

The history of Banyarwanda refugees in Uganda

Mugisha, Charles Batinda

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Abstract:

This study is a reconstruction of the history of the Banyarwanda Tutsi refugees who fled to Uganda between 1960 and 1990 due to the ethnic discrimination, persecution and political instability during Rwanda's post-colonial period. By focusing on the problem of Tutsi refugees in Uganda, an attempt is made to explore broadly a phenomenon of historical and contemporary nature that has haunted Tutsi refugees for generations and troubled successive Ugandan governments for decades. The study examines the movement of Tutsi refugees to Uganda, their reception, and experiences in the settlement camps, and looks at how the government of Uganda refused to integrate Tutsi refugees by naturalization. Uganda maintained an official policy, which believes that the refugee problem is a temporary phenomenon. Uganda's policy towards Tutsi refugees then, was that of providing temporary asylum for eventual repatriation. This meant that refugees had to live in temporary gazetted settlements and could not own land or live freely among local communities. The study also looks at the legal status of the settlements, which were considered temporary just like people who occupied them. The temporary residency for Tutsi refugees was an impediment for them to live meaningful lives in Uganda. In line with Uganda government's policy of ultimate repatriation, Tutsi refugees were not allowed to own land in or outside the settlements. They were discouraged from growing on their allotted pieces of land crops that were of permanent nature, such as coffee or fruit trees. In this situation, they felt that they owned nothing in the country of their asylum. This increased their alienation from the society, in which they lived and perpetuated their hopes of returning to their country of origin. Generalized anti-Tutsi sentiments also forced Banyarwanda Tutsi refugees to get involved in Uganda's national political struggle and civil strife. This political involvement goes far to explain the RPF decision to invade Rwanda in October 1990 with an intention of an armed repatriation. The attitudes and organization of the Tutsi refugees influenced the main political changes within Rwanda up to 1990.