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The Socio-economic Integration Strategies of “Former Rwandan Refugees” in Yaoundé,

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The Socio-economic Integration Strategies of “Former Rwandan Refugees” in Yaoundé, Cameroon

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Abstract

This research is entitled The Socio-economic Integration Strategies of “former Rwandan refugees” in Yaoundé, Cameroon. This is an analysis of immigrants who were once under international protection. The presence of former Rwandan refugees in the city of Yaoundé dates back to the time of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. With the advent of the cessation clause in 2018, we are faced with individuals who must find ways of coping with the new realities. Based on the assimilation and integration of immigrant, this study analyzes the integration strategies of former Rwandan refugees. This integration is facilitated by a social context described as welcoming and less restrictive. The data collection method is based on semi-structured interviews, a literature review and direct observation. The theoretical framework and methodology used enabled us to understand that integration and assimilation within the Rwandan community are due to constant contact and interaction with the host society.

Resumen

Esta investigación se titula Estrategias de integración socioeconómica de los “ex refugiados ruandeses” en Yaundé, Camerún. Este es un análisis de los inmigrantes que alguna vez estuvieron bajo protección internacional. La presencia de antiguos refugiados ruandeses en la ciudad de Yaundé se remonta a la época del genocidio ruandés de 1994. Con la llegada de la cláusula de cesación en 2018, nos enfrentamos a personas que tienen que encontrar formas de hacer frente a las nuevas realidades. Partiendo de la asimilación e integración del inmigrante, este estudio analiza las estrategias de integración de antiguos refugiados ruandeses. Esta integración se ve facilitada por un contexto social descrito como acogedor y menos restrictivo. El método de recolección de datos se basa en entrevistas semiestructuradas, revisión de literatura y observación directa. El marco teórico y la metodología utilizada nos permitieron comprender que

la integración y asimilación dentro de la comunidad ruandesa se deben al contacto e interacción constante con la sociedad de acogida.

Keywords

Former refugees, integration, Rwandan, assimilation, cessation clause

Context

The Rwandan genocide, which began in April 1994, triggered a migratory movement of Rwandan citizens around the world. At that time, 1.2 million people crossed Rwanda's borders and became a protected group of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office (UNHCR, 2000). Cameroon, considered as a safe country at the time of the conflict, hosted nearly 2,000 registered refugees in the cities of Yaoundé and Douala.¹ With the various international conventions ratified by Cameroon on refugees and the attributes of UNHCR, the presence of Rwandan refugees in Cameroon allowed them to have refugee status. Therefore, these Rwandans were under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office. With this status, these refugees received aid or assistance in their host country.

In 2018, at the request of Rwandan President Paul Kagame, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees proclaimed a cessation clause: this marks the end of refugee status. All Rwandans did not welcome the cessation clause in Yaoundé, and many Rwandans preferred to stay in Cameroon. The presence of Rwandan refugees in Cameroon for more than two decades has led to integration into their host country.

Immigration and integration into a host country, particularly in a refugee context, is multifaceted. Studies on immigrant integration into their host countries are approached from several angles. Mazzella (2014) defines the sociology of immigration as a discipline that is mainly interested in the question of “the integration and installation of those who have migrated, subject to the constraints of the home country” (p. 12). These mobilities, which can be forced or voluntary, result from structural, political, and cultural dynamics; thus, leading to new social affiliations.

Bahi and Piquemal (2013), with an analysis of the difficulties encountered by immigrants during school integration, note that the main challenge for immigrant students is their parents' economic dispossession. They mainly explore the issue of school integration of children from refugee families through the emergence and impact of resilience. One indicator of resilience and adaptation is the development of a sense of belonging to the educational institution. Bahi and Piquemal explain that in a situation of cultural clash, the school environment becomes the main source of transformation for the immigrant. This considers the emergence of new aspirations for a double life based on the appropriation of new skills. According to the authors, these coping and integration strategies require a strength, defined as a resilience, that refers to “the ability of a

¹Migration data portal 2021 [online] <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/fr/regional-data-overview/middleafrica>

person or group to develop well, to continue to project into the future despite destabilizing events, difficult living conditions, sometimes severe traumas" (Manciaux, 2001, Introduction).

