

Interviewee: Rumenge Mbonigaba (RM)

Interviewer: Burzin Kohina (BK), journalism student at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

Also present: Yilin Liu and Yuhuizi Zhu, journalism students at Miami handling audio tech; Hayley Green of Catholic Social Services of Miami Valley; Annie-Laurie Blair, associate clinical lecturer in journalism at Miami University

Date: October 26, 2019

Location: Dayton Public Library, 215 E 3rd St, Dayton, Ohio 45402

Burzin Kohina (BK): Okay, so, my name is Burzin Kohina and I am from Miami University of Ohio and I am interviewing Rumenge Mbonigaba. And, today's date is October 26, 2019. And we are conducting this interview at the Dayton, Ohio, public library main branch location. So, what is your full name and how old are you?

Rumenge Mbonigaba (RM): My full name is Rumenge Mbonigaba and I am 34 years old.

BK: Where were you born?

RM: I was born in The Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa, a place called (unclear).

BK: Okay, how long did you live there?

RM: That is, uh, I have lived there since I was born, so I had been living there until I left when I was maybe 18 years old. If I remember.

BK: Who did you live with, with your parents or friends? Who did you live with?

RM: Family. Parents and siblings.

BK: How many brothers or sisters?

RM: I have five brothers, including me, which is six, and one sister.

BK: What work were you doing back home?

RM: Back home we had not a lot of activity, based on the conditions that we had been living in, you know, because it was like in the countryside where we had not a lot of things to do. But I was a student, and I was helping my parents to do stuff at home.

BK: Okay, what was daily life like for you?

RM: For the daily life actually was, back home we were enjoying playing soccer, you know, and other case players and having parents and go to school and sometimes go to, um, what do you call it, watching the cow?

BK: Okay, what is that exactly, watching the cow?

RM: It's like watching the cow, [laughs] I mean obviously our parents were farmers and you know had like cows, sheep, and goats, so a lot of our activities were with them, too.

BK: Okay, what kind of food did you cook and eat back home?

RM: Wow, you made me miss that. [laughs] But, it's very different from the food that we have here. Every food back home was organic. We cook, like, beans, flowers and meats, all kinds of vegetables.

BK: Okay, how did you travel around?

RM: Walking.

BK: Everywhere?

RM: Everywhere. We really did, ya know? From one city to another city, you have to use like a vehicle, but it was not really affordable for everybody. And, you know, we don't have a lot of things that cause us to move from one city to another city; we were just in one city.

BK: Um, so what made you decide to leave The Democratic Republic of Congo and how did you do so?

RM: Oh that is kind of you know, a little bit of a tough question and requires some explanations. You know it's a war. We didn't choose to just leave our lives, our cities, our place. You know it was in 1996 when the war broke out in our city and a lot of people were killed, slaughtered. And due to bad leaders, bad politicians, and hate and discriminations among the tribes, because you were living with other surrounding tribes, there were minorities. That hate spread out, and we were being attacked, and in 1998, that is when we fled.

BK: Okay, so how did you and your family flee the country? On foot or did you get other transportation?

RM: No, it wasn't by foot, actually for the first time you know we fled from the home and we went to the jungle and hide ourselves for a month. And then after we see that there is nothing going to happen, that no peace was going to come, we found our way to travel. So we travel 180 kilometers from Uvira to to Kalemie.

BK: What do you miss most from home?

RM: Everything. You know, home sweet home. I do miss home, most I miss food, I miss the culture, I miss other friends you know, my childhood friends. Yeah.

BK: Have you tried to get in touch through social media or...?

RM: Umm for most of the time yes, but you know the city that we were living, nobody left, we all evacuated at the time, that means nobody was left behind. But everybody, when we fled, we were spread in other cities, displaced in the Congo. So some are in (unclear names) And we crossed the, umm, the lake, we went to Burundi and then to Tanzania.

BK: Okay, so what were the conditions in the camp like, in your opinion?

RM: It was horrible. Most people, I don't know what kind of image that they do have in a camp. You know sometimes, when news organizations try to show people what is going on in a camp, sometimes for the image that they show they try to show good things, right? But the real conditions of the camp are horrible. You don't have enough food, enough shelter, no education, no electricity, no hospitals, no healthcare, no nothing.

BK: How long were you in the refugee camp?

RM: Since 1998 till 2010, I was in refugee camps, I kept moving from one to another.

BK: Wow. 12 years, wow. What did you know about the U.S. before coming here?

RM: Oh yeah, I knew. I knew because I had a chance to go to school when I was little, like what we call high school here, it's a secondary school and we learn about geography and we learn about the whole world, and so I learned about the United States and so I knew that it was a powerful country before I come here. I know of a couple cities, about politics and stuff, so I had a little bit of image about it before I came.

