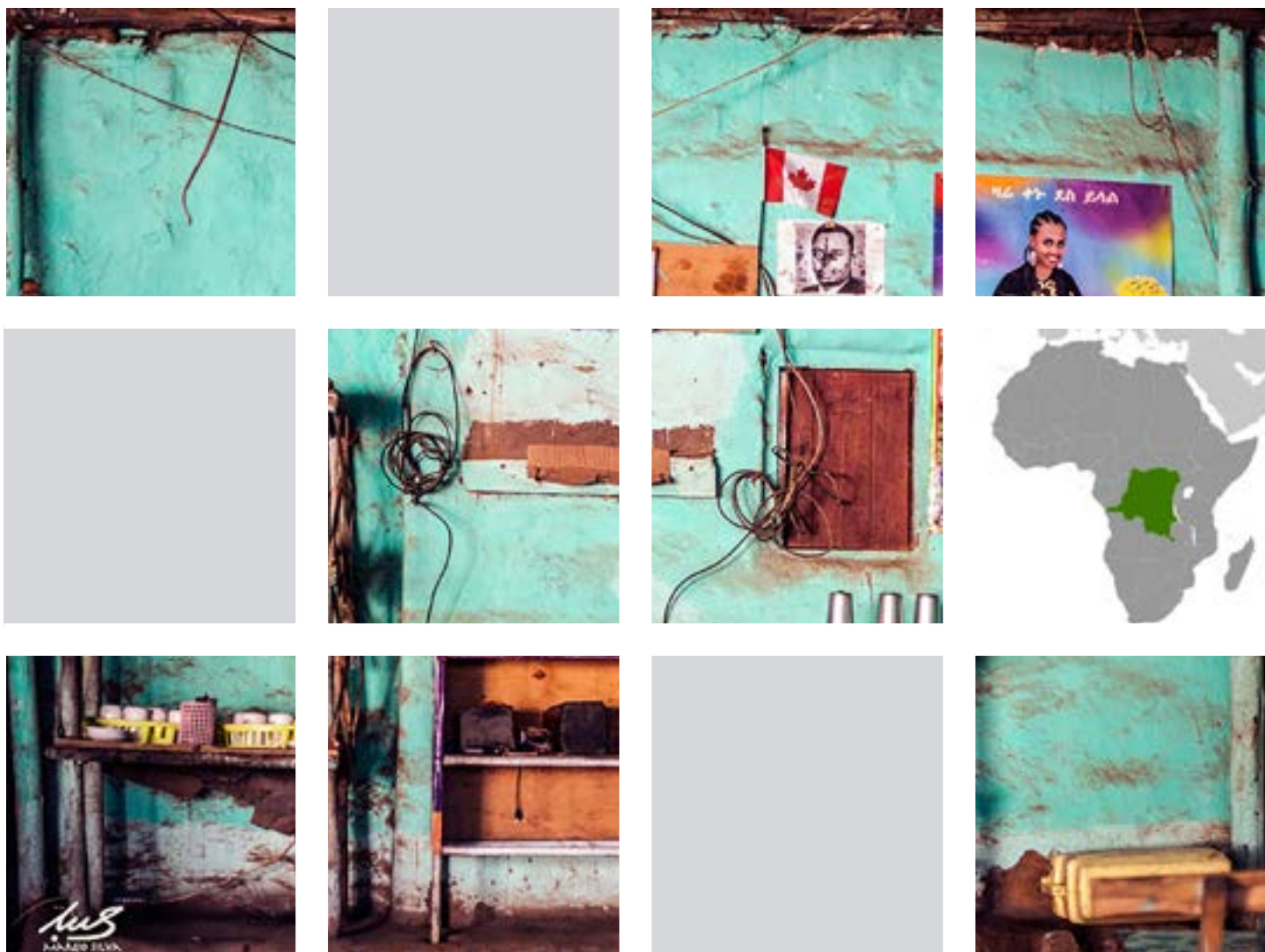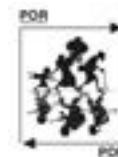Photo from Mariajose Silva Vargas, a PhD Fellow at United Nations University – Masstricht University

Disappearing across the border: circular return and the social dynamics of secrecy and concealment between Uganda's Nakivale Refugee Settlement and eastern DRC

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Hidden among the hills on the shores of a large lake in Uganda's Isingiro district lies Nakivale. Long before it became an official refugee settlement in 1960, the kings of Ankole who reigned in the area used to retreat to Nakivale in times of inter-kingdom conflict. The locality of Isanja, close by the lake, was considered a sacred place where the kings were also brought upon their deaths to eventually disappear under the watchful gaze of the king's guards, guided by the spirits of the lake. This practice had long been abandoned when Isanja became the first site in Nakivale where Rwandan refugees settled in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, still respected by the few locals who inhabited the area, Isanja was a place people avoided going for fear they would disappear and never come back. An old chief living on the hills remembered that Ugandans were suspicious of the refugees' magical powers and identities at that time because they had somehow withstood the spirits of the lake and had managed not to disappear.