Several authors are interested in immigration in the African context, particularly integration strategies and the difficulties encountered by immigrants and refugees. Nkene (2005) presents the challenges and integration strategies related to Nigerian immigration in the city of Douala. According to him, life in a host country requires new forms of sociability. The author studies the principle of transnational demographic intrusion into urban areas, this intrusion causes a decomposition and re-composition of norms and values. The author shows that Nigerians adopt accelerated socialization and acculturation as an integration strategy. Nkene (2005) cites this as "circumvented integration," defined as

Engineering that, proceeding through logics of avoidance and refined methods, allows an actor to subtly infiltrate the social context despite obstacles. Here, the success of the establishment does not result from a deliberate will of the host society. It results initially from processes based on cunning, before then taking the contours of a 'fait accompli' or a second-best solution for the host populations. (p. 11)

Mimche et al. (2006) analyze the factors that facilitate access to education for refugees in Cameroon, qualified as a land of welcome by this category of individuals. They explore the determinants and modalities of the effective realization of the right to education for refugees. Mimche et al. highlight the socio-political stability observed in the country as the main element of access to education for refugees. Beyond this factor, the multicultural character or ethnic diversity observed in Cameroon plays a major role in the integration and reception of refugees in the education system. They note here that the absence of stereotypes and prejudices constitutes indicators of equitable access to education. Contrary to Mimche et al., Gagnon and Khoudour-Castéras (2012) affirm that the multicultural character of Africa does not favor integration in a South-South migration situation. Furthermore, the non-perpetuation of immigrants in Africa limits assimilation as perceived in the South-North migration. In Africa, the short stays of immigrants limit the adoption and internalization of the social norms of their host countries.

Fomekong (2006), using a quantitative approach, presented data on the presence of refugees or exiles in Cameroon. By considering the case of Rwandan refugees, she seeks to understand the reasons which push refugees to choose Cameroon as a country of refuge. In her analysis, Fomekong highlights the aspect of stability as the primary factor in the settlement of refugees in Cameroon. According to the results, 78.3% of Rwandan refugees stipulate that their presence in Cameroon results from the peaceful climate that reigns there. From the results, Fomekong shows that discrimination and lack of integration do not constitute a challenge among refugees in Cameroon. The difficulties observed lie in the absence of basic needs such as nutrition, health, and housing. Mimche (2006), based on the case of Chadian refugees in Cameroon, focuses on their strategies for integration in Cameroon. After leaving the refugee camp, the choice of settling or naturalizing is motivated by socio-professional integration, particularly in the Cameroonian administration. By analyzing the internal trajectories of refugees, Mimche presents urban destinations as being the first choices of Chadians after leaving the refugee camps (in most cases, based in rural areas). The immigrant finds himself in a process of autochtonization in Cameroon through the acquisition of a "home" or a land title. Ba (1995), by retracing the trajectories used by Senegalese immigrants in Cameroon, focused on their mode of socio-

professional integration. Through interaction with nationals, the immigrant allows himself to be shaped by the socio-economic practices of his host society. Ba showed that the cultural similarities and interactions with Hausa traders and artisans from Cameroon facilitated the integration of Senegalese immigrants.

In line with studies on immigrants in Africa, Labo (2000) draws attention to immigration and integration in the Nigeria-Niger border area. The author showed that ethnic connections or similarities and common borders constitute a source of attraction for immigrants. Beyond this factor, the search for a better source of income and pastures for livestock and family reunification further accentuates the decision to migrate. The mode of immigrant integration here mainly concerns the social involvement in the host community. The degree of belonging to the community is defined by networks of friends, mutual assistance, and ownership of a home. From these analyses, it appears that the various interactions in the host country generate an acculturation and integration of immigrants, which results in a feeling of belonging to the host community.

Various studies have been carried out on the topic of migration. Specifically, concerning the host society, the issues are related to the difficulties and strategies of integration of immigrants and refugees. Research has highlighted the motivations surrounding the choice of country of refuge. Going in the same direction as international mobility, my study focuses on a population that has not yet attracted significant interest in social science research. This research aims to describe and analyze the socio-economic integration of former Rwandan refugees who have decided to settle permanently in the city of Yaoundé and responds to the following research question: What are the factors that allow us to understand the integration of former Rwandan refugees in Yaoundé?

Theoretical Framework

In this section, I discuss a theoretical framework based on assimilation and integration. Theories of immigrant assimilation and integration tend to merge. Some studies consider the concepts of assimilation and integration to be inseparable. This theoretical framework assesses the degree of integration by relating the interactions between immigrants and their host society.

Theories of assimilation facilitate the understanding of the experiences of immigrants in their host country. The Chicago School developed the classical perspective of assimilation in the 20th century. Park and Burgess define the concept of assimilation as a “process of interpenetration and fusion in which people and groups acquire the memories, feelings and attitudes of other people and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common community” (1921, p. 735). Gordon (1964) sees in this theory stages of assimilation of foreigners, which follow precise processes.

