cf. Bloch 2018). Known as a relatively well-off community in DR Congo because of their wealth in cattle and land, they were now forced to raise their children in a competitive urban context, where they had to learn new skills and traits to procure income for the family. For instance, one of the families that arrived relatively recently after escaping attacks, in 2018, was still in the midst of building a livelihood in Huye. The family lived in a small house in a compound that was shared with Rwandan families, which had been gifted by a relative who had fled to Rwanda in 1996. The family relied on gifts for other necessities as well, as revealed in this fieldnote excerpt from a conversation with the mother, Nkobwa:

> "It was on Saturday, around 1PM, when [co-field researcher] and I went to visit the family of Nkobwa. . . . Observing her face, she appeared not happy and did not seem to want to speak much. 'How are you today,?' we asked her. She responded sadly that life is too difficult here in Rwanda and that it is difficult for the family to find what to feed her children. She told us that as a parent, she is always feeling guilty to ask for food from friends. She added that their family was rich in Congo, but here in Rwanda, to be able to live, they have to request everything from their relatives and friends, [adding]: 'It is true [that] life is not easy here and we do not know what to do [in] Rwanda. Our children miss the life in Congo and always ask us when [we will go] back there". (Nkobwa, arrived in Rwanda in 2018)

As she mentioned the violence they barely escaped, her gaze turned distant. Nkobwa did not want to think about it, let alone about going back.

However, in most of the family homes we visited, the traumatic experiences of war and flight were a regular topic of conversation. Further, with the war ongoing in eastern DR Congo, exchanges about the past were often intermingled with updates about current developments in the region, alternating with the consumption and sharing of social media posts highlighting these. In some families, children were actively involved in these exchanges. For instance, Kanyana explained the following about her 3-year-old son: "My son is very intelligent; he knows the entire situation in Congo. He is able to understand what has been said on the radio concerning the killings in Congo. He is the one who tells us the number of people killed" (arrived in Rwanda in 2000). Though notably, not all caregivers were enthusiastic about their children's interest in the war violence: "Whenever my children take my smart phone, they open the YouTube app and search for the videos of the killings going on in Congo. I do not want them to continue watching those videos as they are traumatizing. They really like to see 'mayi mayi' (Mai Mai rebel group) trainings" (Runezerwa, arrived in Rwanda in 2019).

The ongoing "presence" of war was further reflected in how families inhabited the environment, which manifested, for instance, in the high fences Banyamulenge built around the compounds of their rented houses and in the practice of always locking doors and windows. Even on extremely hot days, as Nyambuga explained, she, like other families, felt compelled to close and lock everything: "Before the wars, we could even sleep with an open door the whole night. As you see, the door is closed and locked. This is what the wars taught us. We teach our children to close the door anytime because of the consequences of the wars." Besides closed doors, in Kanyana's house, the lights were also kept on at all times, even in her bedroom at night: "After escaping the war, I do not sleep when the lamp

is off. It is the way of making sure that I'm in control of everything that can come into my house." For her and other caregivers, the traumatic experiences fueled heightened vigilance, which persisted in their new, relatively safe environment in Rwanda, and reflected in the constant reminders they gave to children to also lock doors and windows, leave lights on, and stay inside the compound. For instance, on one of our visits, one father, Mugeneka, scolded his children when he entered the living room and found the door unlocked, saying: "Did you like the fresh air?" He continued, looking at us: "Intambara zibyara ikintu (wars leave something), we do not leave it open" (arrived in 2018).

In children's play and conversations, we observed that the home region and the ongoing war were also regularly featured. Children mentioned Mulenge, DR Congo, in general, and the violence enacted there. See, for instance, the following interview excerpt with the 6-year-old daughter of Kayobe (who arrived in 2000), and the notes of a conversation between the two sons of Mugeneka (5 and 7 years old), who, while playing in the compound garden, commented on the plane passing overhead:

> Girl (6 years): "I want to go there [Mulenge], but my mother refused and said that she will not return there. She said that it is a bad place there.
>
> (. . .)
>
> Field researcher: Can you try to imagine that place?
>
> Girl: I think that it is a place full of soldiers everywhere. . .I want to visit my grandparents and come back here, but my parents told me that if I go to Mulenge, I would be killed. But I want to go there myself.
>
> Field researcher: How will you go there?
>
> Girl: I will walk smoothly, those soldiers will not see me, I will step gently, when soldiers are looking the other side, I will pass behind them. They will not see me. I will visit them and come back here, to stay with my parents. I cannot live in Mulenge." (Kayobe's daughter, family in Rwanda since 2000)

> Boy (5 years): "Listen, it is a plane.
>
> Older sibling (7 years) (quiet and attentive): It is going to shoot in the forests in Congo.
>
> Boy (5 years): It is going to shoot people." (Mugeneka's sons, family in Rwanda since 2018).