THE CAMP AS A PLACE TO HIDE

Refugee camps are one of the most visible landmarks of forced displacement today. Unlike refugees living in villages, towns, or cities, those staying in camps cannot engage in practices to conceal their refugee status or to disappear into the host population. Everyone knows that you are a refugee when you live in Nakivale. Yet, in many ways, refugee camps are also places in which a variety of dynamics, activities, and identities are purposely hidden and rendered invisible. While the chief was, of course, right in stating that the Rwandan refugees had not physically disappeared, people fleeing violent conflict and persecution are ,in reality, hiding across the border, outside of the reach of their governments and armed groups, and under the legal protection of an international humanitarian umbrella. In this sense, it can be argued that refugees and the internally displaced do disappear on certain levels and from certain actors. A refugee's identity is anonymous on principle and should only be known by the UNHCR, humanitarian agencies and the department of refugee affairs of the host country (UNHCR 2018). To help maintain this anonymity and protection, access to the camp is, again, in principle, only possible through a rigorous asylum procedure, and visitors are required to make their identities and intentions known to camp authorities before and on arrival. Of course, time and again many events have recurrently highlighted the numerous cracks in this official system of protection, revealing, for example, easy penetration by combatants and intelligence agencies from abroad.

Yet, methods of (protective) anonymity and invisibility are not only developed from the top down, but are also part of a bottom-up process, through which a variety of actors practice different ways

to hide a variety of activities, mobilities, personal histories, identities, trajectories, and experiences from a variety of other actors both within and outside the camp or host country. However, while some refugees have cut communication entirely with their compatriots in the country of origin, others remain in touch in several ways. Social interactions and information sharing with friends and relatives through social media, phone calls, money exchange, and circular mobility between the camp and countries of origin take place regularly and constitute a way of maintaining relationships and support networks. While their identities are thus known to their contacts 'at home,' refugees often attempt to conceal their presence in the camp by being vague or fabricating stories to these personal contacts, thereby creating their own protective measures. However, while communication from a distance (e.g., through social media) allows a certain degree of vagueness on one's doings and whereabouts, this becomes much more difficult when both parties physically meet each other, for example through circular return movements.

By examining circular return movements between Nakivale and eastern DRC, this research brief will explore the practices and social dynamics of secrecy and concealment among Congolese refugees who hide their relationship with the camp from their friends and relatives "back home." While refugees of many different nationalities sporadically or regularly return to their countries of origin for short or long periods while maintaining a residence in Uganda,[4] for personal and ethical reasons,[5] this paper focuses specifically on Congolese respondents. Congolese constitute the majority of the approximately 100,000 inhabitants of Nakivale at the time of this field research. They arrived in large groups in the mid-1990s, the second half of the 2000s, and in 2012-2013. Smaller numbers have continued to trickle in throughout the years. During two two-week research trips in 2018, I accompanied two friends whom I will call Bamidele and Faruq on short family visits to their home towns of Goma and Bukavu.[6] In addition, a number of Nakivale residents connected me with friends and family in and around Goma and Bukavu, who, in turn, provided me with a broader perspective on the camp from the outside, and allowed me to explore issues of return and circular movement further. The field trips to Goma and Bukavu were made in the context of a four-year doctoral research project on the role and position of refugee camps in conflict mobilities in Central-East Africa.[7] The focus of the Ph.D. lies on Nakivale Refugee Settlement in which most of the ethnographic fieldwork takes place. As such, this research brief presents an early analysis of the camp as a place to hide in relation to the dynamics of circular return between Nakivale and eastern DRC.

A total of 55 inhabitants of Goma, Bukavu, and Nakivale directly participated in this specific research, in addition to interactions with other Nakivale inhabitants within the framework of the broader Ph.D. The analysis greatly benefited from a reflection meeting with four researchers from GEC-SH at the Institut Supérieur Pédagogique at the end of my stay in Bukavu (Irène Bahati, Vianney Cukas Muderhwa, Stanislas Bisimwa Baganda and Christian Chiza Kashurha) and conversations with two researchers in Goma (Chrispin Mvano and Olivier Ndoole).