Alba and Nee (1997) in their redefinition consider assimilation as the decline or disappearance of social, racial, and cultural differences. Based on Alba and Nee’s definition, the assimilation process can be undergone by the minority or majority group. The key criterion to consider here is this non-distinction between the immigrant and the native. Alba and Nee, in their work, to complement that of Gordon, evoke a dimension to take into account: socio-economic assimilation, which according to the authors, refers to equality of opportunity or parity in the labor market. Rumbaut (2015) describes assimilation as the product of social interactions that

render individuals of one ethnic group acculturated, integrated, and identified with members of another. Alba and Foner (2016) present the integration difficulties of the second generation, still qualified as children of immigrants. The authors made a distinction between the concepts of “integration” and “assimilation” among immigrants and their children. As for the definition of concepts, integration

refers to the processes that increase the opportunities of immigrants and their descendants to obtain the valued ‘stuff’ of a society, as well as social acceptance, through participation in major institutions such as the educational and political system and the labor and housing markets. Integration implies that immigrants and their children may, if they desire, maintain cultural and social patterns that are associated with their ethnic or national-origin group. (p. 5)

While assimilation “refers to the processes by which portions of an immigrant origin group, typically its second and third generations, and the ethno-racial majority become more alike in a variety of ways and intermingle” (p. 5).

Safi (2023) analyzes the coexistence and relationship between the concept of discrimination and assimilation. In this article, Safi theoretically and empirically combines the concepts of integration and assimilation. By showing that the notion of discrimination goes beyond the migratory field, Safi presents the three forms of discrimination, which are civic discrimination, discrimination towards migratory attributes and ethno-racial discrimination. These different forms constitute a challenge to the process of assimilation of immigrants and lead to the reproduction of social inequalities.

Safi (2006) highlighted the dimensions and indicators to consider in the analysis of the immigrant integration process. This concerns the socio-economic dimension, the dimension of diversity of relationships, the dimension of cultural references, the dimension of norms, and the dimension of national belonging. Yeukai (2021) in her analysis of Zimbabweans’ integration in South Africa affirms that xenophobia and rejection of foreigners is a factor which slows down the assimilation of immigrants in their host country. Yeukai opens a door to a study of the assimilation between a minority and majority group, characterized by common physical traits. Adams and Van de Vijver (2017) develop the three dimensions of an identity. They assert that in the African context, the conception of a majority and minority group in terms of ethnicity remains less relevant. This is due to the cultural diversity and similarity between African nations. Cameroon, known as Africa in miniature, characterized by ethnic diversity (Datidjo & Nana, 2021), remains an appropriate field study of integration or even assimilation of former refugees. This study remains more relevant because, it is a question here of carrying out an analysis of assimilation in a context which is not defined by race or particular physical traits. Given the current study’s focus on a nation-state (Rwanda), the concepts of race and ethnic origin remain limited. The definition of my target is based on a group identified by a common history (Rwandan genocide of 1994, cessation clause of 2018) and a common territory of origin (Rwanda).

Integration and assimilation constitute tools for analyzing the integration strategies of former Rwandan refugees in the city of Yaoundé. The use of this theoretical framework is part of a duality observed in Yaoundé. On the one hand, I observe a category (“the elders”) that still retains an identity linked to the country of origin. This category will be defined here by

integration into their host country. On the other hand, the second group observed here (“the youth”) is made up of immigrants who assimilate into their host society. Most of these individuals were born on the migratory route before their arrival in Cameroon. Still others left Rwanda in 1994 at a young age. These two categories constitute the first generation because they were not born in Cameroon.

Several dimensions, such as the dimension of cultural references, the dimension of national belonging, the socio-economic dimension, and the absence of discrimination, will be used here to analyze the assimilation or integration of former Rwandan refugees in Yaoundé.

Methodological Approach

This research on the integration strategies of former Rwandan refugees in the city of Yaoundé is based on a qualitative approach. The goal here is to take into account life stories in order to retrace the immigrant's journey and their motivations to settle permanently in Cameroon. Furthermore, direct observation through interaction with the Rwandan community in the city of Yaoundé made it possible to supplement the information received. Data were collected during semi-structured interviews with sixteen participants (n = 16).

For this research, former Rwandan refugees in the city of Yaoundé were first recruited randomly among some traders in Yaoundé. Interested in the socio-economic activities of immigrants, I carried out an exploratory study through visits and screening questions to distinguish immigrants from nationals. Out of five restaurants and shops visited, only one shop belonged to a Rwandan immigrant and the other four were nationals. Other participant selection methods are based on purposive sampling and in this regard, based on knowledge and interactions with other Rwandans, I recruited other participants. Then, to better approach the target, I addressed the question of sampling or recruitment by snowball. As part of this research, opinions were collected from individuals who are familiar with the Rwandan refugee community of Yaoundé. I considered individuals who have lived more than 20 years in Cameroon (this target remains a minority in this community, because many have chosen resettlement in Western countries such as France, Canada, etc.). This category comprises individuals who constituted the main informants because of their long experience in Cameroon. UNHCR considered some to be spokespeople within their community. In this research, I spoke with a few participants who lived less than 15 years and more than 10 years in Cameroon (three participants). Tables 1–4 below summarize the sample. Table 1 focuses on the age range of the women and men who participated in this study. Table 2 seeks to show the number of years that each participant spent in Cameroon. For table 3, the aim is to present the migratory journey of the participants. Table 4 concerns the socio-professional activities carried out by the participants in Cameroon.