In brief, alongside nostalgic memories, the traumatic experiences of loss associated with war and flight and the ongoing war in the region were part and parcel of daily family life among the Congolese Banyamulenge refugees we visited. Their presence was expressed implicitly through the various "linking objects" (Volkan 1999) that served as symbols of the past life and loved ones lost or left behind (cf. Peristianis 2024), implicitly through war-born routines, like locking doors, and explicitly in conversations between parents and guests, and sometimes with and among children.

6. Teaching Survival Tactics

Research has shown that caregiving in the aftermath of violence is often affected by a sense of ongoing unpredictability and insecurity, a sense that the worst may happen again (e.g., Dickson-Gómez 2002; Kidron 2009; Golden and Mayseless 2008). Among the Banyamulenge refugee families we visited, similarly, strong anticipation of adversity manifested in their caregiving practices. For instance, one evening, during our visit to Nyamutegerwa's family (in Rwanda since 1998), she and her Banyamulenge guest openly discussed this fear and how to not/relate that to their children:

> Guest: "Who are they? [referring to us, researchers]
>
> Nyamutegerwa: They are people who talk about wars affecting Banyamulenge.
>
> Guest (in loud voice): My friends, do you think Banyamulenge wars is something that you can finish talking [about]? Let me conclude for you: Banyamulenge will

> never have peace. If you want, you can say Banyamulenge [are] equal to wars and deaths.
>
> Nyamutegerwa: However, wars can end.
>
> Guest: No, but be prepared. You will see what will happen [possibly soon]. Where will we flee to? Don't you hear that Congolese are invading as soon as they can? I saw this on YouTube.
>
> Nyamutegerwa (scared voice): What will we do, where are we hiding our children? The only problem with Huye is [that there is] no bush. I know your fear; I hope your children do not know this.
>
> Guest: Why shouldn't they know? Don't you prepare yours? Uhhhhhhh. Mine are always prepared. I will always prepare them. They should not sleep here and think that everything is peaceful there. Do you remember when we fled? We were thinking that there was peace, but it was their trick to kill us all. So why shouldn't I prepare my children?
>
> Nyamutegerwa: Don't continue saying this, my children are near, they may hear you. Please say this in your home. Do you want to make my children scared?
>
> Guest: Okay, but you will see." (Nyamutegerwa, arrived in Rwanda in 1998)

While Nyamutegerwa felt the children should be shielded from this anticipation of war and flight to not "scare" them, others, like her guest, were raising their children to be prepared to flee again. Similarly, Nkobwa, for instance, when we asked about her advice for her children, answered:

> "To be ready. Yes, they always have to be ready to escape. One day, my son was out in the compound, and suddenly he heard the sound of a bursting vehicle wheel. He came in the compound running, scared, saying: 'Mom, Mom, Mom, it's coming, let's escape!'.
>
> . . .We tell them to be ready to for the gunshots." (arrival 2019).

Caregivers who were preparing their children for anticipated adversity displayed various teachings of survival skills. Mugeneka, for example, explained that he simulated scenes in which a soldier would enter the house, describing the importance of teaching children where and how to hide:

> "See, even this table can save you in the wars if you know how to hide yourself. Most of us are still alive because we were able to hide behind chairs and under the tables. Doing so, we want our children to have this knowledge of hiding, as they may need it in the future." (arrival 2018).

In other families, parents explained that they obliged their children to sleep with their clothes on, and one mother, Nyambuga (arrived in 1996), justified her daughter walking the long distance to school by pointing to preparedness for potential adversity: "Do you think I can pay the school bus for my daughter? She has to learn to walk. We also walked while escaping and she may be obliged to do so. We do not know, but she may need it". Finally, caregivers told us that they saw education as a long-term protective strategy for their children, referring to their own experiences of displacement. For example, one father explained: "I want my children to be academically successful. Every evening we tell children that we as parents left properties abruptly in Congo and that knowledge is the permanent property that a person goes with everywhere" (Runezerwa, arrival in 2019).