In the following sections, I analyze the dynamics of secrecy surrounding cross-border mobility by starting with a section on secrecy and circular return followed by explaining how people's secrecy over their presence in Nakivale gradually infringed on my position as a researcher and companion, necessitating my complicity in concealing their doings and whereabouts and eventually also, partly, my own identity. I then proceed to focus on two themes that often determined conversations in Nakivale and DRC about circular return and the presence of Congolese in refugee camps: (1) discourses on danger and insecurity in DRC (titled as 'the battleground'), and (2) resettlement aspirations.

ON CIRCULAR RETURN AND SECRECY

Refugee return – whether permanent, for long periods or short visits – is rarely an easy process. From the end of the nineties onwards, academic researchers have generally agreed that return is a very problematic concept and a difficult process, casting returnees into new socio-economic and political realities (Tegenbos & Vlassenroot 2018: 10). Further, scholars working on circular mobilities have found that the concept and practice of return is also a very fluid and ambiguous one. Many refugees attempt to minimize risk by moving between host and 'home' countries, simultaneously benefiting from refugee protection and socio-economic connections with their countries of origin (Hovil 2010, Kaiser 2010, Harpviken 2014). These practices render migration an inherent part of the return process. Circular movements among Congolese refugees living in Nakivale take place regularly. The border is near, and passports and other travel documents can be bought or negotiated easily. These movements may involve visiting friends and relatives, trading goods, checking up on farms and cattle herds, and combatants engaging in armed incursions. They can be part of a long-term repatriation process, as one person, for example, explained his decision to undertake several trips a year to Goma while gradually trying to create a base for permanent return through reestablishing social networks and searching for property.[8] In other cases, circular movements

help to support a protracted stay in exile, establish opportunities for business, maintain social relations, or briefly relieve the stress of financial, social, and emotional challenges people face in the camp. In the case of my two companions, Bamidele and Faruq, this stress of 'camp life' served as the main reason for their family visits to Goma and Bukavu. However, their return was not an easy process for either of them.

Nakivale has a profound relationship with the dynamics of secrecy, concealment, and mystery. The social interaction between Congolese in Nakivale and eastern DRC, whether from a distance or during return visits, is only one area in which this relationship is established. These dynamics became powerfully clear during and after the two research trips in which my participation in hiding people's presence in the camp became crucial. From the start of my field research in Nakivale in 2017, I had been invited by several Congolese to accompany them on their circular return journeys to DRC. Given the possible legal implications of a refugee crossing the border with her/his country of origin, I conditioned my participation in an invitation to a journey that was to take place anyway. The details of the two return trips were thoroughly prepared and discussed with Bamidele and Faruq in advance. Further, upon hearing of my travel plans, many Nakivale inhabitants requested me to visit their friends and family who lived in and around Goma and Bukavu. However, the purpose of the research trips was discussed ,and consent was obtained before departure.

Yet, neither myself nor the people who put me in touch with their acquaintances in DRC seemed to have realized in advance how these visits, in the context of a research project, risked exposing their presence in the camp. Upon arrival in DRC, I was unexpectedly drawn into a web of mystery and secrecy as Nakivale inhabitants pleaded with me, last-minute, to hide their relationship with the camp when meeting their friends and relatives. I consequently started to take an active part in concealing what would gradually come to seem like a rather public secret, at least relative to the camp as a whole. Building on Simmel's sociology of secrecy and secret societies (1906, 1950), Taussig theorized the "public secret" as "that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated. (...)The secret of the public secret is that there is none" (Taussig 1999: 5 & 7). In the context of the return trips, the public secret existed as a general awareness on the part of the inhabitants of Goma and Bukavu that many of their fellow denizens quietly left the cities to live in refugee camps abroad. On the personal level of all but one Nakivale inhabitant, their presence in the camp was not openly communicated to everyone they knew in DRC and kept deliberately hidden from public view. Fabricated stories about their doings and whereabouts

in Uganda replaced actual reality, although almost everyone had one or two confidants who were officially aware of their real situation and with whom I was often linked to in DRC. In turn, the Congolese I interacted with in Goma and Bukavu knew that those staying in the camps generally invented stories about studying or doing business in Kampala (Uganda's capital). Nakivale inhabitants thus attempted to maintain their personal secret in DRC amid a general public awareness that many Congolese in Uganda are in one way or another connected to the camps and lie about it.

WITH FARUQ IN BUKAVU: PROVIDING AND TAKING COVER

My journeys with Bamidele to Goma and with Faruq to Bukavu in 2018 unfolded quite differently. I accompanied Bamidele to Goma where he visited his family regularly while maintaining a residence in Nakivale. He had fled Bunia at the age of 15 when he and his family were briefly living there in 2005. In the chaos of an attack by 'rebels' in the area, Bamidele and his little sister found themselves separated from the others and eventually ended up in Uganda. Unfortunately, my stay in Goma largely elapsed without Bamidele. The unfolding of different developments in Nakivale required Bamidele's sudden attention, which compelled him to return on the very day of our arrival. Although I remained in touch with his close family during my stay, I was thus unable to follow the personal process of Bamidele's return.