PARTICIPANT SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The data collected reveals two generations of people who left Rwanda to seek refuge within this community (see Table 1). The younger generation is made up of individuals under the age of 40. This generation, having left the country with their parents, have also made a stopover in other nations. The other generation are the community's elders.

Table 1: Age Range of Participants (Women and Men) in This Study

Age range (in years)	Number of Women	Number of Men
30-35	2	2
36-40	0	3
41-45	1	0
46-50	1	2
51-55	1	2
56-60	1	0
61-65	0	1
Total	6	10

Table 2 shows the number of years participants spent in Cameroon. I have taken into account immigrants who arrived before the cessation clause. These are people who formerly benefited from UNHCR assistance.

Table 2: Number of Years Spent in Cameroon

Number of years in Cameroon	Number of Women	Number of Men
10-15	1	2
16-20	2	2
21-25	2	3
26-30	1	3
Total	6	10

Table 3 summarizes the migratory paths of the former refugees who were interviewed for this study. Several nations served as springboards or stopping-off points for settling in Cameroon.

Table 3: Migration Journey of Participants

Transit countries	Number of Women	Number of Men
Democratic Republic of Congo→ Republic of Congo→ Cameroon	2	5
Democratic Republic of Congo→ Republic of Congo→ Central African Republic → Cameroon	0	1
Democratic Republic of Congo→ Central African Republic → Cameroon	0	2
Democratic Republic of Congo→ Kenya→ Cameroon	3	2
Democratic Republic of Congo→ Kenya→ South Africa→ Cameroon	1	0
Total	6	10

From the semi-structured interviews and observation, participants indicated that trade is their main professional activity. Although there are other activities, trade is a preferred activity within the community (see Table 4).

Table 4: Profession of the Participants

Profession	Number of Women	Number of Men
Trader	2	5
Teacher	2	0
Student	1	0
Driver	0	1
Business	0	1
Health Worker	1	2
Religious leader	0	1
Total	6	10

INTERVIEW GUIDE AND DATA COLLECTION

The semi-structured interview guide was subdivided into four sections. The first section of this guide focused on the identification and migratory trajectory of the refugee towards their host country (Cameroon). This section retraces the migratory path of Rwandan refugee. Through this, I seek to understand whether the economic integration in Yaoundé is a reproduction of their experience in Rwanda or stems from the migratory journey and their experiences in the Cameroonian context. The questions in the first section also aimed to understand the motivations of refugees to settle in Cameroon rather than elsewhere. The second section, which focused on their mode of integration, aimed to identify all subsistence, economic activities within the Rwandan refugee community. This section provides deeper insight into understanding refugees' strategies to thrive in the labor market in Yaoundé. The guide also included questions to inquire about participants' degree of interaction with their Cameroonian neighborhood. The third section of the guide concluded by inquiring about barriers to their integration or well-being in Cameroon. The last section, which asks about participants' perspectives or future, involves identifying and understanding the factors of nonreturn to Rwanda, resettlement elsewhere, and continuation of life in their host country. Reaching saturation, accompanied by direct observation and a literature review, facilitated the analytical phase of data collected.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was carried out after transcription and organization of information in a transcription matrix. The data obtained made it possible to present and analyze the results. Selected quotes from participants are incorporated into the findings developed below. To identify the participants when presenting the quotes, I selected the following characteristics: the number of years spent in Cameroon; their daily activities; and their transit countries.

I noticed that most of the interviews conducted here led to a redundancy of information such as the motivations for migrating out of Rwanda and staying away from Rwanda, the migratory trajectory classified mainly into several groups, the most practiced economic activity within the community and, finally, interactions with the host country and strategies to deal with the difficulties that a non-Cameroonian may encounter. The choice of participants' quotes was not made at random. As the refugee experience is almost similar within the community, I selected the clearest quotes or those that provided detailed information. Rwandans who have had a long experience here were to provide information that relates to the reality of their host community.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH OF “FORMER REFUGEE”

For a better understanding of my study object, it is my responsibility to provide a definition conducive to the concept of “former refugees.” The meaning of refugee refers, according to the UNHCR (2019) to “people who have fled their country due to threats to their lives, security or freedom, due to widespread violence, external aggression, internal conflicts, massive human rights violations or other circumstances that have seriously disrupted public order” (Section 3: The 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol). The concept of a former refugee appears with the advent of a cessation clause. This put an end to refugee status and rights by the UNHCR. The clause appears in very specific circumstances.² The proclamation of a cessation clause for

² Refworld | Document de travail sur l'application des clauses de cessation (“changements de circonstances”) dans la Convention de 1951