In sum, the caregivers we met imparted anticipatory tactics for survival on their children, including hypervigilance (Vigh 2011), sleeping clothed so as to be ready for flight, knowing how to hide, and learning to walk long distances in anticipation of adversity to come again. This finding resonates with research in the aftermath of other mass atrocities, such as the Holocaust and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. For instance, Kidron (2009) explained how one of her participants, a child of a Holocaust survivor, when going to bed, would lay out her clothes and shoes in such a way that she would be ready to escape

at a moment's notice. Other studies show how descendants can develop anticipatory strategies including hiding money, learning self-defense fighting techniques, and relying on themselves instead of authorities for protection (Golden and Mayseless 2008; Kidron 2009; Yehuda 2022). Yet, whereas Kidron's aforementioned participant had "picked up on [. . .] things that floated in the home" (Kidron 2009, p. 14), we found that the parents we met explicitly taught their children similar "survival tactics". As such, perhaps more clearly among the Banyamulenge than what we know from most other conflict-affected groups, where research more often identified parental silence and implicit transmission (Lin et al. 2009; Sangalang and Vang 2017; McCleary et al. 2019; Flanagan et al. 2020), children here were intentionally and explicitly taught anticipatory practices to avert or cope with repetitious, future catastrophe by their caregivers (though, see Golden and Mayseless 2008 for institutional caregiving settings).

7. Transmitting Identity as a Caregiving Objective

Besides teaching anticipatory survival tactics, the caregivers underscored the importance of transmitting Banyamulenge identity. This caregiving objective appeared to include historical, genealogical, ethnic, cultural, and religious dimensions, which were described as interconnected. First, concerning history, Kanyana said that in her family, "[they] sit with children and teach them about Banyamulenge history [including] how [they] fled to Rwanda. . . .This is done through talking openly to the children." (arrival in 2000). In the family of Runerzerwa, the 15-year-old son, who lives with extended family members nearby, similarly explained: "Our father is the one to share the information about the history. One of the [pieces of] information he shared is how we were part of Rwanda and became Congolese during the colonial period. Since then Congo did not accept our ancestors as Congolese" (arrival 2018).

Children were also taught to memorize the names of members of their family lineage. The importance of family lineage is linked to family prestige (Rukundwa 2004) and to the ability to "locate" others in the community's clan system, also in view of potential marriage partners. Nyambuga (arrival 1996), for example, explained that she explicitly told her children to learn the family tree, even though they resisted this command. Nyambuga proudly added that she could reproduce the family lineage up to four or five generations back and would be able to tell the clan of most other Banyamulenge just by hearing their and their father's names.

Learning about lineage and kinship was also a way to foster strong social ties in the present. Runezwerwa said that he teaches his children to know and list everyone from the extended family (ibisekuru byabo). He explained that the children "need to be connected to their families from the father's and mother's side," and he "sometimes take[s] the children to visit their biological families in Rwanda and for the other times bring[s] them to the church to help them meet other refugee families" (family arrival 2018).

The caregivers we spoke to furthermore described teaching their children about their identity by referring to the distance between Banyamulenge and other ethnic communities, particularly other communities from DR Congo and Rwandans. For instance, parents said that children should know that "the Congolese" chased them from DR Congo because of their ethnic identity. Some parents warned their children about the Congolese and forbade them to be friends: "Do you think I can allow them to be friends with the families that have made me flee?" (Kadabagizi, arrival in 2007). Nkobwa similarly mentioned to us:

> "[W]e want them [small children] to grow up away from the Congolese. When they are at the ages of 5 and 6 years old we tell them: 'Congolese will eat you.'
>
> 'Why do you tell them like that?,' I asked the wife.
>
> She responded that the family wants children to grow up fearing Congolese, but they are not yet at the age of openly understanding the war. 'Through these words—a Congolese will eat you—[they] themselves can know the extent of how dangerous Congolese are.'" (arrival 2019)