BK: Did you have access to education or any other amenities in the camp?

RM: Yeah, they do have a poor education, and let me call it poor because they do not have enough means to educate kids. It is especially hard for kids to go to school without eating. In class, with the teachers teaching, and I know when I get home, not having food means your mind will not be stable, you will not have focus. So they tried to educate kids, but put them together and it is difficult to educate them.

BK: What gave you hope throughout the refugee process in the refugee camp?

RM: There were two things. I know that the refugee camp was founded by resettlement process. I don't know if you are familiar with it, but it resettles refugees to third countries. The second is when the peace comes back to your original country then you can go back. So that was the kind of hope that we had

because some agencies kept trying to establish peace in our original countries and if not, some countries, like the third-world countries come and interview people and they take them to their resettlement countries.

BK: So what did you think of the U.S.A. when you first arrived here?

RM: Even before I come here, you know we had high expectations of the United States before coming here. And sometimes when you get here it is totally different. It is like, you know, based on the lifestyle you are living in the refugee camp, and the entire situation you had been through, and they tell you now you will fly to America and have the high expectation and feel like, "Oh, my goodness, I can't wait." But when you get here, things change, sometimes. Of course, here it is better than a refugee camp and home, when you don't have peace at home, where there is war, hate, and discrimination and stuff. But here you are free, you can find a job, you can work, and do what you want to do and get a good education.

BK: What was your first expectation of the U.S.A. when you came?

RM: Maybe having a lot of money. [laughs] People think that once you get here you will have a lot of money. But obviously, for you to get something you have to do something. For you to get money, you have to work.

BK: What are your earliest memories of the United States?

RM: My earliest memories... ? [confusion]

BK: Anything that is memorable for you in the U.S., especially when you were first new to this country.

RM: Oh gotcha. The weather. The weather and... its funny you know [laughs], when I came, I think I told my friends there, I went to Connecticut and they put me at a student university. And due to the place the I came from and the place that I was at that time, and it was wintertime, and I saw this snow falling down. I was kind of scared to go out, and they came to take me to the office and I said, hey, I don't want to go because I am afraid of those things falling down. Because we had no snow; I had never seen it before. That memory is kept in my mind. And also the flight process -- how you can see the skies and think how it was going to be. Am I going to land again or am I going to die in the sky, ya know? [chuckles] I have all of those kinds of memories now.

BK: How do you feel about the snow now, and the weather and stuff since you have been in the U.S. for quite some time?

RM: It's normal, ya know, I am actually kind of used to it because, like I said, I was put in the snow state, which was Connecticut, and then I moved to Dayton, Ohio, and they still have snow. Then I moved to North Dakota, which was worse, and then I came back here, so I have never been in a state with warm weather, so I am used to the snow now.

BK: What challenges have you met since you arrived in the United States?

RM: We faced a lot of challenges, or I faced a lot of challenges. You know personally, my English was, and even still what it is, I am glad I am now able to explain myself and talk by myself. But before I couldn't communicate, and when you have poor communication, it is hard to talk to other people. That was a challenge, and another challenge was to use some devices, and of course to be adjusted to American life.

BK: How have you been able to solve and overcome these challenges?

RM: There are a couple things, first of all I did build confidence in myself, saying that hey, you are no longer back home. Not where you were born and raised. This is a new country, this is a new world, so you have to live this life. I built confidence in me and started talking to the people, feeling like, okay I can do this, if you can do this I can do this, too. Another thing is the agencies, the agencies that received refugees, case-worker, friends -- all of them help you in the process of getting jobs, and getting adjusted to the American life and country.

BK: Where you able to access all of the services of Catholic Social Services -- school, education, work permits, driver's license?

RM: Sure. Some of them, you know when I came here, I came in Dayton as a secondary migrant, and there are laws for secondary migrants that they don't take you as a refugee who flew from Africa to here. This means your benefits sometimes, it's already spent to where you first landed. So when I came here I was a secondary migrant, which means I had some benefits that I got at that time. For example, I remember when I went to the center, they told me you know what? First of all, they said do you have kids? I said no. Then they said do you have a wife? I said no. Do you have child support? I said no. Are you disabled? I said no. They told me to go find work. For real, for me I think I was kind of ummm, you know not happy about it, when I went back home and was thinking about it, I was like okay, let me go find a job anyway. So, I was trained how to drive, you know somebody taught me, my friend taught me how to drive and I got my permit, I got my license and I could drive a vehicle.

BK: So what is your job now?