Rwandan refugees appeared in the context of an end of conflict and a return to peace. However, this idea moves away from the conception of the target group. The concept of former refugees is seen here from a legal perspective. It is therefore a question of sociological redefinition, which considers the targeted social category. The expression “former refugees” remains ambiguous, given its social nonexistence in this context. As part of my study, I opted for a legal definition of the term “former refugees,” which refers to a cessation of refugee status. According to Cameroonian law, a refugee is considered as any “persons outside their countries of origin who need international protection because of a serious threat to their life, physical integrity or freedom in their country of origin due to persecution, armed conflict, violence or serious public disorder,”³ benefits from the same privileges as nationals.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The analysis carried out on the integration of former Rwandan refugees in Yaoundé was inspired by the theoretical model of assimilation and integration of immigrants. As developed by the authors, assimilation also analyzes the integration of the immigrant’s descendants. However, my study did not explore the degree of assimilation of the second or third generation. The observation was made only on the first generation. The consideration of children born in the host country is outside the scope of this research.

Findings

CONTEXT AND DIFFERENT MIGRATION TRAJECTORIES TO CAMEROON

The first steps of this research were based on an initial question: What is the origin of the presence of Rwandans in Cameroon? This question has allowed me to trace the trajectories of a population that doesn’t share a common border with their land of refuge. Beyond a critical situation in their country of origin, the presence of former Rwandan refugees in Cameroon is also the result of instability in bordering countries. This section is based on the different life stories shared by the participants in conjunction with online documentary research.

CRISIS IN VARIOUS COUNTRIES BORDERING RWANDA AND CAMEROON

From the colonial period until independence and the Hutu Revolution in 1962, Rwanda entered a period of conflict that, over time, would turn into a political-ethnic conflict. The genocide of 6 April 1994 represented the climax of a conflict of a political and ethnic nature. According to the authors, this tumultuous period, caused mainly by a political crisis, created a climate of discord between two majority tribes, the Hutu and the Tutsis. As a result, Rwandans were mobilized to neighboring countries. Several reports and documentaries mention this tragic event, which was the main cause of the Rwandan presence in Yaoundé. The trajectory towards Cameroon was not direct.

³ Loi n°2005/006 du 27 juillet 2005 Portant statut des réfugiés au Cameroun

Countries bordering Rwanda were the main points of refuge for these refugees. These are Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. All the study participants mentioned that their immigration to Cameroon was not direct and reported that the Democratic Republic of Congo was the starting point on their migration journey after Rwanda. One of the participants reported:

It is war, the war in Rwanda in 1994 made us leave the country to come here. Now, the path was not like Kigali-Cameroon. It was Congo Kinshasa (DRC), road to the Central African Republic (CAR), moreover we crossed all these paths. Cameroon because there was more stability. Arrived in Congo (Kinshasa), there were problems between the different regimes, Mobutu-Kabyla. The camp of refugees was attacked, going to the Central African Republic was not easy. It was in Cameroon that we found stability and that we had to integrate. [A community leader with 27 years of experience in Cameroon, he transited through Congo Kinshasa, Congo-Brazzaville before arriving in Cameroon.]

The study carried out by Fomekong (2006) mentions that “among Rwandans staying in Cameroon and having transited through a country, 44.0% resided in the DRC, 32.0% in CAR and 16.0% in Republic of Congo” (Section 7. Migration route). In the context of the 1994 Genocide, Rwandans settled in Cameroon in several waves (Abessolo, 2007). Two main nations facilitated this immigration, namely the Republic of Congo (to be differentiated from the Democratic Republic of Congo) and the Central African Republic. This is because these two countries border Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Other factors also influenced the flow of Rwandans from these two countries to Cameroon. During the Mass Migration Period of the Rwandan population, the Democratic Republic of Congo also experienced many conflicts with the “war of liberation” mainly against the regime of former President Mobutu Sese Seko and the multiple attacks observed in Rwandan refugee camps in the provinces of South Kivu (Bukavu) and North Kivu (Goma) (UNHCR, 2000). These attacks resulting from the continuity of the conflict in refugee camps, accentuated the flight of Rwandans from the Democratic Republic of Congo. This instability pushed these refugees to settle in the Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo. Nevertheless, their presence in these places was short-lived, given the instability in this nation. The political instability observed in the Central African Republic was due to numerous overthrows, including the overthrow of the government of Felix Patasse by former President François Bozize.⁴ The political conflict encouraged the departure of Rwandan refugees from this area. In the Republic of Congo, the political instability that began in 1992 and ended in 1997 opposed Denis Sassou Nguesso and Pascal Lissouba (Adam, 2003). According to the participants, these various countries bordering Cameroon were in a conflict situation, so they were not considered an ideal place for Rwandan refugees. The participants noted that they had already experienced a large-scale tragedy and were no longer ready to live in a country with conflict. For them, it was a question of migrating to a favorable land. Cameroon was considered as a safe place for this vulnerable group because at that time Cameroon was politically stable. HCR (2005) highlighted the fact that “at a time when immigration policies are tightening almost everywhere, and where borders are becoming more

⁴ Human Right Watch, Contexte : les causes diverses des conflits en RCA. L’histoire politique violente de la République Centrafricaine, 2007 <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/french/reports/2007/car0907/4.htm>

and more sealed off from influxes of refugees, Cameroon continues to practice its hospitality policy and receives a continuous influx” (p.2). I also note that another category passed through Kenya. These people testify that difficult living conditions for refugees were the main reason for their departure from Kenya to Cameroon.