In line with such teachings, some children displayed hatred against Congolese ethnic others. One example is the exchange with the boys of the Mugeneka family (aged 5 and 7 years, arrival 2018). As we were visiting the family, one of the boys curved his back and bent his legs and arms, walking slowly. He said that he was imitating the walk of Bafuliiru—a Congolese ethnic community that clashed with Banyamulenge. Later, when the co-field researcher asked the youngest boy what he wished for the future, he replied that he wanted his parents to give him a gun: "I will shoot Bafuliiru if my parents buy a gun for me." His playful claim resonates with a statement of a Congolese Banyamulenge father, Nyirankema's husband (arrival 2005), who, in a conversation about values he wanted to pass on to their children, mentioned "Kwirwanaho" (to fight back). Upon probing, he said that he would consider his sons to be heroes if they were to join the DR Congo-based youth militia group Twirwaneho (let us fight back) when they grow up. We encountered only one family that described giving their children such encouragement[6].

Notwithstanding the threat experienced from "the Congolese," a more immediate albeit cultural, existential danger appeared, represented by the Rwandan environment and people. As Kanyana expressed: "Our children have to know that they are Banyamulenge, not Rwandans. They have to know how Banyamulenge behave and act" (arrival 2000). Caregivers explained this importance by saying that "Rwandan culture" was almost the opposite of their "Banyamulenge culture". Rwandans were described as people who were "clever" (read: deceitful) and suspicious of others, and who could not even love each other [i.e., fellow Rwandans], referring to the Genocide against the Tutsi of 1994 and the difficulties in reconciliation.

In addition, the Rwandan policy and practice of promoting gender equality was seen as very problematic. According to the caregivers, there used to be a strict division of labor within the family and community: the men were the providers who would take care of the cows, while the women were to take care of the home, children, husband, and farming activities. Marriage was said to be the cornerstone institution for their community, and highly desired for their children, also in exile in Rwanda. Traditionally, children are expected to marry young, starting around the age of 13 for girls and 17 for boys. The young couple were then raised together in the husband's family until they were ready to establish their own household. In Rwanda, however, continuing these practices appeared impossible. Many of the caregivers we spoke to blamed the policy promoting gender equality for the "bad behavior" of Rwandan girls, and sometimes their own daughters. They were said to dress inappropriately, drink alcohol, refuse to get married at a young age, and, when they did, they assumed a position in the household superior to their husbands' position. As one father, Mugeneka, expressed, tying nostalgia for Mulenge and the family's current situation in Rwanda together:

> "We are always in Mulenge, not in Rwanda. Mulenge is always in our dreams. [. . .] Sometimes we are with our cows. The other time we are on our large land cultivating. . . But those are our dreams and when we wake up, we realize that we are still in the country of girls who do not want to get married". (arrival 2018)

Most of the caregivers we spoke to thus tried to shield their children from excessive Rwandan influences, fearing that the exposure could lead to the loss of Banyamulenge culture. To this end, the caregivers kept their children inside the compound or house as much as possible, except for when they had to go to school and church. In addition, the parents sought to instill a sense of distinctiveness from an early age. For example, Kanyana sometimes quizzed her 8-year-old daughter after school on how many Banyamulenge teachers or pupils she had seen. If the daughter got the number wrong, she was told to try again the next day. Two parents we encountered shared different ideas, however, namely, the mothers Nkobwa (arrival 2019) and Kayobe (arrival 2000). They encouraged their children to make many friends and integrate into Rwandan society, just like they themselves were trying.

The caregivers found important support to transmit their cultural identity through the church. Pastors' preaches were filled with references to the homeland, customary

(gendered) practices, and a longing to go back to the paradise lost. Mugeneka, for instance, when asked how caregivers deal with children's integration into Rwandan society, explicitly mentioned the role of the church: "Church. We take our children to church. This is where our children are educated about the [Banyamulenge] culture by pastors" (arrival 2018). Most of the families we met were active members of a church and used the institution as a place of encounter and to forge a strong sense of Banyamulenge identity and community.