For Faruq, on the other hand, going back to Bukavu to attend his parents' 50th wedding anniversary was his first return since arriving in Nakivale a year earlier. In the camp, Faruq often proudly stated that he was not a refugee, but a businessman. "For me, I am not a refugee. I did not come from across the border with my jerrican and mattress on my head, fleeing violence and war. I am a businessman."[9] Faruq had come to Uganda to find a way towards bulaya (Congolese Swahili for 'Europe,' but also often a broader term for 'the West') via resettlement, a procedure that is much easier accessed in the camps than in urban environments. He had studied informatics at one of the better universities in South Kivu, but he had become frustrated with the political instability and economic insecurity in Bukavu after four years of unemployment. In Bukavu, Faruq and I regularly spent time together with and without his friends and family. It was thus especially my trip with Faruq that revealed the many complex intricacies and difficulties that were involved in maintaining the secret of his relationship with the camp.

Importantly, both Faruq and Bamidele had not communicated their real whereabouts to everyone they knew in DRC. Faruq had been forced to inform his parents of his true intentions in Uganda a few months earlier when he ran out of money to pay rent in Kampala (Faruq generally divided his time between Kampala and Nakivale depending on his financial reserves[10]). For Bamidele, only his parents and brother were aware that he lived in the camp. Apart from Bamidele and Faruq, all but one Nakivale inhabitant asked me to hide their real doings and whereabouts in Uganda from public view in DRC. Their reasons varied from security concerns to family problems and worries that their contacts in DRC would not understand why they were in Nakivale. These often also revealed deep feelings of shame about living in a refugee camp. Many of these reasons connect to the reasons why they had originally left DRC, while others were more linked to their current situation or reasons for which they had remained in the camp, rather than returning home.

My time in Goma and Bukavu might be best described as a complex interplay of taking and providing cover. On the eve of many first meetings in Goma, I received urgent and unexpected phone calls from Congolese in Nakivale warning me not to disclose their real whereabouts and advising me instead to tell their friends and relatives that I had met them in Kampala where they were supposedly working, studying, or doing business. Importantly, their secret relationship with Nakivale forced me to conceal different aspects of my visits to Goma and Bukavu as well. My status as a researcher, the purpose of my visit, my business, and interest in Uganda (and Nakivale), the nature of my relationship with their friends and relatives, and the circumstances in which I had met them all suddenly became sensitive conversation topics. In addition, most Nakivale inhabitants had not told their contacts in DRC much about me. Some of them were aware that I was a researcher (in Nakivale), but others were not – and deliberately so. Often, and especially in the beginning, I had to invent and fabricate stories on the spot, trying to remain true to my identity as a researcher without jeopardizing the covers of my friends in Nakivale. I was better prepared for Bukavu, having had extensive conversations with Nakivale refugees in advance to finetune my narratives. With most direct contacts in Bukavu, I was allowed to be open about their conditions in the camp and about my own position as a researcher. However, suspicion about my motives and identity often remained and were admittedly mutual, certainly on the first meeting. I was 'a friend at home' but also simultaneously an unknown researcher, and I would often first test the water to learn how much they knew about me and their contact in Nakivale – something which the other party would often do as well. Evidently, this sometimes created an atmosphere of mystery and distrust, which was not always resolved in the end.

During my time with Faruq in Bukavu, the challenges in upholding the fabricated reality he had been trying to maintain for more than a year of absence were manifold. In general, Uganda was seen as a country with a low cost of living and many opportunities for study and business. A few of Faruq's friends had gone to and come back from Uganda with profitable returns, and the pressure for Faruq to perform the same trajectory was high. Thus, while Faruq had been living on his parents' financial reserves after having outlived his own, returning with empty pockets was not an option for the, albeit unsuccessful, 'businessman' he claimed he was. When his parents later on gently refused to support any more expenditures, Faruq risked not only losing his cover, but also his reputation. Faruq had a lot of friends, and wherever we came, his desire to party combined with the social pressure to buy everyone a 'happy return' drink and show off his acquired wealth gradually infringed on my own pockets. After his parents decided to cut their support, I agreed on a daily allowance during our two weeks so he could make small errands and buy a few beers in the evenings. Admittedly, the issue of money was recurrent in our daily conversations – and arguments – and posed some dilemmas. Faruq's parents disapproved of his choice to return to Uganda after the celebration of their 50th wedding anniversary. Providing further financial support during our stay enabled Faruq to largely support his fabricated stories of being a businessman in Kampala in front of his friends in Bukavu – which no doubt his parents found problematic as well. However, the possibility existed that if and when Faruq lost his protective cover, my own would be fractured as well. The money secretly provided to Faruq also allowed me to partly conceal my intentions since people did not so easily question Faruq's activities in Uganda or imagine that they related to my research on refugee issues.[11] Usual suspicions related to the 'public secret' of Congolese staying in refugee camps and/or seeking resettlement in Uganda did not apply here. Faruq was successfully enacting his fabricated story by spending the money he had supposedly earned in Uganda. Further, given coincidental linkages between Faruq, his friends, and local contacts of another Nakivale inhabitant, I could not risk the personal stories of both Congolese refugees being shared among each other's social networks. Even with one another, Nakivale inhabitants maintain a great deal of secrecy over the reasons that took them to Uganda. In the end, of course, researchers are as much guided by personal as by ethical or practical choices in the field. Maybe this relates to what Simmel (1950: 347-348) wrote about secret societies' "protective character as an external quality" and "the internal quality of reciprocal confidence among its members – the very specific trust that they are capable of keeping silent." While we were by no means a "secret society", Faruq and I were trusted companions, bound to each other by the secret we shared and had agreed to protect.