ROLE PLAYED BY UNHCR IN RWANDAN INTEGRATION IN CAMEROON

The UNHCR, by its obligations, has facilitated survival and integration into Cameroonian social life. To the question of the role played by UNHCR in their settlement and integration in Cameroon, I retain these words of a participant: “We were helped by the High Commissioner for Refugees in Cameroon, UNHCR, who for many years hosted Rwandans, and allowed us to reintegrate into society. After the refugee had a refugee card, that entitles us to certain benefits” (A student with 10 years of experience in Cameroon, she and the family transited through DRC-Kenya before arriving in Cameroon).

Although not affecting all Rwandan refugees, UNHCR assistance contributed to their installation and integration in Cameroon. For some, being new arrivals, the support of the UNHCR through the acquisition of identification documents was essential.

DIMENSIONS OF RWANDAN INTEGRATION IN CAMEROON

In this study, assimilation dimensions and instruments indicate the extent to which former Rwandan refugees integrate into the city of Yaoundé.

Socio-Cultural Assimilation (Cultural References Dimension)

With reference to the cultural dimension of assimilation, it is a question here of ‘measuring’ a certain cultural distance which can separate the immigrant from the culture of the host country” (Safi, 2006). To understand the cultural assimilation of my participants, I was particularly interested in their knowledge of ethnic particularities in Cameroon. This factor in the Cameroonian context, in general, represents an essential element in the identification of a Cameroonian. Given the multitudes of ethnicities observed in Cameroon, these former refugees have been able to identify this differentiation throughout their integration. This capacity is the result of numerous interactions with the major group (host country). Another indicator that I have identified here is the knowledge of local languages and expressions that are part of Cameroonian jargon. Knowledge of the two official languages in Cameroon (English and French) was not a major element to dwell on. At the time of the genocide, French and Kinyarwanda were considered the official languages, which automatically constituted an element of facilitation of integration or assimilation. The fact that this data was not considered among my participants is also due to the fact that French is the most spoken language in the city of Yaoundé. It should be noted that from the country of origin, some Rwandans did not speak French and instead spoke Kinyarwanda. However, these individuals’ knowledge of French increased throughout their presence in Cameroon. The criterion for analysis at this level is knowledge of a local language. In this regard, the participant evokes this ability to communicate in local languages such as Ewondo, Yemba, etc. This is the result of cohabitation with other Cameroonians.

Another factor I note here is the adoption of socio-cultural norms. To understand this process of assimilation or the adoption of socio-cultural norms of the large group, I asked these former refugees, who are mainly traders, about their strategies to circumvent the laws. For this category of individuals, it is a question of “doing like Cameroonians” (A trader with 27 years of experience in Cameroon, he transited through DRC and Kenya before arriving in Cameroon), meaning circumventing laws in the same way they have seen done by Cameroonian traders. This is integration by mimicry which requires, according to the theory of assimilation, an acculturation of the immigrant (Safi, 2006). This integration is demonstrated by former Rwandan refugees using expressions such as “give an envelope” and “Tchoko.” In Cameroonian jargon, the first expression refers to the verb “corrupt” to obtain a service; the second refers to the verb “to give.” In some situations, the expression “Tchoko” can also refer to the verb “give money to obtain a service.”

Another major example of social integration noted among the participants is related to that of identification documents. For them, because of the high cost of obtaining a living permit in Cameroon, some social actors set up a means of circumvention that they have acquired throughout their stay in Cameroon. It is a question here of aligning with a social practice, which is a set of ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (Durkheim, 1937) and which generally characterizes the large group as evoked by a former Rwandan refugee. The aim of this strategy is to overcome the difficulties in accessing legal documents for free movement and exercise of economic activity. This analysis is justified by the words of a participant:

Cameroon is such a free country, we are comfortable. I ride easily here without my card, I can never be stopped, or if I am stopped, it passes. We know the reality in Cameroon, the one who has the means passes, you can easily get by. We give this freedom. [A trader with 25 years of experience in Cameroon, he transited through DRC, Congo-Brazzaville before arriving in Cameroon.]

This strategy acquired over time through contacts with Cameroonians is considered to surpass the system (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977).

Structural Assimilation (National Belonging)

According to the classical assimilation theory developed by Gordon (1964), the next step to understanding the assimilation process of immigrants is structural assimilation. He considers this process “large scale entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions of host society, on primary group level” (p. 169). To understand structural integration and assimilation, I considered former Rwandan refugees’ membership in associations.