In brief, caregiving efforts by the parents seemed inspired by the physical and formal educational needs of their children as well as by the importance of the survival of their ethnic identity and culture in the context of persecution and displacement. The Banyamulenge caregivers described their caregiving objectives in Rwanda in terms of transmitting their identity by teaching about their conflict-affected history, family genealogy, ethnic differences, and cultural practices. The emphases on family cohesion and the transmission of cultural identity resonate with findings from the review article by Kwak (2003), who furthermore argued that in immigrant families, cultural teaching in the home was prominent where the community's cultural values were not supported by the host society. The challenges the Banyamulenge caregivers encountered in transmitting their sense of identity and belonging created for many the image of Rwanda as an environment that may provide physical security, but was a threat to their survival as a people.

8. A Future in Rwanda?

A few weeks into our ethnographic fieldwork with the caregivers and their families, we wondered about the extent to which the overall strong and consistent pedagogical ideas and practices we encountered among the Banyamulenge caregivers on the transmission of survival tactics and ethnic and cultural identity were taken up by their children. Therefore, we started interviewing children separately as well. Notwithstanding the apparent close relationships between the caregivers and their children, we noticed how children struggled with and resisted various teachings, and this appeared incremental with age.

The "presence" of loss and war in the family environment, rather than confusion (cf. Bloch 2018), triggered disparate feelings among the children. While some children revealed a strong interest in the political and violent upheaval in DR Congo and the wider region, seeking out their parents' smartphones for more news, other children struggled with the continuous reminders of loss. Nyambuga's 11-year-old daughter (born in Rwanda), for example, mentioned that her parents' continuous talk of Mulenge made her sad: "I always think of the deaths, and properties taken. They remind me [of] my grandparents who were killed there".

Second, in line with the extant literature on refugee and other migrant communities in host countries describing family discord and conflict (Foner and Dreby 2011), most of the young (primary school age) children we spoke with expressed a desire for more freedom (cf. Kwak 2003). For these children, more freedom concerned having more possibilities to leave the home or compound more often, to play with other neighboring children, and to decide on their own clothing and future aspirations. For instance, Kanyana's daughter said she wished to play with Rwandan children more often:

> "We can be happy if our parents and grandparents give us permission to play with other children outside. We are always alone after school. This is my advice to my mother. [. . .] Maybe because you [researchers] are her friends, you will tell her to let us play and visit other children around here?" (8 years, younger brothers nod in agreement, born in Rwanda)

Kanyana had explained to us earlier (looking fearful), "that she does not even allow them to go to the small shop located at 50 m [distance]" (fieldnotes). In another instance, when a motor taxi driver was taking Kanyana's daughter to the hairdresser, Kanyana reiterated repeatedly what the driver should and should not do on the way. To us, she explained her interaction, saying: "It is a way of protecting my children [. . .] As refugees, we do not trust anybody; something bad could happen to them." Her and other parents' "fear-based parenting" resonates with findings among Cambodian refugees in the U.S.;

parents in that community also want to see their children at home after school, leaving no room for other activities (Mak and Wieling 2024, p. 8).

Nyirankema's daughter expressed frustration at still being dressed by her mother. Like her, most of the girls' resistance seemed to focus on the duties prescribed to moral girls/women and the practice of early marriage. One of the girls we spoke to told us that her parents wanted her 15-year-old sister to get married and that she feared that she would be the next to be pressured into this:

> "I want them to let us free. I do not like how they choose for me what to wear. [. . .] I want to advise them to let me do my things without getting married at a young age. I am Rwandan; I advise them to raise me not as Munyamulenge. I want to first study and be able to have a job in the future." (12 years, born in Rwanda, family's arrival in 2005).

The 21-year-old son of Kayobe resisted his parents' promotion (or in his view, probably, romanticizing) of cows, and rhetorically asked us: "What is the importance of having 500 cows when eating food with no salt?" (born in Rwanda, family's arrival in 2000). These and other children considered protective parenting strategies as suffocating and isolating.

Some children tried to understand the restrictions, tracing the experienced boundaries to fraught relationships between their own and the host community. For instance, Nyambuga's daughter understood her limited freedom of movement as being related to caregivers needing to resolve their differences with Rwandan neighbors:

> "I will be happy to meet Rwandan children from neighbors and be able to visit one another as children. I am a child but I do not know why parents of Rwandan children do not want me in their home? I think that I am not in the age of not being trusted. I did not do anything bad for them but I do not know why they think that I am visiting their family to understand what they are saying and see what they are doing. [. . .] The life will be better if Banyamulenge parents sit with Rwandan parents to solve their problem." (11 years, born in Rwanda).