RM: Like now, I don't really have a job right now. I do keep myself busy. My previous job was Job Corps as an advisor. I resigned because I wanted to do my own thing; I do landscaping, I cut some trees and I move people. But also, the thing that keeps me busy is that I'm an activist, a refugee and immigrant activist in the refugee crisis. I am trying to help other refugees, too, and show them how they can do things.

BK: So, what is your home here like? Do you rent on or do you have your own home?

RM: I have my own home. It's not mine, it's between me and the bank; I have a mortgage. When I came here I lived in an apartment, and I said let me see if I am qualified for a mortgage, so I applied and it was approved. So I have a mortgage because I just want to own my own home.

BK: What do you hope to accomplish in the United States?

RM: Well you know, first of all I think that question is a very good question, it's huge. Everyone wants to accomplish something. Everyone wants to be successful. Nobody plans to fail. Even those who you see probably already failed, but if you try to ask them, they will tell you that they are on their way to success. That is our fight, so I want to be successful. I want to get a job and be educated, and help other people. That is what I really want to accomplish. But the way to success is the most difficult way, because you need to have consistency, you have to have goals, you have to work on your goals to make sure that they are fulfilled.

BK: So you said you want to complete your education. Any particular field you are interested in?

RM: That would take me to my background. I didn't have the chance to go to school, to get a better education back home because of the war -- I fled from one place to another. Displaced. You know, and actually before I came here to come to the U.S., I said the first thing I am going to do is get my education. But unfortunately, like I said, the expectation when I came here was the money. But when you get here you have to struggle to eat, to live, for clothing, everything. And that in a way is your education. Of course, I know people who came here and started working, but I didn't have that chance. I was here and my family wasn't here, my mom was sick all the time and I had to work to try to help them. But I didn't get the chance to go to school here. And I remember I tried once at St. Clair Community College when I got there for three months. They told me I had to pay, but I wasn't approved for student loans and had no money. I was trying to take English, though, and I said if I take long-form ESL, then I get to undergrad, master's, and whatever degree that I want to accomplish -- that money I could not afford it. So I said okay, so let me try to work on other stuff first and I will go back. So now I feel like it is time for me to go back to school.

BK: Do you have any other family here in the United States?

RM: I missed something when you asked me what field I wanted to work in. I really want to work with the people, social and international organizations, so any social field that can connect me to working with these organizations I would like to go for. Because that is actually what I enjoy the most, that is what I feel like I am meant to do.

BK: Okay, so do you have any other family here in the United States?

RM: Yes, yes. My whole family came in 2015: my mom, my dad and my other siblings.

- BK: How have you helped them adjust to life over here since 2015?
- RM: How? They were lucky, they didn't struggle like I did, because when they came here, I was already here and I knew some basic things. First off, I provided them with Food Stamps and Social Security and other documentations, and after I applied to jobs for them, for those who wanted to go to school I connected them with schools.
- BK: So they came here in 2015, and you came here in 2010, so you met them after five years. How did it feel after meeting them again after five years?
- RM: It is (more than) five years. When we fled from Congo, we went all in Burundi. In Burundi, in 2004, the refugee camp that we were in was attacked and we fled. Myself, I was left to Tanzania, and so it means that the five years that I spent in the United States, plus the seven years that I spent in Tanzania, so it had been 13 years that I hadn't met them (my family). When they came here they landed in Austin, Texas, so I went there to meet them and then I told the agency this is my family, I want them to live with me in Dayton. Because one of the goals of the resettlement agencies is to reunite the families. They couldn't say no. They said okay, if it is your family then they have to sign and then we will send them with you. And now we are here together.
- BK: Do you aim to stay in the United States long term or do you hope to return to your country eventually one day?
- RM: That's a good question. Really, I wish I could go back because I still miss home. But I will live here because I already have a home, I want my kids to have a good education and have access to everything like Americans. But, personally, I feel like I would go back home and come back, since I am allowed to.
- BK: Do you experience discrimination here?
- RM: Um, that question I can say yes and no. Yes, we are people. We all have been created in the same way, but we have different imaginations and actions and stuff. Some people you can meet them today and feel like they hate you, like I don't even know you but I feel like I hate you, or I don't get along with you. But also, because we do have the language barriers, culture, differentiations, and all those kinds of differences that makes you feel like I don't really belong to a certain group. So, the way I saw you guys, and I'm not trying to be funny, but I can tell you are from Asia right? (He is referring to the Chinese students from Miami who are technical supervisors for the interview and the interviewer, who is from India.) So if I enter the room and see all Asians and see one African, who is sitting there, then I would do my best to be close to the African. Why? Probably because I feel a kind of connection. That means I discriminate myself to you guys, and we don't even have a problem. Therefore, we are creating a differentiation. So the reason I said yes, was because some people do have this discrimination, but others just discriminate themselves. They isolate themselves from the

community and they claim that they are being discriminated. But discrimination yes of course is there.