Yet, "secrecy is always somewhat like gambling" as Herzfeld put it (2009: 136; see also Malaby 2003). On our first day in Bukavu, Faruq confided in me that his best friend Umukoro probably knew the truth about his stay in Uganda but would not reveal it openly. Whether Umukoro (or others, for that matter) suspected Faruq to be an officially registered refugee processing for resettlement, I never found out. If this had been the case, the "public secret" would have related as much to Faruq's personal secret as to the general, public, awareness among Congolese citizens that many compatriots in Uganda are in one way or another connected to the camps. Yet evidently, either one of us making inquiries of the other would have contained the risk of exposing Faruq, thus openly revealing his secret to the other. Risk and secrecy are closely related here: "Secrecy engenders risk insofar as concealment entails the possibility of unwelcome revelation" (Jones 2014: 54). The inherent protective character (see also Herzfeld 2009: 136) of maintaining secrecy over people's doings and whereabouts in Uganda moreover added to the fear of revelation, engendering a constant feeling of risking one's reputation and security.

THE 'BATTLEGROUND'

For almost all my respondents in Nakivale, shame surrounding "refugee life" played a role in the decision not to disclose their real location, and to feign a reality that was much more "acceptable" in DRC. Opinions and attitudes in Goma and Bukavu about Congolese presence in refugee settings indeed ranged from sympathy and understanding to stark incomprehension. Even Nakivale inhabitants who feared being persecuted across the border by the actors that had made them leave did not always engender sympathy or understanding among Congolese in Goma and Bukavu. Differing views on, and experiences with, the political instability and economic insecurity in DRC were significant here.

The general image presented of Goma by refugees in Nakivale was that of a theatrical (literally, "like in a movie") battleground where helicopters and flying bullets were part of the everyday. Many said they had left the city or its surroundings at the time when the CNDP (2006-2009) and later the M23 (2012-2013) were at their strongest.[12] The imageries of Bukavu were less daunting but still filled with metaphors and representations of profound danger and insecurity. While insecurity and incidences of violence are certainly still very much present as part of daily life in and around Goma and Bukavu, urban denizens who have remained in these cities often tended to

nuance this image of the "battleground," certainly in combination with views on Congolese refugees living abroad. The comment that the latter group had not "resisted" enough was more than sporadically made. If they had taken flight for security reasons, what are all the other inhabitants of Goma then still doing there? And why had those who fled not come back after M23 was defeated? In Bukavu, one of my contacts sighed that he failed to understand why his brother lives in Nakivale: "He told me that he fled the war. Enitan, he doesn't like war, I don't understand why. We are used to it here."[13] As a journalist, Enitan had been advised by a colleague to leave Uvira and later also Bukavu when the threats he had been receiving from high officials related to his writings on sensitive political issues escalated.[14] Yet, the comment of his older brother in Bukavu reflected a feeling towards Congolese refugees that many others seemed to share.