Membership in Cameroonian Associations and Neighborhoods

Although there is a Rwandan community in Yaoundé, there is also integration into the associations of the large group. Membership in associations such as neighborhood meeting groups provides a favorable context for rapid adaptation from abroad. On the other hand, participation in events or associations of the large group is an assimilative step that allows them to identify more with their host country. Among youth, the preferences and membership are oriented towards the associations of the host community. On this subject, a respondent from the younger generation of former refugee quotes “It is a (Rwandan) community, not that we are hidden, we do not interact too much with each other. We interact more with Cameroonians” (A

student with 10 years of experience in Cameroon, she transited through DRC and Kenya before arriving in Cameroon). The assimilation process remains more visible among the younger generation. The young Rwandan identifies more with his host society. This preference is generated by the school system, which facilitates meetings and mixing between groups of individuals. It should be noted here that this rapid integration into the Cameroonian social context is due to their mode of arrival. Rwandan refugees arriving in Cameroon were scattered. Rwandans migrating to countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo or Burundi were housed in refugee camps.⁵ The respondents refer to immigration that has taken place in a disparate manner. When they arrived, refugees interacted more with Cameroonians than their Rwandan brothers. The individuation of the entry processes in Cameroon led to a dispersion of Rwandan immigrants. Unlike immigrants of other nationalities, Rwandans do not have common living quarters. This field observation is confirmed by the words of a participant: “When I arrived in Cameroon, I did not know Rwandans, my neighborhood was made up only of Cameroonians. Rwandans do not have a common residential area” (A teacher with 26 years of experience in Cameroon, she transited through DRC and Kenya before arriving in Cameroon).

This individuation of settlement is a factor that has facilitated the integration of Rwandans in Cameroon. Sebola (2019) considered the absence of a refugee camp as an accelerated process of integration of immigrants. Speaking about Rwandan immigrants, a participant mentioned that

They [Rwandans] are almost everywhere, we cannot say that they are in a stable place. It's not like the Senegalese, the Senegalese can easily be found in Briqueterie, when you arrive in Mvog-Ada, you find Nigerians everywhere. We Rwandans are not in common place or neighborhood. [A businessman with 15 years of experience in Cameroon, he transited through DRC and Republic of Congo before arriving in Cameroon.]

Although there are refugee camps in Cameroon, especially in the East, the Far North, etc., Rwandans on their arrival preferred to settle in communities composed more of Cameroonians. Permanent contact with the mainstream puts the foreigner in a position of rapid integration. The lack of a massive or community arrival created more distance between refugees, which has remained visible until today. These new contacts, which are created as a result of a neighborhood made up exclusively of nationals, enabled immigrants to socialize and integrate harmoniously into their new environment. As contacts are created, the dimension of national belonging arises more and more among immigrants who prefer to integrate in Cameroon after the cessation clause. Beyond frequenting and interacting with the host community, the feeling of being accepted by nationals generates a strong desire to identify with the host country. In the context of this study, participation in (Cameroonian) mutual aid or communion associations is not the only indicator of integration. I also note here that the choice of naturalization remains visible in the ‘Rwandan Refugees’ community in Yaoundé. To this end, the participant cites: “Personally, I am already integrated in Cameroon, it remains only that I obtain naturalization. Several in the community have managed to naturalize with their children” (A trader with 27 years of experience in Cameroon, he transited through DRC, Republic of Congo and CAR before arriving in Cameroon). The feeling of belonging to Cameroon is justified by the sharing of difficulties between Rwandan immigrants and Cameroon citizens. This is considered as a source of

⁵ HCR, Les réfugiés dans le monde : Cinquante ans d'action humanitaire. Chapitre 10 : Le génocide rwandais et ses répercussions, Paris, La Découverte, 2000

consolation because apart from the high cost of access to identification documents, “they go through the same difficulties or daily challenges” as their Cameroonian “brothers” or “neighbors” [a trader with 24 years of experience in Cameroon, she transited through DRC and Republic of Congo before arriving in Cameroon]. Findings indicate an integration manifested as a non-distinction between the immigrant and the native (Alba & Nee, 1997).

Economic Integration (Socio-economic Dimension)

Yet another indicator to consider in the assimilation or integration process is the economic aspect. Alba (2008), in his reformulation of assimilation theory, evokes an important dimension to be considered in the analysis of the integration process of immigrants. Per the author, “the convergence of socio-economic life chances with those of the ethnic/racial majority, is certainly a key dimension of assimilation” (p. 40). Here, the assimilation of foreigners in their host society goes beyond the social. The author, therefore, leads us to analyze the economic integration of former Rwandan refugees in the city of Yaoundé. An interview with a participant reveals that

Here, there are many compatriot brothers and sisters who are in commerce, there are almost in every neighborhood. The big job they do the most is the shops, the trade in general, that is to say, having a food store, it is the business of Rwandans in Cameroon, they adapt easily to that. [A trader with 23 years of experience in Cameroon, she transited through DRC, Republic of Congo and CAR before arriving in Cameroon.]