It should be noted that the children did not always abide by the protective rules of their caregivers. Particularly when talking with children in their teens and twenties, resistance came strongly to the fore. These young people spoke of cultural markers, including cows, lineage, or early marriage, as counter to their own understandings of what mattered most for their present and future, projected to be in Rwanda: "You cannot respect all the Banyamulenge rules as a Rwandan [. . .] They [caregivers] are old and if we respect their advices, we can find ourselves alone in the future" (17-year-old daughter, Nyirankema family, arrival in 2005).

In brief, children of different ages, and, apparently, incremental with age, seemed to long and strive for more freedom to connect and identify with their host environment.

9. Intergenerational Dissonance

Abana bacu na bo barapfuye [our children are dead]. (Nyambuga, arrival 1996)

Nyambuga, a 55-year-old mother, and her husband experienced the political exclusion of Banyamulenge in DR Congo as teenagers and young adults. They then escaped targeted killings during the first Congo war and raised seven children over the course of a turbulent history marked by displacement (their first-born, a son aged 34, born in Mulenge, their last-born, a daughter aged 11, born and raised in Rwanda). Yet, despite her and her husband's efforts to transmit Banyamulenge identity and culture, her children preferred to adapt more fully to Rwandan society. Indeed, against their caregivers' hopes, many children expressly identified as "Rwandans". With some resignation, Nyambuga commented: "Gikweto gifata icyondo gikandagijwemo (shoes grasp the mud of where the owner is stepping)." To her, her Banyamulenge children were dead.

This sentiment, which we observed on several occasions, stands in contrast with the generally close and warm family relationships we encountered on our visits. Overall, the caregivers and children spoke positively about each other and, notwithstanding the

palpable "presence" of loss and war in the daily family environment, described the family as a place of safety and warmth. Yet, like in Nyambuga's family, the memories of the homeland that evoked a sense of nostalgia and attachment among the parental generation were often experienced very differently by the younger generations. They forged their own identities in the new context (cf. Lovering in Lowry 2022).

The caregivers constructed Banyamulenge identity in opposition to a "dangerous" environment. Danger and unpredictability were epitomized by the physical threat families had fled in Congo, which was ongoing there but also loomed large in a cultural, existential way in Rwanda. The paradox of Rwanda being secure and threatening at once, translated into dissonant experiences and orientations between the caregivers and their children, with the latter seeking more connectedness with their daily environment. Yet, the children's identification as Rwandans appeared to be not only fueled by the realities of current and future life and livelihood opportunities, as is often suggested in the literature about intergenerational conflict and dissonance in the context of migration (Weinstein-Shr and Henkin 1999; Foner and Dreby 2011; Losoncz 2017; Ayika et al. 2018; McCleary et al. 2019). Indeed, our findings revealed that the children hoped their parents could let go of the past as they struggled when seeing their parents' sadness in yearning for lives and livelihoods lost. Consider, for instance, the following excerpts from an interview with Nyirakema's 12-year-old daughter and Mutegetsi's 11-year-old son, respectively:

> "I want to advise them to stay here because there is peace. The other thing is that talking about Mulenge is making them sad and ill. I want them to be patient and accept that they left their Mulenge." (12-year-old daughter, born in Rwanda, family's arrival 2005).

> "I want to see my parents happy. I want them to forget about the life they lived. You don't know how I don't like their talks about their richness in Mulenge. I really do not like to listen to those conversations. Whenever they are talking about this, they are sad, and I do not like my parents to be sad. I wish them to forget all about their past and do their things here in Rwanda without thinking of what they left in Mulenge. [. . .] I do not want my parents to go to Mulenge. I wish them to stay here with us. Living peacefully with Rwandans—not only them as Banyamulenge. Because I am Rwandan, I wish my parents to have many friends from Rwanda, but I do not want them to return to Mulenge." (11-year-old son, born in Rwanda, family's arrived in 2003).