On a two-day trip to one of the areas around the city, I visited a local leader and former inhabitant of Nakivale. I had been introduced to him by a relative of his who still lived in the camp. A few years ago, he had gone back to DRC to inherit the authority of his father, who had passed away. "Let's be honest," he said. "Is the image you get in Nakivale about Congo the same as you experience here?" The local leader was referring to the horrible and traumatic (life) stories people would often recite in my presence, in addition to the violent imageries (pictures, videos, stories) of massacres, attacks, and insecurities in eastern DRC that were circulating on social media and continuously watched and sent around in WhatsApp groups established by Nakivale inhabitants. "Of course not!" he exclaimed. "It's completely exaggerated. When refugees see a muzungu, you need to say that Congo is unsafe so that you might help them with your case." A Congolese researcher who had accompanied me on the trip agreed from his own fieldwork experience in Nakivale that camp narratives on DRC's violent "battleground" were overly emphasized, although he also admitted to often downplay the gravity of insecurity in the country. Later that evening, the three of us (the local leader, the Congolese researcher, and myself) sat down in a bar for a drink when a loud and armed argument between two FDLR militants in the street suddenly pushed dozens of people inside. As clients ducked behind walls and under tables, the local leader quickly ordered the door closed and locked to keep any armed actors outside. The insecurity around the bar forced us to return immediately through the backdoor and take a hidden path that led us to the house of our host. It is certainly true that in Nakivale, "performance narratives" of victimhood, vulnerability, war trauma, and insecurities in DRC are widespread and moreover constitute a way of navigating the humanitarian system in the camp, certainly in the presence of white visitors (see also Ingunn 2017). However, experiences of violence and

effects of political instability had in fact also led many Congolese to leave their country, which the local leader also acknowledged.

A few relatives who were more sympathetic to the choices of their family members in Nakivale argued that there was a general need for more compassion regarding their compatriots abroad. Others felt that Congolese refugees had lacked the "courage" to "resist" and live with the reality of political and economic insecurity. Some interpreted the failure of return as a sign that they were too ashamed to come back, after having exchanged a respectful urban life for deplorable conditions in makeshift refugee camps, which was thought of as a significant loss of prestige and social status. The risk of 'coming back home with nothing,' without diplomas, money, or verifiable work experience, was indeed a serious worry for many Congolese in Nakivale. They knew their acquaintances in Congo to be getting married, promoted, and expanding their businesses, while they were "only waiting for life to begin" as someone put it.[15] The longer they stayed in Nakivale, the more they felt the need to fabricate realities for their acquaintances in DRC, and the harder it became to return. The tendency to cultivate memories of violence and insecurity in eastern DRC, moreover, added to many people's traumas and convictions that Congo was not yet a safe place to return.

RESETTLEMENT

Apart from being represented as a cheap country containing opportunities for schooling and business, Uganda was also broadly perceived as a "facilitator" for refugee resettlement. From 2014 to 2018, the Congolese departure statistics of resettlement in Uganda are increasing, respectively: 917, 2705, 5815, 1821, 3751.[16] Resettlement for Congolese in Uganda is mostly handled in Nakivale (in comparison with other camps),[17] and consequently, one of the reasons why this camp was most frequented by those seeking bulaya (also in comparison with other camps in the broader region). Comments by Goma and Bukavu inhabitants on how Congolese camp refugees had lacked a certain spirit of "resistance," were often linked with and reinforced by additional references to the increasing number of Congolese leaving DRC to seek resettlement in refugee camps. Those entering resettlement processes abroad were frequently viewed as preferring "the easy life" of Europe, Canada, or America, instead of trying to struggle their way out of economic insecurity and "resisting" or finding a way to live with political instability by remaining in DRC.

Trying your luck in a resettlement procedure was also a venture ridiculed by many in DRC. Most people knew that these were long procedures that often required you to stay in the camp for several

years. Resettlement is true, on principle, the result of a long and rigorous procedure. Applicants can be found eligible if they suffer from serious insecurity both in the host and home country, includes those with a severe illness, family members abroad, and whose stay in Nakivale has become so protracted they cannot be expected to return anymore (UNHCR 2011). However, apart from having a genuine concern, many Congolese were aware that a good narrative and at times, some "pocket facilitation" could expedite the process. An artist in Bukavu called this mentality "L'esclavage" (slavery): the all-consuming idea that Congo was lost and that economic prosperity and political stability could only be found in "the west." "For most of these people, they cannot be convinced otherwise anymore. Many young people, but others too."[18] Faruq later assured me that, although some people in Bukavu might find such aspirations ridiculous, "from the moment their relatives arrive in bulaya, you will see their pictures being raised on the wall."[19]

Yet, a general depreciation of resettlement aspirations was one of the reasons why some Congolese had left the country quietly without any communication. It was in this manner that a young woman in Nakivale showed herself relieved that I had not been able to find her uncle in Bukavu: "They don't understand why we are here."[20] After a protracted 5-year stay in Nakivale, she and her parents were still waiting for an interview with the UNHCR protection officer. "We make up stories, that's what we do. We thought we would be here for six months, that's what we had heard. Unfortunately, we are still here."[21] Apart from distorting reality, "the art of silence" is a powerful technique in strategies of secrecy and concealment (Simmel 1950: 349). While some fabricate "acceptable" stories to share with their acquaintances in DRC publicly, the young woman explained that she had cut communication entirely as a strategy to hide her doings and whereabouts in Uganda. The silences between Nakivale and eastern DRC are indeed profound, and even when "stayees" were aware of their friends' and relatives' presence in Nakivale, they had very little information on how people lived there or what happened in these camps.

