



Working To Empower: A Refugee, To Be or Not To Be.

Logan Cochrane



Mkambwa Wasokye carries himself as a young man, helping to carry goods and working as a guard, but he is a man who should be retired. Of short stature with a shaved head and tired looking eyes, he speaks to me about his life in DR Congo. “I have lived in Congo all my life, in Fizi region, I am from a city called Baraka,” a city 90km south of the Burundian border. During the civil war Mkambwa fled to Uvira, a border city of Burundi in the Congo. He explains that peace began in the Baraka area, so he, many other IDP’s (internally displaced peoples), and refugees moved to Baraka as the civil war began to slow its momentum. Although Baraka has more residents today than ten years ago the city itself is very different and the peoples only stay for a short time while they resettle to their old villages. Before the war Tuesdays and Thursdays were a big event in Baraka, people from all over the region would come for the fish market. The houses and buildings are now affected by the war, with many totally destroyed. “One other change since the times before the war,” he explains “is that people from all over the world have come here, now when we see a mzungu (white person) it doesn’t matter.”

DR Congo, is formally known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, sometimes called DRC or Congo-Kinshasa. King Leopold II of Belgium took an economic interest in the Congo river basin area before the 19th century, and made it his formal colony in 1908. The control under Leopold II was short and brutal for the population, until it was given to the Belgian government. It was in the year of African Independence, 1960, that DR Congo also became free. Such liberation wasn't all it was hoped for as peoples faced violence until Joseph Mobutu (Sese Seko) took power via a military coup in 1965. At this time DRC was named Zaire, a name often associated with violence as the government was prone to using it. He reigned until 1997 when another coup placed Laurent Kabila into the presidential seat, it was he who gave the country its current name. This was also the year Mkambwa Wasokye fled Baraka to Uvira.

I arrived to Baraka in a van, packed with people having a sliding door that fell off when it opened. He talked to me about this saying, "there are some things we don't understand. When mzungus come without good care we consider that not good." At first I didn't know he was referring specifically to me, and I looked a little puzzled at the comment. He clarified, "because you have no good car, you walk by foot, you don't have money. We think you are at the bottom of the white people." We had a good laugh and I tried to explain the reason I felt I didn't need a good car, to use monies for other purposes in the community, but he seemed still amazed that I was not driving a Land Rover.

"To me," he continues, "development is jobs." This seemed pretty obvious at first but the situation is much more complex, as the international organizations of Baraka only help returning refugees. Although Mr. Wasokye himself was forced from his home, since he was not a refugee he receives no help. "For us (those who remained in DR Congo) the international organizations are only good to try and get some jobs. MSF (Doctors Without Borders) is good for our community but they are leaving." I asked how this affects Baraka and he explained that now medicine is costly and "it is hard when they (international organizations) leave."

He leaves the topic of jobs with a question I had no answer for, "why do the international organizations only see the problems of refugees and IDP's?" Mr. Wasokye continued to explain that the people of Baraka who remained during the war receive no help. Returning refugees get help with housing, metal roofs, help with education, and that in general those who became refugees are much better off than those who remained. "For me, I lost my house but I get no help. Only the refugees."

Refugees not only left Congo but entered, such as from Rwanda and Burundi during 1994. The vast majority of Congolese refugees left during the civil war, which began in 1997 and ended in 2003, however many began to leave in the years before the war as well. The civil war is often known as the African War, as many countries were involved, including Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, Chad, Uganda, and Sudan. The violence not only affected the masses, the President (Kabila) was assassinated in 2001, leaving his son in charge. This held until last year when a new constitution was approved by way of election and a national vote set for summer of 2006.

I began to think of the future and asked Mr. Wasokye about how he feels Baraka can develop. He responded with a story: "If you promise to come to Congo and never come, you can not know Congo. I cannot know a way of development or a way to a good economy. For me, I must see before I believe so I have to first see development."