It should be noted here that economic or entrepreneurial capacity took shape for the participants during their migratory journey. For them, the ability to engage in trade begins with the purchasing power they encountered in the Republic of Congo. This situation, which they describe as similar in Cameroon, allowed them to immerse themselves in this activity. Beyond this purchasing power, one participant testifies that,

My neighbor who is Bamileke [ethnic group in west Cameroon], she has a shop, we are subject to the same rules. Even this is not because we are Rwandans or we are refugees; you receive the same treatment as nationals since it is your host country... The trade sector is liberalized; it is enough that you are in good standing with standard. [A trader with 10 years of experience in Cameroon, he transited through DRC and CAR before arriving in Cameroon.]

According to one respondent, this choice was described as a way to acquire daily income independently. Nkene (2005) and Abessolo (2012) already categorized Rwandans as traders, before the implementation of the cessation clause. Concerning the trade sector, Nkene describes Rwandan refugees as a group that has succeeded in supplanting the Senegalese in Cameroon. The economic integration and entrepreneurship increase also through networks developed by immigrants and nationals, according to Yans-McLaughlin (1990). They have this ability through collaboration with nationals to create wealth or do business. Chiswick (1978) mentioned that long experience in the host country (10–15 years) considerably increases financial income or even the capacity to create or integrate into the world of employment. In my field observations, I noted that the first Rwandan immigrants resulting from the 1994 crisis hold greater economic capital than those who recently arrived. This first wave constituted financial support for other Rwandans with limited Cameroon experience. For example, the practice of ethnic economy is described according to the participants as solidarity or help towards the brother who has not yet acquired experience in the job market and the private sector in Cameroon.

Absence of Discrimination

One of the indicators of complete assimilation is the absence of discrimination. Sebola (2019), in his African conception of the integration of immigrants, defends the idea that the exclusion of immigrants in refugee camps constitutes an obstacle to integration in the host country. Adams and Van de Vijver (2017) agree that the marginalization or rejection of immigrants in their host country leads to a withdrawal of identity or the prioritization of the culture of origin. These interview data allow for an examination of the relationship between discrimination and the integration of Rwandan immigrants in Cameroon. Participants define the host country as:

A good country, the climate is not difficult, it is a rich country anyway and then people are not xenophobic. We can settle there. There are even others who have left West Africa because they understood that Cameroonians welcomed foreigners. We adapt easily to everything, and we get by easily compared to other countries. I am lucky to be everywhere, what I have seen, elsewhere, is disaster. Here, we do not face discrimination. The Rwandan integrates easily like any other foreigner here in Cameroon. [A businessman with 15 years of experience in Cameroon, he transited through DRC and the Republic of Congo before arriving in Cameroon].

For these former refugees, Cameroon is considered a safe place. In this host country, former Rwandan refugees, formerly subjected in their country of origin to conflicts and indexation due to their ethnicity, are spared from any tribal prejudice. The land of settlement, in relation to the country of origin, becomes a place where the daily life of the war victim is cut off from any trauma of the past. This less restrictive feature of Cameroon has led other Rwandan refugees from countries not bordering Cameroon to migrate there. Here, she mentions that:

Before our arrival here, we were in contact with other Rwandans, and they confirmed to us that things are easier here. Cameroon is the only country where my family and I have lived for more than ten years. The side that we do not show too much of Cameroon is this capacity to welcome refugees. [A teacher with 19 years of experience in Cameroon, she transited through DRC, Kenya and South Africa before arriving in Cameroon.]

The host country defines the degree of integration of the former refugee. On a social level, the absence of discrimination or marginalization of foreigners is a factor to be considered in the perpetuation and internalization of social norms. According to Gordon (1964), this non-distinction between the minority and majority groups constitutes a major degree or stage of assimilation in the host society. Yeukai (2021) views this non-discrimination as the best way to describe the assimilation or integration of immigrants.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed and analyzed the socio-economic integration strategies of former Rwandan refugees in Yaoundé. Based on a qualitative approach (semi-structured interviews, direct observation) and a theoretical framework based on immigrant assimilation (integration), I noted various dimensions and indicators of former Rwandan refugee's integration in Yaoundé. The assimilation indicators developed at this level have been an instrument for measuring former refugees' socio-economic integration in Yaoundé. Similarly, I have focused on the factors determining this integration or assimilation in the host city. I note here that the strategies developed by this group allow them to merge into the social and economic life of the large

group. This presence over time has facilitated an integration, which with a socially favorable context (absence of discrimination or rejection), created an assimilation or integration of foreigners. They were essentially immersed in the daily life of nationals by adopting a set of ways of acting, feeling and thinking and sharing a common daily experience. The advent of the cessation clause appears not as a means of forcing a return to the country of origin but rather as an asset to demonstrate their belonging or their attachment to the host country.

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