Further, borrowing from Walter Benjamin's argument on truth, Taussig similarly argues that "the secret is not destroyed through exposure, but subject to a revelation that does justice to it." (1999: 8). In other words, revealing a secret does not destroy it, but instead reinforces and magnifies its power. On one of my first days in the city, I met in a restaurant with the brother of someone living in Nakivale. During our conversation, he admitted that urban inhabitants, in general, did not think much of Congolese residing in refugee camps abroad. "People here look down on them. It's like they didn't resist. That they are weak. And [refugees] are ashamed. Many do not say that

they are [in the camps], they leave quietly. It's like lowering yourself as a respectable urban citizen to a life of suffering in a refugee camp."[22] As we were discussing the urban sentiments towards Congolese camp refugees, the aforementioned local leader from an area outside the city entered the restaurant and was immediately recognized by my interlocutor. Coincidentally, the leader happened to be one of my contacts as well, being a distant relative of someone in Nakivale.[23] We sat down for a talk during which the local leader revealed without any shame that he too was a former resident of Nakivale. As we engaged, my other interlocutor turned silent and barely uttered a word for the rest of the conversation. He later confided to me that he was stunned by how a man of such a reputation, being highly respected in the city, had been so open and frank about his former refugee status. Not many returnees would have done the same, he argued. The awkward reaction of my interlocutor to the revelation of the local leader's former refugee status made powerfully clear that, amidst a public awareness that Congolese in Uganda are possibly connected to the camps, this would usually not be openly articulated in the presence of a (suspected) returnee. Certainly, the local leader's revelation did not destroy this "public secret". Instead, by revealing that someone as powerful and well-regarded as himself has also passed through a refugee camp, the leader complicated collectively-held assumptions about Congolese refugees in Uganda, thereby adding a new layer of mystery and confusion around this taboo topic. In a sense, then, his revelation magnified the secret's power.

Interestingly, while the local leader had been honest about his camp history to my interlocutor, he had not openly shared the reasons that had brought him there. Together with five other families, the local leader had sold property and belongings to pay a resettlement broker from the city for a direct ticket to Canada, without ever needing to pass the camps.[24] After the broker had betrayed the families upon their arrival in Entebbe (Uganda), shame and loss of financial resources had brought them to Nakivale to live off rations and free agricultural land.[25]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research brief has presented a condensed and early analysis of dynamics of secrecy and concealment in relation to the circular movements of Congolese refugees between Nakivale and eastern DRC. This is, of course, only one area in which bottom-up processes of (protective) silence, anonymity and secrecy in Nakivale were found to be practiced and enacted. The interplay between the importance of being visible on certain levels and to certain actors, while simultaneously generating different forms of invisibility is

particularly relevant in refugee contexts. Refugee policies and top-down strategies often involve the high visibility of large groups of people as well as policies of individual anonymity. This high visibility can help or interrupt refugees' daily, individual strategies of anonymity that enable them to maneuver within the system and appropriate it for their own uses and protection.

In this paper, the realities that Nakivale's inhabitants presented to the "outside world" allow a better understanding of the role and position of refugee camps in regional conflict mobilities. While scholars now generally agree that return is not an 'easy fix' that proclaims the end of displacement, insecurity, and political instability, the dynamics of secrecy and concealment during displacement that are discussed in this paper add another layer of complexity to our understanding of the return process. Fear of losing reputation and social status 'back home,' and of being persecuted abroad resulted in ruptures of communication and the fabrication of stories thought to be more "acceptable" for those who had stayed in DRC. Actual return, therefore, encompassed the risk of losing the protective cover refugees had created for themselves in an environment and political/humanitarian regime that is profoundly characterized by top-down processes of protective anonymity and isolation. While research on the isolation and seclusion of refugee camps is, rightly, increasingly being balanced by scholars who emphasize the many socio-economic and political connections and linkages with their broader environments (e.g., Jansen 2011, Betts et al. 2014), social dynamics between camp inhabitants and their compatriots abroad are rarely part of such analyses. Yet, they constitute an important reality not to be neglected. Indeed, the practices and strategies of secrecy and concealment here discussed often provoked a conception of the refugee camp as a secret, hidden universe. In the case of Faruq, his time in Bukavu was not only fraught with stress and financial difficulties, but also severely deepened the disconnection with his home town and the people he knew. Near the end of our stay, he proclaimed that this would be his last time ever going back. "When I return to Uganda, I will now become a real refugee."[26]

ENDNOTES

1 At the current time of field research, the year in which Nakivale was officially established as a refugee settlement is not yet entirely clear. Numerous oral sources and official documents from the 1990s make mention of 1960, while a smaller number refer to 1962. Large groups of Rwandan refugees arrived in the area as early as 1959. Much of the camp's archives were destroyed during the 1978-79 Kagera War in which Tanzania and Ugandan rebels invaded the country to oust president Idi Amin from power; other documents disappeared during the repatriation of Rwandan refugees in the early nineties.