In this regard, our findings seem to contradict the reflections of Hirsch and Spitzer (2002), who described rootless nostalgia among the second generation. Moreover, paradoxically, in our study, intergenerational *proximity* between caregivers and their children appeared to fuel intergenerational dissonance. Indeed, these findings contrast with much of the writing about intergenerational relationships among refugee families, which tends to underline the role of misunderstanding between parents and children regarding their respective experiences (McCleary et al. 2019) and shifts in power dynamics (Losoncz 2017) as causing intergenerational distance. In our findings, the pain brought about by conflict and displacement and the mutual care within the family seeped through these children's quotes about their wishes for themselves and their families' futures in Rwanda.

10. Concluding Remarks

The enduring impact of conflict and displacement on families transcends generations, affecting caregiving practices (e.g., Dickson-Gómez 2002; Golden and Mayseless 2008; Daniel et al. 2020) and family and generational dynamics (e.g., Foner and Dreby 2011; Losoncz 2017; Ayika et al. 2018; Sim et al. 2018; McCleary et al. 2019; Rizkalla et al. 2020). In this paper, we explored caregiving and its consequences among Banyamulenge refugee families living in a semi-urban district in southern Rwanda. We introduced a relatively under-researched perspective, focusing on intended pedagogical content, rather than the

often-unintended processes of transmission of trauma and its consequences on (mental) ill health for children of survivors.

Our findings revealed that caregivers invoke nostalgic memories alongside traumatic ones and seek to impart concrete knowledge and practices learned through war and displacement explicitly to their children. The findings speak to the intergenerational transmission of legacies of conflict, and also point to the importance of the anticipated future. Namely, the caregivers appeared to focus on practices aimed at safeguarding the lives of their children from anticipated adversity, particularly in view of the ongoing violence in neighboring DR Congo, and at reproducing Banyamulenge identity and society—the latter being both supportive of a safety net and network in the case of future adversity and an aim in itself. The two objectives of security and socio-cultural reproduction, however, sometimes also clashed. The children raised in the context of a secure Rwanda often identified as Rwandans, much to their parents' desolation. Indeed, ironically, the charge that Banyamulenge belonged in foreign Rwanda had informed much of the contestation in and flight from DR Congo in the first place (Stearns and Verweijen 2013; Vlassenroot 2013).

Secondly, we explored emerging consequences for social and cultural reproduction through caregiving (cf. LeVine 1974). Based on our conversations with children and youth of different ages, orientation towards Rwanda and Rwandan culture appeared to increase with age, suggesting that for caregivers, who strongly desire to impart Banyamulenge identity, challenges may change over time. In other words, for them, long-term refugeehood leads to new difficulties and opportunities for parents and their children in host communities (cf. Leyendecker et al. 2018; Eltanamly et al. 2021). The different orientations of children also appeared to lead to an increased intergenerational dissonance and conflict, but were, paradoxically, born also from a sense of proximity and mutual care between the generations. Indeed, not only the host environment contributes to this intergenerational dynamic, but also the (close) relationships between caregivers and their children, revealing the importance of taking caregiver–child interaction and child agency into account when exploring intergenerational transmission and questions of belonging. Consequently, the findings are suggestive of profound discontinuities in social and cultural reproduction. Despite intense and consistent efforts by caregivers, supported by institutions like the church, children may turn away from their heritage.

It should be noted that our findings build on a small sample and may not be representative of other Banyamulenge families in Rwanda, including those who live in urban Kigali or have obtained Rwandan identity papers. Moreover, we caution against linear understandings of belonging, as identification with home and host country may shift dynamically over the life course and may be shaped by changes in the wider environment (Foner and Dreby 2011). Indeed, with the war in eastern DR Congo intensifying at the time of writing, there may also be a more intensified mobilization for armed struggle and return among Banyamulenge living in Rwanda. To what extent children and youth will respond to this appeal, is to be seen.

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Notes

1. Estimate shared by Congolese Banyamulenge community representative in Huye.
2. The project entitled "Pedagogies of Peace and Conflict in the Great Lakes region" included research with families of Rwandan, Burundian, and Congolese Banyamulenge descent in Rwanda.
3. Others suggest the term translates more generally to "people from a place of high mountains" (cf. Rukundwa 2004).
4. Accusations of Rwandan support of the M23 rebel group have been expressed by the Congolese president and the UN but are denied by Rwandan authorities (Enoch 2024, May 3).
5. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
6. In view of strict gender roles, it may be relevant to note that we most often spoke with mothers, not fathers, the latter being more often out of the house or expressing less interest in participating (8 out of 10 families).

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