BK: So how do you deal with the discrimination?

RM: I don't care. As long as you're discriminating me and not hurting me, I will be okay. Because you have the right to do whatever you want to do, regardless.

BK: What role did your religion play in your resettlement in the United States?

RM: My religion? In the resettlement process?

BK: Like what is your religion?

RM: I'm a Christian.

BK: So how did your religion play a role when you were in your resettlement process then?

RM: Oh I think that for the religious people, religion has a part of our lives, of our daily lives. Because other religions, I don't know about other religions, but I do not limit myself for things. I can jump on other things and try to learn about it, but I realize that all religions teach people to behave well. The resettlement process has some criteria that you have to meet. They cannot bring you here if you have drug or sex conditions. It means religions teach me how to behave good and that good behavior helps me to meet the resettlement process criterias. So religion helps people how to cooperate and live with others, with other tribes and people around the world and be respectful.

BK: What role does religion play in your life now?

RM: It's the same thing. I think religion is now playing the part in my life in that if we observe what's going on in the world now, it's horrible and terrifying. We need to be humble to survive you need to live with others and love one another and work with others. You need to help others as they help you. You need to respect others. And that, all the religious churches and other facilities teach all this, so if you really want to live with others in peace and harmony, you need to respect yourself and others.

BK: So what is your view of the United Nations?

RM: United Nations is good. But also I wish it would have other power over some governments, especially my country and my continent. United Nations was established after World War II for a lot of countries. But I think some leaders back home, remember I told you I am not here because I choose to be here, but I am here just because of the trouble that has been going on in my country, and I fled and got resettled here. So the United Nations was the one that brought me here, through the agency. But they have the armies, the defense, the weapons,



they have everything. If they should establish the peace in that country instead of letting people evacuate the country, and help them, then they should come in our city and help us to live there. But when we fled after many were killed, then that is what United Nations stepped in. Of course, it's good, but they should probably help to resolve the problems before people get killed.

BK: Did you come across any UN peacekeepers?

RM: What do you mean?

BK: Did you come across anyone who was for peace from the UN?

RM: Yeah, yeah, like I said the peacekeepers are the military from the UN that was sent by the UN to establish peace and resolve the problems. They actually do help, but like I said, they help once everything is already spread out and people have been killed. That is when they intervene and come in and say, hey we got you guys. But before, they don't really want to involve themselves in politics or securing people before they die. We saw them, they have a lot of weapons but they don't use them. I feel like they don't have the power, and you really think, why are they even here?

BK: What was your experience with people who worked in the refugee camps?

RM: It's good. You know we had good relationships with people who worked in the camp sometimes, but not all. First of all, refugees have a lot of demands, things that they need. They have a lot of needs. And, of course, if you work for the UN, I am expecting from you a lot of things. I feel like you can do everything for me. But you do what you have been told to do, and once you do that, I feel like you don't deserve to have this position, but we are wrong. They have high commanders, they have offices and we deal with those in refugee camps.

BK: Was the international community doing enough to address the issues back home?

RM: They think they do enough, but they don't. For some people, they don't really get what they are supposed to get. Refugees don't live the lives that they are supposed to live. You can't tell me, you cannot tell me that you have five kids in a small room like this, you don't have enough food, you don't have enough, no education, you don't have clean water, and you say you are doing enough. And UN has that power of feeding or taking care of refugees. Refugees' camp life is horrible -- they should probably do some more to make sure that they have enough and shelter and those are primary and basic things.

BK: What is a memory that reminds you of the refugee camp?

RM: Most of the time, that is something that cannot go away because it is part of my life. It is a life I have been living, not a story I have been told. It is a life I have been living for more than 12 years. Being called a refugee, I lived in the refugee camp, I slept in the refugee camp, I did all of the things you watch on TV that

happen in refugee camps. I lived that life. So that is a part of my life and nobody can take away, even though I can have a good life and change my life. But sometimes as a human being if I think back, that clicks in my mind and the memory I have is a lot. Not having enough food. Not having enough health. No sleep. Cold. No shelter.

BK: Is there anything else you would like to add?

RM: Um, not really, maybe I can thank you again. Thank you for your time and choosing me to do this interview. I think this hopefully will help you guys to know the truth about a refugee's life, a refugee's camp who doesn't have any experience with it. And like I said, there is something that you guys watch on TV, what is happening there in those camps and you think maybe it's not true. It is true. That's a life that people are living. I really thank you for your time and for contacting me.

BK: Thank you so much.

RM: Thank you.