2 Conversation with a Ugandan, Nakivale, May 2018.

3 See for example the continuous developments around the probe into the network of former Ugandan Inspector General of Police, Kale Kayihura (The Daily Monitor, 17 June 2018); and the recent arrest of 40 Rwandans in Kampala accused of espionage and deporting of Rwandan nationals to Rwanda (SoftPower, 25 July 2019).

4 Apart from Congolese, Nakivale comprises a variety of nationalities among which are Rwandans, Burundians, Somalis, Eritreans, Ethiopians and a number of Kenyans, Sudanese and South Sudanese.

5 My relationships with Congolese inhabitants were much more personal than with other nationalities at the time of field research, which, given the importance of trust in each other on both sides of the companionship, was important. Further, as a *muzungu*, I was advised against crossing the border with Rwandans and Burundians as their return contained a much greater security risk. My 'white' presence would increase our potential visibility to government and armed actors upon return.

6 A note on secrecy: the paper was proofread by a Congolese participant of this research, and whose review of the text was followed by discussions on, and requests for, increased anonymity. Concerns about anonymity were also raised during a presentation at a workshop in Gulu (Uganda, July 2019), as well as by the academic reviewers of this paper. The intricacies of secrecy discussed in this paper thus also necessitated a layer of mystery to the text itself. All names mentioned in the paper are fictitious and of Nigerian origin in order not to mistake people for another Congolese individual with the same name. Apart from names, details of certain stories have been altered (places, gender, personal histories, identities), left out (exact dates in footnotes) or are vaguely formulated where this does not pose a problem for the academic integrity of the paper, or the narrative as a whole. It should therefore be mentioned that only a few women participated in this research, most research participants were men. Further, one of the camp refugees whose relatives I met in DRC does not live in Nakivale, but in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. We met a couple of years ago in Kakuma during research for my master's thesis and stayed in touch. Upon hearing of my travel plans, this person put me in touch with family in DRC. References to conversations with both parties have been anonymized for family reasons to such an extent that they appear to concern a Nakivale inhabitant. Apart from this one person, everyone else is registered in Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Uganda. In regard to the introduction and conclusion sections, no details have been altered, apart from people's names.

7 The trips to Goma and Bukavu were made with additional funding from a VLIR-UOS 'Global Minds' fund.

8 Conversation with Congolese in Nakivale, June 2018.

9 Conversation with Faruq in Nakivale, May 2018.

10 The right to freedom of movement for refugees in Uganda officially exists since the national 2006 Refugee Act.

11 While there is not much room to discuss the situation in Nakivale here, Faruq of course relied on two different narratives to perform credibility as a businessman in Bukavu, and a war refugee in Nakivale.

12 The *Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple* (CNDP) and its successor *Mouvement du 23-Mars* (M23) were two Congolese tutsi-led rebel movements in the Kivu region. See e.g. Jason Stearns (2012), *From CNDP to M23: the evolution of an armed movement in eastern Congo.*

13 Conversation with relative, Bukavu, 2018.
14 Conversation with friend, Bukavu, 2018.

15 Conversation with Congolese in Nakivale, June 2018.

16 UNHCR Resettlement Data Finder, https://rsq.unhcr.org/en/#3ZEq.

17 Widely known among government, humanitarian and refugee actors in the camp.

18 Conversation with an artist in Bukavu, 2018.

19 Conversation with Faruq in Bukavu, 2018. It must be added here that most of the friends and relatives I met were not the less affluent inhabitants of Goma and Bukavu. A researcher from Bukavu explained that seeking resettlement abroad is considered a more acceptable option for poor people (personal communication with Dr. Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka in Kampala, 28/06/2019).

20 Conversation with Congolese in Nakivale, December 2018.

21 Conversation with Congolese in Nakivale, December 2018.

22 Conversation with relative in DRC, 2018.

23 It was not a coincidence that he walked in the restaurant. A researcher and mutual friend knew that the local leader was in town and had told him where to find me.

24 Stories and accusations of resettlement fraud are widespread in Uganda, as in other host countries in the region.

25 Refugees are accorded a plot of land upon their arrival in the camp to encourage "self-reliance".

26 Conversation with Faruq in Bukavu, 2018.

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